INTRODUCTION

A Sense of Place in Twentieth-Century Australian Life Writing

In recent years, at both popular and academic levels, there has been increased talk about an Australian national identity. Events at home and abroad have sparked discussion about what it means to be “Australian”, and Australia’s role in world affairs. Such debates inevitably turn to a reassessment of traditional attributes of the “Australian character”, highlighted a few years ago by the controversy over the proposed insertion of the value of “mateship” into the preamble to the Australian constitution. For all this talk about national character and values, it is often forgotten that, on a more personal level, any identification with a nation or homeland must also involve a sense of place. What makes any of us Australian? Surely at bottom this has to begin with our dwelling in, having origins in, and retaining a continuing connection to this land mass we now call Australia. But what are the hallmarks of an Australian’s sense of place? How is it formed, nurtured and sustained? Does one’s sense of place change or alter depending on what part of Australia one lives in?

As Simon Schama says in the introduction to his extensive study, *Landscape and Memory*, “it is our shaping perception that makes the difference between raw matter and landscape”.1 So, too, our sense of place comes not merely from the physical landforms we inhabit but also from within us, our mode of viewing, which is informed by culture and history.

This thesis explores the sense of place formed during childhood, as remembered by adult Australians who reconstruct their youth through various forms of life writing. The term “reconstructions of childhood” is used to allow the inclusion of works beyond the limits of traditional autobiography, such as fictional autobiography, and in some instances, novels, where it can be seen that the setting and characters are drawn substantially from the author’s own experience of growing up. Of particular interest is the manner in which Australian writers import and transform traditional tropes of autobiography and conventions of representing the child figure

into Australian contexts. Such tropes include nostalgia for the “magic” of childhood experience, now forever lost, and the use of the Eden mythology to convey the moral and psychological dimensions of the transition from childhood innocence to adult knowledge.

The other major concern of this thesis is to offer a regional comparison of the sense of place formed through childhoods in different parts of the Australian continent. Joy Hooton rightly questions John and Dorothy Colmer’s conclusion that “the quest for personal identity involves asking fundamental questions about national culture and identity”, when she asserts that “there are many Australias”. Indeed, Hooton believes that even the term “regional” is too prescriptive to convey the diversity across the field of Australian autobiography. Certainly, within any region offered for study, there will be variety as well as continuity and, admittedly, attempts to categorise Australia into regions will always be somewhat artificial: cultures, landscapes and settlement patterns will invariably transgress state or city boundaries. Yet, while acknowledging these limitations, this thesis aims to show that there is much to be gained from a regional study. In particular, it throws sharper focus upon local expressions of national mythologies of place, and also facilitates an examination of more peculiar regional mythologies that are often overlooked in studies that subsume texts under the general banner of “Australian”.

Constraints of space make it impossible to offer an exhaustive analysis of all Australia’s regions, so three states have been selected for close attention. These are Western Australia, Queensland and Victoria. These three have been selected to offer the widest range of contrast, both in terms of physical climate and landscape, as well as patterns of human occupation. Western Australia and Queensland, to some extent, represent “frontier” societies. Both offer physical distance from the often-cited cultural centre of Australia, the Sydney-Melbourne axis, and both are more sparsely populated than these south eastern states. In the case of Western Australia, population is heavily centralised around Perth and Fremantle, whereas Queensland is the most decentralised of all Australian states and, while the majority of its people do live in the

---

south-eastern corner around Brisbane and the Gold Coast, there is a far stronger network of regional centres extending up the coast through Rockhampton and Townsville, and inland to Toowoomba and Mount Isa. This brings to Queensland literature a stronger sense of rural roots. In climate and geography, too, Queensland and Western Australia offer good contrast, with Western Australia being dry and seasonal, while Queensland is moist and tropical. Hence, while both exhibit the comparatively slower, more casual pace of life, which contrasts with the “sophisticated” metropolises of the southern states, physical isolation and remoteness pervades Western Australian writing, whereas Queensland writers seem preoccupied more with the heat and rampant vegetation.

Victoria has been selected as an example of more “central” Australian culture, offering the booming city of Melbourne as ripe ground for the exploration of suburban living. Melbourne’s position as the centre of Australian industry for many years has influenced the sense of place emerging from this city. Many accounts from working class backgrounds emphasize the drab conformity of the industrial suburbs, overwhelmingly portrayed as diminutions of rectangular structures in a geometric grid, boxing their inhabitants into a bleak unexciting future. Even narratives from privileged backgrounds betray the pervasiveness of this aspect of Melbourne suburbia: Chris Wallace-Crabbe smells the aromas from the Rosella jam and sauce factory in nearby “alien” Richmond from behind the protective hedges of his South Yarra garden; Barry Humphries is similarly aware of the distinction between himself and “The Poor” who reside over the back fence of his Camberwell home.³

In choosing regions for close study, New South Wales was avoided primarily because this most populous of states already enjoys increased critical attention, and Sydney as a region has been the subject of many books.⁴ It is not unusual for studies of Australian themes or even landscapes to focus mainly on analyses of Sydney, allowing these examples to speak for Australia as a whole. For example, Geoffrey

³ Chris Wallace-Crabbe, “My 1930s” in Melbourne or the Bush, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1974, pp. 59-64, p. 62; Barry Humphries, More Please, Penguin, Melbourne, 1992, p. 9, respectively.
Dutton’s study of the beach in Australian culture and art, when examining the representation of particular beaches by the literary community, focuses on Bondi and Manly, and makes only cursory reference to Queensland’s Surfer’s Paradise, Melbourne’s Portsea, and Perth’s Cottesloe. His justification for focussing on Sydney beaches is “because the artists and the writers have also done so.” Yet, there are numerous descriptions of beaches in other parts of Australia that continue to go largely unnoticed in the critical arena. The decision to exclude New South Wales from this study thus aims to question the perceived “representativeness” of Sydney with respect to Australian experience.

Indeed, while Melbourne is often lumped with Sydney by residents from less populated states when seen as the dominant strain of Australian culture, there is within Victorian writing a strong desire to define itself against the perceived dominance of Sydney. Distinguishing Melbourne from Sydney, of course, paradoxically reinforces Sydney’s iconic place in the Australian subconscious. This feature of Melbourne literature can also be seen as a regional expression of the wider Australian preoccupation with absence: Melbourne is different from Sydney because it does not have equivalents for Sydney’s beaches, harbour views, and edgy, fast-paced lifestyle. The resultant sense of lack, which pervades Melbourne writers’ often self-deprecating accounts of their home city, resonates with a more widely held, peculiarly Australian, note of cynicism.

Therefore, while Sydney is not specifically a subject of this survey, it intrudes repeatedly, and is never far from consciousness. Sydney is, to the Australian regionalist critic, what “whiteness” is to the multicultural writer: the often invisible presumption embedded in so called “Australian” experience, and the point of departure from which all other identities are framed.

The focus of this thesis is Anglo-Australian narratives, although some other voices are included at certain points. Indeed, as scholars have pointed out, all

---

5 Geoffrey Dutton, *Sun, Sea, Surf and Sand – The Myth of the Beach*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1985, p. 120.

6 This exclusion is at the level of detailed study – comparisons and contrasts between the chosen regions and Sydney / New South Wales are mentioned where pertinent.
Australian literature other than Indigenous writing is, to some extent, migrant literature. While examples from more recent waves of migration may be tinged with a heightened sense of alienation and foreignness, their issues concerning place are largely comparable to those of their Anglo-Australian counterparts. Indigenous narratives, however, raise very different themes, often revolving around racial discrimination and the policies of the stolen generation era. While these narratives, like non-Indigenous ones, often raise themes of displacement and alienation, it is not usually in relation to place that these occur, but rather to family, culture and society. Because of these factors, and constraints of space, Indigenous narratives are beyond the scope of this study. Their unique issues may more appropriately be explored separately.

This thesis draws upon themes already explored by critics over several different fields of enquiry. Peter Coveney's The Image of Childhood is a foundational work that examines the rise of interest in childhood from the Romantics’ idealisation of infancy to the Victorians’ attachment of sentimentality to the child figure. There is at present a burgeoning interest in the field of autobiography and other forms of life writing, but most studies look at this genre in terms of theories of constructing the self and the nature of memory, rather than with a focus upon a sense of place. Several works do make specific enquiry into the field of remembrances of childhood, and will be mentioned briefly.

The most exhaustive of studies in the genre of autobiographies of childhood is by Richard Coe. Taking in works from Britain, Europe and Russia, as well as Australia, and covering the eighteenth century to the 1980s, Coe’s When the Grass Was Taller examines the formation of the child artist figure. Coe identifies a particular type of autobiography, which he calls the “Childhood”, which focuses on capturing the experience of infancy, and childhood’s “alternative dimension”: such autobiographies engage in a quest for “an inner symbolic truth” that is tied to the child

---

7 For example, David Carter argues “it is highly doubtful whether there was ever a time ‘before’ the migrant writer in Australia”: “Before the migrant writer: Judah Waten and the shaping of a literary career” in Gunew and Longley (eds), Striking Chords: Multicultural Literary Interpretations, Allen & Unwin, North Sydney, 1992, pp. 101–110, p. 101.
Coe’s work examines the multifaceted nature of the self in these types of poetic autobiographies, the development from innocence to experience, the nature of memory and autobiographical “truth”, mythologies surrounding the nature of childhood perception (such as the “magic” and “luminosity” of the world recalled through nostalgia), as well as the role of parents, families and other figures around the child. While Coe’s study is mainly concerned with the development of the self, and the way writers reflect on that process, one chapter, “Inventories of a Small World”, does deal more specifically with a sense of place. Coe focuses upon the minutiae of the child’s world, the immediacy of toys and other objects to the child’s perspective, and the sociological forces manipulating such recollections.

Coe has also written extensively on this topic from the perspective of comparative literature. In other essays, Coe examines national mythologies that dominate Childhod. British Childhod are dominated by experiences with education, French Childhod with unravelling the mysteries of words and language, Russian Childhod with Mother Russia and the mother figure in general. In a separately published article Coe details his findings regarding Australian Childhod. Here, Coe concludes that the significant myth of the Australian childhood is a love-hate relationship to Australian culture. He asserts that the predominant opinion is that the Australian child grows to maturity in a cultural desert. Against this cynicism about Australian non-culture, is what Coe calls the magnetic or “magical” quality of the Australian landscape. While writers are repelled by the mundane kitsch of their everyday built environment, they are attracted to the beauty of the natural landscape, its mountains, the Bush, coast or outback.

Coe’s polemical thesis provides a useful starting point for a wider analysis of the Australian child’s sense of place and, while his observations find a certain degree of support in the literature, his findings are far from universally applicable. As Chapters 6 and 7 of this thesis will show, Coe’s concept of an opposition between

---

10 Ibid., pp. 1–2.
11 “Childhood” is Coe’s short-hand term for an autobiography of childhood and adolescence.
suburban cultural life and the Australian landscape is evidenced in many Victorian
narratives, which, by and large, juxtapose the rigid geometry of city suburbs with
rejuvenating retreats into the countryside. However, accounts from Queensland and
Western Australia are more equivocal. In the case of Queensland, especially, Nature is
not viewed merely as beautiful and redemptive, but at times as threatening in its
primitive impulses. Anglo-Australian culture, which can be restrictive and
anachronistic, having its roots in a different climate, becomes in these instances a
welcome buffer against the pull of the wild. So, too, in Western Australian narratives,
the isolation of distance plays a part and, while remote coastal zones are areas of
rejuvenation for the psyche, there is also a concurrent fear of the land’s indifference to
humans. There is the sense that civilization, rather than being suffocating, is all too
fragile.

Several studies of Australian autobiography also provide useful background. John Colmer’s *Australian Autobiography: The Personal Quest*\(^\text{14}\) examines some of the
most famous Australian works according to how they construct the individual writer’s
pilgrimage towards discovering personal truth and social place. David McCooey’s
*Artful Histories*\(^\text{15}\) is structured around themes arising from the autobiographical genre
and, though not particularly focussed upon childhood, examines texts in relation to
histories, families and fiction, as well as mythologies. McCooey also includes a
chapter on place, which examines types of place in the child’s experience: the house,
the garden and Australia’s place in the world.\(^\text{16}\) His work on the house in particular
feeds into a wider interest in the critical arena concerning homes and dwellings, much
of which was sparked by David Malouf’s *12 Edmondstone Street*.\(^\text{17}\) Numerous studies
have analysed the physical and metaphorical dimensions of the house.\(^\text{18}\) While
architecture does play a role in the formation of a sense of place in Australian writing

---


\(^{16}\) Ibid., p. 138.


\(^{18}\) See especially Elizabeth Ferrier, “Mapping the Space of the Other: Transformations of Space in
Gillian Whitlock, “The Child in the (Queensland) House: David Malouf and Regional Writing”, in Nettlebeck, Amanda (ed),
from all regions, it is in Queensland where architecture is a central preoccupation. The iconic Queenslander House, in which many twentieth-century writers grew up, has a distinctness of style and materials that connects it more strongly with its region than is the case for dwellings in other parts of the country. It is extensively discussed in Chapter 5 of this thesis.

Joy Hooton has published a significant study of autobiographies by Australian women, which includes a chapter on place. Hooton makes the important observation that memory of place involves contemplation of time, thus her analysis of place also examines the elements of nostalgia and the sense of a lost past so common to life writing. In her appraisal of national and personal myths, she asserts that women writers seem more concerned with the personal and intimately-known place of childhood than with exploring national or regional mythologies. This thesis, however, aims to show that, while writers may not be consciously paying tribute to wider mythologies of place, they are influenced by them, and their reflections on personal space frequently exhibit continuities with the experiences of others from their time and region of Australia. Hence it is often through quite personal or private reflections that regional mythologies are birthed and find meaning.

As well as these studies of autobiography, writing on Australian regionalism offers valuable background to this thesis. The most extensive is a two-volume study by Suzanne Falkiner, *The Writer’s Landscape*. The traditional dichotomy between bush and city is upheld in Falkiner’s work as the two volumes respectively examine Wilderness and Settlement. Both volumes include lengthy extracts ranging from colonial literature to recent publications. While Falkiner’s work does use a substantial amount of autobiographical material, in the form of letters as well as published life writing, these are included along with examples from fiction and historical writing: Falkiner’s study is a survey of Australian writing about particular environments or cities rather than an enquiry into the process of writing about place.

---

20 Ibid., p. 342.
21 Ibid., p. 286.
Bruce Bennett’s collection of essays, *An Australian Compass*, also provides a useful exploration into issues surrounding regionalism and sense of place. Bennett’s study attempts to correct the over-simplification that Australian culture is defined by a “Sydney or the Bush” dichotomy. Embracing a broad spectrum of topics including landscape, heroism and wartime culture, as well as special studies on several key Australian writers, Bennett’s collection explores a sense of place both on a broadly national level, and also on a more local plane. There is a special emphasis on Western Australian writing and regionalism, which comes both from Bennett’s choice of several Western Australian authors for close study, as well as his own personal experience as a Perth resident and academic.

By and large, other work on literary regionalism takes the form of shorter publications, articles and anthologies concerning Western Australia, Queensland, and Tasmania. Because of their geographic distance from the dominant south-eastern states, regionalism is more strongly developed in the critical arena for Western Australia and Queensland than it is for Victoria. The emergence of the Fremantle Arts Centre Press, and the University of Queensland Press, has fostered this developing regionalism. Bruce Bennett has published a bibliography of Western Australian writing, and many articles concerning regionalism in these two states have been published in journals, including essays by prominent authors such as Peter Cowan, Elizabeth Jolley, Tim Winton, Thea Astley and David Malouf on the importance of a sense of place to their life and work.

---

24 Ibid., p. 16.
26 Bruce Bennett, *Western Australian Writing: A Bibliography*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press/Centre for Studies in Australian Literature, University of Western Australia, Fremantle, 1990.
As well as these critical studies, it is useful to outline here some key themes that have influenced Australian writings about place and childhood. Twentieth-century Australian writers have inherited and absorbed concepts from both their colonial forebears and from British and European sources. These concepts continually reappear in twentieth-century Australian narratives, often transformed and adapted to suit new contexts. The sense that childhood is a unique phase of human development, possessing distinct modes of viewing both the self and the external world, was first popularised by nineteenth-century Romantic poets, such as Blake and Wordsworth, whose work followed that of European philosophers, most significantly Rousseau. Alongside notions inherited from the British Romantics, Australian literature has developed mythologies all its own in relation to childhood, landscape and the Anglo-European’s position within it.

**Romanticism: Wordsworth’s Child as Nature’s Priest**

While Australian writers have been influenced by the full spectrum of British and European Romantics, it is useful here to briefly consider Wordsworth’s “Immortality Ode” and *The Prelude*, which typify the concerns of the period. In the “Immortality Ode”, Wordsworth voices contemporary Romantic concepts concerning the child’s moral purity and innocence in the face of the adult world’s corruption. The “Immortality Ode” reveals Wordsworth’s belief that the child has a unique kind of spiritual wisdom, a “vision splendid” (l. 73) which ironically springs from his innocence of the world, and lack of knowledge of troubles which “lie upon [adults] with a weight / Heavy as frost” (ll. 130 – 1). It is the child’s instinctive

---


29 For examples of other Romantic works which echo Wordsworth’s elevation of the cult of childhood, see generally William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, as well as the work of John Clare and Felicia Hemans, who also identify childhood with a superior moral state and a heightened connection with Nature. Hemans’ poem “Nature’s Farewell” (ll. 30, 38, printed in Wu, op. cit., pp. 994–995) depicts Nature urging a youth not to rush off to the city, because once the “breath of the world” is “on thy spirit free … Thou wilt miss from our music its loveliest tone”. Clare’s Sonnet (First Published *London Magazine* 6 [1822] 272) printed in Wu, op. cit., p. 997) wistfully imagines the persona’s isolation from the world as a child, “left in some lone place where the world is wild”, where innocence can be sustained, “Emparadised in ignorance of sin”.

responsiveness and guileless trusting attitude that make him the repository for life-changing wisdom.

The “Immortality Ode” is an example of the movement within Romanticism to identify childhood with the prelapsarian human state. Moral innocence is sourced in childhood’s lack of knowledge, which in turn finds resonance in the prelapsarian condition of lacking the knowledge of good and evil. This condition of naivety is attributed with qualities of heightened spirituality and otherworldliness: Wordsworth’s child in the Ode is depicted “trailing clouds of glory”, and the poet further asserts “Heaven lies about us in our infancy”. Religious imagery of light and dark is employed to differentiate the child’s blissful state from that of maturity, once “shades of the prison-house” have begun to close around the growing boy. The connotation here is of pollution by sin and its attendant “chains”.

Paul Kane observes that the Romantic poets’ eagerness to imbue the child figure with prelapsarian innocence, according to the mythology of Eden, is linked to Romanticism’s preoccupation with poetic origins and individual genius.\(^{30}\) Drawing upon the works of other scholars in the field, Kane observes that the Romantics desire “an originary innocence that can be taken not only as ‘a return to “Unity of Being,”’ but as the ontological ground of creation or inspiration.”\(^{31}\) While the Immortality Ode engages with the spiritual and moral dimensions of childhood, in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth explores his personal childhood experience with Nature, and the formation of his poetic inclination. For Wordsworth, the poetic imagination is strongly associated with both childhood, the “infant sensibility” of the artist, and with Nature. Wordsworth values childhood primarily because the child is thought to have a unique, vital and interactive relationship with the natural landscape:

Youth maintains
In all conditions of society


Throughout *The Prelude*, Nature is portrayed as a beneficent force, like a parent, that prompts and guides the child and gradually teaches him all he needs to learn. There, young Wordsworth enjoys a quasi-mystical union with the countryside of his youth, attuning his spirit to its rhythms and voice. Wordsworth depicts his child self in many rapturous solitary wanderings in the natural world, and in so doing attempts to recreate “That spirit of religious love in which / [he] walked with Nature” (Bk. II, l. 376). Nature is overwhelmingly a beneficent force, harmonious and continuous with the basic elements of human existence.

According to both Kane and Paul de Man, the Romantic poets’ preoccupation with origins springs from the fact that words, or the language of poetry, “originate out of nothing”. Kane points out that the Romantic poet desires:

> not only to originate a language that has the status of an object, but to be the ground from which such objects originate. With the romantic tendency to fuse subject and object, we get an identification of the origins of object-language with the origins of the poetic self.\(^{33}\)

In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth traces the inspiration and language of poetry back to Nature. Nature, for Wordsworth, is an active, and interactive, personified force, and Wordsworth depicts the landscape communicating with the child via a primal, wordless language. This language springs from the earliest, most basic relationship of mother and infant. Just as the child holds “mute dialogues with [his] mother’s heart” (Bk. II, l. 283), so too does he engage in “unconscious intercourse with the eternal beauty, drinking in / A pure organic pleasure from the lines of curling mist, or from the level plain” (Bk. I, ll. 589 – 93). These unspoken, instinctual encounters are supplemented with other experiences where Wordsworth describes his interaction with Nature through verbal metaphors. Sometimes, Wordsworth imbues Nature with the qualities of speech; for example, where he asserts “The earth / And common face of nature *spake* to me” (Bk. I, l. 614), or claims to have heard “the *voice* / Of mountain echoes” (Bk. I, ll. 389 – 90, emphasis added). Our sense that the landscape has a code or language of its own, that may be accessible to the human artist if he attunes his


being to its rhythms, is heightened by the depiction of Wordsworth standing “Beneath some ancient rock, listening to sounds that are / The ghostly language of the ancient earth” (Bk. II, ll. 327 – 8).

The child poet is “creator and receiver both” and works “in alliance” with the natural objects he beholds (Bk. II, ll. 273 – 4). Creation is thereby made a property both of Nature and of the mind that serves her. Indeed, Wordsworth sees in the landscape his own activities and moods reflected back to him. The precipices “ring aloud”, and the crags “tinkle like iron” in echo of the children’s joyous “din” while ice skating (Bk. I, ll. 466 – 72), and when the Boy of Winander blows hootings to the owls, the voices of boy, owls and echoes all duplicate and merge with each other: “long halloos, and screams, and echoes loud, / Redoubled and redoubled – concourse wild / Of mirth and jocund din” (Bk. V, ll. 402 – 4). Yet, the landscape for Wordsworth never becomes a mere reflection of his individual consciousness, but rather retains a distinctive voice and presence all its own. Into the joyous laughter of the ice skating, “the distant hills / Into the tumult [send] an alien sound / Of melancholy” (Bk. I, ll. 469 – 71) while in pauses of silence between the mimic hootings “a gentle shock of mild surprise ... carrie[s] far into [the child’s] heart the voice / Of mountain torrents” (Bk. V, ll. 407 – 9). The landscape thus has an awesome, huge and powerful aspect that is foreign to the child, but which he yearns to share. That this presence is still described in linguistic terms (“voice”) indicates that it is possibly assimilable to human experience.

The later books of The Prelude show Wordsworth struggling to carry the bond between himself and Nature into adulthood, but he asserts that his poetic gift springs from his rare ability to maintain his “infant sensibility” and the intimate “communion” with nature that it allows. Poetic creation is, for Wordsworth, the result of a partnership between his artistic mind and Nature, who acts as counsellor, guide and imparter of wisdom to the prophet-like poet figure.

---

34 See Onorato, op. cit., p. 621.
D.H. Lawrence’s *Kangaroo*: “the spirit of the place”

As well as the harshness of the Australian climate, colonial history, fraught with massacre, bloodshed and dispossession of the native people, has left an inerasable mark upon literary representations of our landscape. D. H. Lawrence’s *Kangaroo* is perhaps the most influential work evoking the Australian landscape as mysterious antagonist to man. The most celebrated passage from this work is where Lawrence’s character, Richard Somers, ventures alone into the bush at night and is overcome with fear when surrounded by what he perceives to be a hostile presence:

And the vast uninhabited land frightened him. It seemed so hoary and lost, so unapproachable. The sky was pure, crystal pure and blue, of a lovely pale blue colour: the air was wonderful, new and unbreathed: and there were great distances. But the bush, the grey charred bush. It scared him. As a poet, he felt himself entitled to all kinds of emotions and sensations which an ordinary man would have repudiated. Therefore he let himself feel all sorts of things about the bush. It was so phantom-like, so ghostly, with its tall pale trees and many dead trees, like corpses, partly charred by bush fires: and then the foliage so dark, like grey-green iron. And then it was so deathly still. Even the few birds seemed to be swamped in silence. Waiting, waiting – the bush seemed to be hoarily waiting. And he could not penetrate into its secret. He couldn’t get at it. Nobody could get at it. What was it waiting for?

And then one night at the time of the full moon he walked alone into the bush. A huge electric moon, huge, and the tree-trunks like naked pale aborigines among the dark-soaked foliage, in the moonlight. And not a sign of life – not a vestige.

Yet something. Something big and aware and hidden! He walked on, had walked a mile or so into the bush, and had just come to a clump of tall, nude, dead trees, shining almost phosphorescent with the moon, when the terror of the bush overcame him. He had looked so long at the vivid moon, without thinking. And now, there was something among the trees, and his hair began to stir with terror on his head. There was a presence. He looked at the weird, white, dead trees, and into the hollow distances of the bush. Nothing! Nothing at all. He turned to go home. And then immediately the hair on his scalp stirred and went icy cold with terror. What of? He knew quite well it was nothing. He knew quite well. But with his spine cold like ice, and the roots of his hair seeming to freeze, he walked on home, walked firmly and without haste. For he told himself he refused to be afraid, thought he admitted the icy sensation of terror. But then to experience terror is not the same thing as to admit fear into the conscious soul. Therefore he refused to be afraid.

But the horrid thing in the bush! He laboured as to what it would be. It must be the spirit of the place. Something fully evoked tonight, perhaps provoked, by that unnatural West-Australian moon. Provoked by the moon, the roused spirit of the bush. He felt it was watching, and waiting. Following with certainty just behind his back. It might have reached a long black arm and gripped him. But no, it wanted to wait. It was not tired of watching its victim. An alien people – a victim. It was biding its time with a terrible ageless watchfulness, waiting for a far-off end, watching the myriad intruding white men. (Ch. 1, pp. 8 – 10)

---

Lawrence’s character is frightened by the “vast uninhabited land”. This “roused spirit of the bush” has a nightmarish quality, it is indifferent, hostile and primitive with its “terrible ageless watchfulness”. The juxtaposition of Lawrence’s character, as one of the “white intruders”, against the “long black arm” that is the presence of the bush, implicitly representative of the Indigenous inhabitants, imbues the landscape with a sense of vengefulness.

While Lawrence’s antagonistic landscape initially seems opposed to Wordsworth’s conception of a far more benignly interactive Nature, there is an element of Romanticism that carries a certain degree of resonance with Lawrence’s unfriendly bush. As Kane points out, part of the Romantics’ regard for Nature relates to its otherness, an awe-inspiring vastness that is beyond human comprehension. The darkness of Lawrence’s landscape also alludes to the deeper recesses of the self – that unknowable self, possibly a primitive, frightening self. This connection of the exterior with the internal landscape actually draws on Wordsworth’s “unknown modes of being”, in book I, lines 419 – 25 of *The Prelude*, where he alludes to “darkness”, a “solitude / Or blank desertion” in his thoughts, devoid of familiarity and characterized by “huge and mighty forms that do not live/Like living men”. Nature, for Wordsworth here, possesses an awesome, mysterious aspect that is in some sense continuous with the depths of the poet’s own psyche. Yet it must be conceded that Wordsworth’s version of the “unknown” does not carry the same aspect of terror and fear that is evident in Lawrence’s work.

**Australia’s Lost Child Motif**

The image of the lost child, while not unknown in British and European cultures, has enjoyed a unique prominence in Australian culture from colonial times through to the present, and has been the subject of several recent studies, most notably by Peter Pierce and Kim Torney. While Australia's vast territory means that people did, and occasionally continue to, disappear into the bush, Torney points out that, even

---

36 Kane, op. cit., p. 14.
in colonial times, becoming lost was not as common an accidental cause of infant death as was drowning or fire. Pierce asserts that the fascination with the image of the lost child has as much to do with adult Anglo-Australians and their relationship to the land, as it has to do with children. The first part of his study largely explores the symbolic quality of the child lost in the bush, and he asserts the prominence of this image is testimony to the discomfort felt by Europeans in an environment they experienced as harsh and alien. According to Pierce, the lost child figure represents the anxieties of European settlers when confronted with a hostile or indifferent environment. This reading of the lost child motif draws substantially upon the Lawrentian view of the Australian bush and the alienation of the white human within it. Torney's study is more equivocal. While she recognises that many literary representations of lost children portray them as sacrifices to a bush that is a "disturbing, inimical force", she finds that contemporary accounts of actual incidents of children going missing tend to show that the children were familiar with and quite at home in the bush. This discrepancy suggests that the landscape functions as a repository for a more deeply seated anxiety. Indeed, the second part of Pierce’s study, focussing on the twentieth century, reveals that white civilization is also a potential threat to children, as he explores the abuses inflicted by institutions upon Indigenous children and “orphans of empire”: the angst about vanished children thus goes to the heart of our social fabric. The motif of the lost child has thus enjoyed a large amount of critical attention, and so there is no need to revisit it at length in this study. It is, however, a theme not far from Australian writers’ consciousness, and is identified and discussed where relevant.

**Thesis Structure**

This thesis begins with an exploration of one of the traditional tropes of western autobiography, the mythology of Eden. Popularised by the British and European Romantics, imagery of Eden is employed as writers idealise childhood as a time of innocence, while the onset of maturity brings a growing awareness of the

---

38 Torney, op. cit., p. 13.
39 Torney, op. cit., p. 43.
40 Torney, op. cit., p. 51.
darker side of life and its attendant corruptions. Chapter 1 explores some of the ways in which Australian writers have imagined their childhood landscapes in terms of Eden, and points to some regional distinctions, which are more thoroughly analysed in later chapters. Edens for Australian writers are far more diverse than the traditional enclosed garden, and include the first house, the beach, country retreats and Queensland itself.

Chapters 2 and 3 examine Western Australia, with particular focus upon the effects of geographic isolation upon the regional psyche. Imagery of islands, thresholds and frontiers proliferate in Western Australian writing. Perth’s distance from other metropolises – which alternatively gives rise to a sense of remoteness or paradisal seclusion – reverberates through this city’s imaginings about itself, and has a profound influence on the moral landscape. In a city marked by sand dunes which shift and roll along the coastline above a substrate of limestone, several Perth writers detect a fragile and shifting morality within their society. Their urge is to scrape away surface pretensions and veneers to reach a solid core of identity, to locate the spiritual rock and living water in a dry land, elements which will provide stability and a sense of belonging.

In chapters 4 and 5, the warm subtropical environment of Queensland provides a different outworking of Australian frontier mythology. In contrast to the perceived reticent indifference of the Western Australian outback, Queensland’s natural world is one of exuberance and lushness. Yet this lushness has a dual aspect – it is bounty that carries the latent threat of invasion and supplantion. The tension between nature and culture centres on the figure of the house. The iconic Queenslander dwelling, in which many twentieth-century authors spent their childhood, becomes the site for negotiations between the natural, the primitive and instinctive on the one hand, and the acquired social heritage on the other. Expatriate Queensland writers remember the warm climate and verdant fecundity through a veil of nostalgia, so that the region itself becomes associated with Eden and the timeless world of childhood.

Chapters 6 and 7 examine Victoria, and bring into sharp focus the dichotomy between country and city that marks reconstructions of childhood from this state. Of the three states chosen for close study, Victoria is perhaps the closest in climate and
landscape to Britain, and some Victorian writers more overtly pay tribute to the parent culture’s Romantic heritage. Wordsworthian effusions about the natural world abound, yet parallel to these are also more cynical voices that refuse to identify the landscape with any beneficent supernatural force. Writing about Melbourne city living illustrates the interpenetration of geographic and social factors in the formation of a sense of place. Working-class accounts are often dominated by imagery of the grid street plan and flat terrain, which are perceived as boxing the city’s inhabitants into bleak industrial futures. Yet the countryside offers rejuvenation, and a new perspective from a height above the mundane everyday world often accompanies turning points in an individual’s life.

The final chapter focuses upon that most popular of Australian family holiday destinations, the beach. The three states chosen for study are compared in the attitudes to beachgoing revealed in their literature. While beachgoing is an entrenched part of Western Australian culture, and features strongly in writing from that state, accounts from Queensland and Victoria, by contrast, display a relative lack of marine imagery. Sydney-Melbourne rivalry accounts to some extent for the absence of beaches from Victorian memoirs, while Brisbane’s location kilometres inland on a river means that the sea features more often in Queensland writing as a metaphorical, rather than actual, landscape. Whether as an actual or imagined landscape, the beach positions the viewer contemplating both our distance from and connection to other cultural centres, and has arguably become the most potent landscape encapsulating the Australian’s sense of place.
CHAPTER 1

PARADISE LOST:
A REGIONAL COMPARISON OF EDENIC IMAGININGS

Like writers from overseas, Australian authors commonly invoke the mythology of Eden in narratives about childhood. Childhood is typically viewed as a time of blissful innocence where the infant possesses a vision of the world as perfect and unchanging, a harmony of nature and culture. With the onset of maturity, this ideal is shattered or gradually eroded, as the growing individual apprehends life’s complexities and is exposed to humanity’s fallen condition. In the Australian context, the Eden mythology takes on added historical and spatial dimensions. It is well known that early white settlers imagined their new land alternately as paradise and hell: paradise because it offered a new start in an apparently untouched land, hell due to its harsh environment and distance from the mother country. This contradiction continues to be demonstrated in twentieth-century post-war writing, and certain regional preoccupations in literary constructions of Eden have also emerged.

This chapter seeks to introduce some of the environments that are imagined as Edenic realms in reconstructions of childhood from the three Australian states compared in this thesis: Western Australia, Queensland and Victoria. The mythology of Eden has numerous facets, and an exhaustive analysis of its employment in the literature is beyond the scope of this chapter. Rather, this enquiry will focus on features of Eden’s ideal that resonate with the child’s unique perspective.¹ As Susanna Egan points out, children typically possess an incomplete sense of the separation between themselves and their external environment, and this corresponds with the Edenic vision of the world as unified and undivided.² In particular, nature and culture are seen not as competing with one another, but coexisting in harmony. Closely related is the child’s sense of timelessness, which finds a parallel in Eden’s static paradise, removed as it is from the influences of change and death. Just as the child’s

² Ibid., p. 72.
progression from innocence to experience is inevitable, so too is Eden’s destruction. Within every Eden there exist elements that undercut its timeless unity and herald its imminent demise.

Given that antipodean landscapes have traditionally been depicted as alien and resistant to Western culture, Eden’s unity of nature and culture presents unique challenges for Australian writers. While traditional English paradises, such as the bountiful garden or rural Arcadia, are invoked by some Australian authors, our country’s unique environments have compelled writers from some regions to develop more locally authentic versions of Eden. Among others, the beach, the weatherboard Queensland house, and an industrial dockyard setting are all explored as Australian versions of this ancient mythic ideal.

Issues surrounding the nature of memory, temporality and perception are all significant when considering the landscapes evoked. Eden has always been a story of loss. Biblical scholars believe Genesis to have been written around the time of the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt and, accordingly, paradise is evoked from a point where it has already been destroyed.3 This aspect of the mythology resonates strongly with the element of nostalgia often present in life writing. Edenic landscapes are always to some extent internal as well as external, and underpinning most accounts is the sense that Eden is and always was lost.

**Western Australia: From Arcadia to Beach Paradise**

Western Australia has long been associated with an Arcadian ideal. Ever since Captain James Stirling’s original reports of the Swan River’s fertile alluvial land tempted the first white settlers to make their homes there, an element of Western Australian culture has been preoccupied with recovering this elusive promise of paradise.4 Indeed, the city’s isolation by both land and sea provides the distance necessary from busier metropolises to foster an image of utopia, and the connection

---

3 See, for example, Merrill F. Unger, *Unger’s Bible Dictionary* (Third Edition) Moody Press, Chicago, 1960, at pp. 397 and 763, who relates the theory of Genesis being comprised of composite sources pieced together by “a late exilic or post-exilic redactor”, and identifies Moses as Genesis’ probable author.

4 A good selection of writings contributing to Western Australia’s Arcadian image is found in Ffion Murphy and Richard Nile (eds), *The Gate of Dreams: The Western Mail Annuals, 1897 – 1955*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1990, especially Part II “Immigration and Settlement”.

between isolation and Perth’s Arcadian ideal is more thoroughly explored in Chapter 2 of this thesis. As Suzanne Falkiner points out in *The Writers’ Landscape*, authors such as T.A.G. Hungerford and Kenneth Seaforth Mackenzie recreate semi-rural childhoods full of larrikin adventures and sensual indulgence in an Arcadian pre-war Perth.⁵

These are echoed in the country homesteads around Geraldton that Randolph Stow describes in *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*.⁶ Rob’s idealization of the Maplestead estates as part of an Edenic childhood vision is accentuated by his perception that Innisfail “had been founded on the first day of his world’s creation” (p. 19). This comment also draws upon the child’s incomplete division between himself and what is external to his being – the outside world, other people, and especially the Maplestead family, are all in a sense, extensions of himself. He is unable to conceive of a country, or a world, that preceded his family’s presence.

Within Rob’s secure utopia centring on the Maplestead clan are the seeds of its own inevitable destruction. This can be seen in the frequent appearance of ruins and images of decay throughout Stow’s writing. In contrast to Rob’s “timeless present”, where he is the centre of his universe and “the world would revolve around him and nothing would ever change ... it would be today forever” (p. 15), all around him is evidence of change and time past. Overwhelmingly, the landscapes in *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* are poignant reflections of lost and departed glory. The town of Geraldton is old, “full of empty shops with dirty windows and houses with falling fences” (p. 2), there are many references to ruined deserted buildings, including the “crumbling cottage full of swallows’ nests” at Sandalwood (p. 26).

In this novel, the enclosed garden at Andarra is a sensual paradise where children are likened to animals in their uninhibited instinctual response to the environment.⁷ It is “an enchanted place”:

Andarra lay cut off from the world ... by a forest of gums springing out of mysterious ground in which an underground creek came and went without

warning, at times undermining the road to the house, and then vanishing. Among the gumtrees were pools and mudholes smelling sometimes of pigs, and always, hauntingly of rotting gumleaves and the tender new leaves of saplings, so that the boy and his cousin Didi on some days would throw back their heads and sniff the air with pure pleasure like dogs.

Past the thicket began an avenue of gums and figus and kurrajong and dark unfamiliar trees with fragrant leaves, in which lay smooth gumnuts, felt by the children to be in some way valuable, although they could find no use for them. The avenue was a green tunnel leading nowhere. At the end of the avenue was the closed gate of the wild garden.

The garden was a riot, a jungle, which could not be comprehended in its entirety. It was a tall palm tree rattling high in the sky above the gate. It was dark clumps of olives and oleander ... It was the Geraldton Wax plant grown into trees, and flowering, where children could perch like birds and talk very seriously ... it was above all the roses.

The white roses had taken over one side of the veranda. They engulfed shrubs at the front of the house, and clothed the dead stump of an old palm. The fragile scent of them was everywhere, mixed with citrus and eucalyptus. The flowers, the dark, neat leaves, became the boy’s image of perfection ... The petals were faultless, crisp with life. They were almost too faultless to be real flowers, too alive: faultless as china or marble, alive as painting.

The child’s world is bounded and secure: Andarra is a haven “cut off from the world”, from the truth of life’s changefulness, and also from the deeper unknown self: the gate to the “wild garden” is closed. The child’s world is one of pure sensual exultation, where the unity between humans and nature is signaled by the children adopting animal characteristics: sniffing like dogs, perching in the trees like birds. It is an earthy, natural place, where the smell of animals cultivated by humans mixes with the indigenous flora of the area. It is above all a picture of natural abundance, the garden a riotous effusion of such a huge array of plants and flowers it overwhelms the boy’s powers of comprehension.

Yet, ominous overtones are present in the element of mystery surrounding the underground creek that appears and disappears without warning, sometimes threatening to cut off access to the homestead, which represents the security of the Maplestead clan. The green tunnel of the avenue leads nowhere, implying that this paradise is a world without a future. There are numerous references to a darkness which is vaguely threatening: “dark unfamiliar trees”, “dark clumps of olives and oleander”, oleander also being a poisonous plant. While to the child these mysterious elements add to the adventure of living in a world which daily offers new discoveries, they are nonetheless foreboding. The image of roses “too faultless to be real”
prefigures the shattering of the child’s illusion of the safety and unqualified goodness of the world.

Indeed, this ideal of paradise is subverted by the child’s nightmarish experience beyond the confines of the garden. Stow sprinkles his account with images of Rob falling. Earlier in the narrative he falls from a tree (p. 57), later, he is depicted “stumbling and falling” into ditches as he wanders in Andarra’s paddocks at dusk. There, he finds himself expelled from Eden, and experiences the oppression of vast limitless spaces. His wandering is a parody of Psalm 23 as he traverses barren pastures with no guiding shepherd: “He tried to lie down beside a sheep to sleep, but they bounded off when he came near them. So he lay in the stubble, shivering” (p. 145).  

Although this episode marks the culmination of Rob’s move from innocence to experience, it is foreshadowed on numerous occasions when he is confronted by experiences that disrupt his vision of the world as unified and unchanging. The Hand Cave, for example, brings a new awareness of mortality: “Time and change had removed this child from his country” (p. 56). The words “his world was not one world” (p. 57) become like a refrain as they are repeated throughout Stow’s narrative, hinting at Rob’s inevitable awakening to the reality of life’s divisions.  

So, too, in Dorothy Hewett’s *Wild Card* the description of an Arcadian paradise is imbued with knowledge of its unsustainability. Her “house of childhood become myth” (p. 3) is described in the present tense, having become, in the author’s mind, a realm beyond time passing. The homestead is fertile and marked by an abundance of flowers, fruit and natural produce, from the almond trees that ring the house, to the orchard “heavy with peach and apricot” (p. 7) and the supplies of bread and preserves in the pantry. Yet darker elements also intrude, from the gallows where sheep carcasses hang with their throats cut, to the image of the beautiful “twenty-eight” parrots that cause her father to reach for his shotgun (p. 4). These darker elements foreshadow the succeeding chapters where Hewett exposes sinister

---

8 See Psalm 23:1–2: “The Lord is my shepherd … He maketh me to lie down in green pastures”.
9 See Anthony Hassall, “Full Circle: Randolph Stow’s *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea,*” *Meanjin* Vol. 32, No. 1, 1973, pp. 58–64, for a fuller examination of Stow’s art in balancing the images of circularity and timelessness, represented through the symbol of the merry-go-round, with the disruptive images of Australia as a “haunted land”.
emotional currents in her family. As David McCooey notes, Hewett’s childhood is stained by bitter conflicts, humiliation and deceit.\(^{11}\)

A strong sense of loss pervades Hewett’s account of her early years, as her recollections nostalgically interweave joy and sadness. Objects that recall treasured memories also recall painful loss. The old wrecked car in the farmyard recalls a visitor, “handsome, laughing Kev Mardling” who larrikined around Wickepin in the battered tourer, but later died from tuberculosis, leaving the car to be “shat upon by the turkeys, lurch[ing] into the dry grass in the farmyard, like the ghost of all those golden boys who come to dust” (p. 16). So, too, for Hewett, the childhood realm she describes is a glory that has passed, writing from the sober perspective of an adult existence marked by social ostracism, the death of a child and several failed relationships.

Such foreshadowing highlights the importance of perspective to the mythology of Eden. Hewett’s paradise has been, from the beginning, tainted with knowledge. At the close of the first chapter she writes: “The farm is the centre of our existence, our Garden of Eden, but I always know that under the bridal creeper and the ivy geraniums, the black snakes wait and slide” (p. 32 emphasis added).

A similar balancing of contradictions between a benign surface and a pervasive corruption is evident in Robert Drewe’s *The Shark Net*.\(^{12}\) Drewe pays homage to the local literary tradition of imagining the Swan River as an Arcadian realm when he explores the history of the delightful pleasure garden that once attracted Perth’s nineteenth-century elite to the Dalkieth area:

> in summer the beauty of the gardens attracted boatloads of weekend sightseers and picnickers. The Gallops supplied Perth, Fremantle and the Goldfields with plantains, grapes, quinces, apples, figs, mulberries, peaches. (p. 220)

Yet this image of Eden is subversive: instead of the gardens being subject to the intrusion of snakes or dark forces from outside, the *gardens themselves* are depicted as the intruders in the landscape. Drewe’s mention of the Aboriginal camp on the


gardens’ fringe points to the fact that the land’s original inhabitants have been marginalized and dispossessed. The paradise thus founded on abuse proves short-lived: after a sudden murder, the gardens are dismantled.

This earlier paradise and its contradictions resonate with the fragility of the idyllic image of Perth against which Drewe sets his own childhood. Drewe’s memoir is pervaded with sinister depictions of a serial killer stalking Perth’s leafy suburbs, yet this is not the only disturbing undercurrent in the 1960s city. Perth’s apparently carefree society is riddled with hypocrisy: exhibiting a paranoid xenophobia in its wars against imagined armies of sparrows and argentine ants, while being surprisingly relaxed about personal security. Drewe reflects, “the back door was never locked” (p. 111). The police and media are also revealed to be corrupt when they conspire to suppress a news story that would embarrass the Police Commissioner (p. 293). By juxtaposing past and present evocations of a false paradisal quality in Perth, Drewe underscores the deception that is at the core of the Eden mythology. Perth is not, and never was, innocent.

Alongside the Arcadian ideal, a trend has developed in recent Western Australian literature towards recreating the beach as a type of Eden, or at least as a hedonistic alternative to it. As Tim Winton points out in *Land’s Edge*, Australia is a littoral society, “content on the edge of things”, concentrated on the coastal fringe. This has a powerful psychological and symbolic impact for coming-of-age narratives, as the setting positions characters on an edge between two states: land and sea, innocence and experience. Perth’s famous sunny weather and the continued existence of numerous tracts of relatively isolated beach land facilitate this idealization of the coastal environment. These settings are rich in natural beauty and wildlife, yet, as with all Edens, at the heart of the paradise is the force that threatens it: the ocean. The sea is a traditional symbol of change and the passing of time, and, through its sheer enormity and power, also carries the very real danger of death.

Numerous authors attempt to balance the attractiveness of the coastal lifestyle with the ocean’s fearful qualities. Hewett's family getaway near Albany is exotically

---

beautiful with its white dunes and great karri forests, yet the ocean is a volatile unsettling force, as tides rise to bog cars of holiday-makers innocently enjoying the view and sweep fishermen off rocks with king waves (pp. 9 – 10). In a similar vein is Drew’s recollection of his childhood beach going, which offers a ten-year-old ample prospect of “pleasure and danger” (p. 42). Family excursions to the seaside are fraught with numerous fears – from his mother’s warnings about getting “boiling brain” (p. 37), to his father’s paranoia about currents (p. 41) and Drew’s own fear of sharks (p. 299). As the rest of his narrative indicates, the shark is a metaphor not only for the serial killer stalking Perth’s pleasant suburbs, but also representative of a wider endemic corruption and hypocrisy he sees blighting Perth’s moral fabric.14

The beach is an unconventional Eden in that it seems to lack the quality of enclosure possessed by the paradisal garden. As McCooey observes, “the garden is Edenic not simply because it is beautiful or bountiful, but also because it is enclosed; an enclosure which is always under threat”.15 By contrast, the coast is appealing as a place of openness, space and freedom. Yet, McCooey goes on to observe that:

> The myth of Eden […] need not be recreated by the autobiographer in a garden, for it is the myth of beginning-history par excellence, and can operate anywhere in which it is felt a state of grace once existed. It is the story of the loss of innocence in an unchanging, united world, for a gaining of experience in a changing disunified one.16 (emphasis added)

Arguably, Winton’s portrayal of coastal environs depicts them as regions in such a “state of grace”. For Winton, the sea is loaded with overtones of the religious and sacred, yielding “blessings and miracles”.17 For his characters, it frequently offers renewal, escape and solace.18

Winton’s Blueback19 offers a useful example of the coastal paradise as a type of Eden. Subtitled “A Contemporary Fable”, this short work of fiction traces the life of Abel Jackson from age ten to his mid-thirties and details his special connection to an isolated place on the Western Australian coast. Winton recreates a simple

---

15 McCooey, op. cit., p. 54.
16 Ibid., p. 57.
17 Winton, Land’s Edge, op. cit., p. 39.
18 See, for example, Jerra Nilsam in Winton’s An Open Swimmer (1982), Penguin, Melbourne, 1998.
subsistence life where humans live off the land, dwelling in respectful harmony with their natural environment. Longboat Bay is secluded, surrounded by a national park, and devoid of modern amenities like mains electricity and television. The isolation and lack of change in the pattern of life over generations creates an Edenic sense of timelessness. This is heightened by Winton’s use of the huge blue groper, named Blueback, as a symbol of stasis and continuity. Blueback’s size indicates he is already very old when ten-year-old Abel starts swimming with him (p. 17) and yet the groper is the same presence for Abel’s young daughter some twenty-five years later at the story’s close (p. 94).

The Jacksons’ relationship with the ocean, however, is not without conflict: the family’s ancestors were whalers and a freak storm eerily exposes the bones of hundred-year-old whale skeletons on the beach in front of their house (p. 80). This undercuts the unity effected between the Jacksons and the life of the ocean through Abel’s relationship with Blueback. Like all Edens, Longboat Bay is also threatened by external forces. Abel and Dora Jackson must fight to protect the ecosystem firstly from a rogue fisherman (p. 60), then from a chain of developers (p. 64), and, finally, from environmental degradation and pollution (p. 76). Eventually, Longboat Bay is declared a marine sanctuary. Abel has long since become an adult and moved out into the “real world” to pursue his career as a marine biologist, but he now moves back to the Bay, where he re-enters his own infancy, living “the life of his boyhood every day” (p. 93).

Significantly, this ability to re-enter paradise runs contrary to the conventional Eden mythology, which is predicated on paradise’s inevitable, irreversible loss. In this respect, Longboat Bay is not a true Eden. Furthermore, the paradise of Longboat Bay is infused with images of death, arguably more so than versions of Eden found elsewhere in Australian literature. Behind the orchard is a small family cemetery, a perpetual reminder of mortality. Abel’s father is absent, killed by a tiger shark before the story starts, and a family friend tragically dies in an accident while out abalone fishing. This emphasis on death means that Winton’s coastal utopia may more appropriately be characterized as a “postlapsarian paradise” rather than an Eden in the traditional sense. It is arguably a more positive, sustainable image, where life can
prevail over loss in a world that is beautiful but not perfect, where death is acknowledged as part of the scheme of life.

**Queensland: Nature and the Primitive**

In Western Australia, the Arcadia sought is primarily associated with the past – a simpler, rural existence, pre-metropolis. Queensland, by contrast, is often portrayed as a *continuing*, presently existing region of childhood innocence and simplicity. Perhaps this is partly because several key Queensland writers have, in adulthood, become Queensland “expatriates”. David Malouf, Thea Astley, Jessica Anderson and Joan Colebrook are in this category and more than one of them has commented that they could only write about Queensland after they were no longer living there.  

Personally, for these authors, Queensland *is* the country of childhood and there is a sense in which the two become more particularly entwined as they write from a position distant in space as well as time. Gillian Whitlock identifies a body of narratives that “associat[e] Queensland regions spatially in terms of a lost innocence and simplicity”. A commonly cited example is Anderson’s collection *Stories From the Warm Zone and Sydney Stories*, which juxtaposes the Warm Zone stories about childhood set in Brisbane against stories of adult relationships set in Sydney. Broadly speaking, the Warm Zone stories foreground security in the family and motherly love, while the Sydney stories largely depict broken relationships and disillusionment.

Indeed, the city of Brisbane is commonly linked to themes of innocence and childhood. As Jennifer Craik has observed, the iconic Queenslander house so prevalent in pre-war Brisbane feeds into a collective mythology about the past, heritage and the difference of settlement in Queensland. Brisbane’s humble weatherboard construction and provincial atmosphere cause it to frequently be

---


described as a big country town. The traditional association of the country as a place of innocence, freshness and elemental wholeness, as opposed to the city as replete with corruption, pollution and evil, is evident in some writers’ contrasting of Brisbane and the southern states’ capitals. Tony Maniaty, for example, associates Brisbane with guilelessness, asserting “We’re propelled by the low energy of our sub-tropical innocence [and] the sweetness too of being unimportant in the world.”  

David Malouf, too, reflects in Johnno that: “Brisbane, where I sometimes thought of myself as having ‘grown up’, was a place where I seemed never to have changed … Here I knew, I would always be an ageing child. I might grow old in Brisbane but I would never grow up.”

This identification of Queensland with childhood is borne out in Malouf’s story “The Kyogle Line”, which traces a young boy’s train journey from Brisbane to Sydney. This involves leaving on the train from Kyogle Station, instead of the usual Brisbane trains, because the Kyogle line adopted the wider gauge line of the NSW network. The change in railway gauge is symbolically linked to embarking on a new way of thinking, of perceiving the world. The story is heavy with imagery of crossing thresholds, as Malouf excitedly anticipates “the first trip of my life … that would take me over the border” (p. 125). The movement from innocence to experience is registered by a drop in temperature and darkness falling as the train moves from Queensland into New South Wales (p. 127). At a break stop, the narrator sees Japanese prisoners of war caged in one of the rear carriages like animals, and suddenly becomes aware that a darker world of violence, racism and war exists beyond his own hitherto sheltered life. A “vast gap of darkness” is felt to exist, “a distance between people that had nothing to do with actual space … the experience was an isolating one” (p. 131). This discovery of fragmentation and disunity ruptures the child’s Edenic vision of a united world. Malouf emphasizes the different sound and rhythm of the interstate train on its “foreign” NSW gauge as they head towards Sydney, a sound which produces a new “inner dialogue” – the dawning of experience – as the child’s physical horizons are extended south of the garden of innocence (p. 134). That this dialogue is, for him, the voice of his future in the adult world of

24 Tony Maniaty, All Over the Shop, Penguin, Melbourne, 1993, p. 34.
uncertainty, is indicated by his reflection of its dogged continuation long after the journey ends, its relentless ushering him on “to a different, unnamable destination” (p. 134).

This tying of Queensland with origins and childhood, of course, also has roots in the region’s natural climate and landscape. In the tropics and subtropics, the coastal regions experience very little cold weather, corresponding with Edenic and related mythologies of paradise as a place of perpetual springtime or endless summer. The lush vegetation and prolific growth of the wet areas also evoke primeval continuities, suggesting a region that is prehistorical and, as such, beyond the reach of time passing.

As McCooey points out, “the loss of childhood is characterized as ‘outside’ adult history.” For the adult writer, “childhood may have occurred only thirty or forty years ago, yet it is perceived as ‘prehistoric’ ”. This is clearly the case for Joan Colebrook, who grew up in the Atherton Tableland in the 1920s. In her autobiography *A House of Trees*, she describes mountains formed by the “great upward thrust” of the Pliocene epoch. The verbs imply a landscape still active, as it “draws” rain to water rich volcanic soils, producing the backdrop of rainforest to her childhood home. Preternaturally alive, it is brilliant in colour with its “vivid emerald” grass and “reddish roads” that “[vein] the earth as capillaries vein flesh” (p. 4). An Edenic unity between the human and the natural is implied in Colebrook’s personification of trees that “accepted [children] between the pillars of great trunks into what seemed temples” (p. 7). So powerful is the presence of this landscape that it has a permanent place in Colebrook’s psyche. She reflects: “The sound, the feeling, the envelopment of such constant light swirling rain has been with me always, like one of those primordial lullabies we are supposed to carry with us from another world” (p. 4). Queensland becomes, in this image, an integral part of her childhood self, still residual within her, timeless, unaltered and unalterable.

---

27 See Egan, op. cit., p. 70. See also Thea Astley, “Writing in North Queensland”, *LiNQ*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 1981, pp. 2–10, p. 2, which speaks of North Queensland’s “Edenic latitudes […where] the morrow brings a repetition of the idyll; there is no climatic change.”
28 McCooey, op. cit., p. 54.
The primitive is also a strong element in Malouf’s *12 Edmondstone Street*. Malouf effectively blurs the distinction between the natural and the man-made as he describes his childhood home in Brisbane. He depicts old style “Queenslander” houses as existing in a state of harmonious symbiosis with the landscape. Queenslander houses are open to the natural world:

Airy, open, often with no doors between the rooms, they are on such easy terms with breezes, with the thick foliage they break into at window level, with the lives of possums and flying foxes, that living in them, barefoot for the most part, is like living in a reorganized forest. (p. 10)

Malouf’s enthusiasm for this image of forest dwelling, in unity with other living creatures, points to his perception of a residual affinity with the primitive in the modern self.  As Whitlock asserts, Malouf’s house, its surroundings and occupants become “an organic entity, an ecosystem”. The house embodies an ideal confluence of culture and nature, and is thus a type of Eden for Malouf.

As with all Edens, however, other features of Malouf’s Queensland house undermine the image of unity it presents. As several critics observe, Malouf uses the architecture of the house as a metaphor for his exploration of the different elements of the self. This effectively reveals a world of divisions. While verandas are continuous with the outward social self, inner rooms, like the lavatory, are analogous to the private, interior life. More disturbing is “under the house” which is connected to the irrational and subconscious modes of being. Malouf is profoundly ambivalent about this realm that contains both “freedoms” and “terrors”. It is “a dream space” (p. 47), where ordinary rules of time and physics are suspended. Dimensions are measured “not in ordinary feet and inches, but in heartbeats, or the number of seconds you can endure the sticky-soft lash of cobwebs against your mouth” (p. 46).

---

30 For a wider discussion of the role of the primitive in Malouf’s work, see Ivor Indyk, *David Malouf*, Australian Writers’ Series, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1993, Chapter 4 “Social Surfaces, Primitive Depths”, particularly his discussion of *12 Edmondstone Street*, pp. 85–87.


33 Hills, op. cit., p. 11.
This sense of the house as a divided realm is heightened by the emphasis on boundaries between rooms. For example, the child narrator is conscious of his transgression when he enters the maid’s room in a moment of “extravagant bravado” (p. 17), and attaches significance to re-entering the house proper each morning after his night time exile on the veranda-sleepout: “Each morning I step across the threshold to find a world recovered, restored” (p. 21). In this way, Malouf’s narrative places the child on a tenuous edge between an Edenic vision of a united world and a more mature perception of its contradictions. His tracing of the child’s movement between rooms, gradually apprehending their separate functions, poises the child on the verge of losing the Eden he inhabits.

Nor is Malouf’s rejoicing in the house’s openness to nature without complication. The fernery near his childhood sleepout goes “too far back into the primordial damp and breath of things”; its nightmarish quality threatens to transform him in a reversal of the evolutionary process into a brute “smooth or hairy green thing with dirt in my fists” (p. 19). The very sense of warm lush jungle that contributes to a timeless paradisal quality in Queensland is thus, simultaneously, the serpent within the garden, eliciting unknown and therefore fearful possibilities of this primitive element within the self.

Other writers also detect a sense of threat within the fecundity of Queensland’s environment, in its wild and overgrown qualities. So prolific is nature in the face of Queensland’s traditional flimsy looking weatherboard architecture that nature at times seems poised to overwhelm and consume culture. Perhaps the epitome of this is Tony Maniaty’s image of that signature of Queensland lushness, the mango tree. In his autobiography, *All Over the Shop*, the mango tree becomes the tree of knowledge, its tempting delights harbinger of painful childbirth for Maniaty’s mother and expulsion from the womb into the wider world for the author himself:

The mangoes are responsible for this. My mother […] couldn’t sleep and left her sweaty January bed for the garden. Imagine: it’s only five o-clock and she’s twenty-two years old and nine months pregnant, and over me and her nightgown she places an apron in which to collect the ripe fruit. And reaching up, in that pre-dawn light – pure Botticelli – she goes for the fruit and slips; and falls flat on her bum.
I appear on planet Earth, in a delivery room two hours later. (p. 2)
With similar humour, Maniaty later depicts the same mango tree slowly invading his childhood home, as if to usurp its human occupants (p. 4).

Indeed, the Queensland house and surrounds are often painted as a prelapsarian world haunted by snakes, which prefigure the dissolution of the paradise ideal with the onset of maturity. For example, one of Maniaty’s earliest memories is of an encounter with a snake while toddling around his back yard. The yard is ripe with abundance, full of sounds of cicadas and crickets:

Slowly uncoiling, across our backyard garden: a place of luxuriant vegetables and now of a horrible and beautiful black killer! And then my howl comes through, high pitched and louder than any adult cry; and the only person who hears it is Virpo’s father next door. He leaps the paling fence clutching his spade, and in a flash pulverizes the slithering reptile. It bounces up, and up again like a rubber tube; from this level, where I’m frozen, the snake is horribly real; the aboriginal man’s taller than Dad even, and he’s bashing up his own traditions and gods just to save me. Very good of him, of course, with his boots on. From this level, the fangs go whizzing by, in the head of the serpent as it flies past my eyes. (p. 9)

The resonance with the Eden story is heightened by Maniaty’s reference to the snake’s beauty and his use of the word ‘serpent’. This finds a parallel in Colebrook’s recollection of the snakes in her childhood regions. Though taught to fear them, these snakes did not seem evil “having so bright and beautiful a pattern on their backs, and often lying coiled up innocently on the grass in the sun, warming themselves after the rain” (p. 8, emphasis added). Like the giant bush cockroaches that fly into their house, the snakes are “creatures in their own context” (p. 8). Colebrook’s account evokes a harmony and balance in the natural world, characteristic of prelapsarian Eden, before evil had possessed the serpent. Compounding the effect of this deceptively benign serpent figure is the fruit of the stinging tree, which introduces the theme of temptation: “ruby-coloured and especially beautiful, [hanging] like glowing bunches of raspberries against the dark leaves, as if to seduce us” (p. 8). In this way, Colebrook conveys her lack of fear as partially emanating from the innocence and naivety of the childhood psyche that is so secure in its belief in the basic goodness of the world and the absolute power of parental figures to protect against harm. The physical dangers are acknowledged but diminished in the face of the children’s exultation in the natural world. This duality in her narrative, like in Stow’s The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea,
allows her to celebrate the child’s blissful innocence, while foreshadowing the inevitable apprehension of reality, which will dissolve the child’s Edenic vision.

**Victoria: Suburbs of Division and Country Retreats**

Victoria has produced versions of Eden that are perhaps closer to the conventional English identification of childhood’s paradise with the country idyll, especially in the case of early twentieth-century experiences. Alan Marshall’s classic, *I Can Jump Puddles* (1955), portrays a rural childhood where the persona indulges in an almost Wordsworthian affinity with the landscape of Victoria’s Western District in the years preceding motorcars. In the sequel, *This Is The Grass* (1962), he details his move to the inner city as a young adult, where he must combat exploitation and disillusionment before finding creative possibilities. Hal Porter’s *The Watcher on the Cast-Iron Balcony* (1963) similarly recreates the Gippsland town of Bairnsdale as a type of Eden, rich with abundance and fruitfulness. However, as McCooey points out, Porter’s account persistently strikes an elegiac tone that propels the narrator towards the death of his mother.\(^34\) This acts as the serpent in the garden, the canker in the rosebud, so that Porter’s picture is of a blighted, doomed Eden, rich in beauty but poignantly fragile.

Writers who grew up in Melbourne’s inner city or suburbs seem to have difficulty finding within their immediate environment a landscape that can be assimilated to the Edenic ideal. Though some writers try to locate a sympathetic version of nature in the suburban garden, most efforts result only in satire and parody. Melbourne’s famous flat terrain and grid-pattern of streets are frequently chastised for creating a severe landscape that implicitly excludes nature. Louis Nowra detests the “the rigid grid” of 1950’s Fawkner. In *The Twelfth of Never* he recalls “those square blocks of land on which were built rectangle houses as if roundness and softness were an offence to the human eye”.\(^35\) Similarly, George Johnston’s *My Brother Jack* presents the Melbourne suburbs of the 1930s as a world “without boundaries or

\(^{34}\) McCooey, op. cit., pp. 67–8.
specific definition or safety, [which] spread forever, flat and diffuse, monotonous yet inimical, pieced together in a dull geometry of dull houses” \(^{36}\).

Yet, surprisingly, Johnston’s protagonist David Meredith discovers a “new Eden” in an industrial landscape. This is the docklands area of Port Phillip, where old sailing ships are moored. But it is an *internal* paradise that Meredith finds here, in contrast to the physical or sensual one offered by country settings. What Meredith gleans from the docklands is a new sense of imaginative freedom:

> for the first time in my life I came to be aware of the existence of true beauty, of an opalescent world of infinite promise that had nothing whatever to do with the shabby suburbs of my birth. The fine floating calligraphy of a tug’s wake black on a mother-of-pearl stream in the first glow of a river dawn, the majesty of smoke in still air […]

> It filled me with an excitement, almost an exaltation, that I could tell nobody about. I did not see it then as a way out of the wilderness, for the stuff of this material was too fragile to be considered as something which might be used, but I was quite sure that something important had happened to me. I moved through this newly-discovered world breathless and alone, like Adam in a new Eden, and I felt almost as if I had to walk on tiptoe wherever this shining place extended. (p. 70)

Johnston subtly evokes the concord of the natural world and human environment through his depiction of industry combining with its setting in an artistic prospect. The reference to “calligraphy” and lyrical description of the tug’s wake in the river suggest an element of design whereby the boat and water complement each other in a unified image. The religious overtones evoked by Johnston’s use of words like “infinite promise”, “wilderness”, “this shining place” are continued as Meredith recognizes within himself the compulsion to write. His movement from spiritual barrenness to fulfillment is traced spatially through Biblical imagery as he reflects, “by the time I had reached Little Dock I had walked out of my wilderness” (p. 73). Thus, an industrial setting can be a kind of paradise, possessing redemptive qualities that allow for imaginative expansion beyond the spiritual desert of suburban existence.

Accounts of later twentieth-century Melbourne childhoods reveal that few manage to find Eden in its socially stratified suburbs. This keen sense of divisions can also be related to Melbourne’s street plan. As Paul Carter points out in *The Road To Botany Bay*, the grid pattern, which presupposes homogeneity, has the paradoxical

---

effect of enticing the eye to seek differentiation. It is frequently asserted that in Melbourne, more than any other Australian city, there remains a greater consciousness of social class. Indeed, in accounts of Melbourne childhoods, sharp attention is paid to the finer points of geography that speak volumes about family fortunes. Amirah Inglis, for example, is keenly aware of the division between the “the pleasant part of Elwood which was almost Brighton” and the “ugly and more Jewish part, which was almost St Kilda”.

Barry Humphries, too, is conscious that more than the back fence separates his world from his neighbours’. In More Please, he observes that “the lazy rhythm of the lawn-mower which chattered through every summer afternoon of my childhood was never heard in those derelict back yards […] there at our back door, was another world; the world of the poor!” This awareness of divisions tends to mitigate against making an Eden of the suburbs: they cannot be assimilated to a vision of a harmonious unified world.

One example to the contrary is Chris Wallace-Crabbe’s portrait of South Yarra. Wallace-Crabbe constructs this affluent suburb as an Eden precisely by emphasizing the boundaries that separate it from working class “alien Richmond”, which lies only a short distance across the river. South Yarra is marked by boundaries, it is “a region of quietness and hedges, high walls and walled gardens” where “life was comfortable, insulated and all the distances were short”. Wallace-Crabbe likens the closure of the gates of the Botanical Gardens to those of Peter Pan’s Kensington Gardens, and this reference to the fictional little boy who never grew up evokes the timelessness of Eden.

By contrast, it is a sense of social as well as geographic marginalization that leads writers to portray Melbourne’s northwestern fringe suburbs as a place of exile in the decades after World War II. Home mainly to poorer and migrant families, residence in these regions is endured in the belief that it is only a temporary solution until family fortunes improve. Serge Liberman’s story, “Two Years in Exile”, describes a Jewish family’s sense of alienation and displacement in the harsh, dry,
dusty outer Melbourne suburbs. For them, it recalls generational memories of wandering in the wilderness of a Biblical wasteland. By contrast, the “greyer, rowdier, cruder centre of St Kilda” seems a promised land, because, though “foetid its every corner”, it has a vibrant Jewish community. 42 In similar tones is Louis Nowra’s description of the 1950s Housing Commission suburb of Fawkner in *The Twelfth of Never*. His is an apocalyptic landscape, where “in summer the dry friable earth opened up cracks large enough to place your hands or even your feet down inside them and in winter it turned into a black clag as if it were not so much proper soil but a gelatinous pulp which stuck to your shoes and trouser cuffs like inky porridge” (p. 21). The edge of civilization, Nowra’s street is at the suburb’s outermost reach and overlooks vast flat, barren paddocks.

Fawkner can be contrasted with a later suburb of Nowra’s youth, leafy middle class McLeod. There, the grass is “so green it almost hurt the eyes after the dusty dryness of Fawkner’s paddocks” (p. 213). McLeod seems the epitome of the Garden State: “Nature in this new suburb”, Nowra writes, is “lush, exuberant and prolific. Compared to Fawkner, McLeod was an Eden” (p. 214). Yet the falsity of this impression is driven home by the position of the insane asylum opposite his new home. Far from flourishing in the new opportunities this more prosperous place offers, Nowra senses a profound difference between himself and new school friends. McLeod proves rigid and hostile, a parody of paradise.

In his review of *The Twelfth of Never*, Simon Petch identifies Nowra’s use of various tropes of autobiography, including crisis and resolution, and epiphany. Yet he mentions among these tropes the “fall or expulsion from Eden”. 43 While Nowra does experience a serious “fall” and head injury, which launches him into a kind of “limbo”, his narrative is arguably remarkable more for the absence of any truly Edenic realm in his account of his early years. Nowra’s home environment seems constantly marked by violence and manipulation, leaving him to seek out alternative “Edens” on summer holidays with country relatives. He finds solace in time spent roaming the hills with only dogs for company at his Uncle’s home in Locksley. There he says “I

felt a rare true contentment and I daydreamed of hunting rabbits with my dogs forever in this paradise which was free of all responsibilities” (p. 255).

Indeed, the escape to the country remains the most common image of Eden in accounts of urban Victorian childhoods. A good example is Inga Clendinnen’s *Tiger’s Eye*, where the author recalls holidays to a beach cottage at Wye. The spot’s Edenic aspect is emphasized by its isolation and pure air, wholesome rambles in the bush and, significantly, the abrupt cessation of these adventures after an incident involving snakes. A mysterious foreign couple pays Ben and Inga to catch snakes for venom research (p. 66). The following year, the trips up river are replaced with sexual experimentation, as Ben has a girlfriend and Inga gets into trouble for coupling with a man who doesn’t realize she is below the age of consent (p. 68). After this, Inga is no longer invited to the beach cottage – she has passed from innocence to experience, through snakes and sex.

The image of country purity need not be spatially distant from the suburbs, as long as there is a sense of separation from the everyday world. An earlier version of Eden for Clendinnen is found in her home district of Geelong, when she visits an old house owned and kept by three spinster sisters in a Quaker-style primitivism. Invited in by the sister who is “a bit slow” and does not talk (p. 45), she enters a realm of country housekeeping of a bygone era. The lack of speech implies a prelinguistic haven cut off from the modern world outside, as child and adult communicate through tugs and glances, experiencing the beauty of dew on spider webs, feeding chickens and collecting eggs (p. 45).

While Eden is a powerful and enduring mythology surrounding reconstructions of childhood, the expression of this ideal differs among Australia’s regions. Some Western Australian writing shows an intention to import the English Arcadian ideal, though other more recent works identify the beach or coastal paradise as a more locally authentic type of Eden. In Queensland, evocations of the primitive and warm fertile climate are used to link the region’s environment with the timeless ideal of Eden across rural and suburban areas, with the vibrant fecundity of the natural

---

world contributing both to the evocation of paradise and also to its undoing. Victoria, both in the case of earlier twentieth-century writings and more recent ones, has more obviously clung to the conventional depiction of Eden as a country paradise. Yet it too has spawned some unconventional representations of Eden, such as Johnston’s docklands. While some of the examples employed in this discussion may lack significant elements of the Edenic ideal, they nevertheless create places of similar emotional and spiritual significance for the characters who inhabit them. Such attempts to realistically portray local landscapes in terms of an ancient mythology, in themselves, illustrate a yearning towards the unity of nature and culture central to the ideal world of Eden.
CHAPTER 2

WESTERN AUSTRALIA’S ISOLATION

This is the real Australia, we said, the wildflower state! Here we come true and clean. The rest may have opted out, but the Nullarbor, that mythic desert place, and the long running tides of the Indian Ocean have guaranteed out isolation, our purity and our paranoia.¹

Western Australian regional identity is one that has sprung largely from geographical isolation. The state’s population is concentrated on a narrow coastal fringe, bounded on one side by the immensity of the Indian Ocean, and on the other by desert. Over three thousand kilometres separates Perth from Australia’s Eastern States centres of commerce, resulting in its being “the world’s most isolated city”. Though air travel and modern communication networks more recently have softened the impact of distance, the state’s history and culture evolved under a consciousness of Perth’s isolation from the rest of the “civilized” world. Culturally, Western Australians of Anglo-European descent have suffered from a double sense of marginalization: firstly, as a colony of an imperial power located on the other side of the globe, and secondly, as a far-flung outpost of the Antipodean cultural centres of Sydney and Melbourne.

So remote from these perceived “centres”, Perth “might as well be Africa” to a young Melbournian housewife contemplating a family cross continental move.² But the perspective from within the region often sees isolation having positive features. A heightened awareness of the natural environment and unique flora and fauna has generated a strong conservationist trend among some Western Australian writers.³ The comparative sparsity of settlement outside main centres provides space for imaginative freedom, and the child’s mind frequently invents exoticized fantasies around the fabric of his/her natural environment. The conceptualization of boundaries and thresholds, an ironic corollary of distance and vast space, reinforces identity with

¹ Dorothy Hewett, “Heaven with a Harp and a Paisley Shawl”, preface to Sandgropers: A Western Australian Anthology, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 1973, p. ix.
³ Most notably, Tim Winton: see, for example, Blueback: A Contemporary Fable, Scribner, New York, 1997, and Land’s Edge (1993), Picador / Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 2000, Ch. 3; also the work of Peter Cowan, as noted by Elizabeth Jolley, in “Silences and Spaces”, Overland, Vol. 108, September 1987, pp. 59–64, p. 59.
place, and the imaginative possession of environment so central to a sense of belonging.

**Perth as an island**

While Australia as a whole is an island nation, arguably the sense of being “cut off” from the rest of the world is more strongly felt by Western Australians than by people elsewhere in our continent. The physical geography of Perth and its surrounds are the cause for this. George Seddon comments: “The south-west of Western Australia is an island, with sea to the south and west, desert to the north and east, and one cannot leave it north or east without crossing mile after mile of desert.” Dorothy Hewett also describes the Perth of her childhood in language suggestive of islands: “Perth in 1936 is an innocent little city, not much bigger than a large country town, lost in time and distance, floating like a mirage on the banks of the Swan River”. It is an image that emphasizes the surreal detachment of this city from the rest of the world.

This sense of effectively being an “island” settlement has affected Perth society in a number of ways. Drewe, in his memoir *The Shark Net*, notes that post-war 1950s Perth developed an air of complacency against intrusion and threat from outside. People were comfortable leaving their doors unlocked, frequently unclosed, and it was acceptable for tradesmen of all kinds to freely enter the yard and “bowl up” to the back door to offer their services (p. 111). While seemingly oblivious to human threats, the “island” mentality facilitated a fierce xenophobia and paranoia concerning natural threats, such as introduced species. Drewe details the frenetic official efforts to keep Western Australia free from “pests” such as sparrows and Argentine ants, a crusade that his Eastern States parents enjoy ridiculing (pp. 102 – 8).

Perth’s island-like seclusion has also had a profound impact upon the way its local mythology has developed. As Seddon points out, islands have long enjoyed a special role in Anglo-European cultural history. The “Fantasy Island” offers a utopia,

---

or an ideal paradisal world. The traditional “desert island” was usually a lush tropical paradise, abundant with fruit, flowers and offering a simple lifestyle of self-sufficiency, without the cares and responsibility of real life “mainland” existence. The exploratory journeys of Captain James Cook and his contemporaries to the South Pacific islands did much to develop this myth in the Anglo-European consciousness. While the arid environment of Perth and its surrounds means that it did not conform to the “tropical” island paradise, nevertheless, there developed a strong Arcadian mythology associated with the region of the Swan River. When first explored by Captain James Stirling, the Swan River was described in terms of its beauty, fertility, and pliability. Even though the early white settlers found his descriptions somewhat overindulgent and misleading, it seems that Western Australian society has been eager to embrace Stirling’s perspective on their homeland and further the idyllic myth that he started. Writers like Dorothy Hewett, T.A.G. Hungerford, Randolph Stow, and even Tim Winton, recreate the Western Australian landscapes of their childhoods with strong Arcadian and even Edenic overtones. The harsh propensities of nature are acknowledged, yet the landscape’s benign abundance and sensory delights – sights, smells, seasons and textures – are reveled in by comparison.

As Hewett elsewhere comments, the garden of her childhood is “eternally paradoxical.” “How make a garden out of stinkwort, salt lake and scrub?” Yet Hewett, like other Western Australians, has transformed the Australian landscape to conform to a traditional (European) Arcadian ideal. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Hewett in Wild Card recreates an Edenic Utopia around the rural homestead of her childhood, which serves as a haven of abundance and fertility in the otherwise fairly arid surrounding countryside. The house lies in the bend of two creeks, and a well in the centre of the stableyard ensures a plentiful supply of fresh clear water. Flowers are abundant, with pink Dorothy Perkins roses and a Geraldton Wax bush adding their colour to the soft white of the almond blossoms in summer. Birds are the flavour of springtime – magpies, tomtits, wagtails, plovers all build their various nests and raise their young in the house’s surrounds. But most significant of all is the fruit,”

---

and the orchard is central to the child’s fantastic imaginative transformation of her environment:

The orchard is heavy with peach and apricot, nectarine and mandarin, quince and pear. A silver balloon hangs for a moment on the quince tree and floats away. The grapevines are pendulous with pale green ladies fingers. The orchard is thick with paddy and pig melons. I suck the transparent globule of gum prised off the jam tree. The moon rests on the stable roof like a great ruby bubble. My mountain pony Silver steps out daintily, pulling up clumps of capeweed, her hoofs curling like Arabian slippers. (p. 7)

Yet Hewett’s Eden is true to tradition and, as in the fairytales she reads, the rose that is her world has canker eating out its heart. A harsher, deathly element is hinted at early in *Wild Card* through Hewett’s description of the homestead’s surrounds, as sobering elements intrude on the idyllic scene. In the stable yard are “the murderous gallows, dripping blood and fat, where the sheep hang with their throats cut” (p. 4). In one sense, this is simply addressing a reality of rural life, which involves killing: amongst the produce in the pantry (jam, sugar and potatoes), a sheep’s head floats in a white basin, indicating that death is an integral part of the farm’s abundance (p. 6). Yet, conventional Edenic imagery of corruption signals a blighted paradise: the “black snakes” that slide under the bridal creeper and geraniums manifest themselves in the form of bitternesses and prejudices amongst the adults in her family, and emotional manipulation and threats of violence are prevalent. Elsewhere, Hewett describes the “snake” in more conventional terms: it is “change, sex, adulthood, the journey outwards into the corrupt world”.9

If the metropolis of Perth has traditionally viewed itself as enjoying an island-like, idyllic carefree existence then, arguably, Rottnest Island and the mythology that has grown to surround it offers an intensified microcosm of this ideal. Rottnest Island is “legendary” in the culture of Western Australia. As Seddon says, the mythology surrounding Rottnest Island sustains the Western Australian self image as a society that is “friendly, gregarious, simple, unpretentious, pleasure loving and egalitarian.”10 Lying only a few kilometres off the coast of Fremantle, visible from the city, and an hour’s ride by ferry, Rottnest is a favourite holiday destination for Perth residents, particularly young adults. It is still a popular “schoolies” destination, and so enjoys a

---

9 Ibid., p. 100.
connection with adolescent rites of passage. Motorized traffic is limited to a few official vehicles; otherwise, transport around the island is on foot or by bicycle. The island offers several beaches and bays for swimming, and is renowned for its casual atmosphere: many visitors are happy to walk around barefoot. It is often described as being “outside time”; people go there to unwind and not be ruled by their usual workday schedule. Seddon describes Rottnest as:

> the quintessence of ‘some place else’ ... Rottnest stands for a range of qualities that are precious to Western Australians. It is, in a sense, a place that still lives on in the Age of Innocence, or is thought to do so, although if ‘innocence’ is imprinted on one side of the coin that is Rottnest, ‘licence’ is on the other ...  

Indeed this dual nature of Rottnest can be seen in the contrasting appraisals given by Dorothy Hewett and Robert Drewe. In *Wild Card*, Hewett describes Rottnest as having “a feeling of such unspoilt timelessness that it was like living in a dream country on the edge of the world” (p. 74). However, what Robert Drewe associates Rottnest with is sex. Drewe asserts that the island is “where Western Australians lost their virginity”:

> Just mention the name of this little limestone-and-coral outcrop nestling on the horizon and people either winked or looked nostalgic. Or, in my parents’ case, disconcerted and suspicious. Rottnest was legendary. Only thirteen miles off the coast, it could have been thirteen hundred miles away. If might have been passed over by the old Dutch explorers, then the French and the English, but now it had a reputation as the most relaxed and seductive place anywhere. People – well, girls – were supposed to do things which on the straitlaced mainland would give them a ‘bad name’. (p. 143)

Indeed, it is where Drewe witnesses sex for the first time – a seedy encounter between the island’s baker and his one-armed assistant, covered in flour – and where he has his own first romantic encounters with girls, retold with humour typical of such “coming of age” autobiographical episodes. Rottnest then, for Drewe, is firmly cemented as an environment of transition, between childhood and maturity.

In this sense, Rottnest is another type of Eden. Paradisal, it embodies both the promise of innocence and separation from the everyday world but simultaneously presents the element of temptation in the form of sexual licence, which becomes innocence’s undoing.

---

Not only towns and cities can become islands, but individuals as well. The geographical realities of vast distances and physical isolation in Western Australia become internalized, as evidenced in an array of creative works that centre on emotional distance and what Fay Zwicky calls a “failure of intimacy”. Though addressing Australian literature in general, her point seems especially applicable to Western Australian writing. Both Beth Watzke and Elizabeth Jolley point out that isolation from human intimacy is a prominent theme in Peter Cowan’s short stories, such as “Isolation”, “The Fence”, “The Valley”, “Escape”. In these and other examples, characters whose life’s work is cultivating land in far-flung places have difficulty in bonding with other people, and, in Watzke’s words, “try to connect as if across vast spaces”. The long time spent in isolation, tilling the soil, leads the central characters to form a closer bond with the land than with their fellow humans.

This phenomenon of emotional distance is arguably one more often associated with mature characters, as adults tend to be far more self-conscious and inhibited than children, who naturally have a higher degree of spontaneity. In Randolph Stow’s *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*, it is Rob’s alter-ego, his older cousin Rick, who suffers from a failure of intimacy. Cutting himself off from the family clan, and repudiating the love offered by his fiancée Jane, he takes the path of emotional isolation, which is finally reinforced spatially by his decision to leave Australia for Europe. Yet unlike Cowan’s stories, Stow’s novel suggests that it is Rick’s particular response to the dehumanizing trauma he suffered as a prisoner of war rather than the land which causes his isolation: the distances of the land, instead, mirror his internal psyche rather than acting as a catalyst for his emotional frigidity.

Adolescence is often marked by a sharpening of emotional isolation, and for Simone Lazaroo’s character in *The World Waiting to be Made*, the sense of estrangement from society is felt acutely at school-leaving age when she goes on a holiday down south with a friend. As the pair leaves Perth, the narrator’s friend, Sue,
reveals that she is pregnant, and suffering from feelings of being abandoned and exploited by men. Over the next few days, the two girls are isolated by their femininity: excluded from engaging with the landscape they are on holiday to enjoy by male sexual predation. On their first morning outside Bunbury, they are compelled to retreat from the picturesque beach when young men, obviously eager to flirt, approach their car. The landscape is a fleeting vision as they retreat:

I turned to glimpse the view as we accelerated out onto the road. A dune appearing almost too sheer to scale dropped into a pale turquoise bay, but there was no time to test the water or the steepness, for now Sue was a fugitive too. (p. 157)

Shortly after, the girls’ holiday shack is implicitly portrayed as a hostile realm because it is littered with Playboy magazines and their images of female commodification.

In this novel, the narrator, though experiencing alienation due to racism and sexism throughout her childhood and adolescence in suburban Perth, is brought to a new level of loneliness and emotional isolation as a young teacher stationed in the remote Kimberleys. There, the cultural distance between herself and the rest of the (white) staff seems accentuated, stretched out by the vast expanses of red desert surrounding the township. When the narrator forgets to bring money to a staff meeting to enter their Melbourne Cup sweepstake, and then the horse she is issued on an IOU basis wins the race, the rest of the staff give her an icy reception, which she sees as related to their physical circumstances:

I was too embarrassed to mind. I realized how hard Debbie worked to organize such events. The bet for her was on improving her social standing in our isolated little circle. Whereas for me, already so much on the outer in such a race, the bet had seemed only to be about whether the Melbourne Cup race caller would be heard from twelve thousand miles away over the silence of so much midday desert and desperation, so much lettuce wilting on platters. (p. 201)

In this case, physical isolation compounds her sense of cultural difference, resulting in the narrator’s intensified sense of estrangement from the small community.

While perhaps felt more acutely in adolescence and maturity, emotional distance is not absent from the lives of some children. In Wild Card, Dorothy Hewett reconstructs her childhood in the remote farms around Wickepin largely to conform to an Arcadian ideal; yet there is also an undercurrent of emotional alienation. This is
connected to the farm’s physical isolation: “It is 1933 and I live at the ends of the earth. This really is another country, all the wenches are dead, and I am a misfit ... a little girl who will grow up to be a writer, brought up on a wheat and sheep farm at Malyalling via Wickepin, the Great Southern of Western Australia ... New Holland, Terra Australis, the Great South Land” (p. 11). Hewett’s relationship with her mother is strained from when she is a very young child, largely due to her mother’s intense, often hysterical personality. Manipulative and abusive, Hewett’s mother threatens suicide, and beats the young Dorothy frequently.

While Hewett enjoys playing fantastic games with her younger sister, there is certainly a part of her that is more comfortable with solitude. Like Cowan’s characters, she sometimes finds more kinship with the inanimate than with the human world. Hewett recalls a moment, “Burying my face and skinny body against the trunks of trees, I always feel more like a tree than a child” (p. 18). Later she describes how she enjoys being by herself, hiding somewhere to read: “I sit there in the silence – listening. I can hear my sister calling and I feel mean, but I hug my aloneness and pretend I can’t hear her. I run further away to Windy Ridge and stand under the salmon gums, staring up through their sparse high branches, watching the crows cawing and rocking in the wind” (p. 41). At least in this early section, Hewett’s autobiography conforms very much to the Wordsworthian ideal of the artist’s “seed-time”: constructing her as someone with a special affinity with nature and a Romantic yearning for solitude within it. Physical and emotional isolation is shown to play a vital role in the development of the writer within her. In this way, her work corresponds with that of writers like Cowan, whose characters, while often experiencing difficulty in forming human bonds, as Jolley points out, experience solace and deep self-discovery from environments of solitude.17

Indeed, Hewett at times exaggerates the isolation of her childhood landscapes, heightening their exotic quality in order to write herself into the Romantic tradition of the solitary child. Her initial account of visits to the family holiday spot at Albany portrays the scene as desolate and unpopulated:

17 Jolley, op. cit., p. 61.
The landscape is forbidding and melancholy, with black rocks and low dark scrub lit by the occasional gleam of sunlight on granite or wave or sand dune. The places around us have magical names like Torbay, Nornalup, Nannarup and Two People Bay, Lagoon and ocean, seabird and scrub, lonely and deserted, are surrounded by great karri forests where you can drive a car through a hollow tree. A petrified forest covers the sand dunes. We fish on mirror-smooth rivers. In their green depths white drowned forests drift, quivering … (p. 9)

The only people besides her family that Hewett mentions (Dutch explorers, colonial ladies, and a drowned honeymoon couple) have long departed, implying that Hewett’s family are the only residents of the gothic, dreamlike environment. Yet, later in Wild Card, she describes a far more social scene at Albany, including picnics with cousins and art lessons at a neighbour’s house (pp. 36 – 7). So much fuller is the detail of human activity that it seems a different place, revealing the initial portrait to be a heavily romanticized one which, like the description of the orchard at Wickepin, is constructed to conform to the fairytale landscapes of Hewett’s childhood reading. Isolation thus feeds the child’s imagination, opening the mind to a new world of fantastic possibilities.

**Distance, Boundaries and Thresholds**

As well as invoking imagery of islands, Western Australian writers also negotiate the theme of isolation through juxtapositions of vastness and boundedness. The two do not stand in a diametrically opposed relationship to one another, because paradoxically, vastness can become a form of boundedness in the human psyche. Zwicky explains that in early colonial days, “men were confined as much by infinite space and formlessness as they were by the compounds of Botany Bay and Port Arthur.”18 Vastness, then, is more often felt to be oppressive than enabling. Paul Carter explains that the human psyche paradoxically only finds wide open spaces appealing in as much as they are bounded and form a place of limited extent. He gives the example of plains, which the early explorers found appealing as they offered a vista of openness after fighting through dense scrub. But, significantly, it is not an unlimited, horizon-wide openness. The plains enabled the traveller to get his bearings. Precisely because they were not an environment as clear as the scrub was dense, were not equally infinite, but rather a place of limited extent, they acted as a distinct point of reference. A distinct idea could be formed of them. And, consequently, by a process of

---

18 Zwicky, op. cit., p. 10.
association through contrast, they also enabled the traveller to grasp that apparently undifferentiated zone, the forest.¹⁹

Effectively, the bounded area is a place from which the wild, incomprehensible mass of scrub can be viewed and conceptualized. It offers a safe, because known, vantage point.

The same principle can be seen operating in Western Australian writing which frequently juxtaposes images of the vast, limitless wild expanse of land against images of enclosure and defined boundaries. A good example is Randolph Stow’s *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*. In this novel, the bounded estates and gardens where Rob spends his childhood are set against the wide expanse of countryside through which he travels between them. Significantly, the boundaries are frequently demarcations that grant access to the realm beyond the enclosure, for example, gates and doorways. In Chapter 1, visiting Mrs Maplestead’s house, Rob is depicted passing through a gate and crossing thresholds as he explores the homestead, moving between the house proper and the connected wooden storerooms. He then views his sister sitting in the doorway (pp. 6 – 11). In the next chapter, Rob is three times depicted opening gates of the Innisfail and Sandalwood estates, leaning on them as the car passes through and reflecting on the countryside (pp. 17, 19, 22). In Chapter 5, the estate Andarra is described in terms of an Edenic haven, enclosed, “cut off from the world”, by various gates, thickets of trees and hedges (pp. 63 – 4). Such prominent imagery of thresholds and passageways in Stow’s depiction of the landscape from the child’s perspective indicates their relevance to the child’s growing sense of self and his place in the world.

The imagery of boundaries is sustained as Rob reflects upon the country belonging to his family in terms of frontier mythology:

That was when the boy’s country, his threatened innocent Costa Branca, was seen to be again what it had been in the beginning and never really ceased to be: a frontier. His country was where the small farms ended, where the winter-rainfall ended, where the people ended. Beyond lay the open North: unpeopled, innocent. (p. 47)

He defines his country as a threshold zone, a place where he feels safe both from the threat of the advancing war spilling over from South East Asia, and from the open vastness of the uninhabited (and by implication, uninhabitable) land to the north. The threat of the war, as the Japanese progressively bomb further south, is in some respects an extension of the threat of the great unknown of the Australian outback, the hostility of which is faintly alluded to in Stow’s image of Rob’s grandfather “grubbing up clumps of Guildford grass, which was threatening an invasion” (p. 47). It is classic Australian “engulfment” imagery, which reflects the white man’s latent fear of being overwhelmed by the Other. Here, the landscape’s foreignness is emphasized by its tacit association with the Asian enemy.

In *Wild Card*, Hewett expresses a similar sense of distinction between the enclosed, often idyllic family property, abundant with fruit and flowers, as opposed to the run-down farms on their borders, which are far less prosperous: “The farms on our boundaries have been given over to the rabbits and the banks. The farmhouses fall into ruin, the fences sag; as season follows season, the bush takes over” (p. 13). In her account, the boundary fences also function as a safeguard for her Arcadian haven against the harshness of financial hardship and the less pleasant realities of adult life. Imaginatively, the farm’s boundary fences secure Hewett’s childhood realm against blight and decay just as surely as the doors her mother locks against the roaming swagmen shut out the destitution of the Depression that they represent.

In *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*, the significance of threshold imagery concerning Rob’s association with the landscape is heightened by his reflections upon the “Real Australia”, a land which has become a mythical “Other” through the romantic outback poetry his mother reads to him, “about sad farewells at the slip-rail and death in the far dry distance” (p. 68). Clearly, Rob sees these poems as set in a land that is quite distinct from the country he inhabits:

Gradually Australia formed itself for the boy: bare, melancholy, littered with gallant bones. He had a clear idea where Australia began. Its border with his world was somewhere near his Uncle Paul’s farm, in the dry red country. Once past the boundary fence, the bones would start. He built in his mind a vision of Australia, brave and sad, which was both what soldiers went away to die for and the mood in which they died. Deep inside him he yearned towards Australia but he did not expect ever to go there. (pp. 68 – 9)
Anthony Hassall views the sense of separation that Rob feels between himself and “Australia” as something to be mourned, asserting:

That a fifth generation Australian should feel, at the age of seven, so complete a separation from his country is indicative of the sense of loneliness that Stow sees as the lot of European settlers in Western Australia.\(^{20}\)

Yet, Hassall’s observation fails to take account of two important points. Firstly, the “Australia” that Rob dreams of here, is not in fact the “real” Australia, but a mythology of Australian bush masculinity perpetuated by romantic colonial poetry. That he feels distant from this realm arguably signals that he is beginning to sense the unreality of this myth, that the “Australia” of the poems is indeed a wild fantasy and not an actual place.

Secondly, if Stow’s work is read according to Carter’s theory of bounded space, it can be argued that Rob’s comprehension and appreciation of “Australia” from his vantage point within the enclosed area of the Maplestead estates is enhanced, rather than hindered, by the boundaries that separate him from it. While “Australia” is certainly mythologized along romantic lines, it has some connection with the very real vast uninhabited country in Western Australia beyond the familiar surrounds of Rob’s Geraldton farms. Just as the explorers who felt overwhelmed by limitless expanse were able to “find their bearings” from bounded positions, the fences of Uncle Paul’s farm allow Rob to locate himself within his landscape, and indeed to “possess the view” of Australia “merely by looking.”\(^{21}\) It is an imaginative gaze that Rob extends beyond his Uncle’s farm, certainly a romanticized one, but a gaze which nonetheless enables him to conceptualize otherwise incomprehensible territory.

Rob’s tendency to locate himself in the world from the bounded position of the Maplestead estates contributes not only to his geographical sense of place, but also to his social identity. Rob longs to belong to the generations of farmers and pioneers on his mother’s side of the family. That his father is not a farmer, but a lawyer and, in wartime, an army officer, means that their family home, to Rob’s displeasure, is in the town, not the country: “He was a town kid again, and did not care for it” (p. 74). “The town had its sounds and its scents and its seasons. But at times he raged against the


\(^{21}\) See Carter, op. cit., p. 147.
town, feeling dispossessed, feeling exiled from the country where he knew his body belonged” (p. 116). Rob longs to be identified as a country kid, not a “townie”, and to own land. But what he subconsciously wants to be a part of is the landed gentry that the Maplestead family is descended from. What Rob fails to realize is that the pioneering age of Australia, represented by the Maplestead clan, is all but finished: Andarra is an old crumbling Edwardian mansion, many of the rooms are used for storing old furniture and not for their original purposes, which are no longer relevant. The town is changing, modernizing, a development which dismays Rob, and the huge wild thicket of palm trees in Mrs Maplestead’s yard is ripped out to make way for modern buildings. Rob’s cousin Rick sees that the golden farming era of his forebears is not the way of the future, and so chooses to study law at university. But he is likewise dissatisfied with the new “suburban” mediocrity of Australian life that offers itself as a replacement for the pioneering age of his ancestors. Driven by an internal restlessness, he decides to leave Australia, a decision, which, in Rob’s eyes, amounts to a betrayal of his family origins. In the novel’s closing scenes, Stow details Rob’s vista of the country from the perspective of the boundary of Sandalwood:

He came to the boundary gate and wheeled, and dismounted. From the high land Sandalwood stretched out like a relief map: pale brown under dead barley grass, silver under dead rye grass, yellow under stubble; the folds of the bare hills marked dark green with wattle and gum. Sandalwood and young gums looked almost grey in the silver-brown paddocks, but the trunks of the York gum and Christmas tree stood out dark and stark against the purple brown hills... The huge, huge land rolled out like a blanket under the world-enlarging cry of the crows, which made the screech of a snowstorm of white cockatoos in the river gums by the creek sound busy and trivial and frail. (pp. 274 – 5)

That Rob chooses to view the land from the perspective of Sandalwood estate, and sees it like a map, is highly significant for what it reveals about Rob’s sense of his place and identity. For him, the world can only be viewed from the perspective of the Maplesteads: his consciousness will not admit any other perspective. The novel has detailed his refusal to admit the reality of change and fragmentation of his world, a reality that is continually intruding on his childish vision: “his world was not one world”. The Maplestead way of life is the means by which Rob chooses to locate himself, even though the “world enlarging” cry of the crows here try to draw him into another level of being. In the succeeding pages, Rick is detected by Rob’s gaze as a “blue patch”, starkly contrasted with the earthy tones of brown, green and grey of the surrounding landscape. The colour contrast his shirt creates singles him out as the
“apostate”. Rob is finally forced to admit to himself: “The world and the clan and Australia had been a myth of his mind, and he had been, all the time, an individual” (p. 275). For Rob to reach true maturity, he must free himself from his self-imposed isolation from the modern, changing Australia, and, like his cousin Rick, embrace wider horizons and opportunities.
CHAPTER 3

CITY OF LIGHT: 
THE WEST’S SHIFTING MORAL LANDSCAPE

When Carpenter sailed over this clean city in his glinting capsule and wheezed out greetings, we left the lights on all night to give him glow-worm comfort as he floated by, the man in the moon in a rage and calling exchange to trace that number. The papers made a fuss of us and we, bland hypocrites, immediately changed our views about it being a big fat waste of money and felt proud about being called The City of Light. Now, of course, we’d like to leave the lights on every night.¹

In 1963 Astronaut John Glenn spotted the glow of lights left on all night by Perth residents to honour his space orbit, inspiring the New York Journal-American to bequeath the name “City of Light” to the West Australian capital.² Coming at around the same time as Perth hosted the Commonwealth Games, this arguably signalled the provincial city’s coming of age on the international arena. “City of Light” also embraced other elements of Perth culture, notably its warm sunny climate, expansive white sand beaches, glittering ocean, and casual, “light-hearted”, atmosphere. The moral connotations of the title, however, have influenced several writers, producing works that are preoccupied with the outworking of traditional light and dark imagery in the regional psyche. Griffith Watkins’ “City of Light Suite” sums up this phenomenon in a scathing indictment of a suburban culture that presents itself as wholesome, caring and certain of its own identity, while all the time harbouring hypocrisies, moral decrepitude and an anxiety of facelessness:

... Night tries on other people’s heads and scratches political slogans in the subways. Night is a bad loser and always talks of litigation. Night dispenses

creepy comics and puts dark glasses on every policeman.

whereas:

Day plays hoop-la on the beach. It drops big coins into the disabled serviceman’s tin. Day puts a ribbon in the lost girl’s hair, runs on crosswalk lines and makes every bird a homing pigeon. ³

This conflict between seeming and reality, the bright glossy veneer of Perth’s suburban culture as opposed to its murkier contradictions and injustices, are foundational themes in Robert Drewe’s The Shark Net and Simone Lazaroo’s The World Waiting to Be Made.⁴ In the more rural setting of Geraldton and its surrounds, Randolph Stow’s The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea ⁵ uses similar imagery to expose the illusions of childhood security.

Yet, light and dark imagery in these examples of Western Australian writing is strongly linked to spatial dimensions, and the Enlightenment philosophy that accompanied imperialist actions of exploring, mapping and surveying. Elizabeth Ferrier comments:

Colonial exploration ... gives spatial form and meaning to ‘untraced’ regions, making visible, bringing to light what was previously unknown / dark ... exploration and cartography, practices which prepare areas for imperialist expansion, are presented in terms of an Enlightenment narrative, ie. as contributing towards Universal Enlightenment, Absolute knowledge. ⁶

Drewe, Lazaroo and Stow subvert this Enlightenment tradition by engaging their protagonists in searches for new truths in the darkness that imperial discourse has obscured. All three novels link the exploration of light and dark, appearance and substance, with imagery of probing below the surface on both temporal and spatial planes. History, time and the layering of cultures, patterns of violence and domination, are all exhumed in the personal and social quest for identity and belonging. In this way, writers seek to add an element of depth and vertical organization to an Australia that has traditionally been portrayed in terms of horizontal sprawling expanse by the homogenizing imperial gaze.

³ Watkins, “City of Light Suite”, op. cit., stanzas 13 and 14 respectively.
While digging below the visible often reveals darknesses that are ugly, it can also provide access to riches that have been hidden because they did not advance the white imperialist agenda. Such probing into the darker, unknown depths is a search for significance beyond the superficial, though embedded, assumptions of the dominant culture, a symbolic probing into the true heart of the self and the enduring elements of the land below the veneer of civilization. In the exercise of probing or digging, the goals sought are the geological and spiritual elements of rock and water. In Perth, the “rock” is the limestone foundations of the city, representing a stable core of identity below the shifting sand dunes of appearance and convention. It signals an element of rootedness and solidity in opposition to prevalent images of transience concerning white civilization’s hold on the land. Fresh water is the life-source and sustaining power that enables richness and growth in what would otherwise be an arid existence. The acts of sinking wells and drawing up bore water, both common practices in Western Australia, are heavily symbolic: they represent a desire to draw “living water” from deep within the land itself, thereby forging a vital connection between the earth and the people who inhabit its surface.

A Perth of Contradictions: Good, Evil and Greyness in Drewe’s *The Shark Net*

Robert Drewe’s *The Shark Net* revolves around negotiations between light and dark, innocence and guilt, and the greyness that blurs the edges of moral categories. The memoir’s dramatic tension is created and maintained through clever juxtapositions of Drewe’s tender and often humourous recollections of his own childhood in sun-soaked Perth, with ominous glimpses into the life of “Saturday Night Boy”, whose identity as serial killer, Eric Cooke, is gradually revealed. The novel opens with the committal proceedings of Cooke’s trial, and the narrator’s observation of the prisoner in the dock accentuates themes of perspective and semblance:

It’s a different sunlight – harsher, dustier, more ancient-looking – that enters courtrooms. Streaked by this ominous light, guarded by two big uniformed cops and hunched in his old-fashioned blue pin-stripe suit with the curling lapels, the prisoner looked different too. He was uglier, smaller, and, with the eyes of the courtroom on him, even more self-conscious than usual. He looked like a criminal in a B-movie ...
Drewe goes on to describe how the aura of courtrooms, “that powerful combination of law, history, punishment and varnished timber” (p. 7) could make anyone put in the dock “look guilty of something” (p. 6). His accent upon light, and the way it alters perspective, is reminiscent of *Great Expectations*, where Charles Dickens also uses imagery of sunlight to comment upon the limitations and abuses of the judicial system:

> The sun was striking in at the great windows of the court, through the glittering drops of rain upon the glass, and it made a broad shaft of light between the two-and-thirty and the judge, linking both together, and perhaps reminding some among the audience, how both were passing on, with absolute equality, to the greater Judgment that knoweth all things and cannot err.\(^7\)

In Dickens’ example, however, light is linked with ultimate good, divine authority, – it is an equalizing force that cuts through the divisions of power between judge and accused. Writing at the height of the era of British Imperialism, a strategy of domination legitimated by Enlightenment rhetoric, Dickens is at least able to draw hope from the concept of an absolute power that “cannot err”. Written nearly one hundred and fifty years later, Drewe’s text offers no such consolation. For Drewe, the light itself is a colluder in the courtroom’s capacity to connote guilt. This disparity between Dickens’ and Drewe’s texts highlights the dissolution of absolute concepts in the postmodern era. In this way, Drewe creates a space to explore his own local and personal dimensions of morality, power, and most importantly, the indefinable and often illusory boundaries between competing concepts.

The Perth that Drewe depicts in the opening sections of the novel is one of light, openness and warmth that contrasts favourably with the family’s first home in Melbourne. The garden of the Yarraville branch of the State Savings Bank of Victoria, where the family poses for farewell photographs, is gloomy and shabby:

“It was grey and crumbly and birds shunned it. Not surprisingly, for a threadbare oasis in a grimy industrial suburb, its plants and lawn were dusted with soot” (p. 24). In contrast to this forlorn aspect, the children’s father meets them at Perth airport “all smiles and wearing lighter coloured clothes than before” (p. 28). In the following chapters, Drewe describes the casual existence of the “Sand People” (coastal Perth residents), whose life centres on the beach and coastal breezes. Slow smilers, the men and boys are “tough but relaxed, even sleepy”. Life in this casual coastal city revolves

around bare feet for most of the year (p. 34). The contrast between the cultures of the Eastern and Western States is perhaps best conveyed by Drewe’s depiction of his father at the beach, conspicuously bobbing “white, serious and vertical” in the ocean, “clearing the waterways and gauging the tides”, while the local residents “carelessly brown and horizontal”, “languidly” stroke past, catching waves to shore (pp. 40 – 41).

George Seddon calls the 1950s, during which Drewe was growing up, Perth’s “Age of Innocence”: at this time, Perth was “a complacent, very pleasant, non-industrial middle class city”. Elsewhere, Seddon refers to the Arcadian theme found in writings about Perth, and Stannage has recognized a similar trend in paintings and photographs of Perth:

The river is still, the day is clear (with a haze over the Ranges to the east), the foreshore is tree-lined and the buildings rise prettily above the foliage. In the immediate foreground are trees and shrubbery providing a frame for the composed scene. The scene itself is an arcadia – a statement of the ancient pastoral of Virgil and the landscapes of Claude and his British and colonial romantic followers through to the city planners of the last quarter of the twentieth century. As Stirling had described Swan River in the picturesque language of the romantic era, so Perth has been described in word and picture ever since. In short, the Swan River forms part of the great western tradition of the pastoral idyll, a tradition which was central to the gentry’s quest for internal peace and belief in a harmonious society where men [sic] were at one with each other and with nature.

Other literature lends support to this depiction of Perth as a benign environment, its society very comfortable in its sunny climate and sense of its own identity. On one level, Drewe’s childhood conforms to this sheltered ideal. The key episodes revolve around the simple pleasures of playing with local children, trips to the beach and movies. Even the carparks of Perth’s numerous hotels and pubs offer glittering water-views, replete with images of wholesome weekend family activities. But Drewe’s account from very early hints that views can be changeable: his own version of the same vista offered by Stannage shows a very different image of Perth:

Something strange happened in the south in the late afternoon. When you looked south from King’s Park the whole sand plain and farthest suburban roofs and treetops joined clouds in a dense purple mirage which imitated a European forest. It was a gloomy storybook place of tall, angry-looking trees and hills and castles. But in real life we were all living in bright sunlight and on flat, dry sand. (p. 33)

This hints at a duplicity lurking beneath Perth’s sunny facade, one that is mirrored in the contrasting personae that Drewe’s parents adopt, alternately “Dot” and “Roy” (casual and carefree), and then “Dorothy” and “Royce” (serious, fearful and moody). The “mirage” reflects the child’s ability to imaginatively superimpose his gothic fantasy reading onto the very different landscape of his own region, a factor that increases the “possibilities of danger and pleasure” that his childish adventurous spirit yearns to embrace. But the excerpts detailing killer Cooke’s life that Drewe intersperses among recollections of his own carefree childhood tell a different story. Enthralled with darkness, Cooke plunges into the murky depths of the river for midnight swims after seedy encounters with women. His existence signals that Perth is indeed haunted by a dark gothic dimension, albeit only faintly evident in the child’s Arcadian realm.

Bruce Bennett, in *An Australian Compass*, observes that the decade preceding the publication of Drewe’s *The Shark Net* was marked by media events highlighting violence, racism and corruption in Perth. He contends “If the public culture once presumed innocence in the citizens of Perth, the climate of the 1990s is one of presumptive guilt”.10 This undoubtedly influenced writers like Drewe and Lazaroo in their reconstruction of earlier decades in Perth’s history. Ominous overtones persistently intrude into the sunny beach culture that dominates Drewe’s childhood. The wind gives the impression of ghosts playing on empty swings in the playground: “Drowned kids perhaps”, and sometimes the smell of something dead rises from the sand dunes (p. 37). The ultimate fear is, of course, a shark attack. Unlike Eastern States beaches, Perth has no shark nets to prevent the carnivorous fish from entering swimming areas. Throughout Drewe’s narrative, the danger of sharks is a constant reminder that all is not safe in this seemingly idyllic setting. The shark becomes a symbol of other threatening forces in Perth’s culture and environs, and the sense of a brooding darkness lurking behind the sunny facade is heightened by the relentless intrusion of unsettling incidents into the narrative. For example, young Drewe is plagued by nightmares of lions prowling around his house. Though easily dismissed as a childhood fear, sparked by the sound of the lions roaring from the Perth Zoo, the

vivid, lengthy description of the boy’s real terror implies that the lions represent a displaced fear of something in the boy’s real world. Certainly, Drewe expresses some anxiety about Perth’s custom of openness to unsolicited tradesmen approaching the house via the back door:

the common belief was that locking your doors was ridiculous and showed an untrustworthy, inhospitable nature ... Not only was the back door never locked, it was rarely closed. Only the swinging fly-wire screen door kept out the world. People appearing at the back door caught the house-holder unawares, maybe only partly dressed. While the front door was public, the back door was more intimate. The caller was almost over the threshold. A back-door caller couldn’t be seen from the street. Any lurker could bowl up to the back door. (p. 111)

These “‘lurkers’– axe- knife- saw- and scissor-sharpeners, window-cleaners, gardeners ... moody, whiskery, stained and smelly men lumping sacks of sheep shit and dripping poultry droppings across the path” often catch Drewe’s mother by surprise (p. 101). They prefigure the appearance later in the novel of a genuine prowler at the family home, who could in fact have been serial killer Eric Cooke.

While juxtapositions between light and dark are prominent throughout Drewe’s memoir, the most pervasive colours in his moral landscape are shades of grey. A profound ambivalence surrounds the ethical principles underlying Perth’s lifestyle and culture. Drewe explores the “greyness” enveloping issues of “shark net” kinds of protection, as his narrative continually oscillates between recognizing the need for safeguards on the one hand, and exposing the extremes of 1950s island-nation xenophobia on the other. The inconsistency at the heart of a society so relaxed about letting any man off the street wander into the backyard, yet eager to embrace wars against argentine ants and sparrows with poison and shot-guns, reveals a potentially dangerous ordering of priorities:

West Australians were accustomed to the Nullarbor Plain and the Indian Ocean keeping unpleasantness at bay. Thanks to the desert between us and the rest of the country, and the ocean between us and the rest of the world, there had never been a sparrow in Western Australia. Still, sparrows were at the top of the Agriculture Protection Board’s Vermin List. They were an official menace to agriculture, and a potential nuisance to city dwellers because they built their nests in gutters and eaves. They had to be shot on sight. (pp. 104 – 5)

The fact that the panic results from one dead bird arriving in a car-packing case from England, with no live birds ever seen, shows the capacity of the press and government to create a storm in a teacup over inconsequence. It prefigures more serious concerns
Drewe holds about the ethics of the media, concerns that are explored later in the narrative, including the suppression of one of his stories due to its capacity to embarrass the police force, and Drewe’s own temptation as a young reporter to exploit the tragedies in other peoples’ lives for the sake of a news scoop. Dubbing himself “News shark”, he confesses that he dreams of a sensational story:

If possible, I wanted even more than a shark attack on a noted victim. I’d learned my news values. The shark should be of record size and rare species ...

My fantasy front-page lead – shark attack or boating disaster or freak rip-tide – was a watery adventure story where I became the hero and got the scoop as well. (p. 286)

Drewe seeks to purge himself of the traditional “heart of darkness” in writing his memoir. He is intently aware of the extent to which he himself has been “colonized” by the forces of darkness that he sees operating in Perth, and the tension this causes him is expressed metaphorically through his fear of sharks:

It had to be that sharks were buried deep in my collective unconscious ...
Clearly some of us were born with it – like the chicken’s instinct for the shadow of the hawk. It was amazing what I saw in the back-froth of a snapping wave, in the darker patchwork ripples of weed and reef. Was that surge just a diving shag? Was the shadow really a passing cloud? Or the first and last hint of the white pointer’s charge? This, I thought, was obviously the underlying anxiety of my life. (p. 300)

The shark is a repository for Drewe’s fears about many potential threats implicit in the makeup of his society and also within himself. At the same time as he exposes societal selfishness and hypocrisy, he is brought face to face with similar capabilities lurking within his own nature.

Indeed, from the memoir’s outset, Drewe’s own identity is ensconced in the ambiguity of shadows and moral “greyness”. In a newspaper photograph of the prison courtyard, Drewe makes out himself “on the edge” of the action:

I was barely in the frame. I was a left ear, a nose tip, a cheek, a piece of jaw, a jacket shoulder, a sleeve, a hand, a notebook. I was present, but only just. I was made of gradations of grey dots. (p. 13)

It is a telling portrait of a young man with a profoundly fragmented sense of self. “It reminded me ... that my existence was marginal” (p. 14). His inner conflict has just been demonstrated through his confused feelings about returning the criminal’s conspiratorial “wink” from the dock to the young reporter. Alternately feeling pity,
embarrassment, anger, and gratitude at this communication between himself and the killer, Drewe signals that his delving into the mystery of Cooke’s crimes will also involve an unraveling of his own personal complexes of guilt and responsibility.

As Rosamund Dalziell points out, *The Shark Net* centres around shame.\(^{11}\) Shame radiates out like ripples on a pond, engulfing Drewe’s personal, familial and societal spheres. It is the expression of a form of cultural imperialism, whereby Perth’s dominant “respectable” middle class seek to impose a homogeneity of lifestyle aspirations and values, steamrolling assertions of difference. It is through the usual trials of adolescence that shame gains such a stronghold in the writer’s sense of self. Of course, the sting of many of the episodes is removed by the narrative’s humorous, lighthearted tone. Terrified of being seen by girls he admires while he is beachcombing with his father’s middle-aged, limpet-enthusiast boss, he hastily cuts short their excursion: “I couldn’t let these girls to whom I had never spoken, and who would look right through me in any case, see me (a) shell-collecting, and (b) in the company of a white-legged senior citizen” (p. 127). On a holiday at Rottnest Island, Drewe takes a girl to the movies and finds himself the centre of the community’s hot gossip, feeling perpetually dogged by a “Moral Agent”. Eager to impress, he presents his prospective girlfriend with an offering of a small shark he has speared, only to receive the humiliating reception of the girl’s revulsion and her father’s contempt: “Mr High Society’s here wearing a fish” (p. 157).

Despite the humour of these encounters with girls, the shame nevertheless seeps into his psyche and, as he grows older, he becomes paranoid that his mother will be able to smell evidence of his adolescent sexual adventures as he enters the house after a night out. He reflects that “most Friday nights actually ended for me in a state of guilty anxiety” (p. 172). This is heightened when one night he comes home to the news that his mother has been haunted by a prowler while he was out. The police detective shames him by suggesting that he should have been at home protecting his mother from danger. “I felt instantly guilty. I also felt like an interloper” (p. 202).

Suffering under a cloud of perpetual disapproval, young Drewe discovers that his family also harbours shameful secrets. He catches his father reading a raunchy

---

tabloid magazine before surreptitiously incinerating it, and unwittingly creates a stir at
the dinner table when he mentions a woman to whom his father has given a lift.
Drewe discovers that his father’s indiscretions are part of a wider rottenness at the
heart of Perth society when he witnesses his father bribe his way out of a drink driving
charge by flattering the police officers and flaunting his Dunlop connections. The
gaping holes torn in the social shark net by such corruption are highlighted in the
subsequent conversation: the police overlook Dunlop’s failure to report a petty theft
that might have provided clues to the serial killer’s identity, and prevented further
murders.12 Drewe’s personal entanglement with police corruption is also accentuated
when, as a young journalist, he is smoothly and authoritatively shamed into
submission when he attempts to publish a story detailing a serious hit-and-run
accident committed by a recently retired senior police inspector. The accident has
been erased from the police incident book, and Drewe’s sense of being similarly
erased, rendered invisible, is accentuated by his employer’s forgetting his name:
“Rodney? He’d got my name wrong, too” (p. 293).

However, the extent of Perth’s social darkness is perhaps epitomized in the
“vitriolic shaming” to which young Drewe is subjected by his family and community
when his girlfriend falls pregnant.13 Ironically, it is in the face of great resistance that
Drewe and his girlfriend do “the proper thing” and get married. In an interview,
Drewe comments, “The family wanted me to renege on the moral training they had
taught me”.14 The punishment and shaming continues long after the wedding and the
baby’s birth, when the young couple is obliged to live in Drewe’s parents’ house,
sleeping in separate rooms like naughty children. His culture is thus shown to be one
with hypocrisy and deceit as defining patterns of its moral fabric.

The insidious guilt-mongering reaches a high point when Drewe is implicitly,
and even explicitly by the family doctor, blamed for his mother’s unexpected death.
The doctor tells Drewe it is a “sixty-forty situation” that the stress caused by his
premature marriage brought on the brain embolism that killed her: “This was the best
and the worst he could do – call me in and act as if he were doing me an undeserved

13 Ibid., p. 102.
favour by saying the answer to whether I killed my mother was on the affirmative side of maybe. The jury was going to stay out forever” (p. 283). The doctor’s consultation is narrated immediately following the committal of Cooke for trial, and the injustice Drewe feels at society’s shunning of himself is echoed in his reservations about the subsequent judicial proceedings. He fears that the sensational nature of the killings and huge public debate they sparked make it almost impossible for Cooke to be tried impartially and the hearing confirms his misgivings. The jury “looked as if they would have been happy to give their verdict as soon as they were sworn in” (p. 318), while Drewe questions the Crown’s assertion that Cooke was not acting under diminished mental capacity by declaring that his smiling calm acceptance of the death sentence “looked bloody insane” (p. 323).

The subtle identification that Drewe feels with Cooke is underscored through Cooke’s description of his retarded son as “the same colour as the sand” (p. 332), and Drewe’s closing reference to his own son as “a small, sand-coloured boy” (p. 358). Drewe is obviously unsettled by the fact that a man who could commit such gruesome murders is also capable of fatherly feelings of love, pride and protection. Light and dark, good and evil, are still categories fraught with ambiguity.

A Fluorescent Commodity Empire: Lazaroo’s The World Waiting to be Made

Greyness of identity, shame and exclusion are all similarly explored in Simone Lazaroo’s novel of adolescent self-discovery, The World Waiting to be Made. Also set in Perth, this novel features a half-Eurasian protagonist, who migrates to Australia from Singapore as a young child, and is never named in the narrative. As Miriam Lo points out, the narrator’s identity “encompasses both the hybridizing impact of migration as well as that of mixed ethnicity”. In Lazaroo’s text, Perth’s appellation “City of Light” is simultaneously evoked and subverted as she exposes the darkness of racism endemic in Perth suburban culture. The narrator becomes increasingly aware of herself as a dark person surrounded by a glare of “whiteness”. Like most young people, the urge to conform makes her yearn to belong to the dominant culture, a task

made easier for the narrator than for her darker twin sister, who sobs after losing a
tooth to a school bully: “you are lucky, you are paler than me” (p. 31).

Lazaroo’s narrator quickly learns that her chances of survival depend upon
accentuating this paleness, and distancing herself from the Malaccan heritage on her
father’s side. As a child, she rushes to hide the Asian cooking utensils and spray the
kitchen with Air-O-Zone to mask the smell of spices before school friends come to
play (p. 50). She objects to her father’s hot curries, and refuses to be bathed ‘Asian
style’ any more with a bucket and dipper (p. 30). Playing with her friend’s Barbie and
Ken dolls, the narrator sees the resemblance between the dolls and her friend’s Anglo
parents. Their contrast to her own family is brought home when Sue squashes lilly-
pilly fruit on Barbie’s breasts to demonstrate “how they dress in Oobla-oobla land
where you come from” (p. 29). At night, the narrator’s dreams reflect the sense of
conflict engendered by this adventure with white American Mattel toys:

I ran through the streets of a new country with my father, who was wearing a
Ken doll hairdo and a Harlem Globetrotter’s costume. We ducked to avoid the
stones which were being thrown at him. As his Globetrotter costume fell from
him, I fled down a side street to avoid being associated with him. He had lost
the acceptable black man’s guise. (p. 31)

“Black men do have to smile more,” Sue observes later, looking at a picture of
Tropical Sunset Ken, whose skin is “almost as dark” as the narrator’s father’s (p. 38).

In contrast to the “darkness” of her father’s colouring and the corresponding
“dark secret” Asian heritage that she seeks to suppress, the world of the narrator’s
school friends is one of dazzling luminosity. Frequently described as “fluorescent”,
the other children are overwhelmingly blond and fair skinned – embodiments of what
the narrator hopes will be her own glorious future:

There, I was dazzled by a shimmer of hair, teeth and jewellery. There was
so much more goldenness and fewer foreign sounding names. I clung to my
seat on the edge of this blonde-quake epicentre.

The gaudiness of these students was far more compelling than my hazy
memories of the Tiger Balm Gardens. A phalanx of iridescently coloured girls
with improbably fluorescent names and harshly outlined eyes, glowered in the
centre of the room more dramatically than Chinese lion dance masks...

I had entered an entertainment park where I watched the show
dumbfounded, and where not one of the performers seemed to be suffering
stage fright. (p. 76)
What is striking in this description of garish “whiteness” is the imposed, or artificial nature of the display. This is a literary device whereby Lazaroo makes visible that which is commonly transparent in imperial discourse – the racial and cultural position of whiteness. As Robyn Morris says, “to destabilize the power of whiteness is to render it visible”. Lazaroo plays on this concept of the visibility of race, by ironically decentering whiteness. Though the narrator feels erased by the blonde girls’ habit of gazing straight through her, “as though they weren’t really seeing me at all ...muteness and invisibility might be my proper state” (p. 81), paradoxically, it is their own whiteness, and not the narrator, that is invisible to them.

The references to “masks” and stage performance indicate that the “fluorescent” students are masters of adopting the “face to wear”. The narrator expresses the need to alter her own appearance in terms of darkness and luminosity. She plucks her eyebrows, streaks and bleaches her hair, and applies “layer after layer of mascara”, making her lashes hard and brittle, a shield against accusations of difference. Through these alterations, she attempts to build a protective wall around herself. That such disguises are a form of warfare against the threat of exclusion is underscored by the description of the narrator’s friend’s eyeshadow falling “like shrapnel” in little flakes across her cheeks (p. 77).

As well as foregrounding physical transformation, Lazaroo’s narrative is one self-consciously aware of the transformative powers of language in its reference to a “world waiting to be made”. This world is not just waiting to be constructed in a physical sense, but “literally” needing to be articulated before it becomes a habitable place for her. In retracing her past, and in creating various personae for herself (or “faces to wear”), she is articulating a world for herself, carving out a symbolic and emotional place of being. The connection of race, culture, light and dark with the phenomenon of language is accentuated when she reflects on a white spot of scar tissue in her tanned skin:

Perhaps that knot had been gradually tightening all my Australian life, waiting for the right time to snap my caramel coloured skin into two colours, white and black; and my speech into two languages, Asian and Australian; so that there would always be two parts to me that didn’t understand each other,

The importance of language is also emphasized when she refers to the “secret ink under [her] skin, illegible messages no one, least of all [her] father, could see, let alone understand.” (p. 120). Later she draws comfort from this “secret ink”, “my Evil Genius demons”, “leaking out into the Australian earth”, when she stubs her toe during long beach walks, thereby forming a point of connection between the Asian in her and her Australian physical environment (p. 121). These walks are symbolic acts of inscription for her, as she “blaze[s] [her] escape routes” onto the landscape of the world she is slowly making her own.

The importance of mapping, inscribing and naming is accentuated through an exchange the narrator has with her Eurasian godmother, Eneah, when the family visit the Royal Show. By relabling Eneah’s “gangsters” “yobbos”, the protagonist is using the language that so often categorizes and excludes her as her own weapon:

For a brief moment I felt myself lifted to a lofty vantage point. Like the rest of the family, I was drawing confidence from Eneah’s assurance that the world waiting to be made was foreign, not us. (p. 94)

This implies that seizing of the power to name opens prospects previously nonexistent. This corresponds with theories of spatial history, whereby undiscovered country does not exist in the minds of explorers until the moment the places were named, mapped, or described in journals. As Paul Carter asserts, “it was an act of language that brought a living space into being and rendered it habitable, a place that could be communicated, a place where communication could occur.”

But language is a double-edged sword, able to wreak harm as well as good if used towards destructive ends, or inadequately deployed. The narrator unwittingly finds herself a collaborator with those who seek to judge and limit her when she adopts the “face to wear” of the “mysterious oriental”. She wears voluminous, flowing clothing, and uses airy hand gestures when she tells people she comes from “Asia”. But the responses she elicits are varied:

It was obvious to me that Asia meant different things to each of them. I’m not that kind of Asian, I wanted to say, but felt unable to explain what kind of

---

Asian I was … All I could do was feed into people’s misconceptions of Asia. I was whatever people wanted me to be. (p. 120)

By not articulating her own version of her origins, she effectively abdicates the power to present her own image to the world. Lazaroo’s title “The World Waiting to be Made” (emphasis added) casts the external world as the passive, at times indifferent, partner in the protagonist’s struggles towards belonging. Significantly, she must take the active role and make her own world, articulate her identity; otherwise neither will come nearer to completion or wholeness.

In both Drewe’s and Lazaroo’s novels, the culture of “lightness” or “whiteness” is associated with superficiality. Drewe exposes the lightness of Perth’s casual culture to be a façade masking the darkness of moral hypocrisy. In Lazaroo’s narrative, whiteness is linked in the protagonist’s mind with a materialistic consumer culture. While perhaps endemic to all suburban Australian cultures, it was perhaps particularly prominent in the 1970s / 80s Perth of Lazaroo’s own adolescence, with its large middle class sector. Writing in 1980, George Seddon comments, “Perth, to envious Eastern eyes, looks like the consumer capital par excellence, an antipodean Kuwait where the petty sheiks drive their Mercedes around the desert sands”.18 Having the right accessories is all-important in Lazaroo’s narrator’s quest to be accepted by her “fluorescent” school friends, and her teenage years are consumed with weekly pilgrimages to the shopping mall to dream about owning clothes and merchandise out of her price range:

Sue and Barbie gave everything on the racks a good squeeze, but I stood with my school bag at my feet and my hands behind my back. I was afraid of dirtying the merchandise. I was pinned to the spot by the knowledge that none of it was mine to wear. (p. 115)

Lazaroo’s choice of the name “Barbie” could hardly be more overt in linking the adolescent girls’ attitude to the social conditioning they received though years of childhood play with their American dolls. The array of Barbie dolls, with different costumes for every glamorous social occasion and accessories of a wealthy lifestyle (horse, boyfriend, sports car etc), has obviously entered their teenage psyches as an ideal worth aspiring towards. As Dorothy Wang points out, Lazaroo demonstrates

“how commodification rather than self-discovery constitute the primary process by which the narrator’s ‘Australian’ self is formed”.\textsuperscript{19}

Despite the drive of teenage culture towards acquiring material indications of acceptability, Lazaroo has earlier indicated that her narrator is predisposed towards collecting objects that define her. She has a large “souvenir collection” under her bed, including a few items left over from her infancy in Singapore: a towel from the aeroplane trip, a papier-mâché arm of a figure from the Tiger Balm Gardens, a brocaded slipper, a packet of preserved plums. Later she adds to these “pickings from her Australian life”, synthetic blue pearls, a blonde nylon wig, a palette of eyeshadow (p. 33), “a triple-decker thong, sunglasses, an earring”. But most of the objects are of little use: “damaged and ill-matched – they didn’t go far in fortifying an image I could present to the world” (p. 121). She longs for the sort of paraphernalia found in Sue’s home: “clothes, creams, porcelain, petals, perfume; every soft, solid, evaporative, breakable or ephemeral thing to keep the reality of the hard enduring earth at a distance” (p. 121). The consumer mentality has caused her to yearn not for something that will last, but rather for a panacea to relieve the burden of the “blurriness of who I was” (p. 121).

The consumer mentality can be linked with the earlier imperialist appropriation of other people’s lands and resources by dominant white cultures, as modern consumerism nurtures similar appropriative tendencies towards Asian cultures via tourism. Sitting with Sue’s friends as they watch surfing videos set in Indonesia, the narrator observes the film’s focus on waves and thick Australian thighs showing beneath tropical sarongs. The only close-ups of the locals “showed them to be shy laughing creatures, mostly with buck teeth and hair across their faces”:

\begin{quote}
I looked surreptitiously along the row we were sitting in. The faces in the audience were upturned, mouths opened.
It struck me: These people are in church. They are from good Australian homes like my friend Sue, and they have come to see what blessings are rightfully theirs. They have come to learn a way in which to consume the world. (p. 113)
\end{quote}

Later, on a visit to Singapore, the narrator discovers that the tyranny of consumerism is not unique to Australian culture, but also embraces the Asian side of her heritage. The high rise shopping complex in Singapore, ironically called “New Heaven”, gives material expression to the layers of colonialism in Singaporean and Malaccan history, while also acting as an elaborate multi-storied monument to trade and the white consumer dollar on which modern Singapore is built. It symbolizes Singapore’s social psyche, marked by “So many layers of development! So much striving upwards!” (p. 23) which is also reflected in the bitter jealousies amongst the narrator’s relatives and the disparity in wealth between them. She, too, is not immune from scathing judgments: To Middle Aunty, she is “promiscuous, a shopping slut ...Wasting money when she should be saving for a house!” (pp. 220 – 221), whereas her cousin Tilly encourages her to be more fashionable, to be someone who “dressed as she thought a young Australian relation should” (p. 243). In this way, the narrator discovers that patterns of appropriation and exclusion are not unique to Australia, but a feature of all “worlds waiting to be made”.

The narrator’s movement beyond consumerism begins on a beach trip when she collects natural, rather than man-made souvenirs: “I noticed the diversity of the leaves and stones along the bush trails. I picked up first one unevenly piebalded leaf and then another, this fretted gumnut and that stone, how like a seahorse or embryo in shape: chin and tail tucked in, limbs barely there” (pp. 158 – 9). The implication is that she is finally beginning to form some connection with the land itself, and not just with commodities. The foetus-like objects symbolize a fragiley emerging, as yet only partly formed, identity and combined with images of seeds connote the birthing of a new sense of self in relation to the natural world. This theme is developed later in the novel when the narrator goes on a desert expedition with some Aboriginal people in the remote Kimberley region, where the landscape grows warm with new subtleties of colour when she is encouraged to view it through the eyes of the indigenous people.

**Luminosity and Darkness in Stow’s Eden: The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea**

Richard Coe, in his study of autobiographies of childhood, asserts that luminosity is one of the most common features of remembered landscapes of
As he elsewhere points out, *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* is “permeated with the colour, luminosity and ‘magic’ of the Western Australian landscape”. In the novel’s opening, Rob inhabits the timeless present of childhood, a realm characterized by light: “The boy’s life had no progression, his days led nowhere... He woke in the mornings and lay watching the shafts of sunlight that fell through the vineleaves. He watched dustmotes climbing and sliding, gold in the slippery light” (p. 34). Rob’s tranquil light-infused existence is reminiscent of Wordsworth’s “Immortality Ode”, where the child is described as being “appareled in celestial light”, originating in heaven, and coming to earth “trailing clouds of glory”.

The implication in Wordsworth’s poem is that the “celestial light” of childhood carries some divine revelation or truth that is lost in adult maturity. However, in Stow’s narrative, light plays an ambivalent role. It is at once associated with the “magic” of the childhood realm that the author nostalgically longs after, yet also can be seen working to maintain the illusions of Rob’s infant mind. The merry-go-round in the sea, for example, which is actually an old sunken ship’s mast, looks “more real than ever” when the “sun was going down behind the breakwater, gold and orange” (p. 13). Light and dark imagery is thus central to Stow’s exploration of Rob’s childish illusions and his movement beyond infantile fantasy into the more sombre adult world, which carries the knowledge of change, death and the world’s imperfection.

A good example of this is Stow’s development of the image of Andarra. As discussed in the preceding chapter, this Geraldton estate is an Edenic realm for Rob. Andarra in springtime is depicted as a world glowing with colour: “Day by day the paddocks grew yellower with capeweed, the sandplain turned yellow with scrubby wattle, and the hills pink and golden with heath and guineaflower” (p. 70). Just as luminosity and colour earmark Andarra as paradise, so, too, is the shattering of Rob’s illusion accompanied by imagery of darkness. This occurs when Rob becomes lost in

---

the paddocks at night. In the tender poignancy typical of Stow’s writing, the
darkening of the landscape is elegiac, soft and initially imperceptible:

The drying paddocks smelled sweetly as they cooled. He crunched the dry
tussocks under his shoes, skirting the darkening scrub. The sky towards which he
was mounting was softening and deepening into the colour of the darkest sea.
From the top of the rise the land spread out lightless. There was no Andarra,
and the sun had gone.
I must be lost, he thought. He began to run downhill, slithering on the small
stones.
In the darkness he tripped in a dry runnel, and fell, cutting his shin ... Dark
trees reached out at him. He could no longer see what sort of trees they were.
It was no longer his country. There was nothing familiar there, it was simply
darkness ... He shouted from time to time. And as the hours of darkness went by
he shouted more often and more feebly, with less and less conviction, because
darkness was another country, which was now his country, and it grew difficult
to believe in the country of light. (pp. 144 – 145).

The darkness that engulfs Rob is the darkness of the self in isolation: significantly, he
is wandering alone having asserted his individuality, determined to discover for
himself the quickest route home. Such independence is a signal that he is moving
beyond childhood, characterized by a continuity between the self and what is external,
into the adult world, the realm of individualism. There is a sense that, now reached,
there can be no recovery of childish innocence: “That was the most terrible thing
about the darkness, that it destroyed one’s memory of the light” (p. 145). The
security of a life in continuity with nature and the divine now eludes him – he calls
out to God, but gets no answer.

Rob’s maturing and moving beyond innocence is linked to his cousin Rick’s
horrific, world-shattering experience of war on the Burma railway. Rick’s description
of war employs similar metaphors to those used to convey Rob’s experience lost in
the dark paddocks. Rick’s words, “War is a different country ... When you have
belonged to that country, you do not really go back to the known nations” (p. 165),
are a version of Rob’s reflection: “darkness was another country, which was now his
country, and it grew difficult to believe in the country of light” (p. 145). Rick’s
subsequent dissatisfaction with Australia, and his inability to take up his normal life
after the war, connects Australia – particularly the “Australia” of the landed
Maplestead gentry – with Rob’s world of childhood illusions. It speaks of a past era,

---

23 See Chris Tiffin, “Mates Mum and Maui: the theme of maturity in three antipodean novels” in C.D.
identifies in Stow’s text “a metaphysical darkness” which precipitates Rob towards maturity.
the squattocracy is suddenly less relevant in a world that now has an atom bomb. The Andarra homestead, a large Edwardian mansion, is characterized by grand rooms that are no longer used for their original purposes: “There was nothing in the huge ballroom but toys and tricycles. There was nothing in the huge dining room but saddles and a warm-smelling incubator. There was no traffic in the broad passages but tricycles riding round and round, round and round the tomb of departed elegance” (p. 64). The circular movement of the tricycles imitates the circling of the merry-go-round, an image of both continuity and childish illusion, thus indicating the futility of continuing to inhabit old-style country mansions and a way of life that has become redundant.

**Drewe and Stow: Historical Darkness**

As well as traditional light and dark imagery, Drewe, Lazaroo and Stow engage in both spatial and metaphorical explorations of surfaces and depths to probe the moral and historical dimensions of the landscapes they describe. In Drewe’s *The Shark Net*, the temporal or historical burying of murky secrets is expressed in spatial terms through the careful naming and renaming of Dalkeith’s streets to remove the association of murders that once occurred there. In 1924, a taxi driver was clubbed to death on Dalkeith’s then Westana Road. The fear of falling property values in the area prompted the council to change the street’s name to Waratah Avenue. “Westana Road – and Dalkeith’s bad name – were erased so completely from the public memory that they might never have been” (p. 218).

Further research discovers that the whole of Dalkeith is built on ground that bore witness to a brutal axe-murder of a young woman early in the century, a murder that abruptly terminated Perth’s high society’s enjoyment of the Gallop’s orchard and gardens. The Edenic overtones of this nineteenth-century pleasure garden were discussed in Chapter 1. The employment of indigenous people on the orchard shooting silvereye birds ironically resonates with the Great Sparrow Panic experienced by Drewe in Perth in the 1950s, implying a repetition of history: both the Dalkeith of the past and the present are suddenly transformed from a comfortable,

---

naively secure haven into a realm made rife with fear and suspicion by unexpected murders. After the orchard axe murder, Dalkeith’s murky past was disguised by naming the streets of the new subdivision after graceful racing yachts, allowing a convenient historical myopia to overtake the residents. Drew reflects that, growing up in the 1950s in Perth, there was little sense of the historical past. “Modernity was as important as respectability.” Dalkeith people “lived in the immediate present. The past, as I’d heard it described all my life, went back only as far as the war” (p. 216).

Stow similarly explores historical darkness in the region of his childhood. The Batavia mutiny and massacre on the Abrolhos Islands, off the coast of Geraldton, marked the first contact of Europeans with the Australian West Coast, and in The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea the event looms large in Rob Coram’s mind:

He thought about the Abrolhos ... the name gave him a thrill of darkness. Darkness and fires and massacre. The staid Dutch merchants and their wives from the wrecked Batavia, camping as best they could on the barren islands, must have settled down grumbling on that night. And then, the torches and swords, the blood on rock and sea, the mutineers prancing, in the richest clothes from the rifled chests, round their crazy peacock of a Captain-General.

Hundreds of men had died on that night. Hundreds of bodies had sunk through the night sea to the roots of the Abrolhos: the Graveyard of Ships, the graveyard of bones and treasure.

Fire and blood, and lace and velvet and steel. Never knowing that Pelsart in his tiny boat would reach Batavia and bring back retribution.

And then more blood on the Abrolhos: lopped hands and dangling corpses feeding the gulls. And for two, the fate, equivalent to death, of becoming the first white settlers of Costa Branca. (pp. 113 – 114)

The tragedy captures Rob’s imagination, and seeps into his subconscious as a defining feature of white settlement in his region. Though occurring hundreds of years before Europeans actually settled the coast, it nevertheless emphasizes the violence that accompanied the colonial movement. Rob’s country is one that has brutality, bloodshed and oppression written into its heart. This is heightened later in the novel, when Rick takes Rob and Mike up north to see the convict prison at Lynton and the Tower of Geraldine, where the convicts laboured producing lead shot. Standing red-brown, sharp-edged against the sky, the Tower looks “old as the Tower of London”, a traditional symbol of British tyranny and bloodshed (p. 235). It is a monument to a departed past, one so alien it feels “like the end of the world” (p. 235). The word “desolate” is repeated here, and indeed, reverberates through Stow’s novel, in the arking of crows and mournful sound of the wind in the trees.
Stow’s landscape is pervaded by an overwhelming sense of emptiness, yet it is an emptiness that refuses to be silent, but paradoxically is continually given voice through the evidence of what has departed. The Tower of Geraldine is in ruins, accompanied by roofless houses overgrown with wattle. It offers “an endless view of nothing at all” (p. 236).

However much the boys feel this landscape is alien to them, Rick points out their connection to the tower. He remarks, “if it hadn’t been for the lead, we probably wouldn’t have grown up here, buster” (p. 236). They are implicated in their country’s violent heritage, as beneficiaries of the colonial system. The link between Rob and his past is also emphasized in his reflections on blood. The Abrolhos disaster repeats imagery of blood, and it takes on another dimension in Rob’s reflections on his ancestry, speculating whether he has “nigger blood” or “convict blood” or “rebel blood”. The implication is that he is bound by blood, or lineage, to a culture of bloodshed, and this violence manifests itself in his own personality. He goes on adolescent hunting trips, killing so much wildlife he is eventually sickened by it. Feeling pangs of blood-guilt over hunting where the killing is not swift and clean, he is secretly glad when his friend’s shot misses a wedge-tailed eagle (p. 224). The unity of humans and nature evidenced in the children’s cavorting with the animals at Andarra earlier in the novel has been ruptured by the inevitable onset of maturity and the pragmatic realization that in rural life “you’ve got to kill things ... or they'll mess things up for you” (p. 240). Though this seems logical, it bespeaks the ongoing tension between white settlement and the land it occupies.

Stow’s dwelling upon the Batavia mutiny and the images of colonial convict brutality focus the novel’s exploration of historical violence upon that done to white people. Yet his narrative does exhibit some consciousness of the darkness of Aboriginal dispossession. At the Hand Cave, Rob is compelled to think about the Aboriginal child who has been removed from his land by time and change: “his world was not one world, but had in it camps of the dispossessed” (p. 56). Stow also depicts Rob struggling to comprehend the status of the “nigger” children at school, who are at

---

once “more Australian than Rob was … And yet somehow they were not Australian” (p. 79). While Rob “did not mind the blackniggers, [and] some of the older ones he rather admired”, his mother shows racist prejudice when she claims “they’re dirty … They all have bugs in their hair” (p. 79). Later, Stow also alludes to Rob’s complicity in the abuses of Aboriginal people. A hormone-charged adolescent, he fantasizes about an indigenous servant maid at his uncle’s farm:

In the house at Marsa was a half-caste girl of fourteen, who never spoke, who never spoke particularly to Rob, but who would sometimes momentarily meet his glance with large dark eyes holding a curious moonlike luminosity. He dreamed that in the gullies he would meet Nonie, and they would take their clothes off and he would do that to her ... (p. 263)

Yet, Stow tells us that Rob is “not in love with Nonie”. His selfish use of her (albeit confined to the realm of his imagination) is contrasted with his pure love for a “fair-haired girl”, of whom he requires only “that she should say that she was his girl friend” (p. 264). The discrepancy in his attitudes towards these two women, his subconscious apprehension of the level of relationship considered by his culture to be “appropriate” in each case, reveals that he is indeed the descendant of the colonists, and has some of the same violence in him that the mutineers possessed.

As Moore points out, Stow adds to the well recognized elements of geological and zoological antiquity, a strong sense of Australia’s historical antiquity. The novel is littered with ruins, which accurately reflects the Geraldton of the 1940s, which was in decline. Rob is continually expressing his view that he lives in an old country, and while this seems odd in relation to the thousands of years of recorded history as experienced by European nations, Gerald Moore points out that “a farmhouse which has been deserted for twenty years will make as powerful an impression of antiquity on the mind of a growing boy as an earthwork or ruined castle”. The sense of an extensive, yet obscured, historical past is conveyed through the piling up of names for the West Australian Coast.

Java the Great became New Holland, and then Western Australia. Costa Branca became Edels Lands, then the Northward, and at last Victoria District. Wittacarra became Champion Bay and finally Geraldton. But the coast of Costa Branca was the same White Coast; and the Tower of Geraldine, like an edifice from the history of another tribe, thrust up still from the unvisited scrub. (pp. 238 – 9)

---

26 Moore, op. cit., p. 62.
The various names reflect layers of colonization, inscribing and identity-forming. Portuguese, Dutch, British and Aboriginal cultures are all represented. It is similar to Lazaroo’s account of Malacca being colonized repeatedly by different powers: Dutch, Portuguese, British, and Malaysian. Though emanating from different sources, the litany of names tells a common story unified by patterns of domination and repression.

**Lazaroo: Plumbing the depths of personal darkness**

Probing into historical, social and personal darknesses acquires an added spatial dimension in Lazaroo’s *The World Waiting to be Made*. In a subsection titled “Digging”, the narrator makes use of a Eurasian myth about passing into the afterlife to explore spiritual, psychological and emotional issues surrounding human sinfulness:

> The country of the dead is deep under the ground. A person has to dig far beyond the depths of their own coffin to get to the entrance of the country of the dead. They have only their bare hands to dig so far with, unless they break a piece of wood from their coffin, but if they do break a piece off they risk having no home to spend their afterlife in should they not make it to the country of the dead. Many of these people are so desperate that they take the risk.

> They know they have reached the country of the dead when they see Maligang the guide standing next to a fallen tree trunk which runs over a deep wide ditch ...

> This ditch isn’t full of flowing water, but of ooze and slime and excrement. Maligang makes you look hard at this, until you are forced to recognise some of the excrement as your own from your life on earth. If you are brave enough to do this, you won’t fall into it. You cross the fallen tree-trunk bridge to a better afterlife. (p. 53)

This folk tale emphasizes the importance of confronting and recognizing one’s own failures, wrongdoings and personal “darkness” in order to move beyond them to a new, freer existence. It is, for the narrator, a deeply personal, culturally specific retelling of generally recognized psychological and spiritual truths about the human condition.

This mythologizing of issues concerning personal responsibility and darkness through imagery of digging in a subterranean realm is linked to the narrator’s father’s occupation as a plumber. He specializes in waste removal, and though he comes face

---

to face with sewerage on a daily basis, he is, in the narrator’s eyes, ironically oblivious to his own faults, baggage and filth. Throughout the novel, he plays the role of the Asian patriarch who cannot be questioned by the women in his family. In direct contrast to his workday life spent underground, in his personal life he avoids emotional depth by becoming master of the face to wear. His relationships with his family never seem to progress beyond a rather distant formality. This irony is emphasized in his selection of a suburb for the new family home based on the area’s being earmarked for “deep sewerage” development in the near future. That way, he will not have to perform any more maintenance operations on the family septic tank like the one featured early in the novel, which symbolically brings him uncomfortably close to the darkness within himself that he would rather not face:

Spatially, the episode is significant, as it depicts the narrator’s father in an unusual position of weakness, placed much lower than his young female children who peer down at him from the edge of the hole into which he has dug himself.

While the narrator’s father wants to sanitize his world, and remove all trace of distasteful elements, his young daughters unwittingly show they are remarkably at home with waste and muck. While their father is digging up the septic tank, they are attracted to the damp yellow sand he exhumes, and see in it a world of creative possibilities. Despite their father’s injunctions against playing in the polluted ground, they begin fashioning it to their own ends:

It looked so clean. We edged up to it and grabbed a handful.
It was sticky and soft. You could press it together in your fist and see the size and shape of your grasp when you uncurled your fingers.
We each of us began to fashion our own little worlds from it.
My twin sister, ever the domestic one, made rows of pies and cakes from it.
My younger sister rolled fat snakes.
“They’re turds, not snakes,” I teased, busy with my own imperfect renditions of tigers and strings of jewellery. (pp. 54 – 5)
Deeply symbolic, this episode at once shows how children cannot avoid being saturated with the pollution – psychological and emotional, as well as physical – that plagues their family life. Yet it also exhibits children’s remarkable resilience and ability to turn bad situations into opportunities for growth. Just as the children are creating little models from the filthy sand, so too are they forming their own identities in and through the strained circumstances surrounding the putrefying remains of their parents’ marriage. The whole incident illustrates how digging below surface niceties at once brings one face to face with darkness, moral corruption and decay, but also provides access to a richness of creative life. Manure is a potent form of fertilizer, and Lazaroo’s novel works towards showing how a meaningful identity can be formed amidst a variety of adverse circumstances.

The narrator’s journeying down stormwater drains to the local swamp, where she finds a richness of animal life, underscores the capacity of waste, debris and leftovers to work towards productive ends. The swamp, though littered with “frangers” and other unsavory refuse, is also home to “delicate wildflowers that struck bravely out against the shadows”, and “a menagerie of long-necked creatures”, including shy tortoises and the famous Western Australian Black Swans. After feeding the swans their sandwich remains, the narrator and her friend Sue return home with jars of tadpoles, creatures whose life cycles are suggestive of transformative possibilities. The girls thus find in the swamp an oasis where they can enjoy such traditional “country childhood” pursuits in the midst of suburbia. Yet, their pleasure in this realm is short-lived, censured by the adults who find the swamp unsavoury compared with the prospects of riverside living now available to them due to a rise in income:

“A promotion. How nice. You deserve ...”
“So this weekend we’re shifting closer to the river”. Mrs Farmer fingered her hair gingerly. “Rivers are nicer than swamps.”
“Swamps are dirty,” nodded the British neighbour, who’d come from a country of lakes, not swamps. “Drains flow into them.”

Daughter of my father, I should have known how to discriminate between stormwater drains and sewerage ones, but I didn’t. If I had, I would have been able to fight for my right to continue enjoying the swamp. But during this week before Sue shifted with her family out of my life, I began to fear the brownness and decay of it, the frangers and floatingness of old sticks and logs.

I dreamed I was Tarzan, swinging across steaming ditches on liana vines, not having to look into the murk. (p. 56).
Thus the narrator is pulled out of her childhood guilelessness, characterized by a spontaneous unselfconscious enjoyment of the natural world, and into the world of adult niceties, driven by consumerism and the pressure to desire a clean, respectable lifestyle.

Together with the mythology of the afterlife, Lazaroo’s plumbing metaphors emphasize the element of vertical spatial organization associated with the Asian half of the narrator’s heritage. Her descriptions of Singapore also exhibit this tendency towards the vertical: the bustling metropolis the family leaves in the late 1960s is characterized by “layers of development” and “striving upward”. Towards the novel’s end, the narrator visits Singapore’s high rise shopping complex called “New Heaven” and embarks on a commodity acquiring pilgrimage that takes her ever higher in its artificial universe. This vertical organization is juxtaposed against the traditional image of Australia as a land of horizontal sprawling expanse. McDougall, for example, comments “In Australia, the poetical drive of the culture’s ‘base’ metaphor is not upward, or downward, on a vertical plane; it is ever outward, across a horizontal plane”. 28

The tendency towards the horizontal in Australia is not only evidenced in our vast open spaces, but is also intrinsic to everyday culture, such as speech. As a young child, Lazaroo’s narrator soon learns to “flatten” her Asian accent characterized by undulation of tones:

Blonde brick houses and level kerbed lawns stretched around me for miles.
My existence in Australia being so flat ... I became an expert in the ways of disguise, in blending in with the Australian kids. I would be less noticed if I didn’t dazzle anyone with my brilliance. I chose not to overexert myself at school ... I tried to make my hectic Singaporean singsong marketplace accent flat, lazy and disinterested. “Yah wanna come t’ my ‘ouse s’arvo?” I asked a classmate, almost making my vowels lie down horizontally; shrugging as I spoke to show I didn’t care what the reply was. (pp. 49 – 50)

28 Russell McDougall, “Sprawl and the Vertical”, in McDougall and Whitlock (eds) Australian and Canadian Literature in English: Comparative Perspectives, Methuen, 1987, pp. 205–237, p. 209. See also p. 205, where McDougall asserts that this horizontal impulse is reflected stylistically in the long-lined, “sprawling” verse of poets such as Les Murray, which contrasts with poetry from other nations, such as the writing of Canadian Douglas Barbour, who, in Murray’s opinion, is unwilling “to use the page” (McDougall’s personal communication with Canadian poet Douglas Barbour).
Far from the “striving upwards” of Singaporean culture, the urge for Australian children is to blend in and not make waves. Further evidence of this contrast between Asia as the realm of the vertical and Australia as that of the horizontal can be seen in Lazaroo’s inclusion of “floating stories”. These are Eurasian myths or legends told to the children, paradoxically, by their Anglo-Australian mother, to keep them attached to the Asian side of their heritage: “They seemed to bring our past right into the present, so that it seemed unanchored to any particular place or time” (p. 36).

“Floating” suggests an element of the vertical, of the ephemeral, spiritual and intangible as opposed to the frank, flat “Australian” earth-tied existence. The girls’ mother refers to one floating story as being so elusive she has to “use her brains and a pole to bring it down to earth” (p. 40). Such elusiveness arguably reflects the distance the narrator feels from the Asian half of her heritage. Drifting upwards, out of reach, this culture, and the spirituality it represents, often seem just as far from her grasp as the “Aussie” existence of her friends inconveniently located far across the horizontal plane on the other side of town along the beaches.²⁹

Yet in Lazaroo’s text, by far the most prominent example of the clash between Australian horizontal and Asian vertical ethoses is in the “True Blue Romeo” house that the narrator’s father settles upon as the ideal family home. To him, it epitomizes “Australian” ideals of open spaces, and as such works as a “charm” against “being treated as Aliens” (p. 65):

True Blue Romeo, where art thou? Open plan living for Australians who love living in the land of wide open spaces. Feature walls, balcony, bar, minstrels’ gallery. Sliding doors, patio, pergola. Sumptuous drapes. For true blue Aussies with a taste for international sophistication, this one includes at no extra cost, a bidet. (p. 66)

The description is ironic, following the litany of foreign names to describe the surrounding residential architecture: “Cape-Cod-Queen-Anne-Contemporary” “Georgian” “Italian” “Mock Tudor” (pp. 64 – 5). “True Blue Romeo” similarly expresses a mixture of cultural appropriations, accenting the impossibility of finding any essentially “Australian” house in a culture constructed as a mosaic of imported motifs.

²⁹ See also Olivia Khoo, “Whiteness and The Australian Fiancé: Framing the Ornamental Text in Australia” Hecate, Vol. 27, No. 2, p. 68 ff (etext), who examines the motif of “vertigo” in the context of southward migration to Australia from south-east Asia: arguably, Lazaroo’s “floating stories” operate as the inverse of vertigo, connoting imaginative upward (or northward) movement, to Asia.
Yet, far from working to enhance the family’s identity as “Australian”, the open plan living of the Romeo house actually underscores their father’s difference. His affinity with the vertical is ironically evidenced in his motives for building this overwhelmingly “horizontal” house: “to prove ... how far up in the world he had come” (p. 63). Once built, he cannot find comfort in its open plan organization: “he couldn’t abide sitting around with us in the wide open spaces in the living area ... He curtained a section of the living room off for himself and sat up close to the TV, as if he was trying to close off the space around him” (p. 68). The lack of stratification or other divisions effects a “leveling” of the social hierarchy, undermining his traditional position as patriarch:

In the open-plan Romeo house, my father had to put up walls by hiding behind newspapers, staring straight ahead or walking away. Something about all this open planning and the impudent questions of his children as they became more Australian, endangered the idea he’d grown up with of a father’s place. There was no refuge for him in open-plan houses. (p. 74)

The flat expanse of the house seems to psychologically, as well as spatially, distance the family from each other and their Singaporean life, putting “immeasurably greater space” between them and their past. “Singapore was floating away, just an echo in the night ... members of my family seemed to be floating away from one another too” (p. 75). The flat sprawling house encourages a level of surface interaction devoid of real depth, and, paradoxically, the building of emotional walls to shut members off from the intimacies of each other’s respective lives. It is arguably this level of depth, both in personal relationships and in communion with the land, that Lazaroo is seeking through her exploration of metaphors of digging and plumbing.

**Buried Treasure: Searching the deep**

Peter Cowan comments, “to live in Western Australia is to be strongly aware of a physical landscape, one below the urban facade”. This awareness can be seen in Drewe’s *The Shark Net*, which, like Lazaroo’s *The World Waiting to be Made*, also dramatically enacts the search for spiritual and emotional depth in spatial terms. As

---

young boys, Drewe and his friends spend much of their time probing the earth’s mysteries: the great craze is for digging tunnels:

They called their sand tunnels “underground cubbies”. When we moved in, all the local boys were absorbed in some stage of the tunneling process: digging a winding trench, roofing it with tin, cardboard or three-ply, heaping it with camouflaging sand, then disappearing down inside the burrow. In the hot sand they worked with the strange urgency and optimistic flurry of ants ... (p. 57)

In constructing these cubbies, the children are building alternative homes or worlds, and arguably their unwitting impulse is to construct dwellings more deeply connected with the land. Certainly, as Drewes’s father speculates, the boys are probably also inspired by prison escape narratives from World War II, still in high circulation in the 1950s, not to mention the prevalence of old air-raid shelters which remained in many peoples’ backyards. Yet, the feverish nature of the boys’ work suggests something more compelling, as though they are driven by something within the land itself. Just as, in later life, Drewe as a reporter seeks to dig below the layers of time and imposed identities to uncover truths that may hold the key to modern Perth’s identity, on an individual level the boys seem to be unconsciously seeking some revelation that will tell them something about themselves and their relation to the land in which they live.

Arguably, the search is for something solid, deep and dependable in this region of shifting sand and their parents’ preoccupation with keeping up external appearances. The limestone foundations are the obvious goal: spiritually these represent the Rock, the divine stability that gives rootedness and certainty. The Sand people, Drewe notes, “[would] be lost” without their limestone foundations (p. 36). According to the Sermon on the Mount, which juxtaposes the “wise man” who built his house upon the rock with the “foolish man” who built it on the sand, only to later see his house swept away when disaster struck, this Rock is Divine Truth, the words of Christ. 31 Drewe describes the Perth coastline as being like “ancient religious backdrops at Sunday School” (p. 36), and Perth’s Mediterranean climate makes this Biblical allusion even more apparent. Thus Drewe expresses the yearning towards depth in a similar manner to Lazaroo: the desire is for a stable spiritual foundation on which to build a personal and societal identity.

31 See Holy Bible, Matthew 7:24–27.
Yet, as Drewe discovers, Perth’s limestone may not be a sufficiently solid core to prevent disintegration: social, personal, or physical. This is underscored by a unique incident where he tries to inscribe his initials into the limestone foundations of the house, only to start an avalanche of sand that he cannot stop:

My new neighbourhood friends Nick Howell, Ian Hodge and Neil Liddell had all dug their initials in their foundations. But their initials were arrangements of straight lines. When I carved mine with a screwdriver something strange and fascinating happened. The D crumbled instantly and gently into a powdery cave, which engulfed the earlier R. As I watched, almost hypnotized, the cave quickly grew. Out of its mouth dribbled a pale lemon stream and then such a frightening rivulet of sand that I envisaged the whole house pouring into the street in an avalanche. (pp. 65 – 6)

In a panic, the boy looks around “for a rock or some solid object to plug the hole”. Finally he seizes upon some model cars – a Ford Customline and a red London bus – and then a cricket ball and the garden sprinkler. As Carmel Bird suggests, these are deeply symbolic objects, representing Anglo-Australian culture. Yet what is arguably just as significant is what starts the crisis: Drewe’s attempt to symbolically inscribe his identity onto the foundations of his family home. That his initials are not combinations of “straight lines” alludes to the unconventional path he takes later in life, by marrying his pregnant girlfriend at the age of eighteen, which causes a furore that almost results in the social disintegration of his family. Drewe’s future is foreshadowed in this simple childish endeavour of carving his name; and, while as a child, he initially grasps at images of white respectable civilization to fill an empty hole, it is only by symbolically repudiating these objects (literally pissing on them) that the void is finally filled:

Now I had to put back the lost sand. I tried to scoop up the mound but it was so fine it fell through my fingers. I needed to wet it … Addled by destruction and panic, my brain instructed me to urinate on the pile of sand. (Of course! That’s how they did things around here.) Then I packed the mud into the cave … The entombed offerings held fast. (p. 66)

So too, in later life, does Drewe find the maxims of his inherited respectable culture to be inadequate for the task of forging an authentic foundation for living. Drewe’s reflection, “Our foundation stones were made of sand and they rested on sand” (p. 67), takes on a new moral dimension when his family urges him to abandon the moral

principles they taught him as a child, revealing a shaky system of ethics built upon hypocrisy.

Water in a Dry Land

Plumbing metaphors, the symbolism of swamps, lakes and rivers, as well as the preoccupation with digging evidenced in *The World Waiting to be Made* and *The Shark Net* point to another hallmark of the Western Australian literary landscape: the craving after fresh water in a dry land. Seddon points out that, while Perth actually has a higher average rainfall than Melbourne, Adelaide or Canberra, it all falls within the winter months due to the Mediterranean-style climate. The summers are hot, marked by low humidity and “almost rainless”.\(^{33}\) This makes the West-Coast city unusually vulnerable in its almost total dependence on stored water and, unlike the metropolises of the Eastern States, Perth has no mountain catchments.\(^{34}\)

Despite this, Seddon notes that Perth residents show a partiality towards lush tropical or subtropical garden plants, such as hibiscus, frangipani and, more recently, palms: plants that need a lot of water.\(^ {35}\) Drewe also notes this preference in *The Shark Net*, and relates it to the contradiction between surface appearance and deeper, grounded realities:

> Growing an English lawn, English roses and deciduous trees on dry sand in a place of water shortages was hard work. So even moderately successful gardeners liked to grow their front lawns right to the road, without a fence, to display their good intentions. Having a front fence was considered standoffish, in any case. It could prevent Sunday drivers from admiring your home. Similarly, people who didn’t keep their lawns green were thought to be of low moral fibre. Not to try to overcome the odds was regarded as “letting the street down.” (p. 67)

Drewe goes on to describe how bore water enables people to transform their lawns into an “eerie Technicolour green” (p. 68). Yet, Drewe’s landscape itself seems to lash out in rebellion against these attempts to impose a false greenness upon it: the ground persists in attempts to “swallow” garden hoses. Or is it that the hoses are trying to “make a run for it”?

---


\(^{34}\) Ibid., p. 54.

\(^{35}\) Ibid., p. 25, and later at pp. 55–6.
The hoses seemed to be attempting to tunnel down into the earth. As if to freedom. They seemed to have a strange, well, rebellious force. When you tried to pull them up, they pulled against you. It took all your strength to hold them. They were straining against their taps and water pipes, some stretching to breaking point like big rubber bands, others bending pipes and, in some cases, snapping their shackles and diving into the earth. (p. 68)

Just as in Lazaroo’s novel, in Drewe’s *The Shark Net* it is the children who exhibit a far stronger and spontaneous affinity with the natural landscape than their parents, who are preoccupied with overcoming its harsher physical characteristics. Drewe describes the boys’ unusual habit of urinating on moss. “It was second nature. Perhaps growing up in the dry heat among the cardboard coloured vegetation and pale dunes had given them an aversion to anything lush and green” (p. 57). Just as their tunneling suggests a probing of the earth for some essential truth, so too does this comical childhood habit hint at the boys’ collusion with the subterranean forces that influence the garden hoses to rebel. The Great Hose Escape is finally explained by geologists, yet the initial hints of “subterranean, even supernatural forces” being at work (p. 68) resonates with D.H. Lawrence’s conception of the Australian bush possessing an eerie presence that is hostilely indifferent and resistant to white settlement. This element is also present in Stow’s *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*, which is littered with images that accentuate thresholds and boundaries between settlement and the wild: the frontier mythology. The sense is of a land resisting civilization, pushing it back at its outer limits, overgrowing remote houses with weeds, threatening to cover others with shifting sand dunes.

The search for water, like digging for rock, is also implicitly spiritual. Just as the “Rock” represents some stable truth or core of identity on which to build enduring structures, so too is the coveted water “living water”: a life-sustaining fertility, and self-replenishing supply that will never leave the soul thirsty. Like rock, this fertile source of nourishment is to be found in the land itself, through understanding it in a new, mutually respectful and not merely appropriative relationship. Lazaroo explores this search for spiritual “living water” (though she does not term it as such) in the narrator’s journeying to a teaching post in the far north Kimberley. Also resonant with Biblical associations, this journeying into the wilderness, the desert time of trial, brings her to a new understanding of herself and her relation to the land.

---

36 See *Holy Bible*, Gospel of John, Chapter 8, describing the parable of the Samaritan woman at the well.
At the educational facility that is her destination in the outback, the dry heat of the Western Australian summer confronted by Drewes suburban dwellers through obsessive watering is refracted through an intensifying lens. The stark, artificial greenness of the manicured lawns stand out even more vividly against the desert sands:

There was no mistaking this settlement for the Aboriginal settlement fifteen kilometres away. From its fences to the shoes of its occupants, this one was definitely an outpost of the Western Australian government. The lawns surrounding the teachers’ houses were particularly remarkable. These lawns were the squares of bright green I’d seen from the air, improbably lush against the powdery orange earth and the more muted, almost grey-green of the trees, and ended abruptly at the front gate of each yard, as if they were the beginning and end of each resident’s responsibility to upholding civilization against the wild yonder. (p. 177)

As Seddon points out, “no environment is ‘harsh’ to an organism adapted to that environment”.37 Dryness, fertility and barrenness are all cultural constructions flowing from the intended use of the land by any particular person or life form. The teaching community in Lazaroo’s novel is a displaced metropolitan white Australian culture thrust into an environment for which it is ill-adapted. The teachers’ sense of alienation is manifested in a pervasive anxiety. The narrator’s flatmate, Debbie, engages in house cleaning in an increasingly frenzied way as the year progresses, in a valiant effort to regain lost ground against the red earth which takes the brightness out of her white washing and fills the house with fine red dust. Cleaning becomes a public display, as though some sense of community in ritual will enable these people to retain their connection with the civilized metropolises from where they have come. Lawn maintenance, similarly, is indulged in obsessively and competitively: contrary to the sharing spirit traditionally found in other small, close-knit communities, the teachers are advised they should all have their own lawn-mowers and not lend them out.

In this “outpost” of the fluorescent empire, attitudes towards difference, particularly racial difference, are even less tolerant than in the city. The women, “who’d mastered the art of salad preparation”, and men “who knew how to set up a shed” (p. 178) guard their great Aussie (white suburban) heritage fiercely and, by way

of a heightened racial prejudice, seek to assert its continued relevance in an environment that has long done without white influence. Mixing with the Aboriginal people is officially deemed inappropriate, and the coloured narrator is subtly but surely excluded from their white community, through raised eyebrows at her foreign sounding name, and objections to the smell of her Asian spices (p. 188). The community is a good example of the “endemic fear” that Morris identifies within white Australian culture: “the very death of whiteness”. 38 Unused to being in the minority, in this vast, indifferent land, they feel like an endangered species.

The narrator finds acceptance, however, amongst the Aboriginal community. Feeling some affinity with them, as an oppressed and misunderstood minority under the dominant white gaze, she is also drawn to their special symbiotic relationship with the landscape. The same earth that the white teachers find so dry it is in need of obsessive watering, the Aboriginal elders can read as one abundant in resources:

As I drove, they unraveled the tangle of dry creek beds and paths for me without uttering one word, bending their index finger slightly to one side, more acutely to the other, so subtly that they looked as if they were divining water with their bare hands. (p. 185)

The old men are able to predict that the stingrays’ livers would be turning yellow early that year from the appearance of the blossoms. The narrator becomes in their presence aware of the land in a totally different perspective: “everything beyond the windscreen seemed to be part of a code I couldn’t read” (p. 185). While unable to read this code, she is now aware that it exists and respectful of it, and this allows her to experience a personal revelation from this encounter with the outback. This “epiphany” is expressed in her heightened perception of the colours of the landscape:

I was astonished to see how red the twigs of these trees were against the mauve and green of the leaves. How had I ever thought of those trees as grey? My mind must have reduced them to grey, being unused to dealing with the unlikely combination of colours my eye looked at. I’d lived in this part of the land almost half a year and kept its colours at a distance, beyond windows and air-conditioners, as if I could only cope with overexposed photos of it ... (p. 185)

“Overexposed photos” are ones where the subject is flooded by light, producing a washed-out appearance, and here refers to the white peoples’ perspective of the land, drawing as it does upon Lazaroo’s previous association of the white gaze with

38 Morris, op. cit.
dazzling fluorescence. While the white people keep the landscape at a distance, the Indigenous people do not create such artificial boundaries between themselves and the land: hence the persona’s experiencing it in greater colour and vitality when she is in their company. That she has attained a new sense of belonging is indicated in her closing comment “the shadows of the leaves seemed to dapple the air in the same rhythm as our hearts pushed air and blood through the cells of our bodies” (p. 185). It is a fluvial metaphor: as Simon Schama points out, rivers and waterways are traditionally symbolic arteries and blood vessels of continents – facilitating transport and distribution of vital supplies and nutrients.39 The narrator, through her journey in the wilderness, guided by the country’s first human inhabitants, has tapped into a source of “living water”, an appreciation of the land on its own terms that allows her to spiritually and emotively possess it, and not merely use it for selfish ends.

Fresh water sources in *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* are, by and large, mysterious, elusive elements. They are suggestive of the land’s spiritual presence, and closely tied to the subterranean world. Water is a commodity eagerly sought after and carefully preserved. Stow’s changing seasons are marked by shifts in the rainfall pattern: winter “before rain” is distinguished from winter “after rain”, where the “gutters gurgled, the tanks gurgled as the fresh water drained into them” (p. 115). The world of the Maplestead clan and the farming population is defined by the rainfall, its limits marking the edge of the frontier between civilization and the wild: “His country was where the small farms ended, where the winter-rainfall ended, where the people ended. Beyond lay the open North: unpeopled, innocent” (p. 47). But rainfall alone is not enough, bore water is also vital and this source is symbolized in the figures of windmills, which spike the horizon of Rob’s world, and draw the life-giving liquid up from artesian wells deep below the surface.

Throughout the novel, Rob exhibits a fascination with the underground realm. In contrast to the countryside, which delights his eye with a profusion of colour and endless variety of detail, the world below the earth is mysterious, impenetrable by the dominant sense of vision, and can only be explored through senses of hearing and touch. That it contains something indefinable that the child recognizes as compelling

and vital can be seen when Rob tries to listen to the earth’s “conversations” through the wooden telegraph pole:

in the fibres of the wood was a humming and throbbing as if there might be in the post some almost audible speech more interesting than anything ever spoken into the telephone. It seemed to flow up the post from deep underground, like sap. (p. 68)

The earth’s “speech” here is expressed through a fluvial metaphor – sap – the lifeblood of trees. Through extensive root systems, trees are able to seek out water from deep below the surface to sustain them in times of drought. This incident is echoed in Rob’s experience chasing rabbits, watching them disappear into their burrows, “hearing from under the earth the thump thump of its alarm. Under the earth were other worlds. He watched ants and rabbits with fascination, wondering” (p. 127).

The creeks and rivers that water Stow’s landscape are duplicitous in their relation to white settlement, capable both of enriching agriculture and wreaking violent destruction. Rob’s apprehension that the land, and more specifically the underground, holds resources vital to his existence, is accentuated by his experience of farm life, where production is dependent on the weather and natural abundance of the earth. While Rob admires the Maplestead farmers’ ability to use the richness of the land to build their livelihood, he nevertheless is brought to understand that the land, and its water, have a power and presence far beyond humans’ capability to manipulate them. He and his school friends repeatedly attempt to dam a small creek, enjoying the challenge of pitting their strength against the water and the “satisfaction of that moment when the water proved too much for them” (pp. 120 – 1).

Paradoxically, the boys derive security from the knowledge that the result will always be the same, and the creek will win out in the end. Their efforts to stem the flow of the creek are like Rob’s efforts to resist the change and the passing of time, ultimately futile. 40 But the pleasure the boys take in experiencing the water’s power indicates that richness can come from accepting change, a truth that Rob will ultimately learn.

Later in the novel, when Rob pridefully tries to assert his superiority and cross the Murchison River in flood, he is reminded of the water’s power, and has to be rescued by his father. Initially, he swims in a communion with the river, “enjoying its

40 Later in the novel, Stow writes “Time was like a river in flood” (p. 273).
strength like the strength of a big easy wave under a surfboard” (p. 266). But then he
is drawn under and rolled “over and over in its darkness” and thrown against rocks.
Through violent imagery, Stow hints at a continuing resistance and wild hostility
within the land, which contrasts with other images of its beauty and pliability under
the human hand. The farmers mourn the flood’s stripping the land of its fertile topsoil:
“the red fabric of the ancient continent ... rush[es] to the stained sea.” Over the
desolation of a destroyed bridge, the sun sets “red and burning” “on a waste of brown
water, spiky with the black tops of trees ... among thundery clouds” (p. 268).

Like other aspects of Stow’s landscapes, water reflects aspects of the human
condition, the landscape of the soul. Not only does it return to the white civilization
some of the violence of its own colonial movement, but also mirrors and facilitates
tenderer, gentle aspects. A symbol of life and fertility, it is a healing force, enabling
emotional expression. Janet Cooper takes refuge in the bathroom, under running
water, to grieve for her dead husband:

The thin trickle of water ran into the basin, over her wrists. She listened to
the water, the wind in the leaves outside, the intermittent clank of the
windmill, voices beyond the door ... The water flowed and flowed. Oh why
now? I said goodbye, I said goodbye two years ago. Why this now, why
this? (pp. 109 – 10)

Again, the image of the windmill hints that this source of solace emanates from deep
within the land itself. Eventually, her tears and the water from the tap merge in one
image as both flow together, a gentle soothing unity.

Similarly, it is in the soothing coolness of a waterhole that Rick and Rob have
their most meaningful conversation, towards the novel’s end. The water covers Rob’s
adolescent awkwardness as surely as it covers his gawky teenage body. In delicate
evocative description so typical of Stow, the river is linked with the sunny timeless
childhood present, its yellow-brown water and “flecks of river-stuff like dust motes
spinning in the yellow shafts of light” (p. 269), echoing Rob’s perspective of the
sunlit world of his bedroom as a younger child. Yet, the river has a more enduring
quality, dark depths that are rumored to be “bottomless”, suggesting the unfathomable
mysteries deep within the earth’s core. Indigenous spirituality is acknowledged as
Rick tells Rob the waterhole was once a sacred place, associated with the belief that
the spirits of unborn children inhabit the water. Rick’s comment, “its probably making
new men of us, swimming here” (p. 270), along with their conversation which demystifies the complications of puberty, enhances the reader’s sense that water provides the key that Rob seeks to come to terms with time and change. As Rowley observes, the scene is replete with imagery of baptism and fertility. Water flows across the realms of childhood and adulthood, connecting them and pointing towards a unity of selfhood that nonetheless embraces the reality of the world’s mutability, and provides a spiritual sustenance that enables Rob to face an uncertain future. This is expressed through the image of the windmill in the novel’s close:

Time and death could stain the bright day, and the leaf-brown foxes that traced green paths in the dew could die poisoned in agony among the flowers. He stood by the body of a young fox, and watched the capeweed and horseradish flowers bend in the wind against it, pollen clinging to the stippled hide. Furry-silvery fingered leaves of lupins dipped and swayed, and the new blue flowerheads nodded. Out of the tender blue sea of the lupin paddock a windmill rose, sandy-tawny with rust, spinning against the lupin blue sky. Lupins withered and foxes rotted, and the windmill whirled and whirled against all seasons of the sky, drinking from the filled dark caves below the earth. (p. 261)

In this beautifully descriptive passage, Stow artfully balances the inevitable cruelty of death and time passing with images of rejuvenation through the abundant flowers. The windmill is a version of the merry-go-round but unlike the merry-go-round in the sea, which springs from an illusion of the imagination, the windmill is firmly rooted in the land itself. Flexible under the changing weather, “whirling and whirling” in the wind, it is stable and connected to something larger than itself. Kerry Cotter offers a thoughtful study of the significance of the windmill in Stow’s novel:

The windmill is the signal of home, of the poetic correspondence between inner and surface worlds, the changing world of the eye and the unchanging world of the spirit. The windmill is still whirling at the end of the novel, but at the same time it is unmoving and solitary. It connects surface with depth, drawing up the lifeblood from beneath the surface to invigorate the visible world, as the poetic imagination mediates between the self and the world.

Rob’s journey, from security in his childish faith in the world’s unity towards his adult awareness of change and fragmentation, necessitates his turning from the merry-go-round to the windmill as a symbol of the relationship between the self and the

---

external world. This offers the sustenance and refreshment of an ontology that incorporates the land in which soul, as well as body, must learn to live and flourish.
CHAPTER 4

QUEENSLAND AND THE CULTURAL FRONTIER: CLIMATE, ORIGINS AND IMAGINING

The opposition between Anglo-European culture and the vast wildness of the Australian environment, to some extent, pervades Australian literature from all regions. Yet, arguably, it is more strongly felt in Queensland than other areas. The hot humidity that characterizes most of the state’s more densely populated areas encourages rapid and lush vegetative growth, and the moist, tropical and sub-tropical regions are marked by a bursting natural vitality and fecundity. While, for writers, this is frequently a source of celebration, the sheer magnitude of nature’s fertile potential sometimes engenders only a cautious enthusiasm. Nature is active, wild and constantly threatening insubordination. Compounding this sense of threat from the natural is Queenslanders’ sense of distance from the perceived centres of culture, firstly as positioned in the Antipodes, so far from the British-European cultural heartland, and secondly, as a parochial northern “cousin” to mainstream Australian culture centred on Sydney and Melbourne. These factors combine to create a powerful “frontier” mythology, of a different flavour from that developed in Western Australia or other remote areas.

In *The Road to Botany Bay*, Paul Carter describes the concept of the frontier as a threshold dividing culture and nature:

> Essentially, the frontier is usually conceived of as a line, a line continually pushed forward (or back) by heroic frontiersmen, the pioneers. Inside the line is culture; beyond it, nature. As the frontier moves, nature is bulldozed into submission … [But] however far back the frontier is pushed, there is always something threatening on the other side. 

Such is the presence of Queensland’s natural environment, it is difficult to see it being “bulldozed into submission”. In contrast to drier and cooler areas of the continent, where the landscape’s perceived opposition to human civilization is more passive – an insidious, quiet indifference – in Queensland, the natural realm seems to be constantly growing, expanding, and threatening to overwhelm the built environment. As David

---

Malouf points out, Queensland’s capital city, Brisbane, is unique in that its greenness extends to the city centre, thus the frontier between nature and culture does not exist in some remote outpost of the state, but rather in the heart of its capital.\(^2\) While traditional concepts of the frontier mark it as a site of contention or opposition, this is not always so. Rather, in Malouf’s words, “a frontier is a place where dialogue occurs”.\(^1\) It provides an opportunity for some kind of exchange, a process of cross-fertilization between disparate categories.\(^4\) The essence of growing up in Queensland, then, is to be caught in a perpetual process of negotiation between the contrasting forces of the natural and the cultural, a process which, paradoxically, works both to enrich and destabilize the Queenslander’s sense of place.

**A climate of extremes**

Have I been shaped in any way – fearful prospect – by Brisbane? Our big country town that is still mostly weatherboard and one-storeyed, so little a city that on Friday morning the C.W.A ladies set their stalls up in Queen Street and sell home-made cakes and jam, and the farmers come in with day-old chicks in wire baskets. Brisbane is so sleepy, so slatternly, so sprawlingly unlovely! I have taken to wandering about after school looking for one simple object in it that might be romantic, or appalling even, but there is nothing. It is simply the most ordinary place in the world …

Queensland, of course, is a joke. The Moonshine State. Nothing to be said about Queensland. Half of it is still wild (there are tigers as yet undiscovered in Cape York Peninsula according to some authorities), the rest detained in a sort of perpetual nineteenth century. In the main streets of towns not a hundred miles from where I am sitting they still have hitching posts. Aborigines are herded onto reservations. Kids, even in this well-to-do suburb, go to school all the year round with bare feet.\(^5\)

When the Europeans arrived at Moreton Bay, they entered an environment that was unfamiliar in almost every respect. Its geographic remoteness was accentuated by its reputation as a backwater of civilization: it was a penal settlement designed for the very worst convict offenders. When the town that would later become Brisbane was established in 1823, it was isolated from other Australian centres, accessible only by

\(^2\) David Malouf, “A First Place: The Mapping of a World”, in James Tulip (ed) *David Malouf: Johnno, Short Stories, Poems, Essays & Interview*, University of Queensland Press, 1990, pp. 261–269, p. 262, where Malouf says that the key colour of Brisbane is green.


\(^4\) See Martin Leer, “At the Edge: Geography and the Imagination in the Work of David Malouf”, *Australian Literary Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 1985, pp. 3–21, p. 11: “The edge is where things happen; where sudden discoveries illuminate hidden memories; where revelations and metamorphoses occur”.

sea. As Suzanne Falkiner points out, the colony of Hobart, established nearly twenty years previously, was similarly isolated, but at least its climate – cold and austere – was closer to conditions in the new migrants’ country of origin. Brisbane, by contrast, was in the sub-tropics – hot, moist and fecund.6

Indeed, Queensland writers seemingly cannot overemphasize the pervasive presence of their natural environment. It is a landscape that fills the senses, its fertility of growth providing verdant colour, its warmth and moisture abundant with rich aromas. The latitude and abundant semi-monsoonal rainfall are conditions that produce an exuberant growth of vegetation. Malouf writes:

You are soon made aware here of a kind of moisture in the air that makes nature a force that isn’t easily domesticated. – everything grows too fast, too tall, it gets quickly out of control. Vegetation doesn’t complement the man-made, it fiercely competes with it; gardens are always on the point of turning themselves into wilderness, hauling down fences, pushing sheds and outhouses over, making things look ramshackle and halfway to ruin. The weather, harsh sunlight, hard rain, adds to the process, stripping houses of their pliant, rotting timber, making the dwellings altogether less solid and substantial, on their high stumps, than the great native trees that surround them.7

Through his use of verbs: “pushing” “hauling” “stripping”, Malouf casts nature as an active force, one that is ever moving and relentless.

Tony Maniaty’s autobiography All Over the Shop8 presents an image of growing up in a wild, extreme environment, where all elements occur in excess. To the child’s mind, this adds to the exotic excitement of living “on the edge”:

I’m scared when I sleep, that’s part of the fun and terror of being alive. Anyway, this is Queensland, and you don’t have sissy things like night lights or electric fans here when you sleep; you’ve got the place itself, always steaming with hundred-degree heat and tropical downpours and the brazen shafts of light that enter your bedroom at four in the morning and never go away. (p. 60)

For Maniaty, that most traditional of Queensland symbols, the mango tree, becomes a repository for the compelling power of the natural environment. As discussed in Chapter 1, Maniaty’s mango tree has strongly Edenic overtones, providing luscious fruit, which tempts the woman to fall, and ushers in the curse (childbirth pains). The same tree threatens to undermine the family dwelling: “The mango tree has actually

---

8 Tony Maniaty, All Over the Shop, Penguin, Melbourne, 1993.
started growing into the house, pushing it sideways off its stumps. It’s a very subtle intrusion and everyone’s used to it. There are ten people living here who go to bed in the middle, and wake up every morning on the downhill side” (p. 4). The off-hand tone here is characteristic of the light-hearted flavour of Maniaty’s account which draws its comedic effect largely from exaggerating elements of the ridiculous, incongruous and unbelievable in his childhood surrounds.

Indeed, there is something of the “Texas” overblown flavour that pervades Queensland. Like Texas, once a wild frontier state, where everything is fabled to be “bigger” than real life, Queensland is a place of extremes. As Thea Astley points out, Queensland is “where the tall yarn happens … [where] one is cast straight into an unending summer of tall story, oddball, the origins of rumour”.9 Cheryl Frost identifies a tendency to exaggeration in very early Queensland literature, primarily exaggeration about the landscape, with “complaints about insects” constituting a “minor tradition in writing about the region”.10 This she attributes in part to the fact that the main features of the Australian environment with which Europeans struggled in the southern colonies – heat, drought and isolation – tended to be heightened in Queensland, particularly in areas of its far North.11 Most early accounts paint a picture of a savage, oppressive landscape. The dry country is depicted as a parched, lifeless desert, with “no flowers, no fruit, very little life. Nothing but trees, trees, each with three branches and six leaves on each branch, throwing no shade except from their trunks”.12 The wet areas are correspondingly putrid teeming swamps, with “low banks of oozy mud, awash at high tide, covered with writhing and distorted trees … whilst the only living denizens visible are armies of hideous crabs, and an occasional evil looking alligator”.13

---

11 Ibid., p. 12.
Yet, some find great beauty in scenes that others found distasteful. In her autobiography *A House of Trees*, Joan Colebrook remembers the mangrove swamps of Port Douglas:

> Here the mangroves, with their shining, almost lacquered leaves, formed a world of their own, into which, moment by moment, there dropped, straight as arrows, the heavy seeds that had already germinated upon the trees, and were ready to grow wherever they fell, or to drift on any tide to any destination.

> The journey up the river was long and hot. Crocodiles looked like dark logs in the brown water, until suddenly, they would turn and disappear beneath the surface …

> The mud flats around us did indeed seem alive … Over the rich landscape, with its luxuriant grasses, a veil of silence fell and seemed to merge again with the blue of the coastal range down which we had travelled the day before. (pp. 92 – 94)

It is an exotic, fairytale like landscape, where the child's excitement and awe is tempered by fear. Colebrook’s account contains morbid tales of the crocodiles’ voracious predatory habits, and these haunt the child’s dreams as she sleeps that night. Yet effort is made to understand these creatures, and appreciate their place in their setting.

Just as the virulence of natural growth is often exaggerated for dramatic effect, likewise, heat is emphasized as a feature that transforms Queensland living into a unique experience stretching the limit of human endurance. Jessica Anderson’s *Stories from the Warm Zone* are about a childhood in Brisbane in the 1920s, and the “warm zone” as an image reverberates on several levels throughout the work – the warm comfort of infancy's domestic realm and the mother’s love, the warm flushes of embarrassment and humiliation of youthful trials, and, more simply, a warm climatic region. As Jane Gilpin points out, in these stories, Anderson repeatedly portrays heat as a violent and oppressive force. This contrasts with the traditional image of the Sunshine State as offering a calm and benevolent climate. In *Stories from the Warm Zone*, warnings about avoiding the sun are frequent. In the opening story, Bea’s sisters tell her that she must stay under the house because Mum “would be angry if we left you in the sun” (p. 4). On the way into town, Bea’s mother comments on Peggy and Des’ fair features, and asserts, “I hope they usually wear good shady hats. Imagine

---

allowing children with that colouring out without hats” (p. 71). In fact, such cautionary censures become a kind of symbol of social prestige, because she continues to lament, “But by the look of those children, their parents would know no better” (p. 72). Their lack of protection from the sun is tied to their family's poverty.

As Gilpin observes, Anderson’s sun is an active presence, and strong words are used to communicate its violent energy. Bea comments “the sun beat on my back”, penetrating her sunhat (p. 7). Peggy and Des have “forearms scaled by the sun” (p. 52), and their characteristic squint is also suggestive of being in bright sunlight. Even after days of incessant rain, the sun emerges undiminished in power, “prickling” the tops of uncropped grass (p. 6). Indeed, the Warm Zone collection begins and ends with images of heat. In the opening of the first story, Rhoda, Sybil and Bea stand “in the solid heat” (p. 3), the dark vertical slats enclosing under the house “splinter” the sunlight, and at the collection’s close, Bea and Kenny look out into the “shimmering air” of a sweltering March day (p. 110).

Anderson also uses physical temperature to reflect emotional currents throughout her narrative. It is “hot scrub” that Bea enters when she embarks on a clandestine adventure to find the way to Budjerra Heights, the uncomfortable heat symbolizing her apprehension as she enters forbidden territory. On the other hand, discovering cool enclaves in the house reflects Bea’s sense of security and assurance in her parents’ powers of protection:

When heat collected in the house, and I took my book and searched for cool spots, I found, among the currents of air at floor level, some I had not discovered before. (Later, when we had a dog, he would lie in those same spots). I did not give a thought to my trouble at the school. (p. 64)

After her stammering problem at school is exposed, Bea's parents decide to educate her at home for one year. Bea has discovered new dimensions to her parents’ love and concern for her, just as she finds new areas of cool solace in the house’s topography. This parallel is one she attempts to work in reverse at the novel’s close, when she seeks out areas of coolness in order to combat the growing tension she feels at the prospect of returning to school:

One sweltering March day, when my mother went under a green-lined parasol to see her mother at Albion Park, and left me alone in the house, I found one of
those currents of air that move at floor level and spread myself on the verandah with my hands under my head. The treasures of space and privacy, usually so valued by me whenever I was left alone in the house, seemed already cancelled because they were soon to be lost. (p. 107)

Heightening this association of heat with the pressures of conformity at school is Bea’s observation of her “evenly tanned feet” at the end of her year at home, a visible product of the freedom she has enjoyed, and her reflection, “When I had to wear sandals again, a fan of deeper brown marks would appear on each foot, burned through the three tear-shaped vents in each sandal” (p. 111). Her physical body will thus be marked, branded with the lifestyle of the school routine.

Maniaty’s account similarly emphasizes the oppressive heat of the Queensland environment. Part of growing up in their locality is learning to endure the harsh conditions:

The heat pours in; it's early February and our lives are measured by the weather - heat, rain and flies - and whether or not the mercury will hit that magic figure of 100 degrees! ... We don’t shield ourselves from the sun and heat, but expose ourselves to it; little brown nuggets of boyhood, in only a cotton shirt and shorts. Bare arms and legs, bare feet, no hats: blissfully unaware that we’ll be ravaged by skin cancer in years to come. (p. 87)

Yet, despite this apparent embracing of the climate, much effort is made to escape its extremes. As a child, Maniaty enjoys digging around under the shop, an activity that has “become an escape from the blinding Queensland light”. Down there, he relishes the “coolness of dirt that’s never fully dried” (p. 33). Similarly, at school, blinds are drawn to shield the children from the sun’s heat:

In the classroom the glare’s so blinding we have green canvas shades; when they pull these down over the glass windows, it’s surreal and spooky. You know it’s sizzling hot out there and the gum leaves are frying, but inside you’re bathed in a hushed green glow. (p. 90)

The repetition of “blinding”, along with words like “glare”, “sizzling hot”, “frying”, in these descriptions emphasizes that, like Anderson, Maniaty sees the Queensland sun as violent and dangerous.

It is not only the heat that makes Queensland life one of enduring extremes, but also the unpredictable weather patterns and tropical storms. Ronald McKie’s
novel, *The Mango Tree*, set in a North Queensland township in the latter years of World War I, describes a savage cyclone typical of the area. The town is buffeted by a “demented wind, screaming like the bunyip … that rocked houses and sliced off roofs and drove water into the sturdiest homes” (p. 197). Twenty inches of rain fall in two days, a flood sweeps down from the hills and the river overflows its banks, ruining sugar cane crops. Similarly, Colebrook’s idyllic home on the Atherton Tableland is prone to the ravages of cyclones:

… raging in a circular motion, clawing at the waves and poling them up along the continental shelf until glassy walls of water rushed inland to break against headlands or foothills, to sweep away the broken timbers of the rain forest and fragments of boats and masts and docks, of houses and men and animals. (p. 4)

While such cyclones mainly affect the state’s northern regions, Brisbane itself is also subject to unpredictable weather. In *All Over the Shop*, Maniaty relates how the very changeableness of the weather means that humid clouds, thunderstorms with heavy rain, and blinding sunlight with hundred-degree heat can all be experienced within a single day:

All summer the tropical clouds push down to our southeast corner of the state, massing in giant shapes – grotesque, hearts beating with thunder, like anvils with silver horns. And then they break right over our heads and drench us, and the sky is endlessly blue again – only it’s a colourless sort of blue, like a sheet of paper. And when you think it’s safe, the clouds reappear and burst open even harder, and drown us and the shop and the trams temporarily. (p. 31)

Indeed, the Brisbane region is prone to flooding and the city has several times experienced devastating inundations of the kind related by Malouf in *Johnno*. The chaos and uprooting wrought by this natural disaster that made thousands homeless is represented in the disparate assortment of objects that Dante and Johnno witness floating down the swollen river: “huge tree trunks”, “chicken coops, water tanks, butter boxes” “a Genoa velvet lounge chair”, “dead cattle with their feet in the air” “bushrats and lizards” (pp. 99 – 100). The incongruity of rural and bush creatures being carried through the city echoes the underlying apprehension of a nature capable of rearing up to invade and overwhelm the built environment:

The river, usually placid enough with its rainbow-slick of oil and its bubbles of ferment popping in the heat, boiled up now into lighted peaks like the sea, and its roar could be heard from tramstops half a block away. (pp. 99 – 100)

---

As Philip Neilsen points out, Malouf exploits this historical situation for his own literary irony. Johnno is about to travel half way across the world to experience the exotic territory of the Congo, and the flood transforms Brisbane into a Congo-like landscape. This parallel between Brisbane and Africa – the Dark Continent, with its primeval jungle – accentuates the Queenslander’s frontier mindset and sense of isolation from “true” civilization.

While Queensland’s extremes of climate and natural growth are often depicted as elements to be endured, they are also portrayed as cause for celebration. The sensuous detail that the Queensland environment elicits in literary responses is evidence of a strong element of Romanticism pervading the writing of the region. Indeed, it could be argued that the already noted stereotype of Queensland as a place of exaggeration and excess resonates with Romanticism’s tendency towards indulgence and overstatement. As Harry Heseltine points out, the strongly sensual experience of the natural world and exaltation in aromas and textures has Keatsian overtones. Heseltine observes that E. J. Banfield’s relishing of tropical fruit is comparable to Keats’ indulgence in an apricot, “it went down with all the delicious embonpoint of a beatified strawberry”. There is a similar quality to Thomas Wood’s delight in eating a mango which, he asserts, must be eaten in a particular way … “let the fruit melt into you, lusciously; cheering your sense with the flavour and aroma of orange and jasmine, mellowed into a poem by golden sunlight”.

Heseltine further notes that Queensland seems to have been particularly conducive to the Romantic cult of solitude, reminiscent of Thoreau’s retreat into the woods. He cites various key Queensland literary personalities who, at some stage in their writing lives, sought refuge in the natural world for solace and inspiration, including Vance and Nettie Palmer, Xavier Herbert, Thea Astley, and E J Banfield. The Wordsworthian child as “nature’s priest”, experiencing an intimate communion while alone in the natural landscape, also finds echoes in Queensland childhoods. In The Mango Tree, Ronald McKie’s child character Jamie recalls an epiphanic moment

21 Heseltine, op. cit., p. 39.
where he feels embraced by the basic rhythms of the landscape: “Once he had put his ear to the ground and heard the earth breathing, the pulse beneath, the hiss and flow of the deep dark, the tumult of digesting rocks. Felt part of everything” (p. 54). There is a strong resonance between McKie’s image of the child figure in contact with some elemental power within the landscape, and Wordsworth’s depiction of himself in *The Prelude*, “Beneath some ancient rock, listening to sounds that are / The ghostly language of the ancient earth”.22

Jamie experiences a spiritual peace on Saturday afternoons that rises from the natural world around him:

A brooding eminence that Jamie could almost touch, a sweet savage loneliness just beyond the tips of his outstretched fingers. And later, for a heartbeat as elusive as the long-tailed turquoise butterflies that froze over the mango flowers, a point of response, an awareness of rest, when Jamie knew that he and the weeds and the sun and the sleeping birds and all things, the town itself, the buildings and everyone in them, were in harmony. (p. 50)

Jamie shares an intimate relationship of sorts with the large mango tree in his back yard. Personified, the tree “knew him and even liked him” (p. 13), and becomes, at various times for him, “a friend, a challenge, a peace, a game, a place to sulk … a dreaming place, a confessional” (p. 14).

Joan Colebrook’s account of growing up on the Atherton Tableland is likewise replete with Romantic imagery of “oneness” with and worship of the natural world. Just as Wordsworth evokes the “spirit of religious love” in which he “walked with Nature”,23 Colebrook describes trees in reverential terms, asserting, “They were trees to worship, sacred groves.” She also draws upon the spiritual mythology of Aboriginal people who believed trees contained disembodied human spirits. Through contact with the forest, Colebrook gains a sense of identification with “a past life that we no longer knew”, “accepted” by the “pillars of great trunks into what seemed temples, smelling eternally of sweet leaves and of the disintegration of wood” (p. 7).

---

The Weatherboard House and Origins

In the face of nature’s overwhelming presence in the Queensland psyche, the characteristic Brisbane architecture – the raised weatherboard house – seems flimsy and insubstantial. Ironically, the vernacular “Queenslander” style was developed to suit local conditions: its raised floor level dispensed with the need to establish a level foundation, made difficult by Brisbane’s hilly topography, and also deterred white ants. The materials – timber and tin – were locally available and relatively inexpensive, making the “Queenslander” a form of housing within the reach of many different economic classes. Yet the resulting structure in many ways heightened its occupants’ sense of vulnerability and “frontier” existence. It became yet another feature of their lifestyle that distinguished them from the southern colonies and from their imperial homeland. Patrick White described the Queensland vernacular architecture as “ramshackle houses built on stilts”,24 while Thea Astley likened “Queenslander” houses to “teetering swamp birds, [holding] stiff skirts all round”.25 Both descriptions accurately convey the sense of transience surrounding these dwellings.

David Malouf, in particular, seems preoccupied by Brisbane’s evanescence in the face of a powerful natural world. In Johnno, the author’s alter ego Dante reflects on the town of his boyhood:

It was difficult to see how anything could be made of Brisbane. It was so shabby and makeshift, with its wooden houses perched high on tar-black stilts, its corrugated-iron fences unpainted and rusting … Nothing seemed permanent here. Brisbane was a huge shanty-town, set down in the middle of nowhere … It wouldn’t have surprised anyone, I think, to wake up one morning and find that Brisbane too had died overnight. Its corrugated iron would be sold off for scrap. The weatherboard houses would rot in the damp, be carted away, or fall victim to the voraciousness of white ants. (p. 83)

Significantly, this version of the common “engulfment” anxiety of the colonial subject focuses more upon the fragility of the built world than upon the invasive power of the natural. Arguably, this springs from a heightened awareness of the difference of Queensland architecture from the dominant Western building tradition, which

emphasized solidity and a more vigorous shutting out of the external climate. As Jim Woolley says:

The timber and tin house handles the paradox of connection/separation quite differently from its European counterpart. It provides a very light handed separation. It also does not have a conspicuous core or internal focus as in the European hearth. The Queensland House faces outwards more than inwards. It is not fixed or confined. Nor is it anchored to the earth, but fluid and free, moveable, almost transient.²⁶

This absence of a hearth, or central family room, is arguably critical to Queenslanders’ sense of displacement, of not being fully “rooted” in their setting. The traditional European hearth has a solid stone or concrete floor, walls of solid brick, to collect and store the heat to guard against a cold external climate. A central fireplace or heater would draw the family in to the middle of the house and to each other’s company as they took advantage of a single heat source. It is a unifying and fortifying experience. By contrast, in Queensland’s warm climate, the impulse is to escape the heat, so families are often drawn outwards, towards the verandas, to catch cooling breezes. The view offered for contemplation is of the external world, rather than that symbol of civilization and culture, the house itself.

This contemplation of the natural made possible by the Queenslander style of architecture is clearly seen in Malouf’s 12 Edmondstone Street.²⁷ Malouf evocatively describes his first childhood home in a way that emphasizes the house’s harmony with its surrounds so that, together, they form an organic unity:

Airy, open, often with no doors between the rooms, they are on such easy terms with breezes, with the thick foliage they break into at window level, with the lives of possums and flying-foxes, that living in them, barefoot for the most part, is like living in a reorganized forest. The creak of timber as the day’s heat seeps away, the gradual adjustment in all its parts, like a giant instrument being tuned, of the house-frame on its stumps, is a condition of life that goes deep into consciousness. It makes the timberhouse-dweller, among the domesticated, a distinct sub-species, somewhere between bushie and brick-and-mortar man. (pp. 10 – 11)

As discussed in Chapter 1, this image of the house in accord with nature casts it as a type of Eden for Malouf. In Malouf’s mind the house is associated with the sensory and instinctual aspect of human experience, so alive in childhood before the learned

patterns of social behaviour have gained ascendancy. Elsewhere, he asserts that Queensland houses are “so utterly of [nature], in form and substance”. The weatherboard house allows some of the life and presence of the earth below to flow over into the dwelling. Flexible and adaptable, the timbers expand and contract in response to the climate’s fluctuations in temperature. The comparison to a musical instrument hints at a harmony, or common pulse, between the house and the landscape it inhabits.

While Malouf enthusiastically embraces his Queenslander house’s affinity with the natural, its architecture elicits a very different response from his father. It is distasteful to him, speaking of humble beginnings, poverty and a lack of established civilization:

> Like most people in those days, my father was ashamed of our house. He would have preferred a modern one made of brick. Weatherboard was too close to beginnings, to a dependence on what was merely local and near to hand rather than expensively imported. It was native, provincial, poverty-stricken – poor white. Real cities, as everyone knows, are made to last. They have foundations set firm in the earth. Weatherboard cities float above it on blocks or stumps. Weatherboard houses can be lifted if necessary, loaded on to the back of a lorry and set down again two suburbs or a thousand miles away. They have about them the impoverished air of treehouses …

> As for verandahs. Well, their evocation of the raised tent flap gives the game away completely. They are a formal confession that you are just one step up from nomads.

Elizabeth Ferrier points out that in colonial days, “lack of permanent architecture was equated with the absence of culture,” while “the act of building signified the assertion of culture”. These concepts underpin Malouf’s father’s ideas about architecture. Malouf frequently contrasts 12 Edmondstone Street with the family’s later brick house, which is so desirable to his father because of the greater solidity and affluence it suggests, tying its residents to a stable cultural tradition. While his father sees the Queensland House’s link with “beginnings” in narrow, materialistic terms: “native, provincial, poverty-stricken, poor white”, Malouf’s imagery signals that he sees this as a positive feature. There is a note of celebration in his memory of the house on a level with tree-dwelling animals and the dense foliage they inhabit just beyond the veranda. The transience that Malouf’s father resents in these weatherboard dwellings is

### Notes

something that adds to their appeal for his son. They allow a fresh exploration of the relation between the human and the natural, a relation that has hardened into dogma in his father’s fixed image of the brick and cement “real city” which affirms a settled hierarchical relation between “civilization” and “the earth”.

Malouf’s association of the Edmondstone Street house with the natural and vital is also tied to an association of the external environment with the traditional pagan image of a fertile, mysterious, primeval “mother earth”. Indeed, the warmth, moisture and lush verdant growth so typical of Queensland’s climate facilitate this identification. In this way, Malouf associates the old Queenslander house as connector to “origins” of a far more significant kind: primordial origins of humanity, the earth and life itself. In Johnno, the author’s alter-ego, Dante, compares the two homes of his youth, and expresses his preference for the earlier weatherboard house over the family’s later brick home at Hamilton:

```
It wasn’t the house of my childhood. We had moved there in 1947 when my father built the place, huge, ugly show-offish, after his own design. I had never really cared for it. My memories were all of our old house in South Brisbane, with its wide latticed verandahs, its damp, mysterious storerooms where sacks of potatoes and salt had been kept in the ever-dark, its washtubs and copper boiler under the porch, its vast garden that ran right through to the street behind, a wilderness that my grandfather before he died, had transformed into a suburban farmlet, with rows of spinach, tomatoes, lettuce, egg-plants, a shed where onions and garlic hung from rafters, and a wire coop full of fowls. (p. 4)
```

The South Brisbane house is womb-like in its damp, dark warmth and abundance of supplies and nourishment. The washtubs under the house are likewise suggestive of feminine, maternal activity. This resonates with the sense of security young Malouf feels while in the Piano Room in 12 Edmondstone Street, also an arena of women’s work, with its age-old associations of the primitive and domestic warmth. There, the young boy enjoys lazy afternoons spent with his mother and their maid while the women do needlework, chat and read to each other. This experience is, for Malouf, a male, unique to childhood. It offers a window into “the secrets and half-secrets of the world of women”, a world that, in adulthood, would “be closed to [him] for ever” (p. 30).

30 See Martin Leer, “At the Edge”, op. cit., p. 18.
The garden of the South Brisbane house, as described above in the excerpt from *Johnno*, is a chaotic, mysterious realm. Its implicitly feminine fecundity is readily molded into productive, fertile ground, and significantly, tended by Malouf’s grandfather. In Malouf’s poem “Early Discoveries”, he explores this garden in greater detail, and in so doing weaves his way back to origins of another kind – his cultural heritage in Lebanon. The garden his grandfather creates in the backyard of the South Brisbane home is “a valley in Lebanon; you can smell the cedars on his flesh and the blood of massacres” (ll. 41 – 42). It is somewhat out of place in its antipodean setting, and “Early Discoveries” makes clear that the grandfather has “never quite migrated” (l. 46). As Martin Leer points out, to Malouf’s young eyes, the grandfather “comes like a stranger” with his “odd rites” (l. 22) which will only later be fully appreciated by the author as elements of a rich cultural heritage when he visits Lebanon as an adult:

These days I meet him at all turns. One morning early in Chios, I raise the shutter and his garden, re-discovered, shines: cucumbers, spinach, trellised vines. (ll. 57 – 60)

Thus, the South Brisbane home and yard, through its rich fertility and capacity to accept this translated version of Europe, is re-experienced by the adult author years later. It thus continues to have imaginative significance to Malouf’s sense of identity long after it has physically ceased to exist; in this sense it has an enduring capacity that transcends temporal and continental divides, just as the elemental vitality of his childhood’s tropical landscape is suggestive of a universal evolutionary past, of human origins beyond Brisbane and Australia.

The adaptive nature of the South Brisbane house, its capacity to be shifted, and its garden molded to accept farming traditions of a non-local culture, can be contrasted with the Hamilton house, which has imposed upon it cultural aspirations which sit uneasily. In *Johnno*, Malouf’s Dante finds it

33 See Martin Leer, “At the Edge”, op. cit., pp. 5–6, for a more extensive discussion of this poem and the collapse of temporal boundaries.
stuffily and pretentiously over-furnished and depressingly modern. It represented an aspect of my father, of his earliest ambitions perhaps, that I had never understood, some vision of worldly success and splendour that I could find no model for. Victorian armchairs covered with French velvet, bevelled glass mirrors, brocade curtains, chandeliers. (p. 4)

The house’s elaborate furnishings represent a discontent with elemental things and a desire to shut out the natural, a preference for objects that indicate wealth and social status. It is a process the landscape resists. Significantly, once the restraining human hand has left it, the garden of the Hamilton house is quickly transformed into a primeval wilderness like that which characterized Edmondstone Street. When Dante visits Hamilton to sort through his recently deceased father’s papers, he notices that the garden swarms with insect life:

The whole garden sizzled and hummed. Big slow-flying grasshoppers, so heavy they could barely stay airborne, barged across the lawn or lofted over a wall to the hibiscus. The air glittered, and bees were busy in the cups of creepers that were just bursting into flower, cascading over a trellis or choking a fence. Occasionally one of the local cats strolled through on its way to the waste ground next door and sniffed about for scraps; or a big waterbird floated in from the mangroves and perched for a moment on a dahlia stake. Once I saw a good-sized goanna. Deserted for just a fortnight, my father’s garden was already half wild. The darkness under the thickening boughs was alive with midges and heavy with the smell of rotting vegetation, jungle-damp and sickeningly sweet. (pp. 7 – 8)

This is a heavily audible and aromatic description. The verbs are laden with enthusiasm and vitality – “sizzled”, “hummed”, “ barged”, “bursting”, “cascading”, “choking” – indicating vigorous activity. The references to “jungle-damp” and rotting vegetation evoke the “primordial swamp” of early life on earth, according to evolutionary theory, reaffirming Brisbane’s resonance with a prehistorical past, and origins extending far beyond the individual self.

While elemental things, and the Queensland environment’s affinity with the primeval and originary, can be a source of rejuvenation, it can also elicit fear and revulsion. As a child in 12 Edmondstone Street, Malouf felt the “pull of the wild” most profoundly in his sleeping quarters which, like that of many Australian children of his era, were on an enclosed veranda bounded by a garden. The fernery at the window frightens the young boy, and is described in nightmarish terms:

The verandah is closed on that side by a fernery, or, as I see it, opens on that side into it. Diagonal slats of unpainted timber gone grey with age are hung with stag horns, elk horns, orchids that sprout from fleshy knobs, and
shaggy wire baskets of hare’s foot and maidenhair. The ground is all sword ferns round a pond with three opulent goldfish. Behind it is a kind of grotto made of pinkish grey concrete, a dozen scaly branches of which, eaten raw in places, droop and tangle like the arms, half-petrified, half rotting, of a stranded sea monster.

The Fernery scares me. Being taken out of the house each night and set to sleep beside it is like being put down at the edge of a rain-forest. Those stag horns, huge blunt-nosed decapitations, those hairy fern-stalks with flesh-pale coils at the end, go too far back to the primordial damp and breath of things. If I step out there, I think, in my sleep for instance, sleep-walking, I will get time-lost, I will turn back into some smooth or hairy green thing with dirt in my fists. (p. 19)

The Fernery smacks of a living, animalistic presence, heightened by the names of the plants that evoke various exotic beasts, their appearance which features hair and flesh, and the violent description: “eaten raw”, “blunt-nosed decapitations”. Malouf’s debate as to whether the veranda is “closed by” or “opens into” the fernery suggests his ambivalence towards this realm, as does his confusion about becoming a “smooth or hairy” thing in a reversal of the evolutionary process. While he fears this regression, at the same he time acknowledges his connection with the “green thing with dirt in [his] fists” into which he might “turn back”. In this respect, the Fernery represents another hemisphere of the self, one bound up with physical and sensory experience, and the instinctual animalistic impulse that, because unpredictable, requires repression.

The strong sense of geological origins, of the primeval past lingering into the modern era, is also evident in Joan Colebrook’s A House of Trees. Colebrook describes the location of her childhood home on the Atherton Tableland, which, at the time of her youth, was still being cleared of its dense rainforest to make way for pastoral industries.

I grew up in the 1920s on these ranges of the North East seaboard of Australia, which were the product of the great upward thrust formed during the Pliocene Epoch (a movement of earth that shuddered like a wave from New Guinea to Tasmania), born into a world so different from the large and mostly desertlike areas so typical of the continent – of the Centre, of South Australia, and of a large part of the west. The rain in my native North Queensland, drawn by the divide of mountains, watered the fertile soil eroded from basaltic lava and created – subsequent to the arrival of the pioneers – a brilliant landscape, where the grass grew to a vivid emerald and the reddish roads veined the earth as capillaries vein flesh. Everywhere, in those days, there was a backdrop of rain forest, nourished by the rich fifty-foot deep topsoil and watered by the misty rain of the yearly monsoon. The sound, the feeling, the envelopment of such constant light, swirling rain has been with me always, like one of those primordial lullabies we are supposed to carry with us from an earlier world. (p. 4)
Colebrook’s evocation of a richly coloured, moist and fertile landscape is strongly connected to the region’s geological formation. The landscape is transformed into a vital presence by imagery of the body (‘capillaries vein flesh’) and its implicit movement and activity: the “great upward thrust” of the Pliocene era, and its ability to “draw” rain to itself. The enveloping presence of the light swirling rain, which the author inwardly continues to experience, “like one of those primordial lullabies we are supposed to carry with us from another world”, is an example of the Queensland environment’s capacity to evoke origins far beyond individual experience, like Jung’s theory of archetypes which at given moments are brought to consciousness.34

Colebrook’s work, while predominantly a celebration of the primitive fertility of the Queensland landscape, like Malouf’s, also betrays ambivalence. Certainly, her account makes reference to all the well known exotic dangers of the tropical landscape, such as crocodiles, snakes and cyclones. On one level, her narrative seems keen to minimize the weight that these carried in her infant psyche. Colebrook asserts, “in spite of the shadow of mortality which so often haunts the tropics, it did not occur to us to fear any part of the nature around us. All that had to do with the earth seemed natural, for we had known no other life” (pp. 7–8). While she acknowledges nature’s destructive potential in her description of cyclones that wreak havoc, carrying away “houses and men and animals” (p. 4), her own personal encounter with a wild storm that lifts off the roof of her bedroom is met with the reassurance of “my father’s arms carrying me to safety” (p. 4). The threat of the natural is entirely dissipated by the strong figure of her father whose strength and presence enables him to build a house “in defiance of the power of the rain forest” (p. 6).

Yet, on another level, this reassurance and confidence is a product of childish innocence, a misplaced naivety. There is a sense in which the child’s keen desire for sensory enjoyment of the natural world beguiles her into trusting that which she should fear. As discussed in Chapter 1, Colebrook’s use of the Edenic images of snakes and fruit imply that the landscape in some way seduces the children with its

34 Ibid. Leer discusses Jungian psychosynthesis in relation to the work of Malouf, and makes the connection between such moments of suspended time, when “two continents and two presents merge”. Leer says that Proust experienced these episodes “at the present moment and at the same time in the context of a distant moment, so that the past was made to encroach upon the present and I doubted whether I was in one or the other.” (Marcel Proust, Remembrance of Things Past, Vol. 3: Time Regained, transl. Moncrieff and Kilmartin, Penguin, 1983, p. 903).
richness. Like the serpent in the Garden, which was attractive, the snakes in Colebrook’s rainforest do not “seem” evil, “having so bright and beautiful a pattern on their backs […] often lying coiled up so innocently on the grass in the sun” (p. 8, emphasis added). Through this image, Colebrook casts doubt upon her child self’s youthful confidence in the landscape’s beneficence, which her narrative elsewhere exults.

Mapping Brisbane

The tradition of portraying Queensland as a cultural frontier has created a heightened consciousness of spaces and distances in the minds of developing individuals seeking to understand their location in the world. Such mapping is also an exercise in cultural performance, because, as Carter and others have variously noted, mapping is an imperial discourse. As such, it occupies a special place in the colonial psyche, becoming a vehicle towards possession and ownership of a landscape that eludes containment. Map-making seems especially prominent in narratives about growing up in Queensland, yet, as will be seen, as an exercise, it is rarely successful in facilitating a greater sense of belonging.

Maniaty depicts himself drawing maps as school homework exercises, and for him it is a laborious exercise requiring fastidious attention to detail in the process of tracing, colouring and labeling:

I get to relive these colonial hopes and dreams every Sunday morning when I do my mapping. I have to finish before midday, so we can use the table for lunch. It’s my weekend homework. You need a Spirax map book of cartridge paper, an atlas, tracing paper, Indian ink and a nibbed pen, blotting paper, a rubber and some Copperplate HB lead pencils, and colouring-in pencils too.

Every week they give you a subject, like England showing the coalfields and steel factories. Or last week South Africa, showing mining and minerals. Or even, if we’re lucky, our own country Australia, showing its natural features – rivers, mountains and lakes …

… first you have to draw the border like a frame, a double line in red ink. If you smudge it, you have to rub it out with an ink rubber, which usually

---

35 See, for example, Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay*, op. cit, p. 204, discussing the nineteenth-century map, where he asserts that “located against the imaginary grid, the blankness of unexplored country was translatable into a blueprint for colonization”; also Amanda Nettlebeck, “Cultural Identity and the Narration of Space: A Reading of David Malouf” in Wenche Ommundsen, & Hazel Rowley (eds), *From A Distance: Australian Writers and Cultural Displacement*, Deakin University Press, Geelong, 1996, pp. 73–82, p. 74.
chews up half the paper as well; so you have to be really careful to start with. It’s utterly obsessive; the whole business turns us into perpetual bed-wetters ...

What’s the worst thing that can go wrong? In my whole experience of mapping it’s when you step back from your masterpiece and realize you’ve spelt the Malayan capital in half-inch letters, SIGNAPORE. This is a good time to jump under a train.

These maps, I’m keeping them in case the world changes and the British Empire disappears, even in the atlas. At least I’ll always know where Bradford is. I pity all those sad children elsewhere in the world – outside the crumbling Empire, poor souls – who’ve never mapped. It’s one of the pleasures of my life.

(pp. 130 – 132)

Of course, Maniaty’s mistake in spelling Singapore “SIGNAPORE” underscores the imperial processes implicit in mapping, in naming and signposting landmarks to gain imaginative possession of unfamiliar territory. The obsessive preparation and ritual involved in outlining, tracing and colouring the map emphasizes the process as one of cultural performance, and the adult writer recognizes in his young self’s fastidious efforts the desire to write himself into this imperial tradition – the need for the Greek boy to gain legitimacy as a subject of the British empire through his efforts to capture it on paper. Yet the almost paranoid attention to detail, and Maniaty’s concern at all the possible pitfalls (spelling mistakes, smudging lines), reveals also the precariousness of the exercise: the finished result is not guaranteed.

Indeed, while Maniaty approaches map-making as a vehicle through which land and culture can be imaginatively possessed, for other writers, map-making actually betrays anxiety of placelessness. Characters involved in quests for belonging and self-definition are often consumed with exercises of mapping that reveal a profound insecurity, or illusion, of self and place. A good example is Malouf’s *Johnno*. In *Johnno*, Malouf explores the sense of difficulty in positioning his young self in the world through the maps that Dante draws as school assignments. Reflecting on his address, as listed above, “Arran Avenue, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia, the World”, Dante pauses upon each of these categories, and outlines his conception of them. Regarding “Australia” he writes:

… Why Australia? What is Australia anyway? The continent itself is clear enough, burned into my mind on long hot afternoons in Third Grade, when I learned to sketch in its irregular coastline: the half-circle of the Great Australian Bight, the little booted foot of Eyre’s Peninsula, Spencer’s Gulf down to Port Phillip, up the easy east coast, with its slight belly at Brisbane, towards Sandy Cape and Cape York … I know the outline; I know the names (learned painfully for homework) of several dozen capes, bays, promontories; and can trace in with a dotted line the hopeless journeys across it of all the great explorers, Sturt, Leichhardt, Burke and Wills.
But what it is beyond that is a mystery. It is what begins with the darkness at our back door. Too big to hold in the mind! I think my way out a few steps into it and give up on the slopes of Mount Hopeless that is just over the fence in the vacant allotment next door. Australia is impossible! Hardly worth thinking about. (pp. 52 – 53)

In this way, Malouf’s young persona draws a blank when trying to imagine the details that fill in the outline of his country. Dante’s anxiety about his own inability to delineate his sense of place is also reflected in his pondering the plight of vagrants: homeless people who, by day, inhabit the library, before going back “To nowhere”, presumably sleeping under newspapers in the parks at night. He asks “How, I wondered, had they fallen out of that safe and regular world that the rest of us took for granted as if it was the only world that could be?” (p. 62).

The inadequacy of maps to genuinely reflect all the complexities of place is, however, exposed in Dante’s reflections on the Condamine River, in which Johnno drowned. Dante writes:

And of all the rivers in the world that might have risen up to take him, it was the Condamine, whose course we had drawn so often on our homework maps of Queensland and its river systems – the Condamine that we had represented, like all our rivers, with a blue line of solid ink, but which was, we knew, only the ghost of a river for two seasons of the year, a few glittering waterholes in a channel of ridged white sand, flowing furtively underground. In one of its more abundant moments it had reappeared to swallow him. (p. 151)

The Australian landscape, once again, defies the Imperial culture’s attempts to capture and contain it through representation, proving itself unpredictable and able to operate outside the definition placed upon it by the mapmaker’s hand. Mapmaking may be a vehicle towards imaginative possession of the land, but it is an unreliable one. As Graham Huggan writes, maps are “fundamentally static, two-dimensional models, they lack the capacity to express depth or movement: their fixed points, lines of connection and enclosing contours give shape to, but cannot do justice to the complexity of, individual experience.”

36 Neilsen, op. cit., p. 32, observes that this incident in Johnno shows that maps are “our culture’s inadequate and distorting attempt to capture or define the natural”.
In his essay “A First Place: The Mapping of a World”, Malouf contends that Brisbane is a city where it is difficult to get one’s bearings. This, he says, is primarily due to the river which twists and turns, frustrating attempts to form a mental image of the city’s layout:

Winding back and forth across Brisbane in a classic meander, making pockets and elbows with high cliffs on one side and mud-flats on the other, the River is inescapable. It cuts in and out of every suburb, can be seen from every hill. It also keeps the Bay in mind, since that, clearly, is where all its windings, its odd turns and evasions, lead. But this river does not have the same uses for the citizen as the rivers that flow through other towns.

We think of the Thames, or the Seine or the Tiber or the Arno, and it is clear how they are related to the cities they have growing up on their banks. They divide them, north and south. They offer themselves as a means of orientation. But the river in Brisbane is a disorienting factor. Impossible to know which side of it you are on, north or south, or to use it for settling in your mind how any place or suburb is related to any other.

So the topography of Brisbane, broken up as it is by hills and by the endless switching back and forth upon itself of the river, offers no clear map for the mind to move in …

When remembering Brisbane, Malouf finds it easier to conceptualize the city by mentally referring to the city’s old tram network than the city’s geography – the tram network is far more linear and rational. Arguably this sense of difficulty in forming a mental map of Brisbane is due to more than geography, and bound up with the nature of the city in the mind of the adult expatriate writer. It is a place distant in both space and time, and, as such, becomes like a dream space, governed not by rational principles but by nostalgia and the contradictions of memory.

Indeed, in Anderson’s Stories from the Warm Zone, Bea discovers that more than maps are needed to obtain access – physical, imaginative and social – to a place. After promising her parents that she will not go to the creek any more, she must find another way to see her friends:

To see Peggy and Des at the Creek would be to break the promise, but to see them at their camp at Budjerra Heights would not. Would there be time, when I was left at home alone, to make my way to Budjerra Heights? And where, exactly was Budjerra Heights? I could point in the right direction. I could say, ‘Over there.’ But that was not enough. (p. 66)

Budjerra Heights is actually a shanty town, a collection of humpies inhabited by vagrants and social misfits. Yet Bea has romanticized this place in her mind, as

---

Peggy and Des have told her stories: “I already knew that their father had shot many people during the war, and … that their mother was the most beautiful woman in Queensland, and that they lived in the best camp on Budjerra Heights” (p. 53). Bea idealizes it as a place of freedom, where the children do not have to go to school, but can spend their days fishing and rabbit hunting at will. Bea connives to trick her brother into drawing her a map showing her the location of this place: “I realized that I would only have to say to Neal, ‘Budjerra Heights is near the river,’ to make him indignantly refute it … I could see Neal angrily drawing a map” (p. 66).

Yet, Bea’s plan fails, precisely because she is unable to read the social and emotional “maps” already available to her. Her brother suspects her agenda, and quizzes Bea on her intentions. Maps can be metaphorical as well as actual. Paul Genoni points out that Thea Astley frequently depicts characters’ faces as “maps” that can be “read”, and Anderson adopts the same technique in *Stories from the Warm Zone*. Bea reflects:

> I had often found myself ‘reading’ people. All children have this ability, and I had as well a sister capable of bringing it to a conscious level. It was Rhoda who had called it our ‘reading’. It was also Rhoda who set the block in my imagination which prevented me from suspecting that Neal could do this kind of reading too. (p. 68)

Anderson’s narrative reveals that Bea needs a map of a very different kind in order to understand the significance of Budjerra Heights, its social as well as physical place.

Anderson’s story titled “The Way to Budjerra Heights” actually takes as its subject the process of Bea’s disillusionment about this place, and only at the very end of the story does she discover a physical route. Though Bea has been told by her family that people from Budjerra Heights are “unfortunate”, it is only when she glimpses Peggy and Des from the tram that she is confronted with an image of her friends in this light. Here she notices that they are “barefoot even on this cold day”, while she herself wears “white knee-length socks, black laced-up shoes, and a prickly tartan jacket” (p. 71). Her mother’s comment also marks them as subject of pity: “But

---

40 Elaine Barry, *Fabricating the Self: The Fictions of Jessica Anderson*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1992, p. 126, points out that “the geographical ‘way’ … gives place to the psychological and emotional ‘way’ of accommodating [Bea’s] ideal with her real world.”
by the look of those children, their parents would know no better” (p. 72). But Bea is obstinate in her idealization of Budjerra Heights and, despite this encounter, continues to invent fantasies about herself and Peggy and Des in her conversations with her invalid friend Kenny.

Finally, on a bush walk with her mother and sisters, Bea learns the physical location of this place of her dreams, but it is a phryric victory because she is forced to recognize that Budjerra Heights is not the place she has chosen to imagine. Stumbling by accident on the outskirts of the shanty town, the mother and daughters are accosted by an angry, unkempt woman who threatens to shoot them when Bea’s mother tries to take some watercress from what she believes is Crown land. After this, a vagrant man, ironically with “a beard like King George’s”, points them in the right direction home, mentioning that his destination, Budjerra Heights, lies the opposite way up the track. On the walk home, Bea’s mother and sisters discuss the social ills that have led to the existence of the shanty town, and tales of the occupants’ drunkenness and lack of sanitation finally shatter Bea’s illusion about the place.

Once home, Bea lies on her bed and weeps. Though she has at last discovered the way to Budjerra Heights, she realizes that it is an inaccessible realm for her. As Elaine Barry points out, the Kellaways and Bea’s ability to befriend them are a powerful representation of her personal independence. In losing the illusion of Budjerra Heights, then, Bea is not simply losing a dream, but also a sense of herself as a free agent. She is recognizing the powerful force her family and social situation play in making her who she is, that an unbridgeable gap exists between herself and the Kellaways, and that their world and friendship is not open to her. Her disillusionment smacks of expulsion from Eden for, not only does it culminate in wandering in the wilderness (the sisters joke about being “lost in the bush” while waiting for someone of whom to ask directions), the story closes with an image of Bea’s progression into adulthood:

I never heard what became of the Kellaways, nor am I sure that I ever saw either of them again. I think I once saw Des standing with the larrikins on Hough’s Corner, but I could not go near enough to confirm my impression, because by that time I had breasts and had grown into my face. (p. 104)

---

41 Ibid., p. 125.
Sexual maturity has replaced the innocence of childhood and, together with her knowledge about the Kellaways’ social misfortune, forms a barrier that prevents Bea from ever re-entering the idyllic, if illusory world of childhood imaginings.

Mapping then, springs from the Queensland child’s apprehension of inhabiting a cultural frontier, and expresses a desire to locate the self within the environment. Yet such efforts usually only underscore the landscape’s elusiveness. In the mind of the expatriate writer, the combined forces of distance, time and memory render Queensland’s sensuous fertile landscape a realm that is more effectively evoked than charted or known.
CHAPTER 5

MAPPING THE SELF:
SPACES IN THE QUEENSLAND HOUSE AND THE THEATRICS
OF CULTURAL PERFORMANCE

The sense of inhabiting a frontier of civilization in an environment of extremes means that Queensland writers are perpetually engaged in a process of negotiation between the forces of culture and nature. Central to this process is the figure of the house. Traditionally a symbol of culture, as we have seen, the house in Queensland nevertheless plays a vital role in humans’ relationship to their natural surrounds. Typically, the house is perceived as a separator from the environment – a shelter from weather and extremes of heat or cold. But, especially in the case of the “Queenslander” house, the family dwelling takes on a paradoxical role, functioning both as separator from and connector to the natural world. Its structure deliberately takes advantage of breezes and air currents so vital to cooling in Queensland’s warm location, so that the house becomes a conduit for the environment to flow through, and not merely a box enclosed against it. David Malouf asserts that the Queensland weatherboard house is “a living presence as a stone house can never be”, and this vitality lends the house a symbolic and emotional durability that belies its physical flimsiness. Indeed, Malouf imbues the house with an animation that stretches its existence beyond the physical and into the imaginative realm.

In *12 Edmondstone Street*, Malouf is involved not so much in an exploration of his childhood dwelling, as in probing into the elements of the self. His narrative effectively maps the self onto the house’s topography. Outer spaces, open to the public and natural world, are contrasted with inner realms, which may function either as private refuges or shrines to keeping up appearances. This means that, while different

---

rooms represent correspondingly contrasting aspects of the human psyche, there is no neat division between outer and inner, public and private. The house, therefore, becomes a template for exploring the divergent aspects of the self, and the contradictions involved in being creatures both of instinct and culture. Paradoxically, then, the house in *12 Edmondstone Street* that, as we have seen in previous chapters, has been so strongly linked to the natural, physical and sensory worlds, is most potent as an artistic device: its primary significance is in the form of symbol and metaphor, and as such, it is an agent of culture.

Our sense of the house as an imaginative entity is enhanced by Malouf’s relation of a “trick of memory” whereby he visualises the old format of the house in *12 Edmondstone Street* before it was renovated in the later years of the family’s residence there:

> The fact is that however hard I try, I cannot find this new door or remember where it was. I know where it ought to be, but when I shut my eyes I can’t see it; and though I must, in the years after the house was changed, have gone through it a thousand times, I cannot in my memory, set my hand to the doorknob or put my body in the frame. I still enter by the earlier door, one step up from the kitchen on the other side. Impossible, of course. I hang on hard to this failure of memory, this impossibility, because it allows me, almost by accident, to keep my larger memory whole. So long as that door remains blank, and our handyman, Old Jack, has not yet taken his hammer to the wall, I can keep our first house undivided … (pp. 11 – 12)

Malouf’s emphasis here on unity, on exploring “this whole house” (p. 12) signifies the conceptual role the house plays, as it exists in his memory, in linking his childhood and adult selves, as well as his private and public faces, into a complete whole. This image of unity is necessary to combat the sense of division that the topography of the house, with its numerous boundaries and thresholds, evokes.

---

4 Several critics make this point, see, for example Edward Hills, “La Maison Onirique: David Malouf’s First House”, *Meridian*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 1997, pp. 3–14, pp. 3, 12. Hills refers to Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1969, pp. 5–6, and claims that the first house of memory is “the birth place of our sense of self” where the “diverse and many-faceted selves which constitute our lives can be harmonized into a single integrated whole”.

5 See Hills, op. cit., p. 6, who says that memory allows Malouf to become reunited with a notion of the child-self as complete and undivided.
Under the house

One area that seems more specifically connected with origins, the earth and the natural is the area “under the house”. Many Queensland dwellings are elevated off the ground on stilts and so the area under the house became used as a place to hang washing and as a children’s play area during Queensland’s frequent rainy periods. A semi-constructed space, under-the-house was also used to store odds and ends, and as such, offered fertile ground to the imagination of children sent to play there.

For Malouf, under-the-house is a spot where the principles of order and logic that dominate the world are suspended. It is a primitive domain, outside the rules of physics, history and time, and functions as a profoundly metaphorical space:

It is a forest under here. Regularly spaced, the stumps have grey, galvanized-iron caps and are painted with creosote to keep off white ants. Seen from the washtubs, it slopes steeply upwards towards the Front Verandah; but you can also see it another way: as existing in a perspective in which the distance from first stump to last isn’t at all commensurate with the house above but is to be judged by the tallness of the stumps behind you and their littleness far off. It might be miles. It is a forest that stretches for miles, as dark as anything in Grimm and belonging to the geography of the body’s hot experience of it rather than to Australia or South Brisbane. It is its own place. (p. 43)

The child’s desire to connect his own experience to the world he reads about in books allows him to transform this mundane, cast-off space into a domain which imaginatively takes him beyond his suburban Brisbane life into a realm of universal significance: that of the body and its connection to the natural physical world. This region of “the body’s hot experience” embodies the animalistic, instinctual side of the self, an aspect that is repressed by structured culture, symbolized by the “terrible downward pressure of the house” felt by the child as he crawls upward into the narrowing wedge beneath the front of the dwelling.

Separated, temporarily, from the trappings of civilization, the mind is free to roam wild, and lapse into the irrational sensory world where dimensions are measured “not in ordinary feet and inches, but in heartbeats, or in the number of seconds you can endure the sticky-soft lash of cobwebs against your mouth” (p. 46). Like the fernery that encloses the sleepout, this mysterious realm sparks a fear that expands into creative possibility:
There are no clocks down here. There is not even language. They have not yet been invented. To come down here, up under the floorboards and the life of rooms, is to enter a dream space, dark, full of terrors that lurk behind tree-trunks in the thickest forest, hob-goblins, old gods, but full as well of the freedom and mystery of a time before houses – the old-new, gloomy-glad world where hammers and nails and planks of wood are inhabited by spirits that listen and respond, and where bodies, with no awareness of space or time, expand, contract, float, lapse into dreaming. (p. 47)

Like the sleepout, under-the-house is a liminal space, a threshold zone offering contact between the house and the external elements. As such, it represents a similar contact point between the conscious, rational self that is aware of time and space, and the subconscious, irrational psyche. As with the fernery in the sleepout, under-the-house evokes an historical and evolutionary regression, a backwards spiraling throughout aeons to an existence more immediately in contact with the natural world, “a time before houses”. Layers of history are peeled off as the child scrapes away the cinders spread on the soil beneath the house: “if you scratch a little you find earth … and if you scratch further you come upon debris, bits of broken china, bent forks, old tin pannikins, encrusted nails and pins, which suggest that habitation here might go back centuries” (p. 44). Just as the self is broken down into its basic components, and the child’s recently-acquired civilized persona momentarily lost as he submits to the pull of his instinctual origins in pre-linguistic infancy, so too is the house imaginatively deconstructed. It is reduced to “hammers and nails and planks of wood”, the planks of wood implicitly reverting back to trees. Malouf subtly draws on Aboriginal mythology, which believed trees were “inhabited by spirits”, evoking a local past that predates European settlement. This image also draws upon the organic structure of the timber house as a vitalizing element, transforming the house into a living presence that can “listen and respond” to the activity of its occupants and environment.

Jessica Anderson also uses the space under the house to represent origins and beginnings. In her collection *Stories from the Warm Zone*, 6 her first piece is entitled “Under the House”. While Malouf uses the space under the house to represent the subconscious and instinctual aspect of the self, Anderson strategically places her narrator Bea in this realm to signify her separation from her sisters and the social world. Bea, only four, is somewhat isolated from the rest of her family by her young age. She is yet to develop many of the subtler aspects of communication that will

allow her to fully participate in the social world of the house. In this story, Bea is relegated to wait under the house while her sisters go off to dress up and return as different characters. Her isolation is expressed by her feeling that Rhoda and Sybil are “deserting her”, and the subsequent fear and alienation she experiences while contemplating the objects under the house. It is an enclosed space, with vertical slats at the back and front, and Bea’s sisters specifically prohibit her from “looking down the front paddock” or trying to peep through the front gate. It is thus an imprisoning realm with no view or prospect. Bea approaches it with apprehension:

I could never go alone under the house at Mooloolabin without an uneasiness, a dogged little depression. Unless it was raining, no lines of washing hung there, and nor did my father use that space for his workbench, as he would do in the suburban house to which we were soon to move … So, in the under-the-house at Mooloolabin, there was no extension of the busy house above except the meat safe hanging from the rafter, the boxes of wood cut for the stove, and the tins of kerosene used for the lamps. These objects, dull and grey in themselves, left dominant to my eyes the sterile dust at my feet, the rows of tall sombre posts with blackened bases, and the dark vertical slats splintering the sunlight outside. Broken cobwebby flowerpots were piled in one corner. From a nail in a post hung the studded collar of the dog Sancho, who had had to be shot, and from another hung the leg irons dug up by my grandfather, relic of ‘some poor fellow’ from the days when Brisbane was a penal colony. (p. 4)

Bea identifies with all the broken and discarded odds and ends under the house, as she feels similarly marginalized. The objects bespeak death and confinement.

Interestingly, Gillian Whitlock argues that Anderson’s under-the-house is an arena brought into the familiar domain of the house by the sound of the mother’s movements from above, movements that “civilize and domesticate the space beneath”. She asserts that, while for Malouf under the house is a place of wilderness, gothic, and outside language and time, for Anderson, it is a space tied up with the domestic realm and that Bea’s “wilderness” is outside the dwelling’s boundaries – at the creek where she meets poor children and wags school. Yet, Bea experiences the creek only as a place of liberation and freedom, not of fear as she experiences under the house. It is only through the power of imagination that she manages to conjure up images of her mother moving in the house above in order to avoid the darker associations of the under-the-house realm: “My discontent with the dust and husks of

---

the under-the-house made the bedroom upstairs seem packed with colour and interest, increasing the attractions of the embroidered bedcovers, the lace valances” (p. 5). Indeed, as the passage above indicates, while the under-the-house space has the potential for domestic use, the activities of washing and handiwork are prominent only in their absence: “no lines of washing hung there, nor did my father use that space for his workbench” (emphasis added).

As the progression of the story indicates, the whole point of situating Bea under the house is to symbolize her separation from the social realm of the family, a point from which she is able to move towards greater participation and inclusion, symbolized in her positioning at the story’s close. Here, however, in the game of visitors under the house, Bea is too immature and easily distracted to be able to “play along” with her sisters’ artifice. She cannot continue to feign surprise or pretend that her sisters are the characters they have adopted:

‘You are Beatrice, I believe?’ said Rhoda, in a high, bored drawl. But I could not rise to my part. I was distracted not only because I had betrayed Rhoda’s dereliction to our mother, but also by the evidence which Rhoda and Sybil presented of other punishable acts. (p. 10)

In particular, it is a bright blue hat that Rhoda is wearing that Bea cannot place. “Where did the hat come from? It’s new. And those are Neal’s medals” (p. 11). Bea’s young age stops her from being able to fully participate in her sisters’ game, and it has to be cut short as she insists on looking through their disguises.

By the end of the story, however, the family has moved to a new house in the suburbs, and this shift is matched by Bea’s greater capacity for social inclusion. Since the game of visitors, Bea has developed some of the artifice possessed by her sisters, as she and Rhoda slip into a new game where Bea tries to draw out Rhoda on the origins of the hat, and Rhoda remains secretive. The final paragraphs depict the two dancing together on the broad verandas of the new house. It is a far more social setting than the story’s opening, and offers views of the surrounding world:

Coming to a stop beside Rhoda, my speculation complete, my decision made, I advanced my right foot, curved my right arm above my head, and gazed upward at my hand. Rhoda, the backs of her hands forward, bowed low to the audience. Beneath our feet, in the under-the-house, the leg-irons hanging from one nail, and Sancho’s collar from another, were seldom noticed among
all the stuff from the Old Barn … Gazing upward at my primped hand, I said to Rhoda, ‘That hat wasn’t new.’

‘It’s true,’ she said, it wasn’t new.

Undefeated, she contrived to imply, by that slight inflection, that its lack of newness was a distinction, adding mystery, extending possibilities. Filled with delight, I flung myself twirling away down the length of the verandah. Once again, as when we ran back from the marvelous torrent, I fully connived, this time by silence, so that together, twirling at different parts of the verandah, we put my new-found cleverness in its place. (p. 16)

Here, Bea has moved from being a passive figure, waiting for her sisters to come and direct the action, to becoming an active participant. She makes self-conscious, calculated moves, both in her dance steps, and in her conversation, which is designed to trick Rhoda into revealing information about the hat. The days of passive confinement are over for Bea, she stands proudly on the threshold of the house proper, and the dark realm of isolation under the house is conquered, “beneath [her] feet”.

Tony Maniaty also explores this most “Queensland” of childhood domains, and his treatment of this space in All Over the Shop contains elements of both Malouf’s and Anderson’s experiences. Like Malouf, Maniaty’s child is attracted to the bare earth there and the possibilities of excavation it offers, on both physical and psychological levels. “I’ve given up stamps for the archaeology of knowledge, using a collection of rusty objects” (p. 34). Maniaty similarly sees under-the-house as a primeval realm: “Here it’s like the time when Earth began. There are lizards and millions of ants, with little nests like volcanoes” (p. 64). He utilizes Malouf’s idea of under the house being a “wedge of darkness”: “I go under the house towards where it becomes a steep wedge, as far towards the front as I can” (p. 64). The realm’s imperviousness to normal rules of time is also suggested by Maniaty’s speculation that he might get stuck under the floorboards, and “they’ll find me here in a thousand years’ time” (p. 64).

Like Anderson, Maniaty makes use of under-the-house as a place from which a new concept of the house above can be formed. Just as Anderson’s Bea imagines the rooms above in brighter detail as she listens to the sound of her mother’s footsteps, Maniaty also detects the tread of people over the floorboards. Relying only on sound, Maniaty’s child self invents wild speculations of robberies being launched by shady intruders before being thwarted by his father’s heroism:

8 Tony Maniaty, All Over the Shop, Penguin, Melbourne, 1993.
Wait. Something’s not right. Listen. Can’t hear a bloody thing, and I’m a detective. Nothing. Maybe it’s a hold-up, and he’s holding up Dad for all the money in the till. I can’t hear anything now. This is where Dad is supposed to grab the length of rubber hose from under the counter and kill the bloke! I scramble out from the dark and climb up the side and around the front, just so I can see Dad chasing and catching him.

But there’s nothing. (p. 65)

Under the house is thus a realm that allows the child to imaginatively stretch the boundaries of the ordinary, and play out new fantasies of existence.

Verandas

A key feature of the Queenslander house is the large verandas that often extend around the whole perimeter of the dwelling. Bruce Bennett sees the veranda as central to an emergent pattern of Australian childhood houses that offer access to a vital natural world. Philip Drew’s extensive study of the veranda as an architectural style also emphasizes its significance as a mid-point between the house and the outdoors. He claims, “the psychological significance of the veranda is as a place in nature which is protected and accessible to the house, yet faces outward towards life rather than looking inward on itself.” As we have seen from Malouf’s work, however, the veranda’s proximity to the outdoors can be an ambivalent feature: often frightening and alienating to a young child with a hyperactive imagination. Ronald McKie, too, in *The Mango Tree*, recreates this delicate balance between the pleasure and fear of veranda-dwelling when he describes Jamie’s reaction to his sleeping quarters on a side veranda:

Jamie’s bed was on a side verandah where sleep was impossible without heavy nets tightly tucked. He liked the nets. They made a cave into which he crawled. He felt secure … Listening to the shrilling of the mosquitoes probing for his blood through the net holes or the oboe note of an elephant beetle passing through in laboured flight or the splash of flying foxes in the mango tree when the fruit was ripening. When he was very young he would lie, rigid and afraid, as they snarled and bickered and snapped at each other, hanging head down by their hooked wings like black bundles wrapped in the darkness.

---

10 Philip Drew, *Veranda: Embracing Place*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1992, p. 58. Other writers make similar observations, for example, Hills, op. cit., p. 9: Martin Leer, “At the Edge”, *Australian Literary Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1, May 1985, pp. 3–21, pp. 18–19: “the verandah is probably the Original Edge … which is the most striking feature of Malouf’s images of other aspects of his self.”
11 Discussed in Chapter 4 of this thesis, under “The Weatherboard House and Origins”.
of the tree. Jamie thought they were witches and looked for broomsticks in the
garden … (p. 46)

There is a sense of excitement in the variety of sound and movement of the natural
world beyond the mosquito net, but also apprehension caused by the veranda’s
openness to the unknown.

For Malouf, sleeping on the veranda bespeaks exclusion. In *12 Edmondstone
Street* he writes, “A verandah is not part of the house. Even a child knows this …
Verandahs are no-man’s-land, border zones that keep contact with the house and its
activities on one face but are open on the other to the street, the night and all the vast,
unknown areas beyond” (p. 20). He feels “cast out” when relegated to sleep on the
veranda, and rebels by becoming a “night wanderer” through the house in search of a
more secure sleeping spot.

In one important sense, the veranda played a vital role in the Anglo-European
settlers’ adaptation to a foreign environment. It was a place of safety, still within the
civilized domestic realm, from which the vast land around could be viewed and
comprehended. As Drew says, the veranda represents “an enlargement of the
imagination that reaches out to embrace the immensity of the land.”\(^\text{13}\) The concept of
veranda as vantage point, offering a mode of viewing, takes on an added dimension
when it is considered in the light of the Picturesque movement in art and architecture.
As Drew points out, the Picturesque left a lasting impression on Australian veranda
design in particular, mainly because of its preference for lighter, airier veranda
structures to contrast with the solidity of the house proper.\(^\text{14}\) This accorded well with
the timber and tin materials readily available in our country. But the Picturesque
movement also encouraged viewing the world through a picture frame, seeing it as a
designed landscape, pleasing to the eye, offering a variety of contrasts and the
impression of movement. The veranda, with its open, outward-looking face divided by
supporting poles, offered the ideal “frame” through which to view the outside world.
Furthermore, it was a moving rather than static picture that the gaze fell upon.

\(^{13}\text{Drew, op. cit., p. 42.}\)
\(^{14}\text{Ibid., pp. 60–61, p. 78.}\)
As Drew points out, the Picturesque movement, applied to verandas, involved treating the landscape garden as “roughly equivalent to stage scenery in a drama”. The veranda space came to be conceived as the equivalent of the theatre-auditorium. While it may seem fanciful to suggest that Australian families pretended they were at the theatre every time they gazed out from the front porch, what is significant about this theatre-connection is the idea of a constructed or contrived object for viewing. Drew asserts: “the veranda proclaimed that what lay beyond it was a garden constructed according to Picturesque principles – not undisturbed nature, but artificial nature composed and ordered along aesthetic lines”. The veranda is:

… a formal statement, like quotation marks around an utterance, that announces that what lies beyond it is not something natural, but something shaped like any other work of art informed by man’s imagination. Nature is no longer free to obey its own laws, but instead conforms to the aesthetic principles derived from painting.  

In the Australian setting, the psychological impact of this is profound. The veranda became a psychological device for taming the environment, thus bringing nature into the realm of culture. The veranda effectively “framed the prospect” of the vast unknowable expanse of the Australian bush, rendering it pleasing to the settler’s eye.

This can be seen in Joan Colebrook’s autobiography, which opens with a chapter titled “On the Veranda”. Colebrook chooses to locate herself imaginatively on the veranda for the exercise of retelling her childhood, precisely because of the aspect of viewing that it evokes:

In Australia we used to sit on the veranda. It was hot – at least, it was hot in the dry season – and in moments of leisure – that is, in the afternoon – we would automatically gather there, under the overhang of the roof, and look out over the cleared spaces of the paddocks to the wall of the rain forest (we called it “the scrub”) which ringed us around. 

The overhanging roof offers shelter against the fierce heat, and the comfort of the house in the face of the wildness of the scrub. Between the veranda-dwellers and the scrub is another buffer zone, the cleared paddocks, which likewise illustrate human power to transform the landscape from something overwhelming and threatening into ground that is productive and culturally more familiar to Anglo-Europeans. Through

---

15 Ibid., p. 27.
16 Ibid., p. 28.
these two buffer zones, the rain forest can be safely observed and comprehended. Colebrook’s account goes on to locate her house and region within the Australian continent, and so this veranda-vantage point is utilized on the micro and macro levels: in the first place, it is a point from which to view the immediately local, and in the second, it becomes a vehicle for psychological positioning within a nation and a world. Colebrook’s scope extends beyond what is visible to the eye, encompassing land to the “south and west [where there] extended a whole broad continent, its shape cut out in bold antique form – stretching out with an air of permanence, shimmeringly deceptive with its grasses of light gold, its ragged and weary looking trees” (p. 5). Thus the veranda is the point of reference from which she draws her mental map, allowing the self to be located within the country’s vast expanse.

While the veranda offers Colebrook a sense of spatial positioning, the social activities that are performed there also enable the children to locate themselves culturally within the heritage of their parents. The veranda offers contact with the wider world, in the form of news and stories: it is from this location that the whistle of the train can be heard, as it delivers mail and reports of an active world far away. “A letter was a mark of the world’s favour, a scrap of newspaper something to be pondered over, news from a passing traveler cause for wonder and exhilaration.”

Our veranda on one corner of that continent was the extension of our lives – and hemmed in here, in this boundless and free pioneer’s world, by the very narrowest of possibilities, and by the edge of the property my father had helped to cut out from the virgin scrub, and by the distances which had to be crossed (not rapidly, but in places at a snail’s pace) before contact could be made with the rest of settled Australia – such an extension had incalculable psychological value. By it we were rescued from the prisoner’s mentality. (p. 5)

Sitting on the veranda after dinner, the adults tell the children stories of their past, pioneering stories “of men who performed heroic deeds”, often exaggerated for dramatic effect, so that the children learn to see themselves as part of a mythology of taming a wild vast landscape. With the unkempt rainforest visible as the words sink into young ears and hearts, the children imagine themselves as inhabiting the same setting as the wild tales. Colebrook relates:

These stories were like books to us, with the pages turned over again and again. We listened without thought of how long the stories took to tell, or of whether or not we had heard them before. It was a time when hours were not measured. (p. 15)
Thus storytelling becomes a kind of ritual that serves to reinforce the children’s sense of identity and purpose within the landscape that they inhabit.

As Drew points out, whilst the veranda was a place that bespoke freedom, it was nevertheless governed by rules and conventions of use, conventions that varied according to each particular zone of the veranda. Front verandas were places of entertainment and leisure, often with swings and hammocks for enjoying the balmy climate. In previous decades, the veranda was a place where visiting hawkers, tradesmen and neighbours might be received. In *Johnno*, Malouf describes how the front veranda was where his mother’s visiting friends were entertained with pikelets or pumpkin scones for morning tea, and where the family gathered on warm evenings, conversing with neighbours over the fence. In this way, the veranda operated as a liminal social space, a threshold between the public world, and the private dwelling of the house proper. It functioned as a buffer zone between the street and the family’s living space. With a child’s keen powers of observation, the young Malouf soon learns also the type of company that might be entertained on the front veranda. He is familiar with the traveling salesmen and friends who frequently call for tea. When a person outside these circles enters, he registers the difference immediately. One such visitor is a pregnant woman who had fainted out in the street and was brought on to the veranda to recover. Malouf remembers this woman precisely because of her “stranger” quality – she is from a different social sphere to his family, and as such, to the child’s eye, representative of all that is foreign and slightly fearful in the big outside world:

She is, perhaps, twenty-six or seven, tall, dark, heavy, none too clean; what my mother, with her English eye for distinctions, calls ‘common’ … The woman is pregnant but I don’t see that. What impresses me about the woman is not her interesting condition but the interesting condition of her being there at all – the unlikeliness of her having got into the house by anything but extraordinary means. She has lit up an Ardath and is smoking. Nobody smokes in our house; certainly no lady has ever done so … It is her looking so settled in a place where she should never have been that strikes me, and makes her, in retrospect, the only possessor, the permanent occupant of that particular chair. She is the only person I can actually see there. (p. 16)

The woman’s violation of several codes of conduct marks her as “Other”, and it is the incongruity of her world, of cigarettes, swearing and boldness, brushing with his own

---

20 Bennett, op. cit., p. 37.
world of manners and propriety, that makes her visit memorable. Thus the veranda
effects a widening of the child’s social horizons, offering contact with society beyond
family and the sheltered enclosure of the house.

While the front veranda was a social space, the side and back verandas usually
served more mundane, practical ends. Sleeping quarters were often placed on side
verandas, where possible, where some privacy from the street could be attained. The
back veranda was the arena of women’s work, and often a place to store work boots
and dirty clothes. As a child, Malouf was made fully aware of the particular
conventions surrounding the verandas of 12 Edmondstone Street. He speaks of a
boundary that exists “at some point, far to the left along the Front Verandah,” where
the space ceases to be a public thoroughfare and is regarded as part of the maid’s
room, visible from the far end. “I test the point continually. Can I see? Now can I?”
With the deviousness of the child’s contrary inclination, he lets his toy cars zoom “too
far along the floorboards, and find the barrier is merely notional and can be crossed”
(p. 18).

**Inner Rooms**

As Jim Woolley asserts, the house is a “primary umbilical connector”, linking
its residents not only to the earth on which the house stands, but also to cultural
concepts of home and hearth perpetuated by centuries old mythologies. Yet, the
literature shows that the Queenslander dwelling, as a residing place of Anglo-
Australian cultural heritage, is home to many objects, rituals and conventions that
seem out of place in the sub-tropical Antipodean climate. For children, this makes the
inner rooms of the house profoundly ambivalent. They sometimes represent a secure
zone housing mother and comfort, and at other times appear to be a stifling space
governed by rules and hierarchies developed for a different place and time.

Aided by the shade of encircling verandas, the inner rooms of the traditional
Queenslander are characteristically dark. Malouf comments, “even on the sunniest
afternoons you needed a light in our dining room”. Varnished wood paneling

---

22 Woolley, op. cit., p. 6.
accentuated these rooms’ more ceremonial dimness. It is to the dining room that Anderson’s Bea is summoned when she is caught truanting from school in *Stories From the Warm Zone*. The formality of this room is heightened by her parents’ postures, “My father was sitting, my mother standing beside his chair, as if for a photograph” (p. 60). The environment has its intended effect upon Bea who comments, “I knew there was some ideal of justice at work here, and I was supposed to respect it” (p. 60).

Less intimidating is the kitchen, which, in previous decades, was one of the few realms permitted to children arriving home from school. Food could be found there, so children greeted the domestic space with eager anticipation, before being relegated to the backyard or rear veranda to play. Malouf felt “cosy and safe” in the kitchen, where he often did his homework in the company of the family’s cook while dinner was prepared. It was also a place of storytelling, where his mother and Cassie the maid would read the classics aloud to each other. Like the Piano Room, described in *12 Edmondstone Street*, the kitchen in *Johnno* is a place where the young child can participate in the lives of women and their world of home and caring for the household. “It was a world so settled, so rich in routine and ritual, that it seemed impossible then that it should ever suffer disruption” (p. 35). This evocation of primitive continuities, of the age-old tradition of feminine domesticity, casts the kitchen as a connector to origins, a place of security and access to the maternal qualities of nurture and protection.

By contrast, the formal rooms of the house can be stifling in their showy adornment and reservation for refined adult entertainments. The Front Room of Malouf’s *12 Edmondstone Street* is “a dead room” where nothing happens, but all the furniture and paraphernalia of suburban culture are arrayed in a shrine to middle class opulence. It is “a show place”, adorned with Genoa-velvet lounge chairs, glass-topped occasional tables, and gold-tasseled sash windows. Its crystal whisky and sherry sets, smoker’s stands, and cocktail shakers are displayed out of obligation only, as neither of Malouf’s parents smoke or drink. They exist to signal to visitors that the house’s inhabitants belong to the kind of class permitted, by social privilege and affluence, to

---

enjoy these leisures, yet the objects also carry an implicit injunction that they are not to be touched. The room is like a cursed Garden of Eden, a place displaying “forbidden delights” (p. 49), temptations that must be resisted. In its display of objects, the Front Room represents the kind of “kitsch” of Australian non-culture that Richard Coe claims the Australian child finds so alienating and complicating to his sense of identity.24 The Front Room exists for visitors only: yet Malouf never sees his parents “take into that room anyone they valued as a friend or genuinely respected” (p. 50). Closed to natural light, its dark space glows dimly with the brass and crystal of its ornaments, maintained religiously by rituals of dusting and polishing.

Significantly, it is the Front Room that Malouf’s infant self chooses to defecate in, bringing to this cold, highly organized spot some of the warmth and chaos of his vital, “primitive” body. In so doing, Malouf reinscribes the Front Room with the qualities of his imagined tree-house existence: it is “on the polished forest-floor” that he deposits his “pile of turds” (p. 52). Ironically, he sees the act as one of artistic expression: “I am speaking with what is, for the time being, my body’s only expressive mouth, poems that are hymns or critical protests, who knows which?” (p. 53). Here is the animal instinct of marking territory, a desire fully to possess what is essentially an alien space; yet also the desire for expression and self-definition – an exercise in culture. Malouf’s childish identification with the burglar, who breaks into the house, accentuates his alienation from the space of the Front Room. Like the burglar, the child feels like an intruder in a space not his own.25 The linguistic continuities between his childish instinctual urge and the activity of the burglar (doing a “job”) strike a chord in his psyche, prompting him to see the incidents as connected in some way (p. 53).

It is not just the child Malouf who feels oppressed by an artificially imposed culture in the inner rooms of the Edmondstone Street house, but also, curiously, his parents. This can be seen in the furnishings of their bedroom. An imposing framed picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus dominates the whole room. This picture, “so thickly varnished that its medium seems like the coagulated darkness of another

25 Hills, op. cit., p. 12, makes a similar point.
world”, is foreign to the house and its occupants. A wedding present from Malouf’s father’s family, it creates “an atmosphere so heavy that it might be difficult to breathe” (p. 23). Its presence embodies the very real emotional control that Malouf’s paternal grandmother and aunts exert over the young family, and the Christ’s gaze over the foot of the bed is felt as the condemning presence of these others by Malouf’s non-Catholic mother. It is, as Malouf says, “an intrusion”, such that his mother does not seem to have any ownership of this personal space. Her lack of agency in this room that is “already too fully occupied” is compounded by Malouf’s feeling that the house is “a house of children”, with his parents “more like older children playing Mothers and Fathers than real adults” (p. 25). Malouf’s father is still very attached to his parents’ house down the street, calling it “down home”, and receiving his mail there – factors that must have undermined his young wife’s confidence in his allegiance to her and their marriage.

It is not merely rooms and furnishings that bespeak the oppression of an artificially imposed culture or “image” on children growing up in Queensland. The routines and rituals of everyday life were, more often than not, informed by traditions of European life, and starkly at odds with the natural climate of the subtropics. Malouf, for example, reflects that his mother “was reproducing for us her own orderly childhood as the last of a big family in [pre 1914] London” (Johnno, p. 32), and that although this was rather typical of Queensland parenting of the day, it seems to have been heightened in Malouf’s case: “Forbidden to use local slang, or to speak or act ‘Australian’, we grew up as in a foreign land, where everything local, everything outside the house that was closest and most ordinary, had about it the glow of the exotic” (12 Edmondstone Street, p. 33). Meals are governed by English rituals and standards of taste:

Here, on an early Kooka gas-stove with a laughing jackass on the front, [Cassie] prepares the enormous meals of those days, meals that defy latitude and the facts of climate and weather by reproducing the baked dinners, stews, hot-pots and boiled puddings of the Mother Country (our mother’s country), which we continue to consume, after more than a century, as if a hundred degrees of humidity constituted a strictly moral challenge, and we had our real existence in a cold place on the other side of the globe. (12 Edmondstone Street, p. 55).

That this “paying tribute to origins” goes against the impulses of the local environment is signaled by the family’s “ignoring” the view from the window of a
backyard that “dazzles in sunlight” and “steams after rain” (p. 55). Here, culture is directly opposed to the demands of nature.

Colebrook’s account of growing up in an influential family in the rural community of the Atherton Tableland also accentuates the reverence paid to the trappings of English culture and traditions. When welcoming visitors, every effort is made to give the impression that none of the culture of the Old World is lacking out on this frontier of the wilderness:

At teatime, the cups would be spread out on a starched cloth, and at dinner the candles in the ancestral silver candlesticks – faithfully transported after each change of residence – would illuminate the platter of rare roast beef and Yorkshire pudding and the quivering Victorian desserts which my mother knew so well how to make and which would delight visitors who did not expect to be so nostalgically welcomed on the “fringes of Empire”. That old British idea of dressing for dinner “come what may” ruled on such occasions. (p. 18)

The Heale family are praised for “the way you hold your end up out here” (p. 19), as though to be welcomed into acceptable social company requires adherence to the Empire traditions formulated for an entirely different setting. In the simple country schoolhouse, the children learn British history and culture, play games to chants such as “Oranges and Lemons, the Bells of St Clements” and “See Saw, Margery Daw”, where “the words meant little, having come to us from so far across the seas” (p. 29). Told they are “small soldiers of the great British Empire”, the knowledge imparted by the education system seems slightly incongruous when set against their homeland of dazzling tropical sunlight.

Little is different in Maniaty’s childhood education in suburban Brisbane three decades later. In choir, the children sing “O give me a home, where the buffalo roam, and the deer and the antelope play, where seldom is heard a discouraging word, and the skies are not cloudy all day”. Yet he reflects on their situation, “in the sub-tropics, we’re sweating under black storm clouds and … not a deer or antelope in sight” (p. 132). Their favourite song is “Waltzing Matilda”, which “has an immediate effect on our collective psyches” (p. 133). Though they have no idea what the words actually mean, it is appealing to the children, as part of a national mythology about the land in which they live, rather than a distant realm of which they have no experience.
Thea Astley’s novel, *Reaching Tin River*, 26 also indicates the pervasiveness of clinging to a northern culture. Irritated by the slavish hankering after superficial notions of refinement displayed by those around her, Astley’s Belle cynically decides to make a list of all the convent schoolgirls who learned to play “The Rustle of Spring”. This piano piece was very popular in the era when Astley’s novel is set, and was written by a Norwegian, about a northern spring very different from the Australian season. Learning to play “The Rustle of Spring” became almost a rite of passage for Brisbane schoolgirls, a symbol of cultural attainment. Belle notices that “there were girls at my school who practiced till their fingers throbbed before taking out their licentiate, but they never played a note afterwards. The qualification, not the music, was their centre” (p. 44). “Spring has never rustled in that part of the country” (p. 38), Belle’s aunt reflects, referring to the dry outback landscape of Perjury Plains, where she grew up. Belle’s mother, Bonnie, notes that the era’s most popular piano pieces, including “The Rustle Of Spring”, “Bells Across the Meadows” and the “Raindrop Prelude”, are all gentle nature scenes, “tralala, English, non-Australian in flavour and with pastoral evocations unlikely to arouse our girlish senses” (p. 40).

**Culture as Performance: Posing and Theatricality**

The emphasis on maintaining British traditions, though widespread throughout Australian culture generally, at least until the Second World War, has arguably been more marked in Queensland than in other states. This is, in part, a response to the “Queensland joke”, or the stigma attached to the northern state that has come to be derided as the home of the “oddball”, conservatively parochial politics, and a society distanced from the “real” world by geographical remoteness and rural insularity. As Astley, Malouf and others have pointed out, the heat, distances, and vitality of the natural world are thought to produce a “different sensibility, a different cast of mind … a different sort of Australian”. 27

Initially, geographical remoteness probably prompted pioneers to hold more strongly to rituals of their European heritage, to keep alive the mythology of their

---

origins, and a sense of connectedness to the wider world. As generations passed, these traditions, or trappings of “culture,” began to be exercised defensively, as a sign to the rest of the world that Queensland was not a cultural backwater, but in step with the rest of the world, every bit as civilized and progressive. Culture becomes a performance. The theatrical associations of holding to Old World traditions and niceties that are anachronistic in the Australian setting are explored by a number of Queensland writers, and this has become somewhat of a minor regional tradition in writings about childhood and coming of age in the state. Drama and performance become extended metaphors through which issues of confused identity are explored in a way that is uniquely connected to the Queensland condition.

Astley’s novel, Reaching Tin River, foregrounds themes of drama and performance as it details the main character’s confused journey to locate her “centre”. The protagonist’s parents are both musical performers and, as a young girl, Belle sees her mother’s chosen career as a jazz drummer lead her on a fruitless pursuit of acceptance in a sexist and parochial region. Belle herself is also a consummate performer. As a young teenager, she dons a daring swimsuit and trips down to the bay in a show of flesh designed to excite the elderly boarding house resident, Mr Renouf:

I slip on sandals with unsensible heels and sling a psychedelic beach towel over one shoulder … I blow myself an ironic kiss. Ooooh Mr Renouf, I simper, and close the wardrobe door on the mirror. My reflection remains in the mirror and smiles at the empty space.

Already Mr Renouf is seated for his post luncheon pipe … Too slowly I saunter past his chair, too close, and pause at the top of the steps where the sun gropes for me like a lover until I turn my back on it and my own smile into Mr Renouf’s. (p. 34)

Belle’s actions here are calculated for effect. When Mrs Burgoyne remarks that she is likely to get sunburnt, she drops her towel “exposing more, and wave[s] a languid fringe of fingers, provoking her” (p. 34). It is all attention seeking, since she feels deprived of love because her mother is often away, performing with Aunt Marie at various outback pubs and bars. On coming back from her swim, Belle has lost her

28 Malouf, in his essay A Spirit of Play: The Making of Australian Consciousness, Boyer Lecture 1998, ABC Books, Sydney, 1998, p. 76, details how this mindset is also reflected in Australian colonial architecture generally. While many nineteenth-century Australian buildings appear to be anachronistic, trying to mimic Italian Renaissance and neo-Gothic styles speaking the history of other regions, Malouf points out that these were actually forward looking in their conception, reflecting styles that at the time were considered cutting-edge design in England and Europe. In this way, the Australian colonies were defining themselves, “not as colonial but as confidently provincial, standing in the same relationship to London as the great provincial cities of England”.
easy confidence, and feels like the small girl she is, wanting to be “applauded and laughed at and approved. *Good girl*, I long to hear someone say. (Where is mother?) *That’s the girl. Good girl …*” (p. 34).

It is thus deep need for attention, acceptance and approval that motivates Belle’s posing. In later years, this need is satiated by other forms of fantasy, most notably her obsession with a long dead nineteenth-century Queensland society man, Gaden Lockyer. Aided by resources available to her as a librarian, Belle researches his every move, from his humble origins as a pioneer, to his rise in status to become a prominent personage in local government. In her mind, she inhabits a wild fantasy realm, pretending that the embraces of her husband are those of Gaden Lockyer. Belle tries to reinvent herself as Gaden Lockyer’s wife, adopting the same hairstyle as seen in photographs, and trying to find similar clothes. There is heavy irony when she has to steal a hat from the props department of a theatre company to complete her outfit (p. 143). This obsession reaches its height when Belle embarks on a tour of the places where Lockyer resided, and commissions a life-size poster of a Lockyer family photograph. This she hangs up in the ruins of Lockyer’s house and tries to propel herself into Lockyer’s dimension, to “merge” her identity with his, by launching her body through the paper effigy. The whole episode is fraught with theatrical overtones:

I should be dressed for the occasion in long skirt, shirt-waister and lace-up boots. But there is a limit to the outrages of trespass. Although these garments are in a bag in the car boot also, I am not yet crazed enough to go back and put them on …

My eyes are riveted on that family group (with whom I am shortly to dine) which buckles in the breeze on the veranda of the abandoned farmhouse.

I concentrate on them, on their oneness, their existence then, willing myself back and forcing my thoughts towards that centre until everything outside me is diminished and my mind lasers at unseeable speed towards the flaming expected core … I lengthen my stride to trot, to sprint, running faster than time until I am hurtling forward up the veranda steps and hurling myself bodily through my paper hosts, making sure it is Mrs Lockyer I obliterate … Nothing.

Nothing but a wood sliver in my foot and an overwhelming emptiness with a throbbing in my ankle where wood has ripped flesh, a trickle of blood, and pain for every reason. (p. 176 – 7)

The “nothing” that Belle discovers as a result of this desperate act is closely connected to the “great Australian emptiness”, and indeed, Belle’s quest for her “centre”, and perpetual journeying in search of it, are tropes that cause Astley’s narrative to resonate with conventional explorer mythology.
Bewitched by the fabled existence of an inland sea, an oasis of fertile richness in the Australian interior, many futile expeditions were launched to locate this body of water. But once the rivers were tracked and charted, and many lives tragically lost, the result was – nothing. As Paul Genoni points out, the “sea that wasn’t there” is “a powerful metaphor for the ongoing failure to discover the spiritual centre of life on the continent”. Belle, too, in seeking to locate her “centre” is pursuing some aspect of self-definition, a spiritual sense of home and belonging. The connection between her search and the early European exploration of the continent is heightened by the narrative’s frequent reference to Euclidean circle geometry, which reflects the nineteenth-century’s preoccupation with science, as well as Belle’s acts of mapping and plotting her course. Gaden Lockyer, himself a nineteenth-century pioneer and champion of the empire, also forges a link between Belle’s personal search and the imperial discourse of exploration. Yet the most telling continuity is that of shared failure. Just as the explorers were looking for something that didn’t exist, Belle herself at one point realizes that she may be looking for the wrong thing: “Maybe I have been wrong all along and am a centre looking for a circumference” (p. 145).

Belle’s search for her “centre” can, however, be understood in terms of drama as well as in terms of quest and exploration. This is because it is really an exercise in self-definition, inventing a persona or identity. The failure of her attempt to merge herself physically with Lockyer leaves a sense of emptiness because she has invested her whole self in fostering an illusion. After launching herself through the paper, to find nothing changed, she feels selfless: “I doubt my own presence” (p. 177). Immersion in a false identity has effaced her real existence.

Malouf also explores the adoption of alternative identities as a means of discovering personal fulfilment and definition. This is most clearly seen in his novel, 

*Johnno*. As a teenager and young adult, Johnno perpetually seems to act out his life on a stage in various stereotyped identities. The act that provokes the writing of the narrative is one of illusion: he poses in a photo of a lifesaving group to which he

---

never belonged, wearing glasses that are not his own. He first enters Dante’s narrative as “the class madcap” (p. 13), cast in the role of the naughty yet eminently likeable rebel who keeps the others constantly entertained with his outlandish feats. The science teacher, with whom Johnno constantly wars, “plays the same elaborate game”, by indulging his students’ fetish for explosive experiments, and ritually expels Johnno from class for misbehaviour, with “a high-flown rhetoric that gives all dealings between them the air of the theatre” (p. 14).

In university, Johnno continues the role of the wild dilettante, regularly drunk and embarking on adventures into the clubs and brothels of Brisbane’s seedy underworld. The element of drama in these escapades is emphasized by Dante’s comment about Johnno’s entrancement with the prostitutes: “It was, I think, their theatricality that appealed to him, the high gloss of their finish, their perfect approximation to the idea of ‘whore’ that he had derived from his reading” (p. 71). From this point onwards, Dante sees Johnno as adopting various phases and roles gleaned from his reading. When Dante goes to join Johnno in Paris, it is only after sifting through more disguises and masquerading (Johnno has convinced the concierge at one of his hotels that he is not Australian, but Scottish) that he finds his old friend. Like the dioramas at which they gaze in Parisian shop windows, the world Johnno inhabits is an invented, imagined one. Back in Brisbane, our impression of Johnno as a play-actor reaches its height when he gleefully tells Dante that he is responsible for a spate of arson attacks on churches. Dante feels that Johnno’s story is “less of a confession … than a rehearsal” (p. 137), again imbuing it with theatrical overtones.

Yet, the only version of Johnno that we, the readers, are allowed to see is that which Dante presents to us. In fact, as Philip Neilsen points out, alternative readings of the novel see Dante as the one who is perpetually “acting”, casting Johnno into various roles and inflated personalities so Dante can justify his own inadequate response to Johnno’s attempts to forge a deeper level of friendship. Indeed, the narrative does betray certain signs that it is in fact Dante, not Johnno, who casts Johnno’s life as a scene of progressions from one literary personality to another.

31 Ibid., p. 12.
While Dante claims that “what Johnno called life bore an uncanny resemblance to what the rest of us called ‘literature’ ” (p. 84), Johnno’s parting letter to Dante reveals that it is Dante who has been turning Johnno’s life into literature, casting him as a character in his own fiction. Indeed, from the very beginning, Dante’s narrative reveals that it is those around Johnno who have the keenest interest in his playing up to various roles. Dante and his school friends all have a vested interest in Johnno’s maintaining the rebellious identity they all have bestowed upon him. “If Johnno was not Johnno where did any of us stand?” (p. 47). But soon they find Johnno has “outgrown [their] idea of him” (p. 48). Dante acknowledges his own role in typecasting Johnno when he says, “I had found for Johnno a place in what I thought of as my world and he refused to stay there or to play the minor role I had assigned him” (p. 48.)

Other revelations of Dante’s need to cast Johnno in the role of wild one are more covert. Johnno arguably represents a side of Dante’s own character, a wildness that Dante is too afraid to acknowledge as existing within himself, but can explore vicariously through Johnno’s friendship. This wildness is part of a larger force that the narrative links also with the novel’s setting in the fecund humidity of Brisbane. As Dante begins to doubt some of the respectable order that governs his life, he acknowledges an affinity with Johnno by intimating that he might “sneak over” to “Johnno’s side” (p. 39). Neilsen points out that Johnno is linked to the wild caged creatures in the Botanical Gardens Menagerie. This wildness defies the convention and ritual that orders Dante’s life, and is tied up with sexuality. Significantly, the animals in the garden menagerie can be heard from the brothels Dante and Johnno visit on their wild escapades, and “if the wind was in the right direction you could even smell them, dark and fetid, unnervingly close.” Johnno and the animals are linked by proximity: Dante can hear the animals “stirring in their fusty cages” as he walks home with Johnno in the early morning after their nightly adventures. That this wildness and uncontrolled sexuality is something of a repressed fear in Dante is evidenced by his childhood apprehension of the baboon in the Gardens Menagerie, a creature that “played with itself in a most shameful manner, and with no warning.

32 See Jim Davidson, “Interview with David Malouf” Meanjin, Vol. 39, No. 3, 1980, pp. 323–334, p. 333, where Malouf says “the things Dante is trying to see about Johnno and the messages he gets back are really all things about the possibilities of himself”.
33 Neilsen, op. cit., p. 16.
would hurl itself screaming against the bars” (p. 36). Similarly frightening are the rats that inhabit Cassie’s storeroom – significantly located in the inner recesses of the house, to correspond with the hidden, highly private aspect of the self that Dante would rather not acknowledge.

Though Dante is too apprehensive of this wildness to acknowledge its existence within himself, he finds it compelling, and allows himself to accompany Johnno to the brothels and clubs, and to ritually flee from them in a panic, long after he comes to realize that the danger is manufactured by Johnno to heighten the excitement. In this way, he participates in Johnno’s theatrics. The association of sexual transgression with the tropics is somewhat of a western literary tradition, and the Sex Pit brothel that Dante and Johnno frequent is appropriately linked to the genre: “Potted palms gave the Sex Pit an air of the jungle” (p. 70). The elephant beetle with curved horns completes the picture. Johnno’s wildness, the escapades at the brothels and clubs, are therefore related to the corresponding wildness of nature in the Queensland environment, a wildness that, like sexual hunger, is perpetually brewing below the surface veneer of a fragile civilization. Theatrics and adopting alternative identities are, in turn, mechanisms for coping with this tension between nature and culture in the developing young self.

Elsewhere, Malouf connects the element of drama more directly with Brisbane’s natural environment and topography. Brisbane’s hilly terrain means that a journey through its suburbs is “all gullies and sudden vistas”:

Not long views down a street to the horizon – and I am thinking now of cities like Melbourne and Adelaide, or Manchester or Milan, those great flat cities where you look away down endless vistas and the mind is drawn to distance. Wherever the eye turns here it learns restlessness, and variety and possibility, as the body learns effort. Brisbane is a city that tires the legs and demands a certain sort of breath. It is not a city, I would want to say, that provokes contemplation, in which the minds moves out and loses itself in space. What it might provoke is drama, and a kind of intellectual play, delights in new and shifting views, and this because each new vista as it presents itself here is so intensely colourful.

Drama is thus part of the experience of place, an integral part of what it means to grow up as a Queenslander.

---

34 Ibid.
Indeed, drama and acting are key elements throughout Anderson’s *Stories From the Warm Zone*. Anderson’s characters are younger than Malouf’s in *Johnno*, and so theatrics are utilized to illustrate the processes of child development and self-formation, rather than an adolescent crisis of self. In the opening story, “Under the House”, the shifting views and sudden vistas of which Malouf speaks are evident as four-year old Beatrice catches glimpses of her sisters through the greenery as they approach the house as part of a role-playing game:

> But suddenly, under the she-oaks, I caught a movement, a flash of shining blue. I jumped to the bottom bar to get an unimpeded glimpse between the pointed tops of two pickets, eager to see again the exotic high gloss of that blue.
> Instead, I saw a boy emerge, in grey and white. For a moment he stood uncertainly in the sun, then ran back into the she-oaks. (p. 7)

It is the anticipation and excitement of these fleeting glimpses that enlivens Bea’s imagination as she waits for her sisters to return and start the game proper. As discussed earlier in this chapter in relation to the under the house space, the crucial point in this story is four year old Bea’s inability to play along: she is too entranced by evidence of her sisters’ transgression of boundaries in acquiring their costumes, “punishable acts”, to feign surprise and interest in their acting. The end of the story depicts a more calculating Bea, able to manipulate conversation with her sister Rhoda to entice more information from her, and the girls’ assumed roles are symbolized by the theatric and calculated dance moves they make as they twirl across the front veranda. Thus the ability to play a part earns Bea inclusion in her sisters’ games.

Themes of drama and theatricality are carried into the second story, titled “The Appearance of Things”. This explores the sisters’ phase of church-going, and Rhoda’s infatuation with the Anglican minister, Mr Gilliard. The sisters adopt various devices to convince their “free thinker” parents to allow them to attend church. Their initial appraisal of the church is of the building only, pointing to the story’s title. When the minister comes upon them in their examination of the church, Sybil adopts a theatrical pose, “slipped into a pew, dropped to her knees, shut her eyes, and raised her hands in prayer” (p. 23). Rhoda later accuses Sybil of “showing off”. Yet, in the end, it is Sybil’s faith that proves longest lasting. Bea’s waxes and wanes according to whether it is her sisters’ or her father’s approval that she desires. She finally chooses to join
her sisters in baptism because she is attracted by the prospect of choosing a new name for herself, emphasizing the connection between drama, role-playing and identity formation.

Succeeding stories see Bea self-consciously mimicking those around her as she develops her own persona.36 She stands in front of the mirror, and tries “setting my head back to squint down my cheeks” like Peggy and Des Kellaway, her friends from the creek. She also tries to copy their speech “Ar, well”. On the bus with her mother, she responds to a rebuke by stretching her neck high, and lowering her eyelids, “I was now copying Sybil, who did this to snub people” (p. 78). Elsewhere, she “raise[s] [her] eyebrows as Rhoda did” (p. 72). Such mimicry is integral to Bea’s development of communication skills – it is no accident that these gestures are depicted at the same time as she is trying to get the better of her stutter. Just as humans learn speech by imitation, so too do they glean the power of body language and gestures by copying those around them.

Highlighting as they do issues surrounding identity formation, themes of drama and performance are by no means confined to literature from Queensland. However, they do seem to enjoy an elevated prominence in reconstructions of childhood from this state. Part of this is bound up with stereotypes connecting Queensland with excess and exaggeration, yet also influential is the subconscious need to assert culture in the face of Queensland’s exuberant natural environment. That the environment of Brisbane is itself dramatic – in its colour, lushness and shifting views – underscores the Queenslander’s paradoxical condition of inhabiting a landscape that simultaneously invites both resistance and revelry.

36 Elaine Barry, *Fabricating the Self: The Fictions of Jessica Anderson*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1992, p. 127, also makes this point.
CHAPTER 6

ROMANTICISM AND ANTI-ROMANTICISM: CONTRASTING PERSPECTIVES ON THE VICTORIAN COUNTRYSIDE

The blessing of my life, the gift is yours,
Ye mountains! – thine, oh nature! Thou hast fed
My lofty speculations, and in thee,
For this uneasy heart of ours, I find
A never-failing principle of joy
And purest passion.¹

(William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*)

There seems so little tenderness for soil and plant, so little sense of kinship with beasts, so little sense of the seasons as providing an active metaphor for human life, or of the earth as a mother whose waxing and waning are like those of a woman. The land is a breeding ground and a killing ground. The cattle are lovely in their usefulness; cows do not walk in grass green to the udders, or not very often; and if they walk in grass of any other colour, you carry a stick for the snakes.²

(Vincent Buckley, *Cutting Green Hay*)

Of the three states selected for this survey, Victoria’s climate arguably provides the closest approximation to that of Britain, being significantly cooler than Western Australia and Queensland, and also marked by a greater definition between the seasons. Many of the traditional English garden plants and trees are grown more successfully in Victoria and Tasmania than in other warmer parts of Australia, and some of the green hills in the rural countryside near the Victorian Alps have an almost English appearance. Yet has this closer approximation of landscape and climate resulted in a more enthusiastic adoption of English Romantic literary culture? The literature reveals that attitudes towards the Victorian countryside are varied. The sentiments of Vincent Buckley, as quoted above, are by no means shared by writers such as Alan Marshall, Don Charlwood, or even Martin Boyd, who, on the whole, exhibit a far greater empathy for their local environments. Yet added to these is the equivocal, often cynical voice of Hal Porter, whose affection for his childhood home town of Bairnsdale is mitigated by bitterness and resentment accrued in later years. Accordingly, no real consensus of opinion can be drawn from a survey of Victorian

childhoods, but rather their eclectic mix reveals that a multitude of responses to Nature spring forth from this Australian landscape.

Vincent Buckley’s response to the Victorian countryside around his childhood home town of Romsey, detailed above, is decidedly un-Romantic. According to his view, the Australian countryside is inassimilable to the Wordsworthian vision of Nature as an inspirational and embracing presence. Indeed, Buckley’s language operates to negate the qualities of the Wordsworthian experience of nature. Whereas Wordsworth revels in his natural environment, drinking “visionary power” while standing beneath a rock listening to the “ghostly language of the ancient earth”, there is, for Buckley, “so little tenderness for soil and plant”; while Wordsworth claimed to have an “intimate communion” with his natural world, Buckley claims to have felt “so little sense of kinship” between man and beasts (emphasis added). Buckley’s view of the Australian landscape is decidedly pragmatic: the earth is appealing because of its usefulness, but nevertheless must be contended with in order to be rendered productive. By contrast, Wordsworth sees his Nature as the source of all human creativity; it is not a force in need of human taming, but rather its wild Otherness is what invigorates and inspires human production.

Buckley’s perspective of the Victorian countryside can be contrasted with that of Martin Boyd, who obviously sees the landscape of his family’s farm at Yarra Glen as assimilable to the English Romantic vision. He (albeit wilfully) finds continuities between his surrounds and the landscapes described in English poetry:

The natural beauties of the countryside were all enhanced for me by poetic interpretations. When at school I read of the hedgerows above Tintern Abbey, I thought of a row of overgrown hawthorns below the Kincraig garden, and I remember one still autumn morning riding slowly down the hill above the railway station, and dreaming that “the little lines of sportive wood run wild” that divided the paddocks were close to the banks of the Wye.

---

4 Ibid., Bk. II, l. 300.
5 Wordsworth draws a distinction between the “grandeur” of Nature and more “tranquil scenes” (Bk. II, l. 342), and asserts that he “grew up / Fostered alike by beauty and by fear” (Bk. I, l. 306–7). It is primarily through communing with Nature’s vast, awesome grandeur that he feels inspired with sublime feeling; while her benign elements are portrayed as nurturing and encouraging his spirit.
As will be seen, writers demonstrate a variety of responses to the possibilities for Romantic transformation offered by Victorian rural landscapes.

Alan Marshall: *I Can Jump Puddles*

Alan Marshall’s portrait of Victoria’s Western District more conclusively depicts this rural environment according to the English Romantic ideal. In Marshall’s *I Can Jump Puddles*, we see Wordsworth’s passion for communion with the natural landscape transplanted and transformed into an Australian context. Like Wordsworth, Marshall sees the earth and the natural world as the source and lifespring of his artistic vocation. However, Marshall’s relationship to the landscape is complicated by his physical disability, which threatens his capacity both to engage with his environment and gain acceptance within his community. Most of Marshall’s memorable experiences with the environment are contemporaneous with his overcoming a major obstacle, be it physical, psychological, or social. The first of these occurs in the hospital garden, after he has been indoors for three months, recovering from the poliomyelitis which left him crippled:

As we passed through the door leading to the garden, the fresh, open air and the sunshine poured itself over me in one immense torrent. I rose to meet it, sitting upright in my chair, facing the blue and the sparkle and the gentle push of the air against my face, like a diver rising from the sea.

For three months I had not seen a cloud or felt the sun upon me. Now they were returned to me, newly created, perfected, radiant with qualities they never possessed before.

The sister left me in the sunshine near some sheoak trees and though there was no wind I could hear them whispering together as father said they always do.

I wondered what had happened to things while I had been away, what had changed them so. I watched a dog trotting along the street on the other side of the high picket fence. I had never seen such a wonderful dog, so pattable, so full of possibilities. A grey thrush called and its note was a gift to me. I looked down at the gravel upon which my chair rested. Each grain had colour and they lay there in their millions, into the grass which skirted the pathway and the grass stems leant over them in lovely curves of tenderness.

I could hear the shouts of children at play and the clip-clop of a trotting horse. A dog barked and away out over the resting houses there came the whistle of a train.

The foliage of the sheoaks drooped like coarse hair and through it I could see the sky. The leaves of the gum trees glittered, throwing off diamonds of sunshine that hurt my eyes, unprepared for such brightness.

I hung my head and closed my eyes and the sun wrapped itself around me like arms. (pp. 66 – 67)

---

Richard Coe asserts that Marshall’s ability to “achieve a coherent harmony between childhood’s small world and luminous infinitude” is unique among his contemporaries, and this would tie him to the English Romantic tradition which identified great spiritual truths with the state of childhood. Here, Marshall’s progression from the minutiae of the gravel at his feet outwards to the sounds of children playing and the whistle of the train suggests an expansion of horizons and possibilities, evoking images of mobility, travel and distance.

In this passage, Marshall adopts the Romantic personified view of Nature, attributing the trees with linguistic qualities (“whispering”). The sun is also humanised, a benign and comforting presence, “wrapping itself around [him] like arms”. As Coe points out, luminosity is a key motif surrounding the “magical” experience of childhood, particularly in the Australian experience. As with Wordsworth, sunshine and light in Marshall’s writing have quasi-spiritual overtones, and, indeed, the child Marshall is on the verge of a revelation. Significantly, it is after this epiphanic encounter with the outdoors that Marshall overcomes the first of many physical barriers – that of his confinement to the wheelchair. In pursuit of a bag of lollies on the grass, the boy overturns his chair:

My splinted leg struck the stone border of the pathway and the sudden pain made me mutter angrily and pull some grass out by the roots. The pale roots, holding in their clasp a lump of granulated soil, seemed in some strange way, a comforting thing. In a moment I began to drag myself towards the lollies, leaving behind me as I progressed, some pillows, a rug, a comic. I reached the paper bag, grasped it in my hand and smiled. (p. 72)

The image of the child in direct contact with the soil, contemplating its earthiness, is a recurring theme throughout Marshall’s narrative. In grasping and examining the soil,

---


9 It is worth noting, however, that Marshall’s characterization of the trees with human qualities, having foliage like hair, also has distinctly Australian roots in the Jindyworobak poetic tradition, which consistently blurs the distinction between humans and trees.

10 Coe, op. cit., p. 133.

Marshall comes face to face with the barrier between himself and his goal, while at the same time drawing strength from the common bond of nature that he shares with the earth. Landscape and the earth thus become elements that challenge and chasten him, all the while motivating him to transcend the barriers placed upon him by physical frailty. It is significant that the items that Marshall leaves behind, as he crawls towards the lollies, are symbols of his invalid state.

Indeed, it is contact with the soil and earth that Marshall associates with his burgeoning imagination and its power to release him from the constraints of his crippled body. Back at his home in the rural countryside of Victoria’s Western District, Marshall begins to experience what Wordsworth calls “the self-sufficing power of solitude” when he embarks upon evening retreats into the bush:

I began walking into the bush in the evenings so that I could smell the earth and the trees. I knelt among the moss and fern and pressed my face against the earth, breathing it into me. I dug among the roots of grass with my fingers, feeling an intense interest in the texture of the earth I was holding, the feel of it, the fine, hair-like roots it contained. It seemed magical to me and I began to feel that my head was too far above it to appreciate to the fullest the grass and wildflowers and ferns and stones along the tracks I walked. I wanted to be like a dog, running with my nose to the earth so that there would be no fragrance missed, no miracle of stone or plant unobserved.

I would crawl through ferns by the swamp’s edge, making tunnels of discovery through the undergrowth, or lie prone with my face close to the curled fronds of bracken newly emerged from the creative darkness of the earth, gently clasped like babies’ hands. Oh! the tenderness of them; the kindness and compassion of them. I would lower my head and touch them with my cheek.

But I felt confined, restricted in my quest for some revelation that would explain and appease the hunger I possessed. So I created dreams, for in these I could roam as I willed, unhampered by an unresponsive body. (p. 111)

Marshall’s writing emphasizes the physicality and sensuality of his experience with the landscape. It is something that consumes not just his sight and intellect, but his whole being. His yearning to get close to the earth, “breathing it in”, suggests that he is trying to appropriate some of its creative power, symbolized in the “curled fronds of bracken newly emerged from the creative darkness of the earth, gently clasped like babies’ hands”. The image of new leaves also represents the renewal that Marshall craves for his exhausted body. His effusion, “the tenderness of them, the kindness and compassion of them”, is Wordsworthian in its Romantic overflow of feeling, and also

12 *The Prelude*, op. cit., Bk II, l. 78.
in the imbuing of moral qualities upon the landscape. References to digging, and making “tunnels of discovery”, apply literally to the physical landscape through which Marshall crawls, and metaphorically to the inner landscape of his psyche: his journey through the bush is also a probing into the self, and his own creative resources. Marshall finds revelation through the life of the imagination, constructing an elaborate dream of himself as a dog. As a dog, he possesses the agility, speed and instinctive animal connection with the earth that enables him to engage with it in all its richness:

Listening to the frogs or a mopoke or the chirr of a possum, I would launch myself out into a powerful run through the night, galloping on four legs, my nose to the earth as I followed a rabbit’s trail or the tracks of a kangaroo. Maybe I was a dingo or just a dog living a life of its own in the bush through which I loped in tireless strides. I was part of it and all that it offered was mine.

In this escape from the reality of laborious walking I experienced speed that was tireless, leaps and bounds that were effortless and the grace of movement I recognised in men in action and in the running of dogs and horses.

As a dog running through the night I experienced no effort, no fatigue, no painful falls. I raced through the bush with my nose to the leaf-strewn earth, bounded a length behind speeding kangaroos, turning as they did, leaping to bring them down, hurtling over logs and creeks, passing from moonlight to shadow, twisting and turning, my body firm with tireless muscle and animated by an intense and joyful energy.

In my hunting dreams my imagination stopped at the seizing of a rabbit or kangaroo; it was the chase in which I gloriéd, the merging of my identity with the bush … … In this period of adjustment the two worlds in which I lived were equally as enjoyable. I gained from each the stimulus to pass into the other. The world of reality forged me; in the world of dreams I swung the blade. (pp. 111 – 113)

This dream gives the young Marshall a sense of control over the physical landscape that he is unable to achieve in the world of reality and his crutches. At the same time, he recognizes the positive role his disability plays by enhancing his imaginative life: it compels him to strive for a more direct and intense relationship with the landscape and the creative power it offers.

Like Wordsworth, Marshall sees the landscape both as an external presence on which he can draw to rejuvenate his mind, and also as a reflection of his internal psyche. In this way, contrasting depictions of the landscape as alternately benign and hostile mirror the contradictions that exist within Marshall’s mind and conception of

---

13 Wordsworth variously imbues Nature with emotional qualities, such as where he lies “cheered by the genial pillow of the earth / Beneath my head” (The Prelude, Bk. I, ll. 87–88).
himself. Marshall has imaginary debates with “The Other Boy”, a side of himself that would avoid risks and accept the limitations of his crippled body:

The Other Boy was always with me. He was my shadow self, weak and full of complaints, afraid and apprehensive, always pleading with me to consider him, always seeking to restrain me for his own selfish interests. I despised him, yet he was my responsibility. In all moments of decision, I had to free myself of his influence. I argued with him then, when he would not be convinced; I spurned him in fury and went my way. He wore my body and walked on crutches. I strode apart from him on legs as strong as trees. (pp. 145 – 6)

The Other Boy has a landscape of his own, and this is the landscape of the volcanic crater. It has none of the regenerative properties or kindness and compassion of the bush that Marshall explores at night. The crater is barren and indifferent, an obstacle which Marshall must overcome to gain equality with his schoolfellows:

It did seem as if the enclosing sides would topple over and down, shutting us off from the sky. From here the sky was no longer a dome that covered the earth but a frail roof resting on walls of stone and gravel. It was pale and thin, drained of its familiar blue and rendered insignificant by the mighty slopes that rose up to meet it.

And the earth was brown, brown ... All brown ... The dark green of the ferns was swamped with brown. The still, silent boulders were brown. Even the silence was brown. We sat cut off from the bright sounds of the living world that lay over the encircling rim and all the while we felt we were being watched by something huge and unfriendly. (p. 149)

This is a landscape to combat, not to commune with. Its barrenness threatens to overcome the soul’s creative power. The sense of being watched by something huge and unfriendly draws upon D. H. Lawrence’s Kangaroo, the “spirit of the place” that is terrible, horrid and inassimilable to human experience. Yet, even when faced with the earth’s hostility, Marshall still sees it as an undeniable part of his being. Lying down to rest, his face pressed to the ground, he “could hear the beating of [his] heart coming from the earth.” It is arguably this recognition of himself within the crater and its oppositional qualities that motivates Marshall to rise to the challenge of the landscape: it is ultimately something within himself, as much as within his external environment, that must be defeated.

---

From Puddles to Pavements: Marshall’s Journey from Bush to City

The writer must be at peace with his landscape before he can turn confidently to its human figures.\textsuperscript{15}

\textit{This is the Grass}\textsuperscript{16} illustrates another Wordsworthian impulse evident in Marshall’s writing, and that is the belief that a love of nature leads to a love of mankind.\textsuperscript{17} Like Wordsworth, the country boy Marshall is initially dismayed and alienated by city life, particularly because it deprives him of the communion with the bush landscape that has become his source of strength and inspiration. Marshall describes how he feels trapped and imprisoned in his job as a clerk because it cuts him off from the natural world:

\begin{quote}
Cooped in by four walls I have lost association with the earth. Birds have been singing today, things have been growing and I have been unaware of it. A day in my life has been completely wasted.

I thought of all the confined days ahead of me and realised with horror that the seasons would go on changing the face of the sky and the earth and I would never witness it. Each weekend I would see the results of a week’s magic but never the process.

The windows of the Shire Office were protected by iron bars like a gaol’s, and I felt I was in gaol. I always had some strange feeling that strength came to me through the earth and the things that grew there. The source of the creative power I longed to tap was outside buildings. It was hidden in trees, in sunshine, and bush. It was associated in my mind with beauty, with music, with the laughter of children playing on the grass on summer evenings. (p. 34)
\end{quote}

For Marshall, the external natural landscape is a reflection of his internal, creative landscape that is awaiting written expression. His move to the city results in an almost metaphysical separation of himself from Nature: “I was neither sun nor rain nor sustaining earth. The seeds in me lay dormant” (p. 62). There is a profound sense of loss in this statement: it is a loss of unity, or oneness with the natural world, a merging of self and Nature that is crucial to his artistic identity.

Marshall’s response to the metropolis here is similar to Wordsworth’s on moving to London as a young man. In \textit{The Prelude}, Wordsworth describes at length all the moral vices with which he is affronted in the city, from “shameless women” and “dissolute men” (Bk. VII, ll. 386 – 7), to the overwhelming loss of identity in

\textsuperscript{16} Alan Marshall, \textit{This is the Grass} (1962), Cheshire, Melbourne, 1972.
\textsuperscript{17} See Wordsworth’s subtitle to Book VIII of \textit{The Prelude} (1805) op. cit., “Retrospect. Love of Nature Leading to a Love of Mankind”.

compacted and commercialized city living, where “here there and everywhere a weary throng … face after face… Shop after shop” (ll. 171 – 174) he is confronted with “advertisements of giant size” (l. 210). He then confesses that, in this environment, when he wishes to turn his mind to “lofty themes … I feel the imaginative power /Languish within me” (ll. 495 – 500).

Feeling cramped and stultified by the city, Marshall regains the merging of self and landscape that he craves when he visits the bushland near his parents’ home. There, he asserts, “the renewing of my association with the clean world became almost an identification with tree and bird and sun” (pp. 79 – 80). Marshall’s descriptions of nature here are loaded with connotations of artistic production. He speaks of “the fragrance released from the dry earth by showers that burst the seeds and sent tiny, thrusting leaves upwards in search of light – the burgeoning, the unrestrained leap to fulfillment, the seeding, the death and the rebirth” (p. 62). Thus he sees in the natural world a representation of his own striving towards creative goals. The identification of his creative power as a writer with the natural world is cemented in his reflection: “the floor of the bush was a narrative poem, the bush an evocation” (p. 80).

Within the loss occasioned by his divorce from the bush, however, Marshall senses also a new beginning, and an expansion of possibilities. This is implicit within his reference to “seeding, death and rebirth” in his contemplation of the landscape. He recognizes that he must move beyond his own individual relationship with nature, to something that connects with the people for whom he wishes to write: “I must know people just as well as I knew trees and birds” (p. 35). The challenge Marshall faces in This Is the Grass is finding an avenue leading from the love of nature that he already possesses to the love of people that he needs to be a writer.

Arguably, he finds the necessary link through children. Marshall’s association of his creative power with “beauty, with music, with the laughter of children playing on the grass on summer evenings” (p. 34) shows that his experience of Nature’s creative power already possesses a human element. Indeed, though by this stage Marshall himself has reached adulthood, children and their perspective and pursuits are still one of the overarching preoccupations of This is the Grass. A whole chapter
is devoted to Marshall’s country ramblings with a family of children, and the book closes with an account of his experience of a young child’s spontaneous devotion, convincing him that he is a person worthy of another’s love. In this way, Marshall affirms the value of the Wordsworthian “infant sensibility” to the developing artist.\textsuperscript{18}

In time, Marshall does discover that he can gain creative power from the life of the city as well as from the natural world. Gaining employment gives him a sense of legitimacy and participation in city life, so that he acquires ownership of it, rather than simply being repelled by its alienating qualities. The artist within him learns to create beauty and meaning out of the mundane aspects of urban existence:

City murmurs reached me as I walked under the elm trees. I walked slowly, happy that I would soon be part of that murmur, suggestive to me of powerful life. Even the hot north wind, which sometimes shouldered the buildings at the top of Bourke Street before being flung back to greet me in a swirl of dust, was good. The discarded pieces of paper it carried slid harshly along the pavement, jostling each other to reach the shelter of a telephone booth. Some leaped like ballet dancers, clutching at my crutches a moment before speeding on.

There were nights when the rain made streaks of silver beneath the lights and the pavements shone with reflections. Gutters prattled and people went thrusting through frail barricades of rain on their way to theatres.

There were calm nights when voices were clear and laughter was that of a companion.

It excited me, the lights and bustle. I moved from street to street. I stood motionless in the dark alleys that pulsed in an atmosphere of imminent revelation, waiting and watching and listening. From cramped rubbish bins surrounded with spilt refuse the rats fled with arched backs and bobbing run. Alley cats picked their way delicately over cobblestones.

I stood recognising every shadow, every blade of light. No sound or movement escaped me. I was poised on the verge of immense discoveries that never came but were always there awaiting an inspired comprehension. (pp. 114 – 115)

The “murmurs” of the city here hint at vitality and possibility, as Marshall embraces the prospect of becoming part of its “powerful life”. The discarded pieces of paper that move like “ballet dancers” indicate that some of the “magic” of Marshall’s experience with Nature is being transferred to the urban world, transforming it and

\textsuperscript{18} Like Marshall, Wordsworth uses child figures as symbols of hope and renewal amongst the deadening and decaying impulses of the city. In \textit{The Prelude}, the figure of an innocent child surrounded by the vice and artifice of the world of the London theatre is a subject of grief for Wordsworth, as he envisages the inevitable corruption of the infant’s spirit by his environment (see Bk VII, ll. 365–411). A subsequent image of a father nursing his sick child back to health, aided by Nature in the form of sunshine and fresh air (Bk. VIII, ll. 844–859), is arguably a more hopeful image, as the child figure symbolizes Wordsworth’s own creative imagination, being a visual depiction of the infant sensibility which is the key to his poetic life.
making it beautiful also. The rain, which shines like silver, is reminiscent of the luminosity of the sun in *I Can Jump Puddles*, and carries a similar promise of enlightenment. Just as the pavements here shine “with reflections”, Marshall’s internal psyche is also brimming with artistic reflections on the sights and sounds of city life. In this epiphanic encounter, Marshall recognizes the city’s potential for creative transformation. Ultimately, the creative power to turn the random images into art lies within himself, and his attaining an “inspired comprehension” of all that is before him.

**Endless Perspectives: Hal Porter’s Anti-Romanticism**

Whereas Marshall obviously finds an affinity between Wordsworth’s cult of Nature and his Australian setting, Porter’s autobiography, *The Watcher on the Cast-Iron Balcony*, interrogates the idea that English conceptions of landscape can be imposed upon the Australian scenery. Marshall’s work revolves around experiences with the landscape that are intensely sensory and epiphanic, and function like Wordsworth’s “spots of time”. By contrast, Porter’s work focuses on perspectives. Porter is self-consciously a “watcher” of the world around him, and the environment he experiences changes according to his varying modes of perceiving and viewing the world.

John Colmer distinguishes between the post-Romantic belief in a unified, unique and ineffable self, and post-modern thought which denies the organic autonomy of the self, seeing life as a multitude of fragmented selves. Yet, curiously, Colmer identifies Porter with the former concept of an “unchanging core” of self because of Porter’s use of the watcher figure. Colmer asserts that this recurring figure of the child self observing the world from the cast iron balcony “creates imaginative unity”. While Porter does return to the image of his child self on the balcony at various points in the narrative, it is not with an uncritical eye. Porter frequently uses an ironic and detached tone, implying that the mature narrator hardly recognizes his

---

childhood self, so much has he and his outlook changed since he could faithfully merge his identity with that of the watcher. Indeed, the very vista from the balcony that meets the watcher’s eye is not a unified view, but rather a multiplicity of perspectives. As will be seen, Porter’s work is continually shadowed by the spectre of his mother’s death, and it is arguably the sense of disillusionment and betrayal wrought by this event that causes him to be profoundly distrustful of his youthful self and earlier perspective on life:

I have been watching myself, by this time, for too long, since the days of the cast-iron balcony. I have watched myself watching the small suburban creature, the uninnocent good boy. (p. 12)

In this image we see Porter’s sense of distance from his childhood self, who becomes “the small suburban creature”, effectively another being, under the adult narrator’s gaze.

Porter’s status as a watcher, and the author’s self-consciousness of the difficulty of recovering the childhood self, are signaled early in the autobiography through several images of the child viewing the world. Of particular relevance is that of the child looking through a stained glass window:

He looks out through the coloured glass panels of the living room door, first at a ruby-tinged world, then at a yellow one, finally at a world blue as the blue of a castor oil bottle. Oh, to walk there, to watch himself walk there, wandering off and away, the blue-haired boy holding the blue Teddy Bear, and disappearing among the blue-plane trees. (p. 24)

The experience offers three contrastingly “coloured” or “tainted” vistas, and the child selects the blue one as his favourite, and dwells on the possibilities that it offers. In this image, Porter draws attention to the fact that any vision of his childhood self or environment that he recalls in writing will not be objective, but rather tainted by the glass of time – the years and experiences that intrude between the adult writer and his child-self. Porter’s image of the mediation of experience here can be contrasted with Wordsworth’s version of this phenomenon. Wordsworth likens looking back on life to gazing over the edge of a boat at the bottom of a pond: the view is distorted by the viscosity of the water, which symbolizes the intervening layers of time and life experience between past and present. For Wordsworth, the struggle is to gain an objective image of a single view; however for Porter there are, from the beginning,

multiple perspectives: red, blue and yellow. The privileging of one perspective over another (in this case, the blue world) is an arbitrary exercise – he might just as easily have chosen to dwell on the red or the yellow world. Hence the profoundly ambivalent tone throughout Porter’s work concerning his descriptions of the landscape, people and places: such descriptions constantly carry a note of uncertainty springing from Porter’s acknowledgement that, unlike the Romantics’ conception of a universal “Truth” discernible through Nature, there are, and have always been, alternative ways of looking at the world, the past and the self.

The contradictions surrounding Porter’s depiction of his childhood landscapes are all embodied in the famous vista from the cast-iron balcony of his first suburban Melbourne home, detailed in the narrative’s opening pages. The view from the balcony consists of layers of perspectives, and reflects the interpenetration of the external physical landscape and the internal landscape of the perceiving mind. As Lee Jobling points out, Porter is very aware of the multiplicity of the self and, arguably, the view he sees from his balcony represents not just the cityscape before him, but also the panorama of his memory, a succession of different “views” (of the landscape and of life in general) that he has possessed in the course of his lifetime.23 It functions as an elaborate allegory for the progression of Porter’s psyche from childhood to adulthood:

This prospect is less colonial Australian than eighteenth century English in quality: billowy green trees, misty towers, even a shallow winding stream that starts and ends in obscurity like a painter’s device. Southern hemisphere clouds pile themselves up, up above, and take on Englishy oil-landscape tones, or steel engraving shafts of biblical light strike down, or incandescent Mississippis of lightning. Between this romantic or dramatic background and the watcher at the cast iron lace of the balustrade innumerable more sordid elements are disposed: paltry municipal parks like seedy displays of parsley; endless terraces of houses; endless perspectives of ignoble streets and, strange as palaces, many three-storeyed stucco hotels whose baroque facades topped with urns and krateres protrude here and there above an agitation of humbler roofs of slate or terracotta but largely of unpainted corrugated iron. Sometimes, brilliant and perfectly executed hailstorms load the gulches of the roofs with white. Sometimes, a sunset behind Kensington ridge is reflected in sunless distant windows like spots of golden oil. I seem to be often watching, now and again with Mother a shape behind my shoulder, but most often alone. This watching, this down-gazing, this faraway staring, is an exercise in solitude and non-involvement. (p. 12)

23 See Lee Jobling, “Trick Chinese Boxes: Hal Porter’s Art of Autobiography”, Southerly, Vol. 40, No. 2, 1980, pp. 159–173, who asserts that Porter is often consciously aware of the various individuals he has been at different points in his life (p. 168), and sees life as a “long line of his other selves inhabiting eternally various moments in time” (p. 170).
This view, of course, comes not simply from the child’s eyes, but is mediated by the adult Porter who is writing. It begins in the distance, and moves towards the foreground. Significant in this passage are the references to artistic representation—the distant Englishy vista is associated with “a painter’s device”, “oil landscape tones”, and a “steel engraving”. This heightens our sense that we are viewing a transformed, reconstructed landscape. This idea of mediation is also evident in the description of the sunset being “reflected in sumless distant windows”, again accentuating the idea of multiple perspectives and refractions of reality.

In Porter’s view from the balcony, physical distance mirrors temporal distance, and the “eighteenth century English” quality of the horizon arguably represents the idealism of Porter’s youth, and the child’s tendency to impose the (foreign) landscapes of his young reading upon the view from the balcony. It is continuous with his youthful impulse (now repudiated) to see the countryside of Bairnsdale as a Romantic country childhood of abundance, a world of free-roaming with Nature as guide and counselor. This is the “romantic or dramatic” background to Porter’s adult self, who, now refined by worldly experience, can detect the numerous “sordid elements” that would refute any conception of a harmony between self and landscape. The view closer to the watcher and writer shows a far less glamorous, more haphazard, arbitrary and ungainly scene.

That Porter is often watching “with Mother a shape behind [his] shoulder” alludes to the most important element that taints Porter’s perspective of his childhood as he recalls and rewrites it: his mother’s death. Porter’s resistance to the Wordsworthian indulgence in the country childhood largely springs from the identification of his Mother with this landscape and his sense of loss and betrayal caused by her death. The transitoriness and fragility of her life, for Porter, reflects the fragility of the Wordsworthian ideal of harmony and life-sustaining reciprocal relationship between man and Nature.

Like the view from the balcony, Porter’s first impression of Bairnsdale carries multiple perspectives, juxtaposing the youthful response to the landscape that he believes his mother desires in him, against the gaze of an older, wiser self who appreciates the flaws in this way of viewing the world:

My first sight of Bairnsdale strikes me breathless and still and smaller.
Space! Infinity! Light!
In Kensington, stuck on an asphalted suburban ridge at the rim of a panorama, I had seemed taller to myself, a spy suspended above luminosity. In Bairnsdale, I feel myself let loose at the centre of an immeasurable sphere. Pure light gushes and surges and soars away from my minuteness in every direction, upwards and ever upwards, inhabited by slicing swallows and creaking swans and stock-still hawks and pinprick larks; outwards to arch over the northern mountains in the thick blue of which are half-forgotten, tumble-down gold-mining towns occupied by mere handfuls of hill-billies incestuous as cats; outwards and east to curve for a century of miles over the farthest eucalypts and their sunless tons of glistening morocco leaves, outwards and southwards over the river mouths, the swan-haunted lakes, the very South itself, and the world’s felloe.

I seem no longer to look through a window or a microscope; I am in the window and under the microscope. That this new universe is no wider than the one I have seen in Victor Richmond’s eye is too true to be good, and something, even now, yet to be learned again and again and again. That this immensity is seeming only, and a cage to escape from, and return to, escape from to return to, will, in course, appear. I am hardly old enough to be unsophisticated: I am still six. I am still sophisticated seven or eight or nine or ten. (pp. 52 – 53)

The focus on light, and its attendant qualities of enlightenment and life-giving force are reminiscent of Marshall’s dazzling moment of revelation in the hospital garden. Part of Porter is carried away by the expansive vista, and the endless countryside stretching in all directions is suggestive also of an expansion of the mind and imaginative possibilities. Yet, Porter’s punning on the “too good to be true” cliche suggests that these possibilities are an illusion only.

That the country landscape is in fact no more beneficent than the one he has left is also signalled in the contrasts that Porter sets up between the two homes. In doing so, he is at pains not to privilege one abode over another, but makes the pragmatic observation: “What Kensington lacked, Bairnsdale has, what Bairnsdale lacks, Kensington has” (p. 56). However, the child’s sense of loss at being uprooted from his suburban home is evident in the succession of negatives in Porter’s description of his new home. “There is no porcelain kitchen sink … There is no door with coloured glass panels … There is no path of encaustic tiles … no verandah
enclosed in cast-iron ... no indoor copper set in brick ... no pine wash-troughs ...” (pp. 55 – 6).

Porter’s youthful aspiration to live the Romantic country childhood is indicated through his adoption of all the rambling pastimes that Wordsworth details in *The Prelude*. Just as Wordsworth became a “fell destroyer” and “plunderer” of bird nests,\(^\text{25}\) so too does Porter embrace these traditional adventures of the country boy:

... Until my fervour for climbing, fishing, bird-nesting, mushrooming, fruit-stealing and bodily recklessness runs dry, I embrace every one, and others besides, of these opportunities for doom, and come through with little but bee-stings, miniscule Great Britains of scars on my knees, and bare-foot soles impervious as pigskin. (p. 54)

Porter’s assertion that he engages in these activities until his “fervour” for them “runs dry” shows that, for him, they are but a passing fantasy, and offer no significant nourishment for the creative spirit, as Wordsworth would suggest. Porter’s cynicism towards the ideal of the country childhood also contains a distinct post-colonial element: these traditional boyish adventures bring with them inscriptions of the imperial power, “miniscule Great Britains of scars on my knees”. This physical marking of his body is reflected in a similar tainting of his imagination and perspective with ideas of landscape inherited from a foreign culture.

Porter associates his mother and the countryside through the common image of abundance. His repeated effusions, “Abundance! Plenty!” “Fecundity! Plenty! Abundance!” (p. 63) echo his original impression of Bairnsdale itself: “Space! Infinity! Light!”. These expressions draw upon the English Romantic enthusiasm for the beneficence of Nature, and also what Colmer identifies as the Elizabethan concept of “nature’s plenitude”.\(^\text{26}\) Yet a corollary of Porter’s linking of the landscape with his mother is the tainting of it with death and decay. Porter’s depiction of Bairnsdale is one that fuses images of abundance and mortality in an elegiac tribute:

> The passion I still have for the prolific aspects of nature develops to its height during these years, and is unlikely to diminish. It is a passion not to be defended. I am never so passionately aware of the power of the earth and the lavishness of it as on Gippsland midsummer days. Before eleven in the morning the bees are staggering drunk in the madonna lillies. The endless...

\(^{25}\) Bk I, ll. 317, 336

safaris of ants pass each other scarcely speaking. Out and out beyond the town’s rim of orchards and asparagus fields and maize crops and pumpkin paddocks, thousands of acres of peroxided grasses shimmer and surge at the bases of an infinity of ring-barked trees pale and lustrous as aluminium. The rotating windmills do not cut one swathe in the grassy pelt of fragile tassels, bobbles, plumes and maces. Out and farther out, beyond the Golgotha of the slaughter-yards, lies the cemetery like a spilling of shapes in marzipan, the cemetery and its abundant dead boxed down under the freesias and sparaxis and periwinkle and briers and gorse more abundant than they. (p. 69)

This passage contains overtones of Keats’ ode ‘To Autumn’, particularly in the images of the lavishness (conspiring how to “load and bless”) of the country setting. The landscape Porter beholds is genuinely a breathtaking one, yet the tone is ambivalent due to the imposition of artificial structures on the natural landscape. The “peroxided” grass carries a note of artificial or chemical alteration. Similarly the trees are marred – “ring-barked”, effectively marked for death, and the phrase “lustrous as aluminium” imbues them with a harsh, manufactured metallic aspect. While the “Golgotha of the slaughter yards” and the cemetery threaten to overpower the natural images of rebirth, there is a hopeful note sounded in the fact that the “freesias” “sparaxis” and “periwinkle” are “more abundant” than the “abundant dead”.

Porter asserts that “Abundance has its shades” (p. 63), and proceeds from a Keatsian description of the plentiful aspect of the countryside to describe the sordid abundance of the Adams family, with their numerous dirty and impoverished children: “One or other is always shaven-headed because of lice. Granules like dried honey infest the corners of their eyes and the roots of their lashes” (p. 64). The Adams’ house is a cluttered, chaotic one, a dumping ground for rubbish, and a scene of decay:

The Adams idea of abundance is expressed in the five bicycles they own, in the several tricycles rusting with the rusting pilchard tins and Hornby railway lines and disintegrating go-carts among the shoulder-high weeds of the backyard, in the pianola stacks of unraveling pianola rolls, in the harmonium with its decayed teeth, the three banjos, the gramophone with its toffee-coloured convolvulus-shaped horn which seems repeatedly to wheeze out only Harry Lauder singing “Roamin’ in the gloamin’” though there are deposits of records tossed like quoits in corners, on pantry shelves, on to and under sofas. (pp. 65 – 66)

Significantly, what are rusting are images both of childhood (toys and tricycles) and of art (musical instruments). The record that only plays one tune is perhaps like Porter’s own art, continually tracing circles inscribed by his obsession with his mother’s death,

and his corresponding inability to gain a perspective of his childhood landscape that is untainted by its influence.

**Don Charlwood: Marching As To War**

Don Charlwood’s recollections of his childhood home in Frankston in the inter-war era represent a more moderate perspective, in contrast to both Marshall’s exuberant Wordsworthian enthusiasm for Nature and Porter’s cynical distance from it. Charlwood’s landscape is overwhelmingly benign, and sometimes envisaged as an active presence. A good example is his memory of an early holiday in the region, where the sea and trees are imbued with linguistic qualities:

> While we slept in the resonant bedrooms the house kept its own quiet rhythms. The sea and cypresses conversed of storms and wrecks and drowned sailors; they sighed together night long and sometimes moaned in rising winds. But by day they were friendly and suffered cousins in their upper branches. There we reclined in green seclusion and looked seaward importantly for ships and porpoises.  

The trees’ powers of utterance are matched by their emotional response to the children who play in their branches, effectively personifying the trees, and casting them as characters in Charlwood’s childhood landscape.

On other occasions, too, Charlwood’s voice is akin to Marshall’s. Nature elicits from Charlwood’s young self the appropriate mixture of delight and awe:

> The bush drew me strongly. I crossed the sandy road and entered it one day, feeling on the edge of mysteries. Within a short distance my vision was shut to a few yards and I became aware of faint insect sounds and the darting of small birds and the downward spiraling of dead leaves. All this was new and magical. But when my mind turned to Jackie Guy who had been lost not far from there, I retreated to the school ground. (p. 49)

Charlwood’s experience of the bush here is not dissimilar to Wordsworth’s relationship to his childhood landscape, which “Fostered [him] alike by beauty and by fear”\(^29\) – it is the combination of Nature’s nurturing qualities, and also its awesome alien quality which demands respect, that makes up his experience.

---


Yet other episodes reveal Charlwood to be engaged in a more adversarial relationship to the countryside. He and a friend embark on an epic crusade to map and explore the “Big Bush”, a kind of “conquest of the wilderness” (p. 54). Charlwood’s earlier inquisitive absorption of the bush’s rhythms and minutiae are replaced by analysis (detailed mapping of the land) and conquest (hunting and plundering the bush’s bounty). This leads Charlwood into an uneasy appreciation of the landscape’s beauty, one made tentative by twinges of guilt. The landscape behind the beach dunes is portrayed as being quietly indifferent to the boys:

> This hidden silent world scrutinized and accused me; its bent trees sighed together. I had nothing of which to stand accused; not yet. But it was a relief to burst into the sudden light, into the sound of the sea and its splashing crowds. (p. 59)

Charlwood’s bush here is more akin to D.H. Lawrence’s in its aspect of veiled antagonism. There is, however, a parallel in Wordsworth for this sense of foreboding and retribution. In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth describes how he became a “fell destroyer” of nests and traps, and became “a trouble to the peace”. Having stolen a bird from someone else’s trap, he senses guilty recriminations: “when the deed was done / I heard among the solitary hills/ Low breathings coming after me, and sounds / Of undistinguishable motion” (Bk 1, ll. 329 – 331). Yet it is not clear from this whether Wordsworth feared human discovery, or the wrath of Nature herself.

> The landscapes of rural Victoria, then, provide writers with fruitful material with which to explore Romantic notions of self and landscape, although writers vary in their enthusiasm for marrying Wordsworthian concepts of Nature and creativity to the Australian environment. Marshall is certainly a pupil of the Wordsworthian school of Nature as inspirer and sustainer, yet *I Can Jump Puddles* is not an unmediated adoption of the Romantic vision. The landscape is also a force to be contended with, and Marshall’s struggle to overcome the limitations of his physical disability draws upon classic Aussie battler or pioneering mythology, where man is pitted against the natural world and needs to gain ascendancy over the land.30 While the bush is often seen as a gentle and benign presence, inspiring creativity, heed is always paid to more threatening aspects that would undermine a union of self and landscape. Accounts like

---

Marshall’s and Charlwood’s, which at points seek to Romanticize the Australian landscape, must be contrasted with the more cynical voice of Porter, whose emphasis on endless perspectives and modes of viewing complicate any simple conception of a sense of place and belonging.
CHAPTER 7

LOST IN THE CITY:
PLACE AND PLACELESSNESS IN MODERN MELBOURNE

One of the features of the Australian bush that early European inhabitants found so alienating was its appearance of vast monotony. Endless vistas of grey-green scrub overwhelmed the settler’s psyche as their eyes that craved picturesque variety were left insatiate by a landscape their culture couldn’t comprehend. Now that our huge continent has been comprehensively explored, mapped and settled, the accusations of uniformity and monotony are cast not at our wilderness, but at our settlements: the suburbs. It has become an Australian literary tradition to deride the suburbs as cultural wastelands of materialistic conformity: the artistic mind is believed to be stifled and starved by the suburbs’ mundane preoccupations.¹ Not surprisingly, then, accounts of growing up in the suburbs paint overwhelmingly unsympathetic portraits of this brick-veneer and terracotta landscape. Yet, arguably, an emotion more prominent than distaste or revulsion is that of lonely alienation. There is a sense in which suburban Melbourne children feel most profoundly lost in the environments immediately surrounding home. This chapter seeks to explore this feeling of being lost and adrift, the geographical and social factors conducive to it, and the city child’s corresponding reaction against placelessness by forging an artificially heightened sense of place. This is achieved largely by invoking boundaries based upon social class and ethnicity.

Suburban Placelessness and Melbourne’s Flat Grid

Two famous descriptions of Melbourne occur in Graham McInnes’ The Road to Gundagai ² and George Johnston’s My Brother Jack.³ Both accounts express

¹ See, for example, Garry Kinnane, “Shopping at Last! History, Fiction and the Anti-Suburban Tradition”, in Andrew McCann (ed), Writing the Everyday, Australian Literature and the Limits of Suburbia. Australian Literary Studies (Special Issue), Vol. 18, No. 4, 1998, pp. 41–55, p. 41. Kinnane describes how twentieth-century anti-suburban criticism had its origins in nineteenth-century bohemianism and its artistic communities that defined themselves “against the growing reality of bourgeois modernity”.
distaste for a suburbia that is perceived as dull and monotonous, a vast sea of terracotta rooftops and manicured gardens. Yet more interesting than their undeniable aversion to this landscape is their depiction of the suburbs as regions characterized by paradox. On the large scale, the suburbs appear limitless and unbounded, yet on closer examination they reveal themselves as fraught with divisions.

In McInnes’ text, a distinction is drawn between the city centre and its suburbs. McInnes adopts the perspective of a new English emigrant in his opening description which praises Robert Hoddle’s visionary planning of the city centre. Yet the spacious grandness of the city centre in no way represents the metropolis as a whole. McInnes goes on to illustrate how Melbourne’s heart and its suburbs stand in stark contrast to one another:

Beyond the city proper, beyond Latrobe’s original square mile and the broad arteries leading away from it, lies another city. It lacks the sharp edge of the poorer areas, the factory districts and slums to the north and east; and it lacks the coherence of the city itself. Once past the botanical gardens and the big Toorak mansions standing almost in country estates, one encounters a blazing and monotonous expanse of red brick and terra-cotta roof that has flowed over the hills and valleys to the east like lava, and leaked slowly in an ever lengthening arc right round the eastern shore of Port Phillip Bay twenty-five miles to Frankston. This vast architectural anonymity is very far from being a slum. It is neither sordid nor squalid; it has no foul alleys, no evil smelling drains, no endless faceless barracks of apartment blocks, no filthy children playing in the streets, none of New York’s cold-water flats, none of London’s scabrous dead-ends with a communal watertap. On the contrary each little red-brick terra-cotta roofed house, or more modest weatherboard tin-roofed house, has its own paling or wire fence and neat hedge, and its own little garden with a few standard roses, its own circumambient space and air and light … But these immense deserts of brick and terra-cotta, or wood and galvanized iron induce a sense of overpowering dullness, a stupefying sameness, a worthy, plodding, pedestrian, middle-class, low church conformity. (p. 64)

McInnes here couches his description in terms of absence: the suburbs are remarkable for what they don’t possess. There are “no foul alleys, no evil smelling drains”. His suburbia emerges as a profoundly featureless place, devoid even of ugly, squalid elements that at least add an element of character to slums elsewhere. It is reminiscent of colonial accounts of first impressions of Australia, which likewise, describe the landscape in terms of negativity, for what it lacks by comparison to England.4 McInnes’ images of “filthy children” playing in the street and the “communal

4 See, for example, E. J. Eyre’s lament that he found “no important rivers to enumerate, no fertile regions to point out … no noble ranges to describe.” Journals of Expeditions of Discovery into Central Australia and Overland from Adelaide to King George’s Sound, 1840–1, London, 1845, Vol. 1, p. 94, quoted by Paul Carter, The Road to Botany Bay, Faber and Faber, London, 1987, p. 50.
watertap” imply that other “ghetto” type areas at least offer some sort of community, even if it is one of the down and out and dispossessed. The suburbia McInnes describes instead represents an increasingly compartmentalized, individuated mode of living. Rather than shared spaces, ownership even of intangibles is fiercely asserted, with each house allotted “its own circumambient space and air and light”. The carefully maintained fences and hedges emerge as sacred demarcations between communal thoroughfares and privately owned lawns.

It is not the hedges and fences themselves that McInnes detests, but rather the mentality that he sees driving their careful maintenance: the “worthy, plodding, pedestrian, middle class, low church conformity”. A similar attitude is displayed in Johnston’s *My Brother Jack*. In this semi-autobiographical novel, Johnston’s alter-ego David Meredith loathes the Caulfield of his childhood.

This world, without boundaries or specific definition of safety, spread forever, flat and diffuse, monotonous yet inimical, pieced together in a dull geometry of dull houses behind silver-painted fences of wire or splintery palings or picket fences and hedges of privet and cypress and lantana; and all these sad, tiny habitations had names like *Sans Souci* and *The Gables* … and *The Rest* and *Nirvana* and, of course, other *Avalons* beside ours, for this was a very popular name which would occur once in very nearly every block … All the way through to the city proper there was nothing to break the drab flatness of this unadventurous repetition except the club flags flying over the grandstands of some football ground or other, or a particular factory smokestack that impressed by its height or shape or the amount of reek it gave off …

A lifetime later I went back there and the horrible flatness of it all was just as real as ever, but far more depressing, since one no longer had the child’s exaggeration of scale to help it out. In that earlier time it was always possible to invent what in reality did not exist … (p. 32)

Like McInnes’, Johnston’s description places prominence on fences. He lists all the varieties of dividing walls to be found in the suburban landscape: “silver painted fences of wire or splintery palings or picket fences and hedges of privet and cypress and lantana”. His attention to detail in this way is a comment on suburban narrow-mindedness, implying that such minute distinctions between forms of the fence are the essence of suburban consciousness.

The distaste with which these two writers describe Melbourne is exemplary of what Suzanne Falkiner describes as a “tradition of serious and semi-serious abuse” leveled by writers at the city. She refers to a prevalent “self-flagellating attitude”
which frustrates her attempt to find many genuinely affectionate portraits of Victoria’s capital. The reasons for this are many and varied. It is true that many of Melbourne’s most famous writers have left the city of their birth, choosing to live either in Sydney, or larger cities overseas. Epitaphs such as Chris Wallace-Crabbe’s “Though much has died here, nothing has been born” reflect a general opinion that Melbourne is simply boring. On a visual level, it is true that Melbourne’s flat, carefully planned expanse around the Yarra River and calm waters of the industrialized Port Phillip Bay pale in comparison to Sydney’s picturesque harbour, bordered by a variety of hills and chaotically winding narrow streets. While Sydney has the majesty of the Harbour Bridge and Opera House to claim as its iconic centre, as Wallace-Crabbe observes, Melbourne by comparison seems “sprawling and centreless”. Arguably, much of the city’s unexciting or centreless aspect stems from the employment of the grid-street plan.

As Paul Carter argues, the grid system in and of itself has “no direct impact on social development”. However, it has acquired multiple and often diametrically opposed symbolic meanings. It is frequently invoked as a factor that both reflects and compounds other social and aesthetic elements of the cityscape. In concluding his analysis of the diversity of theories about the grid, Carter observes, “Rectilinear town plans were chaotic or coherent, directionless or full of direction; they were stimulating or monotonous”. A comparison of McInnes’ and Johnston’s texts reveals the diversity of impressions left by Melbourne’s urban planning, though account must be taken of whether the description is of the city centre or the suburbs. On the one hand, while McInnes despairs of the suburbs, he feels that, at least in the case of the city centre, the grid contributes to Melbourne’s grand elegance. It frames “magnificent vistas up the rounded hills north of the Yarra”. Regularity and geometry are hallmarks of McInnes’ favourable description of St Kilda Road, which flows from the city’s

---

6 Falkiner, ibid., p. 144, cites Martin Boyd, Hal Porter, George Johnston, Frank Hardy, David Williamson, Alex Buzo and Barry Oakley; to these may be added Graham McInnes, Barry Humphries, Lily Brett, Gillian Bouras.
10 Ibid., p. 209.
“main axis” in “boulevarded baroque magnificence, matched on a lesser scale by other
tree-lined avenues with four-lane pavements and wide centre grass verges” (p. 63).

On the other hand, the grid appears in Johnston’s writing as a feature that
accentuates the suburbs’ vast monotony. In the passage above, “dull geometry of dull
houses” is an oblique reference to the grid, and the phrase “unadventurous repetition,”
indicates the grid’s homogenizing effect. Despite the prominence of boundaries in the
form of fences and hedges on the small scale, Johnston asserts that, on the wider scale,
the suburbs are “without boundaries or specific definition of safety”. The succession
of quarter-acre blocks spreads seemingly forever. In this respect, Johnston’s
description reflects what Carter calls the “anonymity” of the grid system:

Exemplifying the principles of Euclidean geometry, the grid would seem to
negate such spatial properties as direction, nearness, even ‘here’ and ‘there’. For,
by definition, the grid plan equalizes parts, rendering everywhere the same. In this sense, the grid plan is characterized, like the map grid, by its ‘placelessness’, by its elimination of viewpoints, of comings and goings, and indeed of history.  

11 In this way, the grid creates the paradox of a world that at once seems full of
boundaries (streets, fences, hedges etc.) yet in its monotony gives rise to an expanse
that is formless, static and limitless.

As Andrew McCann points out, anxieties about the suburbs are also “anxieties
about the ‘everyday’ itself as an experiential category referring to the mundane cycle
of work, consumerism and domesticity”. 12 Other texts identify the symmetry of the
grid with the suburban drive to conform. Serge Liberman, for example, in his story
“Two Years in Exile”, 13 depicts a nameless outer Melbourne suburb as a “wilderness”
of adjacent and concentric rectangles, a landscape which consists of “little coloured
boxes” (p. 7). Liberman’s child persona journeys to school “between two rows of red-
brick cubes, set behind ordered squares of green, each fringed by delphinium and
rosebush in a flush of conformity” (p. 3). This carefully ordered and controlled
landscape, however, is a pressure-cooker for prejudice and competitive drive.
Liberman attributes emotion with a spatial element when he describes the ridicule

11 Ibid., p. 204.
poured upon his Jewish persona by his Anglo-Australian neighbour: “Our two yards combined cannot hold his scorn as it rolls, tumbles, and trips, and sprawls on all sides, over wooden palings and creeping passion fruit into the Mertons’ and the Sullivans’ and the Mackenzies’ and the Holts’” (p. 10). Nature may be carefully contained and controlled in the suburbs’ manicured gardens, but the suburban blocks cannot contain the feelings that are generated within them.

The impulse to see suburbia’s social landscape of narrow ambitions reflected in its physical appearance is compounded by the symbolic value attached to Melbourne’s flat terrain. Bruce Bennett points out that, while most living and exploring takes place on a horizontal plane, “the human spirit seems to long for its counterpart, the vertical”. As well as offering variety, an undulating topography offers a wealth of perspectives and new vantage points from which different impressions of the landscape can be gleansed. This is all absent in a flat landscape like the plain on which most of Melbourne is situated. J.M. Powell says that Melbourne is marked by an “incontrovertibly monotonous relief” where there is a “shortage of visual ‘cues’”, and in the world of real estate, “even the slightest elevation might be termed a ‘hill’ to suggest advantage – a chance to appear slightly above, if not aside from, the rushing tide of suburbia”.

In accounts of growing up in Melbourne, reflections on the suburbs’ box-like geometry are frequently proximate to observations of its flatness. In Johnston’s My Brother Jack, the rectilinear pattern spreads “flat and diffuse” across the land, and the passing of time does not ameliorate its aspect: years later, Johnston’s persona David Meredith finds “the horrible flatness of it all just as real as ever”. Kathleen Fitzpatrick, too, in her memoir Solid Bluestone Foundations, uses similar terminology to describe the location of the family’s first rented house in Middle Park. The land’s flatness and parallel streets that act as wind tunnels contribute to the area’s aspect as bleak and barren:

Middle Park is perfectly flat and therefore ideally suited to the unimaginative grid pattern of streets imposed on so much of Melbourne… an arrangement which ensures that no obstruction is presented to the winds raging for an outlet from Beaconsfield Parade. In our day the roads had not yet been sealed and the wind perpetually whirled sand and dust along Harold Street. There were no nature strips and no trees, and the one attempt at beautification that had been made served only to enhance the harsh aspect of the street as it consisted of very large, solidly constructed tree guards, each containing a small dead tree. (p. 102)

Like Johnston’s succession of “Avalons” and “San Soucis”, Fitzpatrick’s house is inappropriately titled: called “Verona” though it “evoked no association with the city of the Montagues and the Capulets” (p. 101). It is dark and poky, with “nothing much to commend it”. The barren meanness of the dwelling and street is matched by the back garden where someone has planted roses that never bear any flowers. Fitzpatrick’s narrative associates the unpleasant setting of Verona with the ill health and emotional tensions that her family experience while living there.

In a similar way, Louis Nowra’s *The Twelfth of Never* 17 entwines physical and social landscapes in a dialogue where the extremes of one reinforce those of the other. Flat barrenness is also the hallmark of the 1950s suburb of Fawkner where Nowra spent the first part of his youth – a housing commission suburb then on Melbourne’s northern edge. His own house is the last in a row of bleak streets and overlooks undeveloped basaltic plains:

> Did I loathe those featureless paddocks? Not really, but sometimes I felt apprehensive as if they somehow flattened me, as if their flatness and the sharp horizon of piercing blue sky and sterile plains offered no hope of refuge or surprise. It was as if anyone on the horizon was in danger of decapitation by the blade of the dividing line of sky and soil. In many respects, this formal sense of line was in keeping with the rigid grid of the estate, those square blocks of land on which were built rectangle houses as if both roundness and softness were an offence to the human eye. The lines of both nature and the man-made seemed to offer no respite, so that one night when I was delirious with a fever and was sitting on my mother’s lap at the table I glanced down at the tablecloth and saw that even its design was made of sharp horizontal lines and cried out in pain because the lines seemed to threaten my eyes like sharp guillotine blades. (p. 28)

Here, flatness and geometry have become a phobic obsession for Nowra. Arguably, he has succumbed to the “continuity of placelessness” that Carter describes as one symbolic extreme of the grid plan:

---

This is the paradox of the straight line: that, on the one hand, with a distant object in mind, it is a symbol of hope and expectations speedily realized; but, on the other, as a mere continuity of placelessness, it turns into its opposite, becoming the very expression of imprisonment. Straight lines that form crossroads are emblems of hope, but lines that exclude all hope of ending rapidly turn into signs of despair.\(^\text{18}\)

Nowra’s aversion to the “rigid grid of the estate” and the sterile geometry it represents is heightened by his story of the local postman who, “driven demented by the neighbourhood’s careless attention to house and letterbox numbers … used his lawn mower to sculpt his own number into his lawn. The two gigantic numerals were to let the estate know the essential importance of numbers to a postman who, even though he knew each household, wanted us to understand the principle at stake” (p. 24). The postman’s eventual nervous breakdown hints at Nowra’s own rising anxiety at the sterility and hopelessness of the environment in which he lives.

Of course, this anxiety is primarily produced by social factors which the physical landscape merely compounds. As a fringe suburb, cheaply constructed with government funds, Fawkner is isolated from the city proper, and home to predominantly poor, socially marginalized families with troubled backgrounds. Nowra’s sense of Fawkner’s isolation is revealed in his conception of the suburb as an “island”: an early chapter describing his home is called “this island earth”, and later this is reiterated as his family contemplates leaving Fawkner:

> The Housing Commission estate was a raft of losers, the lost, the dysfunctional, the strugglers, the desperate, on an island in a sea of paddocks where you made friends out of necessity until it was time to escape to freedom and leave them behind to find their own way out. (p. 209)

In a rebellion against identifying with the area, residents make only superficial friendships. Hence Fawkner is devoid of any real sense of community. It is perhaps part of a survival strategy that Fawkner’s residents avoid considering themselves permanently rooted there, preferring instead to believe in a possibility of altered prospects. Yet this detracts from the development of any real sense of home or belonging to the place:

> All of us, including the New Australians, regarded our district as merely a temporary halt before we moved on to something better or else if we didn’t leave it the only future that awaited us was slow defeat, ground down by dead-end jobs and the barren plains, and because of that, no-one made a fuss of

\(^{18}\) Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay*, op. cit., p. 222.
leaving. The removal vans would come and depart quietly, as did the people leaving, knowing that their goodbye was an escape, not a regretful departure. (pp. 22 – 3)

Here we see geography (“the barren plains”) working in collusion with the social depression of “dead end jobs” to cement the sense of hopelessness: the transience of Fawkner’s occupation thus heightens its placeless character. Fawkner’s character in the minds of its residents as merely a temporary solution casts it as a realm of exile until fortunes improve. Indeed, Nowra’s description of the barren paddocks onto which his house backs imbues the environment with all the characteristics of a Biblical wasteland:

In summer the dry friable earth opened up in cracks large enough to place your hands or even your feet down inside them and in winter it turned into a black clag as if it were not so much proper soil but a gelatinous pulp which stuck to your shoes and trouser cuffs like inky porridge. In summer the only colour in the flat paddocks of pallid dried grass was the sprinkling of the purple scotch thistle flowers. As a reminder of your journey through the paddocks, prickly burrs ferociously burrowed themselves into your socks and cuffs and took hours to remove. (p. 21)

Nature here is pitted against human beings and the land reveals itself as hostile to occupation. Like Fitzpatrick’s description of Middle Park, Nowra’s account makes frequent reference to the land’s infertility: the only things that grow in the garden of his home are couch grass and “a few straggly shrubs that remained stunted examples of their potential selves” (p. 27). Physical and emotional landscapes become one in his reference to the “arid soil and the blighted hopes of [Fawkner’s] inhabitants” (p. 22). Compounding this sense of barrenness is the large cemetery that dominates Fawkner and surrounds its railway station: Fawkner is the home of the dead.

Faith Richmond’s *Remembrance* 19 offers a more positive account of the Melbourne suburban garden, although the author initially paints a gloomy portrait of the family’s new abode in Caulfield. In contrast to the spaciousness of their previous home in Canberra, the Caulfield house and yard are small and poky. The yard’s flatness is also implicitly a detractor: “there aren’t the crests and mounds of grass, the sloping, treed lawns and dwarfing gums we’re used to at home in Acton” (p. 132). Yet Richmond’s female persona, an amateur artist, sees potential for creativity and solace in the mundane suburban garden:

---

At least the garden is alright. It’s overgrown – but you can see that thought must have been given by someone years ago to its design. It’s interesting what some sorts of light – some kinds of days – can do to a garden. I see as I walk forward, every leaf and dark branch, pronounced and clear. There’s no shade or wind to seduce your perceptions – to incline you to romanticize. So, although I view a commonplace little garden, it’s one that has an indefinable quality about it. Certainly there’s nothing magical about the just-discernible rows of withered pumpkins in long grass; about the leaning shed and the fig tree with an empty birdcage hanging from a branch. But I’ve felt this mood before – in the evenings at home in Acton – when geraniums glowed with a depth of almost euphoric colour and the world seemed still and set. And time had stopped for a moment as you looked down, unbelieving, at clearly outlined clusters of frost-green Cats Tongues. And stared into the unmoving depths of a vermilion prunus – as though a thin film had been peeled from your eyes. (pp. 133 – 4)

Richmond’s teenage narrator is looking forward to a new beginning, hoping that the change of scenery will lift her father out of the “grey and alien” depression into which he has fallen whilst the family lived in Canberra (p. 126). As it becomes obvious, however, that her father’s mental illness is worsening, Richmond’s persona feels more alienated from her suburban setting. Her teenage self-consciousness keenly detects the contrast between her own home life and that of others. She feels oppressed by the sharp precision of the “quality homes” in her suburb:

Gardens are geometrically neat as though the owner takes a ruler and set square with him, as well as his fork and spade. And the hedges! Most are clipped neatly with show-box accurate right angles, but some are rich with the skill of the amateur topiarist. One even has an elephant with two smaller ones following. (p. 167)

The sharp angles of the hedges are felt to keenly exclude her from their world. In contrast to the opulence of these houses, her own family is struggling financially, as she and her sister and mother must take odd jobs to pay the bills while their father is unable to work. Yet the privacy of the narrator’s own garden, chaotically overgrown in contrast to the rigid order of the “quality homes”, continues to offer respite. When her older brother comes to visit, the family sits in the garden “on our old silvery-grey bench of plaited wood, and the cat plays among fallen virgilea blossoms”, in an image of tranquil solace. The narrator’s father “even leaves his bed for an hour, and brings a deck chair from the wash house to listen” (p. 176). Thus Richmond provides a glimpse into a very different kind of suburban space, one conducive to domesticity, quietness and serenity, in contrast to the predominant aspect of gardens designed for show.
Combating Flatness: Rising Above Suburban Conformity

The view from an elevated position is a common literary device to represent a character’s expansion of prospects, or new perspective on their situation. In fiction, such views often accompany turning points in the plot or a character’s development, moments of revelation. So, too, in life writing or autobiographical narratives the view from on high is an important symbolic tool.

Bennett points out that because cities are often built on flatlands or plains for ease of building and transport, the hills or mountains have become an important psychological or spiritual alternative to everyday suburban life. He rightly observes that artistic communities commonly develop enclaves in hilly or mountainous regions around major cities, such as the Blue Mountains in Sydney, or the Darlington Ranges outside Perth. In true Romantic fashion, the hills regions become associated with a sense of moral or intellectual superiority, the distance in height and often more natural or wilderness settings of these regions contribute to an air of remoteness from the more mundane pursuits of the city proper. The hills, then, are characterized as places of escape, facilitating contemplation and a new perspective of grounded reality.

In the case of Melbourne, where the city’s flat terrain is so commonly invoked to accentuate the conventional flattening effect of suburban aspirations, there is arguably a greater than usual emphasis placed on the importance of escaping the city in favour of alternative environments, and one of the most common forms of escape is attaining the “view from on high”. Many accounts of Melbourne childhoods place great significance on holiday retreats to country areas, particularly those offering some sense of vertical elevation, arguably because it provides a dimension felt to be lacking in the child’s everyday flat suburban existence.

While Fitzpatrick seems to have hated everything about the house in Middle Park, her portrait of the family’s next abode is far more favourable. The new house called “Cluny”, among other advantages, also offers views: “a hill led up Westbury street to Dandenong Road.” The author reflects: “How I loved that gentle rise, a

---

veritable alp after the flatness of Middle Park’’ (p. 116), and recalls spending hours under a tree that commanded a view of the street. Furthermore, it is during the years at ‘Cluny’ that the author’s father institutes the practice of going on family outings and holidays. Weekends often involved the family embarking on long walks taken in far-flung parts of the city or the surrounding country. This introduces the children to the countryside around Melbourne, and Fitzpatrick recalls with fondness the “bird-haunted fern glades” through which these walks often took them. Holidays from Cluny included spells in the bushland at Macedon, and summers at the seaside resort of Lorne. Cluny thus remains in Fitzpatrick’s mind as a residence which facilitated travel and expansion, a broadening of possibilities.

Brian Matthews’ memoir *A Fine and Private Place* 21 includes a chapter called “Going Bush”, which details a family holiday to a rented cottage in the Dandenongs. That this is an exciting contrast to his family’s everyday ensconcement in suburbia is conveyed through Matthews’ exploration of his mother’s misgivings about the excursion. Having lived all her life in St Kilda, before the family’s recent move to nearby East Brighton, she is an “inner city animal, comfortable among shops and traffic and close-crowding neighbours” (p. 193), and so the little town of Belgrave, “with its high footpaths and Puffing Billy train, [seemed] utterly exotic” (pp. 192 – 3).

For a non-driving, one-time St Kilda dweller, the idea of swapping the spare comforts of the house in Noel Street for some half-baked hut in Selby, wherever that was, seemed lunacy. She thought it was too far … Above all, how would we get there? (p. 194)

Indeed, Matthews’ description of the modest drive out of the city as though it is an epic journey emphasizes the hitherto narrowness of his family’s horizons. He depicts the old Chevvy chugging “into the unknown”, and the “anxiety of the passengers” deepening as the old car’s motor is challenged by the winding, mountainous terrain (p. 195). This only serves to heighten the climax of Matthews’ epiphany when the car finally stops at their tranquil mountain hideaway:

\[\text{The Chev bumped to a stop at the front gate and the engine noise gratefully died. No one spoke. Two kookaburras, visible on a low branch overhanging the tangled loops of wire that passed for a fence, regarded us, their heads cocked for better vision, before bursting into a cackle of derision … I, for my part, came suddenly and embarrassingly near to tears as that wonderful cacophany – which I had never heard ‘in the flesh’ – rang through the echoing} \]

---

chambers of the bush. As if signaled, magpies began their glottal ululations and bellbirds from hidden boughs struck up a running, ringing echo, a sound that explored the meeting point between half-chime and purest whistle. Behind and above and amid all this, the huge forest sighed and stretched and the rushing of water rose from somewhere very deep in the valley and the sun flickered down in shafts and fragments of light through the great roof of patterning leaves and arching, gnarled limbs. I had never seen or heard anything like it in my whole life. (p. 197)

In this passage, Matthews writes himself into the Romantic literary tradition, whereby the artistic child discovers an intense joy in both the grand scale of Nature (“the huge forest”) and also in the minutiae of its variations (“fragments of light … patterning leaves”). The next day his joy in the country setting continues as he lies awake in the morning listening to a rooster’s crow: “That morning it seemed as if the rooster had awakened me to another world” (p. 200). He depicts himself “fighting a tear of sadness” at the end of the week’s holiday, “being vaguely – though wrongly, I am glad to say – convinced that I would never again be so close to and in tune with such wonders of nature” (p. 200).

While Matthews’ relation of the mountain experience embraces the Romantic tradition, the equivalent episode in Louis Nowra’s *The Twelfth of Never*, on the surface at least, purports to debunk Romantic pretensions. In recounting his holidays spent with his cousins at Mount Sugarloaf, Nowra’s chapter opens with the startling assertion: “The first time I was splattered with rabbit guts I was unprepared” (p. 176). Nowra goes on to deflate the traditional interpretation of hills and country retreats as landscapes that facilitate a “oneness” or Wordsworthian communion with Nature through his description of his cousin Connor’s violent assaults on the region’s wildlife. Connor is depicted flamboyantly disemboweling a rabbit with maximum gore only after he has already “smashed dozens of dried mud nests” in a “profane-mouthed attack of brutal intensity” (p. 176). Like other landscapes of Nowra’s deprived childhood, Mount Sugarloaf is initially described in negative terms, offering merely a diluted and blighted version of the traditional hilltop retreat. Its peak is a relatively small aberration in the monotonous flat landscape:

Mount Sugarloaf is not really a mountain but a hill that dramatically rises straight out of the paddocks, but like all landscape eruptions in Australia it has been eroded over time, so it doesn’t call attention to itself. It is part of a landscape where one is never overwhelmed by the vertical but by the endless horizontal plains of an exhausted land. (p. 177)
Nowra emphasizes the continuity of this landscape with that of his home in Fawkner: indeed, Mount Sugarloaf is easily accessible from his suburb: “to drive there from Fawkner was a simple matter of going down Argyle Street, turning right onto the highway and heading in a straight line until you reached Broadford” (p. 177). Yet, this initially gloomy portrait may perhaps be considered essential homage to the Melbourne literary tradition of self-deprecation, because Nowra’s tone does change. He concedes that “in its own small way, Mount Sugarloaf is dramatic”, and he goes on to describe the variety of colours the peak takes on in changing light, the eerie cave at its base and the lichen covering its rocks higher up. And, most significantly, it does offer a view:

From its peak you can see the town, the Hume Highway and the distant chimneys of the major employer, the AMP paper mills. On the other side of the railway tracks the countryside slowly disappears into a blue-grey haze of scrub and gum trees. (p. 177)

Furthermore, Nowra obviously enjoyed his time at Mount Sugarloaf. As well as the world of the bush and farm and native animals for entertainment, his days at Sugarloaf seem marked by a greater than usual social integration for him, as he is well and truly part of his cousin Connor’s entourage as they embark on all the typical Australian country childhood pursuits of hunting rabbits, exploring the bush and elaborate war games.

While hilltop escapes from the city offer suburban children an inspiring alternative environment to their everyday world, other images of vertical elevation within suburbia itself are particularly significant in reconstructions of Melbourne suburban childhoods. These often accompany moments of revelation or redirection for young personae, or create a realm of momentary respite from tense domestic environments. Examples of new perspectives, real and imagined, from a position of height, abound in the literature.

Perhaps the most famous example occurs in the opening pages of Hal Porter’s *The Watcher On the Cast-Iron Balcony*, already examined in the preceding chapter. Porter’s depiction of the watcher on the balcony has become exemplary of a minor

---

autobiographical tradition whereby the continuity of the narrative is momentarily disrupted by this image of authorial “downgazing”. Such episodes become in the literature points where the author pauses for breath, so to speak, in a moment of reflection on his life as a whole and the nature of his craft. All of this takes place on the level of metaphor, however, as the moment of downgazing is usually skillfully integrated into the developing story. While Porter positions his younger self gazing out over the city and taking in its sights, the view becomes a symbolic microcosm of the mature author’s own life and character. For example, his imbuing the prospect with English overtones, and the distinction he draws between the baroque façades of hotels and the “humbler roofs” betray Porter’s own intellectual and social snobbery, which people close to him have commented upon. The child’s view of the physical landscape, as remembered, is thus superimposed with the adult writer’s knowledge and inclinations. The result is a description that effectively conflates the perspectives of child and mature narrator. Porter accentuates the complexities involved in contemplating the layers of the self and the nature of memory when he writes a few pages later: “I have been watching myself, by this time, for too long, since the days of the cast-iron balcony. I have watched myself watching the small suburban creature, the uninnocent good boy” (p. 20). In this way, the view from the balcony comes to symbolize the process of writing autobiography, being as it is a visual representation of the act of observing something from a distance: in the literal view, through a distance of space, in the figurative view, a distance of time and experiences.

Perhaps a similar moment occurs for Louis Nowra, when, as an adolescent, Louis eats a white datura flower and then climbs up onto the roof of the house in McLeod. The hallucinogen accentuates the change in his perception brought about by his elevated position:

I felt better on the roof because I could see beyond our house and garden into other backyards, and the asylum fir trees, their tops vibrating slightly in the afternoon breeze. I sat on the edge of the roof and dangled my feet. It was fascinating to see the world from up high. Our small back garden that looked so shapeless and formless from ground level was transformed. The two sections of the fence that butted onto the plant nursery had a sharply defined A-frame shape and the concrete path that ran along the back of the house seemed to be the base of a triangle that was linked to the fence in a mysterious

23 See, for example, Mary Lord, *Hal Porter: Man of Many Parts*, Random House, Milson’s Point, 1993, p. 172, who describes how Porter avoided mentioning his father’s occupation “because of his own entrenched snobbery”.
significance. The Hill’s hoist was the centre of the triangle. It was all exquisite and perfect. My mother’s Pomeranian ran across the lawn, disturbing the geometrical clarity, and it suddenly occurred to me that I was seeing the world through a raptor’s eyes. I understood why they were such good hunters and were able to see prey from so high up … It all seemed so logical and profound. I sat on the roof for five hours. (p. 309)

The new perspective (admittedly drug-induced) allows Nowra access to an altered view of his surroundings. Significantly, the roof offers an expanded horizon: he can see beyond his own yard, symbolic of his immediate life circumstance, into a wider world and the future awaiting him. But, moreover, Nowra notices a pattern in the layout of the backyard, whereby its separate features are put into new relations with each other. Arguably, this piecing together of elements of the backyard from on high is a symbolic parallel for Nowra’s own authorial activity of viewing his life from a distance, since putting his experiences in writing involves composing the disparate parts of his youth into new relationships with one another. Certainly there is an element of cynicism in Nowra’s downgazing: he is adopting a God’s eye view, and his likening of this perspective to that of a predator casts himself, and humanity in general, as victims vulnerable in a Divine scheme. Yet this functions to comment as much upon his own position as author, downgazing on his life, as it does upon God: the characters he represents in his story are likewise vulnerable to the whims of his own authorial intention.

As a younger child, too, Nowra associates the position of vertical elevation with both freedom of the imagination and escape from a dysfunctional reality. As a child he has a recurring dream of traveling to far off lands by becoming weightless and floating away:

> It is always dusk in this dream and I am standing on the back fence that overlooked the weed-infested alley which separated us from the houses behind. I jump, wanting to make the longest jump ever known. As I launch myself from the fence I find that I am in a sitting position, hugging my knees, and I know as long as I stay in this position I will glide like a bird, drifting above the back-yards of the houses in Argyle Street, floating on and on in a state of calm euphoria and enchantment until I drift beyond Fawkner and sail off into an unknown world somewhere in the warm twilight. (p. 29)

This dream is one of escape from the limiting world of Fawkner and its narrow prospects. Nowra adopts a similar image of floating in response to his mother’s hysterical anger. As a ten year old he sees a dragonfly hovering above the rippled surface of a creek, and thinks, “that’s how I want to be, a dragonfly drifting above
life.” He reflects: “The image of the dragonfly remained with me for some years as a way of detaching myself from my mother’s behaviour, as if she were some wild torrent of a river and I a dragonfly floating above her in the impassive warm air of indifference” (p. 55). While Simon Petch asserts that this is an image of Nowra’s failure to connect with himself, and an image through which he detaches himself from his own thoughts, it is clear from Nowra’s narrative that it is more a way of detaching himself from his incomprehensible surroundings. It is a protection mechanism whereby he maintains a view of himself as distinct from his mother’s wild accusations “Idiot! Idiot! Idiot!” (p. 52). That this is an image of detachment from his surroundings rather than from himself is reinforced by the way Nowra’s language, “the impassive warm air of indifference”, recalls the “warm twilight” of the dream where Nowra floats away from Fawkner.

At other times, the rooftop becomes a realm of escape from turmoils at ground level and a place from which to form a new perspective of things below. Nowra gains such a view when he spends time helping a tiler work on a house under construction in his neighbourhood. “One day he asked what I liked about being on roofs. I told him it was because I could get away from my mother and up high people look small on the ground” (p. 158). The conversation is extended to considering possibilities of travel: “Imagine, though, how tiny people would look from a plane” and philosophizing about the human condition, albeit in a reductive sense: “What fuckin’ alien would want to be human?” (p. 158). While still very much a loner himself, Nowra gains from this encounter an appreciation of the dangers of too much escapism, as he recognizes that the tiler is “an alone man, as if working all the time on the roofs, all humans had become the size of insects and he had grown distant from them” (p. 159).

The usefulness and limitations of rooftop escapism are also explored in Penelope Trevor’s novel, Listening for Small Sounds. There, nine-year-old Joss regularly retreats from her father’s drunken violence by spending time on the roof of their small Carlton terrace house. From the roof, Joss watches her neighbours in their garden and listens to their conversations: “She lies there hidden, listening, tasting their

---

life” (p. 11). Part of Joss’ fascination with her neighbours’ lives is her yearning for an existence free from the horrors of her father’s violence. “She listens for the code in the easy slip and slide of their words but there isn’t one” (p. 12).

Trevor’s character also uses the roof as a way of detaching herself from her daily reality through the imaginative life that she enacts up there. “On the roof what is grounded becomes light. On the roof Joss can breathe” (p. 10). The roof becomes Joss’ regular playground, where she acts out many of her childhood fantasy games:

Next door is a car park. Behind that is a laundromat. It has a big flat roof. Joss can jump and run on it because no-one can hear her above the grind and hum of the laundromat’s machines. Today Joss is a ballerina, she dances on the laundromat roof, above the busy street. She leaps and spins, her arm outstretched, her hands held gracefully, like the dancers in her mother’s ballet books. And then she runs with long open strides towards the end of the roof. It is four feet from the corner of the laundromat roof to the corner of her roof. She would walk across the brick fence but it’s not the same. She flies. (p. 10)

The sense of the roof as a realm detached from reality is accentuated by Trevor’s reference to Joss’ home as “the doll’s house” (p. 20) because of its small size. Yet this epithet also implies an external perspective, one which can take in the whole house at once, and which sees its occupants as miniature figures from on high, rather than the grounded perspective of a character moving amongst them. Trevor’s diction and attention to sensory detail, however, clearly mark her narrative as being from Joss’ child-perspective. Through these references to the “doll’s house” and exploration of Joss’s roof-top wanderings, Trevor effectively conflates the perspectives of her own authorial voice and that of her child character. Nine-year-old Joss is imbued with a capacity for detached observation beyond her years, a detachment which is informed by the adult authorial voice, but invoked by her traumatic family life. When her father’s dark mood abruptly ends her and her mother’s laughter over an incident at school, the narrative emphasizes Joss’s ability to mentally remove herself from her surroundings: “Joss stops being there. She falls backwards into herself and gets out of the way” (p. 25).

Trevor demonstrates the roof’s limitations as a realm of retreat, however, when Joss slips and cuts her foot while playing up there. This incident occurs at one of the lowest points in her father’s depression, a time when he is perpetually surly and violent. Joss’ physical wound is symbolic of her deeper emotional pain, as the dark
blood “from deep inside” “pumps out with the rhythm of her heart” (p. 52). That she is wounded whilst in her rooftop realm of respite indicates that it offers only a fragile, and ultimately unsustainable, separation from the violence of the house beneath.

Perhaps the epitome of roof-top revelations, however, is George Johnston’s in *My Brother Jack*. Though by this stage David Meredith is a young adult, rather than a child, the rooftop perspective of the suburb in which he and his new wife have chosen to live reveals to him far more than the topography and lie of the land. Rather than removing him from the stupor of suburban dullness, or providing some form of escape, however, Meredith’s ascension of the roof of his spacious new villa heightens his anxiety about his suburban predicament.

My elevation provided me with the first opportunity I had had to look out over all the Beverley Park Gardens Estate, and there was nothing all around me, as far as I could see, but a plain of dull red rooftops in their three forms of pitching and closer to hand the green squares and rectangles of lawns intersected by ribbons of asphalt and cement, and I counted nine cars out in Beverley Grove being washed and polished … … I stared around over the whole of the sterile desolation, and realized with a start of panic that I had got myself into the middle of this red and arid desert … [a desert where] heads could always be hidden in the comforting granular sand of an unimpeachable respectability (pp. 271–3).

Meredith parodies his position on high, with its attendant associations of a heightened spiritual consciousness, through ironic references to himself as a kind of classical sage: “I could even stay up here for years, I thought, like some Stylite of the suburbs, on terracotta building tiles in place of a Syrian pillar, and ruminate on all the problems of the world” (p. 272). Yet the episode marks a turning point in his young life. Meredith acknowledges that he doesn’t love his wife and feels stifled by the materialistic lifestyle in which she has inured him to participate. His rooftop epiphany initiates him into rebellion against the culture of Beverly Grove, beginning with his purchase of a hardy fast-growing native tree for the front yard, one which stands in stark contrast to the camellias, mock-oranges and Japanese dwarf maples in the surrounding gardens.

**A City of Divisions: Social Boundaries and their Transgression**

One response to the sense of being lost in a flat monotonous suburban sprawl is the imposition of imaginary boundaries. Melbourne accounts of childhood display a
greater than usual attention to geographical and spatial dividers than do their counterparts from other regions. As has already been pointed out, the two famous literary depictions of Melbourne suburbia by McInnes and Johnston both give prominence to the fences and hedges that delineate possession of the domestic domain. In addition to these markers of space are more symbolic or notional boundaries, which divide whole suburbs or regions of the city from one another. Such boundaries often function to categorize the city’s residents in terms of class, race or both.

In her study *The Writer’s Landscape*, Falkiner asserts, “It is arguable that the English class system survived longer in Melbourne than in any other Australian city and some of its manifestations are still more apparent today”. Indeed, accounts of Melbourne childhoods arguably display a greater preoccupation with issues of social class than is to be found in literature from other Australian cities. The keen sense of social stratification in Melbourne may stem from the city’s history, as Melbourne was for many years the economic capital of Australia. On the one hand, Melbourne grew up fed with the proverbial silver spoon, enriched by both the money from the goldfields of the 1850s, and the capital of rich pastoralists. The city became home to many of the nation’s social elite. On the other, Melbourne’s economic prosperity also contributed to its development as a centre for industry, leading to the formation of large working class suburbs. The result is a metropolis that has for much of the twentieth century been marked by large disparities between the cultures of the affluent and the working class. As Falkiner puts it, there is a “lack of connection between, say, the South Yarra or Toorak of Martin Boyd and the Carlton of Judah Waten and Barry Oakley”.

This sense of a city containing within it two separate worlds can be seen in Christopher Wallace-Crabbe’s recollection of his early years in a privileged region during the 1930s. He describes his childhood suburb of South Yarra in terms of a safe haven, securely cut off from the more sordid elements of the city. It is

---

27 See, for example, Falkiner, op. cit., p. 146, where she describes Melbourne’s beginnings in “financial entrepreneurship”, and the prominence of English gentleman farmers amongst its earliest settlers.
28 Ibid.
a quiet miniature manageable suburb, flanked at one end by the incomparable Botanicals where they closed the gates (like in Peter Pan’s Kensington Gardens) at sundown, leaving the place to swans, ducks and waterhens. It was a region of quietness and hedges, high walls and walled gardens, old houses with creeper crawling up the stucco … Life was comfortable, insulated and all the distances were short … Across the river lay an altogether different universe, though everything I knew of it I knew from afar. Richmond, home of a football team, over the peppercorn tops, over the world’s end, contained malthouses and the Rosella jam-and-tomato-sauce factory, both of which we could smell grandly when summer winds set in from the north. Their scents made the garden ripe and redolent. Also in alien Richmond there stood the big Bryant and May factory, which made our matches, and another smallish orange factory …

His description of South Yarra abounds with images of boundaries and enclosure: it is full of hedges and walls. In his words, the suburb is “more like a supposed version of a European town than like ordinary quarter-acre suburbia” (p. 62). As mentioned in Chapter 1, South Yarra has become in Wallace-Crabbe’s adult mind a kind of Eden, with its images of enclosure and a benign, controlled nature in the form of carefully manicured gardens. For all its emphasis on Richmond’s “alien” quality, however, Wallace-Crabbe’s account contains a tacit acknowledgment of Richmond’s connection to his more pleasant world. It is the industry in areas like Richmond that has generated the wealth his prosperous suburb thrives upon; hence the scents of the Richmond factories enhance the aroma of the South Yarra gardens.

For Barry Humphries, growing up in leafy Camberwell in the 1940s, his own back fence marks the dividing line between the “haves” and the “have nots”:

Once on the fringe of Melbourne, these were now the houses my parents and their neighbours literally turned their backs on … There, at our back door, was another world; the world of the poor!

We stared at each other sometimes, the poor and I … We never spoke, just stared.

Upon starting school, this awareness of social difference becomes more pronounced. With typical ironic humour that imbues his infant eyes with more knowledge than they could possibly have possessed at such a tender age, Humphries writes, “Quickly I became aware of the gulf that divided me from them; the gulf that separated the Australian working class from the newly arisen ‘affluent’ middle class. It was wider, bleaker and more inimical than the grey tundra of the playground” (p. 20). This tone continues:

Respectability began to grow up around us like the garden, putting down its roots and stretching forth its tendrils and branches. We had special words for things which ‘common people’ didn’t use … ‘They’ only had a back yard but we had a back garden. They had a wash house, we had a laundry. They pulled the chain, we flushed the toilet. They had ‘blood’ noses, we had nosebleeds. They had buck teeth, but my teeth were slightly prominent. (pp. 30 – 31)

It is significant that Humphries here relates the social trappings of respectability to the suburban environment: he likens the growing snobbery to the burgeoning garden, and mentions amongst his list of distinctions the contrasting terminology for the land surrounding the house making up the quarter-acre block. In this way, he self-consciously adds his voice to the body of literature linking the Australian upwardly mobile with yard maintenance.

Gerald Murnane’s semi-autobiographical A Lifetime On Clouds also reveals the heightened sense of division between the social classes possessed by Melbourne school children in the 1950s. The persona, Adrian Sherd, is painfully aware of the distinction between himself, living in the (then) outer suburb of Accrington, and attending a modest Catholic school, and boys attending the classier private schools:

The tram was always crowded with boys from Eastern Hill Grammar School and Canterbury Ladies’ College. Adrian knew that these schools were two of the oldest and wealthiest in Melbourne. He felt very ignorant not even knowing where they were among the miles of garden suburbs beyond Swindon. Whenever he looked at the Eastern Hill boys Adrian felt awkward and grubby. He held his Gladstone bag in front of his knees to hide the shiny domes in his trouser legs … When the tram lurched and he fell among them, the superb voices kept up their banter while one of the fellows brushed Adrian away like some kind of insect. (pp. 53 – 54)

Adrian, of course, suffers from a highly overactive imagination and Murnane’s description here comically exaggerates teenage insecurity for dramatic effect. Yet Adrian’s self-consciousness, however exaggerated, is based upon real differences, as evidenced by the contrast between his shabby worn trousers and the easy-going confidence of the Eastern Hill boys’ “superb voices”. The perception of difference between the social classes is again accentuated when Adrian changes the company he keeps at school from the group of working class boys who “all lived on the Frankston line” (p. 89) to a new group who “all lived in garden suburbs and travelled home on trams” (p. 90). As the whole of Murnane’s novel is about a teenage boy’s sexual

---

31 Gerald Murnane, A Lifetime on Clouds, Heinemann, Melbourne, 1976.
fantasies, it is significant that Murnane’s persona notices a difference in the way his two groups of friends discuss their erotic dreams. While the working class boys’ tales are brief but physically explicit, the boys from garden suburbs recount their dreams “like adventure stories with themselves as heroes” (p. 91).

Louis Nowra’s account reveals the strong social divisions between Melbourne suburbs when his family moves from Fawkner to McLeod. So keenly has Nowra felt the stigma attached to living in Fawkner he asserts: “Now that we were shifting to a middle-class suburb I knew my life was going to change. I felt extraordinarily happy, even elated” (p. 210). The change in fortunes is reflected in the contrast of physical environment: where Fawkner was dry and barren, McLeod is green and leafy. The shrubs that failed to grow in the Fawkner garden flourish in the richer soil of the yard at McLeod, where:

the brick walls were hidden by creepers and beautiful red and pink hibiscus. Nature in this new suburb was lush, exuberant and prolific. Compared to Fawkner, McLeod was an Eden. (p. 214)

Yet Nowra himself has more difficulty adapting, and soon discovers that the principles of school ground survival he learnt at Fawkner do not apply in this more affluent suburb. In a football training session, young Nowra elbows his opponent in an effort to get the ball, earning him a stern rebuke from the teacher rather than the expected congratulations: “back in Fawkner I would have been accepting slaps on my back and cheers for winding the captain and returning the ball so exactly” (pp. 218 – 9). Nowra reflects after his first day at his new school:

I was out of my depth in this new suburb. This was a middle-class area where fathers were accountants, doctors, professionals and parents didn’t separate … The children had pocket money, went on ski holidays and their parents had beach houses. The girls were proper, never swore, and everyone had prospects in life … It was an area where decorum and manners were important gestures because they indicated a bourgeois sense of order and place in the social scale. By comparison, I was vulgar and a lair. (p. 219)

Indeed, Nowra never manages to make the cultural shift and blend in with the students at McLeod. Even when his grades improve in his final school years and he wins a school prize, he cannot bring himself to attend the prize-giving rehearsal, choosing instead to slink off to the cinema alone.
Even when issues of social class are not the overt focus, it is quite common for Melbourne autobiographers to very carefully delineate the immediate vicinity of their childhood street and surrounds. Main roads, pubs and other landmarks are invoked to mark off the local domain. Louis Nowra’s description of Fawkner is a good example:

> My world was easily circumscribed. There was the estate, the paddocks, beyond the paddocks the red-brick school with its small windows and gloomy interiors, and in the unseen distance those foreigners with their spitting, jabbering languages and smelly food living in what looked like the halves of giant upturned water tanks.

On the corner of the highway, Sydney Road, and Argyle Street was St Mark’s Catholic church and school …

Across Sydney Road, which led directly, as its name suggests, to Sydney, were the crematorium and cemetery … Further towards the city down Sydney Road was the Boundary Hotel …

The rifle range was on the edge of the southern boundary … (pp. 23 – 4)

Of note in this description are names that invoke a sense of boundary or direction, like the “Boundary Hotel” and “Sydney Road”. The strong sense of boundedness here serves a dual purpose: on the one hand, it emphasizes the narrow social prospects offered by Nowra’s landscape of origin, on the other, the imposition of imaginary boundaries enables the adult author looking back to gain a greater imaginative control over the region of childhood – now distant in time as well as space – that he describes.

As implied in this passage, part of Fawkner’s undesirability is its proximity to the camp for new migrants in the adjacent suburb of Broadmeadows. Yet there is some invisible boundary line in the “unseen distance” which divides the predominantly poor-white Fawkner from the camps of the “spitting, jabbering” migrants, and Nowra’s description makes clear that he inhabits the more favourable side of this divide. His sense of being privileged at least in relation to this class of people is further explored through his description of the intense racism of the school playground. The migrant children congregate together:

> even though they might have come from different countries and did not speak each other’s languages – because it was much preferable to being among the Australians whose abuse of these wogs was unrelenting. Even though these migrants may not have understood English they quickly understood that in the playground they were the lowest of the low. (p. 110)

On another level, however, Nowra finds himself identifying with a non-English speaking Dutch girl, with whom he develops a strange friendship. While Nowra ascribes this to his macabre attraction to the stump of her amputated arm, the subtext
of his account points to a commonality in their shared difficulties with language. The beginning of the relevant chapter announces Nowra’s poor performance at school, “I could barely spell, read or pronounce words” (p. 106). Later, during the period he calls “Limbo”, his difficulties with language are accentuated by a head injury, and at one point Nowra’s description of his confusion smacks of the challenges confronted by someone immersed in an unfamiliar language: “People’s conversations became hopelessly difficult to follow and at times conversation seemed merely noisy gobbledygook” (p. 237). That language (or lack thereof) links Nowra to the Dutch girl is also indicated in his mischievous teaching her “basic English” in the form of swear words (p. 115). The sense that they are in a curious way united as well as divided is compounded by their shared experience of a rain shower when their teacher sends them on an errand:

It had just rained and as we chatted in our pidgin English we both stopped when we spotted the same thing: the asphalt was neatly divided into halves of wet and dry. The rain shower had poured on one half of the asphalt but not the other and the division was so exact it was eerie. She looked up at the sky and muttered something in Dutch. I assume she was saying what I was thinking – how wonderful and bizarre that the rain should fall so neatly into one half of the playground … I told Lorenzo of this unusual occurrence – he liked anything weird – but he didn’t believe me and as the only other witness didn’t have the words to confirm what we had seen he remained unconvinced. (p. 116)

Here, Nowra presents an image of a divided school playground, physically between wet and dry, but symbolically between the Anglo-Australian and foreign migrant children. Yet the fact that they are both disbelieved or misunderstood by others acts as a bridge that unites Nowra and the Dutch girl in their difference. Arguably, this image contains both Nowra’s acknowledgement of life’s divisions while simultaneously expressing a yearning for a less divided world.

As well as denoting social and racial divisions, spatial boundaries are also invoked to demark certain realms of the self and stages in an individual character’s development. Of particular interest in reconstructions of childhood are boundaries suggesting nominal opposed states of innocence and experience, infancy and maturity. Brian Matthews, in his autobiography A Fine and Private Place, evokes the child’s sense of trepidation when, in an act of rebellion, he ventures alone for the first time into areas previously visited only with adult company:
When I arrived at the Esplanade, it seemed much wider than I remembered from previous occasions in the company of aunts or my mother. I squinted into the teary wind at the winter sands and the dark jut of the pier over the cold, white-capped waters of Port Phillip Bay. The broad experiences of beach and lawn, the cool sweep of the roadway and the immensity of the bay were somehow a little frightening after the secure narrowness of Havelock Street and familiar figures and voices of the Peanut Farm. On the Esplanade, there were a few couples, wrapped round each other in the sharp air. There were solitary figures here and there on benches, coat-collared against the slicing wind, and dogs darting and snuffling in a sea-sprayed ecstasy of wild smells and trailing leashes, torn asunder from their masters and mistresses by the sheer joy of it all. The probing cold and spray stung my eyes, but I pushed on, leaving the beach-front shops behind. Sometimes I walked on the beach itself, sometimes on the footpath and, experimentally for a while, I teetered along the sea wall until I found myself staring down not at sand but at a jag of toothy rocks. Then I returned to the path. (p. 123)

This incident represents Matthews’ proverbial “flight from the nest”, or more simply, his movement beyond the safe enclosure of childhood into the wider adult world. It is significant that he mentions being accompanied to the beach previously by his aunts or mother, as this builds on his earlier portrait of his childhood as one dominated by the feminine presence: chapter 6 of his narrative is titled “Down Among the Women” and opens with Matthews’ assertion that he “grew up among droves of them”. His first house is also the home of his maternal grandmother and “innumerable aunts”, and his father is initially a dim presence, firstly being away at the war, and then overshadowed in the Havelock Street house by the generations of women to whom the house has long been home. In the passage above, Matthews’ imagery signals a movement beyond this feminine realm into the masculine one of his father. The openness of the beach as opposed to the enclosure of Havelock Street juxtaposes the wider world of the adult to the almost womb-like realm of his mother and aunts, and the image of dogs trailing leashes is but a thinly veiled evocation of a severed umbilicus. The figures he sees are either solitary – indicating his movement into the world of independence and individuality – or couples, which point to how the young boy will later relate to women – not seeing them as providers and authorities, but as inviting the possibility of romantic and sexual union. The connection of this transgression of physical boundaries with the boy’s increasing identification with his father is indicated in the end of the passage, when he glimpses the mouth of the Elster Canal entering the ocean:

For a moment I couldn’t take this in. The canal at the bottom of ‘the block’ where my father was building our house was called the Elster Canal. I was certain this was what he had told me. Only slowly was I able to accept that this
canal was that canal. This was where it ran into the sea. I felt like an explorer – like Sturt at the Murray mouth or Phillip gazing for the first time on Port Jackson. And I was contemplating the preliminary vestiges of a plan so daring that it made me gasp and feel the excited thud of the blood through my body.

(p. 124)

This trip to the beach leads to a greater expedition, whereby young Matthews follows the canal up its length as it passes through several suburbs, before finally arriving at “the block” where he enjoys an unusual moment of masculine bonding with his father. It is significant that earlier journeys to “the block” had been made only with his mother on the tram. The journey up the canal is somewhat treacherous, as the young boy is depicted in a “quest” style pilgrimage that challenges his tenacity and manhood. First accosted by a vicious dog, then confronted by a couple performing the sexual act, the journey embodies the individual’s progress through life, encountering trials and danger and the awakening of sexual knowledge. It is significant that is takes place in a canal: this canal, leading to the world of men represented by the father figure, metaphorically replaces the birth canal through which the infant first traveled from the womb into the world.

“Little Jerusalem”: Language, Placelessness and Exile in an Unfamiliar Land

One of the contexts lending itself to a heightened awareness of boundaries and thresholds is that of migration. Melbourne is renowned for its multicultural character, as home to many and various distinct migrant communities. For the purposes of this study, the Jewish community has been selected as an example of a migrant literature’s transformation of place through traditions of representation inherited from an overseas culture. Melbourne’s Jewish community burgeoned in the decades following World War II, and has one of the largest populations per capita of Holocaust survivors in the world; hence the Jewish culture is an obvious choice for a case study in Melbourne’s migrant narratives. That said, many of the principles operating in the texts examined here apply equally to literatures from other migrant cultures.

It may be argued that the very invocation of a nominal boundary line invites its transgression. For migrant children, frequently alienated from the wider Australian community by racial and language barriers, boundaries become both a means whereby

the unfamiliar world around them is contained, and also a visual representation of social and cultural hurdles they must leap in order to gain acceptance. This can be seen in Peter Kohn’s fictional autobiography, View from a Sandcastle. 

Through the eyes of his alter ego, Martin Stein, we are introduced to his backyard in Clayton from a Jewish child’s perspective:

In the days and weeks to come, with Papa and Mama away in the new shop, the raw back and front yards of our home become my world. I play alone on the last fine days of May, poring over the block, from streetfront to housefront and from the back wall of the house to the grey back fence. The side fence to the north is new and fragrant. Beyond its pineboard slats sits another house, exactly like ours, only in reverse, front door to the left, where ours is to the right. The side fence to the south is old and dilapidated. Beyond its weathered palings the known world ends, engulfed by the dark green bushes and their shadows. Now and then the netherworld beckons me, challenging me to make shape and form of it, but I find it is safer to ignore it. My world is on this side of the fence, in hearing distance of Omi’s calls to lunch and dinner. (p. 10)

The emphasis in this description is on the perimeter: the various fences and walls surrounding the yard are the focus rather than the yard itself. Martin’s trepidation at the “netherworld” to the south prefigures his introduction to Bill Bogle, a boy who bullies and ostracizes him. When Martin later goes to the Bogle house for Bill’s birthday party, the route he takes is carefully described. Martin must go “through our white gate and down the footpath a few steps, past a creaking black gate and up a winding concrete path that cuts through a wilderness” (p. 16). The painstaking attention to detail in describing the passageway between the two houses shows Martin’s acute awareness of the significance of the threshold he is crossing, and his sense of trepidation at leaving the familiar and entering the foreign. His fears are soon justified: only pages later, his journey is repeated in reverse, as Martin feels so uncomfortable at the party that he leaves twenty minutes after he arrives.

Beyond the safe enclosure of the back yard, notional boundaries are no less significant. Indeed, while the grid system of streets may be perceived by some as a vehicle of repression, boxing residents into a uniformity of ambition and lifestyle, Carter asserts that it has a far more positive potential in the context of migrant assimilation:

The grid permits newcomers to occupy a new country without embracing local manners or local topography. It is a means of articulating human

presence in the absence of a mutually intelligible language (a tradition of occupation, a background of shared values). Each person, each property owner, knows where he stands, even if he stands nowhere. Similarly, neighbours can enter into a kind of dialogue, even if they have neither language nor culture in common. The gift of the grid is not meaningful places but a system of divisions – fence lines, road edges, pavements – that lend the inhabitants a provisional difference, a complementary otherness that can provide the basis of a kind of exchange.\textsuperscript{34}

Carter is essentially drawing on the nature of the grid as a traditional model, one that transcends cultures and is familiar the world over. As he says, “the appeal of the grid plan lies precisely in the fact that it does not resemble a place: the grid is meta place, it offers a spatial grammar which permits the articulation of as many places or homes as there are squares”.\textsuperscript{35}

Indeed, the usefulness of roads and pathways as quite literal avenues towards making sense of an unfamiliar land can be seen in Amirah Inglis’ memoir, \textit{An Un-Australian Childhood}.\textsuperscript{36} Inglis’ first locality emerges in a fragmentary fashion, described as it is from the child’s perspective as the author recreates the daily outings and journeys around the suburb:

\begin{quote}
Our terrace house was the last in the row. Next door was the railway line, which I never crossed, for I liked boundaries. My paths led me in other directions: left down Park Street to Royal Parade, which narrowed into Sydney Road at the Sarah Sands Hotel; quickly past the open door and the blast of cool air spoiled by the unpleasant smell of beer and the harsh, raised voices of drinkers … along Sydney Road a bit and into the familiar lolly shop and the ham and beef shop, both near the corner, and as far as I ventured alone. Friday night was late shopping night when, my hand held firmly in my mother’s, I penetrated further along Sydney Road and into the bigger, crowded shops filled with noise and lights, or stood and listened to the Salvation Army beating tambourines on the corner. (p. 27)
\end{quote}

Inglis constructs her description of her local area in terms of multiple mini-journeys, and the blank and mysterious terrain around her is gradually filled in around the edges of the roads she travels. Like the latitude and longitudinal markings on a map, the roads and perpendicular intersections divide the land into manageable portions, and become reference points whereby the mind can orient itself and gain a sense of direction. Accompanying the geographical exploration, and the accumulation of detail concerning place, is a reconstruction of Inglis’ social world: many of the paths she

\begin{footnotes}
35 Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
describes take her and her mother to visit various Jewish friends. Thus Inglis’ mental map of her suburb is punctuated by social as well as physical landmarks, in the form of the homes of family friends: “Our path led diagonally too from Park Street into Bowen Street, where our good friends the Erlichs lived in the upstairs rooms of a terrace … We would walk through the railway gates into Pigdon Street. Here lived the Pincuses, who were acquaintances, and the Moshers who were friends” (p. 29).

This tendency for Inglis to build up details of place around the roads and paths she travels can also be seen later in her narrative through the fantasies that she invents on the way to school. She develops the habit of imagining detailed stories and dramas involving the occupants of the houses she passes on the bus and tram. Through such fantasies, Inglis replaces with fiction the details that she lacks in the realm of reality. It is the child’s way of rendering knowable the land through which she passes, of bringing familiarity to the unfamiliar.

While Inglis uses roads and boundaries to fill in the “blank” space in her unfamiliar surroundings, and so move towards a sense of belonging, Judah Waten reconstructs his landscape in the opposite direction to communicate the migrant child’s sense of displacement. At key points in Waten’s *Alien Son*, the landscape is obscured to indicate a sense of uncertainty or the unknown. Early, on the boat journey from Perth to Melbourne, Waten describes the appearance of a township on the Australian coast:

> Far away the lights of some settlement blinked faintly, the first shore lights we had seen for many days. From the unseen land blew a desultory breeze laden with the scents of gum-trees and burning timber. A restlessness seized some of the passengers and they leaned over the taftrail avidly searching for the far-off shore. (p. 52)

The migrants’ eagerness to embrace the land that eludes them is indicated in the attention to aromas, drunk in to compensate for the scant visual evidence. The fact that their eventual landing and going ashore in Melbourne is not recounted further contributes to the rather “faceless” nature of the new city to the minds of the migrants. The first mention of the family’s life in Melbourne occurs indoors, and when the persona’s gaze moves to contemplate the city outside, it is a landscape obscured by

---

fog: “Over the tall buildings in the distance hung a mist and above sprawled grey blankets of cloud” (p. 61). In a similar vein is a later image, which depicts the town “shrouded in a white sugary mist” (p. 106). Boundaries, then, are obscured or erased by the mist, to emphasize the new arrivals’ disorientation in the landscape.

While in the case of migrant narratives, ethnicity and language are obviously strong factors contributing to the sense of a divided world, anxieties concerning social class are also very pervasive. Arguably this is due to social issues surrounding the nature of migration. Often driven to settle in a far off land by lack of opportunity and unfavourable conditions in their country of birth, migrants typically begin life in the new country on society’s fringe. As they learn the language, establish themselves financially through hard work and an increased understanding of the new culture, they are able to move to more prestigious suburbs. Hence migration is more than the act of embarking on a one-off journey to another continent; it may more aptly be viewed as a process that involves numerous smaller but often no less significant “migrations” across the Australian cityscape as the family improves its social status.38

That migration is an ongoing process is highlighted in Kohn’s View from a Sandcastle. There, four-year-old Martin Stein asks his grandmother “do we need a passport to go to Clayton?” (p. 3) when the family is shifting there from their present home in the suburb of Armadale. His grandmother’s answer, “Passports are for traveling between countries. We have this behind us now” (p. 4) is loaded with irony in the light of the rest of the novel, which details that Clayton is, indeed, in one sense another world, such is the hatred and racism the Stein family experience there.

Inglis’ An Un-Australian Childhood likewise details numerous family moves. In describing each family abode, Inglis is very conscious of small points of geography, which are important indicators of family fortunes. In the second chapter entitled “Park Streets, West and East”, she describes the area of Melbourne where her family first lived on their arrival in Australia. Often referred to as “Little Jerusalem”, Carlton was then considered a Jewish enclave:

For the first eight years of my life in Australia, my world was the small area on the north-west fringe of the city bounded by Sydney Road, Princes Park, Lygon Street, Carlton and Park Street, Brunswick and, for the first four or five years there, all the people who inhabited my world … were Jews like ourselves and mainly Polish Jews … We all lived in Carlton or Parkville or Brunswick. We knew no-one who lived across the Yarra in the south-eastern suburbs though we knew that some Jews did live there, for they had built the large synagogue on St Kilda Road for their worship. (p. 30)

In this description, the Yarra river becomes an important symbolic boundary that defines the community in which she moves. Later her family moves to St Kilda, and Inglis details why this was a common pattern for families like hers:

Why did we move? I’m not sure. I know that many of our friends moved too and that they moved as we did away from Carlton and Parkville – across the city centre and across the river which flanked it, into those suburbs which we hardly ever visited. Although I didn’t know it at the time, we were moving along a well-trodden path, a path which had led many a European Jewish migrant, as they improved themselves, away from the edge of the city of Melbourne to the ‘better’ southern and south-eastern suburbs of Prahran, St Kilda and Caulfield where the established ‘Australian Jews’ lived. (p. 66)

Moving across the river means more to Inglis than merely a more pleasant address: in this new area, she enters a “wider and more Australian world” (p. 66). She notices that more English is spoken in their new house than in the Brunswick days (p. 71) and once settled south of the river her family begin taking more “Australian style Sunday outings” to famous Melbourne weekend spots such as the Dandenongs and Phillip Island. Boundaries become more significant for Amirah later when she has to enroll at her chosen high school under a previous address to qualify for admission, because the family’s new home “had placed us on the wrong side of the Elwood Canal, which was the boundary line” (p. 117).

Not only the change of address makes moving house important; the process of moving itself, discarding old pieces of furniture and acquiring new ones more suitable for the new place, carries metaphorical significance in this narrative:

When we had first moved across the Yarra, new furniture appeared among some familiar pieces from the two Park Streets, and when we moved down the road in Barkly Street this happened again. Some of the old pieces disappeared altogether and others moved down into lesser positions. We all loved change and improvement; my father, especially, equated the two. (p. 113)

This description comes after a chapter where Inglis describes her teenage embarrassment at her parents’ perceived “Europeanness” and the variety of both
Jewish and non-Jewish friends she makes at her new school. As Inglis’ parents are not religious Jews, and are active members of the Communist party, she cannot fully identify with either the “Jewish” or “Australian” worlds. She must instead negotiate a space for herself taking into account many disparate elements. Just as some pieces of furniture are discarded, or replaced with new ones, so too do different aspects of Inglis’ personality and family life rise or shrink from prominence in the different locations where her family makes their home.

Children from migrant backgrounds obviously face even greater difficulties forming a connection with their Australian home than youth whose Australian ancestry stretches back several generations. A strange environment is compounded by the language barrier which often renders experience inexpressible, and contributes to dilemmas of belonging caused by the child living a double life: one at home with parents and their language and culture, the other at school trying to fit in with the “Australian” kids.

Like many migrants, Inglis’ sense of dislocation from her childhood surrounds is intimately bound up with the vagaries of language. The cultural foreignness of a new land is emphasized by the inability of migrants’ old tongue (and culture) to adequately describe or represent their new place, compounding their sense of loss and placelessness. For Inglis, the first failure of language to represent her comes with the surrendering of her family name: Gutstadt is dropped in favour of Gust, more easily articulated by Australian English speakers. Amirah’s given name also causes difficulties, being “unusual” among the Sallies and Sarahs and Janes of her Anglo-Australian school friends. Furthermore, “Amirah” is not identifiably Biblical or typically Hebrew. So Inglis’ narrative emphasizes a profound sense of absence in the linguistic realm: she experiences the absence of a family surname, as well as the absence of others’ ability to pronounce or know her given name.

As Carter points out, “if one’s own name is unstable, then so, too, is one’s sense of place”. Indeed, the failings of language to articulate Inglis’ personal identity are continuous with the discrepancies between names and places in her early years.

The family’s first suburb is called Parkville, and the Gusts live on Park Street, yet the name in no way represents the local environment:

My mother found herself not in the leafy green garden suburb which she imagined from “Park Street, Parkville” but in a sliver of terraces built almost on top of wide hot streets bounded on the east by the broad and empty thoroughfare of Royal Parade, on the south by the equally wide but uglier and more characterless Flemington Road, on the west by the dry estate lands of Royal Park and running out into Brunswick on the north. It was a bitter disappointment (p. 26)

It is the first of several Park Streets the Gusts live in, which ironically have no parks to mention. Language proves inadequate to convey a sense of place, and thus contributes to the family’s dislocation. At successive addresses, the closest area resembling a park is a patch of “vacant land”, with a “disused cow shed”: significantly, more images of absence rather than abundance.

Yet in one important respect, this “lack” is paradoxically turned into a mode of belonging, connecting the Gusts as it does with a common cultural heritage: that of Jewish exile.40 The disjunction between the image of a park or garden set against the reality of barren streets, which through their heat and emptiness evoke the deserts of Jewish generational wandering and exile, recreates in miniature the history of the Biblical Israelites. Through her accounts of a semi-nomadic lifestyle, forever moving house, Inglis evokes the Israelites’ wanderings in the wilderness, and so writes herself into this tradition of non-belonging and exile and, paradoxically, locates a cultural homeland.

Other Australian Jewish writers, most notably Serge Liberman, write about personal exile in terms of a generational experience. His story “Two Years in Exile” describes a Jewish immigrant family’s first Australian home as “A wilderness … five miles from the city’s heart”.41 Like the Parkville of Inglis’ youth, this suburban setting mirrors traditional environments of exile with its barrenness and dust: “along the dry, cracked and dusty unmade road stretches an empty nakedness that, for Mother, is worse even than the silence and the loneliness” (p. 6). Paradoxically, in this story, we

40 As has been seen at the opening of this chapter, this sense of lack or absence is also a dominant theme in Anglo-Australian landscape writing. Rosini, op. cit., p. 19 notes that themes of exile and refuge in a promised land are common to both Australian and Jewish literature.
41 Serge Liberman, “Two Years in Exile”, op. cit., p. 6.
see the child make what is revealed to be a necessary move from a sense of belonging and ownership of his suburban landscape towards the alienation and displacement felt by his parents. It is only through recovering a sense of exile and distance from the local landscape that he can achieve belonging within his cultural group.

Initially, the child persona immerses himself fully in his surrounds and, with a child’s characteristic egotism, views them as an extension of himself. On the fringe of swelling suburbia, he claims, “everything is mine. The sandy quarry belongs to me; and the scrub, the rocks, the potholes filled with mud, and the mounds of loam, crumbling and sinking beneath my feet as I watch the builders pushing back the borders” (p. 1). He is fascinated with the construction work going on around his home, a visible symbol of his own expanding mental and spatial world:

For as I swing by my arms from the horizontal beams and climb upon the rafters of each rising skeleton, in my imagination, which soars, I build it too, reaping as payment splintered knees, calloused palms and grit in my eyes. With my help, the perimeter where we live is pushed back and the city swells, enveloping us more rigidly within the carbon solidity of conformity. (p. 7)

The child revels in this world to which his parents are struggling to adapt: “Its melody I have adopted, I know its silences, which are not truly silences, and treasure the emptiness”. Yet his “nomad” or exile quality is still evident in this ability to “make my home anywhere, wherever there is dirt, wherever there is dust” (p. 1): in this sense, the dry Australian landscape seems peculiarly well adapted to carry the Jewish tradition of exile.

Inspired by his schoolteacher, Liberman’s child persona absorbs Australian folk culture and lyric poetry, that is until the bullying of other schoolchildren reminds him that it is not his to own. Suddenly his beloved Australian wilderness becomes distant:

I would love to love it still, but it has become remote, something not of my world at all but something that merely winked and taunted me with scented promises. Even the closer wilderness upon which I have helped to build with callouses and laughter mocks at having fooled me. (p. 8)

For Liberman, then, as for many other writers, achieving belonging in the landscape is shown to be inextricable from its social context. The bullying and alienation that
Liberman’s persona experiences at school colour and infuse his response to his physical surrounds: once embittered by the locals, he is unable to love it completely.

Yet, exile for Liberman’s persona is not merely a matter of alienation from the Australian landscape and the culture of his peers but, increasingly, also that of his parents. In a scuffle with the neighbour’s son next door, Liberman’s persona explodes “I am not a Jew” (p. 14). His mother hardens to his plight when she hears this, and says, “See, now, what a shegetz is growing up under our roof” (p. 14). Liberman notes: “Ancestry and progeny have parted. The son has abandoned his past” (p. 14). Thus the Jewish child experiences a double alienation, being unable to fit into the culture of his school peers or that of his parents.

The importance of the social landscape is emphasized by the family’s far more successful assimilation into the inner city suburb of St Kilda. Aesthetically, this place has nothing to recommend it, being seedy, tawdry and unattractive:

Grey is the colour of St Kilda and foetid its every corner where I parcel out bits more of my childhood. Not grass, nor tree, nor flower dominate, but glass and brick, spouting and stone, all smudged, peeling, leaking, rusted, cracked. The street stifles under a pall of beer and rotting meat, it reeks of humus and dander, but here, here where the cats breed amongst potato sacks and the Herald boy shouts in adenoidal tones, and the drunkard staggers and reels ... here I thrive, I grow and thrive like some wild and reckless resilient shoot. (p. 17)

Significantly, it is through community and action in the social sphere that Liberman’s persona finally manages to purge himself of his inner wilderness of rejection. The persona recognizes the qualities of the old school bullies from the suburbs rising up in his own self as he turns on his Jewish friend and ridicules him. The persona’s mother’s rebuke: “we have left the wilderness … but have we really brought it with us?” (p. 20) causes him to reverse his behaviour, offering praise and friendship where he once heaped scorn. Through this act of reaching out, he “drowns” the bullies of the suburbs that once haunted him, purging himself “of the wilderness, of that wasteland, where a splinter of my childhood has, in our wandering, been lost” (p. 21). The wilderness is then not so much a physical place as a moral wasteland bereft of human compassion. The individual’s experience, “a splinter of my childhood”, is absorbed into the wider generational condition of “our wandering”. Thus the persona comes out of exile when he quashes negative emotions of hatred, fear and jealousy within
himself, and in so doing, implies that a similar homecoming is also possible for his larger community.

A less hopeful exploration of the Jewish tradition of exile is displayed in Judah Waten’s *Alien Son*. Unlike Liberman, Waten restricts his exploration of exile to the purely cultural level. Indeed, Waten’s title “Alien Son” refers to a double alienation: the persona is firstly alien to the Anglo-Australian culture, but increasingly is rebuked for not being sufficiently Jewish in his mother’s eyes. At many points, Waten shows him to be distanced and disconnected from his Jewish heritage. The persona indicates early on that his Jewishness is important to his mother by likening himself and his sister to Old Testament characters: “We were to serve our oppressed people. I was to be at least another David and my sister a modern Esther” (p. 2). But as he grows up and wants to be more like the local children, his mother rebukes his waywardness: “You belong to one world, I belong to another. With your new ways you have almost become a stranger to me” (p. 159).

Indeed, there are strong allusions to the Biblical story of Ishmael in Judah Waten’s narrative. The persona’s father is plagued by bad luck in his business enterprises, implying that he is not part of God’s “chosen” people, as he is not blessed. His mother affirms this lack of blessing when she says, “I always said our son would have to struggle here just as I did back home. I knew it from the first day we landed in this golden kingdom” (p. 157). Exile, then, for some becomes a mode of belonging, but for others is just one in multiple layers of alienation.

While the Jewish child may feel exiled from local environments, this is sometimes offset by a sense of belonging to foreign landscapes. Through the power of stories told by parents and other relatives, Jewish children enjoy a sense of connection to places they have never personally visited. For example, Serge Liberman’s persona in “The Storyteller” reflects:

> while the ground I trod daily was that of Melbourne’s St Kilda, and the trees I climbed and the fences I scaled and the parks in which I ran were fixedly

---

antipodean and indefeasibly of the here and now, yet was my head ever
gliding on clouds that swept over such places as Yehupetz and Kasrilevke,
Tunayadevka and Cherkassy, exotic little villages and shtetls that were real,
more real, and mine, more mine, than even neighbouring Elwood and
Armadale and Elsternwick and Caulfield where I went to school or Yiddish
classes or to shul sometimes.43

This phenomenon of being exiled from immediate environments, while belonging to
distant, inaccessible ones can be viewed as a spatial outworking of the Jungian
“inherited aptitudes” to which Richard Coe and Rachel Feldhay-Brenner refer. Coe
describes the child as possessing “an awareness of myths and symbols” and
“instinctive memories of complex patterns that were formed by its ancestors long
before it was born”.44 Feldhay-Brenner further explores this idea in the context of
migrant narratives, which often delve into an ancestral past “which is not the author’s,
but which has nevertheless played a decisive role in shaping the author’s life and
personality”.45 In the passage above, the reference to the Melbourne suburbs being “of
the here and now”, by implication, casts the foreign landscapes as ones of another era
– of the past, specifically of the persona’s parents’ past in Europe. While the focus of
Brenner’s argument is historical memories rather than place, Liberman’s story
indicates that these concepts do flow over into spatial relationships. As this thesis has
argued, relationship to place is just as vital to the formation of identity as inherited
culture: indeed, the two are inextricably interwoven.

Memories of Melbourne, then, seem dominated by competing images of
overwhelming monotony and a heightened sense of divisions. The latter is arguably a
response to the former: it is the need to gain one’s bearings, to locate the self within a
vast expanse of hedge and terracotta, that prompts the mind towards the development
of categories that can render the blank sameness of suburbia knowable. While Chapter
1 explored Melbournian writers’ tendency to seek relief from suburbia’s segregation
by casting country retreats as Edenic realms of unity, a strong sense of divisions
nevertheless pervades experiences of that other great Australian leisure spot, the
beach. It is this environment, and a comparison of coastal experiences across our
continent, that forms the subject of the next chapter.

44 Richard Coe, When the Grass Was Taller, Yale University Press, New Haven/London, 1984, p. 108,
as quoted by Rachel Feldhay-Brenner, “Genealogy & Identity”, Australian & New Zealand Studies in
45 Feldhay-Brenner, op. cit.
CHAPTER 8

BY THE SEASIDE: A REGIONAL COMPARISON OF BEACH IMAGES IN AUSTRALIAN CHILDHOODS

Each visit to the beach … allows an older self to walk for a while untrammelled in the bare sandy footsteps of a little boy … it may be that beaches are as good as anything for the resources of the subconscious being. They can do memory; they can do amnesia; they can do sad prospects of infinity or joys of the boundless. And all the while the restless gulls — seemingly immortal — are overhead.¹

Australia is renowned for its “beach culture” — we are a society of coastal dwellers, and the beach is a prominent image in recollections of childhood from all over the continent. An island nation, the ocean hems us in from all sides in our conceptual map, and is thus a powerful symbol of demarcation and threshold. The sea is a paradoxical image, given that to our earliest Anglo-European settlers, the convicts, it presented itself as both the barrier to escape, while also carrying the possibility of travel to other lands. The ultimate fulfilment of this, continuing well into the twentieth century, was the colonist’s journey to England: for this, the sea provided a passage to the heartland of “home”.² While the annual holiday to the beach is arguably an icon of Australian childhood nationwide, beyond this, there are some discernible regional differences in the ways that children have experienced and utilized the seaside landscape.

Of the states surveyed in this thesis, the beach stands out in Western Australian reconstructions of childhood far more than in those from Queensland and Victoria. Certainly, this impression is due in part to the prominence of Western Australian writers such as Tim Winton and Robert Drewe, whose works focus extensively upon the ocean and beach lifestyle. As Suzanne Falkiner points out, there is comparatively little autobiographical memoir or literature associated with beach culture from Melbourne or, more curiously, from Queensland, leaving only Sydneysiders as serious

rivals to the Western Australians in their attention to seaside imagery and themes. While, in popular Australian culture, Queensland is commonly idealised as the epitome of the beach paradise, literary depictions tend to focus upon other aspects of Queensland’s tropical climate. In the case of Melbourne, geographical features such as cooler weather and the absence of surf or ocean beaches in Port Phillip Bay may account to some extent for a decreased attention to the beach.

Western Australia

The Beach as Regional Icon

That there are different regional attitudes towards beach-going is made clear in Robert Drewe’s *The Shark Net*. In this memoir, Drewe contrasts his Melbournian parents’ cautious attitude towards the ocean with the Western Australians’ carefree enjoyment of the beach. Commenting on his mother’s attitude to the beach, Drewe writes:

… Victoria’s weather was colder. Her beach experience was in the relatively sheltered Port Philip Bay. At first she was suspicious of the surf and relentless sun. Now we were in a strange, hot, dry land, she was a mother, and she was taking no chances. (p. 38)

Drewe’s mother is paranoid about sun exposure which might lead to “boiling brain”, while his father takes charge on family expeditions to the beach, assessing whether the waters are safe for his children to swim in:

Every time we ventured to the ocean, he’d bravely test the waters first. While we squirmed and jumped impatiently on the shore, he’d gingerly dive in… he’d frowningly survey the adjacent waters for seaweed. If a piece of kelp bobbed nearby he’d snatch it up and elaborately dispose of it, flinging it far from him, as if he mistrusted its sinister kelpish intentions. From his solemn manner you’d think he was rendering a valuable service to all swimmers. Of course they were all carelessly brown and horizontal, languidly stroking past or riding waves to shore, while he bobbed there, white, serious and vertical, clearing the waterways and gauging the tides. Finally he’d stamp towards us and brusquely motion us in. ‘Be very careful,’ he’d warn. ‘There’s an undertow today.’ (pp. 40–41)

3 Falkiner, op. cit., pp. 215; 217. Even then several of the examples of Sydney literature to which she refers are from the work of Robert Drewe, who grew up in Western Australia and arguably attained much of his affinity with the sea from that environment.

As a child eager to experience the “danger and pleasure” of the world around him to the same extent as his Perth schoolfriends, young Drewe feels hampered by his parents’ “Melbourne viewpoint” (p. 41). Indeed, as this memoir and other Western Australian literature makes clear, Western Australian society is marked by a pervasive beach culture. The beach seems to hold a special and unique prominence in the West Australians’ consciousness of their developing personal and regional identity.

Western Australians have traditionally insisted that the sea on their coastline is a different colour from the sea of the Eastern States. Certainly, the variations of colour and luminosity of the ocean have captured the imagination of more than a few writers. For example, Graham McInnes recalls his impression of Cottesloe Beach, as a child fresh off the boat from England:

The sea was a series of deep translucent unbelievable blues. It was Nile green and sapphire blue over white sand and limestone reefs soft and golden through the water; amethyst blue where reefs sank swiftly into underwater caves; emerald blue flung in great scarves above the shoaling underwater sands; cobalt blue and then ultramarine further out where the sun sputtered and sparkled so that it flashed like fire.5

There is a sense that the writer is struggling to find new adjectives to describe the intensity and variance of hue that the ocean possesses. In a similar vein is Randolph Stow’s *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*:6

The moods and colours of the sea were always changing: on some days still and burning blue, on others grey-green and swelling. The sea withdrew, till diving was dangerous; then flooded in, covering the beach to the tide-line of sea-olives, changing everything. The sea was never the same, but one could tell by the wind and the sky what mood it would be in: whether warm and grey-green under rain, or brightly burning like a blue gas-flame. (p. 130)

The focus on colour variation combined with movement depicts the sea as a vital, awe-inspiring presence that looms large in the imagination of those who live with it in sight and organize their lifestyles according to its fluctuations.

More significant though than the sea’s colour is its perceived role in Western Australia’s “proud isolation”. While the desert of the Nullarbor Plain separates Perth

---

and the majority of Western Australians geographically from the rest of Australia, the Indian Ocean forms another natural frontier separating the state from the rest of the world. Tim Winton asserts that this condition leads West Australians into a feeling of living not just physically, but also emotionally, spiritually and symbolically on the beach:

Nowhere else on the continent is the sense of being trapped between sea and desert so strong as in Western Australia. In many places along this vast and lonely coastline the beach is the only margin between them. From the sea you look directly upon red desert and from the wilderness there is the steely shimmer of the Indian Ocean. There are roos on the beach and shells out on the plain.\(^7\)

The coastline is an intermediary zone where two worlds meet. Boundaries are constantly in a state of flux, being redefined by opposing forces of erosion and sedimentation with the movement of the tides up and down the shore. In much of Western Australia, it is not only the sea that shifts and rolls but also the land: the vast stretches of sand dunes along the coastline create a landscape that is constantly being re-moulded and reshaped by the forces of wind and sea. These dunes mirror the ocean swell in the peaks and valleys they form and, like waves, move in a constant cycle of building and decline. The sense of inhabiting a median zone has become a core feature of West Australian consciousness. Robert Drewe says that growing up in Perth was like “living in a geography lesson here where the land and sea met. The Indian Ocean was supposed to be constantly invading the shore and the land plants forever edging towards the sea” (p. 36).

The relentless exchange between land and sea in tidal rhythms is accentuated by the wind patterns that dominate Western Australian weather and lifestyle. In *Land’s Edge*, Winton asserts, “The Western Summer is ruled by the wind. Here the wind is a despot” (p. 22). He describes how mornings are marked by a hot, dusty bluster from the east, off the land, “an allergenic blast that scorches flat everything in its path”. Full of pollen and wheat, it blows out into the ocean, so that “on a summer’s morning the sea smells of the land” (p. 23). After a short midday lull, the air currents reverse, and the famous Fremantle Doctor and Albany Doctor rise off the ocean in the

south west, bringing “a sense of relief, a cool rush of air and a softening of the sea” (p. 24). The whole pace of activity on the coast alters:

On the beach they shake out their towels and, out at sea, anglers haul anchor because, within a few minutes, beach umbrellas will be uprooted and sand flying as the sea loses its colour and gathers a nasty chop. Great plumes grow from the backs of the dunes and the heathland rattles with the afternoon gale. The sky goes white with sand and the trees on the coastal plain kiss the ground they grow on. The afternoons are the time to be inside on a bed with a book. (p. 24)

This wind current is so pervasive that it is felt and sought after by those in the suburbs and inland on the farms, far out of sight of the sea from which it emanates, bringing some of the ocean and its cool refreshment way beyond the shore. Dorothy Hewett describes waiting in summer afternoons in Wickepin for the Albany Doctor to blow up “rippling the tops of the wattles along the creek”.8 In this way, the sea and its climatic rhythms become an integral part of life even for those who live inland, bringing relief from the scorching inland heat. The sea’s legacy of cool afternoon refreshment here fulfils the mythical life-giving properties of water in a dry land, quenching the thirst of parched souls.

The sense of living in a margin, “content on the edge of things”, has deep resonance in the local psyche.9 Philip Drew’s architectural study describes Australians as “a race of veranda dwellers”. There, Drew asserts that the veranda is:

an interval, a space where life is improvised. The beach, in Australia is the landscape equivalent of the veranda, a veranda at the edge of the continent ... Land and sea run together and the beach becomes a contested zone, neither land nor sea, but a kind of sea-land. Its mixed nature and plurality strikes us as enormously exciting.10

The nature of verandas, and their role in psychologically positioning the viewer within a landscape, has already been discussed in Chapter 5, in relation to the Queensland house. Like the veranda of a house, which is a midway zone between the worlds of inside and outside, the beach or coastline is a similar realm where the rules or principles of land and ocean respectively are suspended, or at least subject to modification. This sense of living in an “improvised space” connotes a greater degree of imaginative freedom in conceptualizing humans’ relationship with the physical

10 Philip Drew, Veranda: Embracing Place, Collins/Angus & Robertson, 1993, pp. 84–86, also referred to by Tim Winton, Land’s Edge, p. 37.
environment, a space where traditional ideas can be renegotiated and new ontologies birthed. The veranda is a space that welcomes new possibilities: Winton asserts, “The innate human feeling from the veranda is that if you look out to sea long enough, something will turn up”.

Life as veranda-vista, as Ray Cassin observes, offers “a sort of open-ended but one way view,” and this suits the Western Australian predicament. Compared to the desert, which is typically characterised as dry and lifeless, the sea possesses much to captivate the imagination – as Winton says, “of the two mysteries, the sea is more forthcoming; its miracles and wonders are occasionally more palpable, however inexplicable they may be” (p. 37). The sea is an embodiment of all that is vital and mysterious, and is thus an ideal repository for a society’s imaginings about itself and its place in the schema of things. Indeed, the act of gazing out into the ocean while poised on the veranda has, for some, become a regional icon of West Australian existence. Robert Drewe’s “Sand People” (hardened waterfront dwellers) seem to be perpetually looking out to sea:

Their brave bare toes gripping their verandas, the Sand People were forever squinting into the summer sun and wind, the winter rain and gales. Whenever we drove along the coast road I’d follow their gaze out to sea and wonder what they were looking at. There was nothing out there. They seemed so proud of their views but all I could see were straight lines of sand, water and sky, the speck of Rottnest Island on the horizon and the wind forever chopping the ocean …

... After a while I worked out why the Sand People were always staring over the cliffs and out to sea. They were trying to see Africa. It was an exciting idea that Africa was the next continent, just over the horizon. In the atlas it was a straight line from us to Namibia in south-west Africa, or, going the other way, Valparaiso, Chile. We were thirty two degrees south. That sounded much colder than it was, until you found the places that were the same latitude north: Tijuana, Mexico, and Casablanca, Africa.

Casablanca sounded right to me. From the sea, the houses of the Sand People loomed like Foreign Legion forts … (pp. 35 – 37)

So the sea, at once a barrier and isolating frontier, also becomes the medium for imaginary, if not physical, transport to distant realms. Compounding this paradox is the fact that contemplation of the sea – a vast, unknown, and largely unmapped realm – is the means by which the young Robert Drewe gains his bearings (literally latitudinal co-ordinates) and thereby achieves a sense of interrelationship with distant

---

regions. By identifying his geographical location with that of Casablanca, he is better able to comprehend and reimagine his own setting.

Significantly, by the end of Drewe’s novel, it is a Melbournian’s failure to appreciate Perth’s veranda-vista that focuses his misgivings about Eastern states culture. While interviewing Drewe for a position with the Melbourne Age, the news editor turns his back upon the picture-frame view of Perth offered by his hotel window:

*Some sort of loyal West-Australianness on my part wanted him to turn and glance at the view. Congratulations were in order. Crazily, I wanted him to pay the view and the climate and topography — the very elements — the lavish compliments they deserved. (What fabulous water! What great sunny weather! What white sand! Keep up the good work!) Especially the view. Then I could let them go. (p. 351)*

In this passage, Drewe casts his childhood landscape as an inextricable part of his personal identity, deserving of acknowledgement as something unique and worthy in his possession, something which cannot be claimed by residents of elsewhere. Earlier in his memoir, Drewe has described Perth as “a branch manager’s town”, differentiating it in purpose and focus from the big-business metropolises of the Eastern States. Weighing up the pros and cons of moving east, the “casual coastal life” Perth offers is tied to its light and landscape (p. 313). The editor’s failure to acknowledge the view here goes hand in hand with his business-like, cramped efficiency; his collar and small tie-knot are too tight for his neck, and his gestures and speech are clipped and speedy. There is a connection implied here between Western Australia’s vast external spaces and internal space: “breathing room” in attitudes and character.

While the coastal lifestyle has obvious appeal, several writers allude to the fragility of an existence in the fluctuating marginal zone of the West Australian seaboard. Drewe describes how the residents of the dunes around Perth depend upon limestone foundations, built high to stop their houses sliding down the sandhills (p. 36). In *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*, Stow similarly depicts Geraldton on precarious ground:

*The town was shabby, barren, built on shifting sandhills jutting out into the sea. To the north and south of the town the white dunes were never still,*
but were forever moving in the southerly, finding new outlines, windrippled, dazzling. If ever people were to leave the town the sand would come back to bury it. It would be at first like a town under snow. And then no town at all, only the woolwhite hills of Costa Branca.

To the north and south the dunes moved in the wind. Each winter the sea gnawed a little from the peninsula. Time was irredeemable. And far to the north was war. (p. 5)

Stow links the physical instability of the natural environment with the social instability caused by the Second World War, which adults constantly discuss within his child persona’s hearing. The battle for pre-eminence between land and sea, sand and wind, is like a war, the coastal zone itself a kind of frontier between natural elements.

Eroding the self

The indeterminacy of the boundary between sea and land is mirrored in a corresponding blurring, or erosion, of the edges of the self. In the work of Robert Drewe, this erosion of boundaries is expressed in physical terms. Drewe’s “Sand People” live on the waterfront and are buffeted by all forces and moods of the sea and wind, so that their skin is weathered and worn by the elements:

Some people lived in the loose white sand near the ocean. Even though everyone in Perth lived in the dunes I thought of them as the Sand People. Every afternoon the fierce sea wind, which they dismissed as The Breeze, blew their sand into the air and scalloped and corrugated their properties. Sun and wind had rearranged the appearance of the Sand People, too – tanned, freckled, scabbed and bleached them. With their darker skins, red eyes, raw noses and permanent deep cracks in their bottom lips, they looked nothing like Melbourne people. Some were as eroded as the cliffs, their noses and ears worn and peeled away, so that grown men had the snubbed features of boys. Around their edges – noses, ear tips, cheeks, shoulders – they were pink and fraying. Shreds of skin poked up from their general outline and fluttered in the sea breeze. Boys bled if they smiled too fast. (pp. 33 – 34)

For the young boy who has moved from interstate and is eager to fit in with his new companions, these “Sand People” are envied for their lifestyle lived according to the land’s rhythms. Yet, there is more than a suggestion of violence and discomfort in Drewe’s description of the harsh effects of sun and sand on the skin. For the schoolboy, it is all part of an elaborate initiation ceremony to weather his body into conformity with his new surroundings. The culture of going barefoot most of the year proves to be a test of both fortitude against the elements and also his parents’ Melbournian notions of respectability:
The heat was just part of the daily contest for feet. Boys merely wandering home along the road felt bound to compete at withstanding the searing sand, melting bitumen, rocky road verges, bottle shards and grass prickers with their bare soles. The darker the surface the hotter, but it hardly mattered; everything underfoot was either sizzling, prickly or sharp. Feet, generally, took a thrashing. Those grazed ankles and blackened toenails, the blood-blistered heels, the festering reef-cuts criss-crossing their soles, showed a boy’s familiarity with reef, surf and cliff-face. Their feet were painted so boldly with Mercurochrome and flavine antiseptic they looked like they were wearing red and yellow socks. (pp. 34 – 35)

Initially forced by his parents to wear traditional shoes and socks, Drewe yearns “to be like the salad-smelling Sand Children”:

I envied their rakish red and yellow feet. I envied the vinegary confidence with which they peeled sheets of skin from their shoulders and passed them around for comparison at the Saturday afternoon pictures. (p. 41)

The climax of these masochistic rituals comes with self-consumption: “Some boys also ate themselves ... nose-skin, cheek-skin, forehead-skin and especially shoulder-skin.” This the boy accepts as part of the “generally strange and risky” life of coastal living (pp. 41 – 2).

For Randolph Stow, the collapsing of boundaries between self and landscape is more strongly felt on the metaphorical level. The constant interchange between land and sea, such a prominent feature of the environment of Stow’s childhood, has a profound resonance in his literary strategy. Primarily concerned with depicting “figures in a landscape”, for Stow place is not just a backdrop to the development of characters, but central to their portrayal. As Martin Leer points out, Stow’s writing reveals a centrifugal movement of the self out into the landscape: the interpenetration of self and environment does not merely consist of the psyche finding reflections of itself in the landscape, but rather is a process of cross-colonization whereby the mind is colonized by the environment just as the human colonizes, or settles and establishes territory, in the landscape. This results in a corresponding flooding over of self into the external environment and a merging of the two. In The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea, this concept of “flooding over” between self and landscape is reflected in Stow’s

---

depiction of the sensory experience of childhood, with a flowing over of sights, sounds, smells and sensations of the exterior world into the inner being:

In every season the boy exulted in his senses, in his body. He exulted in the heavy sweetness of jonquils and in the frail scent of tomato leaves; in the harsh rasp of leaves on his skin as he climbed a figtree, and in the waxy dusty smoothness of the minute datepalm flowers; in the cold sea of early morning and in the warm sea under the rain. He loved the rough taste of gumleaves and the sweetness of tecoma flowers; the red jewels in pomegranates, and the shells of rainbow beetles in the grey tuart bark. The boy then was little more than a body, a set of sense organs. To himself he had little identity, and to his friends none at all, as they had none to him. They knew each other by sight and hearing, by certain mannerisms. In absence, they ceased to exist for each other. (p. 116)

This passage illustrates the child testing the boundary between his self and environment, and experiencing an erosion of the distinction between them as he consumes tastes and absorbs feelings from the external world. That his friends cease to exist for him in their absence shows how he views them as just part of the external world, and not as individuals.

In the case of the ocean, blurring the boundary between self and environment, of course, can also be wilfully sought out through the act of immersion. For Brett D’Arcy’s character Floaty Boy in *The Mindless Ferocity of Sharks*, surfing achieves a kind of union with the ocean, as the body aligns itself with the energy of the wave and subjects itself to the ocean’s force. As Floaty Boy plunges down the face of a wave, he feels “a great rush around him and all through him” (p. 2). Similarly, in *Land’s Edge*, Winton describes freediving in a way that evokes a certain erasure of self in favour of absorption into the environment:

Of all water occupations, freediving is the most forgetful. You turn your back to the land, to the sun, slide down to where all sound is flattened to chirps and rumbles. The deeper you dive the heavier the blanket that insulates you. You wilfully forget to breathe; you sidestep the impulse and your thinking thins out to the moment at hand. The poet John Blight had it clearly: ‘All reason drowns: drowning within you.’ It’s a religious feeling. (pp. 61 – 2)

“Drowning” and forgetting to breathe of course draw upon the very real dangers of the ocean, and Winton later discusses the age-old connection of the sea with mortality. However, his reference here to Christian mysticism implies that it is a spiritual dying

to the self that freediving evokes, which is not so much a “death” as an absorption into a greater force, a momentary escape from the demands of the body.

The beach as escapism

The amount of unsettled beachfront in Western Australia has undoubtedly facilitated what Veronica Brady calls “the Robinson Crusoe response,” the eagerness to retreat from society to live a subsistence lifestyle from the produce of the land. It is “the determination to make a self and a world”. 16 Robinson Crusoe, The Swiss Family Robinson and The Coral Island are devoured by Winton as a child in the “library” of his family’s beach cottage and capture his imagination:

Physical and compelling, these stories were the world of the desert island, the lonely beach, the still lagoon … there was the chance that I could make do quite nicely on crayfish and rabbits and sleep nights in the warm sand. These were the first books that offered me some of the real world I knew, then carried me off completely to somewhere that didn’t exist at all. 17

It is a childhood fantasy that Winton depicts in several of his fictional works.

Winton’s first novel An Open Swimmer 18 recreates his own youthful camping trips along the south coast, which he acknowledges were a kind of living out of his childhood reading. 19 An Open Swimmer explores the fine line between productive and destructive forms of retreat into nature and the “forgetfulness” of the sea. It depicts one youth’s avoidance of adult responsibility and decisions about his future, a retreat acted out symbolically through his regular camping expeditions to remote spots, where he lives a basic subsistence lifestyle, sleeping in his van and cooking fish from the ocean on a campfire.

This life has a kind of beauty in its simplicity, and real spiritual value in the web of reliance it weaves between the human and the natural. Indeed, the sea, with its imponderable blue depths, vast expanses and incumbent aura of mystery, is a profoundly spiritual realm. Winton elsewhere describes diving as having “a religious

19 Winton, Land’s Edge, op. cit., p. 63
feeling”, and pulls himself up on his vocabulary in describing the offerings of the sea as “blessings and miracles”. As Robert Drewe points out, fish and fishing have long been powerful symbols in narratives about human interaction with the sea. Fish symbolize the psyche in contrast to the body, the unconscious to the conscious. They represent the spiritual realm, which is often set against a materialistic, earthbound approach to life. In this way, Jerra’s attraction to the sea and to fishing is more than mere escapism. He is on a personal quest for deeper meaning to life than simply getting a job and making money, which is all that his friend Sean seems to value.

Throughout the narrative, Winton juxtaposes Sean’s and Jerra’s respective outlooks. Contemptuous of Jerra’s fascination with fish, Sean’s lack of appreciation for the deeper aspects of life is symbolized in his disinterest in diving, which he calls “swimming in circles”. Jerra, however, seeks out the depths: “Ever thought about diving to the bottom more often? In the caves. Always different. Another world” (p. 45). Though attuned to another level of life that his friend cannot comprehend, Jerra’s dissatisfaction with everyday existence and the mundane reality of holding down a job is symptomatic of a flaw in his own approach, an inner conflict which must be resolved. This conflict is signalled by his first catch of fish being full of worms.

Throughout the narrative, secret resentments and bitternesses are unearthed, and Jerra, for all his affinity with fish and the spiritual things of the deep, is revealed to be a soul in trouble. Similarly, the hermit man, to whose lifestyle Jerra initially aspires, is revealed to be living in fear and guilt for past wrongs. Like the hermits that Winton encountered in his own youthful coastal journeying, the hermit in An Open Swimmer is hiding from a painful truth, only to have it constantly fronting up to him.

The paradox of the sea is that it is at once a symbol of forgetting and also of deep self discovery. Jerra’s search for meaning is symbolized by his quest to retrieve a pearl from a kingfish’s brain, a proverbial “pearl of wisdom”, which Sean does not believe to exist: “It’s all fishermen’s bloody superstition” (p. 27). In his desperation, Jerra kills a huge kingfish and cuts its head open only to find nothing inside. He

---

20 Ibid., pp. 62 and 39 respectively.
22 See Land’s Edge, op. cit., p. 65: “There was always a wife, a father, a detective, a boss they were fleeing. They were stuck in time, always in their moment of betrayal or humiliation or outrage.”
leaves the fish out to rot in the sun and be pecked at by the gulls. It is a wastefulness the hermit man berates him for, a wastefulness mirrored by Jerra’s determination not to use his talents and opportunities to “make something of himself.” When he admits to the hermit that he was looking for the pearl, the old man tells him he must look for it in an “open swimmer” – not a fish that hides in caves. So, too, must Jerra himself become an open swimmer if he wants to develop his own “pearls” – to stop hiding behind an apathetic attitude, take some risks and engage with life wholeheartedly.

Another example of the sea providing a vehicle for escape can be found in Simone Lazaroo’s *The World Waiting to be Made*. This novel depicts a teenage girl of Eurasian origin retreating to the beach and solitary wandering as an escape from the pressures of conforming to a racist, materialist culture and a household of bitter arguments:

> Although autumn was coming on and Sue began going to the pub early instead of going to the beach, I continued going to the beach fairly often. I went to escape the sorrowing and shouting at home and the blurriness of who I was. It was a relief to watch the dancing horizon from the curve of dunes and rocks, to smell the pickling odours of salt and seaweed, to be absorbed into the sea’s breathing without having to join the summertime show of flesh on the sand.

> Sometimes I was haunted by the sense that the things I enjoyed about the beach were not the things Sue and her other friends enjoyed. I looked for rituals and familiar signs to comfort me in my solitude...

> ... I headed for the dunes, where I invented ways of escaping.

> The dunes of the beaches near Fremantle became crisscrossed with my secret escape routes, each one taking me away from the equivalent embarrassments of being foreign and of being a good Australian girl. I loved the tangled, silvery vegetation there, the height the dunes gave you, the deep sweep of cobalt, bumpy when the breeze or swell was picking up.

> I was a fugitive from my parents’ home and a fugitive from my Australian peers...

> As I blazed my escape routes around the beaches, I stubbed my toes on whorls of limestone. When they bled, my only consolation was to think smugly about my Evil Genius Demons, my secret ink, leaking out into the Australian earth … (pp. 120 – 122)

These escapes are for Lazaroo’s protagonist ways of possessing the Australian landscape in an effort to become connected with it, and so to uncover some of her own identity. Her traversing across the dunes, blazing trails through the scrub, is a kind of inscribing and mapping of the landscape, testing out its limits, breaking it up into manageable portions by which it can become known. This image of inscription is heightened by the bleeding of her Asian blood out into the Australian earth – the

---

exchange of her mark on the landscape for its mark on her wounded toe forges a commonality between them, yet, significantly, it is one achieved not without struggle and pain.

*An enduring mythology of the sea’s meaning: The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea.*

The sea’s association with the subconscious is a prominent feature of Randolph Stow’s semi-autobiographical novel, *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*. At one point described as being “like a polished blue mirror” (p. 82), the sea imagistically reflects ominous undercurrents in a growing boy’s understanding of the world, life and change, which at times rise up to disrupt his naive secure existence. The novel follows Rob Coram’s journey from his infantile perception of the world as changeless, untroubled and unified, towards his realization of the transforming power of time, which is linear and forever passing away. The merry-go-round image is itself a central point around which Stow’s novel revolves, reappearing in the text variously in the form of windmills, and, less overtly, through seasonal cycles and Rob’s movement between the various homesteads of the Maplestead family in and around Geraldton. It symbolizes the pleasurable security of childhood existence; the unchanging circles that it traces out imply wholeness and stability. In Rob’s idyllic vision, it is set against the backdrop of the sea, an ever-fluctuating, unpredictable force.

Like the utopia of Eden, the merry-go-round in the sea is a fantastic image of perfection that cannot last. While Rob is fixated on the merry-go-round in this opening scene, he pays little attention to the sea and, by implication, to the reality of time and change that it represents:

> Beyond the merry-go-round was the sea. The colour of the sea should have astounded, but the boy was seldom astounded. It was simply the sea, dark and glowing blue, bisected by seagull-grey timbers of the rotting jetty, which dwindled away in the distance until it seemed to come to an end in the flat-topped hills to the north. He did not think about the sea, or about the purple bougainvillaea that glowed against it, propped on a sagging shed. These existed only as the familiar backdrop of the merry-go-round. Nevertheless, the colours had entered into him, printing a brilliant memory. (pp. 1 – 2)

As Anthony Hassall notes, Stow effectively juxtaposes the child’s infantile perspective with the awareness of the adult, a perspective which is nevertheless
informed by impressions of detail and colour gained, yet not appreciated or properly apprehended, in the childhood state. It is the adult’s knowing eye that adds the suggestive detail of the ominous “dark and glowing blue” of the sea, foreboding and sinister, and the imagery of decay in the rotting jetty and sagging shed. Like its background scenery, the merry-go-round is a concept that is also destined to decay and fragment as the boy’s knowledge of the world expands.

As Leer says, the merry-go-round is Rob’s basic conceptual model of space and time. The world Rob inhabits is that of the “timeless present” of childhood, emphasized by Stow’s repeated references in Chapter 3 to Rob’s days having no progression, and moving towards no culmination: “He woke in the morning in his room, and at night he slept, the wheel turning full circle, the merry-go-round of his life revolving” (p. 34). All the same, cracks are appearing in the veneer of Rob’s secure and cyclical world view. The sea “moan[s] through his childhood”, a background sighing, “gentle and far because it was morning” – the morning of Rob’s existence – but destined soon to become more insistent as Rob matures and apprehends the realities of time and change. He has already discovered, by counting to sixty, that moments exist only once: “That is a minute ... It will never be that minute again” (p. 4). Rob’s level of comprehension is represented in his wooden recitation of a poem about the sea, where he has learned the words but failed to put any feeling or expression behind them (p. 87). At this stage, it is just a niggling awareness, which slowly erodes his assumptions, like the sea erodes the edge of the continent: “Each winter the sea gnawed a little from the peninsula. Time was irredeemable...” (p. 5).

The inevitability of the passing of time carries with it another inevitability – that of death and of life passing away. The sea has traditionally been associated with the eternal oblivion, and Winton has observed that the hobby of beachcombing is basically picking over the remains of the dead. He comments: “walking on a beach at low tide is to be looking for death, or at least anticipating it. You will only find the

25 Leer, “Edge To Centre”, op. cit., p. 132.
dead, the spilled and the cast-off. Things torn free from their life or their place”. So too, for Stow’s Rob Coram, the coastline with its shifting dunes forms a half-way zone between land and sea, life and death. Stow’s evocative descriptions of this windswept, barren landscape reveal its otherworldly associations:

The dunes were like snow, like hills of snow. Here and there a few bushes broke the drifts, but the slopes were bone-white, wind-rippled and smoking ... The floor of the valley was hard sand, partly overgrown with a red stemmed succulent like green worms. It was a very desolate, very Antarctic scene ...

(pp. 110 – 111)

The monotony of the dunes is reminiscent of the desert, a lifeless wasteland. The inhabitants of the dunes are also marginalized, by mental illness or substance abuse. The dunes are therefore a social as well as a continental fringe, a kind of limbo for members of the living dead:

There was no telling when old men might be living in the cottage, and whatever old man was there was sure to be mad. Once there had even been a woman, a lady called Methylated Myrtle, who used to come in to the fringe of the town and scream prophecies in the street where Rob lived. The inhabitants of the dunes were always crazy. Even the amiable ageless boy from the town, who roamed the dunes every day with a rifle, was half-witted. (pp. 110 – 111)

For the child Rob, this is merely a feature that adds to the element of risk and adventure in a dune pilgrimage. But the encroachment of Methylated Myrtle into the town signals the fragility of the boundary between civilized society and these darker, disruptive elements. It is the xenophobia of the island nation that Stow is exposing here, reinforced by dialogue elsewhere in the novel concerning Indigenous Australians and their similar marginalization. The association of the coastal fringe with death and violence is heightened by Rob’s contemplation of the Batavia mutiny and subsequent massacre, as discussed in Chapter 3. The event resonates in Rob’s imagination as he becomes aware of his ancestry and learns to grasp the significance of his regional and national identity.

The connection of the sea with the unknown and, more specifically, the unknown adult world, is heightened by its association with Rob’s father. As Leer says, Rob’s mother and the Maplestead clan are primarily associated with the land,

---

27 This has already been discussed in Chapter 3.
while his father is associated with the sea. Historically from a sea-faring family, Rob’s great-great-uncle Isham Coram led a boatload of escaped convicts from Darwin to Geraldton. Rob’s father is, for most of the book, a distant or absent figure. Spending much of the war years in the barracks at the Garrison, he has little to do with Rob’s day-to-day existence, which is spent primarily with his mother and her family. When Mr Coram finally comes home, the family must adjust to his presence in the house, because “the boy’s father emanated silence like a cloud” (p. 92). But Rob and his father eventually form a bond around their common interest in the sea.

Rob and his father go on long walks together in the sandhill scrub of the dunes, emerging upon beaches where the parent is able to share with his son his knowledge about the sea and its creatures: “These things his father knew about: things like sea-eggs and castor oil bottles and Portuguese men-o-war”. The objects from the sea provide an opportunity for communication:

He had no conversation with his father, except when he found something: a cartridge case on the rifle range, or some new sea-life. Then he would ask, trailing after the long-legged figure farther up the beach: ‘What do they call this, Dad?’ (pp. 99 – 100)

Rob’s initiation into the adult world inhabited by his father is symbolized in his learning to surf and catch waves:

In the weekends there was another sea, the open sea where the surf was. The boy went there with his father, and stood hot and timeless vigils, up to his shoulders in the green water, waiting a wave. When a wave came and he caught it and came hurtling down he would have a moment of panic, wondering if it were going to dump him under itself, and roll and batter him against the sea floor. But if he caught it, if he rode it right to the beach, as his father did, then that was a triumph, and a pure sensual joy like flying. (p. 131)

Here Stow gives a more positive image of the reality of time and change that the sea represents: while it can batter infant notions of security, it can also offer exciting possibilities. As with catching a wave, Rob needs to learn to embrace the reality of life’s unpredictability in order to experience the fullness and adventure it has to offer. Yet, still young and inexperienced, he must rely on his father to protect him against the dangers that the open sea holds:

28 Leer, “Edge to Centre”, op. cit., p. 133.
29 Geoffrey Dutton, Sun, Sea, Surf and Sand – The Myth of the Beach, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1985, p. 58, comments that the beach often provides a rare opportunity for children to spend time with their fathers. In this respect, Rob’s experience is like that of many young Australians.
The open sea had wilder moods than the harbour, days when it crashed green mountains, and other moods when it lay flat and still, till the bored surfers complained and went home. And one day it tried to take the boy, as it had taken several soldiers, dragging at his body, drawing him away to where the dead soldiers had gone. He struggled in the water, and saw his father struggling towards him and reached out a hand. Then together they swam and waded towards his mother and Nan, and linked hands all four, and emerged, linked, wading and struggling, from the sudden tug of the sea.

(pp. 130 – 131).

The “tug of the sea” represents the pull of adult awareness that threatens to sweep Rob away from the security of his family and parental protection. Though such separation is inevitable as he develops into an individual, here he is allowed to return to the fold. The incident serves to strengthen the family unit, as indicated by Stow’s repetition of the word “linked”. So the sea, paradoxically, serves as agent to unite the boy with his father, mother and sister, weaving a web of reliance amongst them.

The progressive fading of the merry-go-round image and Rob’s increasing familiarity with the sea and its mysteries trace his movement towards the adult world. Rob and his friend Mike spend a long summer swimming, diving, fishing and gazing into the sea’s fathomless depths. This part of Stow’s novel revolves around the repeated refrain “There’s some funny things in the sea”. The boys also swim out to the old wreck that looked like a merry-go-round in the sea, enabling Rob to see for himself that the merry-go-round is an illusion. When they return to shore, Rob notices that the merry-go-round in the playground, on which he rode as a young child, is now dilapidated. By the end of the novel, the merry-go-round has been replaced by the image of a windmill – a rotary object three removes from the idyllic “merry-go-round in the sea” that so captured his infant imagination:

Over Rick’s head a rusty windmill whirled and whirled. He thought of a windmill that had become a merry-go-round in a back yard, a merry-go-round that had been a substitute for another, now ruined merry-go-round, which had been itself a crude promise of another merry-go-round most perilously rooted in the sea. (pp. 275 – 6)

In contrast to the fragility of the illusion “perilously” rooted in the sea, the windmill is a symbol of fruitfulness and fertility. In the penultimate chapter, the narrative indicates that Rob has finally achieved a kind of peace about the reality of time and change: it is “with agreeable sadness” that he acknowledges that he is not young, and would not be young for long (p. 261). The windmill represents an unchanging core of selfhood which remains stable despite the fluctuation of the external world around it –
it is this changelessness within change that Rob has come to recognize within himself, and within his landscape through the string of names attributed to the white, windswept coastline of his home town:

It changed and yet it didn’t change, the boy was thinking, looking along the endless grey-green and white shore. Java the Great became New Holland, and then Western Australia. Costa Branca became Edels Lands, then the Northward, and at last Victoria District. Wittacarra became Champion Bay and finally Geraldton. But the coast of Costa Branca was the same White Coast; and the Tower of Geraldine, like an edifice from the history of another tribe, thrust up still from the unvisited scrub. (pp. 238 – 9)

“It changed and yet it didn’t change...” It is a paradox also at the heart of the image of the sea, which, for all its fluctuation in tides, colours and moods, beats out an eternal rhythm: unpredictable, fathomless, yet ever-present.

Victoria

While Victoria is home to several famous surf beaches, and beaches appear to be just as popular environments for recreation in this state as in other parts of the country, beach images are fairly sparse in literature about growing up in Victoria. Falkiner suggests that Melbourne’s comparatively cooler climate and the location of Melbourne’s city centre some kilometres inland on the Yarra River may account to some extent for the lack of marine images in Victorian writing.30

Perhaps another reason that beaches are not very prominent in Victorian memoirs concerns Melbourne’s traditional rivalry with Sydney, a city characterized by its famous harbour and the surf beaches of Bondi and Manly. Port Phillip’s comparatively flat waters and wide bay, for the most part, are simply not as visually stimulating as Sydney's seaside images and, arguably, many Melbournian writers simply bow out of the battle of the beaches, being one round of the inter-city competition where Melbourne pales by comparison. Indeed, when Melbourne beaches are considered by its resident writers, they are often unfavourably compared to Sydney examples. In The Road to Gundagai, Graham McInnes describes the public perception of Melbourne’s beach life:

30 Falkiner, op. cit., p. 215.
Port Phillip Bay was almost a salt-water lake. It was fifty miles from north to south and about the same distance at its greatest width, but its entrance was only a mile and a half wide between The Heads. The Bay was ‘our’ Harbour to set up against Sydney’s super-duper challenge and we liked ours better, perhaps because you could get away from the city and bathe with the hills and ‘the country’ at your back. In Sydney you’re never out of sight of a house, and besides – the sharks.

‘What d’ya mean sharks? Why, we’ve shark-proof nets at Bondi and Coogee.’

‘Yeah, but people never use them.’

‘What about it? We’ve the Life Savers and the Shark Patrol air spotter with a loud hailer!’

‘And didn’t a man have his leg nipped off right up the Georges River, beyond tidewater almost?’

‘Aw, you’re just windy! How can you enjoy the water if you’re windy all the time?’

So the battle raged. ‘Our ‘Arbour, Our Bridge and Our Bradman’ was the Melbourne jibe at Sydney. (p. 75)

Certainly, McInnes acknowledges that beachgoing was a common activity during his childhood years in Melbourne. His home suburb of Malvern was just a tram ride away from some of Melbourne’s most popular beaches, which McInnes describes as stretching “in a great arc thirty-five miles from Port Melbourne to Sorrento and Portsea” (p. 72). While these “naturally lacked the drama of Sydney’s great surf beaches”, McInnes still asserts that they “were an endless pleasure in the hot weather.” He describes entering the ‘Baths’ (enclosed sea-water pools, protected from the dangers of sharks) through a turnstile, changing in the wooden cubicles into the swimming costume of the day – “an exiguous male bikini known as a pair of Vees” (p. 72) – and finally enjoying the salt water with one’s locker key hanging from a string around the neck:

Where the bottom shelved into deeper water,ropes strung across assisted non-swimmers. As the protecting piles progressed seaward they became more thickly encrusted with a heavy growth of mussels, like fungus on an old tree, but gleaming jet black in the troughs between incoming waves. With sharks safely out of the way the only hazard came from jelly fish. These varied from small hunks of gray ice to full fledged blueish-white parasols trailing a hundred tentacles which stung very smartly and raised an unpleasant rash. The less noxious jelly fish were used as ammunition in fights between gangs, or slipped into a fellow’s pants as he was preparing to dress after a swim. (pp. 72 – 3)

Certainly the swimming experience seems a lot more cautious and tentative than the open surf suggested by McInnes’ references to Sydney beaches.
In the case of early twentieth-century experiences, another reason for the sparsity of beach imagery was the continued primacy of the bush legend in fledgling Australian nationalist culture. Leone Huntsman examines references to beaches across a wide range of literature and testifies to the dominance of the bush over the beach as a subject for writing.\(^\text{31}\) While McInnes does include beach-going amongst his memories of childhood, it would be fair to say that bush-going is more vividly recalled and emphasized in his account. The trips to the beach only occupy two pages of *The Road to Gundagai*, whereas a whole chapter titled “Up the Country” is devoted to McInnes’ regular holidays to the farm of a family friend, whose property borders the bush near Panton Hill. McInnes describes a myriad of bush pass-times for young boys, from picnics with billy-boiled tea, to hunting for crayfish in still pools of the creek, shooting rabbits and swimming in dams. More bush adventures are related in the following chapter detailing camps with the Boy Scouts. This discrepancy between the amount of attention paid to the beach and bush respectively evinces the enduring power of Australia’s bush mythology, and its primacy over any developing “beach” culture in the psyches even of urban dwellers, for whom beaches were closer and more accessible than bushland.

It is natural, however, in the case of expatriate narratives like McInnes’, that the attraction of the bush myth survives longer, as, unlike resident writers, expatriates recall the Australia of their youth untempered by the effect of cultural changes in the intervening years. Generational restrictions must also be acknowledged: McInnes’ Melbourne beach experiences occurred some twenty years before Stow’s childhood in Geraldton, and forty years before Drewe’s youthful years in Perth. In McInnes’ day, Australian beach culture was only just beginning to flourish and, no doubt, some members of society still had reservations about its propriety. Certainly, Kathleen Fitzpatrick, whose autobiography of her girlhood years covers the period of 1908 – 1928, acknowledges the cultural restrictions placed upon enjoyment of the beach, despite the position of her grandparents’ home on Beaconsfield Parade, fronting famous St Kilda beach:

> We did not frequent the beach much. In winter it was too cold and windy, and in summer it was feared that we would get sunburnt … There was also still

some doubt in the minds of our elders as to the propriety of the new “mixed
bathing” that was coming in at the time … (p. 16)

Fitzpatrick refers to municipal notices that prescribed “neck to knee bathing gowns”.
Hence, the “modesty” factor cannot be ignored in assessing treatments of the beach as
an Australian playground in the inter-war era. It is also arguable that, even if bathing
was readily accepted as a pastime in McInnes’ childhood years, it was possibly not
considered to be an appropriate subject for writing.32 By emphasising his rural and
bush experiences, McInnes is writing himself into an established Australian literary
tradition, founded by great names such as Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson.

On the other hand, it is worth noting that a Western Australian contemporary
of Fitzpatrick and McInnes, writer T.A.G. Hungerford, does pay comparatively more
attention to the beach in his recollections of growing up in South Perth in the 1920s.
Three of the sixteen stories in his Stories from Suburban Road collection have the
beach or riverside as their primary setting and, while the beach could not be said to
dominate his childhood landscape, it is nevertheless a significant feature.33

Melbourne childhoods of later decades do make some mention of the beach as
a weekend and holiday activity, but the beach is rarely an environment that is vividly
recalled or fondly remembered. Amirah Inglis, growing up in the 1930s and 40s, like
McInnes, pays little attention to Melbourne’s beaches, yet none whatsoever to the
Australian bush. Hers is almost exclusively a portrait of urban life. In her case, being a
child of Jewish migrants may also account for a lack of beach experiences: migrant
parents often needed to work long hours to establish the family financially, leaving
little time for leisure trips. Inglis does mention in passing one “memorable summer
holiday at Edithvale, a beach resort near Melbourne”, but the only detailed description
of her enjoyment of the beach is on a visit to Sydney. This is despite the fact that she
lived in Elwood, a Melbourne beach suburb, for many years. Like McInnes, she
exhibits the common Melbournian perception of Sydney life as somewhat dangerous
and risky:

118, for a discussion of the cultural lag in imaginative treatment of the opening up of the beach in the
first part of the twentieth century.
33 T.A.G. Hungerford, Stories From Suburban Road (1983), Fremantle Arts Centre Press, South
Fremantle, 1983.
I tasted and smelt a new sort of life: summery and sandy, with outdoor eating, heat, beer, noise and sunburn. The shark-proof net protecting the beach coloured my whole idea of Sydney. What if a shark bit a hole in the net? Wasn’t that section rather ragged? Surely a small shark could wriggle through?

The sand of Sydney was fine and white, quite different from the coarse, gritty yellow sand of the bay at home and the water was full of danger. I was never carefree in the Sydney surf and returned with relief to the flat water of our bay beach at Elwood. It seemed to me to be the only water fit for humans to swim in; though I doubt we could swim in those days ... (p. 72)

Despite this vindication of Melbourne’s beach environment, Inglis does not actually describe any family outings to their local beach. It would thus seem that, while the beach was part of her childhood experience, it was not overly memorable or perceived as something worth writing about at length. Inglis does extensively discuss, however, her parents’ socialist politics and her own school and university education. Even when recounting that one beach holiday at Edithvale, she mentions that the usual seaside activities of walking and swimming were conducted while “always talking and thinking about politics” (p. 49). It would seem then that Inglis’ autobiography lives up to the “moral Melbourne, sinny Sydney” stereotype that is frequently alluded to in commentaries on Australian culture. The hallmarks of Inglis’ Melbourne childhood are political debate and education, whereas her one visit to Sydney is encapsulated by a visit to the beach and sampling an exciting and more edgy lifestyle.

In a similar vein is Penelope Trevor’s Listening for Small Sounds. Though the story is mostly set in Carlton, the first references to beaches are to ones in Western Australia, where her father describes the huge mud crabs he used to catch there (p. 59), and also Sydney. When Joss and her mother run away from Joss’s violent father, they flee to Sydney and rent an old weatherboard house near the beach. This period marks a rare moment of freedom and security for Joss, and Trevor describes how mother and daughter walk on the beach there. By contrast, the only mention of a Melbourne beach is on their return to that city, when Joss’s father makes a weak effort at organising family activities. Fearfully, Joss travels with her father to St Kilda, where she “watches herself acting out a little girl’s excitement … [at] seeing the sea flat and greyish.” “It’s not much of a sea” (p. 139).

In other accounts of suburban Melbourne childhoods of the 1950s and 1960s, too, the beach is simply not a memorable feature. Louis Nowra’s early years were spent in one of the city’s north-west housing commission suburbs, a long hike from the beach. His volatile home life, marked by the conflict between his parents, meant that there were few family outings or weekend retreats to this classic Australian playground. The only extended beach holiday Nowra recounts is one where he is the guest of another family. This trip is disappointing: while young Nowra was planning to use the dune landscape to re-enact the war-games he used to play with the girls in their home suburb, he finds that the girls’ interests have changed. They have become “giggly, watchful, secretive … uncomfortably frivolous”.36 Having moved beyond the spontaneity of childhood into the self-consciousness of puberty, they aimlessly hang around watching boys “without any purpose in mind”. This trip away quickly becomes “a holiday of doing nothing. No adventure, no excitement, just a dragging of feet in a haze of anti-climax” (p. 105). Unable to relate to the girls now they have entered this new phase of life, Nowra leaves after only a week of the planned month-long holiday.

The only other episode involving the beach in Nowra’s The Twelfth of Never is equally dissatisfying. At St Kilda beach, Nowra’s mother shamelessly uses her son to flirt with a man who shows interest in her. The beach becomes associated in Nowra’s mind with his failure to satisfy his mother by exhibiting “some talent”:

One summer’s day my mother and I were at St Kilda beach. She measured out a fifty yard distance in the shallow smelly water filled with seaweed. I swam it easily and quickly. A handsome man standing nearby said to my mother, He’s quite a good swimmer. She beamed. Oh, do you think so? He told us he was a swimming coach and that I had loads of potential. There was something about him I didn’t like. All the time he was talking about me, he was looking at my mother. Her eyes sparkled and blinked in the sun of his direct gaze … My arms ached and my legs felt like two dead weights. Every time I gulped air into my lungs I seemed to swallow more sea water. I didn’t appear to be getting anywhere. The pier near where they were standing seemed not to be getting any closer. My body was exhausted. I’d look up through the smelly swell and see both of them, he thinking my mother was a good sort and she obviously thinking he was a spunk, their legs planted firmly in the shallows, arms akimbo, happily chatting to each other as I battled my way forwards. Never had fifty yards seemed so far … I was no swimming prodigy, that was for sure, and my limitations were now public with the disturbing undercurrent that I had

momentarily become merely an aquatic go-between for my mother and the stranger to size each other up. (p. 151)

Thus, for Nowra, the beach is a place marked by mask-wearing, artificiality and the complications of adult sexuality. It is a place that exhausts rather than rejuvenates him, its “smelly water filled with seaweed” offering little delight to the senses.

**Queensland**

Like Melbourne, Queensland’s capital Brisbane is located on a river some distance from the region’s open surf beaches. So, too, for Queensland memoirs, the beach more commonly is a place associated with annual summer holidays or the odd weekend retreat rather than an everyday leisure spot. David Malouf does not pay a great deal of attention to the beach in his autobiographical works. One extended reference occurs in *Johnno*, where he describes annual camping holidays in summer to Scarborough:

In winter Scarborough was just a fishing village at the end of the line. In summer it was a vast encampment. In the early years of the war, while hostilities were still confined to Europe, and the Royal Navy, not to speak of Singapore, stood firmly between us and any threat of invasion, we had a caravan at Scarborough and would drive down on Friday evenings in our ’27 Hup. There was a regular colony of campers on the strip of grass behind the beach and a whole gang of kids who played Donkey on the long wet sand when the tide was out or Cowboys and Indians in “The Trees” … But I lined up waiting to be called when they picked teams for Red Rover or Rounders, and slunk off quietly when it became obvious that I would be last …

But I never really belonged to the gangs. I was happiest at home under the tentflaps, reading my favourite Dumas and dreaming myself back into that marvellous Olden Days when people wore satin and spoke French and when everything that happened was History.  

Malouf was obviously one of the quieter type of children, enjoying solitary time rather than social sports, so the beach for him was not a very memorable environment. Its main significance was its provision of time and freedom, which allowed him to pursue imaginative escape through reading.

Tony Maniaty’s recollections in *All Over The Shop*  are another example of the beach as an environment rarely experienced by Brisbane children. For this son of a Greek general store owner in the 1950s, days when the shop is closed are rare, and

---

the most significant of these is Christmas Day, when the family makes an annual pilgrimage to the coast for the day:

It’s a migrant kind of ritual too, on all sides our fellow New Australians have their blankets out and are eating and drinking (another semi-forbidden activity) and singing and dancing with their white handkerchiefs.

But curiously Australian too; in our Cashen togs and clutching the patched-up inflated black inner tubes from distant farmyard tractors, and sucking Peter’s ice-blocks. We stand there with the salt air in our city lungs, and look out. This is not just some water or the Brisbane River, but the actual sea itself. Eternal, limitless, out there. For my Greek Father it’s just a day off, of course, away from the frying vats.

We spit out the seeds; next Christmas Day we’ll return to find a watermelon patch along the sandy earth behind the water. Again we’ll have chicken, unaware of the sheer monotony of what we’re doing. To us it seems extravagant, like Henry the Eighth lustily ripping his chicken apart. Only I don’t see any wenches, not even any girls my own age; just fat Greek and Italian ladies in their once-a-year togs.

It’s our annual treat, from which we retire only when the last rays of sunshine are reduced to a chill and it’s time to go back, to the shop: to our prison and source of all income.

My father isn’t a businessman, as he’d like you to believe … [he’s] only a step away from slavery, in fact.

But on Christmas Day he gets back all that he’s given for a year: and this is his special treat, to sit idly in this strange and wonderful land and do nothing; and watch his wife and two sons playing idly in the yellow sand. (pp. 31 – 3).

Maniaty’s description here casts beach recreation as the pay-off for all the strains of migrating to a new land and the family’s struggles to establish themselves financially. It is a symbol of all the freedoms and opportunities that migrant parents purchase for their children through labour and sacrifice yet, ironically, a pleasure that they rarely indulge.

The other time that the beach becomes a feature in Maniaty’s narrative is when the family spend an extended summer holiday at the Gold Coast during a period between shops. While the young boys initially enjoy the surf and sand, as the weeks pass, they tire of the environment and long to return to more familiar suburbia, where friends are close by:

We’re missing school, our friends that we don’t have yet, the customers we haven’t met and getting up at five o’clock to make little pies … This cycle goes on. We catch fish; he shops for shops, we’re getting browner by the day; we pretend to do our lessons; there’s nobody to play with because all the other kids are at school. We don’t have a school, or a house, or a neighbourhood even; we’re not even sure if it’s Brisbane we’re going back to. We’re in limbo, migrants in our own nation, at the very edge of the Pacific Ocean. It should be heaven, but it’s turning into hell. (pp. 117 – 8)
For Maniaty then, like Malouf, Anderson and most of the Melbourne writers as well, the beach is more properly conceived as a holiday environment rather than part of the everyday landscape. The case is somewhat different for children living outside Brisbane proper. For example, William McInnes, who grew up in the bayside town of Redcliffe, sets many of his childhood occupations against a backdrop of the sea. These include visits to the beachside penny parlour and roller rink, and friendly jellyfish fights with neighbourhood children.  

The sea as dreaming and metaphor

Because the beach is not an immediate everyday environment for many Brisbane children, but rather one enjoyed only on occasions, it is a landscape that writers choose to transform with symbolic or metaphoric meaning. The coast’s removal from the everyday enables it to be infused with some measure of the exotic, as it becomes in writers’ minds a realm that is imagined more than physically experienced. Typically a holiday or pleasure environment, the coast naturally becomes replete with emotions of longing and desire. Thus the sea becomes a powerful imaginative, if not literal or physical, landscape in Queensland writings about childhood.

In Jessica Anderson’s *Stories from the Warm Zone*, the beach is an environment that is referred to rather than actually represented. In this work set a decade or two earlier than Malouf’s *Johnno*, the beach is only really evoked in the last of Anderson’s *Warm Zone* stories and, then, it is by way of recollection rather than through immediate description. When Bea learns that she will have to return to school after a year of home tutoring, she attempts mentally to retreat from this approaching event by recalling the family’s recent summer holiday at the Gold Coast. Bea describes her apprehension at returning to school through marine imagery:

> My impending return to the school began to spread like a stain across my life, or like the huge flotilla of seaweed Rhoda and I had watched one dawn rocking closer and closer across the blue and silver and turquoise sea. Meeting my doom by enhancing it, I told myself as I mooched about that after I went back to school I would ‘lose the sea’. When each lunch hour, the miniature aerial tumult reached me from the school across the park, I would shut my eyes and try to fill my sight with the shining hump of a breaker or the

---

race of foam up the hard sand. When I went to help relieve the invalid boredom of Kenny Fry, I would pause over the draughts or ludo board to describe how, if you went out beyond the breakers, you could feel for a split second that you were standing upright in the swell.

Kenny had grown while we were away, and could now walk a few steps on crutches. I expected him to respond by saying that soon he would learn to surf, buy a board, be a champion, and at that signal we would each go off into our parallel fantasies. But he said ‘What about the sharks?’

‘Pooh, they rang the bell sometimes, but it was always a false alarm.’

(pp. 106–7)

Gillian Whitlock argues that the sea here becomes a symbol for the feminine sphere, and that it is the unique opportunity for female bonding between mother and daughter, made possible by Bea’s year of home tutoring, that Bea does not want to relinquish. Whitlock asserts, “for Anderson too this sea represents a space outside the phallic order and within an intersubjective maternal order”. She refers to feminist writers Kristeva and Cixous who conceptualise the emancipation of the feminine realm through marine or water imagery.

While Bea and her mother certainly forge a unique bond during their year together, arguably, Anderson’s use of ocean imagery here functions not so much as a metaphor for gendered spaces, but as a symbol of imaginative freedom generally: its expansive, inclusive quality, as well as its unpredictability and dangerous potential. It must be remembered, after all, that the humiliation Bea experienced at school the year before was wrought by a female teacher: hence Anderson’s work is not engaged in a simple binarism between masculine and feminine spheres. Furthermore, in the passage above, Bea invokes the image of the sea not while in her mother’s presence, but rather as a solitary exercise to “drown out” the apprehension rising within her as she hears the “aerial tumult” coming from the school at lunch time. This association of the sea with the imagination and with escapism is heightened later in the passage by Bea’s intention in telling Kenny about her time at the sea: namely, she hopes to direct the conversation into their usual “parallel fantasies”. Earlier in Anderson’s Warm Zone collection, Bea describes her visits to Kenny’s invalid bedside as times for both of

42 Whitlock quotes Julia Kristeva, “Oscillation Between Power and Denial” in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (eds), New French Feminisms, Harvester Press, Brighton, 1981, p. 166, where she writes about valourizing a “silent underwater body” in the female text; also Helene Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa” in New French Feminisms, p. 260, urges women to write by asserting “our seas are what we make of them … we ourselves are sea, sand, coral, seaweed, beaches, tides, swimmers, children, waves…”.
them to dream and fantasize: “For him, as for me, that year had become a time of postponement, of the latitude of daydreams” (p. 91).

Yet, paradoxically, by allowing Bea to associate escapism and fantasy with the ocean, Anderson underscores the fragility of Bea’s ideal world and its inevitable dissolution into a more pedestrian reality. For the sea, as well as representing an alternative world and a realm of escape, carries associations of mortality and the passing of time. As a symbol of imaginative freedom and fantasy, then, it is an unstable image. Significantly, in this passage, Kenny does not indulge Bea’s yearning for fantasy. Instead, he brings Bea’s effusiveness back to the level of practical reality with his enquiry about sharks. The time has come when Bea and Kenny must both move beyond dreaming and engage with reality: Kenny with his physical limitations, Bea with her return to school.

In the following pages, however, Anderson demonstrates the positive effects of reconciling oneself to reality, of embracing change and the transition between life’s phases. In the succeeding weeks, “when lunch hour at the school became audible, instead of opposing it with visions of the sea, [Bea] sullenly let[s] it work on [her], recalling the ticking shuffling restless tedium of the classrooms from which those hundreds had just marched out … to swarm over the pale bare dusty ground” (p. 107). It is at this point that Bea remembers an uplifting experience from school: the excitement of playing Medes and Persians, and then she hears the sound of an aeroplane and rushes outside to exchange waves with the aviator. The aeroplane is a symbol of practical modernity and the future, and Bea’s meeting the aviator’s gaze signals her movement beyond the need for escapist fantasy into a future filled with real promise and opportunity.

Another way that the sea functions metaphorically is through the transposition of the ocean’s rise and fall onto the landscape of the city of Brisbane. As Malouf points out, Brisbane is somewhat unusual because “the key colour is green”⁴³. The land’s topography is hilly, and the dips and rises of the ground, when combined with the vegetation’s sea-like colour, imitate the swell of waves. Brisbane’s traditional

weatherboard house on stilts, the “Queenslander”, compounds this effect. It is often
described as having an air of transience and fragility, and Malouf’s language is
significant when he asserts: “Real cities ... have foundations set firm in the earth.
Weatherboard cities float above it on blocks or stumps”.\footnote{Malouf, \textit{12 Edmondstone Street}, op. cit., p. 10.} By using the word “float”,
Malouf suggests that there exists a fluid relationship between house and earth that
opens possibilities of journeying and travel. It releases both the house and the earth
beneath it from their usual categorization as permanent, solid and static.

William McInnes, in his autobiography \textit{A Man’s Got to Have A Hobby}, likens
his Redcliffe childhood home to a ship. The opening chapter, about family life around
the house, is titled “A Fine Vessel”, and McInnes often speaks about the house as
though it were alive: “the breathing house made me safe” (p. 7). When he reflects
upon the many changes to the house’s structure over the years, the comparison
becomes more direct:

\begin{quote}
I remember one time a cyclone hit and as I lay in bed it seemed as if the whole
house lifted up off the ground then sat back down again. And then like a ship, just as
Dad had described it, it gathered itself and rode out the crazed winds and storm.
Girded itself and ploughed on through the seas of time. (p. 105)
\end{quote}

Though McInnes’ house is not the traditional Queenslander but rather a double storey
weatherboard, his work shows that the mythology surrounding the local landscape and
timber family dwelling, birthed by writers like Malouf and Anderson, is an enduring
literary tradition.

In fact, the modernization of the Queensland style can, ironically, be seen as
accentuating the parallels between house and ship, earth and sea. In more recent times,
the traditional Queenslander’s veranda has been replaced or supplemented by the deck
– a large (often timber) platform extending outwards from the house, variously used to
accommodate outdoor furniture, barbecues and the like. Caroline Stalker investigates
the connection between such “decks” and the “decks” of ships in the context of
migrant experiences, an interesting comparison because it invites viewing the house
the timber extension “deck” to the deck of a boat may tap currents running deeper in
the regional psyche. The sense of being at sea is, on the one hand, to be without land
to call home, often to be without bearings or a sense of direction. Yet it also suggests
the possibility of voyage and new horizons. In the context of migrant experience, it
may facilitate a sense of connection with other cultures and lands.

Thea Astley’s early story, “Cubby”, 46 also likens the experience of resting on a
timber tree-house platform to being at sea. An adolescent boy and girl build a
treehouse as a realm of escape from the solid, grounded world below. Astley’s
imagery evokes an imaginative floating or sailing away and thus implies a separation
between the “foreign land” of the youths’ cubby retreat and their everyday world:

After it was complete they dragged up a rug and boxes and sat there eyrie-
drunk watching the swell of green water that was tree and blue water that was
ocean. Their scratched and browned legs dangled thirty feet above the surf as
they giggled and munched, flinging apricot stones into the breakers of branch.
In the current of trades that blew up in spring they could have sworn they were
afloat. (p. 3)

The blurring of the boundary between the tree and the ocean that forms its backdrop
adds to the dreamy quality of the adventure-fantasy world that the children enter when
they ascend to the cubby-house. Yet, these oceanic allusions also carry a strong
sensual element, which is appropriate because, as the children mature, their
relationship moves into romance. The imagery of floating and drifting is also effective
in recreating the memory of a childhood season that is now distant in time from the
mature narrator: memory takes on a dream-like quality.

Indeed, other evocations of the ocean, or floating upon it, would seem to
support the idea that its significance in the regional psyche is as a symbolic, rather
than actual, landscape. One of Janette Turner Hospital’s short stories is titled “The
Ocean of Brisbane”, 47 and in it the persona reminisces about childhood days in
Queensland’s capital through an extended metaphor of swimming and diving:

We were once part of a multiform being, a many-celled organism that played
in the childhood sea, that swam in the ocean of Brisbane, an alpha-helical
membrane-embedded coiled-coil of an us-thing … a memory I didn’t

47 Janette Turner Hospital, “The Ocean of Brisbane” in Collected Stories, University of Queensland
remember I had shifted itself and began to rise like a great slow black-finned
sea-slug, an extinct creature, far earlier than ichthyosaurus, earlier than the
earliest ancestor of the manta ray. It flapped the gigantic black sails of its fins
and shock waves hit the cage of my skull and I was swimming back to Brian’s
front gate, I was waiting for him there, fragrant currents of frangipani were
swirling round, and these monstrously eerie sounds, this guttural screaming
and sobbing, came pouring out through the verandah louvres in a black rush
that whirlpooled around me, that sucked, that pulled … I clung to the gate,
giddy with terror. (p. 334)

Here, Turner Hospital uses the ocean’s rolling, all-consuming quality, to evoke both
the child’s incomplete sense of boundary between herself and the external
environment, and also the blurred, muted effect that memories take on when recalled
through layers of nostalgia and intervening life experiences. The viscous nature of
both water and memory resonates with the thickness of Brisbane’s subtropical
humidity, and the sensual exuberance of the natural environment: “I held the creamy
flower against my cheek. It’s excessive, I thought angrily, the smell of Brisbane. I had
to hold onto the gate. There was surf around my ears, the smell of frangipani, I was
caught in an undertow” (p. 337). Turner Hospital’s metaphor epitomises a trend in the
literature towards identifying Brisbane’s pervasive and vital natural environment with
the ocean’s power and overwhelming energy. Heat mirages commonly cause the
horizon to dissolve into a watery blur, and this enhances the capacity of the landscape
to be imbued with watery imagery, and imagined in terms of water:

Everything was fluid at the edges. Cars seemed to float slightly above the road
and to move the way they do in old silent movies. Even the surface of
Coronation Drive was unfixed, a band of shimmer. A drunk man was
shambling along the bike path giving off mirages; I could see three of him. I
could see the gigantic bamboo canes at the water’s edge doubling, tripling,
tiplling themselves into the haze. I could see wavy curtains of air flapping
lazily, easily, settling on us with sleep in their folds. (pp. 329 – 30)

Australia’s Beaches: A Competitive Adolescent Playground

In his famous study of the beach in Australian art and literature, Geoffrey
Dutton asserts that the beach, like the bush, embodies an Australian tradition of
democracy. It is, he asserts, an equalizing environment of leisure, where the absence
of clothes erodes boundaries between the “haves” and the “have nots”. Dutton says:

The girl with bare breasts sweating gently into the towel may have left her
emeralds at home, or she may only have seen them in jewellers’ windows. The
boy who has scraped together and borrowed enough money to get himself a board is no different on the wave from the boy whose mummy and daddy could afford to give him one for his birthday.\footnote{Dutton, op. cit., p. 17.}

While Dutton’s argument seems logical enough, it is not necessarily borne out in the literature. To varying extents, the beach landscape often serves to accentuate class hierarchies and social prejudices.

In Western Australian memoirs, the beach’s capacity to act as a mark of social differentiation is overwhelmingly tied to its role as an adolescent playground. In *The Shark Net*, thirteen-year-old Robert Drewe is very self-conscious about the judgment cast upon him by an older peer based on his choice of beach:

‘Which beach?’ he asked. The eyebrow and mouth combination was disconcerting. It made his face look apologetic and angry at the same time. I told him North Cottesloe.

‘Really?’ He looked at me accusingly but still smiling as well. ‘That’s a Neddies’ beach.’

‘A what?’

‘Where the Nedheads go, the snobs from Nedlands.’ Still the smile.

It was just a small ocean beach enclosed by reefs and two wooden ramps, a place to bodysurf. But now I felt uncomfortable that I swam there. I didn’t want to do anything snobby or conservative. On the contrary, I was cultivating a rebellious teenage image …

I wasn’t too happy with the drift of the conversation although being a ‘clubbie’, a Scarborough lifesaver, was pretty impressive. The beach was bigger at Scarborough, the surf was better and often more treacherous. That wasn’t all. Scarborough was the centre of Perth’s teenage myth. It was the home of the legendary Snake Pit, a notorious patch of beachfront cement where older, tougher, more reckless and even more extravagantly dressed teenagers jived to a jukebox … (pp. 117 – 8)

While part of Drewe’s aim in this passage is to illustrate the creepy and subtle intimidation tactics of a young man who goes on to become Perth’s most notorious serial killer, it is clear that Drewe is simultaneously charting the development of his younger self from childish innocence to a greater level of adolescent self-consciousness. That different beaches carry different social associations is part of the teenager’s burgeoning awareness of the complexities of the adult world.

So, too, for Simone Lazaroo’s persona, the beach is an environment marked by social competition and intimidation. Already marginalized by her different racial
background, Lazaroo’s persona in *The World Waiting to be Made* is further isolated from her peers by the distance of her suburb from the beach:

‘I’ll meet you at the train bridge at Leighton in an hour.’ She didn’t give me time to reply.

That meant half a mile on foot and twelve miles on three buses, all in an hour. Though their tightness aggravated my occasional stomach pains, I put on my new jeans. In my panic to be on time, I ran all the way to the bus terminus at the shopping centre, my school bag thumping the backs of my knees and pushing me forward to my Australian destiny when I was almost out of breath. *On, go on. Be cool.*

The further away from home I got, the more thorough the gardens and houses became in their efforts to make statements of wealth and style. Asbestos fences gave way to pillared and wrought metal ones. The low dronings of swimming pool filters grew more concentrated as the plantings of palms and conifers did.

The car parks and walkways surrounding the shopping centre were empty. Without the activity of expectant customers around it, the concrete-faced buildings sat like monuments to the dead or larger-than-life hermetically sealed eskys, locked, guarding their unmarred contents for changes in fortunes and in the weather...

While I waited I examined my new jeans, Woolworths’ own brand, and knew they would not guarantee me Sue’s approval. They rucked up above my knee with perspiration…

I was the only passenger on the bus. Several kids I recognised from school glided past my slow bus in the back seats of Mercedes and Volvos…

I finally got to the railway bridge at Leighton, courtesy of a sequence of MTT buses whose schedules were never designed to connect. By the time I arrived at this destination for cool kids, I was sweating over how uncool my own journey was compared with theirs. (p. 104 – 5)

The odds seem stacked against the protagonist in her journey towards this “place of limitless light and potential” (p. 106): the bus schedules inhibit rather than facilitate her access to the beach. Distance is registered through changes to the suburban landscape, marked as it is by peoples’ attempts to clothe their dwelling places in the accessories of social acceptance. This mirrors the protagonist’s own attempts to alter her physical image to conform to the “fluorescent” “white” and blonde ideal of Australian surfie culture, already discussed in Chapter 3. The sepulchral shopping mall, starkly imposed upon the landscape, is ominously symbolic of how the consumer mentality mars and deadens Australian suburbia.

Once on the beach, Lazaroo’s persona notices the distinction between her friend’s fashionable “aqua coloured bikini” and her own “one-piece bathers, made of material as thick as carpet” (pp. 105, 106). Her time at the beach passes in a blur of self consciousness as she tries to hide her “uncool” appearance alternatively in the surf and under her beach towel.
Several Melbourne memoirs reveal that one’s choice of beach is intimately tied to one’s social position and aspirations. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the coastal town of Lorne was an exclusive holiday spot for Victoria’s social elite. Graham McInnes describes it as “the Squatters’ Riviera” where “fashionable gossip writers” would gather material to fill the newspapers’ social columns. It is not clear from McInnes’ account whether or not he actually visited Lorne as a young boy, indeed, it is a noticeably adult environment of one-upmanship that he describes. The typical leisure activities are:

bathing, surfing, drinking, mostly beer and in enormous quantities, tearing around the little town in fast Lancias or Bentleys, dancing, sun-tanning and drinking again. Everyone knew everybody else, each knew what his neighbour was worth and all knew that each of them was worth more than all their non-squatting co-citizens put together. They seemed friendly extrovert snobs, in a wonderful world of the senses and emotions, of golden brown bodies on golden brown sand and no thought for the morrow. (p. 280)

Another visitor to Lorne in this era was Kathleen Fitzpatrick and, like McInnes’, her account of the seaside resort reveals it to be a place rife with class pretensions. She describes the exciting journey from Melbourne to Lorne through the “virgin forest” of the Otway Ranges, and finally the township itself:

Lorne was magical, both bush and beach, and ever so much better than Port Phillip Bay: this sea was the mighty ocean and instead of having only scrubby marine vegetation such as tea-tree distorted into strange shapes by the prevailing wind, the foreshore at Lorne was sheltered and huge blue gums grew right down to where the sand of the beach began. We could choose between bathing and going for bush walks, and sometimes there were longer excursions in a coach with a picnic lunch... (pp. 120 – 121)

In Fitzpatrick’s account, the beauty of the natural environment and the activities it offers are overshadowed by the social landscape and the feelings of inadequacy it induces. The contrast between her brief references to “bathing and going for bush walks” and the detail with which she recalls the ladies’ dinner time attire show these holidays to be times marked by an acute awareness of social position rather than a free abandonment to the senses:

For Lorna and me there was only one fly in the ointment, our clothes. Mother still held rigidly to her concept of simplicity for children and although we had proper bathing gowns by then, she considered that a clean summer dress was all we needed for dinner in a sea-side hotel. Lorna and I knew better, from looking about us, particularly at a girl Lorna’s age whose shell
pink crepe-de-chine with accordéon-pleated skirt was the most enviable garment I had ever seen. On another visit to Lorne we stayed at Erskine House, at the other end of the town from the Pacific Hotel, and it turned out to be a very ‘dressy’ establishment, where the dressing was competitive and some girls wore a different evening dress every single night of their stay, with high-heeled satin shoes to match. The Erskine House experience was really marré for both of us, but especially for Lorna, by mortification about our clothes. (p. 121)

More significant than Lorne in McInnes’ account, however, are the contrasting beachside towns of Queenscliff and Portsea. Like Lorne, these beachside towns each have a distinctive social flavours and beach cultures. McInnes says “Portsea was exciting, forbidden and fashionable; Queenscliff was pedestrian, respectable and family.” The beaches at Portsea:

were covered with half naked men and women who, in that censorious era, braved the beach police by refusing to wear the regulation ‘neck to knee’ bathing togs. Behind the salty bushes, rakish summer cottages lay half hidden. Behind the dunes, in the ti-tree scrub and on the streets of Portsea the fast set disported themselves, and gin was as popular as beer. Yet across The Rip in Queenscliff all was sedate, beery and middle-class, the very epitome of an antipodean cockney paradise. Queenscliff had a ‘Front’ and you bathed primly and undressed carefully in sandstone caves hidden from view. Instead of burning sands there were secluded inlets … In Portsea jazz blared from the panatrope. In Queenscliff the municipal band played in the local park. In Portsea couples paraded up and down in swimming togs; in Queenscliff they dressed in open-necked shirts and baggy trousers, usually with a brace of kids in tow. Portsea was exciting, forbidden and fashionable; Queenscliff was pedestrian, respectable and family. It was in fact the “Southend” of Melbourne. (p. 281)

Like his description of Lorne, McInnes’ contrasting of these two paradigms of Australian beach culture of the 1920s is overwhelmingly from an adult perspective, as though it is a researched, rather than recalled portrait of these two towns. He does, however, go on to describe his own memories of Queenscliff as a boy, the most significant being the drama of the journey there by paddle steamer. McInnes stayed with family friends in a rented one-storey wooden house:

A less prepossessing outlook for a summer cottage would be hard to find, but in Queenscliff there were no private beaches as there were at Portsea and you swam as you still do in many seaside resorts in England. You took a towel and bathing togs wrapped up in a neat sausage under your arm and walked half a mile to the beach, there to change in the threepenny bath house, or surreptitiously if you could avoid the eye of the beach attendant, behind a rock at the foot of the cliff. (p. 282)

McInnes and his friend spend the summer swimming and fishing, and the one time the family attempts to cross to take a look at the “Sodom and Gomorrah” that was
Portsea, engine failure prevents their making the journey across the Rip between the heads of Port Phillip Bay (p. 283).

Barry Humphries, recalling childhood holidays of the 1930s and 1940s, also paints these as exercises as much in the formalities of social class as of leisure. He begins by pointing out that his family always stayed at “guest houses” which, unlike hotels, “were nice, respectable affairs”. His description of times spent at seaside resorts of Mount Martha and Ranelagh on the Mornington Peninsula begin with two pages of exhaustive detail concerning the procedures of dressing for dinner, and the contents of the courses served. Only after this is all explained does Humphries get to “the point” of such holidays, which was “of course, the beach” (p. 42). Humphries’ characteristically tongue-in-cheek account is rather disparaging of the delights of Victoria’s beaches. Beach-going for him is a laboured exercise requiring sun hats with green fly veils and lavish applications of zinc cream before young Humphries is “finally ready to paddle in the waves of Port Phillip Bay, which lapped apologetically a few feet from the fringe of our rug” (p. 43). Yet, like Fitzpatrick, he expresses a preference for these beaches of his childhood over those of the modern day, which Humphries asserts are polluted by “transistor radios” and “hideously writhing tatters of plastic or imperishable chunks of leprous Styrofoam” (p. 43).

While these extracts from the literature have been selected because they display an awareness of class that lingers even at our seemingly most free and casual playground, several of these passages also reflect anxieties of adolescence. The passages excerpted from Drewe, Lazaroo and Fitzpatrick all exhibit the characteristic heightened level of teenage self-consciousness, as the personae are eager to blend in with those around them and feel accepted. Part of the beach’s continued significance for adolescence is undoubtedly the display of flesh it offers, which variously prompts teenagers’ anxieties about body image and burgeoning sexuality. It is significant that McInnes’ narrative which contrasts Queenscliff and Portsea depicts his young self as being prevented from crossing from the “family” seaside town of Queenscliff to the more “adult” and risqué beaches of Portsea: in so doing, McInnes leaves his young

self, at this point of his memoir, firmly established in the respectable purity of childhood, unsullied by the forces of sexuality and licentiousness.

Faith Richmond’s autobiography, *Remembrance*, also associates two different beaches with childhood and maturity respectively. Sandgate beach, near Brisbane, is the beach of Richmond’s childhood, rapturously enjoyed on family day outings, when Richmond’s older adopted brother is still living at home and before her father’s mental illness began inhibiting the family’s daily life. Like other Queensland memoirs, Richmond’s casts Queensland broadly as the land of childhood innocence and simplicity, in contrast to her later homes in the southern cities of Canberra and Melbourne, where childhood gives way to adolescence and more complex family relationships. At Sandgate, her older brother plays beach cricket with other children, Richmond and her sister swim in brightly coloured hand-knitted bathers, and her mother reads a novel on the sand in the shade of a floppy straw hat. It is an environment where a child can explore and wonder at the mysteries of nature:

> On the way back I find, half-buried, a fat speckled shell. Its edge curls inward. My mother says that if I listen I’ll hear inside it the sounds of the ocean. I lift my hair and press the coolness of the shell against my ear. It whispers and reverberates in an orchestration of rushing echoes. How could it register the rumble of the ocean and the soughing of the wind – and yet amazingly it does. I suppose the mystery might be linked with our wind-up gramophone at home in which, somehow, long-ago sounds of voices and music are captured forever. (p. 68)

The only other beach featured in Richmond’s account is Melbourne’s St Kilda beach, visited by the author and her younger brother just after Richmond has started menstruating, and has attempted in vain, by various methods, to stem the flow of blood. Her bike ride to St Kilda beach is marked by a new uncomfortable adolescent self consciousness: “Everyone seems to be watching me … When people stand there following me with their critical judgemental eyes – do they see me as a little girl or as a teenager?” (p. 141). In contrast to her freedom at Sandgate beach, Richmond depicts herself at St Kilda walled-in as she sits in a beach rotunda, separated from the external world:

> The sun is thundering down on the windows of my small beach-dome and even though it’s May I feel burning hot. My face is pulsating and I put up a hand to touch my ember-like cheek. My heart is thudding as though I’ve been

---

running a race. And I watch waves that suddenly have no sound. I look around at the glass that encloses me in here, and I see it burst and shatter outward and tinkle to the sand below. I find my hands are clenched into fists and I expect to see blood on my knuckles. But there isn’t any. And the windows are there too, glinting in the afternoon sun. Quite intact and unbroken. (p. 142)

By this stage in her memoir, Richmond’s father is seriously mentally ill, and his eccentric ravings dominate household life. So consumed is her mother with managing her father’s condition that she does not notice her daughter’s new dilemma and so Richmond is profoundly alone in her transition from childhood to maturity. From this point of confusion and despair, she reflects back on the times at Sandgate Beach “almost half my lifetime ago”. In contrast to those episodes, surrounded by family and involved in their activity, here she is a solitary figure, epitomising the crisis of the adolescent self in isolation.

In other Australian memoirs, too, the beach is strongly associated with adolescence and the transition to maturity. Robert Drewe asserts that “many, if not most, Australians have their first sexual experience on the coast and as a consequence see the beach in a sensual and nostalgic light”.\textsuperscript{51} Drewe’s own experiences on Rottnest Island, detailed in \textit{The Shark Net}, put him into this category. So, too, for other writers, the beach is an environment where the mysteries of sexuality are clarified or explored. David Malouf recalls summers at Brisbane’s Scarborough beach, where with other children he:

\begin{quote}
tagged along when they went out on the dunes with a flashlight to find soldiers and their girls, catcalling along with the rest till someone appeared fumbling with his flybuttons and gave us money to get lost. The Americans arrived early in ’42, and we went on frenchie hunts along the cliffs or round the Skating Rink at Redcliffe. You could find as many in a single afternoon these days as the white horses we counted, galloping about in sunstruck paddocks, as we drove down in the car; and I didn’t let on that until recently I had thought they were some sort of fungus, hanging shiny and white from the twigs. (pp. 19 – 20)
\end{quote}

For Gerald Murnane’s Adrian Sherd in \textit{A Lifetime on Clouds},\textsuperscript{52} the beach provides the arena for him to discover a more mundane side to sexuality to set against his idealised fantasy world. At a family outing to the beach, he distances himself from his younger brothers and cousins, but notices that his female teenage cousin looks more adult than she had in previous years and observes her woman’s shape. While she possesses

\begin{footnotes}
\item[52] Gerald Murnane, \textit{A Lifetime on Clouds}, Heinemann, Melbourne, 1976.
\end{footnotes}
curves, breasts and pubic hair, Adrian is unable to conceive of her in the same way as he does the women in his night time sexual fantasies, who are all idealistic reconstructions from magazine advertisements (pp. 64 – 6). The beach thus provides Murnane’s character with the ground for a more realistic approach to sex and the body, one which sees it as part of a pattern of human relationships, and not just a dissociated activity in remote imaginary landscapes.

For Criena Rohan’s character Lisha Flynn in *Down by the Dockside*, the beach is also associated with adolescent liaisons and dawning sexuality. Early in the novel, the bayside is marked out as a site of romance when Lisha finds herself chatting with a young man at Port Melbourne one night:

> Port Melbourne on a hot December night, how I love you! The lights of the ships anchored at Prince’s Pier, the broken down little jetty where the children play, the barking of the dogs that play with the children, the lovers lying on the sand, the shop straight across the road that sells such quantities of soft drinks, ice-cream and potato crisps. Dear old ugly romantic beach; I love every bit of you in a way I will never be able to love St Kilda, or even the sun-washed beauty of Bondi or Manly, or the desecrated strip of blue and gold that is Surfers’ Paradise (p. 54).

This occasion led to Lisha’s fist kiss, which was “the soft clumsy kiss of the young and innocent but it left me without even enough breath to say good night” (p. 55). Lisha’s apostrophising the beach, “Dear old ugly romantic beach …”, recalls Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey,” “How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee, O sylvan Wye!”, in its overflow of feeling, and indeed Rohan’s character shares a similar attitude of nostalgia for this environment of her youth as does Wordsworth towards the Wye.

* * * * *

While in popular culture the beach may be a significant childhood environment for Australians from all over the continent, it is clear that, at least in literary portrayals, the beach is more significant in some regions than others. Part of the beach’s appeal as a vehicle for escapism is undoubtedly its world wide utilization as a holiday destination. Yet, while writers from other states tend to make brief reference to childhood beach holidays, concentrating their memoirs on everyday

---

suburban life, Winton focuses his recollections in *Land’s Edge* around the coastal environment. There, he relates how, like most Australians, he spent much of his life in the suburbs, growing up on a quarter-acre block in the Perth suburb of Karrinyup:

> I lived there happily for twelve years but I do not dream of that house … when I dream, when I remember, when I doze into reverie, I don’t see the picket fences and the Holden in the driveway … Because in my memory of childhood there is always the smell of bubbling tar, of Pinke Zinke, the briny smell of the sea. It is always summer and I am on Scarborough Beach, blinded by light, with my shirt off and my back a map of dried salt and peeling sunburn. (pp. 6–8)

Winton ponders the contrast between his everyday and his holiday lives, “these two childhoods … the one contained and clothed, between fences, the other rambling, windblown, half-naked between the flags” (p. 8), and asks himself why the beach is more prominent in his memory. He concludes that he “lived the coastal life harder, with more passion” (p. 9).

Simple factors of geography account for a large part of this: indeed, while Winton may describe his childhood suburban quarter-acre block as a place marked by boundaries, picket-fences and walls, the fact is that it was only five kilometres inland, and while homework and other daily realities may have restricted his enjoyment of the beach, he lived his childhood with the daily smell of the Fremantle Doctor in his nostrils. For Robert Drewe, too, the beach was easily accessible from his home in Dalkeith, a mere bike-ride away. In contrast to this, Brisbane children like Anderson, Malouf and Maniaty were faced with over an hour long car journey down the coast to the delights of Surfer’s Paradise. Many Melbourne suburbs, too, are a significant distance from beaches, and open surf beaches are hours from the city centre. It does appear, however, that while Brisbane itself may be miles from the open sea, the sea is not too distant from the minds of its residents. The predominance of water imagery and the transposition of the ocean’s swell onto the green leafy hills of the city testify to this. In Melbourne, this is not the case. There is little in Melbourne’s flat, grid-like organization to evoke the sea, and, by and large, literature from this region does not focus on beach imagery. Education and country retreats are more popular themes for writers who grew up in Victoria, with beaches being more strongly associated in the popular imagination with Melbourne’s cultural rival, Sydney. Despite these regional discrepancies, it is clear that beaches and marine environments do exert a significant
influence over our national literary imagination, and are commonly invoked by writers exploring the transition between childhood and maturity.
CONCLUSION

This thesis has attempted to show that, as well as continuities, there are differences in the sense of place formed during Australian childhoods, according to region. Of course, certain preoccupations, which may be termed regional differences, can also be seen functioning as locally specific expressions of wider national mythologies and anxieties. The sense of fragility connected to the shifting, unstable sand dunes of Perth is similar in origin to the vulnerability felt by the Queensland child frightened of the tropical vegetation at the sleepout window of his weatherboard house: both are expressions of frontier anxiety, produced by a perception of distance and isolation from large centres of civilization. Yet, while similar in origin, the difference of experience between these two environments arguably gives rise to subtle variations in the relationship between self and place in these two settings. For, as has been seen, the perceived resistance of the environment in Western Australia is more commonly felt to be a passive quiet indifference, whereas in Queensland the speed of natural growth makes the environment at times appear actively threatening. In Western Australia, belonging and rootedness are sought by trying to forge a greater connection with the land – through digging below cultural trappings in order to reach something solid and life-sustaining in the earth itself; by contrast, in Queensland writers like David Malouf, who at times celebrate Queensland’s natural vitality, often feel the need to retreat from the environment and the primitive associations it provokes within the self.

In reconstructing their childhoods, Australian writers vary in their responses to the British Romantic ideal of childhood as the “fair seed time” of the soul, when the child’s innocence of the world’s ills allowed a more immediate connection with Nature. The keen sense of dichotomy between country and city which is evidenced in the work of Romantic writers like Blake and Wordsworth, who mourn the social ills of industrial Britain, means that their ideal of the “country childhood” is more readily transplanted into Australian environments that show a similar sense of distinction between the rural and the metropolis. Alan Marshall’s work is a good example, as the country home of his childhood in Victoria’s Western District is contrasted with metropolitan Melbourne. Yet, there are also echoes of the Romantic “country childhood” phenomenon in the Arcadian images surrounding Perth: in this case, the
relative smallness of the metropolis creates an “innocent city”. Perth itself is the Edenic haven, isolated from the ills of society that reside in larger cities. Bruce Bennett points out that Dorothy Hewett, in reconstructing her transition from innocence to experience, looks beyond Perth to Sydney as the “city” to contrast to her “Garden”: Hewett writes “Sydney was the place I went to in order to grow up in the world”. ¹ This is despite the fact that her autobiography, *Wild Card* (1990), clearly shows that Perth was the site of many of her youthful rites of passage, such as awakening sexuality in University years. Indeed, other Western Australian writers like Robert Drewe, Randolph Stow, and Simone Lazaroo are conscious of the parallels between childhood “innocence” and the culture of “innocence” surrounding the Arcadian vision of Western Australian society, and, like Hewett, are aware that this innocence is seeming only.² All three authors link their characters’ developing awareness of the divisions and uncertainties of life to Western Australia’s modernisation in the post-war era, and the region’s “loss of innocence” through forces of modernity, corruption and consumerism. Stow depicts his child persona witnessing the revamping of Geraldton after the war, Drewe is conscious of Perth’s emergence on the international stage in the 1960s with the Commonwealth Games and the astronauts’ orbit over their City of Light, and *The Shark Net* (2000) entwines Drewe’s personal sense of guilt with the corruption he witnesses in Perth culture, and the layering of darkness in the city’s social history. Lazaroo depicts a Perth increasingly preoccupied with consumerism as her own adolescent persona also tries to manufacture an identity for herself.

In Queensland, the subtropical environment is not so conducive to the creation of a rural arcadia, but writers still associate its landscape Romantically with innocence by drawing on its primitive continuities. The Romantic cult of childhood was also associated with the cult of primitivism, as both are tied to a preoccupation with innocence and the natural, as opposed to culture and civilization.³ The lushness of

---

² Hewett, ibid., p. 99, writes “The country that I once knew in Western Australia was mostly innocent but it was an innocence, naïve, self-congratulatory and deeply conservative, a perfect field for corruption”.
³ See, for example, Peter Coveney, *The Image of Childhood* (1957), Penguin, Harmondsworth, England, 1967, pp. 42–4, where he describes how imperialism generated an interest in primitive cultures and how the concept of the “original virtue of the savage” paved the way for Rousseau’s valourization of the child’s original innocence.
Queensland’s fertile natural world, as has been seen, also lends itself to a Romantic indulgence in Nature’s plenitude. Arguably, even more so than Western Australia, Queensland is spatially linked with childhood and innocence, as writers contrast it to southern cities which function as realms of “experience”. As with Perth, there is a sense in which this identification of Queensland with childhood is tied to nostalgia, as the Queensland that expatriate writers recall is inevitably one of the past. In *Johnno*, Malouf describes the process of modernising post-war Brisbane, similar to that occurring in Stow’s Geraldton in *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* (1965):

> The sprawling weatherboard city we had grown up in was being torn down at last to make way for something grander and more solid. Old pubs like the Treasury, with their wooden verandahs hung with ferns, were unrecognizable now behind glazed brick facades … Brisbane was on the way to becoming a minor metropolis. In ten years it would look impressively like everywhere else.⁴

There is not the same sense of nostalgia in Melbourne recollections: the city is far more established, more of a “teeming city” with its pervasive industrial, working-class flavour, and thus not associated with a culture of innocence or timelessness. Edens or environments of innocence must be sought outside the city, or in enclaves within it that are appropriately separated from the everyday.

The element of nostalgia also influences the portrayal of boundaries. As has been seen, spatial boundaries often metaphorically represent opportunities for transition and exchange between forces: the known and unknown, innocence and experience, nature and culture. In Western Australian writing, boundaries tend to emphasize enclosure, accentuating the aspect of isolation that would preserve Arcadian innocence. In Queensland, boundaries seem to be constantly negotiable, as nature and culture variously contend with and complement each other, frustrating attempts at mental mapping. The heavy element of nostalgia in the Queensland evoked by expatriates heightens the sense of its elusiveness, as Queensland becomes through memory a realm blurry at the edges: a landscape now distant in time, it can be conjured or evoked through sensual imagery, but not comprehensively known. Imagery of floating and of fluidity in the topography of Brisbane, often overlaid with evocations of water and the ocean, also feeds into this phenomenon.

---

By contrast, in Melbourne, boundaries are felt to be too sharply defined, restricting movement and possibilities. In Melbourne, adolescents’ awareness of life’s fragmentation is expressed in a heightened perception of geographic divisions and social class. Melbourne is, moreover, much larger than Perth or Brisbane, and so boundaries are invoked within the city to render the large, often monotonous, suburban space knowable. There is not the same sense of being on the edge of the unknown in Melbourne as there is in the “frontier” cultures of Western Australia and Queensland, but rather more a sense of being on the edge of things known to be foreign or other, in the form of different social classes and ethnic groups.

So, too, the urge to transgress boundaries, in order to find meaning beyond the superficial, results in varying explorations of the vertical plane. In Perth, the impulse is to dig below the unstable sandy surface, symbolic of moral uncertainty, to locate the perceived solidity of rock and life source of water. In Melbourne, the yearning for the vertical often finds expression in the opposite direction, as characters seek out high vantage points in an attempt to rise above the city’s flatness – of topography and suburban hopes.

Having identified these regional trends, it must be emphasized that the conclusions about regionalism offered in this thesis are only intended to be tentative: indeed, it is arguably too soon to draw very strong conclusions because of the relatively small number of reconstructions of childhood available from Queensland and Western Australia, in comparison to those from the larger centres of Sydney and Melbourne. There has, however, in recent years, been a surge of interest in life writing – both as a subject of criticism, and also in the large number of memoirs being published. This upsurge of interest in real life stories (also evidenced in the popularity of so-called “reality” television shows) is arguably a reaction against postmodernism and its attendant uncertainties. This, combined with the population trend towards “seachange”/ “treechange” which sees more people moving towards less populous regions, such as Western Australia and Queensland, will, over succeeding decades, result in more memoirs and life writing emerging from these areas. From a larger literature base, more conclusive observations may be made.
Furthermore, there is the potential for more comparisons to emerge from future studies of regions not included in this survey. Tasmania, our only true island state, and South Australia are also developing regional literary climates, and have produced several prominent reconstructions of childhood that could form the starting point for an appraisal of the genre from these states. The much larger body of writing from New South Wales arguably could give rise to several discrete regional studies. There are numerous well-known autobiographies of urban Sydney childhoods, including Thomas Keneally’s *Homebush Boy* (1995), Bernard Smith’s *The Boy Adeodatus* (1984), Jill Kerr-Conway’s *The Road From Coorain* (1989), and Donald Horne’s *The Education of Young Donald* (1967). Additionally, there is an emerging body of life-writing about place from the state’s central coast, Hunter Valley and north coast, as well as reminiscences of growing up in rural New South Wales, from which a non-metropolitan study could spring.

Another fruitful area for future research is in the area of Indigenous writing. As mentioned in the introduction, these were not included in this survey mainly because of the different issues they raise in relation to displacement and belonging. There is a wealth of material in this field that could give rise to interesting comparisons with non-Indigenous literature. For example, Jack Davis, in *A Boy’s Life*, like other Western Australian writers, evokes a rural/bush Arcadia as he nostalgically recalls one of his early homes at Yarloop. The Romantic child’s fascination with Nature is evident in his description of the walk to school “along a path through lofty redgum and jarrah trees. There were new wonders nearly every day, a new bird’s nest, swooping magpies and bush animal or reptile tracks across the path through the bush” (p. 11). It is a heavily sensual landscape, the air is filled with


woodsmoke and the sound of cicadas and birds, and one of the young boy’s pleasures is running in the rain: “I used to love the feel of the wind driven showers on my upturned face, mouth open to catch the delicious drops” (p. 21). Davis is often the Wordsworthian solitary figure, leaving his friends to wander alone in the natural world. Davis retains this kind of relationship with the various country environments in which the family live during his early years, hence his revelry in the landscape is not tied to any particular place, but rather he experiences a sense of joy and belonging wherever his family settles, and the family’s reliance on Indigenous knowledge to supplement their income with food from the bush creates a web of reliance between the human and natural realms. Davis’ boyhood countryside is in this respect a type of Eden. This all changes when the boys are sent to Moore River Settlement, and the family gradually disintegrates. *A Boy’s Life* becomes a tragedy of displacement and alienation, but one connected to the human rather than natural world.

In Roberta Sykes’ *Snake Cradle*,9 tropes of Romanticism are employed but subverted by Sykes’ twist on the Eden mythology through her use of the snake totem. As a child she is unafraid of creatures commonly classed as distasteful, such as spiders, toads or insects, and Sykes relates a “powerful moment” when she locks eyes with a snake and they mutually appraise each other. Elsewhere, Sykes extends this connection between herself and snakes to her physical body: she has a figure like a snake, “no hips and nothing at the top.” She experiences a kind of epiphany when she lies flat along the earth, asserting that a “feeling of wonder, warmth and knowledge that somehow seeped out of the earth and into me through the pores of my skin whenever I lay flattened across the ground” (p. 87). This connection with the earth smells of a Romantic communion with Nature, like that related by writers such as Alan Marshall and Ronald McKie, yet Sykes’ identification of herself with the snake functions as a comment upon Western (white) culture that sees her, in her darkness, as a temptress or embodiment of evil. The connection of the snake with mythology of Eden is made obvious when Sykes describes herself learning “the silence of the serpent” (p. 327). Through this image, Sykes casts herself also as an outcast, both an intruder into and one in exile from Eden. Her sense of alienation springs not only from

---

her “non-white” status, but also from the uncertainty of her Indigenous racial identity, as her ancestry is unknown.\textsuperscript{10}

These examples are offered in order to illustrate the potential for further study concerning the sense of place in Indigenous narratives, and the foregoing observations are in no way intended to represent the depth or complexity of the issues in this area. This is properly the concern of other research.

The shift in the image of Eden in Western Australia, from the rural Arcadia of earlier in the twentieth century to more recent representations of the coastal paradise, is, in some senses, symptomatic of wider trends in Australian culture. As has been seen, the mythology of the bush, tied to an Australian national identity founded on primary production, is progressively less relevant to our increasingly urbanised culture. Country towns are dying, and the population is becoming more and more centralised in our cities, located on the coastal fringe. While there is some variation in experience according to region, generally speaking, the beach is the natural environment most readily accessible to suburban dwellers. As well as its offer of cool refreshment from the land’s heat, this liminal zone carries powerful resonance with a nation whose sense of identity is in a state of transition. As Philip Drew observes:

\begin{quote}
We have made the coast Australia by choosing to live there. The country is now synonymous with the coast. The veranda, in spatial terms, symbolizes the coast. It expresses the reality of Australia as unfinished, only half-way there, a country that has yet to achieve a final shape.\textsuperscript{11}
\end{quote}

As we cling ever more perilously to the coastline of our landmass, and gaze out toward the sea across which many of our ancestors journeyed, it is increasingly the beach that expresses the Australian’s joyous yet uncertain sense of place.

\textsuperscript{10} For a discussion of the critical debate surrounding Sykes’ identity, see Sonja Kurtzer, “Is she or Isn’t She?: Roberta Sykes and ‘authentic’ Aboriginality”, \textit{Overland}, No. 171, Winter 2003, pp. 50–56.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

(I) Literary Works

Western Australia


Hungerford, T.A.G. Stories From Suburban Road. Fremantle Arts Centre Press, South Fremantle, 1983.


Queensland


Victoria


---. *This is the Grass* (1962). Cheshire, Melbourne, 1972.


**General**


**Anthologies**


(II) Critical And Other Sources

*Books*


Bennett, Bruce (ed). *The Literature of Western Australia*. Sesquicentenary Celebrations Series, University of Western Australia Press for the Education Committee of the 150th Anniversary Celebrations, Nedlands, W.A., 1979.

---. *Western Australian Writing: A Bibliography*. Fremantle Arts Centre Press in association with the Centre for Studies in Australian Literature, University of Western Australia, Fremantle, 1990.


**Book Chapters**


**Articles**


---. “Is she or Isn’t She?: Roberta Sykes and ‘authentic’ Aboriginality”. *Overland*, No. 171, Winter 2003, pp. 50 – 56.


**Conference Proceedings**


**Interviews**


**Reviews**


**Theses**

