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Australian poetry; reflections on nature, space and identity

*The national symbolic is a fantasy of collective identity and expression but, at the same time, it is also a powerful system of control.* (Tilley n.d.)

In the relatively brief history of written Australian poetry, nature has emerged as a quintessential theme. As a space and a physical expression of the natural world, nature is expressed through many styles. It has been written in a pastoral style in the works of poets such as Les Murray, Hal Porter, Laurie Duggan and John Kinsella; as bush poetry in the works of Dorothea Mackellar, Henry Lawson and Banjo Patterson and as 'Nature' in the works of Judith Wright and Robert Adamson. This list is by no means inclusive or conclusive, merely introductory. Even in urban poetry, nature is often held in the frame of a window, in memory, or as scarred residues in developed spaces. Contemporary poets in Australia often express a consciousness of nature, even if direct reference to the natural world is absent in an individual poem. Through the poetry of people such as Patterson and Henry Lawson many of the symbolic spaces of Australia were created. With little to distinguish Australia's urban environment from any other city in the world, symbology of the bush and beach helps fuel the construction of Australian identity and poetry. Stereotypes are particularly masculine and inform the symbolic construction of masculinity to the point of parody in much Australian cultural product. These include but are not limited to 'the outback', 'the convict', 'the drover', 'the explorer', 'the settler', 'the athlete' and 'the hero' and the 'anti-hero'. There are few uniquely Australian archetypes available to symbolise femininity in spite of women being present and active in all the aforementioned archetypes.

Prior to the emergence of written texts, Aboriginal culture was deeply involved in poetic engagement with its world through songs, stories, paintings and dance. In a transcribed excerpt of an Aboriginal song we can see an expression of the relationship between people and their environment, a relationship that has become a mainstay of Australian poetry. Called the *Wonguri-Mandjigai Song*, translated by Ronald M. Berndt, the narrative reveals the rhythm of making a camp as it expresses the activity inside the endeavour.

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The people are making a camp of branches in that country at Arnhem Bay:  
With the forked stick, the rail for the whole camp, the Mandjigai people are  
making it.

Branches and leaves are about the mouth of the hut: the middle is clear within.  
They are thinking of rain, and of storing their clubs in case of a quarrel,  
In the country of the Dugong, towards the wide clay pans made by the  
Moonlight. (Kramer 1991, 1)

Such noticing of rain, space and bush is inevitable in a country as vast and sparsely populated as Australia. The purpose of this essay is not to historicise Australian poetry but to discuss contemporary Australian poetry through spotlighting, showcasing and meditating on current and past relationships between antipodean poets, nature, space and identity. In this meditation the texts of contemporary poets will reflect the (dis)connection that exists between Australian poets and their sense of space. Closely aligned with this discussion is how the voice of the wanderer or outsider is affiliated with place. Dorothy Hewitt, one of Australia's most iconic female writers of the past century, writes about the tensions facing Australia's romanticism of the natural world and the limitations it places on authors searching for an Australian voice.

how far is it really possible to cling to romantic positives in an unromantic world: the healing powers of nature, man's struggle to find his inalienable place in the natural universe, the freeing of the buried life through self-awareness and the plastic powers of the imagination? There was always the danger that the freeing of the ego for good or evil through the principle of energy would turn out to be only a circuitous trip back to the cell of the small round skull by a stranger, a wanderer unable to gain ego-room or to be 'at home' in the world. (Hewitt 1979)

Exploring one's relationship with place or home is an important theme in Australian poetry and at the heart of the concern is often a sense of alienation; from others, from nature and from the world. Such alienation is often pitched through natural and classical metaphors, as in Annamaria Weldon's poem 'Absolution'

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where cloister paths converge, one  
luminous lotus

in the still pond a  
winter moon's reflection is  
the flower's calm twin (Weldon 2009)

Alienation is not intrinsically a negative force as this poem shows. Alienation is often a precursor to deep noticing and a catalyst for a journey of self discovery that often leads back to the "small round skull" (Hewitt 1979) or the "flower's calm twin" (Weldon 2009). But the world inside the skull's rigid architecture is altered. As a result of changing perception the experience of habitation is altered and the best of Australia's contemporary poets often grapple with ways of bringing such experiences into language.

There is a house where the green paint hides beneath cream particle-boards, and the rusty gates have disappeared into the blue hues of hydrangeas. The front fibro walls are stacked with sliding windows, still waiting for sibling calls, their intentions made clear – red faces thirsting for Manning's Creaming Soda. (Hageman 2009)

Here the house and its garden have become one through memory, fecundity and time. Nature has beautified the ordinary little hothouse and transformed it into a scene of riotous colour; green paint, cream particleboards, blue hydrangeas, red faces. The poet notices that colour and wilderness redeems the ordinary suburban home and its extended family.

Debates about the value, relevance or otherwise of poetry surface frequently in Australian poetry rhetoric and exert enormous influence over the style and content of the country's poetry. Influential poet, publisher and critic John Tranter, who has been writing for more than 40 years, talks about the role of the poet and the difficulties of writing poetry in Australia.

Twenty years ago he wrote

In our society a poet's 'job' is an artificial thing; a peculiar way to address other people, like the vocation of a comic entertainer, a psychotherapist, or a priest. And writing and publishing verse can be a very marginalised occupation; not

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many people want to buy what you produce, and your status — compared to that of a stockmarket gambler or a newsreader, for example — is a very nebulous thing. (Tranter 1989)

Little has changed with regards to the marginalisation and impoverished status of poets in this country. Added to conflict over the poet's value is a consistent turnover of bitter aesthetic and personal divisions that continue to haunt the Australian poetry landscape. In the 1930s and 40s this tendency towards division manifested as two poetry movements that ruptured out of Adelaide: the Jindyworobak poetry movement and the 'Angry Penguins' literary journal. The 'Angry Penguins' as they came to be known, found themselves at the centre of great controversy as a result of publishing the works of a fictional poet (constructed by James McAuley and Harold Stewart) submitted under the pseudonym of Ern Malley. Tranter and others around at the time said this conflict had far reaching consequences for Australian poetry. A deep suspicion of unknown poets and avant-garde poetry are two of the legacies of the 'Ern Malley affair', as it has come to be known.

The Jindyworobaks believed that not enough space had been created for Aboriginals or the undeveloped environment in the expressive realm of Australian poetry. They believed it was only possible to develop a uniquely Australian voice by rejecting European aesthetics and incorporating Aboriginal culture and indigenous relationships with the land in their poetry. Judith Wright, who lived between 1915-2000 rejected the movement but later reflected on its importance for encouraging debate about the role of Aboriginal affairs in the Eurocentric culture of Australian literary society.

One thing the movement did achieve was to make verse a subject of debate and argument. Opposition movements sprang up, and brought into the quarrel most practising poets of any stature. The Jindyworobak's tenets were discussed, and their more extravagant aspects such as recourse to 'Aboriginality' was ridiculed, even in the daily newspapers (which at that time were scarcely arenas for literary debate). (Wright 1975)

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Wright was at the centre of many literary trends. Famous for her nature poetry, she was not only metaphysically involved with her landscapes, but also politically and romantically. In her poem 'Bullocky' nature is established at once as both an indifferent and a nurturing force.

While past the campfire's crimson ring  
the star struck darkness cupped him round.  
and centuries of cattle-bells  
rang with their sweet uneasy sound. (Wright 1999, 9)

The exhausted bullocky driver is driven mad by the harshness and alienation of a bullock driver's life, spent crossing unoccupied and unforgiving rural space. In the line "The star struck darkness cupped him round" dark sky is rendered as a nurturing rather than a hostile force yet the embrace alluded to by the use of the word "cupped" is set against a sky full of stars: a feature of bitterly cold, cloudless nights. The central figure of the poem is erased as his body decays. He returns to the soil which has claimed the lives of so many other drivers before him. The soil is not a malevolent force however, as it resurrects the bullock driver's body through the life giving force of a grape vine; used here as a spiritual symbol of Australia's unrealised potential as a Promised Land.

Grass is across the wagon-tracks,  
and plough strikes bone across the grass,  
and vineyards cover all the slopes  
where the dead teams were used to pass.

O vine, grows close upon that bone  
and hold it with your rooted hand.  
The prophet Moses feeds the grape,  
and fruitful is the Promised Land. (Wright 1999, 9)

Later in her life Wright rejected earlier romanticised poems such as 'Bullocky', in favour of poems that included representations of dispossessed Aboriginal figures, violated environments and coarse economically rationalist attitudes. Her movement towards a literary social ecology enabled her to reflect on the exploitative colonial gaze which saw Aboriginals and the environment as aspects of the Australian ecology that needed conquering.

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The land itself was now disfigured and desecrated, studded with huts, crossed by tracks and fences [. . .] The all-embracing net of life and spirit which had held land, and people, and all things together was in tatters. The sustaining ceremonies could not be held, men and women could not visit their own birthplaces [. . . and] proper burial became impossible and injustice had to be done to the rights of the dead. (Wright 1981, 27)

In this view Wright was following on from the Jindyworobaks. Unlike the Jindyworobaks however, Wright consciously addressed the abuse of indigenous people in her poems. 'Niggers' Leap', 'Bora Ring' and 'clearances' are examples of poetry motivated by her environmentalism and sense of social justice. Wright, the Jinyworobak poets and indigenous poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal set the stage for several generations of poets to consider the environment as a setting for understanding cultural, political and literary concerns as well as its embodiment of human spirituality and emotion.

The Jindyworobak poets may not have been the first to attempt to complicate natural symbolic identities with alternative truths but they did manage to pry open the lines of a poem to suggest room be made for alternative thinkings about the environment. Such thinking was in stark contrast to the colonial gaze which was highly opportunistic within its settle and develop mission.

This is Australian, each tree and bush, each hill,  
each mountain, each vast plain where dust-storms  
ride the ancient beds of ancient seas,  
each headland set to face the surf,  
each creek, long dry, that thunders when the rains  
break their all-feeding benediction on the earth,  
each rock that carving bears or tribal myth explains,  
each billabong the heron's grey reflection shows,  
each jungle-patch along the north-east shores,  
each valley and each gully where the euro runs,  
each foot of earth, each stick, each grain of dust,  
makes, and is ever part of, each Australian. (Mudie 1942)

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The Jindyworobak also reflected another scene of conflict in Australian literary and civil culture, that between the pastoralist who “defiled” the land, the indigenous “whose flesh is quarried from its earth” and people of the city whose “whose sons and daughters are forever blind / and deaf to all its mystery” (Mudie 1942). People of the bush through the historical lens are often romanticised in the Australian psyche due to the tint of the heroic that accompanies the lives of anyone making a life out of the harsh, drought stricken soil of this country. In contemporary times this heroic image has come unstuck as a growing sense of awareness of the environmental consequences of land management practices, foreign ownership and the wealth involved in the almost incomprehensible size of some of the landholdings come to light. This is coupled with the stereotype of the ‘always complaining’ farmer who tends to have inherited a family business that can no longer compete with multinational forces.

Key Jindyworobak poet, Ian Mudie expressed a political conscience of some alternative and somewhat prescient thinking about the space of Australian identity and the physical landscape. One poem “This is Australia’ offers a rarely published insight into an early political poetry that critiqued colonialism’s exploitation of Australian identity and space. “This is Australia” begins by introducing Australia as “the wide continent” full of “cold light and great darkness” that struggles with its identity as a “new-old land / where conflict breeds” (Mudie 1942). Mudie raises the choice that must be made by Australia’s citizens; to follow the sensibility of the European which is ill matched to Australia’s environment, or to embrace the Aboriginal ideal of “sacred” soil. A choice that has implications for the physical as well as the psychological aspects of identity, since feral species introduced by the British resulted in things such as

rabbit-burrowing blindness  
that gnaws at roots, and, plague-like, kills  
all that will never fill his purse nor stretch his belylskin (Mudie 1942)

which still afflict Australia’s environment today. “This is Australia, this is each one’s earth” says Mudie who raises the right of Aboriginals to an environment unsoiled by colonisation. In the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century this right was acknowledged in national moral rights legislation

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that enabled Aboriginals to claim ancestral allegiances to spiritually significant land that had been developed. This is quite different to the many acts of returning sacred ground to Aboriginals that have taken place since the 1970's. Moral rights legislation acknowledges the memory of place that is intertwined with Aboriginal spirituality and identity but it does not entitle them to reclaim the land from those who currently own it: a controversial yet in the main successful compromise between historical and contemporary practices.

Another symbolic and significant event emerging from the previously silenced "white" voice of resistance to the treatment of Aboriginals was the apology given to indigenous Australians by the newly elected Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in 2008. The apology, spoken at 9 o'clock in the morning "as the first action of the second sitting day of the 42nd Parliament of Australia" was greeted with applause, tears, standing ovations, flag waving and a general feeling of goodwill, though this was to be short-lived in some quarters of Aboriginal society, as demands for compensation fell on deaf ears. The speech began "I move: That today we honour the indigenous peoples of this land, the oldest continuing culture in human history" (Rudd 2008). More than 60 years prior to those momentous words the Jindyworobaks, who in spite of embracing Aboriginal ideas about culture did not have any Aboriginal members, railed against

... each wasted acre  
that the greed of sheep or wheat or axe  
has furrowed and scarred and swept  
and ploughed to barrenness, for each that sees  
as his own body and as mighty all this land. (Mudie 1942)

In recent times a number of Aboriginal writers have written about their relationship to Australia's land, politics and culture from urban and regional perspectives. Queensland poet Lionel Fogarty was born at Barambah, also known as the Cherbourg Aboriginal Reserve. For more than 30 years Fogarty has been a Land Rights activist for Aboriginal people and part of this activism is expressed in his poetics which rejects English as a suitable mode of expression for aboriginal culture. In an interview with Philip Mead in 1994 Fogarty says

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What I try to do in my writings is to show that no matter what English you get, English is the most bastardised language in the world — but it's not all bad — it does not give any natural flavour to what Aboriginal language is about. At the same time I try to show that Aboriginal language is a natural language, is a god-given language, a very spiritual language. Even if you get tribes that have been wiped out, then the tribe next door can still speak that language. But you find people today saying it's impossible to do that. (Mead 1995, 127)

In his poem “Murra Murra Gulandanilli” Fogarty interrogates linearity in favour of a song based metric that denies the grammar of English. His work is blatantly political, criticising the many practices, such as stolen children, land takeovers, lack of rights and deaths in custody that have emerged from the brutal and racist settlement of Australia.

Him smiling at you  
Him a-laughing at you  
Him eyes are dillil

Him understood the street lies  
Him undertook eight and was mistook. (Fogarty 1995, 5)

Politics and poetry have always had a rocky relationship here. Aboriginal poets were denied their language as well as publication opportunities so the contemporary scene is alive with protest, political commentary and outrage. The Jindyworobaks were accused of appropriating Aboriginal stories and images. They lacked true commitment to social justice as they did not invite Aboriginals into their fold. As a result the Jindyworobaks expressed the worst kind of politics, hypocrisy.

During an interview with John Kinsella that took place in Sydney on July 5, 2003, Pam Brown a poet involved in writing and critiquing poetry since the late 60s, discusses her experiences participating in a ‘counter-cultural’ poetry and visual arts group in the 1970s and the ‘quest for community that’s never come off’ as Kinsella pitched it. Kinsella asks Brown why a sense of

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community within poetry “can happen elsewhere but in Australia we try to construct it critically backwards” and as something that “was never really there in the first place” (Brown 2003 ).

Brown suggests that the divisiveness within the Australian poetry community is

always in response to something — like the Jindyworobaks or even, I’d say, the little Coalcliff group. It’s usually in reaction to something disagreeable. Like the factions of the 1970s. But I don’t know why Australia is like that. People say the factions are over but I don’t think you can say that. There are always groups of poets who have agreements about aesthetics or politics or whatever. (Brown 2003 )

Jindyworobak poets were interested in distilling a uniquely Australian voice and style that included Aboriginal language and stories. The Angry Penguins sought a more avant-garde and global voice motivated by the works of James Joyce, Gertrude Stein and other modernists. Traces of this debate about the ‘Australian’ component of ‘Australian literature’ continue to disturb understandings about nationalist readings of Australian cultural product. “There was a stage” said Chris Wallace-Crabbe in 1996 “when those of us who wrote about the scorned suburbs were looked down on by scions of the squattocratic gentry, like Judith Wright and Geoff Dutton. Subconsciously, they treated us as lower middle-class -- terribly politely, of course!” (McCooney 1998, 101). Here Wallace-Crabbe highlights another hot spot within Australian poetry, tensions between poets who prefer to write about the natural or rural world and those who only glance at it. As most poets write about both urban and rural spaces in one way or another, it is difficult to pin down these tensions as merely aesthetic or stylistic. In a way that is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss deeply, such tensions are also political.

Dorothy Porter questions the dilemma facing her and other contemporary poets, consideration of the reader. “Can poetry become flaccid and obscure and irrelevant in a comfy democracy? Does it degenerate into sophisticated but sterile word games?” she asks, arguing her support for lucidity and plain speech over a specialised language for the poets and their small reading circles (Porter 2001). “How much harm is in a book that makes no sense? There is nothing more apolitical than a book that can only be read by a select and small coterie. Indeed Auden’s

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famous quote, “poetry makes nothing happen” could be the coterie’s club motto” she says in defence of lucidity (Porter 2001). Others counter her view with an old yet established belief that poetry is not supposed to change anything and that in trying to critique the world it undermines its own relevance “the aesthetic value of poetry is relative to the age in which it is written (as contrasted with the “eternal” truths of science), for subjects once suitable for it are now no longer so” (Anderson 1939). Porter wrote several successful verse novels towards the end of her life, novels that pitched over into a more general audience and had ‘Monkey’s Mask’ (1994) feature briefly in the best seller list. In her 1999 verse novel ‘What a Piece of Work’ Porter showcases the plain speaking style that made her famous

In the shade  
of a twisted-trunked  
melaleuca  
Frank shows me the poem  
he sweated out  
in the airless swamp  
of his ward  
last night (Porter 1999)

Porter uses nature as a metaphorical as well as scenic feature of her crime verse. Other poets who use nature to enhance the subtext of their poems are too numerous to name as the device is popular in Australia. Lucy Dougan’s suburban garden stands in for the persistence of natural cycles and memory in spite of individual will.

Down the side of the house  
in unlikely soil  
there's an impromptu garden  
and all my attempts to move its show  
have failed. (Dougan 1996)

Australian poetry is often divided between rural and (sub)urban sensibilities. Michael Dransfield’s style of urban poetry casts the city as an alienating place filled with drug and alcohol addicted outsiders, a common feature of romanticised urban poetry.

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a needle spelling XANADU  
in pinprick visions down your arm  
what of nostalgia when  
the era that you grew with dies (Dransfield 1969)

Dransfield's drug fuelled lifestyle and subsequent early death is legendary in Australian poetry circles. Drug and alcohol abuse has inspired certain types of poets since the days of Henry Lawson, so it is no surprise that dramatic manifestations of this poetic cliché should continue to inspire the writing of many young poets. Initiation in the form of drug and alcohol binges has become a familiar and mainstream activity for Australian teenagers and young adults. Some poets view this behaviour as a kind of template for poetic initiation in a similar way that Beat poets did. Some never grow out of it. One of the initiates who shared the lifestyle of Dransfield (and occasionally with him) but who managed to survive was Robert Adamson. From his prison inspired poems we develop a keen sense of a poet restless for freedom and space. In lines dealing with this subject matter the poet paces the page the way an imprisoned animal paces the borders of its cage.

I've looked around every inch  
of the jail & dug my own groove in yellow  
sandstone, & searched without sleep  
& searched again  
back on the street in the rain – searched for  
some kind of rebel angel,  
some kind of law. (Adamson 2004)

Adamson's tales and poems parallel contemporary Australian poetry in an interesting way. After recovering from drugs, loneliness and alcohol Adamson carved poems that put distance between him and his pain; poems that turned a camera lens on his past life. Mallarme, one of Adamson's declared influences, can be seen as a smudge on Adamson's lens.

On my deck chair's arm a tumbler  
of gin has sucked in a dragonfly.

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I drink myself sober as they say.  
All that happens is my past  
oozes through its pack of black jokes  
and disasters. During Under the Volcano

I sucked bourbon through a straw  
from a milkshake carton, at 4am  
eating handfuls of icecream  
I tried to soothe a hangover that went on

for a decade. (Adamson 2001)

“The difficulty with Dransfield and Adamson” says Hewitt “has been to separate the fire from the smoke, the romantic cult from the work itself. Like all committed romantics both have, of course, collaborated in the creation of their own sensational mythology, and then let it roll” (Hewitt 1979). This problem is not unique to Australian poetry but is a significant part of it. Adamson later moved out of Sydney’s drug infused streets to the oyster farming country of his heritage. It is from there that he crafted exquisite poetry about the human-nature relationship. It is not nature poetry in the traditional sense as Adamson brings his story, his heritage, his environment and his nature into the scene of his most successful poems. In one poem ‘The Gathering Light’ Adamson kills an enormous fish

I’ve just killed a mulloway –  
it’s eighty five pounds, twenty years old –  
the huge mauve-silver body trembles in the hull. (Adamson 2001)

As the son of a fisherman Adamson is accustomed to the violence of fishing, yet in this particular act of violence he is freed from the oppressive weight of his criminal, drug and alcohol addled past. As the sun catches him holding the fish Adamson experiences a naturally induced transcendental high, something he has never felt before.

The sun is a hole in the sky, a porthole –  
you can see turbulence out there,  
the old wheeling colours and their dark forces –

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but here on the surface of the river  
where I cradle the great fish in my arms  
and smell its pungent death, a peace  
I've never known before – a luminous absence  
of time, pain, sex, thought, of everything  
but the light. (Adamson 2001)

In 'The Gathering Light' the death of the fish serves as a moment of resurrection for the poet, who weaves sacred and profane forces deftly through a scene where nature and the past meet in a portrait of convergence. Adamson was dubbed the "Huck Finn of the Hawkesbury" in the 1970s as a result of serving time in one of Australia's reform schools. He was later imprisoned for theft and sex with an underage girl. During his last stint in prison he discovered poetry, which along with Bob Dylan he credits as saving his life (Tulip 1971). Adamson who fulfils Australia's peculiar romantic tastes for certain kinds of criminals and certain kinds of environments, now writes psychologically invested naturalism. As a country brought into existence through the efforts of transported convicts and their violent keepers there is mythological sympathy for the criminal who challenges authority on behalf of the 'little guy'. This tolerance exists predominantly in a symbolic and mythological way and Adamson's theft of a rifle bird from the Taronga Zoo, for which he was sent to reform school, ensured that his criminality would be skewed towards a romantic reading. Inside his personal story lies a modern day hero's journey: from fall, through suffering towards redemption and enlightenment. Cynics and critics of Adamson accuse him of constructing himself in such a way as to fuel this mythology. He has documented the journey as artfully as any Homeric fiction and fans of his work have walked alongside him as he moved from inner city badlands to the disquieting but enriching environment of the Hawkesbury. In 'Day Book for Eurydice' a twelve poem sequence, Adamson's alter ego

walks the streets of  
the inner city enduring his limbo calm  
as a sentence (Adamson 1999)

Adamson uses Eurydice to enact and perform his own resurrection.

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Eurydice flies up from under the ground  
and moves through the penthouses. (Adamson 1999)

In so doing Eurydice rises above the streets full of drunks, pushers and prostitutes to occupy a space symbolic of prestige and success. Adamson speaks to this directly when he says “our lives will change” (Adamson 1999).

Adamson’s body of work expresses a lived as well as a crafted experience. For this reason he is emerging as one of Australia’s most important contemporary poets. Much of Adamson’s poetic endeavour in the last decade has focussed on the Hawkesbury River and its surrounds.

Adamson comes closest to Wright’s virtuosity in writing about the relations between the human and natural world, though Adamson, unlike Wright, is happy to foreground himself and his lover in his poems.

The shadow your hand casts  
resembles the mudlark, opening  
its wings, calling and rocking,  
perched in the pages  
of my book. (Adamson 2006)

There are doublings throughout the poem’s text, in its use of repetition and the spaces it manifests in these few lines. The body of the poet, meets the body of a lover, meets the body of a bird, intertwined and conversational in the expansive space of the poem. Adamson’s love of his Hawkesbury homeland is contained in a lifelong meditation on the meaning and value of his own existence and its relationship with the river’s own life force. Adamson has a gift for combining close noticing, classical reference and subjective rendering of the natural world, bringing many layers into each of his poems. An example of this can be seen in his poem “The River” which weaves its syntax across enjambment and unpredictable flows to mirror the river’s structure while invoking romantic staples such as stars, lovers and the ocean.

There’s a gale in my hair as the mountains move in.

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I drift over lakes, through surf breaks

and valleys, entangled of trees –  
unseemly? On the edge or place inverted

from Ocean starts another place,  
its own place –

a step back and my love's before me,  
the memory ash – we face each other alone now,

we turn in the rushing tide again and again to each other,  
here between swamp-flower and star

*to let love go forth to the world's end  
to set our lives at the centre*

though the tide turns the river back on itself  
and at its mouth, Ocean. (Adamson 2004)

In lines such as these Adamson follows the flight patterns of poems written by those who have influenced him: Christopher Brennan, Kenneth Slessor, Francis Webb and James McAuley. His detouring away from the works of his mentor Roland Robinson also represents an influence. Quite early in his career Adamson became interested in moving away from pursuing an Australian syntax and style in preference for an American inspired voice. He was particularly inspired by the poet Robert Duncan who helped Adamson escape the colonial traditions so difficult to shake off during the 1950s and 60s. Adamson's subject matter may be Australian but his style was unapologetically American. Adamson rejected what he considered phoney nationalism and colonial eulogising about the 'lucky country' to participate in and then head up a literary movement called the generation of '68. This perhaps signalled the moment where Australia's source of cultural inspiration began to shift from Britain to the USA, a shift which has become a source of irritation to artists and writers seeking to establish a contemporary Australian style. In *An Elm Tree in Paddington* Adamson talks about his aesthetic predicament and influences.

of Brennan standing on similar joinery,

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in the same suburb, soured by love and Symbolism . . .  
. . . I drink American whiskey from a champagne flute  
and think of Lawson at the Rose & Crown,  
he knew the price of a beer cost more than the blackest sonnet. (Adamson 1989)

The extent to which American television, music, literature, non-fiction, politics and spirituality reaches into the heart of Australian identity makes it impossible for artists and writers to contemplate a uniquely Australian voice. A strategy used to manage this lack of cultural integrity has been to borrow styles and techniques from other cultures and apply them to the Australian environment, which is another reason why so many poets write about the spaces of their lives and generally get less involved with abstractions, rhetoric or ideology. Take for example the following lines from Adamson's poem 'The Written Moon' which exemplifies the technique of using image to embellish feelings.

In the green beach-light  
you said you'd make  
the moon sing,  
the surf purring  
and you beating the sand  
with the shreds  
of your voice. (Adamson 1995)

The Generation of '68 was a group of young poets with a fondness for Rimbaud, Bob Dylan, hippy culture (drugs, sex, rock 'n roll) and all things American. This post-colonial infatuation with America's alternative lifestyle and pop culture brought Adamson and his peers into conflict with traditionalists such as Roland Robinson who were perceived as expressing redundant ideas about Australia's identity and poetry. The takeover of *Poetry Magazine* by Adamson and other members of generation '68 (John Tranter, John Forbes, Laurie Duggan) brought Adamson into conflict with his mentor Robinson and allegedly heralded the start of a new era in Australia's literary development. Sensitivity towards criticisms from the various cliques that run Australian poetry tastes are discussed openly by Adamson, who these days is less concerned with the kind of backlash he used to generate and is perhaps more involved in aesthetic management than he might care to be.

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when I'm writing poetry that is influenced by L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E-centred poetry, or poetry without reference – whatever you want to call it – I'm in a semi-defensive state, combative sort of state, knowing there's this audience in Australia that will savage it. That you'll have enemies, that you'll have savage critics of it because it is poetry that's threatening to a lot of Australian poets, I think. Either that, or they don't like it . . . What they call L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry is like this vague, strange, demonic beast to them. (Kinsella)

In discussing L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry Adamson highlights the poetry controlling forces that poets must confront if entering the fray of 'serious' poetry in this country. Unfortunately such forces are often self-appointed and self-imposed and in a country with such a small population they can have a limiting influence on experimentation.

Critic Martin Duwell speaks of a difference in the treatment of perceived space by poets from different parts of Australia. Duwell summarises this as something "strung out between particular perspectives and broader ones" especially in the work of Melbourne poet Kevin Brophy (Duwell 2008). Particularity in a Melbourne context may be seen as an urban equivalent of nature writing in the sense that it notices with great precision the quality of 'things' in the world; rendering them with a similar meticulous attention to detail that often accompanies descriptive forms of nature poetry. This approach to poetry writing is emerging from one kind of Australian voice; a voice that constructs the noticed and imbues it with a sense of the human eye and body involved in the noticing. For some poets writing about place, witnessing things in the environment is an important way of connecting with lived and inhabited experience. In Kevin Brophy's poem 'Difficult' we encounter the poet detailing the detritus of his urban existence. Brophy treats his laundry as an explorer might document a first encounter with a new civilisation. In a clever and tactical way he points to the writer asserting authority over the scene at the same time he writes himself.

The place is left as realistic as anything you might write yourself.  
Dirty clothes (for instance) are piled into a predictable straw basket,  
their odour not quite animal or human,

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though the stiffening socks were plainly meant for feet. (Brophy 2004, 12)

The 'particularity' of Melbourne poetry is something Duwell, a great critic of Australian poetry, considers "a Melburnian vice, the counterpart to that intense sense of belonging to a small area and being acutely aware of differences between suburbs, football clubs etc" (Duwell 2008). Poetry of the particular has a large following in spite of critics like Duwell remaining underwhelmed by such a strategy. Later in Brophy's poem we encounter the poet detailing his world and his relationship to urbanised nature.

The plain truth is the bricks outside are wet with rain  
and now you find yourself inside  
the couch is sprinkled with the drops that just blew in with you  
through the curtains of the open window.  
Sounds of possums in the poem's ceiling must distract you,  
a blackbird in the yard outside is startlingly alive,  
the cat inside will stay asleep despite your tread,  
and a green bin steaming with the evidence of wasteful lives  
in a corner of the kitchen is what you've come to expect from art. (Brophy 2004, 12)

A tremendous feature of Brophy's poetry is its capacity to draw you into the minutiae while at the same time contextualising it within a broader material and psychological scene. Brophy is not alone amongst Australian poets echoing French philosopher Gaston Bachelard's idea of a poem as a house, however Brophy's poem-house is quite literally bursting at its seams with wildlife, rain, wind and waste; in other words his house is represented as an ecology. Nature has moved into the scene of the poem and the poet's house. Reading Brophy's poetry is like encountering an impressionist painting which provides an opportunity to zoom in on an angle of light or to back away and read a landscape's greater narrative. Indeed Brophy's approach is quite painterly. Andy Kissane, a substantially different poet from Brophy also concerns himself with the domestic scene. In his poem 'Miscarriages' Kissane expresses relationships in a more direct and perhaps less philosophical way than Brophy.

I've just let the onions slide off  
the chopping board onto the spices darkening  
in the cast iron pot when the phone rings.

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Can you get it? I say, taking the knife  
and peeling back the hoary skin from a knuckle  
of ginger. (Kissane 1999)

'Miscarriages' embodies that most occupied space of Australian life, the domestic scene, and it does it succinctly; reflecting the urban lifestyle of the majority, who live in cities and suburbs rather than the outback, deserts or remote country. Urban space is rich with particular kinds of activities and scenes, yet at its heart resides a deep imaginary called 'nature', a space frequently exploited by marketers wishing to invest their development products with a psychic connection to a more natural and nurturing space. These are the qualities of being an Australian that surround the wandering or domestically ensconced poet's body. This may be why so much Australian poetry is concerned with nature or a sense of the natural world and the extension of natural metaphors as philosophical comments. For example, in Mike Ladd's poem 'Philosophical Autumn' a dinner party with friends in a courtyard at his home brings 'late sunlight' along with the 'good bread, good soup / good words...' Later

A parrot arrives  
in the pin oak  
in a sudden beating  
of green and red.

The leaves flare,  
seed husks fall. (Ladd 2008, 4)

In an average backyard, birds and humans share different spaces granted by a single tree. "I will bring you the still moonlight on the lagoon" says indigenous poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal, writing as Kath Walker, in her poem 'Gifts' (Noonuccal 1981, 39). A certain kind of pragmatism dismisses the romantic imperative of the male character trying to woo the protagonist who continues with

And steal for you the singing of all the birds;  
I will bring the stars of heaven to you,  
And put the bright rainbow into your hand.' (Noonuccal 1981, 39)

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Efficiently Noonuccal dismisses romantic idealism and literary romanticism flavoured by European sentiment, in favour of a pragmatic and earthly love; one where the man offers sustenance to the woman. A true provider is what she seeks in the closing lines “‘No’, she said, ‘bring me tree-grubs’ (Noonuccal 1981, 39) instead of the ‘singing of all the birds’; a line that points to the destructive practices of European settlers which lead to the extinction of many birds and their songs.

Nature has many treatments in Australian poetry. Sydney poet Peter Minter writes suburban scenes infused with nature in his 2006 collection *Blue Grass*.

The night wind is over.  
Cold air running over flint leaves  
& grey steel fields

white nimbus  
breaking moonlight on hilltops  
at bright speed (Minter 2006, 103)

Here the hills of pastoral poetry are transformed into the grey steel fields of tin rooves. The Pastoral, a form of nature poetry, is a controversial space. In the past it has meant everything from “countrified paradise terrestre, an Australian Wessex” (Fuhrmann 2009) to poetry written by poets living in or writing about the regions; that great vast space beyond the cities where people cluster around economically valuable activities such as mining, farming and government service. Les Murray’s early works positively glow with the sunlit hues of the pastoral. In ‘The Fire Autumn’ (1969) Murray exemplifies a style of pastoral poetry that delights in translating and interpreting vistas.

The walls of the country this year, the forest escarpments,  
the seacoast stump-mountains are fired with amber and buff  
like autumn in the Jura, October legends of fall,  
some hilltops are sailing the storm-rains with almost bare poles  
and the logs that still smoulder in gullies are not far from mist. (Murray 1969)

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“An author” says Andrew Fuhrmann, may hope for an association with the pastoral “by christening his or her volume Arcadia, Idylls or Pastorals, or else dubbing some poor shepherd Amyntichos, but there will still be doubt” (Fuhrmann 2009). Fuhrmann suggests that the existence or otherwise of pastoral poetry in Australia depends on whether such poetry is believed to be “a form, mode, mood or genre”. Like jazz poetry, the nature of pastoral poetry is too slippery for such convenient distinctions. Perhaps the true pastoral tradition is “deceased” argues Fuhrmann following Laurence Lerner’s (1972) belief that “pastoral was no longer a living poetic tradition” (Fuhrmann 2009).

Pastoral, it seems to me, is essentially this: life in regions that lie beyond large, bustling cities, as sentimentally imagined by urbane, sophisticated, literary poets. ... What is wanted is an imagined space where deaths, loves and celebrations of the natural world may be staged. (Fuhrmann 2009)

A pastoral view does not acknowledge the contemporary realm and expression of nature and its relationship with people via gardens, backyards, hills etc. Contemporary poetry needs to free itself of such parochialism and enable writing about cultivation and husbandry that is not only independent of geographic spectacle or distance, but one that is placed inside as well as outside fences.

In Laurie Duggan’s ‘Pastoral Poems’ we witness a direct critique of the aged and Euro-centric pastoral myth that has evolved in the bush poetry and sentimental nature poetry of Australia. Urban space is configured around a tight concentricity of what Australians call the CBD or Central Business District. Every capital city in Australia has one and quite often there is a mall at its centre. Wrapped around the CBD is the city, which is often split by a river. Somewhere within 10 -15 kilometres, depending on the city, the consciousness of the suburbs begin. One hour out of an unnamed city in Duggan’s poem lays the pastoral: somewhat rural, perhaps grazing country, perhaps farming or empty acres, but not bush and not too far away from ‘civilisation’.

Clouds hang at high altitude.  
A tin windbreak shelters a rotating sheep.

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Figures group and regroup against the gust,  
suit collars turned up in the spring air

an hour away from the capital  
in the town where the poet bought groceries

whose books you could recognise birds from. (Duggan 1985)

In mentioning the poet 'you could recognise birds from' Duggan alludes to Hal Porter and his decorative pastoral verbiage. Many poets leave the urban environment, even if only temporarily, to tap into this sense of 'outer' space. A sense of 'outer' space comes from the reality of Australian existence, one surrounded by concentricity, like living in the heart of Kissane's onions that 'slide off the chopping board'. In the case of MTC Cronin space is acknowledged as a plastic force reflecting the laws of nature in every thought.

The sound  
                  of a leaf  
  
brushing  
                  another -  
  
my thought today  
                  has grown still  
  
and elongated  
                  in the tree trunk. (Cronin 2002)

Self and other are effectively neutralised as positions in Cronin's poem. Oceans, deserts, distance from influential Western cultures, difference from influential Asian cultures, and the big clear skies full of stars that remind anyone driving a 100 km away from most Australian cities that there is a universe out there capable of diminishing one's sense of self importance. Duggan's scathing attack on the parochial attitudes emerging from the pastoral sector which exerted a significant influence over Australian culture in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, demonstrates the kind of attitude that still prevails in matters of taste in some quarters of Australian society.



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something is wrong. (Kissane 1999)

It is as though the rushed moment in the cramped space of the kitchen is reflected in the spatiality of the poem's lines, which appear more concerned with rhyming patterns than drama. The lines don't reflect the speaking voice so much as a narrative infiltrated with prosody. As the poem's narrative continues we witness a common yet devastating event unfold.

Sorry, I'm so sorry,  
scattered through your listening  
and I want to ask who it is, but restrain myself,  
slicing the ginger with a precision  
copied from cooking demonstrations on TV.  
Eventually I catch her name and I know. (Kissane 1999)

The title of the poem does give away the poem and deny its true potential for suspense. Importantly however, it contains a connection to the earth despite being located inside a home through the act of cooking. Cooking as a gesture of transformation converts agriculture to food through a dislocation of organic forces. For example tinned tomatoes, onions, knuckles of ginger are set to the knife as the forces of consumption surround the poem's scene. There is no reason to suspect this home is different from any other as the poem is not concerned with the house's structural features, emphasising instead the people living in the house. This house is similar to the myriad of other houses crammed tightly into Australia's cities and suburbs.

Words are inadequate. I stir the onion and add  
a tin of tomatoes. Solidarity is most powerful  
when silent — an arm around a shoulder,  
a meeting of eyes. It's quite common actually,  
they write magazine articles about how no-one  
talks about miscarriages, one of the last taboos.  
Ours started with the ultrasound — length of body  
consistent with nine weeks, not twelve. No sign  
of a heartbeat. It wasn't a mistake, he said,  
our baby was dead. (Kissane 1999)

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Poets such as Andy Kissane, Mike Ladd, Angela Gardner and Eluned Lloyd notice that home and place are understood through relationships; which include discrete weather patterns, birdlife, animals, friends, gardens and atmosphere. External and internal worlds have a way of informing each other, as Eluned Lloyd demonstrates in her prose poem 'breathing in'.

*'I am a fish and I swim in your veins. I feel the warmth and beat of your heart the pulse of your breath. You flow in my head and my heart.'*

the plane is two hours late and there is lightening on the runway before i leave.  
this weather has come from where i am going. i see the 5 metre swell in the bay  
before we land. there is turbulence in me a main artery flowing with your  
words and the preparations for this hard journey. you have left  
graffiti in my body you have left poems in my sleeping (Lloyd 2004)

Fellow Queensland poet Brett Dionysius has dedicated his recent poetry to critiquing social relationships. A country boy who grew up on a farm that slaughtered its own meat, Dionysius now a father living in the rural town of Ipswich, brilliantly crafts our human capacity for systems that promote species-threatening brutality. As a product of the real pastoral rather than the romanticised pastoral tradition, Dionysius has no illusions about the violence of man. Evolution is used as a device to show how little human behaviour has changed since the ascent of *homo sapiens*. In his poem 'Lower than the Angels' time is placed at '1998 AD' where in the third section of the poem 'The Ascent'

The Taung baby;  
the first pre-millennial  
Hollywood child star  
raises her head & time stops.  
The Rift Valley hums like  
an apartment block on M LOW defrost.  
Unemployed for two million years  
her child labour resumes in 1924.  
Australopithecus - 'Southern Ape',  
the first astronaut on that -  
'awful planet of the apes'.  
no maternity leave in the ascent of man. (Dionysius n.d.)

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In the fourth section of the poem 'Now, the other dole bludgers in the queue' Dionysius sardonically speaks of our future by reminding us of our place in the evolutionary ladder.

fossil lemur (50 million BC.)  
Aegyptopithecus (30 million BC.)  
Dryopithecus (20 million BC.)  
Ramapithecus (14 million BC.)  
Australopithecus (4-5 million BC.)  
Homo Erectus (1 million BC.)  
Homo Sapiens (500,000 BC.) (Dionysius n.d.)

Mike Ladd has been dubbed an industrial nature poet by an observer of his works. Although the intent of this label is unclear, a sample of Ladd's poetry demonstrates affection for suburban life and its bounded engagement with nature. Unlike Dionysius' innovative, pessimistic and globally situated world view, Ladd draws us simply into the nurturing quality of intimacy that has survived decades of marriage and child rearing.

From 'London Aubade'

We talk on the bed,  
words strange pebbles  
held in early light.

Ivy on the bricks outside;  
swiftly grown,  
glossy red. (Ladd 2008)

From 'After Villon'

Trace the leaf  
that wetly kissed the ground,  
follow the footprints  
melted with the snow.

None of these I can trace;  
but catch in your eyes

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your nineteenth year  
in your ageing face. (Ladd, Transit 2008)

and from 'Camping Ground Desiderata'

Be intimate once more with the dirt:  
in your plate, in your hair,  
in the loop roads of your guts.  
The grime under your nails telling where  
we came from and where we go. (Ladd, Transit 2008)

In Ladd's poems a new romanticism emerges that draws heavily on the old, as love and the acts of love are enacted in and through nature. Angela Gardner also draws on the romantic poetry tradition of writing the quality of flowers as the quality of love in her poem 'Pollen'.

waiting takes on a peculiar density  
flowers die in their vases  
and pollen falls too late or early for stars  
in a meteor trail dusting the windowsill (Gardner 2008)

These samples reveal a common thread of romanticism in contemporary poems that reference nature in a metaphysical way. Each also expresses a uniqueness in style, voice and structure that reveals the diversity and range of Australian poetry.

Vincent Buckley declared that "Poetry deals with man at a metaphysical level – but with man's metaphysical status reflected in his actual state, localised in his actual physical surroundings, embodied in his sensuous and spiritual reactions to his world" (Buckley 1957, 1). In his poem 'Golden Builders' we see how metaphysical man journeys through the world seeking divine love in a fashion similar to William Blake, the master of such writing.

... When the bush burns to ashes I still must touch my forehead to the ground,  
because its radiance is in my body. Gods are vulgar. So are journeys. Ulysses sails  
to find a speck of blood in the newly woven pattern; Orpheus goes down to find  
mortality a blessing. I walk beside these fires because I must, in pain and

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trembling sometimes thanking God for what they give me, the few poems that are the holy spaces of my life. (Buckley 1981, 99)

Buckley's comments about Australian cultural identity and poetry are as relevant today as they were in the 1950's, another era dominated by conservatism and consumerism. Witness Claire Gaskin's poem 'a liberty of flowers'

somewhere in her ashes is what I was married in

two blades of grass  
touch in the breeze  
like god and adam

I bury my head in the shifting sands  
the rain comes from the future into the present (Gaskin 2008)

Australia's preoccupation with realism, narrative, lyrical description and nostalgia for landscape as a mythological force capable of resisting urban isolation, is as active today as it was in early settlement days. The minutiae, particularities, or the everyday are attractive to many contemporary poets because they help stop the noise and slow down the pace of life. Such poems call us to the rain, the trees, the birds, the soil and the person next to us and therein perform affirmation through witnessing ordinary life and relationships. Hewitt suggests that this preoccupation is expressed in a "bleak stoical tone" coupled with a powerful storytelling drive. A "country like Australia ... (even more than the U.S.) has a fastidious distaste for emotional overburden of any kind, and an underground sympathy for the dry-eyed masculinity of the stoic loser" (Hewitt 1979). This is perhaps less true today as it was in the 1970s though a fondness for emotional allusion is still prevalent. Take for example Kristin Hannaford's poem 'All this Kiss' which uses the metaphorical value of nature to express the sensation of kissing, a difficult activity to render directly.

Where have you taken me today?  
under the bridge  
moss skin and the dank wet soil

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smells metallic  
as I take your long fingers  
guile me into the wood  
this roughskinned ironbark

pushing breath held  
lungs bursting against the  
water surfaces  
seizing delayed sounds  
fluid fluid fluid

all this kiss. (Hannaford 2002)

Buckley's privileging of a landscape aesthetic derived from 'man's reaction to his world' in a way that deepens "sensibility to the point where the land is conceived and imagined in terms which are at once spiritual, moral, sensory and directed to the drama of human existence" (Buckley 1957, 23) has left its legacy in Australian poetry; with its deepest contemporary expression residing in the poetry of Les Murray. In 'Laconics: The Forty Acres' this is realised in classic Murray style

We have bought the Forty Acres,  
prime bush land.  
If Bunyah is a fillet  
This paddock is the eye  
The creek half-moons it,  
log-deep or parting rocks. (Murray 2009)

The landscape is imbued with spiritual and metaphysical properties which the poet inhabits, personifies and expresses.

Under the booty weight of bees, cleome flowers  
on improbably lank spears  
incline their heads, then fling  
Christmas stars are violently detonating.  
Failed fruit trees for the chop, since they never bore,  
Now offer spotty treats against the saw.  
Christmas is near, with beach shirts and bling,  
We preferred the no-fly zone of spring. (Murray 2009)

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Man is the centre of everything including landscape which is put to the service of man. As a result the landscape becomes personified to serve the poet's need to speak through the portal of nature. Such poetry seeks to embody human consciousness in the symbolic realm of nature to defer a personal and direct expression of emotion. Murray is a master of poetry that renders a rural scene and the world beyond the scene into pastoral language. Adamson however places himself at the centre of his own mythologising. In "Flannel Flowers for Juno", Adamson strips himself of dark memories in favour of love, nature and the simplicity of presence.

The sounds of the river are softened  
while you carry the rest of the world in your head  
And I empty myself of memories one  
word at a time. (Adamson 1999)

Janice Bostok's poem 'Slipper Orchid' speaks of lost love. It is no accident that the Slipper Orchid is used to talk about the loss of a parent, who is most often understood in the context of domesticity. The slipper suggests a father and the poem exemplifies the stoic handling of emotional loss. It is a 'life-goes-on' poem.

your slipper orchid lives on  
brought home when your house was sold  
it settled in fractured sunlight on my  
back patio away from the draft  
of the open garage                    high  
on a corner shelf unassuming in bloom (Bostok 2002)

Contemporary indigenous poet Sam Wagan-Watson expresses his own journey through a mixed identity and his relationship to Australia's land.

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

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curvaceous segments of road  
like black smiles and frowns  
either gazing in the direction of the Pacific or the hinterlands,  
dark horses upon the clearing of the dreamtime tabernacles (Minter 2005, 53)

Wagan-Watson notices the line, the divide, but is detached from it. This detachment allows him to notice where past, present and future line up with urban and rural features expressed through his own complex subjectivity as both Aboriginal and poet. The divide between the urban and the rural is not only geographic, it is stylistic and aesthetic. "Is this history or personal despair " asks Rae Desmond Jones in her poem "Voyage to Sebaldia" which captures a day in a city with aplomb.

I would ask over the cold coffee & brittle toast.  
The waitress speaks a language I don't understand  
As sullen storm clouds swirl & touch the glass,  
Tracing primitive symbols in the motes of dust.

Despite your writing I think you are a listener.  
Perhaps you would chew your toast carefully then  
Dab your lips & smile up at the roman numerals on the clock.  
Yes, if I had time, I would follow you. (Jones 2005)

On a beach at Kings Head MTC Cronin draws attention to the loss of fish that development is causing. "Nobody's heard of Kings Beach / Caloundra like they've heard / of Pittsburgh / or the Cote D'Azur" she says in a poem that draws attention to environmental stress through juxtaposition with human leisure. It is neither an urban nor rural poem but one that brings an urban voice to a semi-rural beach.

Yet here every year when the mullet  
run we kneel on the shore  
and catch the fish  
in our hands

Someone always asks  
where the fish are going  
and every year from a larger crowd  
less and less can answer

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as trucks load the ocean's movement  
and we bleed from the beds  
of our nails cut by fin  
and scale (Cronin 2003)

Today poets and publishers grapple with the sense of impermanence that is noticeable in a country with such a young literary history and relatively few canonical poets. The editor of a well known Australian press, Vagabond, exploits this Australian sensibility of impermanence as his editorial method.

I don't look at publishing poetry as anything more than a working of impermanence, in the way that a conversation moves smoothly through arising differences and allows for anything, takes a subject, like a poem, picks it up for a moment and then sets it back down. In some ways, what I do editing or publishing is geared to the same sense of detachment that arises when I'm writing, each piece is a moment marked in time and set aside for the next moment. (Brennan 2005)

Nature poems of all kinds attempt but will always inevitably fail to resist such impermanence. The rate of environmental destruction and extinction is so rapid in this country that the landscapes captured today could vanish within an hour, a week or a month. In spite of the collapse of Australia's major river system, the widespread destruction of its forests and the pollution and overfishing of its waterways, nature is somehow configured into the Australian psyche as something that is a part of us. Even if we were to follow Dorothy Porter's demand to speak plainly and broadly a poem is unlikely to save nature. As the density of the suburbs increases with a subsequent loss of habitats to facilitate a relationship between people, plants and wildlife, the construction of Australian identity will inevitably change. As people dig deeper into technology and spend less time in nature, alienation between self and the world may increase and poems that relate to nature may become either increasingly sentimental or increasingly personified. Personification, while useful and essential as a technique, denies nature its own space to exist. In the words of Anthony Lawrence " All scrublines and human interaction / are what we do to them when we look upon them" (Lawrence 2008)

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