

MICHAEL SHARKEY

IT TIES UP AND I BID FAREWELL: THE POETRY

OF CORNELIS VLEESKENS

Jacket information on the cover of Cornelis Vleeskens' most recent collection of poems, *Orange Blizzard*, tells us he was born in 1948 in Holland, and has lived 'mostly in Australia since 1958, except for a short period in South-East Asia, Hong Kong and Japan, where he taught English to businessmen'. In Australia, he has completed a degree at the University of Queensland, and is chiefly known as an editor of *Border Issue*, the Makar Press, and the Sydney review, *Fling*.

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Cornelis Vleeskens' four collections of poetry to date, published in Australia, mark the rise of a poet of mature conceptions concerning poetry. His earliest volume, *Hong Kong Suicide and Other Poems* (Makar Press: Gargoyle Poets No.20, Brisbane, 1976) indicates several preoccupations which recur in subsequent volumes to crystallize in the title poem of *Orange Blizzard*, (Queensland Community Press, Brisbane, 1981), a work which reconciles autobiographical 'information' with an account of poetical awareness, to conclude with images of power and assuredness. An initial appearance of slightness in some works gives way to an appreciable tautness and precision that makes each successive volume a pleasure to consider.

*Hong Kong Suicide* introduces an acknowledged consciousness of form; in 'The Motorcar as Poem in Two Parts' (p.16), Vleeskens describes his own procedure as he writes; the poem plays with para-rhythmic effects to ironise the situation of becoming 'formal' in practice:

beat-up fender  
wailing against screeching tyres  
in the corner  
(surrounded by my own

words and books of others'  
read, perused and now and then  
regurgitated in an undammed stream  
there's more form crept in  
than i intended to allow

...  
it's become an obsession,  
so many words neatly ordered  
and drinking only to the past.  
and even then not truthfully

In this brief space a great deal is implied, concerning Vleeskens' own perceptions, and the situation of poetry in the mid-seventies: in particular, perhaps, the stances or practices adopted by those poets espousing or identified with a 'New Romantic' tendency, and those whose practice evidences a more tentative and 'conceptual' approach. These terms may be perceived to overlap to a great extent when the work of Michael Dransfield (d. 1972) and Robert Adamson is considered together with that of John E. Tranter or Vicki Viidikas – to mention a number of Sydney-based poets. The debates among so many poets of the contemporary period (at least toward the end of the decade which closed about the time of Vleeskens' first publication) concerning the myth-making propensities and escapist elements of the one direction, or the detachment of the other, may ultimately give way to a recognition that both methods of operation contained much that is derivative of American models, and that both contain much that represents manifestoes concerning the position or attitude of the poet revealed in the work. And both labels may be further seen as artificial lines of demarcation to conceal an essentially similar preoccupation of many poets of the era in Australia: the continued attempt to deliver a poetry which is somehow 'appropriate' to the mood of an era as well as to particular events within the decade. The embracing of 'open-form' poetry and poetics is evidenced across the borders of dispute, despite the large numbers of poets whose practice suggested unconcern with such a development, or who adopted a more tentative approach to what was 'new'. Cornelis Vleeskens' earliest work in this regard suggests a measure of caution. Like Dransfield, Vleeskens in the 'Motorcar' poem analyses an 'obsession', which is poetry itself. The motor-

car is a vehicle in the sense of metaphor to pursue the analysis.

*Hong Kong Suicide* also explores another direction suggested by Dransfield's practice; there is at least an analogy to be drawn to Dransfield's utilization of eastern imagery among the store of metaphors, and while one might also observe that another contemporary, Robert Gray, has written a large number of poems dwelling upon Buddhism and eastern poetic practices since the same period, Vleeskens' work more acutely than either poet adduces evidence of actual residence among many Asian locations, and presents often a more 'realist' vision. This perception is presented in language that tempers 'mystic-east' connotations with frank avowals of inadequacy to deal with all the complexities attendant on the experiences, but with ironic, even humorous reflections on why this should be. Vleeskens translates imagistic practice to convey simple vignettes:

datan squatting,  
drinking of coke  
& birdsong.

a lone butterfly  
lit on

a branch of small red flowers (p.13).

The poem suggests as well as haiku poetry the versions of Chinese poetry by Ezra Pound. Vleeskens' poem here ('Datan Now, Aged 2½') includes (as well as the Dransfield lower-case characteristic) a more individual touch: the poem comes into both worlds, east and west, with the coke bottle or drink. Vleeskens' political statements are subtle, often a mere notation of cultural shifts or inclinations, and the poem becomes rather more than a plain description of an 'event': a relationship of some sort is advertised.

In an early poem (No.5) in the 'Hong Kong Suicide: 10 Preludes' sequence, Vleeskens indicates awareness of their 'sketchy' nature – both in terms of material and 'expression': 'sketches like this don't work without/ some sex-appeal, another girl-friend perhaps?', and 'the lies come easy/once you admit to them' (p.7). The poems consider their own 'relative' truth in other places in the collection also, and Vleeskens acknowledges the inclination to create a myth of himself, or of any other subject, while restraining the impulse to define his work only in these terms. The control occasionally seems

to lapse, as energies or directions become vague and dissipated. 'Rainscape with Newspaper' (p.15) is such a case in point: a graceful lyric description is dismissed in a throwaway understatement that is barely saved by a conceit concerning knowledge of the effects or magnitude of a 'storm' until the occasion has passed. The poem is focussed, however, as it provides an oblique commentary upon memory and the creative process. The concept of a 'blizzard' which occurs in later works seems foreshadowed in such a metaphor and procedure.

There is restraint in the first collection, which marks an intelligence constantly aware of how a poem is regarded before, during, and after its writing. The mood encompasses frustration, with both love and poetry, as Vleeskens tries 'a new approach' in successive poems, to the 'familiar warmth' of a person or 'poetic' situation ('Away from the Harbour', p.18). A genial self-mockery undercuts and obviates sarcasm, posturing or cynicism; the material for poetry is everywhere for Vleeskens: 'a pregnant pause/ gives birth/ to another forced cliché' provides a conceit for the poem 'Stage Directions' (p.21) which lifts the work above a cliché however; 'conception' is the topic of the poem, the Vleeskens remarks 'i cannot create alone, i cannot/shape your expectations as i shape mine' (p.23). The final poem in the series, and in the book, leaves the interpretation open while suggesting the preoccupation or 'theme' of the performance: 'each act a new exploration: changing focus' (p.24).

The exploration of conceits and metaphors to do with poetry and art in more general terms evidenced in *Hong Kong Suicide* are less the point of Vleeskens' second volume, than coincidental concerns to further preoccupations. *Longhair* (Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1979) expands ironic perspectives concerning poetic awareness however; one of the 'Kitchen Sink Poems' (p.142) reworks the contention 'I KNOW . . . WHY . . . SYLVIA PLATH . . . /KILLED HERSELF' in reflecting upon other personas than the poet's. *Long Hair* generally marks an expansion of moods dealing with love, travel, and landscape — both Japanese and Australian.

The volume opens with a poem on 'The Political Situation in Laos' (p.133)<sup>1</sup> which offers a disclaimer about implication: a restaurant setting establishes a milieu which is at once cosmopolitan and confusing. The poet with his notebook observes journalists entering, who 'know what's going on in Laos': the connexion is stated above, however: 'I know them'. The poem does not inform us concerning the Laos situation overtly, but appears concerned with minutiae associated with learning a language (French) and eating a meal, to conclude 'tonight's movie is in French: i won't/ be able to understand that either'. The evasion of a statement of attitude or 'position' is deliberate, and the connexion between observations is to be sought in the precise list of behaviours and objects perceived. Vleeskens develops this method of implication of a theme throughout his poetry by increasingly adjusting the 'focus'; it is in the *Orange Blizzard* collection that several foci are attempted most extensively. 'The Political Situation in Laos' extends suggestions concerning participation by the poet by the device of leaving statement out of the poem; the reader is invited to supply a connexion, by seeking one, and thus become also 'implicated' in the simultaneous events described. Any notion that the poem should (or could) make a definitive statement on ethical considerations is not avoided by a slick technique, but expanded to permit the reader to inquire into the matter of evidence.

The title poem of the *Long Hair* collection (p.134) takes another tack: it is ostensibly a brief cameo describing moonlight in a sleeper's hair. Here, the uninflected description invites the reader into a moment of intimacy, as well as suggesting an atonal technique suggestive of preoccupations with Japanese tanka and haiku; the brief 'Bon Odori', in juxtaposition with 'Long Hair' seems to corroborate the mood: 'fires dance the river/ children laughing;/ full moon on the mountain'. In both Japanese and Australian settings the poetry preserves the detachment and openness. The detachment can also imply a satiric impulse; in considering claims upon one's involvement, 'You Can't Call *That!* a poem' (p.141) undercuts what might be a claim for a 'new' brand of poetry – or just a passing fad:

they're advertising a new revolution!  
(you know how it goes – everything's

obsolete within a year) this one  
has all the latest features!

Vleeskens' shrewdness here sends up his own tentativeness, and points to the pitfalls of purely conceptual poetry (perhaps chiefly a solipsistic obsession, or a closed-system of reference). The awareness of craft, his own and that of others, is acknowledged also in 'Seated in a Doorway' (p.141), depicting a professional calligrapher, who will 'translate/ your common thought into a work of art:/ a love letter/ with subtle turns of phrase'. Such undemonstrative subtlety itself reinforces the description, or more accurately, raises the poem from 'pure' image into a sort of homage to a fellow-craftsman.

'The Japan Poems' (pp.148-53) offer a summary of *Long Hair's* impulses – the records of domestic events and moods, the pleasantly confusing potential in travel, and some word-games which reflect more than lexical versatility or academic interest in language. 'Letter to Celia' (pp.149-50) suggests surreal exuberance rather than pedantry, in rearranging letters to enhance the conveyance of the 'effects' or results of a love-relationship. In the last of the 'Japan Poems', another 'device' is included – a sort of buddha-ex-machina, to provide another dimension to some images of landscape: 'the buddha sits unruffled/ on the mountainside (p.153). The device is rare, however, in all of Vleeskens' work, and may arguably be inevitable in such a summary estimate of Japan; like all of Vleeskens' tributes it is appropriate, if not quite subtle in this instance.

The impulses which inform the earliest 'simultaneous' situation poems in *Long Hair* are at work in 'Two Sonnets beginning with a line by Dylan Thomas and ending somewhere after midnight' (p.155). Celebrating his 'thirtieth year to heaven', both poems are apparently loosely organised, but compress a great deal of information – framing the poet in contemporary press and other circumstantial references, to imply acceptance of failures. The poems range over industrial relations breakdowns, a spoiled TV dinner, ailing social welfare programs, rifts in social patterns, a failed wine-harvest, and a lacuna in personal communications. The summary is at once witty and dense, and reflects the mature control of form: the sonnets even deliberately fail to become fully wrought into patterns of

rhyme, and their lines fluctuate in length to propose the complexity involved in correlating so much which *might* be achieved. The poems are, at length, alert and open to possibilities.

The final poem in *Long Hair* perhaps relates in its limited aim ('Some Attempts at Definition', p.159) and conclusion the 'personal' element in Vleeskens' whole enterprise: 'and i/ wanting/ to touch you/ but not wanting/ to break this. . . .' *Long Hair* does not negate feeling ('touching') but represents an exemplary restraint in placing perceived relationships within the 'field' of art, which includes the reader or recipient of the information. In all, it is a concise and sophisticated record of travels since the *Hong Kong Suicide* poems.

*Salted Herring* (Fling!, Sydney, 1980: unpaginated) is Cornelis Vleeskens' third collection of poems, and it immediately takes up the preoccupations of *Long Hair* with an attempt at 'definition'. The poems concern memories of childhood in Holland, and offer impressions or images which remain; the works appear to be based on reflections upon old photographs, their commentary 'filling in' the circumstances of each exposure. The initial poem remarks on the circumstances of such a procedure: 'Definition has deserted/ leaving the outlines blurred/ as if night were overtaking the poems'. As the collection proceeds, the 'fading snapshot' impression is endorsed through conceits associated with memory and recollection. The fishing nets laid out for repair in the third poem, a human rope to drag the boy from an icy pond in the fifth poem, and the remembered music — whether a barrel-organ or a 'smoky blues' in later poems — all image the process announced in poem two: 'I recollect the way'. The re-collected occasions, like the 'two young girls/ with flattened bicycles/ on the Erasmusweg' (which 'lay there for eternity') ultimately achieve a solidity in the poems: together they constitute a world which is not only the poet's private domain, but which implicates the reader in a contemplation of both a new world of experience and the very nature of nostalgia and time 'past'.

The poems in *Salted Herring* are taut and unsentimental,

relating circumstances or jokes against the youthful self: an old fisherman, in the seventh poem, smiles and offers his hand: 'I shake./ And withdraw my hand/ to find it clutching/ a juicy wad/ of well-chewed tobacco'. The inclusion of such material suggests that nothing is unimportant in charting awareness; the bombed-out ruins and the German tourists, the transubstantiation of catholic belief which he observes, all point to aspects of Dutch history, and to Vleeskens' sensibility. In expressions such as 'Memory conjures/ a different waterfront in this place', old photographs become enlivened by the commentary: what is 'missing' is evoked together with what appears to be all the scene, and the reader is invoked in such a musing as 'Picture/ my father's face and the music. . .', to consider, perhaps, an impossibility.

These poems trace an important element in Vleeskens' preoccupations in their overt acknowledgments of genealogy: 'Grandma sends her regards/ is the message/ I so often neglect to convey'. Above all Vleeskens does not neglect to convey his sense of the eternal place of the members of a family within the consciousness of its individuals, and this consciousness is perhaps the over-riding conceit in the entire sequence relating to time. *Salt Herring* is the most unified and profound contemplation in Vleeskens' early work, as a result of this deliberation. As music is an important motif in this poetic exploration, a sense of place within a continuing generation serves for a metaphor for the generating of poems. The inclusion of references to members of the family and neighbours facilitates the construction of a world which defines personality and identity. The collection concludes with two poems relaying a sense of comfort stemming from the meditations. The penultimate work recalls

Stormclouds loom over the North Sea  
and the fishing village  
is once again nestled comfortably  
beside the harbour.

The final poem unites past and future in one of the continuing rituals of Christmas: trees are piled and surrounded by 'a circle of snowmen': 'Tonight/ they will be set alight/ and fireworks/ will welcome in the New Year'. The summation is a succinct

resolution of the sequence and shows the imagistic and 'Romantic' impulse of the poet at once. The careful balancing of the celebrated New Year and its growth against the melting shapes of the past, and the anticipation of fireworks presages *Orange Blizzard's* technical range and themes, while lending *Salted Herring* considerable polish and weight.

*Orange Blizzard* returns to some preoccupations and considerations of the previous volumes. In four sections, the collection ranges widely over themes and forms. The epigraph, from Jack Spicer, is a notice of practice:

All the words they use for poetry are meaningless.  
Postage stamps at the best. . . . And each stamp we  
put on the letters they send us must be cancelled,  
heartlessly. As if its delivery, the beautiful image  
of it, were a metaphor.

This advertisement does not quite assume the 'heartlessness' of the reader: it argues for preservation of the pristine 'stamp' even while acknowledging that this is not possible; in delivery, something is changed. The quotation implies too the relativity of words (a cliché for poets) while asserting that poems are primarily communications (even if of meaninglessness). If 'cancellation' is inevitable (concerning any attempt to impose intention upon the work other than communication, the arrangement of the words may be perhaps at least as 'meaningful' as the disposition of elements in a painting or in musical 'space'. The context or field is a determinant in how the letters are to be opened, and *Orange Blizzard* ranges further in exploiting formal space than *Salted Herring*: the 'words for poetry' which a critic employs may lag considerably in conveying anything but a basic schema, and at best may propose only an injunction to actually appreciate the work in a closer relationship.

The poetry is, for all the critical and conceptual paraphernalia invoked or evoked in the epigraph, immediately addressed to a reader: the initial poem 'On the Front Page' (p.9) is arresting:

The words are ordered to catch your attention which is flagging between last night's dreams and the half eaten bowl of breakfast cereal and already on its desultory way to the office,

to the past. . .

The poem may, of course, refer only to itself, and be offering only a jokey comment on how or where poems originate. The ambiguity, concerning who orders the poems to catch attention, the identity of 'you' in the poem, and the suggestion that this is another poem about time past, is deliberate. The poem acknowledges 'order' of a sort, and determines what it will be. Like several poems in *Orange Blizzard*, the work is subdivided into numbered sections, to organise related material (musings or images perhaps, 'metaphors') or to deliberately heighten the *illusion* of order and provide a way of undercutting expectations: thus the poem insists on being considered in its own terms, and reserves its surprises for the reader. The third section of the poem remarks

If you took time to observe  
you'd see that the words insist on the now  
on the moment of crisis  
between history and the unrealised future.

The 'now' is by this account (as in the two 'Dylan Thomas' sonnets of *Long Hair*) assisted to definition by incorporation of all the observations which impinge upon the poet *and* the reader in the act of reading. The 'crisis' stems from the realisation of the 'everpresent' in each 'now' — 'like a wild skid on a frosty mountain road./ You can't wait for tomorrow's headlines/ to see if you pulled out in time': the image is of impossibility, perhaps, since the poet as well as the reader can not experience tomorrow's construction of the same events. Thus, 'everpresent' looks like an oxymoron in the poem, but also comes close to the preoccupation of much metaphysical poetry besides Vleeskens' with conceptions of 'time' itself. The idea of the reader as time-traveller is neatly conveyed in 'Grass Fire' (p.11):

Will you walk? or thumb a ride?

Travel on for free in someone else's poem?

To be sure, the notion of poetic 'borrowing' is also here, though

extended to include the recipient of the 'letter' as well as the sender.

The conceptual game is abandoned in 'The Key' (pp.13-16), where an extended prose dealing with a decayed marriage culminates with images of desolation and separation. The empty house may serve as a metaphor for the poet-reader relationship, although the point of 'meaningless' in the epigraph of the book seems driven home. In 'The Chinese System', postulates about poetry are reworked:

- (1) The poem in poor health finds itself uninsured  
against the abuses heaped on it  
and never completely cured by greedy practitioners.  
Keep it ill and paying, there's a living in it yet!  
...
- (3) The poem looks out over the ocean  
to the Chinese system of paying  
while the going's good and withdrawing support  
the minute the practitioner fails. (p.17)

The poem offers at once a pleasing reversal, the practitioners of the beginning are neatly satirised as quacks (one might suspect a more barbed comment or vectoring is contained in the poem, in relation to the funding of poetry) and the poem proposes a scale of merit. Ironically (although the poem does not state it) the look 'over the ocean' might also throw up some anomalies concerning support for art.

If 'The Chinese System' advances the note of immediacy and realism of the earliest poems in *Orange Blizzard*, 'The Dutch Masters. (p.19) takes us to the heart of an art-life dichotomy. The painting in question, 'some minor domestic scene' is appreciated for what is left out or is implicit beyond the representation of a woman 'huddled over the woodstove': 'cows sloshing through the mud/ and duck-shit all over the lawn'; 'it's wet and miserable'. Besides the picture itself, 'the smell of sour milk/ lingers in the floorboards for decades'. In this almost-satiric counter to Auden's vision of old masters, Vleeskens creates the minutiae to balance a 'pretty' interpretation. The poem's 'toughness' or avoidance of sentiment, is not so much a development out of earlier impulses as another expression of disengagement, an identification of art with all the circum-

stances attendant upon assembly of the work by both maker and observer, poet and audience.

The concluding poem of the first section, 'El Presidente' (p.23) offers another face of this realism: 'After the revolution they shoot *El Presidente* in CINERAMA/ rename it *The Republic* and rewrite all the rules'. The ambiguity of references, and the relativity of language are abruptly summed in another invented, exemplary occasion.

The second section of *Orange Blizzard* moves through further abrupt allusions to contemporary society; in 'Summer in the Himalayas',

A swami is black-listed for doing impeccable repairs  
without a union ticket and the case goes to court  
in an orange blizzard. Your guru's silver cloud  
is parked outside. There's a snowman in the driver's seat.

The jury is hung . . . (p.26)

'Ground Cover' (p.27) offers a neat equivalence of images in 'you swing a machete like the stars and stripes', and draws on urban lifestyles:

The hangman's noose draws tight circles under your eyes  
in preparation for the thunderstorm that's building  
mock-spanish haciendas all over the country

(4) Yours will, of course, be more traditionally naive.

Some elements of the cultural melange of Australia occupy the second section of the volume; 'Bulldust' (p.30) plays on literal and metaphoric senses to recount a self-consciously American-style cowboy accoutred hitchhiker in a country town; 'The Plan' (pp.33-35) relates the continuation of 'The Key' situation, the post-divorce adventures of the jettisoned male in a fashionable Balmain milieu. In the third section of the book, 'Close-up' (pp.42-43) appears to conclude the suggestion that an easy sexuality will resolve the 'Messianic' phase of the male vision in 'The Plan'. 'These Forsaken Islands' (p.41) continues cultural motifs, to suggest that the Australian landscape is present in all the poet's travels, rather as *Salted Herring* posited the ever-presence of early experience of Holland. 'These Forsaken Islands' also encompasses the notion of poetry's landfalls however:

You've been on a world cruise with your guru,

the poem, and come at last  
to *these* forsaken islands.  
And what did it get you?

'Soft' continues this conceptual journey, in a manner analogous to Dransfield's 'loft' conceit; 'you climb up to the loft/looking for something/ appropriately soft' comes as a refrain, and the poem concludes with the suggestion of a desire to self-destruct or to 'silence' the poem's audience. Among so many neatly-crafted works, 'Soft' is one *tour de force* for Vleeskens' style, combining a comment on exasperation with a control that suggests how poetry may be endlessly refuelled.

'Two Pieces for Australian Literature' (pp.46-47) reconciles the 'pursuit' for literary models, particularly among American poets which preoccupied much Australian poetry of the sixties and seventies, by relegating the practitioner to relative oblivion for derivative performances. Self-awareness may again be a target for this satiric episode: 'He just/ isn't going to go down in history for extensive performances'. 'Crowd' (p.52) plays with being 'just another face in the crowd', but the poem is outstanding for its formal inventiveness in 'ordering' which questions such an appraisal of achievement. The work moves through images of the poet as participant in a ballgame, and at a bullfight, to conclude 'Death waits in a side-street./ I am just another face in the crowd'. The distance implied here – the poet as observer, even voyeur, of his own work, relegates passivity to an area which frees him to continue creating, and the identification with the bull, the matador, and the crowd is endorsed by acknowledgment that a death is at the heart of the experience. The poem's life is a constant concern with Vleeskens, and its 'finite' elements or counters, including notions of death, are subsidiary to the informing of the whole work with evidence of movement and process. The stylistic device – of commencing each stanza or passage with a line which 'adopts' the concluding word of the previous line (a sort of modified sestina) makes a punctuation for the theme of continuity.

The concluding poem in the volume, 'Orange Blizzard', is a lengthy sequence which gathers in much of Vleeskens' world, not only in this collection, but earlier works, to recapitulate and

open up the seemingly hermetic or private images. The 'orange blizzard' takes on connotations which include the suggestions implicit in eastern elements of much of *Long Hair* and *Hong Kong Suicide*, and the poem 'Summer in the Himalayas'. There is in addition the resumption of legal references advanced in 'Summer in the Himalayas'; the court alludes also to the World Court at The Hague (and hence at least another aspect of 'Orange' imagery becomes clear, as Vleeskens alludes to a specifically Dutch approach to universal justice). The poem is inescapably 'political' as well as autobiographical; while critics, portrayed as a mob unleashed in a revolution, or a swarm of insects, pursue the poet, the poem declares

I'm well away before they get here. This is no place  
to hold court. That is reserved for the orange blizzard  
blowing in The Hague while I stand huffing at the door  
of the International Court or is that me playing ball  
with fallen angels outside St Peter's Basilica? (p.58)

Here, 'catholic' elements of *Salted Herring* are also expanded, together with the 'ballgame' of 'Crowd'. The poem recounts 'beat' days in the Kings Cross of the sixties, 'junk'-filled dreams of Asia, and experiences that reconcile reading and habitation:

reading Snyder and I'm in Kyoto in the full lotus  
on neatly raked pebbles outside a Zen monastery but  
am distracted by the bulging Samurai armory in the  
courtyard. (p.59)

Vleeskens' curriculum vitae ranges through Europe, back to Australia (dodging 'the accusers') and domesticity – life in the country in Queensland, or in urban locations – includes literary works 'interred' in files, memories intersected with allusions to ways of perceiving poems and poetry, the whole work being informed by the 'orange blizzard' blowing like a Shelleyan wind,

... throughout the Lowlands like a battle. Like an  
International Terrorist Organisation. Like South  
Moluccans in revolt. Like Baader-Meinhof. Like a  
train stretched under the sun across the ZUIDER ZEE  
... and where am I?

Writing Molotov Cocktails? Painting an Oil Crisis?  
Sending *Postcards from the Front* ... (p.62)

The poem ends on a brilliant concentration of energies and

suggestions, powerfully evincing all of Vleeskens' conceptual infrastructures, and arguing cogently against 'cancelling' the letters from 'The Front' which he despatches. The autobiographical elements are resolved into powerful allusions to his Dutch and Australian cultures: the enclosed sea, or the walled-in nation offers an image for civilisations and societies; Dutch imperialist experience is linked with German revolt, and the global 'political situation'.

Control in 'Orange Blizzard' is assured in this counterpointed survey of experience that occasionally recalls John E. Tranter's *Red Movie* poems (Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1972) or *The Blast Area* (Gargoyle, Brisbane, 1974), in its concern with expanding vision, and displays of 'crisis' situations which seem to invite the reader to supply an ethical responses. Vleeskens' imagery is more vital however; where Tranter's work seems to offer a preoccupation with cognitive processes and 'discovery' (rather like R.D. FitzGerald's 'Heemskerck Shoals' or 'The Wind at Your Door'), Vleeskens' forays into other cultures and societies offer a moving tapestry or film which realises or acknowledges aspirations to a personal freedom. His imagination works over a startling array of images from myriad angles or views in order to continually engage the reader in the process. 'Orange Blizzard' which concludes his most recently-published work, is eminently re-readable and comes remarkably close to offering memorable interludes and passages within a distinctively 'open' format. It's sharp awareness of form also impels a re-reading of the entire volume, in order to appreciate the conceptual elements of the book.

The body of Vleeskens' work is fresh in its images and assumptions, deftly treating 'derived' material, literary or otherwise; it does not appear dogmatically committed to a single view of what poetry *should* be, but in defining its own terms, it masterfully shows what poetry can be, in transubstantiating experience and showing the interpenetration of life and art.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This volume was one of a series collected into the 'Poems By' anthology by Angus & Roberts in 1980.