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REVIEW

Van Ikin, ed., *Glass Reptile Breakout and Other Australian Speculative Stories*, University of Western Australia: Centre for Studies in Australian Literature, 1990, \$14.95, 161 pp., ISBN 0-86422-099-5.

James G Porter, *The Edge of the Rainforest*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1991, \$11.95, 170 pp., ISBN 0-7022-2350-6.

Suzanne Edgar, *Counting Backwards and Other Stories*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1991, \$12.95, 145 pp., ISBN 0-7022-2316-6.

Van Ikin's *Glass Reptile Breakout* is a collection of eighteen short stories which shows the versatility of science fiction when it is not anchored to the engines of future war theme. The editor has chosen mostly published fiction to emphasize the human, 'speculative', even moral side of futuristic writing. Most of the stories are miniatures, and many of these capture the reader's attention almost immediately by their subversion of expectations. The militaristic triumphalism of screen sf is deflated and in its place is a tentative search for what might happen in alternative worlds. One of the first signposts of a "speculative" story is a linguistic hint that the prose comes from a slightly different place from the one the reader inhabits. Several of the pieces in Van Ikin's anthology make the passage from reality to *the other* easier for the reader to negotiate by inserting a small semantic shift. The alteration may occur in the title, as in Leanne Frahm's "The Supramarket" (67-72), which deals with a larger, more absorbing, more devastatingly possessive dominion than the one every shopper in the contemporary world knows as a "supermarket". Here the shoppers are more purposeful, more channelled than in our familiar reality. They strike their children, of course, and the toddlers have dried teartracks on their cheeks. But what if the uniformed assistant with the pricing gun is a robot, and what if your helpful friend with the trolley of well-chosen bargains is a siren carved out of smiling ice to help you become a satisfied customer?

The questions are not quite answered and so the reader is left with a vague disquiet. We know this scene; we have travelled these aisles of weepy children and watched those rodent faces with their pocket calculators and noticed that the word "special" has turned from an adjective to a noun. The supramarket in the story is bigger, louder; we are not told just how sinister it is; perhaps it is a trap with no exit. Philippa Madden's "Confusion Day" (99-105) operates the same kind of linguistic spell from its title onwards. The two words bend our normal usage, which is based on signals like "shopping day" or "birthday" or even "Thursday". It proposes a day when everything is set to go awry. The clockfaces lose their numbers and hands, the children elongate their age, a symphony orchestra plays in the barley field and harmless birds claw your face. The heroes stumble out for a walk to a Confusion Day service; when the moon dies things may slip into harmony again, but who can be sure that another year will not bring a similar suspension of habit and image for one whole day?

David Lake's "Omphalos: A Dialogue" signposts the solution of the story from the foregrounded, first word of the title (Gk. for "navel"). An urbane dinner host (a bachelor) gives his guests sea-food and champagne. They fall to discussing the subject of alternate existences, of how everything might be changed if William the Conqueror had *not* conquered England. In the meantime, passively confronting all the somnolent, contented partymakers, is a large, bead-covered port-hole in the wall. The host insists that it doesn't take a political or military cataclysm to precipitate another world: what if his guest took one puff less on his pipe? Or suppose they were all listening to Mozart's 41st symphony instead of the 39th? A little bored, or curious, one of the wives, Anthea, gets up and climbs through the port-hole and onto the verandah. There is no tension at all when she walks back in from the moonlight. She is the host's wife, Anita. Nobody thinks the world has altered its course. The guests are quite happy with their steak and their servings of Drambuie. Neatest of all is the way they continue listening to Mozart:

It was still the same old world, but I was content that it should be so. Mozart's 42nd Symphony is my favourite of all his works, and I especially enjoy the majestic I minor finale. I always have. (90)

Lucy Sussex, in her contribution "The Lipton Village Society" (125-37), uses the common name on a tea brand to cause a kind of black hole in

contemporary urban existence. A woman rents an apartment in a Gothic folly; her landlord runs "Times Gone Books". She eats some mushrooms and partly suspects hallucinations when she meets her fellow-tenants. They unfurl maps to a fantasy world called "Lipton Village". they paint and plan, they revise their Utopian sociology. Then all these neighbours simply disappear. Being a government worker, the heroine has some access to names and addresses. She tries to track down the young people who have vanished. One of her informants says quite casually: "To a good job with a tea company. Tetley's, I believe." This story thus begins and ends its porous link to an alternative world with the linguistic trigger of a tea packet.

It seems to me that these stories function in direct proportion to their ability to sidetrack the readers, to gain their *acquiescence*. After all, we are perfectly aware that Mozart did not write forty-two symphonies and we know that Chopin and Liszt did not record their piano works for Decca and RCA. But what if they were recorded without knowing it? Suppose a smart early-nineteenth-century musician devised a harmonic amplifier that converted sounds to exact colours and also left a repertory of the virtuoso solosits of the day? What if she was also a brilliant pianist herself, rivalling Clara Schumann and familiar with the great names of their period? All it needs is a bit of comedian's patter and the sf reader is sucked in to the fable (Sean McMullen's "The colours of the Masters", [107-21]):

He removed the cover, to reveal a complex system of fine rods and levers, all driven by thin metal diaphragms, and in turn moving a system of paper-thin mirrors and tiny lenses and prisms. Every moving part was mounted on jewel bearings. A frosted glass screen faced whoever was playing the piano.

The detail which seduces us is that "frosted glass screen": anything can happen beyond a screen. Literature is full of mirrors that turn out to be opaque, or concave, or flawed or frosted. The story's modern actors are seated in a contemporary drawing-room. Two elderly twins, descendants of the inventor, take up the story with an extension of the writer's patter mechanism:

“We still have that mirror,” said Charlotte. “It is locked in a special case.” “There is a note inside which reads ‘This scratch is the playing of Herr van Beethoven, January 1829’,” said Claudine.

With such enchanting *topoi* for *Mittel-Europe*, the reader’s absorption is assured. Now we need a little cultural persuasion, together with a spot of local language. Just in time to make the dollar pay-off clear:

“Number three: NP and KV, 1838,” read Charlotte. “That will be Niccolò Paganini and Katherine Vaud, of course. He said ‘scusi’. He was Italian.” “And he coughed. He was not very well,” said Claudine. “He died two years after this was recorded. The theme is from Rossini’s Mose. Paganini’s variations on it were very popular last century.” “Paganini himself,” I whispered in awe. “It’s worth millions!” exclaimed Gerry. “A recording by the greatest violin virtuoso ever, and he’s not even around to argue about royalties.”

In his useful introduction to this collection, Van Ikin stresses that sf may be seen as “the literature of ideas” and also notes that Australian science fiction tends to be concerned less with gadgets and technical whizz-bang, more with human reactions and even people’s sense of humour. His own contribution, “Combatant”, features a stuntman diving from a cliff and staying under water long enough to be transported (in his imagination?) to a grassed other-world where a thousand whispers urge him, for days, to defeat an arriving invader. The reader has just about grasped that the alien is a *sheep* and the twin yellow suns in the horizon overlook a typical meadow of eatable *grass*, when the stuntman clammers out of the sea-weed and the film director says he has fumbled the take. Rosaleen Love has a story about a sea-serpent which challenges the reader to accept a fable and then withdraws the evidence just as the impossible animal seems to be waving its tail over the sand. The sceptical scientist declares that he has been “thumped by an illusion” and the air of fable is left dangling through the long years in which the animal will remain a story rather than a verified sighting.

Jack Woodhams, in "Mostly Meantime", constructs an epistolary fable about used parts on a SlammTrak Transporter which has defects caused by its neutron magnetizer. Various manufacturers write from different galaxies saying the original complaint is now centuries old because the letter was carried by the wrong space-ship, or became tangled in a cross-warp, or got caught up at the Cygnus poste restante which has a "terrible reputation for dilatoriness" (147). The reader quickly understands and consequently enjoys decoding his humorous up-date of the old "My letter is in the post" theme. George Turner's "Shut the Door When You Go Out" suggests that if earth travellers lay in Slow Metabolism chambers on a space voyage and then sought re-entry three thousand years later, they might be refused permission to land by a new Gaia, each of whose inhabitants knows and interprets the wishes of the entire Earth. Greg Egan's "Artifact" proposes a space-traveller who wants to come home even when his colleagues have come near a huge geometric laser-connected figure in the sky. Neither the Captain nor the ship's psychologist can persuade him to postpone his re-entry. He flies back to Earth on a lone transport, acting as courier for the scientific post of the entire expedition: a bank of "memory bubbles", 2 to the power 41 bits. Here is a clear reversal of a common sf *topos*: inter-stellar space generates a marvellous alien artifact and the sky-scientist just wants to go away. He wants to be lazy. Even the mysterious data of the heavens cannot deflect him from a desire for normality, waste, ambiguity. As a parable of real life the latter seems comformtingly close to the truth.

Other stories, especially Terry Dowling's "Vanities", where fishermen at a future Australian crater lake set their line at "vanities" and the waters yield mirror-encrusted sarcophaguses of people who dived in, are more complex and cut across several genres, as indeed does the piece by Russell Blackford, which gives its title to the volume, "Glass Reptile Breakout" (11-22). Here "sharks" cruise the discos and rock joints for "roes". The dancers wear fins and implants; the semantic signal is given by the fact that the places are called "miracle bars". The whole story is an elegant allegory of the discordance trend. Here the characters do "flickdancing", gyrating with knives to draw their own blood from wounds which then heal in an orgy of colour and sound.

This is an interesting anthology which quotes many of the standard devices and themes from the trillion year spree of science fiction writing without labouring the point for the uninitiated. Readers who come to the genre innocent of its conventions and fixed points will still be

enchanted by this “literature of ideas” and also, perhaps, by the up-beat shafts of feminism and ecology which the Australian sub-genre has managed to add to mainstream writing in this rather overpowering and certainly well-inhabited literary *cul de sac*.

James Porter’s *The Edge of the Rainforest* comes from an area of writing called “Young adult fiction”. Set in the Atherton tablelands with forays to Magnetic Island and James Cook University, it explores an area and a subject with precision. The whole book, apparently aimed at eighteen-year-old readers, works inside a casing of life-style betterment and — why not admit it? — sturdy morality. A single mother and her daughter struggle to keep a communal farm going. The daughter loves her goats and her view of Mt Bartle Frere. The mother loves her independence, is opposed to “people pollution” and determined to make her minor Utopian vision work out. All that is needed is money and a water supply. But access to water is denied by the bossy, up-market cattle farmer on the next property. And money — well, money is always a problem. Here it is tangled up with beer-drinking lawyers and literal bankers. Throw in a little mild-mannered xenophobia: the prospective purchasers are German and speak indignantly in “their own language”; add some love interest: Karen is rescued by the neighbouring farmer’s idealistic son, a first-year Engineering student at James Cook; he is prepared to sell his sports car to redeem his father’s egotism and also raise funds to rebuild the community cabins, and we have an all-purpose plot in the young adult mould.

The young people travel up and down the highway to Cairns (at one point the girl hitches a lift and wrestles with a drunk whom she outwits in the woods and reports to the police). Cars break down, surfing is learnt on Magnetic Island; the kindly law Professor at James Cook advises that a deed of sale may not be binding; the rainforest stands over all other phenomena, containing nasty wild pigs with “razor sharp tusks”. The patient boyfriend is gored by one of these beasts and Karen organizes his rescue. The families are reconciled and good neighbourliness can win out.

As a fable, it leads to a happy ending after sundry vicissitudes. At times the desired patina of realism is rather strained, as when Karen learns that her biology lecturer at James Cook University is her natural father. Confronted with this possibility at the end of a lab session with his “pet-student” (also his daughter), the dishy teacher, already described by Karen’s friend as “tall, dark and handsome”, quickly reverts to expected form and pats her on the shoulder. It is hard to imagine whether his

response is a parody of masculine guilt but the author's language seems quite serious:

"Now then, no more of that. I've got a family of my own. Two boys and a girl. Rex is thirteen, fair-haired, a lot like his mother, Brian is eleven, darker, like me. Aileen is only six, an afterthought. She's going to be tall, like you — and a brunette as well."

(80)

When the biology lecturer invites Karen to have dinner and meet the model family after this Malthusian excursus, the girl declines unless she can meet them as brothers and sister. Perhaps the trouble with this kind of writing is that everything has to be on the level. Young people have to have healthy problems; issues must be sternly serious. Officialdom has to seem stodgy but relatively benign. Office jobs are dull, dogs frighten wild animals and single mothers are battlers.

While, admittedly, the plot may need to be clear for the late-teen reader, the language takes a number of spills in the attempt to draw demarcation lines round its characters' thoughts and actions: "there was a mischievous glint in Mike's eyes" (5); "She thought cow's milk tasted awful" (8); "*Ugh*, thought Karen" (26); "'Wow!' Karen blinked" (p. 53); "'Mm-m,' was all she said" (83). Cups of tea are often a problem for English writers. They are so numbingly boring that perhaps the attempt to describe them should be abandoned: "Mike sat pensively sipping the hot brew" (133). Twice in the novel the meal *smells* "delicious" [55;149]. Karen says "Yuk!", her mother often says "Cooee!". People are usually hungry: they "stave off starvation" or "wolf" their sandwiches. The girls "drip" when they come out of the rain: hot showers and dry clothes "revive" them (62).

Predictability also snares the writer in his characterisation of the German property-buyers with their Great Dane ("which immediately slobbered all over the newcomers", [112]), and their looks: "Hans Schneider, with his bristling ginger walrus moustache and intense blue eyes, sat in the driver's seat. Alongside him was his blonde wife, Marga. Hans spoke with a heavy accent." Indeed: the next thing, these Huns will be fished out of Lake Eacham in their Stuka bomber.

The Edge of the Rainforest makes no claim to be part of a literature of transgression. It offers a series of inspired glimpses of the



city/country polarity, contrasting Cairns with Milla Milla and fields with rainforest. It is at its most interesting when it hovers on the edge of describing why adults make their impulsive life decisions. It features a teenage type that is agonizingly serious, rather egoistic and a bit wet. It seems like hard labour, to try to write about these teenagers: "Phew" (p. 76).

Counting Backwards, by Suzanne Edgar, is so different from the books reviewed above that it might seem to have been written on another planet. The confident narrating tone drops away completely. Here we have a series of seventeen short stories, often flooded with memories, many going back to before the War. Old cars, disturbing habits, sick relatives, split families, funerals: small enough as material but surveyed with a precise, ironic eye that leaves no mercy and yet suggests that old age can rescue us from the tyranny of appetites, of fur coats, betrayal, family quarrels and eating disorders.

It is true that one story slithers towards the tragedy of suicide: one of Suzanne Edgar's seventeen protagonists succumbs to separation and the indifference of grown-up children (in "Counting Backwards"). She learns to count herself into hypnosis in the surgery of a pink, plump specialist, but finds ultimate comfort among her absent daughter's dolls, on her bed, in the lean solitude of her last hopeless night. She crams "shiny coloured capsules" from her doctor's prescriptions into her mouth and then counts slowly backwards towards a zero in which deserting husband or faithless children can no longer wither her self-esteem. In the other stories, however, the grim perplexities of life give way to small discoveries and consequent consolations. An irritating, enormously fat female patient (in "Story of a Ham Sandwich") has to be washed in bed by a student nurse with under-average exam results. The struggling nurse finds an illegal sandwich wedged under the fleshy flap beneath the woman's left breast. She removes it, because this is a **NIL BY MOUTH** patient, and later takes it back in a rush of compassion. But the over-eater manages to turn it down. She wants, in that marvellous phrase loved by popular journalists, to "start a family". The nurse then runs away with an Italian waiter.

The title of another story, "The Man Who Measured the Rate at Which His Lawn Grew", leads into a delightful vignette of graphs, water supply, growth rates and yellow patches. It works as an ironic parody of the gardening and sprinkling obsession that can infect certain homeowners.

Only this one has a threatening gallstone and has to go to the hospital for tests. What will become of his lawn? His wife brings him his graphs and trims his moustache. His nurse tells him not to be too worried about a *little* bowel irregularity. Realization dawns on the fussy gardener: grass, bowels and snipped moustache are all part of the slight ache of retirement. He gazes at the chrysanthemums and tosses out his grass growth table.

Edgar's stories return to illness and hospitalization more than once. "Post Mortem" (31-45) is the most powerful narrative in the collection. It offers a fascinating study of a busy woman finding time and energy to care about the incurable arthritis and imminent death through kidney failure of a manipulative elder sister. The story is harrowing and tight, with strong sketches of ruined flesh and bright interspersed comment from the surrounding beds. Nurses possessed of varying degrees of truculence and compassion punctuate the progress towards the end. When the woman finally watches her sister undergoing death, the cadence of the story seems curiously inevitable. It makes a small discovery for all such watchers at the bed of the terminally ill:

Lou saw what dying is: a matter of how many more breaths one can gulp, the spaces in between, longer and longer; the consciousness so deathly tired it cannot return, shuddering, to the lowering faces. You drop back from the race you might still have had a chance in, leave it to the rest.

Other stories, generally told from a finely balanced feminist point of view, succeed in creating pictures of men which are thoroughly awful just because they are so gently obvious. The following opening sequence from "An Intruder" (about a rich, elderly lady and her ex-brigadier husband) creates a scene all the more alarming because it is so normal:

Lilian lifted the teapot lid and stirred.
"Ready to pour," she said, "pass your cup, dear."
Her husband was deep in the newspaper, she had to raise her voice and clink a spoon against the silver tea caddy before he listened. The brigadier reached for the cup she was holding out and cut a slab of cake. The tea slopped in his saucer. "I wish you wouldn't behave as if you were deaf, Richard."

In "Kingfishers" we are presented with a conjugal scene. Husband is ambitious, a travelling academic and a trifle snappy. A bit quick with his fist, in a domestic dispute, and rather inclined to criticize the spaghetti if it is not "blended, in a textured sauce". He believes, on the whole, that if his wife wants to view the kingfishers feeding, then she should learn to focus the binoculars properly. It would help if his wife would take their son to Adelaide for a while. Then comes the casual admission which sews the man-character up in his bag: "I met someone, a Swedish entomologist, at the conference." The wife, struggling with the paucity of this information, sees "zigzagging across the kitchen wall a blonde scientist. Shorts showed her tan thighs and half-moons of buttock". The narrative ends with a decision. She takes the road out and does not turn back, even at the still, wondering cameo of her child's face framed in a window.

Several other stories concern minor failures in life: a schoolboy who can't stand life at home with his father and so devises a way of eating meals with all the different families where he drops in on the way home. A schoolgirl who lives in two homes, with separated parents, a brisk, permissive mother and a sarcastic cursing dad. Nobody in Australian society quite escapes the lash: workers whinge, children whine and the wealthy wither. Suzanne Edgar's brilliance as a story writer is to compose every detail, to embed it in tough colourful language and to extract every possibility from the clippings in a front garden or the congealed grease in a butcher's kitbag.