

unfurl

An abstract painting featuring a dark, expressive face with large, circular eyes. The face is wearing a light-colored, wide-brimmed hat. The background is composed of broad, textured brushstrokes in shades of yellow, black, and grey. The overall style is gestural and expressive.

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WRITING+ART

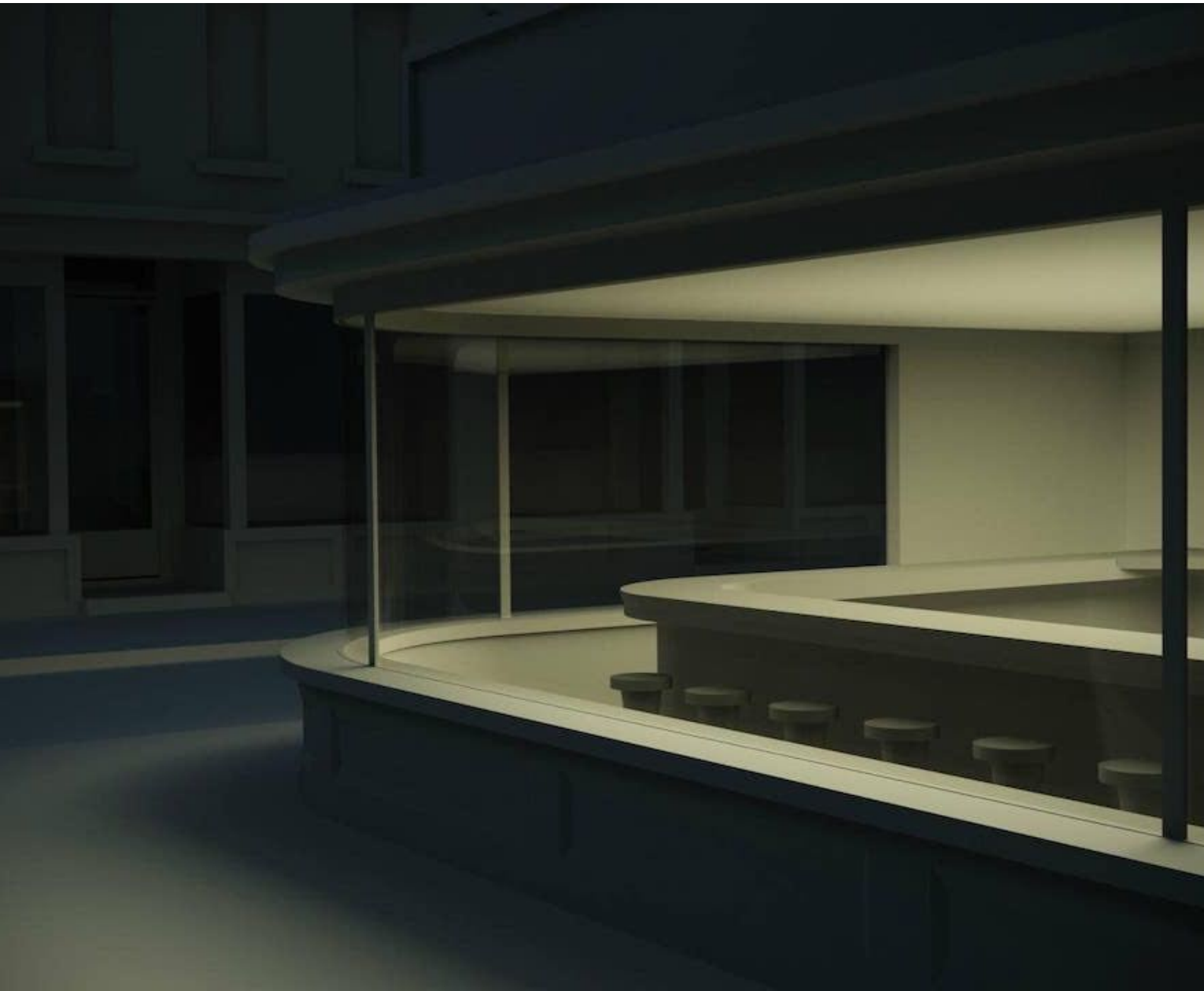
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**June 2020 — writing+art
/painting /poetry /stories
/video /music /dance
/drawings**

**/AlexSKOVRON
/GinaMERCER
/LeeJamesSHOTT
/SteveCOX /LesWICKS**







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- Alex Skovron /poetry /story /art
- Gina Mercer /poetry
- Lee James Shott /painting
- Steve Cox /two biographical stories and two watercolors
- Les Wicks /poetry



- [Gander](#)
- [UNFURL playlists](#)
- [Internet roulette](#)
- [Unfurled already](#)



Masthead image is *Man wearing gas mask 1950* (2020) by Lee James Shott.

Introductory images: *Nighthawks* (1942) Edward Hopper; *Depopulated Nighthawks at the diner* (2012) Dean Rohrer; and an Internet meme (2020) by unknown illustrator.



Alex SKOVRON /poetry /story /art

Alex Skovron was born in Poland, lived briefly in Israel, and emigrated to Australia in 1958, aged nearly ten. His family settled in Sydney, where he grew up and completed his studies. From the early 1970s he worked as an editor for book publishers in Sydney and (after 1980) Melbourne; since the 1990s he has worked as a freelance editor. His poetry has appeared widely in Australia and overseas. *The Rearrangement* (1988), his first book, won the Anne Elder and Mary Gilmore awards and was shortlisted in the NSW Premier's

Awards; there followed *Sleeve Notes* (1992), *Infinite City: 100 Sonnetinas* (1999, shortlisted in the Age Book of the Year and Victorian Premier's Awards), *The Man and the Map* (2003), *Autographs: 56 poems in prose* (2008), and *Towards the Equator: New & Selected Poems* (2014, shortlisted in the Prime Minister's Literary Awards). Other awards have included the Wesley Michel Wright Prize for Poetry, the John Shaw Neilson Poetry Award, and the *Australian Book Review* Poetry Prize. The numerous public readings he has given include appearances in China, Serbia, India, Ireland, Macedonia, Portugal, and on Norfolk Island. An 80-minute CD in which he reads from his poetry was published in 2019 under the title *Towards the Equator*. His next collection, *Letters from the Periphery*, is due in 2021.

Concurrently with his poetry, Alex has intermittently published in prose, including short stories, a novella, and the abovementioned *Autographs*, which can be read as a book of microstories. The novella, titled *The Poet* (2005), was joint winner of the FAW Christina Stead Award for a work of fiction and has been translated into Czech. *The Attic*, a bilingual selection of his poems translated into French, was published by PEN Melbourne in 2013; and *Water Music*, a bilingual volume of Chinese translations in the Flying Island series (Macau), came out in 2017. Some of his poetry has also been translated into Dutch, Polish, Spanish, Macedonian and German. His collection of short stories, *The Man who Took to his Bed*, was published in 2017, and a Czech-language edition appeared in 2019. He has collaborated with his Czech translator,

Josef Tomáš, on English translations of the twentieth-century Czech poets Jiří Orten and Vladimír Holan.

Concerns that have driven Alex Skovron's poetry and fiction are many and various: history, language and music; the riddles of time and the allure of memory; philosophy, faith and the quest for self-knowledge; art and the creative impulse; fantasy, eros and the affections. His interest in speculative fiction has played a recurring role in his thinking and his work, as has a lifelong passion for music. As a poet, he enjoys both the disciplines and the aesthetics of formal design and the diverse challenges of freer structures. Integral to his project has been a focus on musicality and the primacy of rhythm. He likes probing the elasticities of syntax, and exploiting the 'contrapuntal' layerings available to imagery and meaning via compression, connotation, ambiguity.

▶ [Read Alex Skovron's poetry](#)

▶ [Art by Alex Skovron](#)

Photo: Martin Langford

The man who tried to erase his shadow

by Alex Skovron

Ever watched a man at a tramstop on a windy day, attempting to turn the page of a broadsheet? Not just turn the page, but fold it back and around the rest of his paper and then fold that over again, to leave exposed just the half-page that contains the article he's interested in. The problem is the wind. To achieve his goal, the man must release the page he has finished, allowing the wind to grab it and lift it for him. All is well until the halfway point, the point when he tries to take control of the fluttering page, to fold it under. The wind won't let him. The man twists his body this way and that, manoeuvring his vessel of print like a master mariner, trying to fill its sails to just the right measure, to catch just the right angle for the page to settle politely around the back of the paper. Several times he almost manages it, but the wind keeps changing at the last moment, he simply can't rotate his body into the proper attitude and the page flaps wildly, defiant. The man is not unmindful of the comical aspect of his exertions, but for him it is exasperating. A bit like trying to evade your own shadow. In the end he settles for a very imperfect, untidy folding-back of the page – the kind he regards with contempt whenever someone at home has browsed through his paper with no concern for neatness or alignment.

Look, I might as well come clean. That comment about evading your shadow was not an accidental simile. The newspaper image seemed a good way to

introduce what I really want to tell you about – the man who tried not just to evade, but to *erase* his shadow.

You'll probably think this is simply an excuse for one of those fashionable little pieces you find in the literary journals. But my story is different because it really happened – yesterday afternoon, in fact. I didn't want to share it with anyone at first, but this morning on waking I experienced this strange compulsion to get it out of my system. I considered telephoning a friend, and I certainly gave thought to telling my wife; but in the end I decided the best course was to write down what I had seen. Just for myself. Nobody will ever read this (I never show my jottings to anyone, and I'd never dream of publishing them) – though I confess that this knowledge feels both comforting and, well, a tiny bit sad. But then, that's a feeling I get almost every time I sit down to write. Call it the subterranean rumblings of the ego.

Anyway, what happened is this. Yesterday morning I was alone in my room cradling my third cup of coffee and listening to a James Taylor CD. Lorelei had rung from the office to hurry me up on the Trixy Toys project – she'd received an email from Toronto and the parent company was getting edgy about deadlines, what with the launch of our new range set for October. I don't know why I bother to remain in this job, I hate writing advertising copy, especially for products I don't feel passionate about. Well, I do know why: because the money's so good. And after all, it's not as though

I'm helping promote cigarettes or pornography or guns. Most of our accounts are toy manufacturers, with a scattering of sportswear labels, a newsagency chain and a hardware emporium. It shouldn't be too difficult to believe in the products I write about, and I guess in a way I do. But you see, there's no passion: I don't feel even a shadow of conviction.

So when Lorelei rang I was a little put out, though I assure you that this had nothing to do with Lorelei. Quite the reverse. I've had a crush on Lorelei ever since she started with us back in April. I wouldn't mind describing her to you – maybe I'll do that next time. No, why not now? My great-aunt Trudi always said – in German, mind you, though it's been so many years that I don't recall her exact words – she would often remind me, whenever I was trying to put off some unsavoury chore (this is when I was a boy and great-aunt Trudi lived with us), that the Lord had no time for procrastinators; that when the Day of Judgment arrived, those who had been prompt to do their duty, be it scholastic, professional or military, would be the first to be admitted to the Kingdom of Heaven; so one should never shirk responsibilities, but embrace them with passion (there's that word again, it makes me think of the Trixy Toys commission I've been stalling on). As you can see, great-aunt Trudi was a very religious woman, and she had quite an influence on my life at the time. She would have been proud of me, I suppose – a successful copywriter with a bustling firm. On the other hand, maybe with her religious beliefs she would have dismissed advertising as sinful – though surely not in the sort of accounts I handle. I'll

never have the chance to discuss this with her, because she's been gone a long time. I was thirteen when she died. She was struck by lightning during a thunderstorm as she crossed a busy thoroughfare in the middle of town. She was carrying a steel-tipped umbrella, and the bolt of lightning must have noticed it and homed in with lightning glee. But that's nonsense, why am I writing like this? Still, she did always have a hell of a time with that umbrella, an enormous thing with a sculpted handle; it would never open properly, and was inclined to blow out on itself at the first sign of a breeze. I have visions (no, I have actual *memories*) of great-aunt Trudi wrestling with her umbrella in the midst of lashing city gales, trying desperately to stop it from jumping inside out. It brings to mind the man wrestling with his broadsheet, and also the other man, the one who tried to erase his shadow. I'm coming to that. Perhaps Lorelei is the one I should have rung about it.

But I promised to describe her to you. Well, let me start by saying that Lorelei is not exactly beautiful; but she's unbelievably sensual. At least, *I* think so. I'd like to tell her this, but I worry that she'll take it the wrong way. Actually, she'd be taking it the *right* way, because I really would love to *do* it with her, as they say (if I may be forgiven such a vulgar expression), but she has a boyfriend and I've always made a point of avoiding trouble. My record is spotless. Great-aunt Trudi would be proud of my record, because she was a great believer in spotlessness. She was a fanatical polisher of the furniture, she used to follow visitors around with a duster – but that's another story. Great-aunt Trudi

probably wouldn't approve of Lorelei, because she didn't believe in sex before marriage, and I know that Lorelei lives with her boyfriend. He's some sort of investment broker, and rather handsome. (Mind you, the company he works for sounds a bit shady.) He dropped in at the office once, and I was struck by his clear eyes and mellow diction. For some reason he reminded me of James Taylor. James Taylor is my favourite singer. I love his silky, hypnotic voice, his poetic lyrics, his country calm. I have all of his recordings. I suspect great-aunt Trudi would have approved of James Taylor's country calm – after all, she was born in the German provinces. Thuringia, I think. Or was it Saxony? Though I really doubt if she would have understood his music. For her, singing ended with Schubert. What would she have made of Led Zeppelin, AC/DC, the Sex Pistols?

But I was telling you about Lorelei. She has this amazing smile, and every time she smiles I nearly fold. She is slightly overweight, it's true, and maybe her nose is a fraction too snub and her chin a trifle on the weak side. There are those who would call her plain. But whenever she smiles and flashes her two front teeth (with the saucy little gap between them), her cheek crinkles and her eyes light up with the most seductive glimmer, and you know, I feel like sweeping her up in my arms and carrying her off and, well, ravishing her. Sometimes she makes these suggestive little remarks – just to tease me, I suppose – and I try to ignore them. The nearest I ever came to responding to her advances (that's how I'm tempted to view them, because she's a bit of a flirt, and she uses too much

eye-shadow), the closest I came to any danger was on her last birthday, when I gave her a festive peck on the cheek followed by a brief hug. It was so good to hold her, if just for a moment. She didn't seem too eager to break away, in fact I even imagined she was pressing herself in towards me a little, so I pulled back. But then I always did have an over-vivid imagination. One day I might tell you a few of my erotic fantasies. One of them involves Lorelei. Great-aunt Trudi would be horrified.

Thinking of great-aunt Trudi in the same breath (can you say that?) makes me wonder if Lorelei is of German extraction too, because her name reminds me of a poem by a famous German – Goethe or Schiller, I think – which great-aunt Trudi taught me all those years ago. I used to know all the words. The poem tells of a legendary siren on the Rhine who lured sailors to their deaths with her beautiful singing. Perhaps I ought to be more careful with *my* Lorelei. I've never heard her sing, but she hums quite tunelessly, mostly when she's embarrassed about something. Like on her birthday, after I'd rejected her advances.

If that's what they were. Because I really shouldn't be concerning myself with Lorelei. After all, I'm a married man; Tessa and I are not unhappy together. We've been married for eight years and plan to start a family soon. She can't wait. Tessa comes from a very large family, she's one of seven, and aside from her parents, her brothers and sisters and their children (about eighteen of them, all told), there are droves of cousins,

uncles and aunts, and they all descend on our house at Christmas and Easter and whenever Tessa has a birthday or nameday. I can barely recognize or identify most of her relatives – to be honest, I still know only a few of the children by name, and I'm hopeless with all the cousins and aunts and uncles. *Zio* this and *Zia* that, most of them look the same to me. This annoys Tessa, of course; whenever we argue it's usually to do with my attitude to her family. She says I don't try hard enough, accuses me of going silent or escaping into my study when they come to visit. I must confess it's true, I don't have much time for her family – and her parents were cold towards me from the start. They would have loved their Teresa to marry a good dark curly-haired Catholic boy, but were saddled instead with this reticent German Protestant complete with blond mop and blue eyes. I must tell you about the marriage ceremony and the function that followed – it makes the wedding-banquet scene in *Goodbye, Columbus* seem sedate and dignified. No, I'll leave that for another time, because I really need to describe the incident at the tramstop yesterday, the one with the man and his shadow, that I started to tell you about.

It was the tramstop nearest to the office. Now, trams have always exerted a strange fascination over me. I actually met Tessa on a tram. One of those totally illogical encounters that could easily not have occurred – you know, if the tram hadn't happened to tarry a moment longer at that stop, if the seat next to me hadn't happened to fall vacant, if she hadn't happened to bump me as she sat down laden with awkward parcels – and if the butterfly hadn't

happened to alight on that specific palm-leaf in the steamy Brazilian jungle twenty years earlier ... Anyhow, we started to chat about toys, mainly because the parcels she was carrying included a large Christmas selection for her nephews and nieces. And from there, things just seemed to take their ineluctable course. Before I knew it we were going on a date, and then another, and all of a sudden we were getting engaged, and then – never mind, or I'll get started on the wedding again. Tessa hates it whenever I mention the wedding in the heat of an argument.

Not that we argue a lot. Mostly about her parents and relations. Oh, and sometimes about music as well. Tessa hates my taste in music, and she especially detests James Taylor. I think she has made a point of this just to spite me, she couldn't have been so opposed to him before we got married because she'd hardly heard any of his songs (the one she knew was 'Fire and Rain', a terrific song, sure, but scarcely the key to the man's artistry). I tried to play her a few of his albums and she listened just to humour me. It didn't change her mind about James Taylor. She goes for the Carpenters, and Celine Dion, and John Farnham. How is it that I can appreciate *her* favourites, whereas she can't bring herself to give my hero the scantiest of fair hearings? Lorelei says she adores James Taylor.

She's not so keen on rain. I was actually with Lorelei when the incident with the man and his shadow took place. It was cloudy all day yesterday, and I was stuck in a Projects meeting that dragged on well beyond five.

As I was leaving a tremendous thunderstorm erupted and the rain came teeming down. Lorelei, who had also been in the meeting, asked if she could share my umbrella as far as the tramstop. Well, I was going home by tram too (a different tram, unluckily), so we pushed off towards the stop together, me wrestling with my umbrella (thinking of great-aunt Trudi, as I always do in a thunderstorm) and Lorelei holding on to me for dear life, her arm locked into my elbow. It struck me that anyone observing us at that instant might think we were husband and wife, and this pleased and excited me. I thought of how disaffected I had become with Tessa, and how romantic it was to be struggling through a thundery downpour with Lorelei humming in my ear. (She really was, too, tunelessly of course.) It was even better than those erotic imaginings I was going to tell you about.

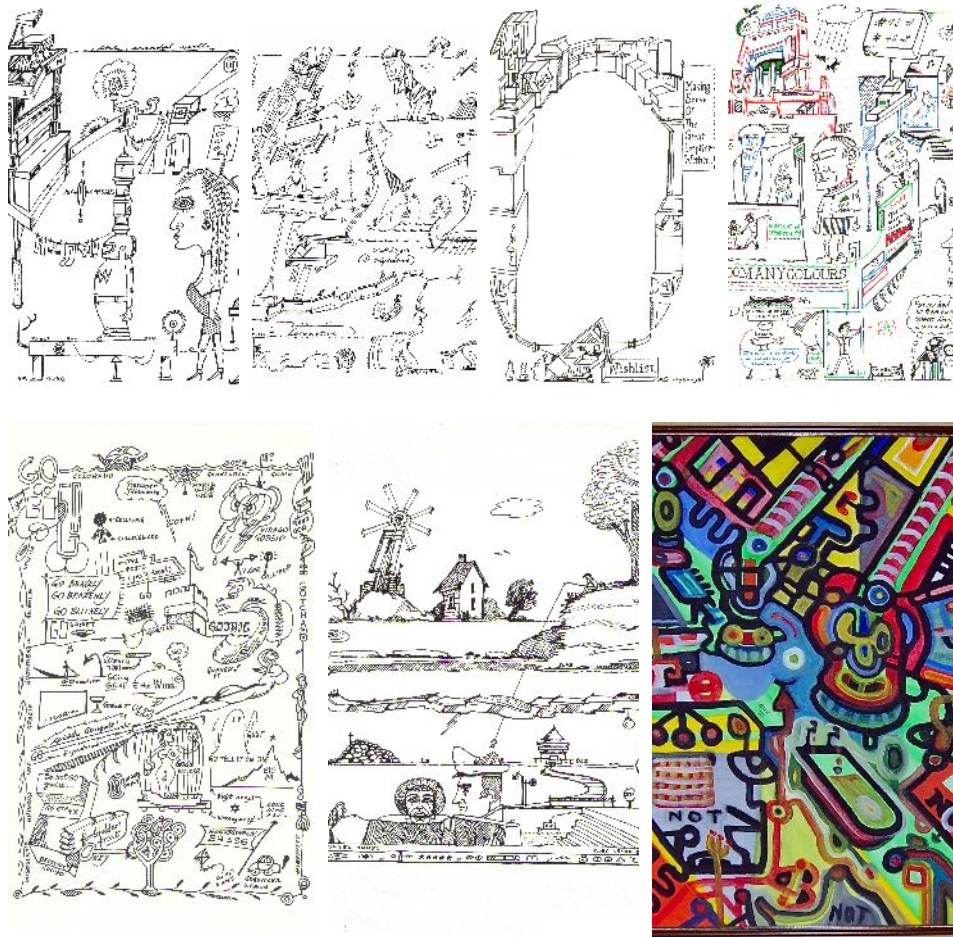
Then abruptly the rain stopped, the thunder receded, the sun broke through – and the spell I had woven with my fantasy was broken. That was when we caught sight of the man at the tramstop. He was tall and thin, and he seemed to be casting about for something – the way you do when you’ve dropped a coin that you know must have fallen close to your feet but you just can’t spot it. No – more the way an infant trapped in a highchair will strain to look outwards and downwards when a toy drops from his tray and he can’t understand where it’s gone. I must admit I don’t have much of a taste for infants. (Tessa senses this, it’s one of the unspoken tensions between us.) Infants have a special talent for throwing their playthings about. Toys are forever slipping out of their fingers,

and I can tell you as a copywriter with a bit of research under my belt that some toys are particularly tricky that way. Tricky toys. Tricksy toys. Trixy Toys. That gives me an idea for a new promotional angle – why didn't I think of it at yesterday's meeting? But Lorelei was taking down the minutes and I can never concentrate properly when she's around.

Another thought has just hit me. Is it possible that we both subconsciously *planned* the way we needed to leave the office at exactly the same time, the way she requested to share my umbrella, the way she hooked herself into my arm as we trudged through the wind and rain? Maybe she's grown as unhappy with her boyfriend as I have with Tessa, perhaps she wants to have an affair. With me. What was she humming as we struggled towards the tramstop? What was she trying to tell me, in her tuneless, gap-toothed, gorgeous way? Now that I think about it, she did seem a little restless, as if she longed to come out with something, to share something important. But then we reached the tramstop and caught sight of the man who was trying to erase his shadow, and the moment passed. I want to tell you about this man, it was extraordinary to watch, I've never seen anything like it. And I *will* tell you about him, soon. Right now I'm feeling a little agitated, and I need to stop and think things through.

From *The Man who Took to his Bed* (Puncher & Wattmann, 2017)

Drawings and a painting by Alex Skovron



Left to right, top to bottom: *Scandal mill* (1996); *Vikings & viqueens* (1995); *Zero won* (1996); *House full* (1996); *Forbidden fruit* (1996); *Haunted house* (1995); *Knots* (1975, acrylic on canvas board).



Alex Skovron

Poetry

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Sisyphus

I choose my boulders carefully,
They are scattered like words across the white plain;
I scoop my syntax from the clouds' dictionary –
The path to wisdom is difficult, rich and mundane.
I have my nostalgia, the soft exquisite aching
That lulls and lacerates; and I can dream
The dazzling city that drives upward to the horizon
Beyond the land where the rumbling boulders lean.
One evening soon, as the crescent overtakes me,
I'll slip discreetly over the edge of the plain
And into the valley beyond, because I know
The song of terrible grace that summons me.
But the clouds are backing away; an exquisite pain
Is pleading for me to stay. How can I go?

Springvale

In the city of the dead
with my mother. Necropolis
is many cities:

they float amid
the listening geometry & I
said things

not said
when they could have been said
& saw shapes.

My father
slowly closed his back to the
shut earth, & I

drifted ahead,
pausing to browse among
names

& sealed numbers
as they led me quietly
stone to stone

endward. I
among the rows imagined
absent mourners'

thoughts, hovering
low like abandoned clouds:
each belonging

silent to a silent
seldom-revisited mirror
in the ground.

The Composer on his Birthday

I am thirty-five: next year Wolfgang
will be dead. Young Franz lies buried in Vienna now
three seasons under. Even the infant Arriaga's no doubt
notched his genius. High time for Hochzeit
is the needle of an ailing mother, she spies
a grandchild round every corner but I remain deaf
dreaming my firebirds & kalevalas, or a father of twenty who
still had time. Already mirror-scratched, I'll soon be scored
as the grim sheets grinning back, edentulous with
missed music: my curlicues stare bleak at the decay
around them, tracked by a thin fate. What should have been
the great romance of Chroma & Diaton is an Opus 1
Allegro fragment scattered lovesick
on slippery timber. I sit to excavate knowing all musics
are entrapped in this ivory but the keys
lie tacit, unbroken – neat bones of a cryptic enigma
the solutions to which are infinite are
impossible are at worst
satisfactory. Sebastian is smiling like a steep uncle, Bonn's
mountain pulsates with laughter. My mother
is weeping.
I must journey once more to Vienna.

Sanctum

So there he was in the library, crouched above the floor
like a mousetrap, squinting into his rickety parallel edition
of the *Satires*. The paperback was from the late fifties;

its cover had long detached, released its burden, demoted itself
to a floating flapless jacket, and some of the pages
were beginning to tip out – in short, the book required two hands

to be consulted, so his grip was intense but worshipful.

He never journeyed anywhere without it, and he relished
the odd quotation over an ale: ‘Why is it, Maecenas,’

he would mutter, ‘that *no one* is ever quite happy ...?’

And there he was again, on the Persian rug, a prayermat mouse
Latining into his cups, mumbling mantras that he alone

could hear. We hated it when the demons repossessed him –
the medicos would dismiss him as eccentric,
at best melancholic, in those days when the Sadness was just a ‘cloak’.

The house tonight shook to eluctable musics, the clustered roomfuls
jangled and rowdied onward,
distressing damsels (spilt and semiclad) drifted the liquid corridors

strumming their thighs; but he had settled himself on the magical carpet,

Horace in hand, deaf to all temptation. A prism
of the Black Label sat beside him, the mystic flask an orange glow

on the mantel, yet his love of the elixir never placated him –

it only made him vocal, and further classical.
Surely enough, as we broached his shadowy island he shouted: ‘*Nemo!*’

Dreams of Dead Poets

Time was, I would have died for such adulation,
given up a decade for a day of it.

My volumes dance in all the literate bookshops,
pupils sift my enjambments for a sign,
my symbols scatter like dust about the land
and all the quarterly reviewers now
drop my old name as if it were a chant.

In short, I am a poet on the crest of fame
every anthology's incomplete without,
my statue looms erect in pantheons
and I've inspired a thousand lesser gods.

Yet as I sit and scan the other side
a horrible despair encircles me.
I've learnt about the suffering of the dead –
much blacker than the half-blind pangs of life.

I am objective, but not yet detached
enough from that poor ego I inhabited
to stay unmoved by seeing what I see.

The stuff's no good!
The lines I sweated over mock me now;
those random clusters of inspired gloss
stand like a sentence, and my cleverness,
that self-reflecting eloquent façade,
haunts immortality from the halls of time.

I can see through it all –
I was no poet: yet I could have been,
perhaps, perhaps, if I had stopped to hear
that which was truly happening within.

And oh, the verses I could *now* create
from these half-listened-to, half-done designs!

I could rewrite my whole inheritance –
or most of it: there is the poem or two ...

I curse this clarity!

Soon it may scarcely matter. But now I'm helled,
like a poet at night, in one last desperate quest:

I must find Milton, Botticelli, Bach.
There are some urgent things I need to know.

The Other Side

Audi partem alteram (St Augustine)

If I could be certain about *my* city
I would not be proposing this;
see, there are too many documents,
they sail across our unshuttered window
each eventide and vanish
somewhere right-angled to the sky.
You lied (no?)
when you accused the sky of hypocrisy—
it means everything it says, just
doesn't twig too deftly
to the inherent duplicities of the cosmos:
strong force, weak force, strings
open and closed, what a recital!
A garret above she's reciting Mandelbrot
into her cups, alert poet
not yet alarmed, the appointment
a week away. Will there be fire? Or is it
great Anaximander I mishear
at the harpsichord, desperate to reconcile
his celestial wheel with equal temperament?
Meanwhile stationary old Earth
heaves a soiled sigh of hope, we wait
in trepidation for the timid boy next door
to start repounding his weights
or curl his bicep to lubricious pixels
that constellate the black hole of his lair.
I conjure all those nuclear *familiae*
with their duple single beds,
the Crux of the South cartwheeling
over the rotary hoist, every last parchment
secure in its slot, each element tipsy
with itself, still writhing under the table.
Where are you, Democritus,
and what about all those atoms?

Carousel Days

And one evening, constellating the dots
from the top deck of Civil Engineering
my gaze skimmed beyond Delta Orionis
and I suddenly detected a tiny shifting

of the sky's slant, an opening that said—
look hard enough into us drizzling stars
and you will discover more of yourself
than if you drank from an endless chalice

of the choicest rum. And I forgot about
the fragrant maiden, eighteen, next to me
(I myself only just barely twenty), forgot
the spring night's rooftop seminar, transit

of the morning star, all the lecture notes
folded in my bag, the poems fattening
my little black book with the bright red
spine, and I stared like some ridiculously

transported thing, a boy who'd disturbed
for a mere moment and twisted some key,
glimpsing a doorway to a language meant
(he was certain) for him alone. And each

waking minute in carousel days to come
he would search to regain it, to translate
what, upon that starstruck roof, had stung
his soul. He is there still, translating it yet.

Travellers

'In the rushing train only the future is real,
for every moment is given to a different place ...'

Hermann Broch, *The Anarchist*

Just five of us in the carriage,
three with cords recharging their ears,
and a fourth has periscoped
a palm-sized apparatus, and begins

to film the bleak suburban panorama
rolling past. As we're hushed
into a tunnel he holds focus,
for his porthole is suddenly articulate

with mirages of the three women
sprinkled down the far side of the aisle.

One of them has caught on,
darkens her regard, turns disdainful

to her own blackened window.
The traveller, chastened, dips his lens
into a holster secreted below,
hoists a paperback with a German title

which, craning past his neck,
I disambiguate as *The Sleepwalkers*.

Sensing espionage, he glares
at me through his dissolving mirror,

for the tunnel is being retracted,
the illuminated world invades the gloom
and decelerates. I look about:
we have slotted ourselves into a station

and my traveller is chasing the corridor,
gaining on the girl who rebuked him.

How much slighter she looks,
in her heels, clumping to the platform.

Legend

But this was 1969: her father seemed so old that
I expected him to crumple at any moment. Instead he folded

his fat Saturday paper, smiled Nixonically
and, thoughtful, brushed at his shadow like an alcoholic. ‘We

eat at six on Saturdays, you’re welcome to join us.
In the meantime, drive nicely.’ At last: we were alone as

a couple of cosy parkers in Lovers’ Lane, or almost – this was a
daytime date so we’d have to make do. And because her

Psych project was due Monday, and tonight being the night of
her babysitting debut, most of the weekend was a write-off.

So we drove down to this windy deserted beach
halfway along the coast, to a place where they’d converted each
little picnickers’ bay into a sheltered virtually one-car
niche, turned off the wipers, the motor, managed to plunk our

starving bodies into the back, where, peeking over at
me like a magnet she loosened herself somewhat and ‘Gopherit!’

she said. And before we knew it, as the cross-hatched rain
sealed us into our great dream forever, latched in our hot pain

against the wet world, half-naked where it mattered;
and as I watched her effigy unveil, and our teeth chattered

in the steam of the afternoon downpour, and she unravelled a
hand into my skin, and I sensed her perfect shadowy parabola

remould itself and disappear somewhere and grow ample,
and understood the thrall of Samson as he grasped the temple

pillars with all his love and all of his power; and as I knew all
this, I suddenly recalled, absurdly, that the fuel

gauge had been sitting on absolute zero and in a while I'd
have to restart the car; I thought of her dry old dad and I smiled,

and I looked into her spinning, half-open eyes and her arms clung
irreleasably and that was the moment I drowned, there among

the pounding waves of rain and her infinite lips ... That and
the radio humming, and 1969; and who cares today if any of this

is anywhere near the way it never quite happened.

unfurl

A Case in Point

‘He was quoting Latin, such was his exasperation.’

Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*

Like the apothecary Homais, one saving grace
he could confess to was a love
of metaphysical disputation—
a Voltairean’s spicy logicality
seasoned with the dogma of an autodidact
proud of the strewn shackles of revolt.

Fabricando fit faber, he would thunder,
not unlike Yonville’s pompous pharmacist,
scarcely disinclined to clip the ear
of any pretentious, over-pietistic apprentice—
though his *métier* followed Gutenberg
not Galen, printer by trade,
typesetter, compositor, call him
what you will, for he could expound
endlessly on each and every chunky distinction.

‘My serifs are my seraphim,’ he used to bristle
grinning from galley to press;
‘King James, much as I praise the prose,
has much to answer for.’ And thereupon
would issue forth an unpaged
stream of Romanesque expostulations
against the poperies of the learned ignorant,
who couldn’t tell a pica from an em,
an en-rule from a hyphen, a homily from a hoax.

Cryptic Crosswords

‘Same again!’ he called from his corner
by the window to the sad brunette behind the bar.

She confirmed, so he rejoined the cryptic

he’d begun on the train from Montreal, the world
outside a blank of all-devouring white.

By Schenectady he’d given up, decided to leave
the puzzle half-cracked till he got to Penn.

New York was bleak, an icy January wind scoured
the taxi-ranks as he dragged his suitcase

toward the next yellow blob steaming at the curb,
headlights drizzling. The cabbie, shadowy

and sullen, grumbled at the three-dollar gratuity
he’d pressed into his glove at journey’s end,

the Roosevelt on Madison and East 45th. Adding
a five, he trusted his bag to a bouncy porter

prowling the sidewalk. Sharp rain slanted straight
into his cheeks, he felt a spasm of unease—

especially once he spotted his wife in the lobby,
pointing irritably into her Tissot, spoiling

for argument. He performed an eye-rolling shrug
up into the ostentatiously faceted ceiling.

She stood up to welcome him, they embraced like
hypocrites. Surely the divorce documents

had come through? He could hardly wait to settle
everything, get back to his favourite bar

on 51st, his cryptics, downing alternate espressos
and Edradours, rare specialty of the house.

They’d agreed to meet in the morning for the ride
to the attorneys’. But now, casing his suite,

he recalled the white train, brightened, stripped
to his t-shirt in the oppressive central heat,

unfolded the damp *Times*. That pesky 49-across.

Tale Without a Moral

for Peter Kortschak

Her face had never launched a conversation
her talk was Parisian chatter
her brain, though not unsharp, shrank from deliberation
but her body
was another matter

Some labelled her volcanic
whenever she moved men trembled
her topography indeed was immaculately mounded
she was not at all
unpleasantly assembled

But there was something about her of the depressive
and sometimes a tendency to panic
a vegetarian, she could be quite alarmingly aggressive
yet her pleasures
were all perfectly organic

She'd accumulated orchestras of lovers
to a man they rose and genuflected
and although her favourite was a Romanov philatelist
she retained the mark of one
widely collected

Towards mid-age her preoccupations narrowed
an early vanity found itself reborn
she began to invent herself all over again: a sparrow's
small necessity had
caught the worm

To the Jeu de Paume she daily discreetly went
willing a swollen fantasy to simmer
then home to assess the pose. Until in the end
the mirror made her thighs
and buttocks quiver

And then the plummet into chronic hypochondria
liaisons with the medicos were legion
and she'd diagnose disease in every Mondrian
and Modigliani: Death
was her religion

They say she died both beautiful and bitter
her face had gentled with time
to glow serene by the candlelight that lit her
bed, while turmoil
darkened her mind

At the graveside it was moderately cluttered
little was spoken, even less was said
it's reported the penultimate thing she uttered
was: Let me go now
but wake me when I'm dead

Narcissus

In the end, of course, he got married
to himself. A civil ceremony, nothing too glib, a friend
or two, a reporter from the *Mirror*, the odd flame
from the past, a waiter with icy water;
his watery parents, a little perplexed, looking around,
confused because no engagement had been announced.

The celebrant was vague, her words left an eerie
echo, she quickly left. Nobody spoke. At last, he escorted
himself into the Bridal Suite: nervous, a little beery,
he sat there blushing on the edge of a single bed.

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Syzygy

What I connote is both conjunction
And opposition, I'm where the moon
Meets the sun; I'm a combination
Of two feet in a measure, an immov-
Able union, or a cluster of functions;
A couple of linked things, or their relation ...

Yet sometimes the other s's gang up on me,
They mock my vocalic rut, my rash of descenders,
They call me *Three-y's*, and remind me I'll always be
The last ... Who cares! Yesterday, I met Xystus.

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Galatea

It's worst when he lugs me to his bed at night:
The soft clammy flesh, the sweaty fumbling,
Those flabby encroachments. Yet the eyes haunt me.
'Oh, hold me, hold me!' he whimpers, pathetically,
Though he knows my paralysis – all I can do
Is gape unblinking at the stony ceiling.

Afterwards he'll always caress me lovingly,
Polish my thigh with a garland of tissues,
Then dwindle to a snore. I slip the blankets
And stand in the rain. Stand there imagining skin.

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Glissando

From a train, each act is slowed, made trivial
in a sadness outside duration. That's the real
wisdom of trains ... You hurtle past a suburb: men limp
into doorways, schoolgirls stroll the sun, the street
vendors are statuettes with heavy mechanical limbs.
Who was it said time is an engine of cogs and gears?

Look again. This crowded *shtetl* is no vanished world
from the mists of time, sealed in monochrome sorrow,
but life, poised at the lit leading edge of time. A child
waves, smiles up at us: as if there's no tomorrow.

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The Golem

I walk among you, breathing clay,
Everything I touch is smeared with red earth,
You who created me will not easily forget the day
Your computations and your magic gave me birth.
I shall fashion my earthen generations
After my own kind, we will conquer your vanity,

Transform you for your longed-for dispensation
Of harmony and bliss. But know this: the joy
Of paradise will demand your soul for the new sanity:
Whom we would make sane, we must first destroy.

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The Waterline Poems

*Però, se 'l mondo presente disvia,
in voi è la cagione, in voi si cheggia...*

Manifest

Science advances, evolution crawls,
the calendar propels the moon before it;
we celebrate direction, forwardness, the line
of letters or the dancing torrent
tabloid and broadsheet bring as evidence
against those vacuums we abhor, sameness
and silentness, the enemies of time;
and time becomes the prisoner of clocks.

Here we accost the all-consuming sea
of platitudes: that Character advances,
that Age gathers its wisdom naturally,
a kind of garland for the years of chances –
missed, when you track it out. And in the end,
tapered to pain, or glory, or to madness.

Descent: Below the Waterline

They say the drowning man about to die
experiences the flooded mind unreeling
frame by escaping frame the history
of every act and circumstance and feeling,
until the culmination of a lifetime's blindness
brings a release of momentary sight
and a perspective unalloyed and timeless
at that last instant of receding light.

I wouldn't know what it is like to die –
all too precise, time will devise its reckoning;
but I detect, when molecules of day
carry me to the ocean-face of dreaming
and night implodes its inky lullaby,
the past's peculiar vistas, beckoning ...

Schooldream

I ran the gauntlet of the years that night,
from first-day kindergartens of an alien food
and brown-smirched toddlers with befuddled legs
through bus-time bullies on the Old South Head
returning from a gruelling primary day
of Englishless encounters by a globe
turned always with the bulging reds in view
for apathetic strangers who could speak.

Then on to nervous corridors of chance
and lizard-tongue retractions from the cane
and useless Wednesday football masquerades
and lessons fraught with mathematic calm ...
Always before me, like a pair of specs,
the looking-glass horizon steaming up.

Heroes from the Line

Images dancing: my *Rienzi* Batman
flashlit across the Wintergarden skies,
George Reeves's crinkled 'S' (I nearly cry
to learn his bitter fall), at 8 p.m.
I'm sprinting home, my supercilious cape
streaming behind this overcrowded head,
the swell of flight rotating like a tape
that I alone can hear ... Or reconstruct instead

another turn of time: the coin is tossed
and lands on the reverse, I'm on the homebound
bus from school (it's 1958),
the swimmer Barry, big boy from next door,
is there to protect me as I disembark,
the daily bully sulks. Tomorrow, Barry will drown.

Back

My schools were rich in fashions, passing fads.
Sausage balloons – a thousand at a time
in every colour and all possible shapes
would decorate the playground in the sun:
a twist, a squeak, and *anything* emerged!
Then there were Tarax bottle-tops, flicked with the thumb
and middle finger like a blowfly sling.
Or plastic waterpistols – all that sort of thing.

What about yoyos, dizzying the grounds –
every kid's wrist and knuckles spelt prestige
or poverty; and the marble pits
flogged from the dirt or concrete with a throat
like barkers at the Show; and swapcards too,
Atlantic, Shell – but that's really going back ...

Blades

The circle was described within the sand,
the sand was moist and thick and solid-packed,
the packed-up penknife glistened in his hand,
the hand unscissored it in one glib act.
The act was slick and steady, and precise –
precisely as a razor he dispatched
the patch of earth the penknife cut, a nice
and nicely chosen slit, a challenge matched.

Above it all I recollect the *thwup!*
and *thwup!* of steel, its hiss into the soil,
a soil that could be aimed at from the up
upon a range of angles, with the coil
of coiling finger on the blade or wood.
I'd redescribe that circle if I could.

Waterline Sunday

Sun-filtered voices, a dazzle of sand,
my mother watching with suspicion from the edge,
I snorkel face-down in the north-end rockpool
examining crab-holes in the slippery ledge:
bodies about me, a murk at the bottom,
my face-mask is pressing, my nose laps the water
that rocks in the rubber, my lips like a clamp.
Sun-filtered voices, a sliver of land ...

For one split second I must have submerged
or been vanished, enough to arouse her panic:
I spotted her awkwardly splonk in the shallows,
more helpless than anything *I* might have struck
in my Sea Hunt, for she couldn't swim ...
(That's when I surfaced, and waved from the brim.)

Jailbait

Mucking about on the pier one afternoon
my friend and I, jointly inspired or singly,
decide to disconnect an unsuspecting dinghy
and start to paddle, our target the moon-
fat splendid flying-boat bobbing at its Base.
Welcomed aboard, we politely case
all the amenities, beaming at our luck,
then turn to take the borrowed vessel back.

That's when the royal rug is cleanly wrenched
from under us – when we reach the hatch
a detective is waiting. In some consternation
we're whisked by police car to the scowling station
then on to incredulous parents ... But before all that
I'm made to row the stolen vehicle back.

Light on the Waterline

Observe the little coracles of doubt
bobbing and bubbling on the tranquil waters.
Their mother is life; in a lurid cloud
death is the father cossetting his daughters.
He is destroyer, disbeliever, thief
of protections gathered in the moment;
she is creator, artist of belief
in honesty of mirrors and the cleansing torrent.

Suffer to question, struggle after peace;
doubt, to inherit clarity of knowing;
but clamber to be certain, and you cease
to suffer growth, merely continue rowing
in circles of an ever-swirling fiction:
the circular Sargassos of conviction.

Chess

On Tuesday nights you sat the School of Arts
in Bondi Road – blackjumper nights of chess
across a trestle-table scene of devious thoughts,
coffee, Scotch Finger, cigars in your face; as well,
some other thing discovering itself,
a reaching out of doors, even the way your shoes
resounded at the top of the old stairs,
and the romance of boards and clocks, new clues

swelling your steps – for all the time, of course,
things not of chess co-equal on your tongue:
intoxication of the railway crowds, the crazy clinging
jeaned impossibilities, the night
faces you turned into a pillow, or that other mood
welling superbly as you whispered *J'adoube!*

Fistgame

I am the earth, given identity
in three dimensions of compressed desires;
great dullness and a weight distinguish me
from his acuter wit; but since my mass
must overpower his thrust even as he
outshines, outraces me in daytime's dazzle,
I shall blunt him yet; and as for her,
she whom his nature constantly must scar,

I'm powerless to brave her folding sweep,
her delicate embrace and perfect skin
that creases as if pained to gather me
and close about my roughness like a womb.
And if she lives in terror of his reach,
she recreates and multiplies; I merely teach.

Juvenilia Waters

And every night I'd settle into bed
or sit myself under the table lamp
to carve another poem in my black
book with the faint blue lines traversing it,
each neat consecutive undrafted find
entered spontaneously, numbered, dated, signed:
a splendid casual arrogance of will
coupled with some evidence of unfolding skill –

those improvised enjambments where an impulse rowed
and rhymed and divided, ultimately caught
up with its logic or resolved its part
while all along a theme or thread cajoled,
cavorted, sank, or blandly transformed
itself; made drunken by that first flush of art.

Timescape

Figleaves are falling in the thicket now
the torch-bound carpenter climbs a stool
a gash of lightning precipitates a vow
condemning a millennium, and the Fool
fiddles with insects that the birds dispense
to prove a lie or vindicate a nesting
but poison arrows do a drawing-board dance
while Saint Sebastian watches unprotesting.

Chapters of marriages are silent as churches
a harmony of incense purifies the air
worship is perfume to the dreamers' urges
ten million blanknesses observe a square.
All across continents animals are queuing;
excuses are dying, whatever else they're doing.

Script

There was a poet who had written one
fine work of art but nothing else beyond.
Try as he might, no further poems came,
no inspiration opened up the fond
sky of the soul to filter through his pen.
Think of the paper and the ink he'd spend
as he contrived in heightening despair
to recreate that momentary flair.

Nothing arrived – the muse was mystery.
What could he do? He struggled to forgive,
tortured his conscience, cleansed its history;
and every night, pretending to relive
that first, jardinian glimpse of the divine,
rewrote his only poem, over and over again ...

Waterline

The comedy advances, we withstand,
to find ourselves prone on a golden beach
fastened with ligaments, our feet in sand-
castles constructed prehistorically, and each
digit a memory to be wiggled at,
each clump a lifetime sliding out of reach ...
And as the world proceeds with crooked gait,
we thrash about for causes, or we wait.

Here we rejoin the all-absolving sea
of alibis the calendar advances:
that Time unravels forward, or that History
was nothing but a plague of backward glances.
And as the pathway narrows up ahead,
we glance over our shoulder, and we tread.

Tranquillus: A Meditation

'Ave Caesar, morituri te salutamus!'

for Peter Steele

My Roman friend, I have been staring at
the tacit wisdom
of a time-machine – this tiny discus
next to me, glowing
with such astute perfection in the dark.

While you, Suetonius –
perfected by the candle at your side,
huddled over script
with shoulders that could mark a servitude
to clays more akin
to grain than your grammatica – imply
the lust of tillers
who rise around this blankest page of dawn
awaiting bounty:
once more denied, it seems, by custodies
unprayerable to ...

What I am saying may not perhaps add
up to a deft truth –
you cannot share the theologic of
my decade's trinkets:
a quintessential Abacus quicker
than lightning, a Quill
of Light, a Picture Cube displaying what
could best be labelled
Infinite Book, a Scribe to copy it,
Music Wheel machine
atop a Word Chest of myriad voices,
Ribbons of Sound ... No,
how two millennia must terrify you!
But under my house
roots and sand and stones reach into bedrock
and the earth still burns.

Does that make sense? Maybe not. But recall,
 recall, Suetonius,
the steps of Senate-houses you with your
 archive-hearted and
uncomplicating scrutiny would sweep
 below your sandal,
regardless of the blood your sandal sloshed
 into your eyebrows,
while your nib dragged you into solitude
 to seal it with ink.
Old friend, you and your cold compatriots,
 your wrinkled Caesars,
governors of walls, do you think today
 your *essence* abides,
distilled from the quintillion words that dot
 this province of print?

But let's not quibble – change is wrinkle-deep.
 My century cites:
There is a tide in the affairs of men,
 or, *This is cactus*
land, or, O the mind, mind has mountains, or,
 Hell; my self am Hell.
No matter though: each age must embezzle
 the touchstones of its
firmament, those self-reflecting truths self-
 evidently held:
each generation is alone enough
 to discover them
all over again – but not just as art,
 nor as evidence
of some shining Alexandria, but a
 tragedy its own ...

Young Kafka had the paradox down pat,
and it sustained him,
mothlike, flamelike, as a flickering book
endlessly tugging
into a breeze just strong enough to read
between its pages
yet never knowing it could never *lift*
that gravity from
where it lay. From where I inspect myself
(and forget not, friend,
my one and only vantage-point is here),
the clean space behind
the glass I yawn into like a cheap clock
each flimsy morning
is no illusion; only what shimmers
just *beyond* it is.

I sometimes image Beethoven, whose hand
reshaped our cosmos
and whose hand shook as it scrawled in time with
demons at his left
(Gaius, excuse the mediaeval touch)
that pounded his thumb,
while angels tired of dancing on their pin
came to pester him
with fancy deafening footwork on his right –
although, Tranquillus,
you'll surely know I never did subscribe
to such fabulous
dichotomies. What I'm really thinking
is what most of us
struggle a lifetime to approximate,
then embrace too late.

And what I cling to is our native feel
for the absurd, our
love of paradox, our knowledge that there's
nothing in the glass
beyond the glass that sees itself in us
every day; and yet,
that what we glimpse under a melody's
pulse is telling us
how *touchable* such absences could be,
if only we could
seize them from the spaces behind the soul
and hold them in our
fingers like a flower, then swallow it
and know who we are
at last – and know a music truer than this
hundredweight of lines.

So let me have another sixteen, friend,
and I will spend it
just as nicely, convince myself a man
can be transmuted,
or at a pinch transported by the thread
waving above
his bed at night like precious filament
forgotten by some
spider in its haste, to tacit wisdoms
in the shallow pond
of everydayness; while this silent watch
beside me, gleaming,
its crystal deliquescent as the dawn
it knows nothing of,
reflects that dawn and warms it a little.
More we cannot expect.

Supplication

LET THE FILM turn before it touches the Moment. Let the motorcade stop, drift backward down the plaza. Let the jetliner freeze, metres short of the tower, flow back out of the frame like a toy wing at the sling's limit. Let the black plumes billowing from the edifice be reinhaled to unmask the blue. Let the bullet thread with a thud back in the barrel crouching in the gateway, the victim clinch his scarf and vanish within. Let the high sniper crawl from his perch, crabble back down the fire-escape, the drunken messenger lift his stone boot from the pedal, his machine veer backward from the X. Let the siren's wail diminish again, let the smoke be sucked back, the ovens clang open. Let the battalions pause on their relentless march, the battleships heave about, the bombs plunge upward. Let the tanks unroll, let the stormtroops halt, pummel grotesquely backward down the boulevard, let the proud man-children in camouflage watch their rifles fetched from their palms, the proud inflamed barefoot boy-children receive their stones flung back in their fists. Let fists unfurl. Let hearts. Let every prayer open with *Amen*, each breath be the ending of a prayer without words. Let words unravel, and all manner of thoughts, and things done and undone, let the Moment be immaculate and true, untouchable as a dream. And let the days unfold and fold back again, so that as we awaken and begin to forget the dream, we remember the Moment.

Acknowledgments

‘Sisyphus’, ‘Springvale’, ‘The Composer on his Birthday’, ‘Sanctum’, ‘Dreams of Dead Poets’, ‘Legend’, ‘Narcissus’, ‘Syzygy’, ‘Galatea’, ‘Glissando’, ‘The Golem’, ‘The Waterline Poems’ and ‘Supplication’ are from *Towards the Equator: New & Selected Poems* (Puncher & Wattmann, 2014).

‘Tale without a Moral’ appeared in *The Rearrangement* (Melbourne University Press, 1988); and ‘Tranquillus: A Meditation’ in *The Man and the Map* (Five Islands Press, 2003).

‘The Other Side’ was published in the University of Canberra Vice-Chancellor's International Poetry Prize anthology *Dazzled* (Axon Elements, 2014).

‘Carousel Days’ first appeared in the *Weekend Australian* (9/12/ 2017), and ‘Travellers’ in *Australian Poetry Journal* (6/1, 2016). At time of posting of *Unfurl* 3, ‘A Case in Point’ and ‘Cryptic Crosswords’ were unpublished.

About Alex Skovron

Alex Skovron was born in Poland, lived briefly in Israel, and emigrated to Australia in 1958, aged nearly ten. His family settled in Sydney, where he grew up and completed his studies. From the early 1970s he worked as an editor for book publishers in Sydney and (after 1980) Melbourne; since the 1990s he has worked as a freelance editor. His poetry has appeared widely in Australia and overseas. *The Rearrangement* (1988), his first book, won the Anne Elder and Mary Gilmore awards and was shortlisted in the NSW Premier's Awards; there followed *Sleeve Notes* (1992), *Infinite City: 100 Sonnetinas* (1999, shortlisted in the Age Book of the Year and Victorian Premier's Awards), *The Man and the Map* (2003), *Autographs: 56 poems in prose* (2008), and *Towards the Equator: New & Selected Poems* (2014, shortlisted in the Prime Minister's Literary Awards). Other awards have included the Wesley Michel Wright Prize for Poetry, the John Shaw Neilson Poetry Award, and the *Australian Book Review* Poetry Prize. The numerous public readings he has given include appearances in China, Serbia, India, Ireland, Macedonia, Portugal, and on Norfolk Island. An 80-minute CD in which he reads from his poetry was published in 2019 under the title *Towards the Equator*. His next collection, *Letters from the Periphery*, is due in 2021.

Concurrently with his poetry, Alex has intermittently published in prose, including short stories, a novella, and the abovementioned *Autographs*, which can be read as a book of microstories. The novella, titled *The Poet* (2005), was joint winner of the FAW Christina Stead Award for a work of fiction and has been translated into Czech. *The Attic*, a bilingual selection of his poems translated into French, was published by PEN Melbourne in 2013; and *Water Music*, a bilingual volume of Chinese translations in the Flying Island series (Macau), came out in 2017. Some of his poetry has also been translated into Dutch, Polish, Spanish, Macedonian and German. His collection of short stories, *The Man who Took to his Bed*, was published in 2017, and a Czech-language edition appeared in 2019. He has collaborated with his Czech translator, Josef Tomáš, on English translations of the twentieth-century Czech poets Jiří Orten and Vladimír Holan.

Concerns that have driven Alex Skovron's poetry and fiction are many and various: history, language and music; the riddles of time and the allure of memory; philosophy, faith and the quest for self-knowledge; art and the creative impulse; fantasy, eros and the affections. His interest in speculative fiction has played a recurring role in his thinking and his work, as has a lifelong passion for music. As a poet, he enjoys both the disciplines and the aesthetics of formal design and the diverse challenges of freer structures. Integral to his project has been a focus on musicality and the primacy of rhythm. He likes probing the elasticities of syntax, and exploiting the 'contrapuntal' layerings available to imagery and meaning via compression, connotation, ambiguity.

Author photo: Martin Langford

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Gina MERCER /poetry

Gina Mercer enjoys a three-stranded career as writer, teacher, and editor. She has taught creative writing and literature in universities and communities for 35 years. She was Editor of *Island* from 2006–2010. She has a passion for working with writers as book doula. Gina has performed her poetry in cities and regions throughout Australia as well as Canada and Ireland. Recently she's collaborated with musicians interweaving their original compositions with her eco-poetry in the performances: 'Off with the Birds' and 'Diving into the Derwent'. She's been writer-in-residence at Prince Edward Island (Canada), Varuna

(NSW), the Tasmanian Writers' Centre and Katherine Susannah Prichard Writers' Centre (WA). She's published widely in journals, anthologies, and diaries, as well as ten books (poetry, fiction, academic nonfiction). The three most recent books are: *The Dictionary of Water*, a limited edition poetry collection, Wild Element Press, 2019, wildelement@iinet.net.au; *Weaving Nests with Smoke and Stone*, a poetry collection all about birds, Walleah Press, 2015; and *The Sky Falls Down: An Anthology of Loss*, co-edited with Terry Whitebeach, Ginninderra Press, 2019.

▶ Read Gina Mercer's poetry

Photo: Gina Mercer with Patrick Kavanagh sculpture, Dublin.



Gina Mercer

Poetry

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Cloud Bank

I'm skipping up to the Cloud Bank. Need to fill my pockets full of clouds.
Withdraw a bundle of those shiny, light, and frothy ones – to balance out, discount,
the darkening miasmas of pandemic panic. That's the world's weather about now.

Yes, I need a stash of those small, round, flotsam clouds that frolic on high
summer skies. Frolicsome cirrocumulus. That's the currency I need.
Interest in such clouds is sky high.
Floating rates. Stratospheric.

And maybe, while I'm at it, I'll stock up on some of those spectacular, lenticular clouds.
The ones people mistake for spaceships. Maybe apply for a loan
on the futures market? Definitely wouldn't be a blue skies investment.
Happy to go into hoc to get a stock of *stratocumulus lenticularis duplicatus*.
Feed my hunger for wonder.

Is there any need to worry there might be a run on the Cloud Bank in these uncertain
times? Good news is – there's never a deficit. No shortfalls. Forecasters predict
the Cloud Bank is always in surplus, can supply any level of demand.
Orographic to cirrus. Stratus to altocumulus.
Every cloud currency in plentiful supply. Your balance is always in the black
and steel-blue. Flame and cream. Purple and green. Apricot and grey.
And, of course, gold is standard, especially at sunrise.

The Cloud Bank specialises in updrafts, never overdrafts. Simply cast your eyes up.
Take in a draft. Draw down as much as you need from the endless lines of credit.
Let's skip up to the Cloud Bank.
Use our inbuilt iris scanners to open up the vaults.
Get ourselves a pocket-full, head-full, heart-full of clouds.
Feed our hunger for wonder.

Extracts from *The Dictionary of Water* – Part II

dragonfly || Water's most favoured attendant. Construction: fine copper wire, iridescence of curiosity. Jeweller unknown.

fruit || Small highly-coloured sacs invented by trees for the satisfaction of tongues. Global phenomenon. Water in high state of desirability.

bath || Epiphany of solace. Long deep egg with sub-ventral blowhole. Essential qualities: 1. warm on days of pain and frost 2. cool on days of miasma and fever.

milk || Water infused with emulsion of pearls and essence of summer. Best delivered via tender one-way valve in dilly of warm skin.

mud || A compelling coalescence of Earth and Water. Known to induce states of ecstasy in toes and other small animals.

dam || Water penned in rammed earth for the benefit of thirsty human or other animals. Achieves intense beauty despite indefinite detention. Chief advocate: The Sky.

dew || A grace of water bestowed by night on the humility of grass. Converted by morning into a blessing of glistening.

watermark || Imprint of water washed into the sheer onion-skin of every human animal. See: *Inescapable* and *Indelible*.

Becoming otter

Niagara Falls, Spring

grey pavement. grey road. sky – a multiplier of grey.

bouquet of umbrellas unfurl along the path: pink against grey, red against grey, bright-white against grey. the tourists are tired. cold. all wet grey. they are here to look. they are saturated by the pervasiveness of rain and spray. they are grey tired of looking.

yet they do
tired eyes
mesmerised by

fluid glass-green pouring,

so much, so fast, so living,
this pouring, this torrent, pouring clear,
so clear, so swift flowing over the lip,
all this curving green clarity,

desire rises,
i dive in, otter my body,
roll over and over

in and down

the greenness

all of me otter

in this liquid *YES* lipness

utter otter

curving diving

singing defiance

singing *NO* to all the grey

Playing opera to the Atlantic

Ian's a social worker 40 weeks a year,
teaching mindfulness to unpredictable men.

Ian's a lobster man 12 weeks a year,
pulling 275 pots every 12-hour day.
Inheriting boat and licence
from his large, silent father
who built both boat and business.

Albert plays classical trumpet,
sails with Ian, just the two of them
out there pulling pots.
Every run is same, same:
pull one up, remove the angry spiky haul,
bait the pot, drop it back,
12 hours a day,
12 weeks a year.

But the sea
is never same, same.
It's the big boss,
unpredictable, cold,
kill you in minutes,
without rippling a muscle.

Ian respects the boss,
dead if you don't,
knowing how to swim is no protection,
wet-weather gear weights you
down the one-way tunnel
to hypothermia // drowning.

Gotta respect the boss,
all day, every day,
one slip, one mindless moment –

you're a lump of frozen lobster-bait yourself.

Ian inherits boat,
licence and a passion
for mindfulness,
paying marine-deep attention
to every subtle mood and wrinkle
of those ice-hefting swells,
attending every minute of every 12-hour day.

Ian's father fished
whole days without words –
mind full
of sea.

Ian and Albert
soothe the boss
play CBC Classical,
floating opera and rolling symphonies
across vast intransigence.

Most dangerous workplace in the world,
even if you know how to swim,
better have your mind full
of nothing
but the Atlantic.

Note: This poem is based on a generous conversation with lobster fisher, Ian Forgeron, Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, Canada, October 2016. Lines in italics are direct quotes.

Upgrade

After a long day
of poets and metaphors,
she calls home.

He tells her he has:
replaced her motherboard,
upgraded her processor,
created two new USB ports,
defragged her hard drive,
refreshed her virus protection,
increased her memory,
replaced her fan,
consolidated her directory.

As the mobile phone
flubbers his words,
all she hears is
the purest love poem.

Let me grow old

Stop painting me
as seventeen, dark-haired and slender.

You, with your much-vaunted aesthetic,
see me as I am:
my shank spindling
delicate as lark-bone;
my breasts bending to
that invisible lover, gravity;
my tessellated skin recording
time's intricate wash;
my curves dancing,
sculpted by the days' deft hands.

And the white of my hair, look –
look, how it enmeshes
the light from that high window –
a holy flame rising on my love-wise head.

Note: The French artist, Pierre Bonnard, had a relationship with Marthe de Meligny from 1893 until her death in 1945 (he married her in 1926). Throughout that time he consistently painted her (in 384 paintings) as she appeared when she was in her early twenties.

The curve of her hip

as elegant as the curve of a ship
as it breasts the wave-swell

as elegant as the swell-wave of her breasts
as they breast the waves of street air

her curves as elegant as elegance is hip

unfurl

You are the craggy earth

for my women friends

When I am a building in need of restoration –

you are my scaffolding.

When I am an empty white bath tub –

you are the warm water that fills me.

When I am a fragile wren –

you are the slender web of branches in which I roost, safe and dry.

When I am a desolate cliff –

you are the green waves' constant murmur, eroding isolation.

When I am an asylum-seeker –

you are the strong voice of hope on the phone.

When I am a tree thinned by drought –

you are the underground springs which keep me green and whispering.

When I am a failing body in intensive care –

you are my heart monitors and blood transfusions.

When I am a winter-worn snake –

you are the craggy earth which tenderly sloughs off my tired skin.

Small change

A small suburban block. Nothing startling. Garden motley. The only residents, a bodgie gang of blackbirds who dominate the real estate. Forests of weeds flourish. We set to. Weed and dig and mulch and terrace. Spurn the dwarf conifers and lavender hedges the suburb favours. Bed only local plants into the freshly turned earth. Dig a pond. Frogs arrive, mysterious. What songline tells them of new water? How do they navigate arid bitumen? They make themselves at home, call so vigorously the neighbours can't hear their TVs. Rosellas, green and eastern, begin to drop in for a drink. All winter, honeyeaters feed here on the island's subtle blossom. Kunzia perfume teaches us to breathe in new ways. Rampant bushiness asserts itself. Neighbours finger electric hedge trimmers. Bird calls renovate our days. Frog songs lullaby our nights.

Swimming the sky

“see you’ve been writing nature poetry since you moved up north”

shit – got it wrong again
should be doing urban chic
all cool and monotone
concrete and cats’ piss – but ...

here

banana fronds unfurl, swimming the sky
in fluid grace, like schools of green stingray

reef-dwelling clams are large robust vulvas
glitter-frilled, muscular, mysterious

casuarinas breathe, light subtle, yet there
like baby’s skin swept by a mother’s hair

maybe its my hormones, that essentialist mother-earth myth
nature does impress
makes me want to write

desire

live

yeah my compost heap inspires me

living proof that nothing is waste

decay is noble

worms invaluable

if i lived in a big city maybe i’d feel the same about the constant changing

buildings going up and coming down and going up again

but i happen to live with bananas and casuarinas and guavas and poincianas
not to mention a few people, constellations of birds and geckoes and spiders

so i make

culture with nature

otherwise

it might not be there next time

the compost cycles round for renewal

and life without trees and babies and worms and clams
won't be worth a cat's piss
no matter how many cafes and monotones
there might be left in our cities

don't want to get into the city versus country bit
but this desiring nature
is not
washed out watercolour self-effacing hobbyist pale
it is
passionate as poincianas painting the town red
rampant as peak-hour traffic
muscular as city coffee
robust as reef-dwelling clams

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The aviary

Inside me –
the bright-brown bantam
clucks her sonnet of contentment.
She dances the abundant garden,
replete in her shapely domesticity,
her compact completeness,
her questing eye.

Inside me –
the white-breasted sea eagle,
cool and controlled, patrols
headlands and solitary trees.
Lonely as an icon,
her full-stop eyes never miss
that crucial comma of fish
in the ocean's complex manuscript.

Inside me –
the angular heron
swoops into the garden pond,
pointing her teacher's beak
at indolent gold fish.
A meditation of steel-blue stillness,
elegant and precise,
she knows the tension of a meniscus,
monitors the slow revolutions
of orange flesh beneath green sunlight.

Inside me –
an aviary
alive with beaks and feathers,
soft cooing to soothe,
claws to slit open
your pale belly.







Lee James SHOTT

/painting

Lee James Shott was born in Aberdare in the Cynon Valley area of Rhondda Cynon Taf, Wales (UK), and holds an M.A. in Fine Art.

Shott's paintings subjectively capture the contemporary culture of communities throughout South Wales. The work focuses on human interactions and the idiosyncrasies of his daily life, observations of

people and their interactions, night-time walks, and commuting by public transport.

Shott paints both landscapes and portraits that are at once psychological and voyeuristic, implying that the viewer is surveying and surveilling his environments and subjects.

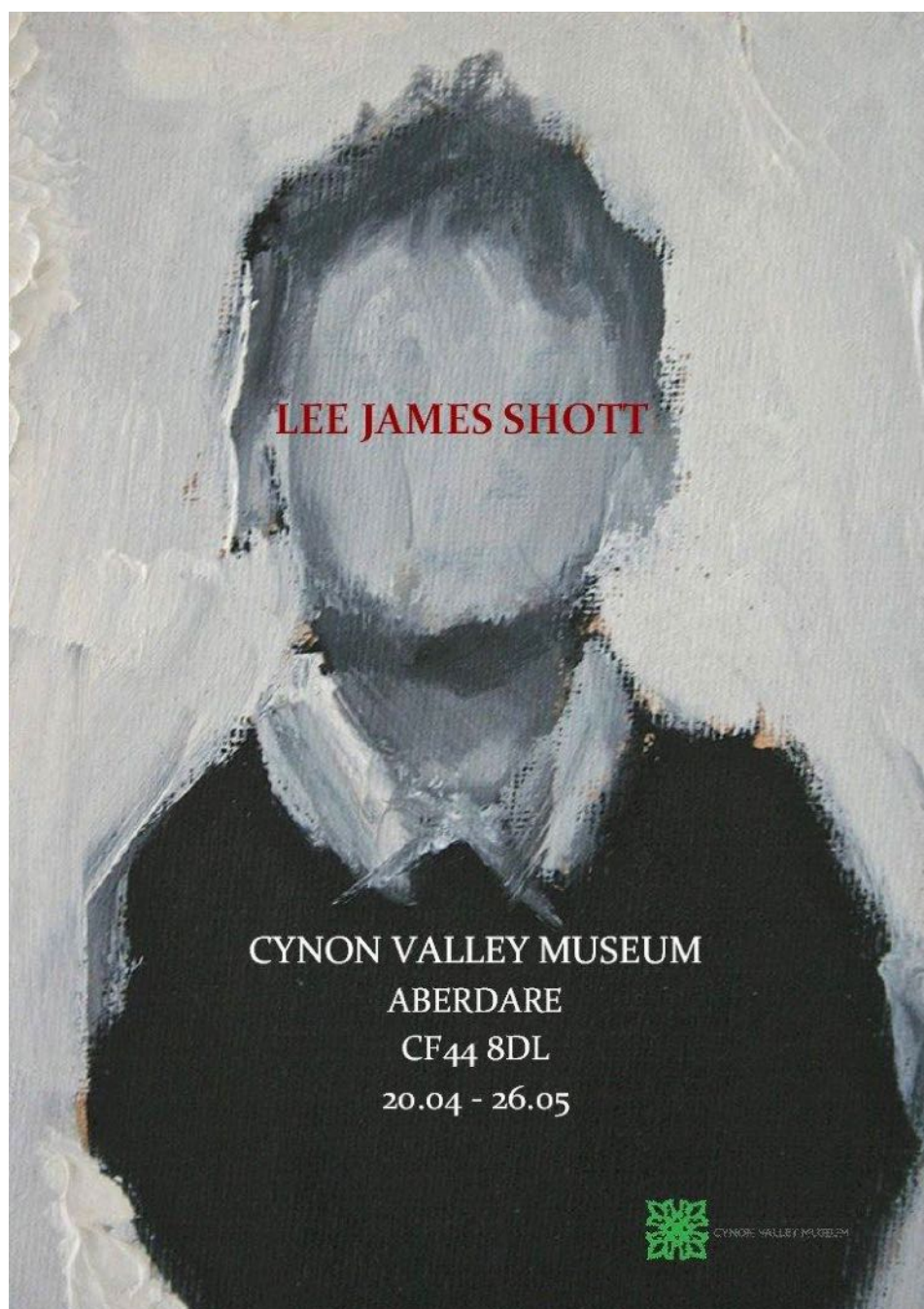
The work, seen as a whole, includes portraits with blurred and fragmented features along with figurative images of workers and young people. His landscape paintings often show machinery in the green valleys of South Wales. Each painting is a precise, and precisely ambiguous, moment of life.

▶ [Lee Shott's Tumblr site](#)

▶ [Lee Shott's Wix site](#)



Exhibition poster



Exhibition poster

...

Paintings by Lee James Shott

















Abandoned car 2 (2020) Lee James Shott; *Abandoned car* (2018) Lee James Shott; *Elder* (2020) Lee James Shott; *Hooded man* (2020) Lee James Shott; *Lake* (2019) Lee James Shott; *Mother and child* 2016 Lee James Shott; *Passenger* (2020) Lee James Shott; *Onlooker* (2020) Lee James Shott; *Road side (morning)* (2017) Lee James Shott; *Self portrait* (2017) Lee James Shott; *Skull* (2018) Lee James Shott; *Turned head* (2017) Lee James Shott; *Untitled (Swing)* 2016 Lee James Shott; *Herron on snapped tree* (2018) Lee James Shott; *Judge* (2019) Lee James Shott; *Man wearing gas mask 1950* (2020) Lee James Shott; *Untitled* (2018) Lee James Shott; *Reclining figure* (2019) Lee James Shott; *Schoolboy* (2015) Lee James Shott; *Split head* (2015) Lee James Shott; *Three workers* (2018) Lee James Shott; *Untitled (cloud)* (2018) Lee James Shott; *Valley* (2019) Lee James Shott.





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Steve COX /two biographical stories

Steve Cox is an artist and writer. He has a forty-year exhibition history and his work is held in major public and private collections throughout Australia and internationally. As an arts writer, since 2000, he has contributed articles and reviews, and has conducted interviews with artists, for numerous newspapers, journals and magazines, including *The Guardian*; *VAULT: Australasian Art & Culture*; *Gay Times, UK*; *FilmInk.com*, amongst others. Cox writes on a range of subjects, including contemporary and historical art;

LGBTQI issues; social issues; cinema; contemporary music.

Between 2013–2014, he was the London Arts Editor of *NakedButSafe* magazine. In 2019 he was on the judging panel for the Young Arts Journalist Award (YAJA). Also in 2019, he was the inaugural Writer in Residence for Brunswick Street Village, an innovative building complex, which espouses green values and arts in the community as a primary concern. During the residency, he produced a collection of fifty poems, on a range of subjects.



The Gestapo comes to Eastbourne

by Steve Cox



Paul Harrison (not his real name) lived at the top of Kings Avenue, my street in Eastbourne, Sussex. The year of this account is 1967 – the fabled Summer of Love – although, at nine years old, I was rather too young to appreciate this germane detail. We both attended St Mary's Boys' School. Paul was a plain, freckle-faced boy with auburn hair. His rambling late-Victorian family home was set in a lush, jungly garden that tumbled untidily down an incline; in the centre of this acreage there was a rectangular fish pond in which half a dozen fat orange-and-white koi drifted through the bronze water. There were pieces of statuary set here and there, overgrown with weeds or brambles. At the bottom of the garden was a thicket of young trees which grew up through elderly stone pathways, disrupting and crumbling them into dysfunction. The general neglect of the garden had a magic quality which fascinated me: much later, I read John Ruskin on the importance of allowing implacable Nature to stake its claim over man-made structures – and here was his principle in action. Paul could not really understand my fascination with the garden; his familiarity had led to general disinterest with his own habitat. He was more interested in playing with his plastic toy soldiers in his bedroom, a pastime in which I would increasingly be enjoined, to my chagrin.

Paul lived with his mother – a rather imposing figure with a Roman nose and a French bun. The official story was that his father was 'away overseas on business' – but the edgy way he spoke of this betrayed a deeper wound of abandonment. His grandparents

also lived in the house, although his grandfather was very rarely seen, as he spent most of his life folded away in a private study room. I liked his grandmother – a small, mousy woman with brown curly hair, who prepared poached eggs and beans on toast for us both whenever we arrived at his house, together, after school.

Paul was a bossy kid who always directed our play. It would be he who set up the little soldiers on his dusty bedroom carpet; it would be he who decided which military campaign we would be reenacting on this or that day. I had no real interest in these games: the activity of rolling pellets of Plasticine into the serried ranks of little men and watching them tumble seemed rather pointless to me and I always hankered for another trek around the leafy world outside his mullioned bedroom windows.

At some point, probably in the summer months, our relationship took a sudden turn into something more grown-up. This was, once again, spearheaded by Paul.

One summer afternoon, in this, our ninth year of life, we were once again in his bedroom, after school. The curtains were drawn across the lead-lighted window against the slant of still-bright sunlight. Motes of dust twirled in the air. The room was hot and stuffy. The door was closed. I could hear Paul's grandmother washing up in the kitchen.

"Let's show our willies," he said, flatly. With that, he unzipped his fly and lowered his trousers. He fished around in his underpants with his fingers and plucked out his penis. It looked identical to mine, although it was beginning to stiffen slightly. I stood up and followed his example, more out of politeness than any real desire to expose myself. Paul reached over and grabbed my little prod. I did the same to him. It didn't feel very erotic, at least to me. He stood close to me and we noodled our members together for five minutes; then he zipped himself up again and we resumed our places on the carpet, with his plastic battalion.

Some weeks later, I was again ensconced in his room after school. This time he decided we should enact some scene from his imagination, about a British soldier (to be played by me) who had been captured and was now being interrogated by the Gestapo (to be played by him).

"Take your shirt off," he said, "and I'll tie you to the door." I politely complied with the order and meekly removed my white school shirt. He raised my arms, and with his school tie, tightly fastened my wrists to the coat hook that was fixed to the top of his bedroom door. He hadn't bothered to take down the various jackets and scarves that also hung from the hook, so that my face was now buried in the various fabrics. The next stage of the routine was one which clearly gave him a good deal of pleasure. He suddenly went

into character and began speaking to me in the accent of an evil, cartoon Nazi.



The Bully Boy (2015) by Steve Cox.

"Zo! Vee heff been obserffing your movements vor some time, Herr Johnson, yes? Your ections are vell

known to us. You will now tell us the names of your contacts, yes?" Then he took his dressing gown cord from the end of his bed, doubled it, and swung it smartly across my naked, white back. It stung rather a lot. He swung again. And again.

"You VILL talk!" he demanded, striking me more severely with each lash. His breathing had become heavy and his voice had risen to perform the short, barking orders that punctuated each slashing blow.

"Yes! ...You!...VILL...Talk!" I might have cried out at some point during this ordeal because the timorous voice of Paul's grandmother could now be heard on the other side of the door on which I was tethered.

"Paul? Paul? ... Paul?" she said, "What are you doing, love? What's going on?" Snapping suddenly out of his starring role, Paul became flustered and threw the dressing gown cord onto the floor, just as his grandmother opened the door, with its unusual cargo, and I was forced to shuffle backwards as it inched forward. Her head peeped into the room and took in the shameful scene. She hurriedly retreated.

"Well, I think it's time for Steven to go home now," she said, as she returned to her washing up.

A month or two later, I was again at Paul's house, this time on a Saturday afternoon. Also present were twins,

David and Mark Gold (not their real names). I recall that there was much boisterous running through the garden and the house. After several hours of this, we found ourselves sitting, quiet and exhausted, on the big wooden staircase, in the spacious entrance hall.

"Let's show our willies," said Paul, flatly. Immediately, we all stood up and fished out our cocks. I was intrigued to see that the Golds' were circumcised – the first I had ever seen.

"I dare someone to put a willy in their mouth," said Paul. There was an eruption of laughter at this preposterous suggestion. "No, I really, really, really dare someone to do it!" Feeling the sudden overwhelming desire to be both shocking and the centre of attention, I volunteered to do this outrageous thing.

"I will," I said. At this, the boys roared with pleasure.

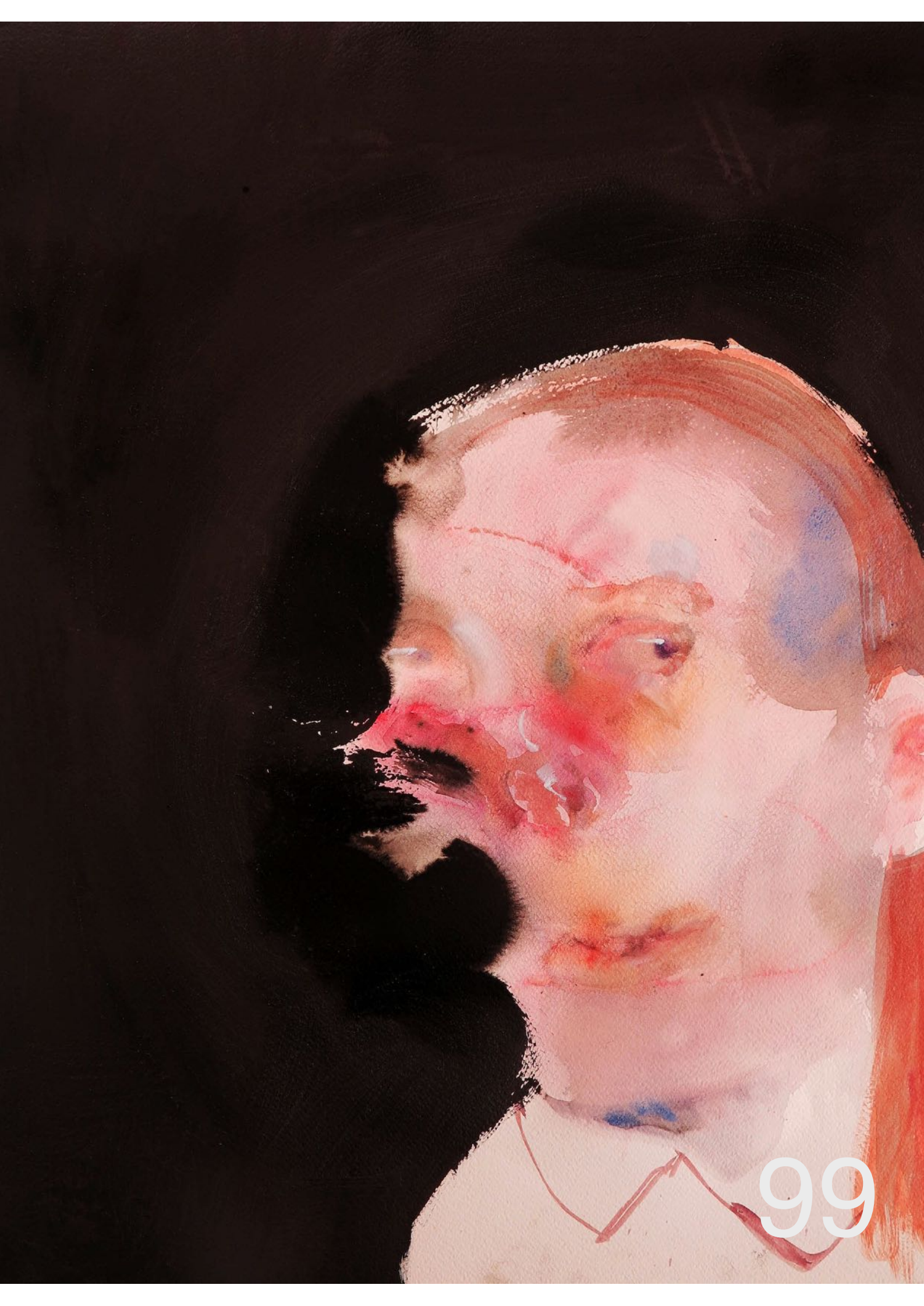
"Ok, do it with mine," said Mark Gold. He stood up and once again unzipped his fly. He hitched his trousers down over his haunches and his little acorn was presented. To the hushed excitement of the others I bent forward, opened my mouth and took the thing inside.

"What on earth are you doing?" said Paul's grandmother, who had appeared quietly at the foot of the stairs. Mark scrabbled to pull up his pants and the

other boys stood up and shifted about guiltily. "I think it's time that Steven went home now."

Mrs. Bertram's anatomy lesson

by Steve Cox



In 1969, I was eleven years old, and a first-year student at Claremont High School, in Hobart, Tasmania. I had arrived in the state in October, the previous year, when my family had emigrated from England. The move and the resettlement were traumatic for a hypersensitive boy. It took me months to begin to properly ascertain what the teachers and the students were saying to me – although they were speaking their own version of the English language. My own careful speech patterns of precisely modulated, Received English, were routinely ridiculed as being ‘Pommy’, or ‘Poofy’, and therefore, deeply suspect in the country of hardy machismo. I learned to curb my tongue, and to keep my faulty English trap shut. This deeply felt ‘difference’ chimed with my other vaguely-felt discrepancy – a burgeoning, barely recognised, but still bubbling sense of myself as homosexual. I arrived on the scrubby, hard-baked, sun-blasted, school oval, flayed and wide open for the picking. A lamb to the daily slaughter, meek and raw. I was desperate to fit in, yet hopelessly aware that this could never happen under the ancient, time-honoured, normal, regime. I resigned myself to being the annoying stone in the well-worn sandal. But, one day, the drab curtain of the normal regime would be thrown wide open, in a shocking and blunt performance which blew the façade wide open.

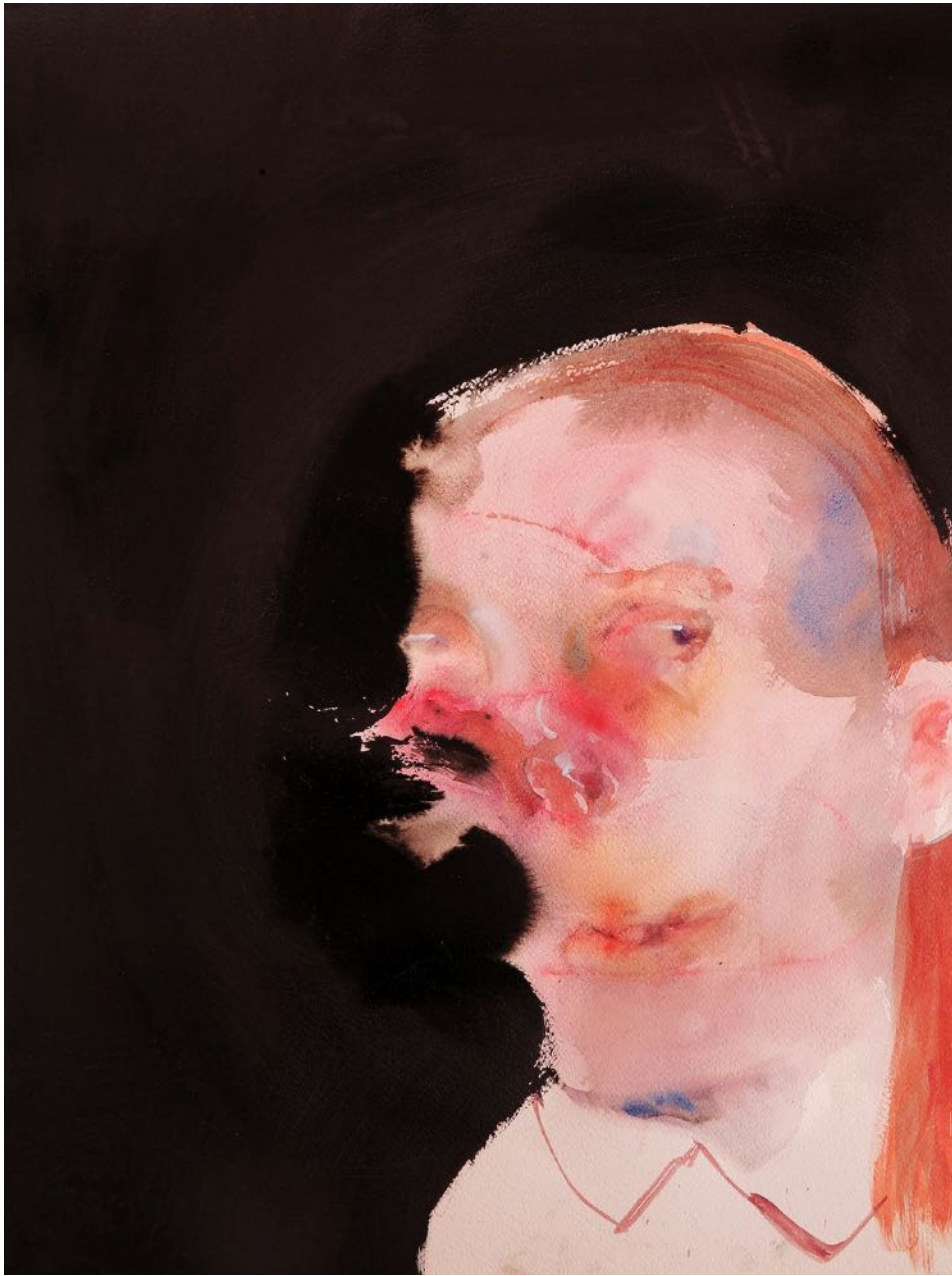
John Bertram (not his real name) was a boy in my class. He was a serious, studious boy with a richly freckled face and dark auburn hair, which fell over his forehead in a short fringe. He rather kept to himself, which I thought was an admirable trait. After a few

weeks of attending the school I became aware of John Bertram's tragic burden: his mother.

One afternoon there was a small commotion down at the school's perimeter fence. A small group of older boys had gathered in the shadows, beneath the pine trees that ringed the boundary. On the other side of the fence, a middle-aged woman stood on the sandy path that ran through the trees. She wore a white, summer blouse and beige slacks. She was unsteady on her feet and it was evident that she was drunk. She kept glancing guiltily up towards the school building. The boys were laughing - it was the kind of ribald laughter that indicated something unseemly. I started to walk down the grassed slope towards the boys. Other boys were following suit, drawn by the dirty chuckles. The woman was John Bertram's mother, I was later to discover. As I neared the excited group, I saw her lift her blouse up, exposing her bare, white breasts beneath. These were the first breasts that I had seen that were not my mother's, and the effect was strangely mesmerising. The fact that it was a grown-up who was doing something so bad was strangely exhilarating: it was as if the fabric of the universe had suddenly been torn, and the horrible mechanisms behind it were now nakedly revealed. The boys erupted in laughter, thrilled at such a grotesque transgression. She said something to them, which I did not hear above the noise. She glanced again back to the school building and once more yanked her blouse up over her face: this time she jiggled her shoulders for a few seconds, causing her breasts to judder. The boys shrieked with coarse laughter. The air was also filled

with the shrill din of little brown grasshoppers, which flew up out of the long, grey grass around my legs as I continued down the slope towards this mad performance.

And now, poor John Bertram came charging down the hill, past me, his white shirt dazzling in the bright sunshine. His face was beet red and I heard his exasperated gasps for breath as he ran towards his pitiable mother. The boys were still laughing at the wretched woman. Bertram reached the fence and called something out to his mother, who looked a little bewildered, suddenly, as if she had been woken from a bad dream. He climbed over the fence and took his mother by the shoulders and led her away from the scene of her horrible drama. The boys, suddenly deprived of the source of their entertainment, now looked at each other rather shame-facedly: their guilt was easier to access now that Mrs Bertram was being ushered away down the road. One of her beige shoes had fallen off as she was led down the little bank, it lay on its side in the grey grass; her son picked it up and gently slid her foot back into it, as she leant on his shoulder. A teacher now appeared up by the school building, and he yelled for all the boys to return to the quadrangle immediately. They began to wander lazily up the hill.



Mrs Bertram (2015) by Steve Cox.

Three days later, at lunchtime, Mrs Bertram once again appeared, drunk, at the perimeter fence. This time, she wore a blue cotton dress, but her routine was almost the same - only this time she raised the garment to reveal her naked pudendum.

Shortly after this, her son took to spending lunchtimes and recesses sitting under the trees by the fence, ready to spirit his mother away from the invasive eyes of his classmates. By the next semester, he had left the school altogether, the shame being far too great to cope with.





Les WICKS /poetry

«Me—what can I say? Poetry has been a core part of my life since I was about 19 with a largish gap in the middle pursuing career and family. At its best, poetry can say things unutterable anywhere else and I'm completely committed to it. I really am now a one trick pony even if the beast is as thin as poetry is. I edit and run workshops which provides a bit of income but is much more rewarding on deeper levels. Most of my publishing work is aimed at getting new audiences rather than "clogging up" pre-existing outlets. Varying approaches, but some extraordinary outcomes in terms of getting poetry in front of people who wouldn't

normally encounter it. As for my own work I feel blessed that I have seen publication in rather a lot of places/countries/languages. I've had 14 books out and still love them all despite their attitude problems, the latest being *Belief* (Flying Islands, 2019). If you buy a copy you'll make me very happy. I constantly work at bettering my poetry, I don't share (a surprisingly common) delusion that I am a (grossly unrecognised) International Treasure. Compared to say actors I have occasionally said I am not a Streep or de Niro, but I aspire to be maybe Brian Dennehy. But heard today he has died!'»

▶ Read Les Wicks' poetry



T

Gander

Les Wicks

Poetry

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By the Wayside

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About Les Wicks

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<http://leswicks.tripod.com/lw.htm> »

unfurl

The Session

Funny, when an obnoxious shithead
carries your eyes
to the colourful corner.

He's fat
& a little drunk.
Potbelly is squeezed past shirt buttons
like icing from a piping bag —
that battleground of a sweatstained cotton.

But I forget all the nonsense. His music.
No one image contains *this*:
the immobile journey off along
cobble lanes candled by bell-floss...
away to the edges that matter.
Piece by piece
drop confected consistencies
that glued me to my linear life.

Doesn't want followers, a set's
extraordinary won't last long enough
to scratch any atlas. So don't look.
It finds you.

He goes home, the audience becomes homeless.
There's the hum of true circles.
If we sleep at all
it will be in hammocks of undirected insight
strung between stars.

Requiem for a Squid

A solitary pelican cut the moon
reflected on the implacable still
of the Hawkesbury River.
Atrociously white,
that glide on the surface with barely a ripple.

Perhaps this scratch of night
was peace for us,
hand in hand on the jetty.
We'd already shed unnecessary words.

But for the bird it was lazy predation.
Does each moment carry
these opposing aspects?
Like estuarine erosion
does death & catastrophe seep
into all our lives' careful abutments?

A dive, the pouch writhed with its catch
like some kind of answer.

Time Taken

Sure this wasn't love
it was as one sided as an angry wank back home
after that party where fights uncorked beside the laughter.

A teenager, western suburbs boys' school
beauty was hard, was holding the smoke in.
Nothing arty. No one discussed "girly types",
they would have been targets.

Watched him cross the quadrangle
he was trimmed as a paling fence, smooth as a cricket pitch
those eyes line-marked the school boundaries
his lips lacked only kisses.

We never even spoke,
I talked *pussy* with the mates
& already felt the yokes of the watcher —
those of us who cannot *do* outside our heads.
There is a freedom, this unlatchment
but always the traitor hands.

What is Believed

Minoans didn't kill the bulls,
those young men & women leapt between the horns,
their ladder to the goddess.
No more suffering for the beasts than
the slap of sandalled feet impossibly dropped from sky.

This useless sacrament
if athletes survived
led to yet another masterpiece on the walls.
To the artist it was process.
For the rest, bread.

Lars turns on his keyboard,
Claudette's lips seize the saxophone.
Paintstained hands grasp brushes manufactured from bovine tail-bristles
as poets quibble with quills as sharp as the moment of jump.
Another ritual limbers up.

Cities expand down the coast,
they smother the old ones
pluck up the ancient limestone blocks for pergolas, pavements.
"Real" work always has destruction near its centre.

All those sheaves of grace & eloquence
that art-serfs toil to harvest,
they wouldn't feed one baby.
But there's still the leap between fears
to sawdusts of wonder.

Centuries on there's nothing left in Crete
but beauty & olive trees.

The Compassion, Rut & Self Proposition*

There's news just in from neuroscience
& it's not pretty.
By some scholarly criteria we don't exist.

Music is a tingle in the nucleus accumbens
right between the eyes
but no one can truly hear or see.

Circumstance, experience is data. The soul
is a sweeper for the mind which
fools itself or with itself the difference:
breadth of a blade.

Thalamo-cortical system collects the toll thinks itself
motorway though it's a lane that feeds elision.
Our complicated machine, the cheating circuitry so busy
but creates only those baubles
& babbles we call insight.

Violence at a distance satisfies completely.
After everybody worked hard to make them, those
sweating divinities in their beach cottages have
no option as they spray supplicants
with their briny amnesties.

There's deceit in each choice, psychiatric hygiene.
Forget your education.
Crippled primates on a new tangent
have fallen from the trees into office cubicles.
Ali al-Sistani says Quran okays
masturbating in front of one's wife
so long as she helps.
Torah lets you eat locusts, but not oysters.
Look at those switches —
the processing of speech, facial recognition,
social emotions like shame — click, click.

* This and the following poems are from Les Wick's book *Belief*.

The occipital lobe censors out
the rubbish streaming in through eyes
that wear their black spots like a promise.
Consciousness — that narrow light,
flange of brain — a frilly dress for agony, desire.
Therese's swearing pertly, symmetrical bones —
just looking at her lights up reward centres.
She's thinking about work the next day.
Adrian's conditioned rape response kicks in.

Amygdala screams as easily... all connected —
polysemy pile-up towards the narrowest of consensus,
if we're anything perhaps we're cabling & fluids
senselessly cooking in the brainpan, bubble'n'squeak.

Accelerant intellects across the globe ignite tiny suns
yet still are astounded by xmas lights...
toddlers & meddlers all of us. The defence presented...
what else would one expect
with those lopsided cranial hemispheres.
We're mostly lethal to ourselves,
our old & damaged, new & selected.

Friends reinforce the collage of fiction that we are.
Addicted to praise, we grasp for one sure thing.
Like vigilantes we preserve
these flintier figments... burn through cities
to keep us reliable, right.

Certainty is a kind of lunacy.
A peer buys the drink
then you are reassured
effervescence in the beer, you are so *here*.
Boss gives you honey,
you drown in it. No sin, only synapse.
To eliminate surprise
psychologists promise deep but they are
orchids high in rainforest boughs,
way above relevancy.

Identity scaffolds are up
but nothing gets built it's
about the scaffolds. The dorsolateral prefrontal
takes you for a night out
under the town.
Eccles' World 3 stops talking to World 2.

We're all on the blood bus
& you can't trust this
incident we call being. Bundle theory,
each one of us is a crowd.

Create a bright side.
Let all the philosopher/neurologist nit-pickers
lurch about this implacable complexity.
A new connection, a lubricant,
allows the wounded to wobble
towards the end of life with
fantasy padded around their every tumble.
Humans, screaming death-sacks all,
shuffle through their moves.

But but but
optimists putter like two-stroke engines
towards the affirmations outside this argument —
those anagogic mountaineers.
The Empathy Trick
has tiny audiences in tears.
You say "what about our kids!" I go all
softy gooey nest-mess so
pre-programmed & evolutionary.
We defecate predictability.

Doctors snip & a handful are silenced.
Shucking their unisex scold's bridle
a few ride beyond conviction
to a knowledge deep in meat.
Parmenides' juggles-full of nothing,
Anselm's absolute good & perfection in a notion.
The flotilla of words show a certain flexion,
we are clever within our cage.

Free will, though never free,
can free. The next step
could be a revelation.

Small charges ignite a numinous spurt.
This can become a fountain, look!
The day after rain
we abandon our homes for sandscapes,
white cockatoos croak like consumptives
a frantic pair of currawongs feed a craze of family,
this is no black/white binary no leaf/sky absolute.
Neighbours stand in gawk beneath simpleton sunshine as it
burns this small globe pure.
That awe, if swindle, is worth any *cost*.
Which is also imaginary anyway so why worry?

Then there is the brainchain.
My thoughts bounce from hers she touches
strangers, this neural brushfire is perpetual
& a world-changer. If each self is a cascade,
an almost random deluge,
what is our community of selves?
There is an inundation of hatching outcomes —
all potentials, all hope.
Despite rats in the eyes,
Damian's patience has cured Sharon's hurt
and thereby cured himself.
A sacrament sits within simply listening.
That succession of aware entities that we are/will be
is a gift, a harvest.

Neurotheology — god is in giggles. It is the hymn within \
our Personal Delusional System.
Neuroplasticity — we can sculpt
a future with our laughter, invent tranquillity
or dance with fairies. Irrepressible glory —
I will lay down my life to pretend it matters.

If it's all just blips
then that makes our sorcery a perpetual surprise.
There is yet more

sounds like a prayer,
I built my churches about this murmur
(though the conniving cortex *would* say that).
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The Euthanasia Workshop

Mark & I have both seen ghosts.
For two agnostics
a surprisingly comfortable realisation.
But no ghosts today,
I'm sitting with dozens of 60 70 80 somethings
all eager for gossip from the fast-train to dust.

There are hugs from friends, how come
so many repeat attendees?
Are they checking on who're still around
their pre-purchased poison wrapped in foil
on the fridge door shelf beside the mustard?

While Esther thinks her heart pills will do the job
Barry's bought the nitrogen kit online with
(of course) a *recyclable* plastic bag.
Mexico has Day of the Dead veterinary bus tours
while a civil Chinese online supplier
called Smith is *100% genuine*.

When I run across a colleague at the tea-table
we both bluster *Knowledge is power* yeah right.
Seems like demise is the last challenge...
one has climbed mountains
& surfed that stupid-huge wave off Oahu.
We frocked & balding adventurers
won't be pushed, we'll jump.

Even modern death has such a hurry
no time for cupcakes & pretty monologues.
There's much laughter —
especially when we hear Grace's rehearsed last speech
was short-circuited by the fast reaction —
her last words — *This tastes like shit*.
No way Nembutal can pass as a cocktail
our final sip has disgust built in but
right to the end life costs,
there's always an aftertaste.

By the Wayside

Over the drinks
Alise started discussing “us veterans”
as though we had conquered something real.
There were enough stories that day, our
backs bent, the calcium dust we shed
as we struggle on towards dotage.
There’s a form of war
universally fought against the years.
She had a hit in the 80’s.
Staunch, she faces this foe
that always defeats but that’s
not the point.

Later, look her up on google, 251734 results.
Then think back
her ex-lover Janet
that careless brilliance the photographs, poems
her singing voice raw with gitanes & clarity.
I think about the “fallen”,
those casualties to narrative,
the ones who shone with promise
flared a few years then disappeared.

Because I saw Janet last month, North Wollongong.
Written out, whatever-happened-to’d.
She’d raised 3 kids,
2 of whom weren’t her own. Her 4th education
was in a psych ward she
graduated with a patience for small circles.

A next-door neighbour loves her unconditionally
though Alzheimer’s has robbed most context.
Janet cooks. & laughs.
This is now her audience, her *demographic*.

There are so many of them —
Remember? Where are they now?
Some had predictable disasters.

Of course, my own irrelevance crowds at the edges
& is itself irrelevant.
My place is guaranteed in the void.
Incidentally, so is yours.

Janet said *I still dabble*
as though it were an embarrassing affliction.
We patched in the decades,
cracked a few revelations.
Beachfront café was shared like a joint —
the crackle & smoke obscured
loss, apology.

I didn't say
she wouldn't have acknowledged
that nothing stopped that didn't need to.
There was no point discussing
contradiction & regret.
She was dying, pancreatic cancer.
Notions of fame & achievement
had walk-on roles, comic relief.
Our respective kids are *doing great*,
though we are anxious about them.

Brilliant careers aren't worth
the confetti they're written on.
Worn out is a core part of the contract.
It's a tiny dire.
I hunger for her dignity.
She'd swap me
for 3 more months.

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Andy Warhol at Tate Modern



<https://youtu.be/ZjgAd6Z-dd0>

Science communication

The Astonishing Simplicity of Everything | **Neil Turok**



<https://youtu.be/JV7K8CvA26I>



Theophilus Brown's friends



https://youtu.be/841Nlaon_8A

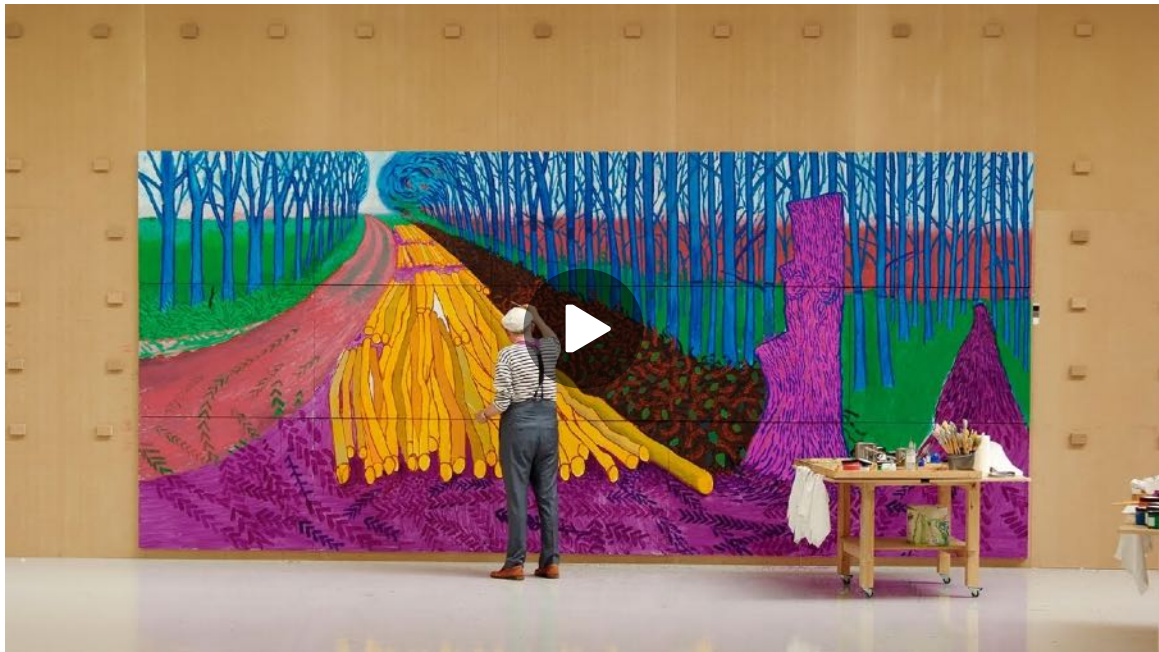
Taboo words

Gender pronouns — Steven Pinker on politically-motivated campaigns to change and abandon language



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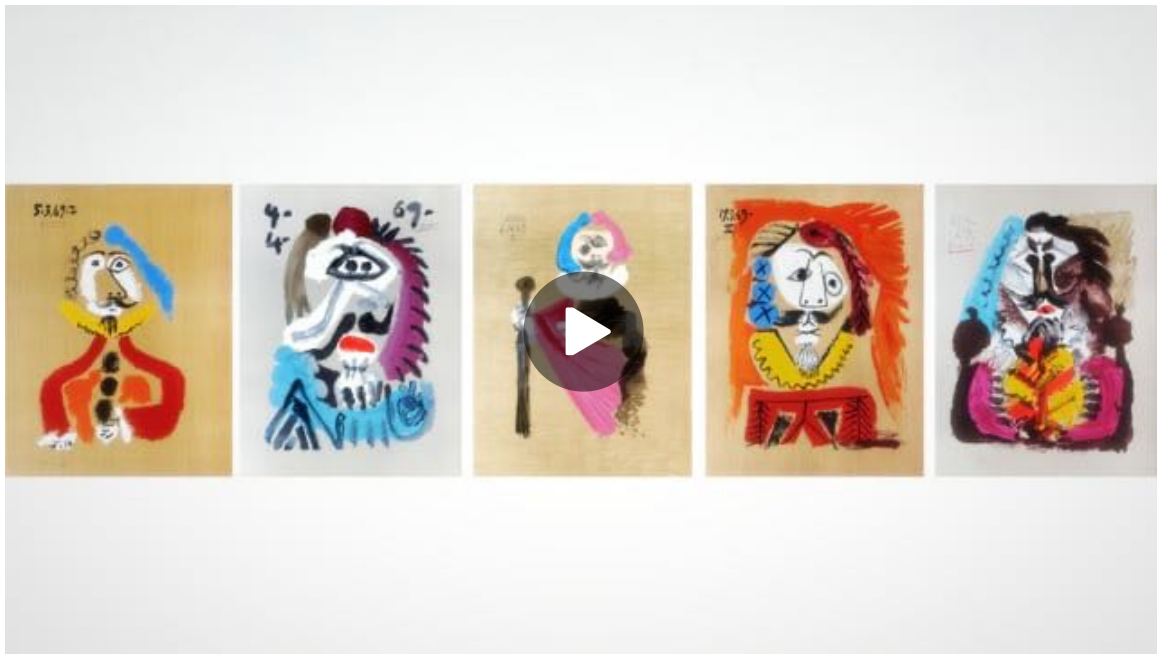




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GO, PLAY!



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Internet roulette

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♥ Buy the editor a gin and tonic.

*(This publication was created on its editor's deathbed
The gin will make him feel better. The tonic may or*

may not have a restorative effect.)

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