

BRUCE MERRY

OF RECENT AUSTRALIAN BOOKS

Robert Hood, *Day-Dreaming on Company Time*, Five Islands Press, Wollongong, 1988. 96 pp.

Carla Sari, *The Cry* and Leah Kaminsky, *Spilt Milk*, RMIT Poets, Melbourne, 1988. 32 pp.

Peter Goldsworthy, *This Goes With This*, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Crows Nest NSW, 1988. 55 pp.

Karrinjeet Singh-Mahil, *Closed Doors*, RMIT Poets, Melbourne, 1988. 24 pp.

William Henderson, *Black in Bright Sunlight* and Linda Rooney, *Snakes from Ireland*, *ibid.*, 1988. 28 pp.

Let's reflect on some of the canons that have been suggested for a successful story: it must have a middle and then dispense with its beginning and end (Chekhov); it has three or more characters (O'Connor); it describes a scene or rehearses an emotion; it reads clearly, like a letter to your best friend (Maugham). We know that it must grasp the attention of the reader and hold it through one reading. Eichenbaum compared it to a falling bomb, whose impact is greatest at final impetus (the small form), whereas novel (the large form) has a horizontal trajectory and may peak well before the end, closing on a *coda* (see *Anna Karenina*). Short stories also obey the rules of sub-genre: romantic, detective, sci fi, historical, spy, ghost, horror and so forth. Hood's present collection tucks fairly neatly into the 'horror' category (with unconscious *renvois* to Dino Buzzati or Landolfi, one might have suspected, rather than to Dahl). He also uses *mise en abime* (self-reflecting narrative), with strong attachment to meta-story (i.e. the author confronts his own 'blank page'), with amusing consequences such as the word-processor which goes on spooling out sentences though the author has closed his document, or the screen which anticipates the *denouement* that journalists are just about to report for an event which the author wanted to scoop).

The story that gives Robert Hood's collection its title presents as its hero the insignificant clerk who features so largely in the Mitteleuropean tradition (Musil, Kafka, Svevo, even Gogol). Bright, bossy clerk Adler riles supervisor Winters (the grey automaton) with sexy challenge and bouncy Sally herself. Winters dreams of a conquest at the sea, while Sally and Adler would have been the actual beach lovers. Adler gives Winters a crossword clue: 'ghostly corpse' in eight, i.e. 'revenant'. This clue becomes a cue for the narrative, which takes an afternoon or a

half-minute according as to whether it is read as a dream, a sexual fantasy or a reality. It is peppered with shift (*sdvig*), like a swerving tense-change ('Winters moves off Sally' p. 92) and with lexical oddness ('Lust rose like an euphoric fog'), charged with altering imagery ('A sea-gull laughed at him . . . before he noticed that it had only one leg') and defamiliarizing notations of the everyday ('Ring S.V. for a good time, followed by an annoyingly obscure phone number').

Hood also takes out standard themes and gives them a vigorous repainting. Thus in 'Caesar or Nothing' the man who would be tyrant of the world (though he is an obscure nobody) studies hard until he gets his will by living backwards in time to solve the crisis he already threatened. Perhaps some accents are issuing from his revolutionary soliloquy: 'Coup d'etat . . . Ole' (*sic*), but the lexical precision is unerring. We watch a derelict 'oozed' on withered grass. There is a phone call to the Chairman of United Nations: ' . . . She thought him mad and possibly dangerous'. This story reminds us that 'everyone ignores good news'. Indeed, *Schadenfreude* (joy at others' misfortune) underpins most motifs in the volume. In 'Juggernaut' (the extraterrestrial slab which destroys everything in an accelerating grey path) we have a little girl with disintegrated toes. Then a dog is annihilated and even the little girl pauses. In 'Dead End' a weary wife hurts her back lifting concrete that her inconsequential man should be seeing to. There is a corpse under it. Quite old. She hurts her back. Her man is back from the pub. She holds a mattock. The idea occurs to the reader just before the author puts it on paper. The woman (who is reading a horror manuscript for her publisher) brings the mattock down on the man and immures him in the concrete together with the half-emerged corpse under the paving. The corpse was wearing football knit. Madeline ' . . . wondered what team he played for'. The reader enjoys the *insouciant* sadism of this and other touches: 'Bren leapt from the waterbed, causing a disturbance that flung Madeline out from under the quilt after him' (p. 49). With malevolent dogs upstairs, a typist who lives the end of the world, a teacher who enters the common room and knocks his own childhood exercise book off the table, Hood's technique is to sprinkle the various stories with familiar topics artfully resumed. AIDS hovers at the edge of the cataclysms evoked. A fourteen year old girl 'raised an eyebrow' at the new male teacher and ' . . . then fell into a slouch'. The scenes are all too true. Just as Sheglov once observed that Ovid's technique in *Metamorphoses* is to make the change-over from man to stone, or woman to bird, so gradual that each item in the change is a physical and believable simile, so Hood transfers his material over from the everyday to the weird by a series of realistic parallels. In 'Necropolis' the tower of Centrepoint is observed standing up like 'a giant stirring-spoon. Light-bubbles churned through the buildings.' This makes it much easier for it

to autodestruct during the 'arvo'. Australian *argot* also helps to render the horror credible: the text is traversed by 'sickies', 'Ref', 'Sat'dy', 'whatta' and so on, but the hi-tech language is also posted: 'reticulated change', 'perceptual stability', 'split fabric of 2D space/time' and, wittily self-parodying, 'I did it with my digitally-operated, one million K, low cholesterol sosslethwapper'. The rest is all high-comedy, charmingly predictable satire: 'You fiend!' cried Nick, 'You'll pay for this!' 'I already have. It cost me 2000 mega-krats and an operation to have my Intergalactic Express card permanently grafted to my forehead'. Nothing is wrong with your T.V. set, o reader. Do not attempt to adjust this book.

From wit and the other side, Carla Sari's *The Cry* veers us back to the melancholia of childhood, love, eros, pollution, drugs, freak-religion, language misheard or mis-pronounced, forgotten courtyards and the ecstasy of a slow-to-talk infant who finally breaks his wall of silence by CHICCHIRICCHI (*sic*, needs a final accent?) for 'COCK-A-DOODLE-DO!' The poems are brief, crafted appeals. They evoke common enemies, as well as the problem of second languages. In suburbia the 'little man next door' is all-proud of his 'clothes hoist / the naked spine of your cemented backyard', while 'Acid rain may fall / carbon dioxide eat up the planet', the bourgeois house-owner broods, feeds anger, and uses the verb 'encroach'. The poet plays with the notion 'Whose land?' and the composition turns into a lyric for the planet lost rather than a rude neighbour's aggressive gardening and DIY. A remarkable love poem seems to forge the little-headed truth that a man has to find the right words, to touch a woman's heart 'like no-one else . . .'. Otherwise people must walk in their separate deserts and re-enact the discordances, 'chasms, craggy terrains', of the pock-marked battle of mere organisms. This woman, any woman, seeks for a ' . . . presence, so light, I can only sense it / below the level of consciousness.' Woman wants to find the unicorn, the Tristan or Abelard. A man of depth and sense: 'lightly, unexpectedly, I had despaired / of ever finding you'. Counterpoised against this elegy of refined hope is the (I take it) horrendous cult mass marriage evoked in 'Young Lady From a Distant Shore', whose 'arms perform the offering / with the mechanical grace / of a marionette' espousing a man 'dressed in a suit with matching tie / a civil servant on duty'. The two poems span love regained and civilization lost for love. Leah Kaminsky's *Spilt Milk*, which partners Sari's Italianate poems in the volume, may be read as Jewish in allegiance, clinical in experience. The deliberate pun on Auschwitz/Australia, revealed as an assonance in the title of the opening poem, contrasts 'forty years' of 'bitter endless tears' (Samuel Beckett, 'The tears of the world have a constant quality . . .') with the gaudy simpering transparency of the Bondi Beach syndrome, where a girl's pat-a-cake fades back into the baker's dozen of an omni-Baker who uses ovens for the final purpose.

The past horror saw older women with a 'shaven head'. Immigrant girl plays with her 'curls / like the rest of the girls' (deliberate, vicious, trivializing rhyme) and the drama is done. If Hitler's culture was 'god-forsaken hell', the blond receiving nation is 'hell / forsaken'. Here the jagged *enjambment* stresses the sadness of an older survivor's death in the southern waste. One day the speaker's mother told her Hitler had won: 'I laughed and went to bed / that evening / the empty heart stopped bleeding'. To avoid one mass grave is to find an even sadder coffin. In other poems from 'Spilt Milk' a medical lecturer's evil-sounding 'Thalassaemia' is transported into his listeners' 'imaginary Greek isle' or an Italian dying lady sings 'Ave Maria' and 'dottoressa' but ends up with just a 'stump' to 'wiggle'. The staff can only smile, ' . . . We cry'. The grand drama of illness and suffering is neatly defused by the betrayal of a pet cat preferring the lap of another woman. The speaker says 'I thrash my tail / and sharpen my claws'. So no milk, or atrocity, can be cried over for ever. The dull threnody of these tears of the world is just (from 'Nothing Left, But Faith in Life') 'red down my thighs' while 'jesus christ and The Beasts' (capital and lower case letters artfully reversed) 'listen as I snore / and laugh / at my tangled web'. For all of us who are uncomfortable with telephones it is a consolation to know that for Kaminsky's speaking voice 'the most beautiful line that I have traced / is the one that is disconnected from the plug'. An obsessive metronome divides the male and the female stanzas with close rhyme (left or right of the page) to end, in 'Eve's Rib' on the gnomic:

'be a deer
 fetch a beer'
 she opens fridge
 frozen tear closing scene
 of her midnight dream
 his head rolls off
 a guillotine.

The collection closes, in 'Barriers', with a doctor's caravanserai round Australia, Europe, China, South Africa, New York (see end notes) and in this knitting together of all the cosmic horrors the white of sheets, of milk, sterile linen and apartheid is harshly run into that of the 'staccato white lines running down the centre / keep us on the right side of the road'. Radical is not white. Then, with 'Matthew Michael', the nether sphincters unloose the other tears, those of womb and bowels. From a hospital window comes the last colour, yellow, daffodils that speak of spring and morning rain. Yellow tears at the end of 'Spilt Milk'.

In Peter Goldsworthy's 'This Goes With This', another medical man enjoys paring down the empirical truths with irony and the half-

tunes of music, Eliot, grammar, Proust, dislocated rhythm, chess, travel, *chic* and landscape remembered:

I was born
in a small town
with a large graveyard.
There were four pubs
and five churches.
There was a six-pack
of grain silos.

Here there are many poems about words and exploring the act of composition itself: words 'sentenced heel and toe' but 'Still they will not / be unlaced.' Bright jokes mask the essential agnostic uselessness of observed life: Christmas is the 'season of donor organs' and time passing is a remembrance of trivia: 'I believe in making lists. / In quartz clocks, / calendars, reminder calls, alarms. / I like the hours 9am and 5pm, / and taking to the weekend shapelessness with these: / hedge-clippers, edge-trimmers . . .'. Here there are faint, well-pruned cadences of matters biblical: 'These things I say unto you' etc. Ferocious beliefs are thus unbeliefs and Goldsworthy unravels his column of short lines so that a few bitter pointers express the basic nihilism of an aesthete with a good conscience. The people to have near at nightfall ' . . . are the Nice', those who wheel meals 'unbiographied' and 'those who wept in 'Lassie' '. The irony is beginning to come clear and the meaning of 'nice' subtly alters as we progress down the column: 'the middle-classed / and all their children, / sugar of the earth'. To join the Club Goody Two-Shoes, the brigade of anonymous do-gooders, meals-on-wheels volunteers, and, why not?, Amnesty members, must pass by way, it seems, of: 'lost Guides, bent Brownies, / sentimental blokes / who offer sweets from cars'. The algebras won't sit still and niceness becomes nasty, just as piano practice is 'Czerny without end' and 'better versions by other people / reproduced'. So why bother? After all Glenn Gould has the last word, recluse and manic and perfection. Goldsworthy hints at his fascination with perfection, both in the title and most of the poems, but he can only offer a 'kind of mob' of hands at the keyboard, a 'delinquent right index, that lazy left little.' (Full stop after the adjective and line-end). There are those thumbs, 'yes, you, in the middle'. So they are, at percussion instruments like the piano, but they don't make the strike any better if they offer merely 'whittled toothpicks on demand'. Then there is the marvellous re-writing of word orders familiar from the ghostly Four Quartets; the adverb followed by the noun cumulus, as in ('Sunset': 'Always this same finicky attention / to detail (. . .) / the precise colouring, as if by numbers, / panther-pink, pool-blue', or in 'Credo': 'I prefer nouns to verbs: / the label affixed, unmoved', where Eliot's noun-epithet cursus is given a modern lexical register, to be sure,

but the old favourite cadences of English lyric are given a breath-taking airing. Nothing goes on beyond a just dance-measure in this collection. The morning kettle may steam open a first 'gummy envelope' (the day, the post, the beard) and the writer carves his usual face out of soap ' . . . each morning / slightly less perfectly'; with the help of old, now unfashionable, tropes the verbal surgeon drops in his effects: 'You (i.e. 'Alcohol') are the eighth / and shallowest / of the seven seas' (a formal *adunaton*) and drink makes mischief, for it is the ' . . . wetter of cunts, / drooper of cocks' (short vowel plus *-er*, then plural four-letter effect, followed by long vowel plus *-er*, then plural for male organ). It is a conceit; it is also set in *isocolon* etc.

Goldsworthy has his patient on his toes all through the book: remember each night this advice: 'Never eat on an empty stomach' and 'the dangling seventh must resolve, / the laws of grammar will not be *broke*'. Harmony on the participle; and numbers to predict infinite contingency will soon be discovered by 'scientific Americans' (watch the small *s*- doing its act there). All devised by a man with a mind to 'the stash of clippings, / the mantelpiece of shined trophies', for the trivial is preferable: Twiggy (p. 38) could be a lyric poet because she weighs less than 99 lbs. I generalize, breaking the rule that if P then q, not-Q does not entail not-p. Goldsworthy's 'Sea of Tranquillity / always exactly shallow enough to drown in', seems to suggest that he won't win his battle for perfectionism. Yet the trivial is its own treasury. Dad's desk had 'strange toys: / Latin grammars; cheque-book stubs / neatly tied; a blue inepad and stamp, / [. . .] and once, in its own deep drawer, / a pencil, deep bruise-purple, / mysteriously marked: INDELIBLE.' These lines assort depth, colour and grammar. Take this to your desert island.

Ms Singh-Mahil, aged 23, is altogether more raw and angry: *Closed Doors* opens with 'Principles' that 'are the principal / Cause of wars'. White doves are ineffectual and, with tension, 'away she goes, a long way up / To the top of the mushroom cloud' (note here the parody of Australian 'she' for "it", "the whole damn thing" in English). The collection closes with a parable of infinity: dropped grains, deep waters, an irrelevant single water-skier, then 'The fog settles gently about its throat'. The poet liquidates football in 'Castlemaine 39, Visitors 59': 'A fist catches an unshaven / Temporo-mandibular clicks / Back in reaction' (subject? Object? Who knows, in a rugby scrum!). Ecology surfaces in the tone-poem about colours 'I Will Never Belong': 'Red dust tries to fly forever upward / [. . .] And polled herefords grazing / To cut down any green / Before it invades with its unwanted colour'. Savage support for green, and those poor tame bulls. 'Another Murder at the Anvil 2 1979' suggests that the ignorant knifers at the nightclub will not be pardoned even though they, their birth, are 'Mum and Dad's doing'. A

woman on her own at night, directed to a party, lives a modern parable of prostitution:

Terrible consequences of the female condition
when left to cope with problems of two.
Two policemen focus their boredom on the
pavement
As they pass in their clearly labelled car.

Women mutter 'Never again' and go to the beach, re-convicted that 'Men are uses' (see 'I Enjoy the Sea — That's Why I Go To The Beach', p. 14). The poem ends tidily. The woman lies back to capture as much sun as possible, 'To fry as many cells as she could, / So that she might attract another / Man'. An abortion is rather tellingly juxtaposed with a sister who writes saying she is 'trying to conceive'. 'Here, have mine, I cry / To the letter held in my hand'; and there is a fierce assault on the image of 'All Those Published In Women's Anthologies': fat on the lips, brown dust on the nose, a 'nice-natural look', paint seen in the mirror if you study your face, fluttered false eye lashes: 'I think it may be / Just an illusion / That some man / Has wrapped you in.' *O tempora, o mores!* Oh, men, o world!

William Henderson's *Black in Bright Sunlight* is a slight yet pungent collection of fifteen poems, dominated, to my mind, by the potent satire of 'Tourists in the Pacific'. On the whole, reads its closing line, black Australians don't visit the Pacific. Of course. 'The natives could never be black enough for the reverend'. The consul talks about his wife's growing the sycamores. The bus is late for the tourists (white): 'it's the other beach we wanted'. Of course, the locals took to the sycamore with their machetes. The island divers never get a suntan. Just think. It's all too much for any white woman. Gauguin, bulls looked for in every cockfight, sea-island cotton shredding —. These are travel poems, ranging from the 'World's best sound' which is the five syllables between 'f' and 'k' from the 'fat, farnaarkling crow', but the poems all rest inside the local observed as from afar: there are 'rubbish cans and cats' (surely, then, cats are rubbish too?), and in the metropolis by the sea ' . . . some who were having an eternal party / on some marginal and magical second floor / looking like they were somewhere else'. City life is 'a blitz of so-so restaurants in our / oh-so-ho restaurant city'.

There are mothers, cats and clocks in this collection, as stable a set of poetic chords as the mirror, the path, the goblet in Renaissance verse. Thus 'Bags', such a common and negligible item, revert to great poetic *vis* in Henderson's:

Large enough for an hour
light enough for nothing.
No time to collect —

only diaries, books, spoons,
and the photographs of a place
you cannot visit. (p. 8)

The partner collection in this volume, Linda Rooney's *Snakes From Ireland*, consists of fourteen poems. They are informed by Ireland, lessons from Vietnam, a crass comment on the Chinese girl diver winner at the Games, sexual love, marriage leading to war widowhood and the mere crassness of trying to defy eternity (which is 'a freeze frame / of genetic stability'). These are more epigrammatic than the other volumes commented on in this notice: when you sleep in his arms, you 'pray to the god of pharmaceuticals'. In parks eyes glint or people have an 'excursion of emptiness'. Dogs are the only non-guilty citizens of free public space. There can be no emotive bond between park couples, for 'All strength is strung / In the loins'. At a Dinner Party we learn that a man with strong views 'hides guns in his bedroom'. A War Widow 'watched the burgundy bridesmaids' dresses / Grow deeper chilled and thinner'. No photo or memory can survive the tears of passing time. There is an up-beat and sonorous love-poem in this collection, for if St Patrick banished snakes from the Republic of Ireland (as Irish tour guides often tell Americans), modern songs have made it near-impossible to string together lines about love (which used to be the subject of all poetry):

Love me like a leopard's lick
Crawl me through a python's pit
Comb me curlicue sandrocks
Spin me a woven weblock
Sing me scented solitude
Bask me in drunk attitude

Flip me with a flamethrown switch
Drive me to a skyscape pitch
Smooth me zigzag avenues
Feed me frangipani news
Paint me powdery colours
Wash me feathery rollers
Swim me like a deft crayfish
Love you with a scallop's kiss.

Not least remarkable in this love poem is the shift from 'me' to that 'you' in the last line, the *sterzata* (gear-change) from imperatives to the last line's indicative.

