Writing on Thresholds: An Australian Postcolonial Poetics

&

The Blue Archway

By

Molly Murn
BA (Dance)(hons.); MCA

Thesis
Submitted to Flinders University
for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

College of Humanities, Arts & Social Sciences

March 30 2022

Thesis Summary

This thesis develops a 'threshold poetics' methodology through a reading of aesthetic and material thresholds in contemporary Australian poetry. It considers the works of my case study poets: Yankunytjatjara/Kokatha poet Ali Cobby Eckermann, Iranian-Australian poet Ali Alizadeh and Australian poet Andy Jackson. It addresses how both the poetry, and the poets themselves, inhabit the threshold as an in-between place where a transformation—bodily, linguistically, culturally, spatially—can occur, revitalising what Philip Mead calls the 'networked language' (2008) of contemporary Australian poetry. This kind of understanding sees poetic language 'networked' to the culture and history in which it is formed and allows room for a polyphony of voices—migrant, settler, Indigenous, exiled, and bodily different. The thesis discovers the threshold as a productive or generative space—one that acknowledges and embodies the unsettlement of contemporary Australian postcolonial poetry and poetics.

The creative component of the thesis is a full-length poetry collection, 'The Blue Archway', in which I address the notion of the threshold as an imaginative, sensorial, figurative, and material site for creative investigation. The work of Cobby Eckermann, Jackson and Alizadeh has influenced and affected my approach to composition, or poiesis in different ways. Their work serves as a provocation to me, or Barthes' *punctum* (1979; 2000), prompting a series of associations, questions, impressions, memories, calls and responses. The poems in the collection encounter the threshold in various ways: as rite of passage, synthesis, meeting place, locus of transformation, and site of crossover in nature, such as the shoreline or where the river meets the sea. They enter dialogue with other poets and artists whose works encounter the threshold (including but not limited to the works of Cobby Eckermann, Jackson and Alizadeh). The exegesis and poetry collection together consider unsettlement, ekphrasis and collaboration as practices of threshold poetics, and formulate a statement of threshold poetics.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Molly Murn

March 30 2022

Acknowledgments

I acknowledge that *Writing on Thresholds* has been supported by Flinders University, the Commonwealth Government of Australia (via the Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship, formerly the Australian Post-graduate Award), and The Australian Federation of University Women South Australia Inc. Trust Fund. I would like to thank the Flinders University Library and Document Delivery Service, the Adelaide Central School of Art Library, the University of Adelaide's JM Coetzee Centre for Creative Practice, the Oratunga Winter School, and the Australian Association of Writing Programs. A very big thank you to my principal supervisor Jeri Kroll, and associate supervisor, Patrick Allington. I couldn't hope for more insightful readers of this project. That praise goes for my partner-in-crime (and editor/reader extraordinaire) Andrew Herpich, too. Thanks also to Nat Harkin, Amy Matthews, Kylie Cardell, Threasa Meads, Tara Brabazon, Melinda Graefe, Heather Robinson, the late Syd Harrex, Gillian Dooley, Meaghan Shelton, Megan Clarke, Antonia Pont, Paul Hetherington, my vivid Matilda Bookshop colleagues, and to the teachers and students at Kensington School of Yoga. For Moroccan dreams, my love to Gerard and Emma. Finally, and most significantly, thanks to my beautiful family Saskia, Jachimo, Andrew, Sally, Alan, Roxy, Jacqui, and Catherine. In all-ways you have been walking the threshold of this project with me. And now here it is.

Publications (during candidature)

'Writing on Thresholds: Ali Cobby Eckermann's *Inside My Mother*' in *Coolabah* no. 24 and 25, 2018. Universitat de Barcelona **[peer-reviewed article]**

'Landing Party' and 'Terra Firma' in *First Wave: Exploring early coastal contact history in Australia*, eds. Gillian Dooley and Danielle Clode (South Australia: Wakefield Press, 2019) **[poems]**

'Glisk' in *TEXT: Special Issue—The in/completeness of human experience*, Vol. 58, April 2020, ed. by Julia Pendergast, Shane Strange & Jen Webb **[poem]**

'Poem for a Sister' & 'Persephone 2' in *Social Alternatives*, Vol. 39, 2020, ed. Aidan Coleman **[poems]**

'Drought', Raining Poetry in Adelaide (installed on North Terrace as ephemeral art, August 4, 2021 & published in *Saltbush*) **[poem]**

'The Body as Threshold in the Poetry of Andy Jackson' in *Social Alternatives: special issue-- Poetry to the Rescue*, ed. Aidan Coleman, 40:3, 2021. **[peer-reviewed article]**

Table of Contents

1.

Introduction

***Threshold:** The piece of timber or stone which lies below the bottom of a door […] to be crossed in entering a house; border, limit (of a region);[1] **a point of entry or beginning.**[2]*

To look through an open door or window might be to glimpse the promise of something new—the outside, the sun, the cold, the hope of passing through to somewhere else. It might indicate to the one who sees that they are no longer confined. It might offer up the expanse of the natural world or the comfort of suburbs. Conversely, going out of an open door might mean being forced out of sanctuary, not being allowed or able to return. It might mean homelessness or bravery, liberation from imprisonment or destitution. Or both. A closed door might mean lock-down—a forced confinement to the interior. A sliver of the outside, viewed through a window or door, may simply stand in for a dream, a wish, a memory of what came before.

I am drawn to and inspired by images of doorways in the visual arts—usually by women artists. Why doorways? And why doorways by women? What stories are artists like Grace Cossington Smith,[3] Georgia O'Keefe[4] and Margaret Olley[5] telling me about the relationship between the interior and the exterior through their work? Is it that they force open a passage through the wall that threatens to obstruct their creativity: patriarchy, domesticity, inequality? What is noticed when passing an open window from the outside looking in? My mother says that when I was young, if there was not a clear exit in sight, a means of escape, I would become twitchy at best and panicky at worst. I climbed trees, roofs, garden sheds. I slept on the trampoline and underneath open windows. I needed not only to be connected to the outside but to *know* that I was connected to the latitude of outside too.

The American artist, Georgia O'Keefe, said of her obsession with painting the door of her famously austere adobe home in the desert of New Mexico, 'I'm always trying to paint that door—I never quite get it […] I must continually go on with that door.'[6] There are dozens of 'doorway' paintings by O'Keefe with variations in perspective and colour, but always with a rectangle or

---

[1] "threshold, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2021: <www.oed.com/view/Entry/201234> Accessed 29 August 2021.
[2] "threshold, n." *Macquarie Compact Dictionary* (Sydney, NSW: Macquarie Dictionary Publishers, 2017 [1st published 2014], p. 878.
[3] Grace Cossington Smith *Open Door*, 1960, oil on hardboard, 90cm x 60cm, Bathurst Regional Art Gallery, Bathurst.
[4] Georgia O'Keefe, *Green Patio Door*, 1955, oil on canvas, 76.2cm x 50.8cm, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, New York.
[5] Margaret Olley, Red Room and Open Door, 2001, oil on board, 76cm x 61cm, Phillip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane.
[6] See Olivia Laing, *Funny Weather: Art in an Emergency* (London: Picador, 2020), p. 59.

square void in a blank wall, a strip of sky or ground (or both), and a simple geometry of line and tone that is peaceful to the eye and draws the viewer to the focal point of the door/void. The perspective in these paintings is always from the outside looking toward the door. Is this a subversion of the trope of the woman looking out from the confines of inside to a world, a dream, an awakening, outside? Is O'Keefe's door, instead, representative of the entranceway to her own being—her house/self, as it were?

These are just a handful of the prompts that the images of doorways provoke in me. In some way I am always trying to *write* the door. Or the threshold. The liminal—the spaces *in* and *of* transition—are resonant with possibility, and I think this is why I am drawn to the liminal in an artistic sense. And it also explains why I'm drawn to other people's writing and artworks that seem to me to inhabit the borderline sensibility of the liminal. If the imperative of art is to evoke and provoke transformation—and for the purpose of this study, it is—then the liminal space is conducive to unsettling, reimagining, reconfiguring entrenched notions of identity and belonging, especially at the socio-political level. And if I tease this out a bit further to thinking about Australian literature and what a 'national' literature might embody, or look like, in the contemporary moment, the threshold—a liminal space that involves crossing over/transforming—is a potent symbol.

In undertaking this project, I have called up the notion of the threshold to help me better understand the slippery foothold we as a postcolonial nation have on settlement and belonging. I use the term postcolonialism with some trepidation because—as Kim Scott argues—contemporary Australia cannot really be classified as such because we are not a republic (the coloniser has not withdrawn); the power relationship characteristic of colonial societies still exists in Australia; and the benefits of colonisation haven't been equally shared with the prior societies.[7] And so, the contemporary Australian poet is necessarily a 'reconciler'. Writing on the threshold, the poet creating/composing in a postcolonial environment is a conduit who inhabits the *intermezzo* or the middle ground. As a poet writing into and out of this space, I've had to wrestle with/face up to my own unsettlement, privilege, and vantage point. If words can initiate and generate, they can also wound; they can also silence. They are about power—who gets to speak, who has agency. In terms of my writing practice, it has been necessary and essential to listen to other voices, be nourished by other voices, other vantage points and other formal techniques to be confronted in the dialogic space. This dialogue might occur through ekphrasis, or by collaboration, or as a coalescence of both of those practices. There is a going out of myself or a willingness to let something in. The threshold as unsettled and productive space is a useful site for such an engagement. I am interested in the ways poetry can engage with the public imagination by

[7] Kim Scott, 'Covered Up With Sand' in *Meanjin* 66:2 (2007), pp. 120-124, (p.120).

apprehending spaces for cross-cultural exchange, while gesturing towards the transformational possibility of such exchanges.

This project investigates the aesthetic and material concepts of the threshold as they figure in contemporary Australian poetry and examines how the threshold can be a productive and generative space in Australian poetics. As well as writing original poetry into this space, I consider the works of selected contemporary Australian poets: Yankunytjatjara/Kokatha poet Ali Cobby Eckermann (b. 1963), Iranian-Australian poet Ali Alizadeh (b. 1976) and Australian poet Andy Jackson (b. 1971). I examine how the poetry, and the poets themselves, inhabit the threshold as an in-between place where a transformation—bodily, linguistically, culturally—can occur. I use Cobby Eckermann, Alizadeh and Jackson's poetry as case studies to demonstrate how the figure of the threshold—materially and aesthetically—is approached in a variety of ways. Considering their work together, I develop an understanding of an Australian poetics of the threshold, revitalising what Philip Mead calls the 'networked language'[8] of contemporary Australian poetry.

Mead's seminal work *Networked Language* (2008) is interested in the language of poetry and the ways in which it is meaningfully entwined or networked 'to the time and place of its production'.[9] He demonstrates that a focus on the formal characteristics of language reveal much about our relationship to poetic texts of the past, as well as facilitate an understanding of the writing of the present. Considering that poetry is a 'calculus of change'[10] the work of living contemporary poets reveals much about the cultural, social, political barometer of a nation. Mead avers that the 'breaking up' of language is a key feature of contemporary poetics. This 'breaking up' or 'unsettlement' of language as poet and scholar Michael Farrell has more precisely phrased it in his *Writing Australian Unsettlement* (2015) 'refers to [a] text's relation to settlement as such, and its material negation or resistance'.[11] He goes on to point out that unsettlement 'is not guaranteed by antisettlement sentiment' but is 'effected through writing practice'.[12] This distinction is important because it emphasises that writing does something. And in *Writing Australian Unsettlement*, the texts under consideration unsettle notions of literariness, and what we might think of as 'settled' writing. In responding to both Mead and Farrell's texts, I consider the notion of the threshold as instructive in engaging with both networked language and unsettlement.

---

[8] Philip Mead, *Networked Language. Culture & History in Australian Poetry* (North Melbourne, Victoria: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2008).
[9] Phillip Mead, *Networked Language*, p. 1.
[10] Phillip Mead, *Networked Language*, p. 29.
[11] Michael Farrell, *Writing Australian Unsettlement, modes of poetic invention 1796-1945* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p .7.
[12] Michael Farrell, *Writing Australian Unsettlement*, p .7.

The thesis comprises an exegesis and a poetry collection. In the productive space between the exegetical and creative components, I formulate a statement of threshold poetics. This outcome has developed through interaction between the components and is informed by five essays that link, comment upon, and braid together the creative and exegetical elements. The linking segments or essays between the case study chapters are entry points that navigate the reader (you) and the practitioner (me) through this project's 'materials of thinking',[13] or the elements that bring together a poetics of the threshold. The critical and creative components of this research are not discrete, but coalesce, converse, and contribute to each other via the linking essays. The backbone of the exegesis is held in place by the three analysis chapters of my case study poets.

Chapter Two focuses on the ways in which Cobby Eckermann writes on the threshold between two or more locations, be they geographical or figurative (the ancient world and the contemporary world), and two or more identities (her recovered Aboriginal identity and her growing up in a white world identity). Cobby Eckermann's poetry inhabits the threshold through the central metaphors of sand, clay, trees, and birds as entry points to belonging, and Cobby Eckermann herself writes on the threshold—that in-between place where a transformation can occur.[14] Writing *in* the productive middle between cultures or identities, Cobby Eckermann's work might be one way to understand an Australian poetics of the threshold.

In Chapter Three, I consider the poetry of Melbourne-based poet Andy Jackson. His body of work not only inhabits (and is rooted) in the liminal space of the body, but is used as a site to consider subjectivity, language, form, selfhood, and bodily difference. Using poetry as a generative practice, beyond collective (national) unsettledness, Jackson expresses the unsettledness of being in his own body. In Jackson's work the threshold is a stepping through place where Jackson successfully articulates the transformative practice of writing through the body and of the body.

In the final case study section, Chapter Four, I examine the productive capacity of the middle ground—where writing between cultures creates a synthesis, a third space where something new emerges. Iranian-Australian poet, Ali Alizadeh, writes in the Persian lyric mode of the ghazal but renovates the form within the literary space of contemporary Australian poetry. Alizadeh's ghazals enter a third space, a liminal or hybrid space, across and between form, and across and

---

[13] Paul Carter in his *Material Thinking: The Theory and Practice of Creative Research* (2004) defines 'material thinking' as the process of creative research that 'occurs in the making of a work of art'. I will go into this in more detail in the Poiesis section to follow.

[14] Ali Cobby Eckermann articulates explicitly what it has meant for herself as a poet to write in between identities and culture. See especially, Cobby Eckermann's interview with Ben Etherington in *Wasafiri* 31:2, 2016, pp. 13-17. In that interview Cobby Eckermann explains how her identity is shaped by her three families: 'adoptive', 'traditional' and 'ratbag' (p. 16) and that while she is 'forced to write in English' she hopes that readers feel 'this other ancient rhythm of this ancient land' (p. 15).

between cultures. In this renovation of a traditional literary form, certain ideas (social, political, personal) can be tested, coalesced, illuminated, scrutinised, and made anew.

The *exemplar poet* chapters are followed by a linking essay, that responds to each of the poet's work in some way. The essays highlight my reasons for choosing these particular poets and their poetry for this study. In 'What Lies Underneath' I articulate Cobby Eckermann's engagement with the longstanding and ongoing implications of colonial dispossession in her poetry, as instructive to my own reckoning/wrestling with that inheritance. In this essay, I also outline the decolonising methodologies that underpin my investigation into threshold poetics. Cobby Eckermann's work, with her spare lines, white space, clear metaphors, shows me how to be a poet. In 'What Dwells Inside', the essay that follows the chapter on Jackson's work, my attraction to the Classical Persian poetic form of the ghazal is expressed. The threshold sensibility Jackson inhabits via the ghazal sensitively explores the uncertainties of the non-normative body as locale of personal and poetic transformation. In responding to Jackson's work, I am inspired by the ways in which he writes his body onto the page—I am interested how the poet puts the body on the line. And finally, in 'What the Shape Will Hold', I explore the ways in which Alizadeh uses the ghazal to entwine the personal with the political in an interrogation of place, identity, and belonging. Alizadeh is in direct dialogue with the philosophers, thinkers, and poets who have influenced and inspired him—his work builds on an artistic lineage and pays homage to the influences that underpin his work. I am attracted to the ways Alizadeh achieves this dialogue.

Cobby Eckermann's, Jackson's, and Alizadeh's writings serve as provocations and the essays go some way to forging a connection between the *affect* or influence of their work on my own practice and the exegetical investigation into threshold poetics. So, while I articulate the methodologies of practice in the section below, I also bring them to bear in the linking essays, in as much as the essays *are* my methodologies of practice. The two hinge essays that open and close the thesis are an attempt to work through my overarching research question: as a creative practitioner, how might I investigate the threshold through my making (poiesis)/practice?

The creative component of the thesis is a full-length poetry collection, 'The Blue Archway', in which the notion of the threshold is addressed as an imaginative, sensorial, figurative, and material site for creative investigation. The poems in the collection encounter the threshold in various ways: as rite of passage, synthesis, meeting place, locus of transformation, and site of crossover in nature, such as the shoreline or where the river meets the sea. They enter dialogue with other poets and artists whose works encounter the threshold, including but not limited to the works of Cobby Eckermann, Jackson and Alizadeh. The exegesis and poetry collection together

consider unsettlement, ekphrasis,[15] and collaboration as practices of threshold poetics, and formulate a statement of threshold poetics.

The exegesis, *Writing on Thresholds: An Australian Postcolonial Poetics* considers the threshold as a category of experience—especially in an artistic sense, but also socio-politically, shifting emphasis away from the ritual and ritualised threshold processes of van Gennep and Turner.[16] The notion of the threshold as a mode of inquiry was first articulated by Arnold van Gennep in his 1909 cross-cultural study of ritual processes, *Rites de Passage*. In that seminal study the threshold, the liminal (limen), marked the transitional stage between rites of separation, and rites of incorporation found in the initiation processes of many cultures. Threshold rites include 'direct and physical rites of entrance, of waiting, and of departure'[17] such as pregnancy, betrothal, initiation, and death. Victor Turner in *Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage* (1967) saw threshold rites 'deserv[ing] special attention as constructive "building blocks" for change or possibly transformation and initiation to another level of consciousness'.[18] Turner's ritual liminality is characterised by 'anti-structure', a transition between states, where the liminal being is located outside the conventional social structures (temporarily) as they undergo 'processes of growth, transformation, and the reformation of old elements in new patterns'.[19] The phase betwixt and between is marked by a state of productive reflection. The critical and creative investigation of my thesis discovers the threshold as an embodied and empowered experience during the creative process and of the creative process.

A poetics of the threshold is one that considers the productive capacity of the middle—a site that is fluid, dynamic, essential, and sustaining—as a meeting place that brings worlds (imaginatively speaking) together. Just as a river exists between two bodies of land, a threshold is an active space, fertile and teeming with possibility. The threshold as a locale suggests movement or passage and porousness and is akin to Paul Carter's (2008) concept of dark writing.[20] The emphasis is on the spaces in-between, the pregnant spaces betwixt what is readily visible. In this region there is, for the artist, not a border to cross but a coming together that suggests transformation.

---

[15] "Ekphrasis, n.": 'a literary device in which a painting, sculpture, or other work of visual art is described in detail' *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2021: <www.oed.com/view/Entry/59412>Accessed 30 August 2021.
[16] See: Arnold van Gennep, *Rites de passage*, trans. by Monika B. Vizedon and Gabrielle L. Kaffee with an Introduction by Solon T. Kimball (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960 [1st published Paris: Émile Nourry, 1909)
Victor Turner, *Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1967)
[17] Arnold van Gennep, *Rites de passage*, trans. by Monika B. Vizedon and Gabrielle L. Kaffee with an Introduction by Solon T. Kimball (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960 [1st published Paris: Émile Nourry, 1909), p. 25.
[18] Victor Turner, *Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1967), p. ix.
[19] Victor Turner, *Betwixt and Between*, p. 9.
[20] Paul Carter, *Dark Writing: Geography, Performance, Design* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008).

1.1

Entering the Space

(walking/claiming/priming)

Threshold as Receptive Place

The metaphor of the threshold as a point of entry or beginning, place of transition, place of exit, rite of passage, or liminal space, speaks to the writer's imagination as a location of potent creative power. It is here, on the threshold, that a writer gestates ideas, follows the call of the initial creative impulse, and brings her words forth to be shaped. During this (w)rite of passage something new is made. Complex creative processes may begin or extend before and after entering this locale, but while in this space, the artist/writer/practitioner works intentionally to produce/create/unearth. The practice of "intention" appears to be a vital component of the creative act. Theorist of creativity Albert Rothenberg in his *The Emerging Goddess* defines creativity as 'the state or production of something both new and valuable',[21] and the creative process as 'active' and 'intentional', but where unconscious material is also unearthed.[22] Rothenberg explains that deciding to create is an active, cognitive act, while the 'unearthing of unconscious material is not volitional'[23] But it is the coming together of these counterpoised processes, and myriad others, that allows something to be created, articulated, produced: '[c]reation involves intense motivation, transcendence of time and space, concentration, and the unearthing of unconscious material.'[24] It is this 'transcendence of time and space' that I'm most interested in as a practitioner. Where do we go both intentionally and unconsciously when we create? What place/state/mood does the artist/writer/scientist enter to shape/mould/think/invent? How do we protect this state? How do we exercise the parts of ourselves that are required to make the world anew?

Recently I have been life modelling for students of life painting and life drawing. While I pose, I am lulled into a meditative state by both the stillness required of my body, and by the sometimes gentle, sometimes furious brushing and stroking of the canvas or paper by the circle of artists around me. The lecturer reminds them, 'painting is thinking'. The students are quiet, focused, intentional. What they produce in the three allotted hours might be a long way from what

[21] Albert Rothenberg, *The Emerging Goddess: The Creative Process in Art, Science, and other fields*, (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. x.
[22] Albert Rothenberg, *The Emerging Goddess*, p. 346.
[23] Albert Rothenberg, *The Emerging Goddess*, p. 347.
[24] Albert Rothenberg, *The Emerging Goddess*, p. 345.

they intended to create, but their mark-making occurs while in a simultaneous receptive and generative state. I hear them enter the state and I feel it energetically in the room when they step out of it. But afterwards there are new material things in the world. Their art-making muscles are more finely tuned. While I sit for them I, too, am paying attention to the space, to my thoughts, to the sensations in my body. I might think on lines I am yet to write or have been turning over.

Poet and Lacanian scholar, Dominique Hecq, explains the 'poetic attentiveness'[25] a writer must inhabit in order to conceive a poem in this way:

> It is an inner gesture whereby the 'I' relinquishes its usual control and takes […] a step back, allowing an inner space to open up, so that it can simultaneously be inside and outside, both the observer and the observed.[26]

This gesture, an 'extension of [the] bodily self into some imaginative space',[27] suggests movement towards a place not quite here and not quite there: a threshold. To be in this space, Hecq writes, is to 'stand in the experience of uncertain shadows', where 'the phantom hand […] pushes the poem to its resting place'.[28] When *creating*, the practitioner crosses over from one state of being to another, or several states of being, in order to pay attention to (or make sense of) the feelings, words, images, utterances that will grow their poems/stories/sketches/paintings/melodies. Hecq describes this process aptly, in her *Towards a Poetics of Creative Writing* (2015), as 'Inking the *In-Between'*.[29] In this place of in-between, a practitioner enters a heightened state of awareness, and something new is made. Seamus Heaney might call entering this space the 'first alertness'[30] of creativity. Heaney explains in his essay 'Feeling into Words' (1980) that, when writing a poem, the initial spark of creativity is 'pre-verbal', 'vatic' and involves a kind of 'divining'.[31] In this pre-verbal state of being, the writer dwells on the threshold between germination of idea and fully-grown project. The poet is on the threshold of speech—before words. In the same way that the seed holds all the materials necessary for the tree to grow, the threshold is redolent with potential. As Gaston Bachelard writes in his *Poetics of Space*, '[t]he poet speaks on the threshold of being'.[32]

Bachelard attends to a 'phenomenology of the imagination',[33] where a primal and poetic

---

[25] Dominique Hecq, *Towards a Poetics of Creative Writing*, (Bristol; Buffalo: Multilingual Matters, 2015), p. 139.
[26] Hecq, *Towards a Poetics of Creative Writing*, p.139.
[27] Hecq, p. 138.
[28] Hecq, p. 141.
[29] Hecq, p. 137.
[30] Seamus Heaney, 'Feeling into Words' in *Preoccupation: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London; Boston: Faber & Faber, 1980), p. 49.
[31] Heaney, 'Feeling into Words', p. 49.
[32] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (New York: Penguin Books, this edition with a foreword by Mark Z. Danielewski and an introduction by Richard Kearney published in 2014 [first published in the USA by The Orion Press, 1964], p. xvi.
[33] Richard Kearney, 'Introduction' in *The Poetics of Space* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014 [first published in the USA by The Orion Press, 1964], p. xviii.

connection is drawn between physical spaces inhabited by memory, such as the childhood home, or cellar, garret, shell, nest, and the spaces of the imagination. We need houses in order to dream, he asserts—houses being both our physical shelter and the containers of our minds.[34] A poet must enter the house of the mind to be receptive to the poetic image. In a philosophy that emphasises the poetics of space, the threshold becomes a touchstone. Bachelard writes of the threshold: '[it is] a mixture of being and nothingness'[35] and the door itself 'an entire cosmos of the half-open'.[36] It is a site for the imagination, for revery, for attending to the poetic image which may alight before words, before thought. For a writer, being on the threshold is at once a place where she can thresh out ideas (receptive), and it is also the site of creative acts (generative).

Yet the threshold is not only a metaphor for the creative process but is a liminal space where certain kinds of knowledge can be sensed in passing. The word 'liminal' literally means '[to occupy] a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold';[37] that beautiful word, liminal, sounds the threshold. And the threshold figures in the imagination in different ways. The idea of the 'threshold as a productive space in literature or art'[38] is a resonant one, not only because its poetic lure is so compelling for writers and artists, but also because of the kinds of terrains that may be 'crossed and spoken across'[39] the threshold. As poet, novelist, and academic, Jeri Kroll, has discussed, the relationship between creative writing and liminality is potent: 'writing finds its energy and innovativeness in just this uncertain and unsettled state, its sense of being on the edge, in being in transition.'[40] I'm particularly interested in what may be 'spoken across' the threshold, or indeed, not spoken. With this in mind, my aim for this project is to formulate an Australian (postcolonial) poetics of the threshold.

---

[34] John R. Stilgoe, 'Foreword to the 1994 edition' in *The Poetics of Space* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014 [first published in the USA by The Orion Press, 1964], p. viii.
[35] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 218.
[36] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 222.
[37] "liminal, adj." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, September 2021:< www.oed.com/view/Entry/108471> Accessed 12 September 2021.
[38] Subha Mukherji, *Thinking on Thresholds*: *The Poetics of Transitive Spaces* (New York: Anthem Press, 2011). p. xvii.
[39] Mukherji, *Thinking on Thresholds*, p. xviii.
[40] Jeri Kroll, 'Living on the Edge: Creative Writers in Higher Education' in *TEXT* 14:1 (2010), p. 3. This paper was first presented as a keynote at the *Margins and Mainstreams* 14th Conference of the Australian Association of Writing Programs, held in Hamilton, New Zealand, in November 2009.

Threshold as Generative Space

Any consideration of what Paul Carter calls 'a distinctively Australian poetics'[41] must acknowledge the 'prior acts of clearance, both human and environmental'.[42] When we talk about "productive" spaces and "generative" spaces of art—including poetry—in an Australian context, the political and the poetic are entwined: '[i]n making white Australia, the settler had to *invent* a fresh space of inhabitation'.[43] And in this space, rather than a dominant "mother-tongue", there is polyphony of voices and languages: Indigenous, exiled, settler, migrant. In his *Networked Language*, Mead posits that the language of poetry is networked to the 'culture and history within which it lives',[44] and poetic language creates 'meaning through structure and connection'.[45] Poetic texts, therefore, have 'an after-life in subsequent and changing cultural contexts'.[46] A poem's after-life, then, is significant in that it leaves a map, a poetic textual history, of what has been before and, just as importantly, what is *becoming*. The writing of poetry is a research process that generates knowledge.[47] As poet, translator, and critic, Stuart Cooke, argues: 'The relationship between poiesis, or the creative generative moment, and the act of poetry crosses cultures and territories […] poetry is linked to the process of world-making.'[48] How, then, might this 'world-making' occur in a contemporary Australian context? How might the *threshold* figure (as the place of crossing over) in the act of 'world-making'?

As a starting point, and as numerous Australian writers and critics have found,[49] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's notion of the rhizome is useful, and not least because of its 'influential presence [in] Australian poetics'[50] across many disciplines from cultural studies to the visual arts.[51] In a rhizome system, knowledge and subjectivity spread out in all directions, putting out lateral shoots and roots at intervals; it is not a fixed system.

---

[41] Paul Carter, 'The Forest in the Clearing', in *Halfway House. The Poetics of Australian Spaces*. ed. by Jennifer Rutherford & Barbara Holloway (Crawley, Western Australia: University Western Australia Publishing, 2009), p. 148.
[42] Carter, 'Forest in the Clearing', p. 135.
[43] Stuart Cooke, *Speaking the Earth's Languages, a theory for Australian-Chilean postcolonial poetics* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013), p. 3.
[44] Philip Mead, *Networked Language,* p. 1.
[45] Mead, *Networked Language* p.4.
[46] Mead, *Networked Language* p.1
[47] Nigel McLoughlin, 'Writing Poetry' in *A Companion to Creative Writing* edited by Graeme Harper (Somerset: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), pp. 40-55, p. 53.
[48] Cooke, *Speaking the Earth's Languages*, p. 128.
[49] A search of Deleuze & Guattari's 'rhizome' as subject in *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing course*s brings up a myriad of results and approaches.
[50] RD Wood, 'The Raw and the Cooke' in *Australian Poetry Journal* 5:2, November, 2015, p. 76.
[51] See Philip Mead's *Networked Language*; Kim Benterrak, Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe's *Reading the Country: Introduction to Nomadology* (1984); Stuart Cooke's *Speaking the Earth's Languages* (2013); Michael Farrell's *Writing Australian Unsettlement* (2015*)*; Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (eds.) *Practice as Research. Approaches to Creative Art Enquiry* (2007).

> Bulbs and tubers are rhizomes. Plants with roots or radicles may be rhizomorphic […] Rats are rhizomes. Burrows are too, in all of their functions of shelter […] The rhizome itself assumes very diverse forms […] any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be. This is very different from the tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order.[52]

There is no hierarchical structure in a rhizome—no central point of political power. A rhizome is 'open and connectable in all dimensions',[53] just as a map of country in the Indigenous sense of mapping, has multiple levels of interpretation.[54] In the map and in the rhizome, subjectivities produce meaning by intersecting, merging, and establishing connections with other subjectivities. Deleuze and Guattari argue that there is 'no ideal speaker-listener, any more than there is a homogenous linguistic community […] There is not a mother-tongue, only a power takeover by a dominant language within a political multiplicity'.[55] The decentring of social and linguistic power structures is necessary if Australian letters are to avoid, as Mead hopes, an 'overarching or linear story about poetry as a genre, against an assumed national background'.[56] Recent prize winners of prestigious awards such as The Prime Minister's Literary Award for Poetry, the Judith Wright Poetry Prize (*Overland*), and the Peter Porter Poetry Prize (*Australian Book Review*) have included a multiplicity of Australian voices. Winning the Prime Minister's Literary Award for 2020, poet Omar Sakr became the first Arab-Australian Muslim to win the prestigious award.[57] Sarah Saleh, who won both the Judith Wright and Peter Porter Poetry Prizes for 2021, is the daughter of second-generation migrants from Palestine, Egypt, and Lebanon. A scroll through the poems shortlisted for these prizes in recent years highlights the breadth of Indigenous, South Sea Islander, Filipinx, queer, Muslim poets, to name just a handful of the voices engaged in decentring the white-settler-tongue that has dominated Australian poetics for 200 years. This shift in social and linguistic power structures shows that the field of contemporary Australian poetics is in the process of becoming a revitalised and a productively unsettled (but networked) landscape. This development in Australian publishing and representation still has a very long way to go, however, in reaching parity of inclusion and exposure for marginal voices.

---

[52] Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated and foreword by Brian Massumi, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 6-7.
[53] Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p.12
[54] See the section on Travelling Dreamings in Geoffrey Bardon's *Papunya: A place made after the story* (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2018), for a comprehensive and beautiful explanation of the multifaceted resonances of mapping in Western Desert paintings: '[the] use of lines dots […] reinforce the sense of place in what was being told, each painting expanding from the axial, spiritual and topographic centre to its peripheries or frames …' (p. 50).
[55] Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, p.7.
[56] Philip Mead, *Networked Language*, p.5.
[57] Omar Sakr, *Lost Arabs* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2019).

With the rhizome as a model, and following other critics, Mead's study aims to highlight the connections/networks between specific 'examples of Australian poetic creativity, the broader poetic field as a plane of culture, and the social history of […] language',[58] and in doing so, makes the case for the unsettlement of language in Australian poetry. Such unsettlement recognises alternative 'networks of language and culture from the (exclusive, settled) commonwealth of Australian English',[59] such as 'contemporary Australian language, including dialects of English, Aboriginal English, indigenous literary modes, "migrant" English […] Kriol […]ethnolects [and] mongrelized lingos of all kinds'.[60] While Mead emphasises language and its shift toward the experimental, the creolised, the multi-lingual as the hinge around which to consider contemporary Australian literature and poetics, this study places a category of experience—the threshold—as the hinge.

Taking Mead's work as entry point, Michael Farrell in his *Writing Australian Unsettlement* (2015) has adapted Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'assemblage',[61] in order to read 'a series of exemplary unsettled texts' from the 'long colonial era'.[62] He argues that Australian writing has always been unsettled. While Mead considers poetic language in the contemporary moment, Farrell retrieves historical texts, such as Ned Kelly's *The Jerilderie Letter* and Bennelong's 'Letter to Mr Philips, Lord Sydney's Steward', and reads them using a 'counter-lens […] of "unsettlement"'.[63] He writes:

> Australian literature […] is not and never was, settled. From its beginning it was being made and remade by writers of different cultures, whether Indigenous, Chinese, convict Irish, or working or middle-class English settlers. These writers invented new material practices of lettering style, syntax, and punctuation usage, as well as new and networked affects, tones and ironies.[64]

In Farrell's reading of these works, it is his particular focus on punctuation (or lack thereof) and 'the space of the text' that is most instructive. He explains that in unsettled texts, the markings on the page 'de-privilege the semantic and grammatical'.[65] When thinking about the 'relationship between the space of the poem and the speaker's voice'[66] in the poetry of my case study poets, Cobby Eckermann, Jackson and Alizadeh, I test Farrell's 'poetics of the page'.[67] Cobby Eckermann

[58] Philip Mead, *Networked Language,* p.1.
[59] Philip Mead, p. 454.
[60] Philip Mead, p. 403.
[61] Michael Farrell, *Writing Australian Unsettlement*, p. 6.
[62] Michael Farrell, p. 4.
[63] Michael Farrell, p.10.
[64] Michael Farrell, p. 195.
[65] Michael Farrell, p. 6.
[66] Stuart Cooke, *Speaking the Earth's Languages*, p. 282.
[67] Michael Farrell, p .3.

uses the space of the text to deliberately draw attention to the gaps in knowledge between Indigenous and non-Indigenous subjectivities; Jackson uses space to write the flaws, disorders, perfection of the imperfect body; Alizadeh uses space to unsettle a traditional form.

In his *Speaking the Earth's Languages* (2013), Stuart Cooke applies Mead's concept of networked language to the reading of postcolonial poetry but focuses his study particularly on the language and poetics of Australian Aboriginal and Chilean Mapuche cultures. Cooke employs Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'nomadology' in order to make comparisons between the two cultures. Nomadology aims 'to free thought from a fixed point of view or position of judgement'.[68] As Brian Massumi points out in his foreword to *A Thousand Plateaus*, '[n]omadism […] is a mode of being in geosocial space […] which value[s] motion over fixation, variation over order [and] which affirm[s] the spaces between stops'.[69] Cooke calls for an understanding of 'nomadic poetics'—after Pierre Joris' *A Nomad Poetics* (2003)—as 'essential' to a 'genuinely *post*colonial form of habitation'.[70] Cooke explains that a nomadic poetics is one that develops in response to a dynamic local environment, and where the poems themselves may incorporate 'a variety of authors, translators or voices.'[71] Cooke is influenced by Australian Aboriginal[72] and Chilean Mapuche[73] philosophies of language, where language 'comes into being in tandem'[74] with country. Of course, First Nations' poets might resist this kind of appropriation. The emergence of a dynamic group of First Nations' (mostly female) poets, including and not limited to Evelyn Araluen, Jeanine Leane, Alison Whittaker, Natalie Harkin, and Ellen van Neerven, sees an 'undiminished ferocity of political intent'[75] defined by poetic experimentation in language, form, and content. This poetry cannot easily be described as resembling the landscapes in which they are composed, unsettling Cooke's potentially cliched categorisation.

A nomadic poetics is porous and liminal, and as a 'poetics of the interstitial region'[76] it 'acknowledges the flow of matter and energy *between* spaces'.[77] It is Cooke's application of Deleuze and Guattari's 'productive capacity' of the rhizome as 'always in the middle, between things,

---

[68] Stuart Cooke, *Speaking the Earth's Languages*, p.7.
[69] Brian Massumi quoted in Pierre Joris' *A Nomad Poetics: Essays* (United Kingdom: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), pp. 39-40.
[70] Stuart Cooke, p. 5.
[71] Stuart Cooke, p. 12.
[72] I'm deliberately using the term Aboriginal here, as this is the term Cooke uses in his *Speaking the Earth's Languages*.
[73] The Mapuche are 'the most numerous group of Indians in South America … Most inhabit the Central Valley of Chile, south of the Biobío River … Historically known as Araucanians, the Mapuche were one of three groups—Picunche, Mapuche, Huilliche—identified by Spanish ethnographers. All Araucanians now identify themselves as Mapuche' (http://www.britannica.com/topic/Mapuche).
[74] Stuart Cooke, p. 22.
[75] Geoff Page, 'Poet finds neat ways to send political message' in *The Weekend Australian Review* August 7-8, 2021, pp. 14-15, (p. 14).
[76] Stuart Cooke, p. 267.
[77] Stuart Cooke, p. 32.

interbeing, *intermezzo*', that has resonance for a threshold poetics. In the region of the in-between, the postcolonial poet stands between those things that are parted and interacts. This is not dissimilar to Gloria Andalzua's liminal 'borderlands'[78] where the convergence between cultures (in Anzaldua's case, Mexican, Indian, and Anglo cultures) creates a third space, a borderland, where a new consciousness—'a mestizo consciousness'[79]—is born. In this borderland, there is the capacity for something new to be made across and between cultures. But while Cooke argues for the postcolonial poet to inhabit a nomadic sensibility, I question how this sensibility might actually be practically applied, especially for the non-Indigenous, single author poet? As RD Wood points out in his review of *Speaking the Earth's Languages*, 'nomadism as Cooke reads it might not be an adequate discursive tool for categorising a multiplicity of Indigenous experiences'.[80] It is, in fact, the case that a wider frame of reference is needed 'to create a diverse and dynamic *poiesis* that opens up and productively redefines our own work'.[81] Yet Cooke's motion towards an Australian nomadic poetics is a useful entry point for thinking about/investigating the threshold as the generative place of in-between—the (nomad's) 'resting point'[82] between stops.

The threshold as in-between place, a productive middle between cultures or identities, might be one way to consider the unsettlement of language, form, and content in Australian poetry. This research tests this notion by looking at the ways in which specific poems by contemporary Australian poets inhabit the threshold as a generative space. The threshold may figure aesthetically (the underlying principle)—as the subject or subjectivity of the poem—or it may figure materially in that the poet 'makes' something while writing on the threshold between cultures/identities/locations. The threshold as material, 'the matter from which a thing is or can be made' (OED),[83] is the site (and the matter) for creative acts. I argue that the threshold—aesthetically and materially—is both an unsettled *and* productive space. It is productive *because* it is unsettled.

---

[78] See Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands: the new mestiza = La frontera*, (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987).
[79] Gloria Anzaldua, p. 79.
[80] RD Wood, 'The Raw and the Cooke', in *Australian Poetry Journal*, 5:2 (2015), pp. 66-78. (p. 76).
[81] RD Wood, p. 77.
[82] Massumi quoted in Cooke, *Speaking the Earth's Languages*, p. 9.
[83] "material, adj., n., and adv." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2022, www.oed.com/view/Entry/114923. Accessed 26 March 2022.

1.2

Entering into Dialogue

(responding/expressing/making)

Poiesis & Methodology

Poiesis is concerned with *making*, especially of a work of art. The word *poiesis* is a borrowing from the Greek *ποίησις,* to make, create, produce.[84] The act of *making* is not always aligned with *writing*. The visual or plastic arts are more obviously or intuitively a making process because material objects are manipulated or handled such as paints, bronze, canvas. And yet, when we write we mark or score the page. Something is made. Susan Stewart, American poet and literary critic, says that 'without the mark there is no boundary […] writing gives us a device for inscribing space, for inscribing nature […] writing serves to capture the world, defining and commenting upon the configurations we choose to contextualise'.[85] I am interested in the "materials" that are handled in writing. And for this reason, the conceptual framework of this research draws on both literary and visual art theory to illustrate poiesis in practice. I am informed by spatial theorist, Paul Carter, and his concept of 'material thinking', in which creative *making* occurs in process.[86] The process is the transitional space/time between the material thinking and the realised artwork. Methodologies of practice-led-research, as articulated by Barbara Bolt, Estelle Barrett, and Kim Lasky, also frame this investigation. Further, I demonstrate ekphrasis and collaboration as instances of threshold poetics. The project (both exegesis and artefact) has emerged through process-driven practice—'a speculative throwing forward of the mind'[87]—that informed the work as it unfolded, and where the end-point (a collection of poems and a statement of threshold poetics) was arrived at inductively.

In this process-driven practice, I acknowledge the thinking and 'inventiveness' during creative production as material—not simply a by-product or end-product—and therefore, 'the meaning of the artwork is [not] detached from the matrix of its production'.[88] When thinking about

---

[84]"poiesis, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2021, www.oed.com/view/Entry/146580. Accessed 23 July 2021.
[85] Susan Stewart qtd in 'Ekphrasis as Enactment: Towards a practice of contemporary diaspora practice' by Marcelle Freiman, *Axon. Contemporary Boundary Crossings and Ways of Speaking Poetically*, 7:2, 2017, n.p.
[86] Paul Carter, *Material Thinking: The Theory and Practice of Creative Research* (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2004), p.xi.
[87] Paul Carter, 'Interest: The Ethics of Invention' in *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Art Enquiry* edited by Estelle Barrett & Barbara Bolt (London; New York: IB Tauris, 2007), pp. 15-25, (p. 16).
[88] Paul Carter, *Material Thinking* (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Publishing, 2004), p.xi.

the ways in which poetry is networked to the time and place of its creation, *poiesis*—what is made and what is being made—is relevant as indicator of the current socio-political climate. As Carter outlines, 'the value of invention' is that 'the making process always issues from, and folds back into a social relation'.[89] Carter has examined this particularly as it applies to collaborations between artists and writers. In *Material Thinking,* Carter employs a weaving metaphor to illustrate his vision of poiesis. In this mode of making, collaborators pass 'the shuttle of creative vision back and forth, in a way that advances or changes the pattern'[90] and this mode relates especially to the role of art in place-making.

As a spatial theorist and historian, Carter is most concerned with the intersection between the act of writing history and art, design, architecture and geography. This is a multi-disciplinary approach that takes as its origin the notion that 'white settler societies […] are mytho-poetic inventions',[91] where the writing of history has shaped a narrative of 'immaculate origins and unnegotiable destinies'.[92] Carter calls for a reinvention, where the role of the artist (writer, designer, place-maker) is to 'rematerialise' the creative process in order to 'broker a new relationship with degraded environments, displaced others and […] an impoverished imaginary'.[93] All six case studies he outlines in *Material Thinking* as exemplars of collaboration practices privilege migrant voices and stories of migration. In these examples, and in Carter's vision more generally, the role of art has a political dimension where collaborators are involved in 'weaving and reweaving […] the federal text',[94] using a plurality of voices and vantage points. This is in keeping with Mead's articulation of networked language and Farrell's understanding of unsettlement. In this way, collaborations exemplify transformation and the forging of connections. Further, there is an element of responsibility involved in collaboration because what develops *between* collaborators is a third space for apprehending. And in this generative space, responsibility shifts beyond the individual. Carter emphasises that the materials of thinking are never fixed. They are always in the process of *becoming*. This threshold sensibility sees creative practice wedded to the present moment—individually and collectively.

While Carter emphasises the relationship between image and text in collaborative works, Barbara Bolt, artist and academic, privileges the relationship between *process* and text.[95] An artist's relationship to their materials and to their process, in Bolt's view, is what constitutes material

---

[89] Paul Carter, 'Interest: The Ethics of Invention' in *Practice as Research*, p. 19.
[90] Paul Carter, *Material Thinking*, p. 5.
[91] Paul Carter, *Material Thinking*, p. xii.
[92] Paul Carter, *Material Thinking*, p. xii.
[93] Paul Carter, *Material Thinking*, p. xii.
[94] Paul Carter, *Material Thinking*, p. 5.
[95] Barbara Bolt, 'The Magic is in the Handling' in *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Art Enquiry* edited by Estelle Barrett & Barbara Bolt (London; New York: IB Tauris, 2007), pp. 27-34, (p. 30).

thinking, or 'materialising practices'.[96] This dialogic relationship emphasises research and artefact as '*necessarily* emergent'.[97] The correlation between the two is constantly adjusted and revitalised, Bolt argues, as the work unfolds:

> the exegesis [does] much more than explain, describe or even contextualise practice […] it enables a shift in thought itself […] a knowing that arises through handling materials in practice.[98]

The practice-led research loop cannot be forced into being; it is characterised by a series of leaps into the unknown—each leap followed by consolidation and synthesis of findings, or regressions and missteps as the picture of knowledge begins to develop or alter.[99] During the process, the writer or artist must handle the materials of their practice. But what does this mean for the practice of writing, where the materials are intangible? Mark Doty, American poet and memoirist, in his evocative long-form essay, *Still Life with Oysters and Lemons*, an ode to the still life, remarks on his enviousness of the visual artist's relationship to their materials:

> I try to imagine coming to this kind of knowledge, a very specific, long practice of perception alloyed with a knowledge of materials—how to commingle oils and pigments just so, to the right texture, how to apply them in particular layers so as to translate this knowledge of the appearance of a particular gleam into paint. It is a sort of knowledge that must be wordless, incommunicable, so precisely does it depend upon a long context of looking and practice, and so specific its aim.[100]

I, too, am attracted to the non-verbal and plastic arts. Among my earliest memories is the feeling of being enthralled by the shelves of paint in my father's studio, and of running my fingers over the dried splotches on the large tins. Its materiality; its texture. My father practiced as a printmaker, a silk-screener, and he would squirt down the screens outside my bedroom window with a high-pressure hose. It was physical work. It was messy. The ground ran with colour and dirt and runnels of water. The sound of the ink being blasted from the fine mesh screen was a kind of clattering, a puncturing noise that hauled me out of sleep (he often practiced at night when all the other domestic work was done and the house quiet). I understand, now, this need to steal hours for creative work. But as a child, his art-making was enveloping, encompassing, interrupting, normal. I was interested, as a child, in the pictures he made. Later, I became interested in the pictures that words make. Visual art has always provided a rich seam in my work. I think this is

---

[96] Estelle Barrett, 'Introduction' in *Practice as Research*, p. 2.
[97] Estelle Barrett, 'Introduction', p. 6.
[98] Bolt, 'Magic is in the Handling', p. 29.
[99] Jeri Kroll, 'The creative writing doctoral thesis: insights from genetic criticism' in *New Writing*, 15:2, 148-169, 2018.
[100] Mark Doty, *Still Life with Oysters and Lemons* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2001), p. 16.

because what is seen is immediate, or at least evokes an immediate response that might only later be tempered by contemplation and an intellectual consideration of the form and context. When looking at Grace Cossington Smith's *Open Door,*[101] for example, the doorway (threshold) is clearly articulated. I see it. I wish for this clarity in my poetry, but it can never be so. Each medium has its own body of language, and we might spend our life building a lexicon. The dialogue between image and text can happen in reverse, too, of course. This interest in the call and response across and between artworks is outlined in the section to follow on ekphrasis and collaboration.

But as my practice is text-based and language-centred—it is concerned with what I can do with words and ideas—Carter's 'materials of thinking' and Bolt's 'materialising practices' are useful conceptual frameworks to consider threshold poetics. The emphasis in both concepts is on the transformational qualities of the creative process. The endpoint of this process apprehends a third space between collaborators, or between the creative and critical components. This is in keeping with the idea of the threshold that I explore—that the threshold is a point of entry and exit, or place of transition, or in between space where something new emerges—a site where creative acts become material. In developing this thesis, the materials of my thinking have been the following: responding to/entering into dialogue with the work of other poets and artists; the influence of other poets and critics; 'a principle of attention',[102] personal experience, and instincts, visions, dreams; and (experiencing) the natural world/the built-up world. Underneath all of this, though, is thinking on what it means to live and create on unceded Peramangk and Kaurna Country as a non-Indigenous woman, mother and global citizen—in the contemporary moment.

Materialising practices have been applied by following a series of critical and creative inputs. Kim Lasky, poet and global studies researcher at the University of Sussex, explains the model as process-driven poetics using a 'triptych of practice-led research'.[103] In this model the outer panels of the triptych include 'critical and theoretical inputs and outcomes' on the one side and 'creative work' on the other.[104] Lasky explains that, ideally, the 'hinges' between these panels allow for fluidity and connection across and between the three modes of the critical/creative process.[105] In my case, and following this model, as the components coalesce, a 'statement of poetics' might be articulated. This statement (of threshold poetics) then underpins all aspects of the investigation. The hinges in this thesis are exemplified by the linking essays placed between exegetical and compositional/creative modes.

---

[101] Grace Cossington Smith, *Open Door*, 1960, oil on hardboard, Bathurst Regional Art Gallery.
[102] Mark Doty, *Still Life with Oysters and Lemons*, p. 48.
[103] Kim Lasky,'Poetics and Creative Writing Research' in *Research Methods in Creative Writing*, ed. by Jeri Kroll and Graeme Harper (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp14–34 (22).
[104] Kim Lasky, p. 22.
[105] Kim Lasky, p. 22.

Ekphrasis and Collaboration Practices

Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak[106]

—John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*

Call & Response: Ekphrasis

For the ancient Greeks, the practice of ekphrasis was a rhetorical device for teaching and learning. It was a way in which an object could be evoked in words and committed to memory. The emphasis was on description, and on provoking a response from the reader who was given the opportunity to 'see' a real or imagined object or item. This rendering of an image—something static and material—into words, 'transforms the 'seen' into a second and reactivated form of seeing'.[107] This is not the same as recounting. Something new is made. Marcelle Freiman, in her essay, 'Ekphrasis as Enactment', argues that the quality of *enargeia*, or 'vivid, sensuous word-painting'[108] was essential to medieval thought and ekphrastic practice because the potent visual description encouraged a focusing of the mind both spatially and spiritually. It encouraged the listener/reader to enter a receptive space and a receptive state. Frieman highlights that ekphrasis has always been related to apperception: 'it was employed to create a lasting effect in the *mind* of the listener'.[109] Here is one medium attempting to articulate another. Virginia Woolf explains the difficulty of articulation this way: 'we fling [words] like nets upon a rocky and inhospitable shore; they fade and disappear.'[110] Both or all mediums have the same purpose: to close the distance in time between the making and the seeing. An insect caught in amber for eternity.

Both or all mediums have the same purpose: to capture time like the insect caught for eternity in amber.

But ekphrasis as a literary genre has a long and complex history and the notion of what constitutes ekphrasis is an ever-evolving field. Beginning with the description of Achilles' shield in Homer's *Iliad*, to the evocation of the tapestries of Minerva and Arachne in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*,

---

[106] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books [first published by the British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books in 1972; Reissued as part of the Penguin Design Series 2008], p. 7.

[107] Cassandra Atherton & Paul Hetherington, 'Ekphrastic Editorial: Poetry that Sees' in *Cordite Poetry Review*, March, 2017, pp. 1-4, (p. 1). See: <http://cordite.org.au/essays/ekphrastic-editorial/>

[108] Marcelle Freiman, 'Ekphrasis an Enactment: Towards a poetics of contemporary diaspora practice' in *Axon. Contemporary Boundary Crossings and Ways of Speaking Poetically*, 7:2, 2017, n.p.
< http://www.axonjournal.com.au/issue-13/ekphrasis-enactment>

[109] Marcelle Freiman, 'Ekphrasis as Enactment', n.p.

[110] Virginia Woolf, 'Pictures' in *Oh, to be a Painter!* Introduced and selected by Claudia Tobin (New York: David Zwirner Books, 2021), p. 38 ['Pictures' written in 1925, was first published in Virginia Woolf, *The Moment and Other Essays*, ed. Leonard Woolf, in 1947 by the Hogarth Press, London].

through to Keats' imagined Grecian vessel in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' (1919), and WH Auden's interpretation of Brueghel's *The Fall of Icarus* in 'Musée des Beaux Arts' (1938), the origins of ekphrasis have been rooted in poetic and literary works of art.[111] The relationship between these two—text and image—is not without contention, struggle, opposition. While critics have not always agreed on the parameters of ekphrasis, it is generally understood to be integral as a practice to the origins of art theory, which developed during the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods.[112] Contemporary scholars, however, have tended to widen the frame of reference of what constitutes ekphrasis, with Peter Wagner, Professor and Chair in English Literature at the University of Koblenz-Landau, calling for *all* writing about art/pictures—'poems, critical assessments, art historical accounts'[113]—to be included in a definition of ekphrasis, or more generally art criticism. I do not disagree with this evolution but wonder for my own reckonings/creative practice where the borders between poetry and criticism lie. By logical extension, ekphrasis opens to ever widening constellations of intertextualities and modes/mediums, such as films which reference artworks, artworks that references music, music that attends to poems etc. I am fascinated by these kinds of dialogical relationships/collaborations but for the purposes of this study, however, it is the 'sister arts' of visual art and poetry that I engage.

In 'Entering the Museum of Words: Browning's "My Last Duchess" and Twentieth-Century Ekphrasis' James Heffernan makes the case for the *paragonal* relationship between literature and visual arts, and thus defines the relationship as a 'literature of conflict and competition'.[114] The conflict is borne out of cohering a narrative (story and voice) from the 'doubly stilled figures of visual art'[115] and where the impulse toward narrative when describing works of art is powerful. Heffernan emphasises that ekphrasis as a mode of interpretation, seeks to highlight not only the work of art in question, but the story of that work of art, such as who is doing the looking, who is doing the making, what is the context for the work of art, where is it situated, how is it placed in relationship to other works of art both literally (in the museum/gallery) and culturally etc. He uses Browning's 'My Last Duchess' to illustrate ekphrastic poetry as a museum of words which encodes, interprets, describes, commentates. As a form of art criticism, ekphrasis is a kind of doorway upon doorway upon doorway of interpretation. A representation of what is being represented by what is being represented. Heffernan and others (Tom Mitchell, Grant F. Scott,

---

[111] Peter Wagner, 'Introduction: Ekphrasis, Iconotexts, and Intermediality—the State(s) of the Art(s)' in *Icons, Texts, Iconotexts: Essays on Ekphrasis and Intermediality* (Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter Inc, 1996), p. 12,
[112] Peter Wagner, 'Introduction: Ekphrasis, Iconotexts, and Intermediality—the State(s) of the Art(s)', p. 6.
[113] Peter Wagner, 'Introduction: Ekphrasis, Iconotexts, and Intermediality—the State(s) of the Art(s)', p. 14.
[114] James A.W Heffernan, 'Entering the Museum of Words: Browning's "My Last Duchess" and Twentieth-Century Ekphrasis' in *Icons, Texts, Iconotexts: Essays on Ekphrasis and Intermediality*, p. 263.
[115] James A.W Heffernan, 'Entering the Museum of Words: Browning's "My Last Duchess" and Twentieth-Century Ekphrasis', p. 263.

Peter Wagner)[116] have articulated an accommodating contemporary definition of ekphrasis as 'the verbal representation of visual [or graphic] representation'.[117] At its most essential, this definition allows for text and image to cohabit, not without conflict, but in a dynamic exchange at best, and a failure of communication at worst.

In contemporary ekphrastic practices, the call and response relationship between artworks or mediums of art, as Cassandra Atherton and Paul Hetherington have so aptly described it, is much more concerned with renewing and revitalising the urgency of the poetry-painting nexus,[118] or indeed other points of intersection/transformations between artistic mediums. It is fair to say that the abiding tension between word and image has been seen by some nineteenth and twentieth century critics as an insurmountable struggle. In other words, this tension has been seen as impossible to reconcile while fraught with ethical dilemmas. In later textual and pictorial theory, however, it has come to be seen as a fertile and productive dialogic relationship that thrives on its very unsettledness.[119] Frieman argues for a 'postcolonial creativity': 'a poetics of ekphrasis that *embodies* and necessarily includes in its language, voice, performativity and affect, the possibilities of otherness'.[120] In an Australian postcolonial context, ekphrastic practice might be one way to enter a generative space where a polyphony of voices can be heard.

In thinking through questions of who gazes at whom and from what vantage points and with what privilege, I return to John Berger's articulation that when we engage in *seeing*, 'we never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves'.[121] To make art is not a passive act. To look and respond to art is not a passive act. Every creative decision or critical/uncritical response calls into question our personal, cultural, and social biases. In her fierce essay on artmaking, the body (as subject), and transgression, bell hooks says, 'writing about art, making art, is not the same as being the subject of art.'[122] Writing from the experience of being both artist and (unwilling) subject (of visual art) at different points, she argues that to transgress willingly, is an assertion of 'the right to choose', while 'to be naked […] without intimacy […] without consent calls out memories of violation.'[123] The body is the first site of transgression in artmaking. In Alloula Malek's *The Colonial Harem* (1986), Malek takes the picture postcards of Algerian women distributed and exploited by the French during colonisation as his subject. These

[116] See Peter Wagner's 'Introduction' in *Icons, Texts, Iconotexts'* p. 10.
[117] Peter Wagner, 'Introduction: Ekphrasis, Iconotexts, and Intermediality—the State(s) of the Art(s)', p. 10.
[118] Atherton & Hetherington, 'Ekphrastic Editorial', p. 3.
[119] Marcelle Frieman, 'Ekphrasis as Enactment' n.p.
[120] Marcelle Frieman, 'Ekphrasis as Enactment' n.p.
[121] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing,* p. 9.
[122] bell hooks, 'Being the Subject of Art' in *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics (*New York: The New Press, 1995*)*, p. 135.
[123] bell hooks, 'Being the Subject of Art' in *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics (*New York: The New Press, 1995*)*, p. 137.

images of nude veiled women ('Frenchman's phantasm'),[124] 'wrest certain features of Algerian life from their indigenous context only to reinscribe them within a framework that answers to the […] imperialist's appropriation of the Orient.'[125] The bodies of Algerian women as subjects saw the models exoticised, sexualised and commandeered as part of the colonising project. As Berger explains, 'the relation between what we see and what we know is never settled'.[126] The reclamation of agency for (largely women's) bodies in contemporary visual art, by (largely female) contemporary artists is an act of defiance that unsettles, reimagines, and transforms. I am interested in the networked language that grows out of this unsettling—the doorways art can point us towards.

Wandering the Art Gallery of South Australia one spring day in October 2018, I was staggered when I encountered a series of sepia-toned black and white photographs, wall-sized, by the Australian artist, Tracey Moffatt, as part of her *Body Remembers* series.[127] First exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 2017, the photographs feature a maid, Moffatt herself, stranded on a desolate and ruined colonial property. I was struck by the force of the images. Moffatt's use of shadow (the body's shadow) projected against a plane of wall or dirt, brings the artist into the frame, and yet suggests ghostliness, or a kind of haunting. Not quite here, not quite there. The notes accompanying the exhibition state that the degraded rural setting 'references the forced removal of young Aboriginal women from their families and homes and their internment as domestic servants on rural properties,'[128] and Moffatt describes the series as 'a play with time, backwards and forwards of the past and present'.[129] I experienced the images as a collision between sorrow and wonder. I felt sorrow at the colonial history they reference, and in which I'm implicated as a white Australian. The images provoked a visceral immediate response (I felt it in my heart and guts). And I felt wonder at the images' ability to evoke grief, resilience, womanhood, dispossession while playing with time so effectively. I wrote back to the images in a series of four poems which appear in the collection to follow.

In his seminal work on photography, *Camera Lucida*,[130] Roland Barthes illumines his concept of the *punctum*. The *punctum* is the ineffable element of a photograph that *affects* or 'pricks'

---

124 Alloula Malek, *The Colonial Harem* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. xiv.
125 *Alloula* Malek, *The Colonial Harem,* p. xx.
126 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 7.
127 Tracey Moffat, *Body Remembers*, Art Gallery of South Australia, 14 July – 1 October, 2018. [First shown at the Venice Biennale 2017 as part of 'My Horizon' curated by Natalie King and commissioned by the Australia Council for the Arts. Collection of Neil Balnaves AO, Courtesy of the artist and Roslyn Oxley Gallery]
128 Natalie King, *Body Remembers* Exhibition notes.
129 Natalie King, *Body Remembers* Exhibition notes.
130 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage Books, 2000 [1st published 1982 by Jonathan Cape).

the viewer; it moves beyond just a simple appreciation or enthusiasm for an image (*studium*);[131] and instead, challenges, 'wounds', and provokes the viewer's perception or sense of self. Barthes writes:

> [the *punctum*] is the element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me […] a photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).[132]

The wounding element is a disturbance. It is the part of the image that affects the one who looks, or the one who sees. In Moffatt's photographs, the *punctum*, to me, is the shadow of the artist's body entering the frame. She is both observer and observed. She is both resilient and lonely.

The Moroccan series of paintings by Australian artist, Hilda Rix Nicholas, also serve as a provocation or *punctum*, prompting a series of memories, associations, questions, impressions as I enter the receptive space where poems are made. Rix Nicholas' paintings from her time in Morocco in 1912 and 1914 are not only early experiments in the post-impressionist technique but show a woman coming to terms sensitively with a place and culture very different from anything she had previously known. The title of the poetry collection I composed for this thesis, 'The Blue Archway', is an homage to Rix Nicholas's painting of the same name. I spent time in Morocco in my twenties, and Rix Nicholas' rendering of light, colour, and texture shows me something new and awakens a cellular and emotional memory of my time there. Aural and olfactory recollections surface, provoked by the visual cues of her paintings. I am interested in what she sees and in what I see in what she is seeing. Not least, I wonder at how Rix Nicholas managed her creative practice in that particular place, time, culture, milieu, and what limitations or opportunities she was afforded being a western woman travelling alone in 1912 and 1914 in Northern Africa. In the Moroccan series, scenes of the marketplace and everyday street life are glimpsed through Moorish doorways and archways—thresholds which frame, or re-frame, the view. The middle section of my poetry collection comprises ekphrastic poems responding to Rix Nicholas' paintings of Tangier.

Weaving Together: Collaboration

In July 2018, I attended the inaugural Oratunga Winter School—Creating out of Place, hosted by the University of Adelaide's JM Coetzee Centre for Creative Practice, and taking place in the enigmatic Flinders Ranges. It is an annual creative school held at the historic Oratunga Sheep Station on Adnyamanthanha Country. Each year, a team of distinguished scholars and creative

[131] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 26.
[132] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pp. 26-27.

practitioners guide a small group of participants through the art of creative place-making in storied Country. There is much that can be said about the experience of that winter in Oratunga: the dry (very dry) uncluttered beautiful country and its effect on me both personally and creatively; the opportunity to meet inspiring individuals and to explore new ways of creating out of place; the assistance and guidance of expert practitioners; the terrifying wonder and pleasure at being 'out of range', uncontactable by employers, friends and loved ones; but especially, for me, the beginning of a flourishing creative relationship and collaboration between myself and the visual artist Meaghan Shelton.

A few days into the week at Oratunga, Shelton approached me and said that she thought our work, her visual art, and my poetry, shared a sensibility—she might have heard me mentioning thresholds, and seeing that her work is concerned with female rites of passage, she was interested to see how I'd approached the subject in my respective medium. Shelton brought up some images of her work on her phone, and I was drawn immediately to what I was seeing. I saw thresholds being evoked. I saw sadness and loss and hope and doilies and lace and vulvas and coral and watery transitions. I saw gaps and slippages in the negative spaces of the crochet. Upon return from Oratunga, and after some time for germinating, I composed in response to the call of her artworks. When I sent the poems to Shelton, she said that she felt the words had 'transported her work' and that I was 'brave with words'. I felt that it was she who was brave with her images. In 2019, *A Threshold* (both the painting and the poem) was entered in the Du Rietz Art Awards in Gympie, hanging centrally and holding the space of the exhibition—the threshold to the exhibition. Shelton won the prize with another work, a sculptural work, but the judges commented that the shortlisted artists had put themselves and their dreams on the line, and that our collaboration in *A Threshold* evidenced this.

When encountering the image of Shelton's *Bride* for the first time at Oratunga Station (on Shelton's phone), the rumpled fabric, the burnt holes, the tea-coloured stains, and the topography of the fabric folded into a disembodied feminine shape, I was struck by both the sense of desire and sense of loss the trace of a wedding dress evoked. I worried for the imagined bride; the imagined rite of passage. The empty dress infers a gap, a tracing, a kind of haunting. The creative prompts—the ruched dress mid-waltz; the not quite whiteness of it—serve then as a departure for reflecting on girlhood, womanhood, and nationhood, just as Moffatt's work did for me also. This response comes with acknowledgement that I bring my own subjectivities and experiences to bear on the seeing. Shelton's body of work uses lacework, embroidery, and crocheted threads as a leitmotif, to celebrate and revitalise feminine crafts and to address female rites of passage: '[feminine crafts provide] a means of personal aesthetic expression and the characteristic repetitive

and obsessive patterns may be interpreted as concealing or veiling inexpressible details of female experience'.[133] Shelton's work seeks to 'represent the unsaid'; 'the layering of lace-like forms over dark and foreboding backgrounds speak of personal secrets and family legacies [and they] can also be interpreted as a visual inference of our historical blind-spots and national shame'.[134] I was interested in the ways in which Shelton's images gave me an entry point to engaging with such blind-spots or secrets.

Shelton writes of her practice: 'I am still and meditative when I choose to create something out of tiny stiches; this borrowed time allows me to access the affect and opens possibilities of perception'.[135] She enters a generative space akin to a sacred kind of threshold. And her work, too, embodies the threshold: 'the doilies and lace [of feminine crafts] provided a veil to screen […] acute feelings of resentment, dissatisfaction and unfulfilled dreams, but also to keep safe those inner thoughts and perceptions not ready to be shown to the world'.[136] To enter into dialogue with Shelton's work is not an attempt to simply recount the image but is a 'working-with',[137] a making process that occurs on the threshold between mediums, identities, subjectivities, inhabiting the i*ntermezzo* or the middle ground. In this productive capacity of the middle, there is the possibility for synthesis, a third space across and between mediums where something new can emerge, not only in terms of poetic and artistic form, but in the terrain of contemporary poetics more generally.

Collaborative practices between practitioners manifests in a multitude of approaches, with varying levels of equality and authorial status. What is created in the space between practitioners, then, is encoded by each of the contributors' subjectivities, biases, power lines, relationships to each other, practices, ethics etc. Creative Industries academics, Donna Lee Brien, and Tess Brady, in defining twelve categories of collaboration, emphasise that movement between the various form of collaboration within the same project as a vital component of the creative process.[138] The success of the collaboration, they argue, is dependent on 'articulated, recognised and agreed upon'[139] movement between categories by all parties involved. When the movement is 'unconscious' or 'not formalised',[140] the collaboration may become fraught, or at worst, collapse

---

133 Meaghan Shelton, *Intricate, infinite: Addressing the ineffable aspects of women's experience through the lens of traditional craft practice.* Masters by Research by Creative Works, Queensland University of Technology, 2018, p. 3.
134 Courtney Pedersen, 'Exhibition Notes for Meaghan Shelton's *Woven*' (Tacit Galleries Fitzroy, Wednesday 24 October - Sunday 18 November 2018).
135 Meaghan Shelton, *Intricate, infinite*, p. 34.
136 Courtney Pedersen, Exhibition Notes.*Woven*.
137 Kevin Brophy, 'On Recognising Collaboration' in *The Poetics of Collaboration. Axon: Creative Explorations*, 6: 1(March 2016), n.p: < https://www.axonjournal.com.au/issue-10/recognising-collaboration>
138 Donna Lee Brien & Tess Brady, 'Collaborative Practice: Categorising forms of collaboration for practitioners' in TEXT, 7:2 (October 2003), n.p: < http://www.textjournal.com.au/oct03/brienbrady.htm>
139 Donna Lee Brien & Tess Brady, 'Collaborative Practice', n.p.
140 Donna Lee Brien & Tess Brady, 'Collaborative Practice', n.p.

entirely. Of the twelve categories defined by Lee Brien and Brady, my work with Shelton sits somewhere between 'Conjunctive Collaboration', which involves 'writers/artists contributing to a given work, but where the contribution occurs in a sequence'[141] and 'Sequential Collaboration', where 'one writer/artist might produce the initial outline […] and another writer/artist develops this'.[142] And yet our collaboration is not quite either of those categories, seeing as when Shelton created her work, she did not know that I would one day be riffing on it with words. My response to her work is also not strictly ekphrasis. Shelton's work calls, I respond, and between us, something new is made. Together we consider/agree/articulate that the conversation between our respective mediums goes in both directions.

In their introduction to the *Axon* special issue on collaboration, Antonia Pont and Cassandra Atherton approach collaborative practice 'via the figure of the equilateral triangle'.[143] The first triangular vertex posits collaboration as a mutually beneficial practice, in which the 'artist, maker, thinker, critic' come together 'for alchemies and surprises' but remain 'intact' and 'ontologically unchallenged by the collaborative approach'.[144] The second vertex is described as an entanglement that brings 'two apparently discrete subjects together in order to unleash a process of making and unmaking, of unsettling and generation [and renders] questionable the identities we assume and defend'.[145] The third vertex encompasses the potential for collaboration between an individual and 'existing text and technology'.[146] My poems composed in response to Shelton's images and included in 'The Blue Archway' most closely align to the third vertex of collaboration, but the chapbook we are developing together sees our collaboration enter the second vertex of entanglement, unsettlement and generation. Or it may enter the territory of Lee Brien and Brady's 'Contribution Collaboration' where we both 'contribute to a project in [our] separate ways, each maintaining [our] own signature, but producing a unified object.'[147] Shelton and I have begun sketching our shared vision for a future project. And in doing so, we prompt each other to move beyond our sphere, beyond our lexicon.

Interestingly, when a third participant became part of the (Conjunctive) collaboration of *Bride*, the poem/artwork was transformed into something new entirely. A graphic designer, Abigail Rutter, put the artwork and the poem together in a new configuration, featured in the first issue of *Art Datum Zine*, 2018. The original artwork, made from a found object (a hand-me-down

---

141 Donna Lee Brien & Tess Brady, 'Collaborative Practice', n.p.
142 Donna Lee Brien & Tess Brady, 'Collaborative Practice', n.p.
143 Antonia Pont & Cassandra Atherton, 'Introduction' in *The Poetics of Collaboration. Axon: Creative Explorations*, 6: 1 (March 2016), n.p: < https://www.axonjournal.com.au/issue-10/introduction>
144 Antonia Pont & Cassandra Atherton, 'Introduction', n.p
145 Antonia Pont & Cassandra Atherton, 'Introduction', n.p
146 Antonia Pont & Cassandra Atherton, 'Introduction', n.p
147 Donna Lee Brien & Tess Brady, 'Collaborative Practice', n.p.

tablecloth), and the original words, a visceral response to the image, when put together in this way, highlight what Kevin Brophy might describe as achieving a 'new and uncanny meaning as its location and its outcomes move outside of any single individual's responsibility'.[148] This new configuration becomes a multi-voiced dialogue between artist, poet, designer, and reader. This is not unlike the creation of a picture book—usually a collaboration between author and artist—where the abiding relationship between word and image becomes a dynamic third space, beyond the jurisdiction of either contributor's artistic medium.[149] The various subjectivities in such a collaboration produce meaning by intersecting, merging, and establishing connections with other subjectivities. My collaboration with Shelton begins in conversation and ends in a transformative encounter both personally and creatively. As the poet Luke Fisher attests, 'in a genuine conversation what one says, "speaks to" is what one has divined in the other's words; speaking is thus grounded in listening'.[150] The transformative practice of art and art-making, writing and 'world-making', is a revolutionary act: it introduces something new to the world. I agree with writer, teacher, and author, Sarah Sentilles that to engage in artmaking is to engage in world-making: '[w]hen we make art—sentence, loaf of bread, garden, painting—we exercise the muscles we need to remake the world. We remember it's possible to make something new.'[151] The world is calling out to be made anew as we rethink the meaning and function of borders, identity, citizenship, privilege, country, nation. A threshold sensibility in our artmaking, our poiesis, might be just the approach needed to negotiate the uncertainty, the loss, and the transformation we have been undergoing as global citizens since the ongoing pandemic of early 2020. Embracing unsettlement politically, socially, individually, collectively, is a radical creative act.

Olivia Laing, British writer, novelist, and cultural critic, talks about the 'hospitality' artists and writers have shown her through their work. In Laing's series of essays, *Funny Weather: Art in an Emergency* (2020), Laing explains that she borrows the word 'hospitality' from John Berger and the term encompasses generosity and transformation. She writes: '[w]hat I mean by hospitality is a capacity to enlarge and open, a corrective to the overwhelming political imperative […] to wall off, separate and reject'.[152] In writing these essays, Laing was '[excited] to not be writing about writing, to turn instead to works that existed outside of language'.[153] An interest in work that exists outside of language is an element that ignites me also as a practitioner, and so the focus of this

[148] Kevin Brophy, 'On Recognising Collaboration', n.p.
[149] Ross Watkins, 'Writing the half of it: a challenge unique to picture book authorship' in *New Writing*, 16:1, 2019, pp. 3-15.
[150] Luke Fisher qtd in 'On Recognising Collaboration', n.p.
[151] Sarah Sentilles, 'Creation Stories' in *Griffith Review 73: Hey, Utopia!* ed. Ashley Hay, (South Brisbane, Queensland: Griffith University, 2021), pp. 31-41, (p. 32).
[152] Olivia Laing, *Funny Weather* (London: Picador, 2020), p. 6.
[153] Olivia Laing, *Funny Weather*, p. 7.

exegesis is twofold. It considers the productive unsettlement of a postcolonial poetics as articulated by the threshold and it is concerned with the transformative imperative of art (both word and image) in defining/making sense of the social system and culture of a nation. I am both inspired by works that reveal the threshold to me and interested in how the threshold might go some way into revealing an Australian postcolonial poetics that privileges a multitude of voices and vantage points. Australian writer Charlotte Wood writes that to create is an act of enlargement.

> [Creating art] lights a candle in the darkness, offering solace, illumination—maybe even the possibility of transformation—not just for the maker but for the reader or viewer, which is to say all of us. Art urges us to imagine and inhabit lives other than our own, to be more thoughtful, to feel more deeply, to challenge what we think we already know. Art declares that we contain multitudes, that more than one thing can be true at once. And it gives us breathing space, in which we can listen more than talk, where we can attentively question our own beliefs. It gives us a place in this chaotic world in which to find the sort of meaning that only arises out of the stillness, deep within our quiet selves.[154]

This project has been an act of transformation personally and artistically. It has allowed a kind of breathing space, needed now more than ever as we become a masked community negotiating a global pandemic. I am indebted to the hospitality of the poets and artists whose works I have encountered while dwelling on the threshold. What follows is a dialogue between my own creative practice, the work of other practitioners and scholars, and the unsettled terrain of contemporary Australian poetics.

[154] Charlotte Wood, *The Luminous Solution: Creativity, Resilience and the Inner Life* (Sydney; Melbourne; Auckland; London: Allen & Unwin, 2021), p. 43.

The Hinge in Between

One

When I was twenty-five years old, I spent time in Morocco. I travelled there with a woman I met in Spain whom I hardly knew but who showed me great hospitality and generosity. She was an ex-pat Aussie living in Spain as a Nanny who took frequent visits across the Gibraltar Strait to rendezvous with her Moroccan lover in Tetouan. Their discreet relationship was tolerated by his family, but they would never give their blessing to marriage, family, domesticity. Their relationship belonged in the liminal space of an unresolved affair. I'm sure that unmarried, single, male Mustapha had other lovers, but the two of them seemed genuinely in love (or lust). This woman, Lou, agreed to escort me over to Tangiers, have me stay with her in the village of her boyfriend's family for a while, before I would go on to meet up with dear old friends of mine—who were also travelling through Morocco—in Fez. It was twenty years ago now that I was there, but I have vivid recollections—sensual recalls of voluptuous dates piled sticky at market stalls, the call to prayer entering fevered dreams, the coolness of tiles under foot, the dusty steep mountainous roads, the smell of rotting meat and leather tanning vats, the dry still heat of a rooftop at midnight. Palm trees against terracotta walls. Women with shining eyes. During my weeks there I experienced a sensual immersion. My heart was also broken. By travelling as a single woman, I was testing myself to see whether I was strong enough to liberate myself from a difficult relationship. But the real test was the reckoning I had with myself in North Africa. Place of dreams and heat and languor.

Lou and I made our way slowly down to Algeciras from Barcelona. We hired a car and swam on beaches edging the desert. We ate dinner late and drank a lot of wine and stayed in quaintly decorated rooms. Like I said, we didn't know each other well, but we came together then for an intense and brief encounter. I often wonder what happened to Lou and Mustapha—we didn't keep in touch. Perhaps her life at that moment was at a crossroads as much as my own was. I like to think that we carried each other across a threshold somehow. Lou embodied a kind of recklessness or boldness that veered towards dangerous vulnerability. I hope that things turned out well for her. She was in thrall to Mustapha and that seductive country and I worried for her autonomy. But Lou prepared me well for the trip to Morocco: I would need to wear a wedding band and clothing that covered my legs and arms. We bought long skirts and scarves and shirts at a Spanish market in readiness. I enjoyed wrapping myself in fine soft cottons, and if anything, my pale skin welcomed the protection from the direct sun. Lou explained that I would need to be demure: don't flaunt your Western-ness. Or your single-ness. If anyone asks, you are on your way

to meet up with your husband, she warned. It was hot underneath all those layers, and I wondered how stifling a veil could be.

Ali Alizadeh's extended poem 'The History of the Veil' (*Ashes in the Air*, pp. 14-18) charts the history of the veil or *hejab* as more than an object of clothing. Its history not only unveils socio-political tensions and preoccupations between the colonising West and Islamic countries but considers the veil as symbolic of both women's oppression and liberation. In the poem, when the wife of a Bedouin shepherd (the prophet Mohammed) first fashions the veil and brings its use to prominence, it is to emulate 'something some Pagan Persian princesses do/ to mark affluence, exceptionality' (14). Later, at the time of the Crusades, the covering 'surpasses class, overlaps gender' (14) and diverts the gaze of 'Norman brigands, Goth marauders and Nordic rapists' (14) away from women's bodies. And yet the erotic imaginations of the invaders are inflamed. The women are exoticised by the veil. As Barbara Harlow points out in her introduction to *The Colonial Harem* (1986), the 'veiled, exotic female'[155] is synonymous with the imperialist project of colonising Arab lands. During the Enlightenment the Islamic veil comes to symbolise the 'sign of a beaten civilisation, and then a fixed attribute of an inferior species of colonised beasts' (15), writes Alizadeh, and during the Gulf War it was a 'sign of endless, blood-soaked *jihad*' (17). During the Algerian revolution (1954-1962), Islamic women initially discarded the veil and donned Western clothing as an act of revolution. By abandoning the veil, they were able to actively confront the colonial presence of the French in Algeria as members of the National Liberation Front (FLN).[156] Near the end of the revolution, Islamic women were forced to don the veil again as protection. In their Western apparel they eventually became suspect and readily visible. In assuming the veil, their revolutionary practices were better disguised: 'they could conceal within its folds the weapons and explosive devices they carried between the French and Arab quarters of the city'.[157] The wearing of the veil by women as act of self-hood and agency, to assert their allegiance to tradition and custom, to mechanism for resistance is a complex weave. Alizadeh concludes the poem:

> […] altering
> the shape of the body; covering it by force here, uncovering it
> by force there: woman will/not wear the veil un/happily ever after. (18)

The veiled women I encountered in Morocco appeared strong, distinctive, embodied, proud. I acknowledge this can only be projection. Then and now. But I am interested in disrupting my

[155]Barbara Harlow, 'Introduction' in *The Colonial Harem* by Malek Alloula (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. ix-xxii (p. xvi).
[156] Barbara Harlow, 'Introduction' in *The Colonial Harem*, p. x.
[157] Barbara Harlow, p. x.

assumptions. I carry this imperative into my thinking on thresholds—the material and psychological items that conceal and reveal.

On the ferry to Tangier Lou and I kept to ourselves. It was mostly men on that boat. It was crowded and jostling and we were being looked at. I would have liked to have been protected by a veil. The few women that we saw were travelling with their husbands and children or were down below deck. I tucked myself into a little corner out of the wind and Lou navigated the purchase of some beer. I remember the sea was literally glittering. There was so much light. After living for months in monochrome London, I felt a sudden lurch in my chest for home. Here, somewhere between the Mediterranean and Africa, was the saturated colour and dry heat of Adelaide. I was terrified and exhilarated.

Tangier, threshold between the two continents of Europe and Africa, earned its reputation as a cosmopolitan "international zone" not only because it attracted waves of colonisers over the centuries (Phoenicians, Romans, Vandals, Portuguese, Spanish, British, French),[158] but also because of its magnetic pull for travellers, artists, creatives, writers and socialites.[159] Some of these luminaries included Henri Matisse, Hilda Rix Nicholas, Henri Ossawa Tanner and his wife, Jessie Tanner, and Edith Wharton at the beginning of the twentieth century,[160] and in the period after World War Two, Paul Bowles, Jane Bowles, Tennessee Williams, Samuel Beckett,[161] Allen Ginsberg and other members of the Beat Generation right up until the 1970s. The artists came to Tangier for the light. Jeanette Hoorn explains:

> In the early twentieth century modernist artists were less interested in reproducing orientalist themes such as the odalisque, the harem or adventures of violent sultans and pashas, which had occupied so many over the centuries. The great challenge as these artists saw it, in line with modernist teachings, was to capture the essence of their subject. In order to do that, the artist needed above all to have strong and reliable light. This was one of the great attractions of Tangier for painters—it was believed that the light of North Africa was superior to that of almost anywhere on the planet.[162]

---

158 The Monocle Travel Guide Series*, Marrakech, Tangier + Casablanca* (Berlin: gestalten, 2019), p. 91.
159 Jeanette Hoorn, 'Painting Portraits in Private: Hilda Rix Nicholas and Henri Matisse in Morocco', *Third Text*, 30:1-2, pp. 117-137 (p. 118).
160 See Jeanette Hoorn, 'Tangier as a Place for Artists' in *Hilda Rix Nicholas and Elsie Rix's Moroccan Idyll* (Carlton, Victoria: The Miegunyah Press, 2014 [first published 2013]), pp. 54-59.
161 Samuel Beckett was a frequent visitor to Morocco and Tunisia, and famously, was in Northern Africa when he was announced as the Nobel Prize winner in 1969. See: David Wheatley, 'Black Diamonds of Pessimism: David Wheatley on the final correspondence of Samuel Beckett' in *Times Literary Supplement*, January 20, 2017: < https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/beckett-letter-volume-four/>
162 Jeanette Hoorn, *Hilda Rix Nicholas and Elsie Rix's Moroccan Idyll* (Carlton, Victoria: The Miegunyah Press, 2014 [first published 2013], p. 128.

The Australian artist, Hilda Rix Nicholas, travelled to Tangier for two separate creative and generative stints in 1912 (by herself) and 1914 (accompanied by her sister, the writer, Elsie Rix). Her paintings from this time were exhibited to acclaim at the *Paris Salon* and the *Société des Peintres Orientalistes Francais* and represent her most experimental work in terms of 'arrangement of form and colour'.[163] Writing to her mother and sister from Tangier in 1912, Rix Nicholas says, 'We are *really truly here!!!* And oh oh it is *wonderful*! So much like an extraordinarily beautiful dream that I'm afraid to wake up & find it all gone.'[164] Rix Nicholas, on the most part, set up in the market-place or Soko, and painted publicly all day *en plein air*. Her status as an unaccompanied woman enabled her to slip into the crowd without fuss and mostly unnoticed as she observed and painted the street life of Tangier, including the play of light on stonework and the richness of detail and colour in the people's clothing and wares. This intimate vantage point and proximity to the community and its everyday goings on was less available to her male artist counterparts. Henri Matisse, for instance, was confined to work on his paintings inside.

As a male artist, Matisse's presence in the marketplace was more likely to garner unwanted attention. In her essay on Matisse and Rix (who were painting in Morocco at the same time), Hoorn explains that 'Matisse made no attempt to paint in the marketplace'.[165] This was most likely due to the complication for artists around Islamic protocols to do with the making of images and, by extension, the modelling for images. But for Rix Nicholas the marketplace provided rich and vivid material. Rix Nicholas' Moroccan series demonstrate a 'looser application of paint'[166] and often show glimpses of the sea through arches or doorways. These 'glimpses' of the sea are a particular feature of Tangier. The evocation of light in Rix Nicholas' North African paintings remind me of Australian light—high, brilliant, saturated. I wonder if, like me, the light of Morocco reminded her of the spacious skies of home. And I like to think that the archways of her compositions are thresholds through which she extended her vision and her practice.

[163] Jeanette Hoorn, *Hilda Rix Nicholas and Elsie Rix's Moroccan Idyll*, p. 80.
[164] Jeanette Hoorn, 'Painting Portraits in Private: Hilda Rix Nicholas and Henri Matisse in Morocco', p. 117.
[165] Jeanette Hoorn, 'Painting Portraits in Private', p. 123.
[166] Jeanette Hoorn, Julie Petersen, Elena Taylor, Mosman Art Gallery, *Une Australienne. Hilda Rix Nicholas in Paris, Tangier & Sydney* (Mosman: Mosman Art Gallery, 2014) p. 27.

the blue archway

Hilda Rix Nicholas
1912 Tangier, Morocco
oil on canvas and board

The light here a portal, how awake I am now
and crossing the Strait of Gibraltar —is a meditation on blue

did you feel it too—on arrival? In your skin? Eyes smarting from the glittering port
& the white of the archway promising more than a gateway to a city.

On this side of the wall a man occupies the foreground obscuring
a woman who looks over his shoulder —you give her such radiance
a state of being she already possessed

the sun igniting the wall is revelation (how long did you sit in the chalk of a Tangier street?)
while the bowaabs, gatekeepers, on the other side noting who enters and who leaves
are not clearly formed dark folds of their hand-woven clothing contrast

the only certainty the sky

I crossed through Bab el-Assa one day too

barely knowing then what a blue archway could do

When we arrived on the continent of Africa, I was grateful to follow in Lou's wake as she pushed through the Tangier crowd. We were offered taxis, hotels, guides, food. But Lou grabbed my hand and we didn't make eye-contact with any of the spruikers. Mustapha and his cousin picked us up in a 1970s Mercedes. I slid onto the leather seats and I turned my face toward the open window. Palm trees rushed by and white low houses, crumbling buildings, azure skies, lush fields. Mustapha had arranged accommodation for us in a 'compound' in his village, with an internal concrete courtyard and rudimentary kitchen and bathroom. I soon realised that this was where Lou and Mustapha had been conducting their affair for some months, but there was something that made me uncomfortable about it. Perhaps it was the high level of security? The high wired fence? We were safe and we were locked in.

Mustapha and his relatives showed us much kindness. We were taken to beaches and cafes and ramparts; we drank mint tea at his uncle's place and his aunt came over to henna tattoo our feet and hands. I soon realised my presence was helping to facilitate Lou and Mustapha spending time with each other under the guise of 'showing the Australian girls around'. After a few days, I felt a little more over the shock of the new, acclimatised, and ready to leave Lou and Mustapha to their complicated dalliance. When I boarded the train to Fez and hugged Lou goodbye, I didn't know that I would never see her again. I realised too that I was suddenly a solo traveller. Lou's tangle of red hair receded from view and I swivelled my makeshift wedding band along my finger. I was alone in the carriage. Even though the compartment was reserved for married women only, I did not feel that I could sleep for the entire fifteen-hour journey. I wished for another 'married' woman for company, so that the low distant voices in the adjoining compartment didn't seem so threatening. The moon rose and glinted like a piece of bone, and I pressed my cheek to the glass. Soon enough the steady rumble of the train rocked me to sleep so that the night kept bumping against my forehead. As we got further and further from the ocean, I felt I was truly entering some inner landscape of the heart.

My friends, let's call them Emma and Gerard, were at the station in Fez to meet me and I almost fell into their arms I was that relieved to see their smooth smiling faces. I was grateful for safe deliverance. I could feel already that the hyper vigilance of travelling alone was a grind. I was hollowed and jangled but also uncannily peaceful. This was partly to do with the spooling distance from a relationship where I hid in the shadow parts of myself. And partly to do with desert country. The narrow alleys of the old part of Fez were intoxicating. It wasn't just the stall after stall of carpets, slippers, brassware, jewels, spices, herbs, coffee, clothing and open-air butchers, but it was the gruff lilt of the Arabic language spoken around us, and the elegant script of the writing itself on signs and entrance ways. My companions and I felt we were walking a labyrinth, or that we had

slipped into some kind of hallucinatory daydream. None of us knew exactly how to navigate ourselves out of the Soko. And we didn't mind. A week later, though, we were high in the Atlas mountains. We had already fallen in love with Fez, and then Marrakech, and after losing time wandering desert gardens and oases, cooling ourselves in intricately tiled courtyards, drinking dangerously sugary mint tea on rooftops, and frequenting the night market for street food and magic, we wanted to travel deeper into the desert interior of Morocco. And so, naively, we hitchhiked. We took rides through Bedouin villages to Imilchil, Ouarzazate and finally to the coast of Essaouira.

Imilchil or Garden of the Hesperides

dropped off by a supply truck, we did not realise Imilchil
was a one Inn town. The riad a monolith of tiles
& columns
too much of an apparition to be believed; plummeted from

space onto a bare dune. Oh but the stars brisked our shoulders
in the desert void and we exhaled. Droning song of the Gembri
a fever dream a lifeline:

there could be music here, too. The men were kind to us then.
And the horizon spooling in all directions from underneath
the flap of a Berber tent— was a call to prayer.
Sobered from heatstroke with sugary mint tea & golden
apples I wondered

what it was to shed a skin. Yet my new skin could not stand it.

How many layers of cotton does it take to keep out the sun?
How many bruises does it take to hold up the sky?

We didn't see the English wife but she screamed all night. And the
bathroom doors would not lock. The men became surly if we

asked for too much. A towel, a key, a bottle of water. Soap.

So we hitched a lift out of there as soon as we could (begged
for a place in the Land Rover tour of a Spanish caravan).
(they held a conference/put it to a vote/solemnly agreed)

I sat among the luggage bracing myself for potholes

in the back of a jeep & high in the Grand Atlas
I did not know that air could be so dry. Rough as sand.
I did not know that when a nose bleeds onto cotton & hands
it makes a pattern like snakeskin. I did not know that a mountain
could be dust & stone or that a scoured-to-bone road could
be so many colours in a day
—ash gold white granite skin

I was dumb with this English tongue

I did not know that a woman could emerge from silence
with a voice like water. I can still hear her singing

I can still hear my desert awakening

from an immeasurable distance.

Looking back, it was reckless of my companions and I to hitchhike into the mountainous void. Youthful exuberance. We caught a bus as far as we could go from Marrakech and stayed one night in the depot town where Emma got food poisoning. From there we hitched a short ride to a crossroads, where we spent almost a full day waiting for a lift in the blazing heat with only a small, gnarled shrub for shade. Our water quickly ran out, but as we crouched in the dust, two little girls appeared from a splintered door in a rough stone house. They stroked our hair and shook their heads, as if to say, you won't get a ride. Nothing passes through here but supply trucks once a week, we had heard from our first driver. The girls watched and waited and played with a little pile of stones beside us. I gave the younger girl a red clip from my hair and she fingered it delightedly. And I worried about my friend who was getting more dehydrated by the hour. Eventually, the older girl brought out a wet face cloth and cooled our faces with it. When we were finally picked up by a young man in a flashy leather jacket, our fate was sealed. We could have been taken anywhere. And we were. Mostly, we were safe. But that is another story. The girls waved at us furiously until we were no longer in sight of each other.[167]

I am wary of inveigling the trope of desert as mystical, dangerous, exotic, biblical, space where psychic and physical transformations take place, on the arid geographies I have loved. Do love. I don't have to drive very far from the verdant Adelaide Hills where I live to reach desert country. Just three hours north will get me to the beginning of the Flinders Ranges. Beyond that

[167] The first short story I had published was a version of this roadside account. See 'Interlude' in *Slippery When Wet: A Collection of Australian Short Stories Volume One* (Victoria: Australian Roadside Services, 2002).

the Great Victoria Desert, and further on, the Simpson Desert. My father lived in Tennant Creek for fifteen years as CEO of Barkly Regional Arts, working alongside desert painters. Even though he recently retired to Adelaide, the desert is in his skin. He must return at least every couple of months to its kiln-like beauty for sustenance. I understand the desire for this uncluttered environment. The spaciousness. But the 'emptiness' of deserts is also associated with loneliness, sterility, inaccessibility, tediousness, and madness. The conviction that Australia was graced with abundant inland seas, led early explorers—Sturt, Giles, Burke & Wills, Stuart—astray. By laying their understandings about how river systems work in their native countries, over this ancient dune-field of playas, lunettes, clay pans, dry water basins, they were ill equipped to encounter the interior of Australia. And its lack of visible water. For the outsider, the desert can be a place of nightmare and death.

William Atkins, editor, journalist and desert traveller/lover, writes that he has always been 'drawn to the lawlessness of the desert'[168] but that the 'moral liberty'[169] the desert allows us is also the 'liberty to perpetrate outrages'.[170] Atkins is referring in particular here to the Maralinga Atomic tests that took place in the Great Victoria Desert in the 1950s. The British commandeered the desert for a testing ground because it was (conveniently) considered unoccupied and met other criteria to do with distance (from inhabitation), climate, aridity. We now understand the full scale of destruction and devastation those nuclear tests caused to the Anangu people who did reside there) and their Country—a country that was not empty, but richly veined with stories, songlines, sacred sites, livelihoods, under-land water soaks and ancestral knowledge. It was a place of peace where warring tribes came together in shared understanding. This desert country is known as Ooldea. Ali Cobby Eckermann's birth mother was born under a lone tree at Ooldea.

Ooldea Soakage[171]

the big sand hill is
smaller now reduced
in the memory of
my mother

[…]

at the tribal camp
we gather old coals
history trapped inside
rubbing charcoal on skin

168 William Atkins, *The Immeasurable World: Journeys in Desert Places* (London: Faber & Faber, 2018), p. 65.
169 William Atkins, *The Immeasurable World: Journeys in Desert Places*, p. 98.
170 William Atkins, p. 98.
171 Ali Cobby Eckermann, *Inside My Mother*, p. 15.

The underground water source of this desert country, a site of great spiritual significance—a meeting site—and a carefully managed arid ecology, dried up in the wake of the settling mission[172] and the building of the Transcontinental Railway, in the early part of the twentieth century. The so-called emptiness of deserts, or their mineral/oil rich deposits, or their potential status as a borderland—socially, politically, geographically, nationally—makes them rife for contestation and colonisation. In North Africa, an insidious fallout of colonisation by the French was the degradation of productive wheat and grain growing land for viniculture in indigenous Muslim communities where the drinking of wine goes against cultural and religious practice. The ineffable expanse and latitude of deserts, their fragile ecology, and sun-etched beauty makes them ideal environments for exploitation, but also as sites for deep journeys into the subconscious. Many a writer or artist has craved or been inspired by a kind of desert oblivion. Think Georgia O'Keefe, Robyn Davidson, Paul and Jane Bowles, Edith Wharton, TE Lawrence, Lawrence Durrell, Patrick White, Michael Oondatje. But it is those who live with the desert, not as outsiders but as part of its ecology, systems, stories, songlines, inheritance, who are its true custodians.

The Western Desert painters of Papunya Tula, for example, 'notate a sacred geography'[173] in their imageries. Geoffrey Bardon, the young art teacher who travelled in 1971 to Papunya in the Northern Territory and supported the community's recording of dreaming stories onto board (and was thus instrumental in establishing the Western Desert Painting movement), sums up the paintings' significance:

> These Western Desert paintings seemed to me, in 1971, to explicate and culturally enhance a visual writing in which word and image became one. The ideogrammatic and pictorial texts in these paintings were not understood linearly, but rather from any direction by the Western Desert peoples; they used an archetypal writing summoned forth from the brutal environment of the desert assimilationist camps and re-enacting the Western Desert culture in all its glory.[174]

For the Western Desert people, the earth—the desert—is their skin, and can be understood and marked like skin.[175] A sensitivity to touch rather than sight was and is the 'material' of their painting practice. And as artist Charlie Tarawa (Tjaruru) Tjungarrayi put it, 'if I don't paint this story some whitefella might come and steal my country.'[176] Art-making is synonymous with caring for country

---

[172] The Ooldea Mission was established by the United Aborigines Mission (UAM) in 1933 at Ooldea Soak. See: https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/guide/sa/SE00146

[173] Paul Carter, 'Introduction: The Interpretation of Dreams' in *Papunya: a place made after the story* by Geoffrey Bardon & James Bardon (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2018) pp. xiv-xx (p. xiv).

[174] Geoffrey Bardon, 'Introduction: A Way into The Continent' in *Papunya: A place made after the story*, pp. xxii-xxiii (p. xxii).

[175] Geoffrey Bardon, *Papunya*, p. 42.

[176] Judith Ryan, 'Valedictory: Remembering Geoffrey Bardon' in *Papunya*, p. 506.

and therefore one's own body, articulating country and its spiritual significance, and engaging the artist's body with what is being represented. Bardon recalls the Western Desert artists using their hands to feel lines or scores as they created their images. This haptic approach coalesces the body and the medium (board, wood, dirt, linen etc). I can't even begin to imagine the kind of understanding between body and desert environment that the Papunya painters expressed. But as citizen, writer, mother, I ask myself, how can I tread lightly on the 'history trapped inside'[177] the veins and seams and thresholds of the desert? In my own country? In others'?

Before I went to Morocco I was a young woman. I had not yet learnt that a grown woman must be fierce—with her heart, her space, her desire, her work, her intentions. I knew something of spaciousness—its importance in creative practice—which is why I loved that country so full of light and heat and dreaminess (lending itself so readily to the imagination). I also recognised it as familiar and strange all at once. The dry heat was like home. But never had I felt so subsumed. I could disappear in the folds of the sand and leave not a trace. I could evaporate into blue vapour. I could leave him. And I knew something of my writing-self dawning, which is why I catalogued everything I saw at the cellular level. But I did not yet know that being loved should not feel dangerous. After Morocco, I would one day write a series of poems, a story, a prayer to the desert—its spill of stars, its stony mountains, its vivid fabrics and smells and sensations. Its thresholds. The traces it left. I would remember what it had given me. Independence. A notebook of impressions. A lapis lazuli necklace. A love of desert places. A knife. A glimpse at agency. I would cross a threshold and become a writer. A fierce writing woman.

This time in the North African desert I carry around like a small precious stone. Probably a lapis one. Majorelle blue.[178] I fold it into my being and sometimes bring it out to gaze at the bright (and sometimes painful) memories flecked in gold. I turn it in my hands. When I came across some of the Moroccan series of paintings by Rix Nicholas at the Art Gallery of South Australia many years after this visit, I was entranced and I wept. I felt a strange humming (of excitement or nerves?) in my body and it was the same feeling I'd had before every nose-bleed in Morocco. Something atmospheric? Rix Nicholas had captured the ineffable light and texture of the red city (Marrakech) and the blues and whites of Tangier. But something more, too. What had Rix Nicholas captured and what was I responding to?

---

[177] Ali Cobby Eckermann, *Inside My Mother* (Sydney: Giramondo, 2015), p. 15.

[178] In 1924 the French artist Jacques Majorelle constructed his largest art-work, the Majorelle Garden in Marrakech, Morocco, and painted the garden walls, fountains, features and villa this very intense shade of blue, for which he trademarked the name Majorelle Blue: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Majorelle_Blue>

The well in blue, Arab Quarters

Hilda Rix Nicholas
oil on canvas on board
1912-14
25.5cm x 33.5 cm
National Gallery of Australia

I do not travel light—umbrella, stool, paints, canvas
but I become light sitting here on the shaded side

of the blue fortress Is it thirst or sunstroke or
simply an unravelling of the senses? I watch

all afternoon the colours shifting as if the expanse of wall
were a canvas but names for all the ways to be

blue cannot get at lapiz Majorelle ultramarine
cannot get at the ache between my shoulders cannot force

a way into the curved windows cut into stone, or understand the
huddle around the blue well. I wonder what is being

whispered in the foreground. The woman gazes at the
man directly. His green djellaba slips from his shoulders

sensuously? But it's the dream of water scooped from
deep below this pale hot dirt that shows me how

to paint the sky. Sweet and mineral. Endless. I long for water

I long for relief I long for the sun to turn its shoulder from me
I long to know this blue hour and to bathe in

water cool from the well. I look up and she sees me.

I mix magenta with cyan.

2.
Ali Cobby Eckermann's Inside My Mother

When the first footprints of my ancestors touched the northern shoreline of this land, humanity itself had crossed a threshold [179] —Stan Grant

There is no one to teach me the songs that bring the Moon Bird, the fish or any other thing that makes me what I am [180] —Errol West

In considering what an Australian postcolonial poetics of the threshold might constitute, I begin with a particular focus on the work of contemporary Aboriginal poet Ali Cobby Eckermann. Her work is located in the field of Aboriginal poetry and poetics—she is proud of this lineage[181]—but is representative of a new wave of Aboriginal writings that see 'categorical notions [of a] homogenised or fixed Aboriginal "identity"'[182] teased out and revitalised. Cobby Eckermann's *Inside My Mother* (2015) is a shift away from the direct activism of her earlier poetry such as in *Little bit long time*[183] (2010) and explores and reflects on belonging in all its manifestations—personally, culturally, spiritually, geographically, mystically—and with separation and reunion between mother and child at its heart.

Cobby Eckermann has two mothers—her birth mother, Yankunytjatjara woman Audrey Cobby, and her adoptive mother, Frieda Eckermann. Cobby Eckermann was taken away from her biological mother who was herself a member of the Stolen Generations not long after her birth. When Cobby Eckermann finally did meet up with Audrey, three decades later, they had just fifteen years together before Audrey died. Cobby Eckermann's difficulty in grieving for a mother that had been absent for most of her life resulted in the poetry collection *Inside My Mother* (2015*)*. This book pays homage to Cobby Eckermann's Aboriginal heritage and her birth mother, Audrey, but is dedicated to her mothers—plural. The reunion with Cobby Eckermann's

[179] Stan Grant, *Talking to my Country* (Sydney, NSW: Harper Collins, 2016), p.10.
[180] Errol West, *Inside Black Australia: an anthology of Aboriginal poetry*, edited by Kevin Gilbert (Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 19), p. 165.
[181] Ali Cobby Eckermann, *Wasafiri*, p. 15.
[182] Michell Cahill, 'Transcending the Conventions' in *The Weekend Australian—Review*, August 13-14, 2016, p. 22.
[183] Ali Cobby Eckermann, *Little bit long time* (Warner's Bay, NSW: Picaro Press), 2010.

birth mother was made possible by Link-Up,[184] a service set up to assist members of the Stolen Generations to trace their families, and which grew directly out of recommendations made in the National Inquiry into Stolen Generations and the subsequent *Bringing Them Home* Report[185] in 1997. The delivery of the *Bringing Them Home* Report saw a shift in the Federal Government's Reconciliation Council's focus from the "sharing of history" between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians, to the re-authoring of history from an Aboriginal perspective.[186] *Inside My Mother* is an exemplar of such re-authoring, prompting a deeper public engagement with the gravity of past injustices against Aboriginal Australia. But Cobby Eckermann is not heavy-handed—there is spaciousness in her poetry, reminiscent of the oral tradition of her forebears, as well as a formal attempt to enact a shift in the reader's (especially non-Aboriginal readers') perspective through the deliberate use of pause, and short two-or-three-line stanzas[187]. On the page, there is space for contemplation. In this way, Cobby Eckermann uses the white space of the page to enact unsettlement through her writing practice. She says:

> […] just to give two or three lines at a time and then a pause is because I really want the reader to absorb the words. If they read it all in a big chunk, they might miss the important things that I'm trying to say so that we can change this nation.[188]

When the judges of the Windham-Campbell Prize for 2017—a prize administered out of Yale University in order to 'call attention to literary achievement'—awarded Cobby Eckermann for her contribution to poetry, they had this to say about her work:

> Through song and story, Ali Cobby Eckermann confronts the violent history of Australia's Stolen Generations and gives language to unspoken lineages of trauma and loss.[189]

The judges of the Windham Campbell prize draw attention to Cobby Eckermann's 'substantial and formally innovative body of work' with the 'award-winning 2015 collection *Inside My Mother*' receiving a special mention[190]. In winning this international prize, Cobby Eckermann's work crosses cultures and territories. As Noongar author and scholar Kim Scott argues, the reclaiming

---

[184] See: <https://aiatsis.gov.au/family-history/you-start/link>
[185] See: <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/bringing-them-home-report-1997>
[186] Robert Clarke, 'Reconciling Strangers: White Australian Narratives and the Semiotics of Empathy' in *Travel Writing, Form, and Empire. The Poetics and Politics of Mobility*, ed. by Julia Kuehn and Paul Smethurst (New York; London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 167-170 (p. 169).
[187] Ali Cobby Eckermann, 'An Interview with Ali Cobby Eckermann' by Ben Etherington. *Wasafiri*, vol. 31, no. 2, June 2016, p. 13.
[188] Ali Cobby Eckermann, *Wasafiri*, p. 14.
[189] Windham-Campbell Prize website: http://windhamcampbell.org/2017/winner/ali-cobby-eckermann
[190] Windham-Campbell Prize.

of Aboriginal perspectives and alternative vantage points than those dominating the archives is about reconnection with and regeneration of an Aboriginal heritage.[191] *Inside my Mother* contributes to this 're-generation' or re-imagining of a federal text.

Throughout the collection Cobby Eckermann explores the body as the threshold between the natural world and her identity; in particular, the tangible (bodily felt) grief of separation between mother and child, and the liminal space she occupies from being cut off from her Aboriginal heritage as a child and young woman. At Adelaide Writers Week in 2020, Cobby Eckermann in a session shared with Native American poet laureate Joy Harjo, explains that she is 'always walking the middle line' because of her two families, and that she wants to use her poetry to 'shift people's perceptions'.[192] Cobby Eckermann uses the central motifs of sand, clay, birds, and trees in her poems to highlight either severance or connection to family, spirit and identity. But Cobby Eckermann also writes *on* the threshold, using her writing to tease out questions of belonging, identity, and heritage.

The noise of the in-between

In the opening lines of the poem 'Australantis'[193], the second poem of the collection, Cobby Eckermann writes 'there's a whole ocean filled with sand/between what was and what will be' (4). The ocean (that once was and remains in-between) figures as a threshold—the threshold between the ancient world and the world it has become or is becoming. The 'stark canvas devoid of view' (4) that Cobby Eckermann goes on to describe is not a blank space, or an empty space, but is a place both perceived empty by those who do not know how to read it, 'not a sand dune nor a tree' (4), and a place denuded (by colonisation) where the reader might contemplate what has been before or might project what will come to be.

When Europeans arrived on the continent of Australia, they were crossing the threshold into a land already spoken for. In fact, the sea and sky, as well as every animal, rock, hill, tree, mountain and river, were known and sung and looked after[194]. What appeared an empty and alien space to the Europeans was redolent with signification to the first peoples and was not a wild and untamed place but a carefully managed ecology. As Deborah Bird Rose explains, in an Aboriginal

---

[191] Kim Scott, 'Covered Up With Sand' in *Meanjin* 66:2, 2007, pp. 120-124, (p.122).
[192] Inner Exploration: Joy Harjo and Ali Cobby Eckermann chaired by Michael Williams, Adelaide Writers Week, March 2, 2020.
[193] Ali Cobby Eckermann poems discussed are taken from the collection *Inside My Mother*. From here will cite page number in body of the text.
[194] Deborah Bird Rose, *Nourishing Terrains. Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness* (Canberra: Australian Heritage Commission, 1996), p. 7.

concept of country, humans make up one small aspect of a holistic and multi-dimensional system which also includes, 'animals, plants, Dreamings; underground, earth, soils, minerals and waters, surface water and air.'[195] In this system, country is a conscious 'nourishing terrain'[196] that can be spoken to and sung about, nurtured and cared for; it can get sick, as well as be worried and longed for[197]. It is kin. Ngarrindjeri elder, Aunty Ellen Trevorrow, puts it this way: 'The lands, waters and all living things are connected like family.'[198]

Bird Rose makes a useful distinction between the Aboriginal understanding of country and the European-derived notion of 'landscape'. While Aboriginal country is 'lived in and lived with'[199], the term landscape denotes a 'distance between the place [...] and the person or society which considers its existence'.[200] The European's egocentric view sees landscape as empty if 'one cannot see traces or signs of one's own culture in the land'[201], and at the time of colonisation, this world-view neatly justified the legal concept of *terra nullius* (land that belongs to no-one). Furthermore, Aboriginal societies valued a knowledge-based system over a property-based/ownership system, and so even though there were complex land-management practices in place,[202] the colonisers were blind to the signifiers of a rich and diverse cultural life flourishing on so-called *terra nullius*. As Scott points out, despite the initial hospitality of the Aboriginal people to 'white' visitors, in the settlers' failure to understand an Aboriginal worldview, an opportunity was lost where a 'grafting of newcomers' culture and being onto Indigenous roots'[203] might have occurred.

In the final stanza of 'Australantis' Cobby Eckermann writes: 'only a shell hangs beyond the skyline/spilling the noise of the in-between' (4). Shells are fragile houses, containers, empty of life—they are ancient—but the 'noise of the in-between' can't be contained. Cobby Eckermann invites her reader to listen to this noise. What might the 'noise' have to say about the shared histories between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians? Cobby Eckermann writes *of* the threshold, that in-between place where a so-called lost civilization, Australantis, may be contemplated. And she writes *on* the threshold between two or more locations, be they geographical or figurative (the ancient world and the contemporary world), and two or more

[195] Bird Rose, *Nourishing Terrains,* p. 8.
[196] Bird Rose, p. 7.
[197] Bird Rose, p. 7.
[198] Tom Trevorrow, *They Took Our Land and Then Our Children* (Adelaide: South Australia: Migration Museum and Ngarrindjeri Land and Progress Association. Year not supplied), n.p.
[199] Bird Rose, p. 7.
[200] Bird Rose, p. 10.
[201] Bird Rose, p. 17.
[202] See Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emu: Black Seeds Agriculture or Accident?* (Melbourne, Victoria: Magabala Books, 2014).
[203] Kim Scott, 'Covered Up With Sand', p. 122.

identities—her Aboriginal identity and her identity as a woman raised by a white family in rural South Australia.[204]

Following the legacy of Aboriginal writers and poets before her—Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Jack Davis, Kevin Gilbert, Archie Weller, Lionel Fogarty, to name just a handful—Cobby Eckermann's poetic voice is shaped by the inheritance of loss and trauma that First Nations people have experienced and do experience under colonisation.[205] In an interview with Radio National's Sarah Kanowsky, Cobby Eckermann explains that it is through writing that she makes sense of history: '[writing] was the only way to keep myself safe and healthy'[206], she says of the period in her life when she was coming to terms with her 'role' as both 'relinquished child' and 'relinquishing mother'[207]. In Cobby Eckermann's family, the severances between mother and child continued down the line—an intergenerational inheritance of loss and shame. Cobby Eckermann says in conversation with Mike Ladd: '[my mother's] generation were really shamed to give their children up'[208]. When Cobby Eckermann fell pregnant as a teenager, she was encouraged to give up her son for adoption, and on a personal level, the ramifications for that are everlasting: 'if you can't trust the womb/how can you trust the universe?' she writes in the poem 'Severance' (63).

Sand and Shorelines

Sand as symbolic of mother and country, and specifically Cobby Eckermann's mother's country, is a dominant metaphor throughout *Inside My Mother*. But in the first section, Cobby Eckermann treads lightly, excavating her origins to find a way 'home', working through grief and personal and generational trauma both, leaving soft footprints in the sand—transient—like the footprints of her ancestors that wash away with the tides or become something else. This is not because cultural knowledge is disappearing but because sand is a living thing and will move and shift as all living things do. In 'Tjukurrpa' (5), she writes, 'tribes gather on the sand/at the ancient birthing place'. Country is family—mother and father—and when it hurts it keens like all living things: 'my father is the sand dune/that rock is my mother' (5).

---

[204] Ali Cobby Eckermann, *Wasafiri*, p. 16.
[205] She writes in *Wasafiri:* I'm a little bit more passive [in my protest] compared to the freedom fighters and the premier poets who were helping to establish a louder voice for Aboriginal Australian writers back in the 70s and those earlier years' (p. 15).
[206] Ali Cobby Eckermann, 'Book and Arts' with Sarah Kanowsky, *Radio National*, March 8 2017: <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/booksandarts/ali-cobby-eckerman/8332138>
[207] Ali Cobby Eckermann, 'Books and Arts'.
[208] Ali Cobby Eckermann,'Inside My Mother: Ali Cobby Eckermann'. *Radio National: Earshot—Other Mothers Series* with Mike Ladd. Aired Monday May 2, 2016: <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/earshot/inside-my-mother-ali-cobby-eckermann/7319198>

Later in the collection, when Cobby Eckermann explores the sadness and desecration that has come with colonisation, the nourishing terrain of sand is transformed into something fixed ('Footprints' 39):

> the moment you jumped from your boat
> and landed on the shore
> your footprint stood next to mine
>
> in the morning my footprint had disappeared
> and yours remained
> it would not leave

Shorelines are in-between places, thresholds—places of crossing over between one kind of environment and another; they are places of exit and entry. Shorelines embody a place of transition—perhaps violently, perhaps in the spirit of hospitality. In several of Cobby Eckermann's poems, shorelines are not only the entry point for colonisation—'the incoming tide betrayed me' (39)—but are locations where all the parts of oneself can come together: 'she remains beyond her imagination/ no imprints mar her mind […] one foot in water, one foot on sand/the tidal gravity keeps her grounded' ('Abstract' (12)). Or shorelines are porous borderlands where a third space between languages or between cultural identities can open up: 'a boy sits on the shore of languages, water babbles/there are no rocks, no constants, the tide laps gently ... the language names are twining like invisible string […] waiting for the approach of new' ('Kaleidoscope' (38)).

This 'approach of new' might be a potential third perspective—or a potential synthesis. While Cobby Eckermann highlights the necessity to write her poems in English—'if you're serious about having a career as a writer you're simply forced to'[209]—she also hopes the 'ancient rhythm of this ancient land'[210] is discernible in her writing. Cobby Eckermann explains that she tries to keep her writing sparse like the 'sparse environment'[211] of the desert.

Cobby Eckermann writes in 'Lyre Birds' (89):

> meet me at the river
> where lyre birds hide
> maybe
> we will catch a glimpse of them
> maybe
>
> hold me in that place where
> shyness and lyre birds meet

[209] Ali Cobby Eckermann, *Wasafiri*, p. 14.
[210] Ali Cobby Eckermann, *Wasafiri*, p. 15.
[211] *Wasafiri,* p. 14.

maybe
the tangle of thorns will retreat
maybe

touch me softly oh so softly
stroke feathers on my cheek
maybe
my softness will return
maybe

There is tentativeness here. But the tentative step is towards a potential meeting place: a threshold where something new can be reimagined or can emerge. This poem can be read with 'overlapping cultural, emotional and personal possibilities'[212], allowing a space to open up for the reader to contemplate the fragile middle ground between being born black and growing up white that Cobby Eckermann inhabits. In her memoir, *Too Afraid to Cry*, Cobby Eckermann writes about reconnecting with her Aboriginal family: 'I learn that I can't fully live their traditional lifestyle, and that they can't live mine. So we compromise … [w]e grow smarter and stronger as one'[213]. This place of compromise is a source of strength. It is a third place where bush way and whitefella way can coalesce. A threshold.

Clay

In Cobby Eckermann's poem 'Clay' (19) sand and dirt mix to become both an 'epidermal covering'[214] as the narrator smears her body in clay, and a metaphor for overwhelm, the threat of submergence, of not being able to cope:

the world is turning to clay
its muddy weight dry on my skin
drags me down below river banks
reducing the sky to a sliver [. . .]

shrinking me back into the earth
only the whites of my eyes suggest clouds

the clay on my skin has dried and cracks
its earth voice hoarse, now drowned in mud (19)

[212] RD Wood, 'Heartsick for Country. *Inside My Mother* by Ali Cobby Eckermann' in *Plumwood Mountain*, 3:2 (2015): https://plumwoodmountain.com/r-d-wood-reviews-inside-my-mother-by-ali-cobby-eckermann/
[213] Ali Cobby Eckermann, *Too Afraid to Cry* (Elsternwick, Victoria: Ilura Press, 2014), p. 190.
[214] RD Wood, 'Heartsick for Country', n.p.

This poem is located in the body, where the body becomes a threshold between cultural knowledge and practice (smearing the body with ochre), and the overwhelming weight of (colonisation) history on the body. As Wiradjuri journalist and author Stan Grant explains, 'our history is a living thing. It is physical. It is noses and mouths and faces. It is written on our bodies'[215]. In 'Clay' the body is grounded, but not in the positive sense of the word, it is swallowed up—silenced.

In the introduction to *Inside Black Australia*, the first anthology of Aboriginal poetry to ever be published in Australia, activist and author Kevin Gilbert writes: 'Aboriginal poets share a universality with all other poets, yet differ somewhat in the traumatic and material experience of other poets'[216]. Nearly three decades later, this definition still applies as the effects of land theft and massacre, as well as interventionist government policies since Federation continue to ripple through the lives of Aboriginal people. Grant highlights that the 'weight of history in Australia'[217] is suffocating and explains that Aboriginal people 'could do nothing to stop government officials invading [their] privacy […] homes and bodies could be invaded at will.'[218] Official policies that sought to 'protect', and then assimilate Australia's first nations, dispossessed Aboriginal people from their land and traditional ways of being irrevocably, and then severed children from their families. Harjo calls the severance from land and kin that has occurred for all First Nation's people a 'stunning grief' and explains that this is a grief that only poetry can hold.[219]

When Cobby Eckermann writes that 'clay', 'drags me down below river banks/reducing the sky to a sliver' (19), the feeling of drowning is tangible; the narrator's ability to see, her autonomy, is reduced: 'all peripheral vision is blocked by earth […] only my eyes reveal the myopia secret/my desire to live in the sky' (19). This notion of the sky being a free place, a place of birds and Spirit, is juxtaposed by the embodied metaphors of clay, sand, earth, dirt, and soil across the collection. This juxtaposition draws attention to both the earthy weight of loss and trauma on the body and landscape (the two are entwined), and the inseparable connection between body/landscape and a sense of belonging and heritage.

Cobby Eckermann says of discovering her birth mother's country: 'that land loved me so much that it guided me there – I love the feeling of that and I love the truth of that – I ran to my mother's birthplace'[220]. The closing stanza of the poem named after her mother's birth place, 'Ooldea Soakage' (15) tells of 'old coals' gathered at 'tribal camp' the 'history trapped

---

[215] Stan Grant, *Talking to my Country*, p. 69.
[216] Kevin Gilbert, 'Introduction' in *Inside Black Australia: An Anthology of Aboriginal Poetry* ed. by Kevin Gilbert (Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin Books, 1988), p. xviii.
[217] Stan Grant, *Talking to my Country*, p.117.
[218] Stan Grant, p. 101.
[219] Joy Harjo, *Radio National—The Book Show* with Clare Nicholls, March 9, 2020.
[220] Ali Cobby Eckermann, *Earshot*.

inside/rubbing charcoal on skin' (15). Cobby Eckermann points towards the traditional practice of marking the body with charcoal, but in this poem 'history' comes to bear too. She may be referring to both her ancestral history and the history of the Maralinga atomic testing that occurred near Ooldea when her mother was just a child. The layers of (a complex) history are felt viscerally. In 'Hindmarsh Island' (41) the land protests against the violation that has been done to it. The mouth of the Murray River, silted up from the building of a bridge through sacred women's country, is 'filled with screaming sand' (41). Like a body, it is injured. It screams. The natural world and the body are synonymous in these poems: 'Aunty hold my mulloway hand' (41). The river is not only a threshold between what was (a culturally and environmentally intact and healthy place of sacred women's business) and what is becoming (a culturally and environmentally violated place), but is filled with 'our tears' (41). The birds and sky offer some hope to this bodily felt grief: 'sing the pelican song/sing the blue sky refrain' (41).

In the final poem of the collection, 'Evacuate' (91), it is the body that must be relinquished in order for the subject of the poem to heal—to 'process' her 'dreams of tragedy' (91):

> today I will relinquish
> my body [. . .]
>
> only then can I
> return to myself

The use of the word 'relinquish' in this poem is significant, denoting a giving up, a giving over, as Cobby Eckermann has experienced from both perspectives—first when she was 'relinquished' by her birth mother, thus her connection to her Aboriginal identity also 'relinquished', and then in 'relinquishing' her own child for adoption. Her body is the site of these splintering giving ups. But there is the sense in this poem that the relinquishing to be done now will not be traumatic but will be an act of healing. The body a locale now for transformation—for inhabiting the threshold between what was and what will be. But it is from the eagle that the narrator takes her prompts: 'I wait for eagle/only then can I/return to myself' (91). *Inside My Mother*, taking a circular flight path, both ends and begins with reference to birds as liminal messengers.

Trees and Birds

Throughout the collection *Inside My Mother* birds are Spirit guides, 'the song lives in the eagle flying overhead […] do not flinch away from angels' ('Clapsticks' 31), while trees are like ladders to the birds, rooted in the earth (body), but stretching skywards: 'the song of owls pulsates/as trees guard

the sky' ('Heartbeat' 17). The metaphor of the 'tree' for Cobby Eckermann is not Oodgeroo Noonuccal's 'Municipal Gum' where the tree is 'castrated, broken, a thing wronged/Strapped and buckled, its hell prolonged'[221]—but is restored to its original cultural position as a living thing imbued with sacred significance. This rebukes the recurrent trope in much Australian literature of the fallen tree, or dead wood as symbolic of the death of Aboriginal culture:

> in her trance she observes
> the hard and the soft of the trees
> branches uplift his bark-bound body
> there is no request more sacred ('Trance' 11)

This is not to say that the tree in Cobby Eckermann's poems does not suffer or is not wronged—'we watch canoe trees/turn to ghosts' (34) because the river is dying, and in 'Warriors at Salt Creek' the 'modern day warriors' hang from trees (33)—but that for Eckermann the tree represents a gateway, a threshold, between body and spirit, ancient culture and contemporary concerns.

Audrey Cobby was born under a tree in Kokatha country near Maralinga, at a place called Ooldea, but her people are the Yankunytjatjara of sand hill country in the remote north west of South Australia. In the poem Cobby Eckermann wrote for her mother 'Today' (88), the tree figures as an entry and exit point for Audrey's life, but is also the location for a kind of transmutation where all the parts of oneself can coalesce:

> today I found the tree under
> which my mother was born
> her placenta was buried here
> as her ashes are now [. . .]
>
> today I became a weeping tree
> a vision of memory deep inside
> a face embedded in its bark
> the mirror of my mum

The tree of Audrey's birthplace is a gateway between life and death, between grief and memory. In 'Canoe' (13) the material of the tree—the wood—becomes a vessel in which a rite of passage is enacted. A young woman looks on as her soon-to-be lover cuts and shapes a canoe out of bark stripped from a tree:

---

[221] Oodgeroo Noonuccal, 'Municipal Gum' in *Inside Black Australia. An Anthology of Aboriginal Poetry* ed. by Kevin Gilbert, p. 100.

the soft flesh of the tree expires

the scar bleeds on the trunk […]

the structure forms to natures [sic] laws
a new dais of voyage prepared

at midnight they sail the river
she turns without causing a ripple
looking back along the darkness
to the neon of the scar tree

it shines like a bended doorway
a light within beckons as if a
sacred star has fallen and a
yearning will soon be done

The tree is transformed into something new. It is scarred now in the same way that the lovers will be marked by their first sexual encounter. And it is a threshold: 'it shines like a bended doorway' (13).

But if trees represent guardians, gateways, thresholds—sites of generative and transformative acts—then the birds of *Inside My Mother* soar beyond the trees in the realm of the Spirit and are liminal ancestral figures of hope, redemption and power:

our birds fly
on elongated wings
they fly forever
they are our Spirit (3)

In the lines, 'fill my ears with/ bird song/I will survive' (Tjulpu 49), there is the sense that the narrator survives because there is bird song—bird song is synonymous with life. This, of course, means that the inverse is true, so that in 'Mamu' (28), a poem about ecological and human desecration resulting from introduced substances and species—'sugar', 'catfish', 'toad'—it makes sense that the narrator claims, 'the first metaphor is a dead bird/I have murdered it' (28). Bird song in the poems of this collection both stands in for ancestral language and *is* that language. When the warriors hang from trees ('Warriors at Salt Creek') 'hatchlings shriek from grassy knolls' (33), like ancestors screaming *murder murder*. And in the poems, birds are timeless beings: 'they fly forever' (3), and they are messengers: 'boobook owls permeate/their call transmutes me' (17). Birds are witnesses (to massacre): 'Crows gather and walk the sand/This vision can never leave their eyes' (33), and they are teachers/healers, showing the subject of the poems where to turn: 'sing your love toward the sky' (31). The messengers of this collection—owls, crows, eagles,

lyrebirds, gulls—hover above the weighty concerns of the mundane: the scars of history on the land and body, the wounding severances of mother from child, the disconnection from heritage and belonging, and inhabit the sky 'free from blemish' (19). They hover between the realms of earth and spirit like wishes, promising reconnection, regeneration, and return. Threshold creatures. And as such, they wing through the collection like points of light where certain kinds of knowledge can be sensed in passing. For Cobby Eckermann they represent a positive working through of grief, and of not being comfortable in her own skin: 'most of my life had been a misinterpretation of the life and the person that I believe I was born to be.'[222] but writing poetry has been a way of resolving that schism.

poetry as nourishment

Cobby Eckermann's development as a poet was born directly out of this tension of unravelling and reweaving the threads of her identity: 'I think because my life was so fragmented, poetry was my only option to get a phrase or line out'.[223] She uses brevity of form: two-or-three-line stanzas, short lines, and lack of capitalisation. Cobby Eckermann creates spaces between lines for the reader to absorb and interpret: 'now I want to write with my instincts totally in agreement with what I am putting on the page'.[224] Through the craft of poetry, Cobby Eckermann hopes for 'small shifts' in the consciousness of her readers 'so that we [Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people] can become better friends'. Cobby Eckermann's creative work opens up spaces for contemplation and transformation. She says:

> acknowledgement and understanding […] is the main thing I write for. I think that when the readership can reflect their conversation back to you it also grants healing by understanding beyond the words on the page[225].

Cobby Eckermann's poetry inhabits the threshold through the central metaphors of sand, clay, trees, and birds as gateways, and Cobby Eckermann herself writes on the threshold—that in-between place where a transformation—bodily, linguistically, culturally—can occur. Writing in the unsettled place of the threshold, the productive middle between cultures or identities, might be one way to consider a transformation of Australian poetics.

---

[222] Ali Cobby Eckermann, *Wasafiri*, p. 13.
[223] Cobby Eckermann, *Wasafiri,* p. 14.
[224] Cobby Eckermann, *Wasafiri,* p. 13.
[225] Cobby Eckermann, *Wasafiri,* p. 16.

2.1

What Lies Underneath

I first heard Ali Cobby Eckermann's speaking her poems while I was driving. I turned on the radio in the car and there was a voice—articulate, gentle, tough, loving, compelling—coming through the airwaves that made me sit up and pay attention. Cobby Eckermann was in conversation with Mike Ladd on Radio National as part of an Earshot series called *Other Mothers*. She was talking of her life, her poetry, her birth mother, her adopted mother, her severance from culture and family, her son, and how her poet-self emerged from the ashes of trauma and dislocation. The poems included as part of the documentary were from *Inside My Mother* and hearing them read aloud by Cobby Eckermann, I noticed a spaciousness articulated between the lines which I found both restful and powerful. A pause at the beginning of the poem. An exhalation at the end. She read 'Ooldea Soakage'[226] and then spoke about her relationship with Ooldea—a tiny settlement on the edge of the Nullarbor Plain, and the location of an Aboriginal mission from 1933-1952.[227] Growing up in Adelaide, Cobby Eckermann ended up moving to Ooldea as a young woman, accompanying a boyfriend (who turned out to be abusive), a railway worker on the Trans-Australian Railway. The relationship ended badly and she moved away from the town after some months. What Cobby Eckermann didn't know at the time was that this was her birth mother's country. It had called to her, she explained, but it would be years before she would realise the significance of the place. Ooldea—spinifex country—would later become the site of her transformation and healing. It would be the nourishing desert terrain where she recovered a sense of belonging, identity, and poetry.

Driving in the car that day and listening, I was drawn to the directness of Cobby Eckermann's word and what they were showing me about the open wounds wrought by colonisation on families, on bodies, on the Country of First Nation's people. As a practitioner, I am ignited by the ways poetry can articulate understanding and reckoning with deep truths—through metaphor, song, story, and by creating spaces to contemplate the lines on the page. The trees, birds, sky, sand, stones of Cobby Eckermann's poems, for instance, are gateways to her own healing, and in a wider sense the readers' healing too. Speaking at Adelaide Writers Week with Native American poet Joy Harjo in 2020, Cobby Eckermann and Harjo agreed that as Harjo put

[226] Ali Cobby Eckermann, *Inside My Mother*, p. 15.
[227] The Ooldea Mission was established by the United Aborigines Mission (UAM) in 1933 at Ooldea Soak. Cobby Eckermann's mother lived on the mission as a child and was schooled there. See: 'Find & Connect. History and information about Australian orphanages, children's Homes and other institutions': https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/guide/sa/SE00146

it 'stories don't belong to ourselves—we need to create an international song […] a dialogue that is kinder and stronger [and] poetry is the tool to make [injustices] *just better*.'[228] For both women, turning to the writing of poetry was a turn back towards their hearts, countries, lineages and agency. Their poems are tools for transformation—personally and collectively.

I had already chosen to focus on Cobby Eckermann's work as part of this study. But after hearing her speaking so exquisitely about what the notion of 'severance' really means to a contemporary Aboriginal woman living in South Australia (my home state), it was confirmed *Inside My Mother* would be the entranceway to the project. I had been privileging First Nation poets in my wider reading on contemporary Australian poetry and poetics—Alison Whittaker, Ellen van Neerven, Samuel Wagan Watson, Natalie Harkin, Evelyn Araluen, and Ali Cobby Eckermann—because it was important for me to hear those voices. I will always wrestle with what it means to write here, and what it means to belong in a postcolonial nation where the long-standing implications of colonialism continue to reverberate and wreak havoc.

In looking to First Nation stories, research, and experiences, I hope to practice the kind of reciprocity advocated by Indigenous and non-Indigenous collaborators Gus Worby, Simone Ulalka Tur, and Faye Rosas Blanch.[229] These scholars privilege 'writing forward, writing back, writing Black'[230] as a mode of enquiry and as a tool for decolonisation inside and outside of the Academy. This model sees the telling of Black stories as part of a cyclical exchange of healing and reciprocity. Tur puts it this way:

> For us, writing forward, writing back and writing Black are acts of obligation based on an age-old practice of give and give in return […] Anangu call it Ngapartji Ngapartji which can be translated, in this border-crossing context, as: 'I'll give you something in return.' That's the way we're using it.

This dynamic give-and-take sets out something like a kinship system for intellectual and knowledge exchange, across and between cultures. This reciprocity is grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing where Country and species are cared for and attended to through a land management practice that is based on principles of give and return.[231] In 'writing back'[232] to the coloniser,

---

[228] Adelaide Writers Week Monday March 2, 2020: 'Inner Explorations' session chaired by Michael Williams.
[229] Gus Worby, Simone Ulalka Tur, and Faye Rosas Blanch. 'Writing Forward, Writing Back, Writing Black-Working Process and Work-in-Progress.' *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature : JASAL* 14.3 (2014), pp. 1-14, (p. 1).
[230] Gus Worby, Simone Ulalka Tur, and Faye Rosas Blanch. 'Writing Forward, Writing Back, Writing Black-Working Process and Work-in-Progress.'
[231] Robin Wall Kimmerer, *The Democracy of Species* (UK: Penguin Books, 2013), p. 88.
[232] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin adopted the phrase "writing back" from Salman Rushdie ("empire writes back") and defined it as postcolonial writers engaging in the power of imperial discourse, not by writing 'for' the centre but 'against' the assumptions of the centre to a prior claim to legitimacy and power. In *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures* (1989), the three authors prescribe the re-

Indigenous authors engage in an act of self-recovery, not only by reframing the "researcher (white)/researched upon (non-white)" dichotomy of imperialism, but in writing back or forwards to culture, connection and self-determination. Unbound Collective[233] (a group of four First Nation's women, from all parts of the country who are academics at Flinders University) emphasise that an activist pedagogy is one where you pay attention to your lineage.[234] For instance, researchers, especially non-Indigenous ones, need to ask themselves where their frameworks and/or theories come from (Europe?) and how will they be applying those knowledges. Embodied knowledge, as Unbound Collective define a 'critically loving' approach to pedagogy, is a 'collective weight-bearing activity.'[235] Critiques of love come from Black feminist scholars such as bell hooks and Audre Lourde and are concerned with attending to other bodies when producing knowledge with generosity, reciprocity, and hospitality. Maori academic, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, emphasises that decolonising methodologies in education is, at heart, about nurturing Indigenous peoples as researchers and storytellers.[236] And so the question returns, how might I as a non-Indigenous researcher take part in this reciprocal exchange? This is the question that I have held in one hand, while holding the writing pen in the other as I interrogate a postcolonial poetics of the threshold.

It is the same question that underpinned the seed project to this doctorate, a Master of Creative Arts, which looked at Australian fiction as sites for reconciliation.[237] And it is the question at the heart of the search for understanding I embarked on in writing my debut novel *Heart of the Grass Tree*.[238] This novel tells of the shared contact history between Aboriginal women and non-Aboriginal sealers on Kangaroo Island, Kukakun,[239] South Australia, before the state was officially settled in 1836. The question of how to practice the kind of reciprocity advocated by Worby, Tur,

---

appropriation of discourse and history through the rewriting of canonical texts of English literature to the concept of 'writing back.' They regard it as a field that is ironic, satirical, subversive and crucially concerned with undercutting, revising, or envisioning alternatives to reductive representations in the colonial mode. Some thirty years on, the focus has shifted to embracing and privileging Indigenous research and knowledges, as in Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous People,* Zed Books, 2012.

233 The Unbound Collective brings together years of research in performances that move through spaces that have historically seen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians excluded. The Collective is Ali Gumillya Baker, Simone Ulalka Tur, Faye Rosas Blanch and Natalie Harkin: < https://www.artspace.org.au/program/52-actions/project-1/unbound-collective/>

234 Unbound Collective, keynote address at CHASS (College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences) Spring Conference, Flinders University, Bedford Park, South Australia, November 15, 2021.

235 Natalie Harkin, Unbound Collective, keynote address, November 15, 2021)

236 Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous People* (London; New York: Zed Books, 2012), p. 54.

237 Molly Murn. *Stones, Rivers and Deadman Dances: Negotiating the Meeting Place: Contemporary Australian Fiction as Spaces for Reconciliation* & *Heart of the Grass Tree*, Thesis (Master of Creative Arts (Creative Writing) (Flinders University of South Australia, Department of English, Creative Writing and Australian Studies, 2013).

238 Molly Murn, *Heart of the Grass Tree* (Sydney, NSW: Vintage, 2019). A version of this novel was written as the creative artefact of MCA thesis completed in 2013.

239 Kangaroo Island is part of Ngarrindjeri country, considered a psychic landscape or where we go when we die. The Ngarrindjeri word for Kangaroo Island is Kukakun. See Diane Bell's *Ngarrindjeri Wurruwarrin: a world that is, was, and will be* (North Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 2014 [1st published 1998]), p. 95.

Blanch, and Smith needs to be asked over and over again, and with each new writing project. And so, what materials of thinking do I carry into the close reading of Cobby Eckermann's transformative body of work?

Listening and paying attention. Bearing witness. Reading 'Blak' words/work.[240] And engaging with the poets and storytellers whose words help to shape an understanding of what has come before, and what is still being imagined into being.

poem for a sister

(for Ali Cobby Eckermann and after Judith Wright)

Ali my sister with the warrior heart
I am sorry. For all that was stolen.

umbilicus cut too many times; too
many severances, down the lines

you show me how to be a poet: the
stops in between; bird song words

gifted like water in deserts; keening
from the heart, and not too afraid to

cry; kneeling lonely between stanzas
listening for what cannot be taken:

skin, rain, longing, sisters, the moon—
scars heal like silken ragged words

[240] Gomeroi writer and researcher, Alison Whittaker, talks about 'Blakwork' as Blak intellectual work that 'uses the language of the coloniser to communicate very deep, incomprehensible grief' (in conversation at Sydney Writers Festival 18 May 2020 with Daniel Browning from Radio National's *Awaye*). See also *Blakwork,* Magabala Press, 2018.

At a poetry reading for Little Windows Poetry Chapbook Launch in November 2017, I handed Cobby Eckermann 'poem for a sister'. She seemed shy to receive it. Earlier in that same year Cobby Eckermann had won the Windham-Campbell Prize administered out of Yale University, for her literary achievement and for raising awareness of legacies of trauma and loss through poetry. To the small crowd gathered on a warm Adelaide night at Howling Owl, she said:

> There are still so many unwritten poems inside me—there will never be enough poems to tell of the stolen generations. We live it daily. I have met so many people through my poetry from other countries, war-torn countries, so many nationalities, but the Australian government is the only one to forcibly remove children from their parents, and they are still doing it […] the Australian government doesn't even know who I am.[241]

In writing 'poem for a sister', I was moved to respond not only to the form of Cobby Eckermann's poetry (uncluttered, direct, an aerial view), but to something she said in an interview with Ben Etherington in *Wasafiri*:

> Acknowledgement and understanding [between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people] is the main thing I write for. I think that when the readership can reflect their conversation back to you it also grants healing by understanding beyond the words on the page. [242]

The poem's genesis came simply from being moved and awe-struck by Cobby Eckermann's craft and story and thinking how I might engage in the conversation she had started with her poetry. I also had in mind Judith Wright's poem to Oodgeroo Noonuccal (formerly Kath Walker) 'Two Dreamtimes'[243] but wanted to bring new understanding to the conqueror/conquered sensibility of the 1970s that underscores Wright's poem. The intertextuality across the poems and the porousness of this dialogic space, is an instance of threshold poetics. Through Cobby Eckermann's deliberate use of white space and gaps on the page, she makes spaces for contemplating in her poetry and 'poem for a sister' grew out of contemplating what it means (to me) to be an Australian poet writing in the present moment.

---

[241] Ali Cobby Eckermann, *Little Windows Poetry Chapbook* Launch, November 14, 2017, Howling Owl, Vaughan Place, Adelaide.
[242] Ali Cobby Eckermann, 'An Interview with Ali Cobby Eckermann' by Ben Etherington. *Wasafiri*, vol. 31, no. 2, June 2016, p. 13.
[243] Judith Wright, 'Two Dreamtimes' in *Collected Poems 1942 to 1985* (Sydney; Auckland; Noida; London; Toronto; New York: Fourth Estate, 2016 [first published in 1994 by Angus & Robertson), pp. 294-295.

3.

Andy Jackson's *The Thin Bridge* & *Music Our Bodies Can't Hold*

Is there such a thing as a poem which does not draw its life and power from a body?[244]

—Andy Jackson

It's not on paper that you create but in your innards, in the gut and out of living tissue …[245]

—Gloria Anzaldua

The poetry of Andy Jackson not only inhabits (and is rooted) in the liminal space of the body, but is used as a site to consider selfhood, subjectivity, language, form, and bodily difference. Using poetry as a generative practice, Jackson expresses the unsettledness of being in his own body. Jackson has the hereditary genetic disorder, Marfan Syndrome, where the body is unable to correctly produce the protein fibrillin-1, which in turn affects the connective tissue, the heart, the spine, and the joints. People with Marfan Syndrome are often (but not always) unusually long-limbed and thin and because of these attributes may possess extraordinary abilities—'many end up playing basketball or the piano, becoming models or artists'[246]—but can also suffer from 'sudden aortic dissection, partial dislocation of the lens of the eye, spinal curvature, extremely flexible joints, early-onset osteoarthritis, and chronic back pain'[247] as well as premature death, especially if the condition is left undiagnosed. On his blog, *Among the Regulars*, Jackson describes his body of work as 'poetry, from a body shaped like a question mark.'[248] A pronounced spinal curvature means that Jackson inhabits his body in a particular way, and in turn marks his use of language in a particular way. He is explicit about this: 'I would argue that to begin to unravel how

---

[244] Andy Jackson, 'Unsettled Inabitations: Bodily Difference in Poetry', *Inhabitation: Creative Writing with Critical Theory* ed. by Dominique Hecq and Julian Novitz (Canterbury, UK: Gylphi Limited, 2018), pp. 215-230, (p. 215).

[245] Gloria Anzaldua, 'Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers' in *This Bridge Called My Back. Writings by Radical Women of Color* (2nd edition), ed. by Cherrie Moraga & Gloria Anzaldua (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983), p. 172.

[246] Preface to *Music Our Bodies Can't Hold* (NSW: Hunter Publishers, 2017).
See also 'The long and the short of it: Marfan Syndrome' by Lucy Hunter in the *Independent*, March 18, 2008: 'Considering its rarity, Marfan's has more than its fair share in the hall of fame – especially musically. There's the composer Sir John Tavener, Sergei Rachmaninov, Niccolò Paganini, Joey Ramone and Jonathan Larson, the writer of *Rent*. Others believed to have the condition include Abraham Lincoln, Tutankhamun and Mary, Queen of Scots' https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/features/the-long-and-short-of-it-marfan-syndrome-797095.html
For further reading on the syndrome, see Daniel P Judge & Harry C Dietz, 'Marfan's Syndrome' in *Lancet* 336, (2005), pp. 1965-76: 'Tall stature with […] (long-bone overgrowth) leads to an increased incidence in certain athletes, including basketball and volleyball players […]' (p. 1965).

[247] Preface to *Music Our Bodies Can't Hold,* n.p

[248] See Andy Jackson's blog: <https://amongtheregulars.wordpress.com/>

the body is implicated in poetry will illuminate and liberate both'.[249] In rewriting the language of the body, Jackson engages in a poetics of the threshold—the threshold being the nexus between selfhood, subjectivity and the body, both the individual body and the collective body. He does this by renovating form and language, and by interrogating (his own) disability.

In his most recent collection, *Music Our Bodies Can't Hold* (2017), Jackson writes a series of portraits of people with (or reputed to have had) Marfan Syndrome using techniques of form and language—line-breaks, enjambment, sentence structure, meter, rhythm, vocabulary—to emphasise difference across each portrait (poem) and each subject's body. He says of the collection: '[h]ere we have numerous embodiments coalescing—the body of the poem on the page, the body of the historical person, my own body, and the collective Marfan body'.[250] In *The Thin Bridge*, Jackson's earlier 2015 collection, while not as directly focused by the 'Marfan body', similarly explores the limits (and possibilities) of the body and of language ('What's possible between us')[251]—emphasising the thin bridge, the threshold, between the two. Jackson writes, 'language comes out of our bodies'.[252] Throughout the collection, a grammar of the body—blood and ink, the body as question mark, font, accent, and sentence, illustrate Jackson's own reckoning with his body/corporeality through the act of writing poetry.

In the essay 'Ramps and the Stair' co-authored by Jackson and the poet and novelist, David Brooks, for *Southerly: Writing Disability,*[253] the connection or resonance between writing and disability is highlighted. A body of writing and a human body are both questions of *form*. The *disabled* body, however, is one that does not assume a normative body shape or function, Jackson and Brooks point out, and this disabling is made more pronounced by virtue of the fact that the world we inhabit, its structures and constructions—'the shapes of cups, of tables, of chairs, of beds'[254]—are designed for the "normal" body. Jackson and Brooks are careful to explain that the term "disability" is an umbrella term that 'effaces even as it tries to draw attention',[255] there being 'as many forms of disability as there are things a non-disabled person might be able to do'.[256] And while disability that interrupts the neurological or motor functions of the body may conform to expected normative body *shape*, it may not follow normative bodily movements or behaviours. Using precise terminology to differentiate disorders/disability/disease avoids the indignity of

[249] Andy Jackson, 'Unsettled Inhabitations', p. 223.
[250] Andy Jackson, 'Unsettled Inhabitations', p. 228.
[251] Opening poem of *The Thin Bridge*: 'What's possible between us', p. 1
[252] Andy Jackson and David Brooks, 'Ramps and the Stair' in *Southerly: Writing Disability* 76:2 (2016), pp.12-27, (p. 26).
[253] Andy Jackson and David Brooks, 'Ramps and the Stair' *Southerly: Writing Disability*.
[254] Jackson and Brooks, 'Ramps and the Stair', p. 13.
[255]Jackson and Brooks, 'Ramps and the Stair', p. 13.
[256] Jackson and Brooks, 'Ramps and the Stair', p. 13.

generalization—this is crucial—but it also categorises conditions or disorders against what is considered "normal": 'I can be found, I'm told, in the latest diagnostic criteria […] a cluster of other Latin names that examine me, while I'm elsewhere,'[257] writes Jackson. The social model of disability as outlined by People with Disability Australia emphasises that it is the 'physical, attitudinal, communication and social environments [that] must change to enable people living with impairments to participate in society on an equal basis with others'.[258] This perspective sees the onus on external/societal factors to make the accommodation for non-normative bodies. And yet, Jackson's poetry demonstrates over and over again, the ways in which his body is not accommodated.

The bodily felt difference Jackson experiences in inhabiting a 'stareable body'[259] is both a shameful 'exposure' and an enlightening 'aperture'.[260] David Brooks, who has Multiple Sclerosis and a heart condition, and Jackson discuss the profound effect (humiliation and shame) of having a body that is othered and handled (by others), as a kind of relentless effacement or erasure.[261] The disabled body is a public body in that '[t]he having to be helped to piss or shit, to eat, the having to be cleaned. The having to be fed'[262] is *disabling*. In the poem from *The Thin Bridge*, 'Two portraits, no black rectangle'(26), the desensitizing required to endure diagnostic procedures illuminates the indignity of having a private self, made public:

> *Move your hands away from your sides, thanks.*
> This isn't about aesthetics, but diagnosis.
>
> *Can you move your boxers down just a little?*
> What does it matter what I felt?

The lack of agency described here is evident in the body as a set of diagnostic indicators, even while the (good) intention is to care for this body. While the narrator's body is being attended to (in order to maintain its health and longevity, essentially), it is also measured against the normative body. And shown to be lacking. Jackson uses poetry to not only question perceptions of 'otherness', but to reclaim his agency: 'I think I began to write poems […] so that I could have an influence over how I was seen'.[263] In this way, Jackson's writing of poetry becomes like a bridge

[257] From 'A Disorder of Connective Tissue Speaks: i) for themself (substance)' in *Music Our Bodies Can't Hold*, p. 38.
[258] Carly Findlay 'Introduction' in *Growing Up Disabled in Australia* (Melbourne: Black Inc Books, 2021), pp. ix-xi, (p. xi).
[259] Andy Jackson, 'Question Marks and a Theory of Vision' in *Growing up Disabled in Australia*, p. 2.
[260] Andy Jackson, 'Question Marks and a Theory of Vision', p. 5.
[261] Jackson and Brooks, 'Ramps and the Stair', p. 18.
[262] Jackson and Brooks, 'Ramps and the Stair', p. 18.
[263] Andy Jackson, 'Free-Verse Bodies. Or, Is Poetry Deformed?' in *Meanjin Quarterly*, November 12 (2014), n.p.

that allows him not only safe passage between the seen and unseen (both his own seeing, and what his readers might 'see'), and between the inchoate and clearly articulated. It offers liberation from the physical restraints of the Marfan body. For the poet to pause for a moment during this 'passage' is to dwell on the threshold where transformation is possible. This unsettled threshold is at the heart of Jackson's work and he names his disability, Marfan's, as an act of recovery.

And so, naming is significant. Halfway through *Music Our Bodies Can't Hold,* Jackson interrupts the collection with his own voice, or more precisely, the voice of his condition, in 'Interlude: A Disorder of Connective Tissue Speaks' (38):

> Incarnation is no burden. I arrive when the genetic stars align,
> optimistic every time. At first, their lives are mostly short, broken
> sentences. I love each one, dumb with pain or suffused with light
> or both. ( ) The first case
> may not have been a case. Though if her tired ghost wants to lay
> down here, she is welcome. Her long fingers and toes were the
> only signs. She died, still a child, of tuberculosis. I'm so sorry. She
> has a name. Gabrielle. Names are critical, threads from a time
> before us, spiralling into the future.

The 'short, broken sentences' of 'their lives' refers to not only the lack of a medico-historical survey (by the institutions invested in the research, collating and archiving of medical data) into the lived experience of Marfan Syndrome, but also to Jackson's compositional choices as a poet. Jackson explains that in composing a suite of (initially seven) poems titled 'Marfan Lives', which later became the complete collection *Music Our Bodies Can't Hold* of forty-seven poems, an interlude and a postlude, that he was interested in the ways in which the 'physical layout' of the poems are informed by the disabled body.[264] Not the generalised 'disabled' body but particular disabled bodies—with particular forms, names, lives, families, and legacies. Each poem in the collection varies considerably in terms of line-length, enjambment, stanza shape and voice, in response to the person's story being spoken or conveyed. By putting these poems together in the one collection, Jackson highlights bodily difference across the collective 'Marfan body' thus liberating the disorder from a dehumanising grammar of categorisation. In the unsettled yet productive space of the body as threshold, Jackson tests the edges of language, of skin, and of what it means to write *of* the body and out of the body. The emphasis is on the porousness between all things. A bleeding at the edges that sees writing as corporeal practice:

[264] Andy Jackson, 'Unsettled Inhabitations', p. 223.

) Sometimes, too conscious of how I've shaped you, that minor rearrangement of elements that estranges, you look around for kin, as if you might find yourself in other bodies. Skin breathes and absorbs, but it is also a barrier. When you're tired, come back inside. I am not only your so-called flaws. I am your font, your accent. Please continue. (
) Yes, I could be accused of being self-absorbed, overwriting myself into each body, half a mind on the next. Classic case of genomic narcissism. Or perhaps the grammar of centuries of being stared at.

This 'grammar of centuries of being stared at' is one where 'font' and 'accent' have been written into the body in specific ways via a medicalisation of othering. Jackson attempts to unsettle this grammar by writing his body on the line.

Lines, blood, ink

When Jackson writes, in the opening poem to *The Thin Bridge*, 'Fingerprints return after the hand is burnt/Who knows what we're capable of?' (1), he picks at the threads, at the lines that run through us—that are imprinted in us. The lines of our fingerprints cannot be erased—they are genetically encoded—just as our 'so-called flaws'[265]/disorders/disabilities cannot be rubbed out like a pencil mark. In this poem, the speaker finds a spider among his clothes and marvels, in a terrified fashion, at its ability to hang 'suspended/only by the work of [its] own body (1)' The connective thread, genetically encoded, that anchors the spider to its surroundings, is an apt metaphor/metonym to frame a body of work that troubles the threshold between the lines of the page (formal functions of language) and the lines of the body ('disciple of flesh')[266]. The spider's web mirrors the web of connective tissue that runs through our bodies: the speaker says, '[t]oo often, I surface with handfuls of air/thinking the connecting threads were within' (1). If connective tissue (of the body) is interrupted/disordered by the speaker's DNA (Marfan Syndrome), then 'connecting threads' of language might be a way to express bodily difference via a poetics of the threshold.

In 'Rope' (6) the encoded line is the 'braided […] red ribbon from a Bible, the nerves that burned beneath my cool skin, and a thread I still can't identify'. It is Saint Simeon's rope that bound the ascetic so tight that it cut into his flesh and caused his body to rot. It is the lace 'in catalogues' that sent the young boy of the poem 'fluttering and swooning secretly'. The various

[265] From 'A Disorder of Connective Tissue Speaks: i) for themself (substance)' in *Music Our Bodies Can't Hold*, p. 38.
[266] From the poem 'We are all flesh' in *The Thin Bridge*, p. 22

threads of this poem all signify the tendencies/desires/impulses that are written in our bodies, and that are of our bodies ('nerves' and 'skin'):

> […] We
> have such strange and beautiful bodies,
> such bones and folds and eyes
> that catch the light (6).

This contemplation of the line—marking, encoding, fraying, singing, crossing—runs through the entire body of Jackson's work. For an artist whose practice is invested in the lines of the page, this makes sense. But what is particularly illuminating is the ways in which the *line* both limits and liberates the speaker in the poems. There is a jostling between being comfortable in one's own skin (one's lines) and being unwillingly at the mercy of it, that sees Jackson attempting again and again to decipher his own code bodily and linguistically.

In 'Ghazal of the Other'[267] the speaker says, 'I'd climb into the soft curves of a font/Yet even ink bleeds/Other lives move through us', the writing of a poem both a solace (a liberation via the act of writing from the abject body) and a reminder that all bodies, all lives are connected. Jackson is adept at describing the subtle nuances between body that feels (his own), and the body that is part of an interconnected ecology/ecosystem (again, his own). Novelist and essayist Daisy Hildyard explores the notion of the alternative body that is ours but not ours in her essay on the Anthropocene in *Second Body* (2017). She outlines the differences between the autonomous body and the second body that is something more nebulous but is defined by its connection to others and to the environment.[268] The concept of the second body is most clearly understood as the version of ourselves that is not 'made out of personal skin',[269] the first body that we inhabit each and every day, but the body of our 'literal and physical biological existence'.[270]

This second body can be further explained by the breaching of borders between 'bodies, nations and species';[271] when there is a catastrophic fire on Kangaroo Island, for example, or in the rainforests of New South Wales, hundreds of kilometres away, the smoke from those fires might be inhaled by our first body, but our second body is implicated on the global scale. This notion of the second body responding in particular ways to protect our first has been demonstrated recently with the COVID-19 pandemic. Our collective second bodies are responsible to every first

[267] From *Immune Systems* (Melbourne: Transit Lounge, 2015), p. 56
[268] Daisy Hildyard, *The Second Body* (London, UK: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2017).
[269] Daisy Hildyard, *The Second Body*, p. 25.
[270] Daisy Hildyard, p. 25.
[271] Daisy Hildyard, p. 24.

body. We practice social distancing, even if we do not have the virus. Any decision made by an individual has collective consequences and any one body operates both within and beyond its personal boundary. In this way, we enter each other through our bodies—not just at the microbial level as demonstrated by a viral transmission, but emotionally, socially, politically. When Jackson writes, 'I hear the string of voices, all telling/their story, we are all the first person and the last/We breathe into each other'[272] he inhabits the threshold between his own body—the 'fingers, question marks' and the 'arm inside a deep cave'—and the bodies of others who have come before and will come after and whose bodies are implicated now with his own. He explains, '[s]omething disabling overflows into the lives of those close to me'.[273] He is keenly aware of his own deficiencies and the lines of obstruction they may cause not just for himself but for others, too:

> To be physically different is to be continually assailed by these tiny missiles of looking. Those of us who are stareable absorb these sparks in our bodies. We carry burn marks and develop scar tissue […] These fires disable. They can spread out to beyond the hearth to burn others. At the same time, harnessed, they can warm and sustain.[274]

So, while Jackson describes being 'stared at' as a 'strange kind of fame'[275] his bodily difference is affirmed as 'a source of insight'[276] by poetry. At one of the first open mic poetry readings that Jackson participated in, he tells of the affirmation received from the audience when he got to the end of his set. All the fear and shame and doubt about his own appearance fell away in the 'stunned warm silence'[277] of the room. The visible difference is Jackson's curved like cursive spine. The invisible difference is that the valves of his heart are vulnerable to 'fraying and tearing'[278] and bleeding.

Ink bleeds into the bodies of poems too: 'The poet drains by drops into black – blood becomes ink alone'.[279] Or bodies inscribe shapes in particular ways: 'my body shaped itself into a question mark […] not the end of the sentence but its beginning'.[280]The poem entitled, 'A language I didn't know I spoke'[281] may also speak for the grammar of other people's bodies—

---

[272] From 'A deer' in *The Thin Bridge*, p. 17.
[273] Jackson and Brooks, 'Ramp and the Stair', p. 25.
[274] Andy Jackson, 'Question Marks and a Theory of Vision' in *Growing Up Disabled in Australia*, ed. by Carly Findlay (Melbourne: Black Inc, 2020), pp. 1-5, (p. 5).
[275] Andy Jackson, 'Question Marks and a Theory of Vision' p. 4.
[276] Andy Jackson, 'Question Marks', p. 5.
[277] Andy Jackson, 'Question Marks', p. 5.
[278] Andy Jackson, 'Question Marks', p. 3.
[279] From 'Ghazal' in *Immune Systems*, p. 49.
[280] From 'Postlude: Moonlight' in *Music Our Bodies Can't Hold*, p. 85.
[281] From 'A language I didn't know I spoke' in *The Thin Bridge*, p. 24.

'The fluorescent light on her thin arms/her body curved like a comma'.[282] In the final poem of *Music our Bodies Can't Hold* , Jackson contemplates the fragile porousness of his body with others':

> skin thinks of itself as an absolute border
> it takes effort to wonder who else we could be
>
> […]
>
> trace a slow and tender finger along
> the surface of your lives
>
> when you wince I pull my hand back
> afraid these lines could be incisions.

The incision or lines the poet's (metaphorical) ink makes on the page might just as easily be the scalpel, flaying open the boundaries between self and other, language and body, personhood and nationhood. As Jackson and Brooks point out, disabling forces are not only biological, but are also political.[283] In writing the physical self into the body of the poem, Jackson makes something new with the line—'all that remains is the line',[284] he says. And again and again the line comes to represent 'the thin bridge',[285] the unsettled *in-between* where 'crossing back'[286] is to inhabit a poetics of the threshold. In the poem from which the collection takes its title, 'A language I didn't know I spoke' (25), the 'thin bridge' is tenuous, ineffable, yet tangible. It is the bridge the narrator crosses while hiking somewhere beautiful, but it is also a bridge across languages: the language of a bird, the language of water and the language of stones. The narrator, in this poem, is awe-struck by the ways in which his body seems to communicate with the natural world. The crossing over the 'thin bridge' offers peace, belonging, contentment. Perhaps Jackson's own long thin body is this bridge, bringing to mind the words of Gloria Anzaldua: 'we can't afford to stop in the middle of the bridge with arms crossed'.[287] A bridge carries us safely from one place to another, one body to another, one awakening to another. A bridge is a threshold.

---

[282] From 'FDA (funeral director's assistant) in *The Thin Bridge*, p. 12.
[283] Jackson and Brooks, 'Ramp and the Stair', p.18.
[284] From 'Ghazal: Kalimpong' in *Immune Systems,* p. 51.
[285] From 'A language I didn't know I spoke' in *The Thin Bridge*, p. 25.
[286] From 'A language I didn't know I spoke' in *The Thin Bridge*, p. 25.
[287]Gloria Anzaldua, 'Foreword' in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color 2nd edition*, ed. by Cherrie Moraga & Gloria Anzaldua (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983), p. 20.

Music, song, patterns

While Jackson's poems are concerned with lines, blood and ink, they also sing. They reference music, song and the visual arts. And if the physical layout/line/visual shape of the poem speaks to the innate voice or mood of the poem, then its musicality is its soul. An 'awkward cadence'[288] might reflect not only neurological diversity, but an 'incorporation of woundedness and mortality'.[289] The association between musical aptitude and dexterity and the physical features of Marfan's syndrome is well documented and is best illustrated by the explosive talent of violin virtuoso Niccolò Paganini of Genoa (1782-1840).[290] It has been posited that Paganini's incredible bowing technique and virtuosity was 'inborn',[291] most probably due to his inheritance of Marfan's. The elasticity and pliancy in the joints of the shoulder, elbow, and fingers, as well as the overly long limbs of the Marfan's body, gave Paganini a natural edge over other violinists of the time. Jackson uses a musical lexicon to articulate Marfan lives.

In 'Niccolo' (64) from *Music Our Bodies Can't Hold,* Jackson writes:

> tension and violence – as one string breaks,
> then a second and even yes a third, I continue – I feel it
> in my fingers, their rapturous held breath- spurring me onward –
> […]
>
> when I first step onto the stage
> I feel them asking, without sound
>
> *how can this gaunt figure even hold his instrument aloft?* –

There are flighty en-dashes that break up the lines of 'Niccolo' as they build and fall away, build and fall away, making it sing like the non-linear and meandering voice of the violin. And there is both rapture and self-loathing in this representation of Paganini's voice. He is both gifted and afflicted by his 'inborn' talents. This contradiction (or unsettled threshold) between disability and extra ability is foregrounded by the earlier more neatly structured poem of 'John': 'What use is music your body can't hold/that can't take you from this world?' (34). The body as vehicle for expressing great artistic beauty at the same time as irreconcilable shame, underpins many of the poems in this collection. As Elspeth Probyn has written so persuasively, shame 'works over the body in certain ways […] but it also reworks how we understand the body and its relation to other

[288] Andy Jackson, 'Bodily Difference', p. 230.
[289] Andy Jackson, 'Bodily Difference', p. 230.
[290] Myron R Schoenfeld, 'Musical Magician and Marfan Mutant?' in *JAMA* 239:1 (1978), pp. 40–42.
[291] Myron R Schoenfeld, 'Musical Magician and Marfan Mutant?', p. 41.

bodies'.[292] Probyn stresses writing as a corporeal activity—we use our bodies to write—and outlines the experiential effect shame has on the (writing) body. She defines shame as growing out of 'the clashing of mind and body resulting in new acts of subjectivity'.[293] Writers such as Levi Strauss and T.E Lawrence have shown us that the experience of shame, and the writing of shame, not only reveals our humanity or lack of it, but affects our bodies as readers and writers. Probyn puts it this way: '[w]riting takes its toll on the body that writes and the bodies that read or listen'.[294] Jackson explains that while he carries 'burn marks' and 'scar tissue'[295] from inhabiting a 'stareable body',[296] his bodily difference is also an 'opening',[297] to a new way of being in the world, and to a new way of writing the world.

The Marfan body is not one body, though, and Jackson is careful to emphasise this via his composition. For example, in 'Victoria' (43) the short staccato yet run-on lines have a breathless confessional quality, while the triple lined stanzas of 'Ann' skip from one line to the other singsong and coherent. Here is a mother fully grown into her own Marfan body but also fully aware of what an inheritance of Marfan means for her newborn child:

> Three days after he was born,
> I knew for sure. It was over
> one of those interminable cups of tea.
>
> The midwife cooed *ooh hasn't he*
> *got long fingers?* and I burst
> into tears. He has what I have.

In 'Akhenaten' the shape of the poem flows down the page like rippling water but the lines in themselves are fragmentary, much like the remaining hieroglyphic record that tells of this long limbed, long skulled, (allegedly) unusual looking pharaoh:

> I have found a place
> in the empty centre
> for Him who arises
> splendid in the horizon

[292] Elspeth Probyn, 'Writing Shame' in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Siegworth (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 74.
[293] Elspeth Probyn, 'Writing Shame', p. 80.
[294] Probyn, 'Writing Shame', p. 76.
[295] Andy Jackson, 'Question Marks and a Theory of Vision', p. 5.
[296] Andy Jackson, 'Question Marks and a Theory of Vision', p. 2.
[297] Andy Jackson, 'Question Marks and a Theory of Vision', p. 5.

what god could there be
but light and I
am His

my life a perpetual
sacred ritual

And so, each poem in *Music Our Bodies Can't Hold* becomes its own unique biography in terms of voice, form, and appearance—the body and the poetic informing each other—but also with that other non-verbal language, music, running across so many of the Marfan lives presented. When Jackson writes, 'with our many invented words/ we compose beautiful songs, hum them/to ourselves […] we prove our differences don't matter',[298] he refers/defers to the transformative imperative of art, music, writing. Such artmaking allows for new possibilities to be imagined. The 'new songs' of the opening poem to *The Thin Bridge* imply that 'What's possible between us' (1) is connection, understanding, transformation and liberation in concert with the reality that hangs over every one of us—dying. The patterns sewn into our DNA are more musical score than 'a disorder of connective tissue'.[299] In *Music Our Bodies Can't Hold* the speaker in 'Sandy' says, 'when I am working in the studio/my hands can only follow/where my heart goes' (77). The short one-or-two-line stanzas of this poem are 'thrown and fired' like the beautiful ceramics the speaker creates.

By attending deliberately yet organically (hands following heart) to the visual layout of the poems in this collection, Jackson accounts for the diversity of bodies affected by Marfan's. The birth date and in some cases death dates at the end of each poem remind the reader of the lineage between us and pay homage to the specific and individual lives celebrated in the poem. Between the two collections the ungraspable nature of music accounts for the ineffable—for the unseen connections between poet, speaker, reader:

easy to forget poetry is not surgery or a ramp

not an embrace or a letting go

but a way of leaning carefully into whispers[300]

In the bodies of his poems, Jackson asserts a new and profound way of inhabiting the physicality of language—he embraces 'deformity', by experimenting with formal devices.

---

[298] From 'The elephant' in *The Thin Bridge*, p. 2.
[299] From 'Double Helix' in *The Thin Bridge,* p. 30.
[300] From 'Moonlight' in *Music Our Bodies Can't Hold*', pp. 85-86.

Strange and beautiful bodies

In his writing practice, Jackson excavates whether the body, 'in its unsettling difference, can be separated from the poetic'.[301] His bodies of works discover again and again that body and composition cannot be separated. In an essay featured in *Meanjin*, Jackson argues that free verse poetry, its non-conformity to traditional form, and its diversity, is a kind of deformity in itself.[302] If we consider each poem as a body, then each free-verse body can be expressed in a multitude of ways with poetic devices such as line-breaks, rhythm, meter and enjambment allowing for subtle or overt divergences from the norm. Jackson mentions the crippled 'foot' of iambic pentameter, the short syllable against the long one, that allows for a kind of 'limping movement' despite the assured rhythm of this 'most classic and confident of western meters'.[303]

The embodiment of a poem is shaped by its writer (and their own unique body) and Jackson's interest in how such embodiments are expressed in poetry is fundamental to his compositional practice. He says of the ghazal, the seventh-century Persian, Arabic, and Urdu poetic form, which features in his 2015 collection, *Immune Systems*: 'its ecstatic and earthly sense of frustrated longing, felt like the perfect vehicle for my experience and uncertainties'.[304] The ghazals of this collection are more diffuse than the poems of his other collections, embodying a kind of open-ended questioning or longing, but at the same time are intensely personal: 'We are what our bodies open themselves to — lips, tongue/fingers, scalpel, these cries … God, don't let me sink alone'.[305] In *The Thin Bridge,* we see not only the spacious aesthetic of the ghazal leaving its compositional trace, but poems that bleed and sing and desire. We see bodies no longer confined.

> and leaning into light, this desire
> that shares something with the wood,
> the sap, the fingertip seed.
>
> I place my palm against a sapling,
> leave a trace.[306]

[301] Andy Jackson, 'Bodily Difference', p. 216.
[302] Andy Jackson, 'Free-Verse Bodies. Or is Poetry Deformed?' in *Meanjin,* November 12 (2014), n.p.
[303] Andy Jackson, 'Free-Verse Bodies,' n.p.
[304] Andy Jackson, 'Notes' in *Immune Systems,* p. 59.
[305] From 'Ghazal' in *Immune Systems*, p. 49.
[306] From 'Reaching and Leaning' in *The Thin Bridge*, p. 19.

In this poem, the body is a place where joy and rapture might dwell. The speaker's body is placed in loving relation with other living beings. The tree and the body described both share a desire for light and both leave a trace in this world.

Jackson writes in the generative place between the body—'[a]ctual, real, particular, individual bodies with their viscera, sweat, memories, desire, bacteria, heat, odour and scars'[307]—and the ways in which poetry might express the non-normative body. This poetic threshold is a stepping place, a transient stopping place, where Jackson might address self and other, subjectivity and form, disability, and language, and where he successfully articulates the transformative practice of writing through the body and of the body. Jackson's sensitivity to the intersections between bodies and poetic forms raise questions to do with how we experience embodiment. It interrogates how we move in the world (our specific socio-political location), and how we move with our individual body in relation to other bodies. Jackson writes: '[m]odern poetry, with its fractured forms and perfect incompletion, is a kind of linguistic full-length mirror in which we encounter ourselves and each other.'[308] In interrogating the poiesis of his own body, Jackson attends to the bodies of others. His artmaking is a humanitarian act.

[307] Andy Jackson, 'Free-Verse Bodies. Or, is Poetry Deformed?' in *Meanjin*, n.p.
[308] Andy Jackson, 'Free Verse Bodies', n.p.

3.1

What dwells inside

I remember vividly the spark of ignition that set me on the path of (writing) poetry. I owe this 'heat-seeking'[309] to poet, teacher, mentor and supervisor, Jeri Kroll. I was taking Kroll's *The Craft of Poetry* class as an elective to complete the final six units of a coursework Masters degree in Creative Writing at Flinders University. This was in 2006. My children were just four and two years old. I didn't feel much like a poet yet. It's possible that as a mother of young children I was just too tired to think. And I didn't quite know how to get inside the skin of what I was writing. But I loved moving words around on the page to see what they could do. I applied my intellect to the free verse and crafting exercises, and I was happy with the results, but there was something missing. Perhaps it was just that I was at the beginning of my apprenticeship—still learning how to saw, sand, chisel, mould, turn, dovetail, shape, polish—but Kroll kept throwing out the prompts as all the best teachers know to do. Near the end of the semester we were required to write a poem using a particular form. We could choose anything from the pantoum, to the villanelle, the Petrarchan sonnet to the ballad, and back to the sestina. While I loved experimenting with the limitations imposed by each of these forms, and the waterfalling repetitions of the pantoum for instance, there was something leaden or corralled in the shapes I came up with. Too early on in the poet's apprenticeship to bend the rules and make them sing? Or was it that I was just waiting to meet the enigmatic and elegant ghazal?—the Persian lyric form dating from the eighth century onward. I chose the ghazal for the exercise and it was a turning point.

The classical Persian ghazal grew out of court poetry or praise poetry (previously Sufism), which exalted the sovereign, and before becoming an independent form served as a lyrical introduction to the praise poem.[310] The ghazal may address God, the beloved/lover, or a patron and may shift ambiguously between all three addressees.[311] It is tempting to give its name 'ghazal' a 'gazelle'-like lilt, but the sound of the word 'ghazal' is something guttural at the back of the throat, not deer-like at all. It translates roughly to 'the cry of the gazelle when it is cornered in a hunt and knows it will die'.[312] A heart-cry. Vulnerable. Deer-like. The ghazal is a lyric form which arose in seventh-century Arabia. It is probably best known by the writings of the undisputed masters of

[309] In *The Luminous Solution: Creativity, Resilience and the Inner Life*, Charlotte Wood defines 'heat-seeking' as 'the way artists separate promising material form unpromising material by sensing and following the 'power' or 'energy' coming from any part of a work', p. 27.
[310] Dick Davis (trans), *Faces of Love: Hafez and the Poets of Shiraz* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013), p. xix.
[311] Dick Davis, *Faces of Love*, p. xx.
[312] Lorna Crozier, *Bones in Their Wings: Ghazals* (Canada: Radiant Press, 2003), p. 55.

the form, the Persian mystics, Rumi (writing in the 13th century), and a century later, Hafiz-i-Shirazi,[313] followed by Ghalib four centuries later, who mastered the form in Urdu.

In terms of structure, its most glimmering and startling feature is its end-stopped couplets or *sher* or *bayt* (house).[314] These couplets (a minimum of five) are 'clandestine' in that they are worlds unto themselves—there is no enjambment between them—the couplets are closed, and in the classical form, their position in the poem can be shifted without disturbing the overarching meaning or quality of the poem. Just like rearranging pearls on a necklace, the *bayts* can be threaded in a variety of nuanced ways, each threading of the pearl shifting the emphasis just slightly.[315] The poem doesn't unfold with a resolution in mind: 'story is sacrificed for suggestion, implication, allusion'[316] as the poet Lorna Crozier has said of the ghazal. The *bayts* also follow a particular rhyme scheme: a mono-rhyme (*qafia*) precedes a refrain (*radif*) at the end of both lines in the first *bayt*, and from then on only in the second line of each *bayt*.[317] In the final *bayt*, the poet will sign off with a pseudonym.[318] It is this shift, this dance of ambiguity between unity and disunity within the 'enforced economy of two stand-alone lines'[319] and the imposition of the *qafia* and *radif*, that make the ghazal such a complex, beautiful and difficult form to master. The shifting nature of the ghazal, its porousness, its resistance to move progressively, linearly, towards a resolution, had me smitten. And of course, I am not the first. There is a lineage of non-Persian poets dancing with the form (I will explain this fully in Chapter Five). The self-contained couplets gave me both scope and resistance. I loved the pressure the closed form put on the line. And so I started writing ghazals and something opened up. A seam of pleasure. A fault line. My second poem to be published was a ghazal.[320] I don't write ghazals so much anymore, though I return to the practice if I am in a stuck place or an overly verbose place but encountering the form all those years ago was an igniting force. I am still in love with ghazals. And I think I know now what it means to get inside the skin of a poem. But this came later.

So what does any of this have to do with Andy Jackson? The connection is two-fold. I first discovered Jackson's poetry via Ali Alizadeh, whose essay 'Sufis of the Antipodes: the ghazal in

313 Agha Shahid Ali, *Ravishing DisUnities. Real Ghazals in English* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), p. 1.
314 Lorna Crozier, *Bones in Their Wings: Ghazals*, p. 59.
315 Lorna Crozier, p. 59.
316 Lorna Crozier,), p. 60.
317 Lorna Crozier, p. 61.
318 Paul Smith, 'A Life with Hafiz' in *Southerly: Persian Passages*, 76:3 (2016), p.79.
319 Lorna Crozier, p. 60.
320 See *Overland* Emerging Poets Series: Molly Murn:
<https://overland.org.au/2012/11/overland-emerging-poets-series-molly-murn/>

contemporary Australian poetry'[321] highlighted the 'physical aesthetic'[322] of Jackson's ghazals as exemplars of Australian versions of the form. I was eager to read Jackson's (Antipodean) poems for myself. And so I was led to Jackson's work while following the hunt of the ghazal. His poetry collection *Immune Systems* (2015), a simultaneously tender and eviscerating interrogation of India's medical tourism industry, closes with a cycle of fourteen ghazals. Jackson draws on the form elsewhere and in previous and subsequent collections of poetry (including *The Thin Bridge*), but in *Immune Systems* he follows most closely the traditional *radif* of the ghazal, where the final word of the final line in the couplet is repeated. And he uses the form to staggering effect. On first encountering Jackson's work, I was affected by the craftsmanship of his juxtapositions:

> At dawn, I wake damp from another dream. She's gone.
> In the corners of my eyes and heart, these tiny hard stones.
>
> Plastic wrappers, prayers and shit floating in the holy river.
> Water, in time, wears down the certainty even of stones.[323]

The tone of the poems are philosophical, metaphysical, searching (for some deeper connection with divinity or desire), yet the ghazals swinging geographically between Melbourne and Kolkata, are grounded in the material body—its limitations and its position among other bodies. In a place with a swarming population like India, Jackson confronts the fragility of his own place in the scheme of things (in keeping with the overarching aesthetic of the traditional ghazal), and yet the gaze is direct, often domestic. The threshold sensibility Jackson inhabits via the ghazal sensitively explores the 'uncertainties' of the non-normative body as locale of personal and poetic transformation. In responding to Jackson's work, I am interested and ignited by the ways in which he writes his body onto the page—I am interested how the poet puts the body on the line.

---

[321] Ali Alizadeh, 'Sufis of the Antipodes: the *ghazal* in contemporary Australian Poetry' in *La Trobe Journal*, 91 (June 2013), pp. 140-148.
[322] Ali Alizadeh, 'Sufis of the Antipodes', p. 147.
[323] 'Ghazal at Hampi' in *Immune Systems*, p. 50.

body on the line

—after Andy Jackson

rond de jambing over and over again
on the same small patch of black

how to write the dancing body
the shift from distil to proximal

the radiance of desire unfolding
the duende of the subjunctive mood

if I could I would trace circles
of belonging skin tearing

bloody welts on pointed toes
inking the body on the line

we all have an outline
a way of folding into the earth

I found in Jackson's ghazals something I didn't know I'd been wanting to see. The form as aperture to a wider interrogation of the body, not only in terms of the writing/writer's body, but as the body in relationship to country, milieu, identity (especially in an Australian context). Ali Cobby Eckermann's work explores the body and language also, but with Jackson's reimagining of the ghazal, here was a non-normative white male body in relationship to the present socio-cultural moment. And more specifically, here was the non-normative body as site for testing the edges poetically speaking:

> [W]riting the poems, in particular, has been an exercise in attending to other people, and to the spaces between us. In some way, each poem emerges out of some feeling of affinity or solidarity, a sense of bodily connection. And, at the same time, more often than I might realise, out of ignorance.[324]

At its heart, Jackson's creative practice enacts a reaching out—a stretch of the hand and heart—to make connections to others as much as with himself. If Cobby Eckermann's work provokes in me a thinking about what has come before, the history that lies beneath us all, Jackson's work prompts a turning inwards—to write from my own skin and consider what dwells inside. But more importantly, Jackson invites the reader to inhabit *his* skin via poetry. It is this dialogic relationship I am most interested in. Jackson explains that he writes in order to 'have an influence over how [he] was seen'. By making himself the subject of his art, he wrests agency back for himself. If the body is the first site of limitation, as bell hooks has expressed, so eloquently in 'Being the Subject of Art'[325] then it is the first boundary or threshold to transgress. It is in the body that we recover our sense of self. Jackson's writing practice is an act of recovery.

When I studied my undergraduate in dance, my feet were disfigured and bleeding for the whole four years of the degree. The black Tarkett floor was rough on flesh as we ground away at exercise after exercise to sharpen our bodies. It was in the repetition of the lines (of the body moving through space) that we built strength, skill, endurance. This is how we built a practice. The vocabulary was kinetic. And always, in every class, there was the space humming between the dancers in the room. It is what I loved most, I think, the feeling of dancing near someone or even with someone, a ball of fire thrown back and forth from one body to another, and to all the bodies in the choreography or the early morning class. Pushing to the edge of the musical phrase together with each rise and fall, contraction and release, extension and rotation is an ecstatic feeling of connection. Writing is like this too—an energy exchange. Writer to writer and writer to reader and

---

[324] Andy Jackson, 'Andy Jackson: An Introduction' in *Transnational Literature* 11:1 (November 2018): <http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

[325] bell hooks, 'Being the Subject of Art' in *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics (*New York: The New Press, 1995), p. 133.

back again. In writing and in dancing (in life), there is always the dark companion of injury, illness, pain, disorder, of course—taking the body further than it wants to go, landing badly, not paying enough attention, getting it wrong, being encoded with 'faulty' DNA, or experiencing incomprehensible disease. But this body is written in skin.

The fracture shows a new passage into the bone.

the things we can't see

—for Matina

our bones
music
how the cells of our blood will behave

a tulip bulb resting in the frozen ground
the moon when it's new
the mystery of our spine—what's behind us

where love is going to fall
and pain of course—that awful arbiter
taking us much further into or
out of our bodies than we ever knew
we would be asked to go

what lonely chasms what terrifying thresholds
you have crossed dear friend

Let me tell you of the things we can see
grace—yours—the way you stretch your hands
and make beautiful things
the memory of your asana
what the body knows

the courage we practice for you

we can see the tulip turning to the sun
the light amassing
in the veins and sheen of its
skin

4.

Ali Alizadeh's *Ashes in the Air* & *Towards the End*

Love begins where politics ends[326]

—Alain Badiou

If Andy Jackson and Ali Cobby Eckermann are primarily poets of the body, then Ali Alizadeh is primarily a poet of the intellect. The ashes in the air of his 2011 collection might refer to the ephemeral nature of reality. The element of air, particularly, might refer to ideas, or delusions, while ash might refer to transformation, or wholesale destruction. Ash is the final substance left from matter after combustion. The title of his most recent collection, *Towards the End* (2020), hints at the failure of capitalism, and the ideology of capitalism as antithetical to enacting or embracing a common and ethical humanity. His is a radical poetics which aims to rupture and transform the 'oppressive, hegemonic structures of language'[327] while addressing the material and social reality of culture.[328] In Alizadeh's case the lens is sharply focused on contemporary Australian and Western culture—its obsessions, oppressions, politics, policies, identity, injustices, unchecked desires—and is inflected with a Marxist sensibility, while firmly rooted in the immigrant experience.

Alizadeh was born in Tehran in 1976 and moved to Australia (Brisbane) as an adolescent in 1991 when his parents decided they could no longer live under brutal state oppression. Adolescence is a tricky rite of passage for most, let alone if an individual is transplanted to a country where their language, appearance and cultural understandings have no purchase, or are even actively despised, and Alizadeh writes about this dislocation in his poetry explicitly. But it is through wresting language back for himself that Alizadeh confronts and disrupts a capitalist worldview. By 'traversing boundaries of content and form'[329] he writes on the threshold between the political and the personal, between the invisible qualities of ash (destruction/transformation) and air (delusion/inspiration). Alizadeh's two most recent collections are therefore both exemplars of the changing landscape of Australian postcolonial poetics.

---

[326] Epigraph to Alizadeh's poem 'Robespierre' in *Ashes in the Air* (St Lucia, QLD: University of Queensland Press, 2011), p. 51.
[327] Ali Alizadeh, 'Interview with Ali Alizadeh' by Michael Brennan, *Poetry International*, July, 2011, n.p.
[328] Ali Alizadeh, 'Marx My Muse. Towards a Far Left Poetics' in *Axon: Creative Explorations*, 4:2, (December 2014), n.p.
[329] Julia Clark, 'Poetry Against Neoliberal Capitalism in Ali Alizadeh and Melinda Bufton,' in *Cordite Poetry Review*, October 2020, p. 1: < http://cordite.org.au/scholarly/against-neoliberal-capitalism/2/>

In *Ashes in the Air* Alizadeh writes in the Persian lyric mode of the ghazal but renovates the form within the literary space of contemporary Australian poetry. He writes on the *threshold* between cultures and identities, inhabiting the *intermezzo* or the middle ground. In this productive capacity of the middle, there is the possibility for synthesis, a third space across and between cultures where something new can emerge, not only in terms of poetic form, but in the terrain of contemporary Australian poetics more generally. In *Towards The End*, Alizadeh pushes the form (and content) even further and experiments with *polisthetics*, a term Alizadeh himself invented to describe his creative practice. Writing about *polisthetics* in 2014, six years before the publication of *Towards the End*, Alizadeh says:

> *Polisthetics* […] signifies the approach which I wish to further develop in the future […] exploring explosive interventions and interactions of art and politics […] my aim is to use this prism for not only engaging with a number of potent examples of truly radical works of anti-capitalist art and literature, but to also create new literary works of my own that attempt to counter the cultural logic of capitalism to the best of my artistic ability.[330]

Alizadeh achieves a counter to the 'cultural logic of capitalism' by successfully articulating the tension between the political and the personal, by using incomplete phrases or sentences to hint at the 'void' (more on this later), and by turning his attention to the human, artistic, labour cost of living under a system that commodifies almost every event from the creative to the administrative. Alizadeh's body of work attempts a transformation of consciousness while remaining cognisant of the limits of what a poem can do. This revolutionary approach to poetics has its antecedents in Alizadeh's formative years growing up in Tehran under a volatile political system.

Despite the hopes and wishes of Alizadeh's devout Muslim grandmother for her studious grandson, Alizadeh (as his parents did before him) renounced religion to become a firm atheist. Alizadeh explains that the turning away from Islam was in part to do with the books he devoured as a young adolescent—'Farsi translations of works by Rousseau, Voltaire and Marx'[331]—as well as a resistance to his country's 'extreme levels of cruelty and censorship'[332] under its religious regime and Holy War against Iraq. It was a shock then for Alizadeh upon arrival in Australia to be branded together with all other immigrants from the Middle East as not only religious but fanatical and suspect. This ostracisation was further intensified after 9/11 and saw the beginning of a particularly stressful time for the nascent poet. This period of turbulence incited a turn back towards the writing-self Alizadeh had abandoned in Tehran with a switch to the Creative Arts

---

330 Ali Alizadeh, 'Marx My Muse. Towards a Far Left Poetics' in *Axon: Creative Explorations*, 4:2, December 2014, n.p.
331 Ali Alizadeh, 'Leaving God' in *Coming of Age: Growing Up Muslim in Australia*, Amra Pajalic and Demet Divaroren (eds), (Sydney, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2014), pp. 68-80, (p. 69).
332 Ali Alizadeh, 'Leaving God', p. 69.

from Architecture, and later to a PhD in Professional Writing.[333] His composing of poetry signals an attempt to make sense of the threshold between the here and there of Tehran and Australia. In 'The Suspect' (*Ashes in the Air*, p 10), Alizadeh begins: 'There in the Other land, I was/*gharb-zadeh*, Farsi to the effect of *west/smitten*. Here, in Our land, I am *Muslim immigrant*, nomenclature with grave/allusions'; and later in the poem: 'There I was suspected of perfidy to the Faith, an infidel/-wannabe/Over here I am suspected/ of terror, Our values' covert enemy'. The 'here's 'there's and '[o]ur's that swing this poem from one couplet to the next speak of the traumatic place of the in-between, a kind of no man's land between cultures.

In 'A Familial Renaissance' (*AA*, pp26-27), a poem dedicated to Alizadeh's sister, he tells of the different ways the members of his family have experienced this unsettled in-between: Alizadeh was 'bullied, beaten/at school' for being a 'dirty terrorist'; for his father 'Immigration was more than/traumatic abusive'; and his mother's 'reshaping as an Aussie [was] almost aborted […] when denied recognition of her degrees'. Alizadeh's sister is the 'triumphant genius' in this equation: 'caring daughter in the crossfire between workless father/and alcoholic brother'. Alizadeh himself was this sibling. The state of in-between-ness becomes for the poet an aesthetic approach that may also help to illumine the ways in which the individual relates to the systems that govern or oppress us.

The point Alizadeh seems to be making is that the oppression we experience can be of our own making, yet more often than not we are defenceless against our desire for things, for material accumulation, especially when this need is embedded in the cultural and political strata. As writer and critic Julia Clark points out, Alizadeh subverts 'the figure of the individual by positioning the lone poet against the systems of power that uphold inequity and oppression',[334] and in this role he attempts a new way of thinking on capitalism, migration, asylum and nationhood. The lone poet-philosopher is both himself and the collective choral voice that sings out—using subversive language and word-play—in resistance to concepts like 'nationhood' or 'immigrant' or 'country' and what they might actually mean, as well as how their use as hegemonic terms does us harm. Heavily influenced by the writings of German Marxists such as Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, and contemporary French philosophers such as Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière, Alizadeh's poetry not only cites these influences (see the following poems from *TTE*: 'The Point', 'Alphabet City', 'The General Will', 'PS')[335] but actively seeks to embed their discourse in the

[333] Ali Alizadeh, 'Leaving God', p. 75.
[334] Julia Clark, 'Poetry Against Neoliberal Capitalism', p. 1.
[335] In the Notes section of *Towards the End*, Alizadeh lists the poems in the collection that have been dedicated to other poets or writers such as Robert Adamson and Michael Brennan, or are conversant with, written after, or written in response to the writings of figures such as Karl Marx, Walter Benjamin, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, WG Sebald and so on. In this way, Alizadeh situates himself in a particular poetic tradition or philosophical lineage that

project of transformative poetics in which he engages. This discourse 'breaks with the dominant artistic logic of capitalist culture'[336] and advocates art as a social scene rather than a commodified (and therefore elitist) enterprise.

Alizadeh is interested in constructing meaning 'out of […] seemingly disparate linguistic units.'[337] In this way his praxis draws on Walter Benjamin's tenet that the production of art is material rather than mystical. The poet is not a heightened or esteemed figure whose work of 'indeterminable worth'[338] comes down from on high, but rather, the poet is engaged in the social reality of their milieu. In this approach, the semantic elements of the poem, the linguistic signs and their 'immediate, socially determined referents'[339] is central and the poem's exchange value becomes neither lofty nor capitalist, but artistic, social, and focused on communication/language. In 'The Point' (*TTE*, p.43) Alizadeh invites the voices of the philosophers and thinkers, including Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht, who have helped shape his understanding of how art should function in society, to converse with each other (and with himself) on this very point:

what's to determine
the quantity of kudos

afforded to a poem
like this? Labour-time? Aesthetic judgement?

[…]
against aestheticised politics
against instrumental reason
against fetish and ideology

So let's paraphrase Marx:

The point of poetry
is *not* to
represent/replicate/interpret/converse/communicate/play/
experiment with

the world, but

to change it.

is about becoming 'more and more capable of expressing the actual existence of humanity' (The Garret Podcast: Writers on Writing, March 26, 2020).

336 Ali Alizadeh, 'Marx, My Muse', n.p.

337 Ali Alizadeh, *The Garret: Writers on Writing*, transcript, 26 March, 2020: <https://thegarretpodcast.com/ali-alizadeh/>

338 Ali Alizadeh, 'Marx, My Muse', n.p.

339 Ali Alizadeh, 'Marx, My Muse', n.p.

Here we see an interrogation of language via juxtaposition—placing verbs 'represent', 'replicate', 'interpret' and so on alongside each other is in itself a kind of playing around with the truth of these words. The use of the 'anti-couplet', evident here, is a deliberate mode that Alizadeh has adopted directly from American avant-garde Imagist poet Hilda Doolittle (H.D) (1886-1961). He is particularly influenced by H.D's epic poem, *Trilogy* (1945),[340] where two-line stanzas are semi-measured and unrhyming, as shown below.[341]

> Now polish the crucible
> and in the bowl distill
>
> a word most bitter, *marah*,
> a word bitterer still, *mar*,
>
> sea, brine, breaker, seducer,
> giver of life, giver of tears;
>
> Now polish the crucible
> And set the jet of flame
>
> under, till *marah-mar*
> are melted, fuse and join
>
> and change and alter,
> mer, mere, mère, mater, Maia, Mary,
>
> Star of the Sea,
> Mother.[342]

In H.D's poetry of civilian war, words take on multiplicities of meaning, so that across the three movements of *Trilogy*, a palimpsest of associations and connections is built as particular words come to have various significations.[343]

Taken alongside Alizadeh's unravelling of the medieval Persian lyric form of the ghazal, the 'anti-couplet' sees the poet troubling the dynamic threshold between wordplay (how far can words be pushed) and lyricism. Alizadeh subverts many of the tropes of the classical (lyrical)

---

[340] H.D, T*rilogy: The Walls Do Not Fall; Tribute to the Angels; The Flowering Rod* Introduction & Readers' Notes by Aliki Barnstone (New York: New Directions Books, 1998 [*Tribute to Angels* 1st published Oxford University Press, 1945; *The Walls Do Not Fall* 1st published Oxford University Press, 1944; *The Flowering of the Rod* 1st published Oxford University Press, 1946].
[341] Ali Alizadeh, *Poetry International*, n.p.
[342] H.D from poem [8] *Tribute to the Angels* in T*rilogy: The Walls Do Not Fall; Tribute to the Angels; The Flowering Rod* Introduction & Readers' Notes by Aliki Barnstone (New York: New Directions Books, 1998, p. 71.
[343] Daniel Thomieres, 'H.D.'s Trilogy: The Multiplicity of being', *Enthymema*, 2015, pp. 2-5, (p. xii).

ghazal—roses, wine, nightingales, caravans, taverns—in what could be read as both an act of rebellion and a nod to his literary and cultural heritage. And in the stretching, pushing, extending of the 'anti-couplet',[344] we also witness Alizadeh's thinking through of art's relationship to power. The poem is a tool for transformation 'against fetish', 'against aestheticised politics'. The philosophical content of Alizadeh's ghazals, coupled with the influence of avant-gardist American poets such as the Beats on the form of his writing, makes the unsettled place *between* content and form in his poems particularly dynamic.

an urge to whirl with (or at least near) the dervishes

Alizadeh renovates the medieval Persian lyric form of the ghazal as a medium to interrogate not only his transnational cultural identity, but to push boundaries between form and content. Alizadeh argues that the ghazal has not only been (and still is) a viable form for experimentation by modern and contemporary Persian poets, but by multicultural, immigrant and Western writers.[345] In these revisions of the ghazal, the residue of the original form remains present (most often in its use of the couplet) but is made more open (in style and content) by the application of free verse. The ghazal, then, may be transformed to incorporate and discover new possibilities of theme and subject. In an Australian postcolonial context, Alizadeh cites Judith Wright, Philip Salom and Andy Jackson as poets who have successfully composed unconventional articulations of the form, finding new ways to encounter the elliptical and metaphysical traces of the ghazal, and with an emphasis on eco-poetics, eroticism, and the body/selfhood respectively.[346]

In the Preface to *Six Vowels & Twenty-Three Consonants*, an anthology of Persian poetry edited and translated by Alizadeh with John Kinsella, Kenneth Avery says of the Persian tradition: 'In this poetry there is an effulgence of meaning; nearly every word resonates with chords of allusion and multiple signification'.[347] Alizadeh mentions in the same volume that he is particularly interested in the form's flexibility in transcending 'ethno-cultural division'.[348] Western writers have long been enamoured with the Persian form. During the literary, cultural and philosophical revolutions of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Western writers applied the 'discursive quality

[344] Ali Alizadeh, *Poetry International*, n.p.
[345] Ali Alizadeh, 'Sufis of the Antipodes: the ghazal in contemporary Australian poetry' in *La Trobe Journal: Persian Cultural Crossroads* 91, June 2013, pp. 140-148, (p. 142).
[346] Ali Alizadeh, 'Sufis of the Antipodes', p. 146.
[347] John Kinsella, 'Preface' in *Six Vowels & Twenty-Three Consonants* Ali Alizadeh and John Kinsella (eds. and trans.) (United Kingdom: Arc Publications, 2012), pp. 9-10, (9. 10).
[348] Ali Alizadeh, 'Modern Persian Verse' in *Six Vowels & Twenty-Three Consonants* ed. and trans. by Ali Alizadeh & John Kinsella (United Kingdom: Arc Publications, 2012), pp. 95-98, (p. 98).

of the ghazal to their own poetics'.[349] Goethe's final collection, *West-Eastern Divan* (1819), is considered 'a model encounter between Western and Persian literature'.[350] And other devotees of the form include Tennyson, Emerson and Pound. Contemporary American and Canadian poets such as Adrienne Rich, John Thompson, Lorna Crozier, Phyllis Webb, Patrick Lane, and Jim Harrison have experimented with the form to startling effect.

The poets featured in the anthology *Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English* (2000), edited by Agha Shahid Ali, follow strictly the rhyme conventions and enclosed distich of the stand-alone couplet, causing many of the poems to feel corralled or coerced. While in *Six Vowels & Twenty-Three Consonants*, Alizadeh and Kinsella have been less 'militaristic'[351] in their translations, keeping the poems as close to the original as possible but letting them breathe—the poems included in this anthology from the Classical to the Modern carry the enigmatic qualities of the ghazal: spaciousness, lyricism, a concern with the profound. As is demonstrated in both anthologies, most contemporary practitioners of the ghazal tend to do away with the closed couplets, so that the ghazal becomes expansive and playful, while maintaining suggestiveness. Alizadeh uses the ghazal, or the trace of the ghazal, or at least an experimental or renovated version of the ghazal, in all the poems in *Ashes in the Air*, and most of the poems of *Towards the End*.

Alizadeh adapts the form by using open couplets that incrementally gather momentum as the end of one couplet is really the beginning of the next, so that as a reader, we must keep scanning down the page to rest in the (often unsettled) conclusion. He also does away with the strict meter and rhyme scheme of the ghazal, blowing apart the neat, even clandestine, couplet of the classical form to achieve a roominess open to several strata of interpretation. Thinking on the incomplete lines or sentence fragments of his compositions, Alizadeh explains:

> I've used stronger punctuation than a comma like a full stop, to sort of break off and then create that space where the reader can form their own meaning. Which is, I think, what ultimately makes a poetic statement: the absence of completeness of a sentence.

The effect of the torn open couplet, or anti-couplet, and the incomplete sentence is that the meaning of words shifts and transform because of their unlikely juxtaposition beside each other. Sentences often end mid-couplet, skewing the logic of syntax, so that the reader must skip to the next unit/sentence to gather the meaning of the preceding utterance:

---

[349] Ali Alizadeh, 'Sufis of the Antipodes', p. 140.
[350] Darius Sepehri, 'Judith Wright's *The Shadow of Fire*: Making the Ghazal Appropriate in Australia' in *Southerly: Persian Passages*, 76:1 (2016), pp. 184-210, (p. 194).
[351] John Kinsella, *Six Vowels*, p. 12.

Similes, nature analogies, never
term the pitfalls, assaults upon

soul's integrity. Imagine
sinking into depths deadlier than swamps

or twisting through the spiral
of angry, lacerating waves. Yes, water

absolutely the right metaphor. Element
of emotion, sucking the body down a well

of dark sentiments. It's not simply
nostalgia, this new obsession ('Culture and Its Terrors' *AA*, 7)

It is not until we get pulled down to the final lines of the poem, 'So I've resorted to natural/ disaster metaphors: Mother Nature's blights/complement Father Culture's terrors' (9) that we come to understand the use of the metaphors of water, mud, sand, wind, and hurricanes throughout this poem as multiplicities. Water is 'lacerating'; sand buries 'uniqueness'; wind will 'suck me up, have me/ twist, submit to the cycles of your national/psyche'. When the speaker declares, 'You want me as your grateful/immigrant', we understand that the battering the poet has experienced from external forces is nothing to do with weather. And in 'the History of the Veil' (*AA*, 14), Alizadeh continues to unsettle the tropes of the ghazal. A Bedouin and new wife of the Prophet Mohammed hates 'deserts, caravans and camels'. In 'Attar', the drug-maker/poet protagonist is 'always drunk on lees, bitter residue in the urn's pit/in the tavern, valley of the ruined' […] 'a hapless captive to the mystical deviance of dervishes' (*AA*, 49-50). Between the here and there of his adopted home and familial home, between the here and there of the contemporary ghazal and the inheritances of the classical form, Alizadeh writes on the threshold.

Walking the 'tightrope' between distant memories (or inheritances of memory) of the Middle East and the reality of the 'dyspeptic city' the speaker now inhabits, is the subject of 'Distance *vs.* the Heart' *(AA*, 67-68). The 'tightrope' or threshold between memory, inheritance and the present moment is, in fact, the underlying conceit of both collections. While the speaker craves 'An urge to whirl/ with (or at least near) the dervishes' or to 'loaf about the harems/ of a Turkish dream', he cannot reconcile the need to escape the 'fetid metropolis' with his falling in love or lust with someone in the here and now. In 'Distance *vs.* the Heart', he writes:

my heart's grown
too fond to want only

(mixing metaphors) to tiptoe
on the tightrope between this

crass cesspit and the realm
of Oriental delirium […]

[…] (I guess
you know exactly what these

metaphors have been
meant to show: my longing

for your body, this
lust for movement, from me to you.)

The 'crass cesspit' and 'Oriental delirium' are the *here* and *there* of this poem, but now the poet may be undergoing a crossing over of sorts. While Alizadeh writes on the threshold between 'a serene (fantasy)' of elsewhere (there) and 'beyond this miasma' (here), the speaker reckons with the pull of the heart/lust to the here and now. The threshold inhabited in this poem is one where a transformation (of heart, of belonging, of acceptance) is taking place.

Alizadeh is rarely this personal, his gaze usually directed outwards even while referencing his own experience, but if this is a love poem it is still disdainful of the city as a bloated 'fetid', 'rotting' capitalist nightmare. This play between the deeply personal and the philosophical and political sees Alizadeh drop contemporary Melbourne scenes into a wider interrogation of capitalist power dynamics or historical events. In 'Austerlitz' (*TTE*, 49) where chunks of white space break up the couplets mid-way through the line, or push couplets together, he writes:

[…] Next week

you'll leave Melbourne
for a few weeks, for the ghosts
and snows of Europe. So many
soldiers and civilians have been shot
, drowned, gassed and buried there. Too many
to be honest. So return
soon, Anna
Ithaca. Return
soon, my love
and this Melbourne won't become
a kind of St Helena.

And by situating his own biography amidst the wider forces of greed, capitalism, war, colonialism, as well as the labour costs of making art and working in the Academy, a microcosm of the dominant system, Alizadeh writes on the threshold where the poet's sense of place and self are

explored and made anew as a radical poetics. Alizadeh is interested in what a poem can and cannot do. What it can do is use language to disrupt and transform dominant discourses, and in this way Alizadeh makes the space of the in-between a productive and transformative location. While he claims for himself a radical poetics, Alizadeh asserts that much contemporary Australian poetry is 'devoid of radical discursive, conceptual and political ambitions'.[352] This may be harsh criticism for those poets whose fierceness may be expressed less radically than Alizadeh's own work, or whose work actively rejects such ambitions. Alizadeh is passionate about the purpose of poetics, and the purpose of his poetry, specifically: to enact change. He writes on the threshold between the two cultures that have shaped him, he writes on the threshold between form and content by renovating the ghazal as anti-couplet, and he writes of the threshold: his poems are largely concerned with the transformative space of the in-between—a life/lives in transition.

the presence of unsung words and the passage of language

In the opening poem of *Ashes in the Air*, 'Marco Polo', the speaker asks, 'Why have we conceived/and delivered a life into the world/in transition?' (2). This question hangs somewhere between a parent's concern for their unborn child—'Are we monstrous parents? […] depriving him of his deserved/comforts of sedentary genesis (motherland, mother tongue/two ebullient grandmothers, etc'—and an acknowledgment that as an immigrant, the speaker/father knows what is to be light footed, on the move, restless even, between *here* and *over there*. The speaker recognises that the child is already shaped/will be shaped by this sensibility. In Alizadeh's case the here is Melbourne, Australia (where he lives now), and the over there is Tehran, Iran (where Alizadeh was born and lived until he was fifteen). That the collection begins with 'Marco Polo', a travel poem celebrating the 'nomads treasure' [*sic*.] and the 'in utero – trajectory' of an unborn child, is no accident. It sets the tone of the collection—here is a poet, immigrant, traveller, scholar, lover, father, philosopher—whose poems are built from the tissue of his own experience of living restlessly between two cultures.

Towards the End also begins with a poem about 'my son', but in 'The Singer' (1-2) the child is now older. While singing nursery rhymes with the child, the speaker laments the songs passed (and not passed) on from his own father—'homesick/-ness haunting his larynx like a ghost' (1). The dislocation from home country experienced by the speaker's father has caused unspeakable

[352] Ali Alizadeh, 'Against Representation: Louis Armand and the Limits of New Australian Poetry', in *Antipodes*, 25:2, December 2011, pp. 191-196, (p. 5).

loss; in particular, loss of language, song and music. This loss is passed from father to son with irrevocable disunity between the two as a result, but in this poem the speaker attempts to staunch the loss when it comes to his own child: 'I'm here for my son's nursery rhymes to enact/ the presence of unsung words' (2). The figure of the poet's father across the poems in both collections, but in particular in *TTE,* is associated with the erasure of voice and language, so that the writing of the poems for Alizadeh appears in some way to be a reclamation of his inheritance, and a reclamation of connection to culture—lost—because of his father's unassailable grief. In 'Destinal' (5) the looming presence of his father's (emotional) absence features:

> This pen
> undermines expression. What
> I remember, the excess of his absence
>
> […]
> Words
> blow like cigarette butts, leaves
>
> on the footpath where father
> was supposed to walk, holding my hand.

The words the speaker builds are ephemeral, and his father's homeland is ephemeral, too, so that both father and son experience a (separate) rootlessness that cannot adequately be expressed in words.

In 'Merri Creek' (*TTE*, 6-8) the speaker discovers a restless solace in a local river, 'just about the only place I'd call home' but more than that the body of water represents the shifting in-between-ness of being on the outside of language, it represents the threat of drowning, yet its 'leafy corridors' promise the passage to something like belonging. With reference to Twain's Mississippi and Caesar's Rubicon, the poem suggests the river, or creek in this case, as the threshold that will 'soothe' and 'protect' the speaker from being overwhelmed, from being marooned between two worlds, two cultures:

> […] I swam
>
> in the weird, inexplicable words
> of your Hawkesbury, a migrant
>
> with little English, holding my breath
> under the phonetics of birds' names
>
> and scales of fishing metaphors. Then
> I was drawn to Melbourne, and lonely

in the struggle with life and poetry
I kept my head above the dark surface,

the swamp of desire and alcoholism,
by drifting alone on the rundown trail

along Merri Creek (TTE, 6-7).

And in this poem the reality of metropolitan rivers—'Dirty water', 'dreary watersports', 'Banks, hardly scenic after routine floods' and 'manmade decay'—is countered by the rivers in the books the speaker has read as a child, which tell 'tale[s] of courage', so that the universal language of the river is as much a source of comfort as the river itself. In 'Merri Creek' the speaker comes to know the vocabulary of a suburban Australian river as an entranceway to the language of his second tongue—English. But this understanding does not come without cost.

In the earlier collection, *Ashes in the Air*, Alizadeh wrestles with the gagging, erasure and blocking of the mother tongue as irrevocable fallout of colonialism, incarceration, and exile. The effect of such obliteration of language is to feel engulfed or submerged, and we see this perception being expressed in Ali Cobby Eckermann's 'Clay'[353] and 'Hindmarsh Island'[354] also, as discussed in Chapter Two. This repeated motif of submersion occurs across several of Alizadeh's poems, perhaps because of his near-drowning experience as a child as outlined in 'The Deep End' (*AA*, 72)—a primal fear laid down at the formative level of being and a portent of the feeling of overwhelm to come. In 'Exile and Entropy' (*AA*, 30) he writes,

[…] Village animal in the marsh,
an image to denote dislocation: removed

from Tehran's clamorous scenes
of coups, rallies and revolutions

to an island. Here rain makes the headlines
and 'history', a post-script to 'sport'. Not

only boredom but the erasure
of mother tongue – the proclivity for

voicing a rope to clench
and crawl out of the swamp.

[353] Ali Cobby Eckermann, *Inside My Mother*, p. 19.
[354] Ali Cobby Eckermann, *Inside My Mother*, p. 41.

The 'Here' in the poem echoes the 'here' and 'there' of 'The Suspect' further consolidating the poet's sense of inhabiting the (uncomfortable) threshold between two cultures. The 'erasure of mother tongue' is to be stuck in a swamp like a '[v]illage animal', the only recourse, making a rope out of words to enact an escape. But this rope of words may become a chain, as in the poem 'Languages(s)', so that still the poet cannot emerge from the entropy of exile: 'Forge a discourse/ to chain your/my tongue/s. You'll write me/yours, I write you mine, and we'll relish/the mystery of the written sign […] incoherent thorn in the monoglot Master's eye' (*AA*, p.32-33). The incoherence (between the dominant language and the 'subaltern's whisper')[355] is insurmountable, so that by the time we get to a poem late in the collection, 'Cacofonix', the speaker reflects, 'In my/world I soon had no choice but to write/ as a bullied immigrant with no English/to speak of […] my accent too fucking thick, laughable' (*AA*, p.78). Alizadeh widens the lens on his own inability to speak without fear of ridicule, or worse, fear of being swallowed up, drowned out, not having a vehicle of expression (a human right) in his adopted country, to a writer imprisoned in Tehran for speaking out against the regime in 'Shut Up':

> So he's shut up. Vilified:
> an unpatriotic recalcitrant,
>
> gagged for penning
> Imperialist turpitude
>
> […] He wants
> to return to writing, but anger
>
> blocks the passage of language
> from the heart to the page. So he's
>
> shut up (*AA*, 19-20)

This poem reveals varying levels of interpretation and intimacy coming together on the page. Both Alizadeh and the writer mentioned in the poem have been '*gagged*' even while their personal subjectivities have played out in vastly different ways. The shift between the deeply personal and the political is a feature of Alizadeh's writing across both collections. In an interview with Michael Brennan for *Poetry International*, Alizadeh explains that while his poems often reference his personal history, particularly his experiences and memories in Tehran prior to immigration, the purpose of

[355] Ali Alizadeh, 'Language(s)' in *Ashes in the Air,* p.32.

the reference is to open a window to a larger (cultural, social, political) truth or event.[356] The open window here draws attention to an oppressive regime, where the individual is not free to create, think, love, express unless they follow the state agenda.

But this literal suppression of voice can occur in a range of contexts and circles us back again to the presence/absence of Alizadeh's father in a poem like 'The Letters I won't Write' (*AA*, 28-29), where the speaker is haunted, troubled, by the 'murmur' of the words or letters he can't or won't write (to his father, now that they no longer live in the same house). The larger truth here is the intergenerational trauma of dislocation, where the inheritance of language, and therefore culture, becomes arrested. This may occur in a family, or in a nation, but both have the same effect: the passage of language is blocked from the heart to the page. When it comes to his own subjectivity, Alizadeh is concerned with maintaining a 'fidelity to the truth produced by an event'[357] in keeping with the philosophy of Alain Badiou. In this way, his personal experience is particularised and highlighted only in relation to a wider reckoning with historical and socio-political events or truths. If we linger on this idea for a moment, it becomes clear that the silencing of voice that Alizadeh experienced on a number of levels (within his family, within his social sphere, and from being geographically cleaved from his language of origin) cannot be separated out from his impulse/desire to then use language (English), via poetry, as a tool to disrupt and crack open dominant discourses. This situates Alizadeh in the unsettled place between the weight of words—the things a poem cannot do—and what a transformative poetics may actually look like.

only an absolute, monochrome void

While writing out of his particular subjectivity as an immigrant, Alizadeh is keen to transcend labels such as 'multicultural poet',[358] 'post-colonial writer',[359] and points out that initially he saw his work as 'participating in some sort of discourse about Otherness'[360] but is now more interested in participating in conversations that interrogate systemic inequality. He argues that multiculturalism is 'a capitalist ruse to distract people from the real sources of injustice',[361] and that 'cultural diversity is a very poor substitute for […] political and economic equality'.[362] Alizadeh's vision for a

[356] Ali Alizadeh, *Poetry International,* n.p.
[357] Ali Alizadeh, *Poetry International,* n.p.
[358] Ali Alizadeh, *Poetry International*, n.p.
[359] Ali Alizadeh, *Poetry International*, n.p.
[360] Ali Alizadeh, *Poetry International*, n.p.
[361] Ali Alizadeh, *Poetry International*, n.p.
[362] Ali Alizadeh, *Poetry International*, n.p.

reimagined Australian poetics that pushes linguistic, formal and aesthetic boundaries may be grand, but his approach certainly illumines the unsettledness of Australia's multicultural present, while simultaneously locating that present experience amidst a larger global narrative. In other words, the immigrant or exiled experience is a human one, transcending countries, borders, identities, even while those very concepts are challenged by the dislocation of immigration.

Alizadeh's project, while enacting a radical poetics via the productive capacity of the *intermezzo* dwells in the unsettled place of the threshold. He aims to transform the perspective of the reader while enacting a transformation on the page. Inequality is systemic, inherited, evasive and cuts across social, economic, cultural and political lines in Australia and elsewhere. In 'The Chariot' (*AA*, 23), the poet argues, 'I have to be a magician/ to survive this transitory hell'; while in 'The Deep End', the speaker is annihilated by 'an absolute, monochrome/void' (*AA*, 74). The 'void' Alizadeh refers to in several poems across both collections has a multiplicity of meanings. It is at once threshold, nothingness, 'the proletariat',[363] loss, atheism, transformation, and draws on Badiou's thinking on Karl Marx's voids. The void in Badiou's view is 'the proletariat', the name given to the labouring class by Marx, who embody 'the central void of bourgeois society'.[364] I am aware that I gloss, here, the theoretical underpinnings on the role of the void in the philosophical processes of Marx, Kant, Badiou, and others. My purpose is to point to Alizadeh's influences and poetic leanings, and I urge readers to follow up for themselves if interested in the ways in which Alizadeh has braided philosophy with his poetry. For Alizadeh, the void (or the people inhabiting the void) are akin to the displaced, marginalised, dispossessed. Their voices are silenced by the ceaselessness of the void. But the void also represents 'the arrival amidst the visible of the invisible',[365] a reclamation of power, voice, and equality. Alizadeh wrests the place of transition, the void, the in-between, as a place of great potency and revolution even.

[363] Ali Alizadeh, 'Against Representation', p. 5.
[364] Alain Badiou, *Ethics: an Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans by. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2002), p. 69.
[365] Alain Badiou, *Ethics*, p. 69.

4.1

What the shape will hold

Ali Alizadeh uses the form of the ghazal as his underlying aesthetic—the bones of his poetic compositions are built from the spiritual affirmations of the classical form. But he has taken the couplet structure of the ghazal and set it on fire. The couplets resemble couplets (they are two lines in length), but as each runs headlong into the next (no end-stop) they embody an urgency, a declarative tone that is not dispassionate but provocative, testing, mercurial, flammable. In his Introduction to *Six Vowels and Twenty-three Consonants*, Alizadeh emphasises that despite the 'longevity of traditional closed forms'[366] in classical Persian verse, the artform is receptive to radical change, innovation and experimentation. He writes:

> One of our aims in emphasising this movement [towards open forms and the avant garde] has been to show that, in opposition to imperialist/Orientalist views that perceive 'the East' as constant and unchangeable, the Middle Eastern poetics that we are presenting in this anthology is neither inherently hostile to change and experimentation nor in any need of an imposition of progressive Western aesthetics. At the same time, however, we hope to acknowledge that Western influence—as opposed to interference—did in fact play a crucial and constructive role at the end of the nineteenth century by inspiring Persian intellectuals […] to inaugurate less rigid, more liberal discursive formulations and, by doing so, to provide for an explosion of the hitherto suppressed voices, most notably those of Persian-speaking women poets.[367]

I am interested in Alizadeh's suggestion that a dialogic process has occurred/can occur/does occur across and between traditions, cultures, and practices where something new is made—'an explosion of the hitherto suppressed voices'. And so, in the Australian postcolonial moment how might Alizadeh's set-on-fire-ghazal blaze a passage to a new kind of interrogation of place, identity, and belonging? This was the question I had in mind as I approached Alizadeh's most recent collections as exemplars of threshold poetics. I hope that I have travelled some way in addressing this question in the preceding chapter.

In the editorial for *Southerly*'s special issue, *Persian Passages* (2016), Alizadeh and Laetitia Nanquette outline their desire as editors to create a hospitable literary space for Persian-speaking Australians. They explain that this group of Australians 'have not thus far been explicitly included

---

366 Ali Alizadeh, 'Introduction' in *Six Vowels & Twenty-three Consonants: An Anthology of Persian Poetry from Rudaki to Langroodi*, ed. and trans. by Ali Alizadeh & John Kinsella (Todmorden, UK: Arc Publications, 2012), pp. 19-23, (p. 19)

367 Ali Alizadeh, 'Introduction' in *Six Vowels & Twenty-three Consonants*, pp. 19-20.

in the discourse of multicultural literature,'[368] and that the issue 'has been prepared in response to both local and international circumstances, and is a reflection of the growing visibility of Persian literary and cultural activities in Australia […].'[369] The issue focuses particularly on Australian incorporations of the ghazal, and on the influence of the poet Hafez on Australian writers of all backgrounds, more generally. Darius Sepehri in his essay on Judith Wright's ghazal series *The Shadow of Fire*,[370] points out that her leaning towards the form was a yearning to connect more fully with her locale. The eloquence and stillness of the ghazal allowed her to step lightly on the ancient and storied land she lived and worked on: 'Wright was in search of a form of poetry at the end of her writing career that would allow for reconciliation.'[371] Wright seemed to understand the ghazal as the ideal form with which to approach an ecological sensibility, which in her case, was informed by Indigenous ways of knowing. The bringing together of the sensibility of the Persian ghazal with a sensitivity for Aboriginal cosmologies made for a profound working through for Wright of the concerns that had always underpinned her writing: colonialism, desecration of the environment, lost narratives. The poets who have illumined the ghazal for me (and Judith Wright is one), Ali Alizadeh, Andy Jackson, Hafez, Lorna Crozier, Niloofar Fanaiyan, and many others, are my teachers. And in the quiet spaces of the ghazal, I enter threshold as receptive place. When a poem is made, I begin again (as a writer) every time. Here is a poem I wrote about writing a poem. A ghazal.

find me a garden

I find in you the space to turn and swing,
and slowly wing the poem to its end.

Each stopping place along the way slakes
the thirst, and sings the traveller to its knees.

Find me a garden, and I will go there—she
says—*I want to know the heart of you.*

Every carapace shields the tender centre;
every hummock makes the journey longer.

Yet, you lie open as the uncluttered plain—
the bones, the blood, the heat, the sand.

---

[368] Ali Alizadeh and Laetitia Nanquette, 'Editorial' in *Southerly: Persian Passages*, 76:1 (2016), p. 6.
[369] Ali Alizadeh and Laetitia Nanquette, p. 6.
[370] Darius Sepehri, 'Judith Wright's *The Shadow of Fire*: Making the Ghazal Appropriate in Australia' in *Southerly: Persian Passages*, 76:1 (2016), pp. 184-210.
[371] Darius Sepehri, 'Judith Wright's *The Shadow of Fire*', p. 205.

I come to you to gather the quiet refuge
of my words, to utter the beat of the heart.

And now, turning inward, to return, return
again, let's leave the poem where it ends.

But what interests me especially about Persian ways of knowing are their shared relationship with Indigenous ways of knowing, stemming from the long-standing implications of colonialism and imperialism on both lineages, albeit experienced and expressed in vastly different ways. The inclusion of an Islamic perspective in the seminal, *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies* (2008) outlines a shared understanding of subjugation—in language, knowledge, power, agency—with First Nations people. Professor of Education at Bishop's University, Christopher Darius Stonebanks, writes:

> Muslim ways of knowing are […] deeply connected and guided by Islam, within the divergences of Muslim voices, they cannot be understood apart from historical analysis, contextual perspectives, and […] a continually changing and emergent consciousness, much of which has stemmed from the experience of colonialism and imperialism.[372]

When considering an Australian postcolonial poetics, the 'transformative power of Indigenous [and] subjugated knowledges'[373] must be valued. The networked language of counter-narratives 'create[s] spaces 'for multicultural conversations [and] stories [to be] embedded in the critical democratic imagination.'[374] While crucial social and political processes must also be involved, privileging other ways of knowing is how we move from a postcolonial nation to a decolonised one. As Denzin, Lincoln and Tuhiwai Smith point out in their *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*, decolonization privileges counter-narratives:

> [the] decolonizing project attempts to rebuild nations, communities, and their people through the use of restorative indigenous ecologies. These native ecologies celebrate survival, remembering, sharing, gendering, new forms of naming, networking, protecting, and democratizing daily life.[375]

In this way, decolonisation is engaged in world-making via transformation of the status quo. When applied to contemporary poetics, decolonisation is demonstrated by unsettlement of language,

---

[372] Christopher Darius Stonebanks, 'An Islamic Perspective on Knowledge, Knowing, and Methodology' in *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies* eds. Denzin, Norman K; Lincoln, Yvonna S; Smith, Linda Tuhiwai, (Los Angeles: Sage, 2008), pp. 293-322, [p. 295].

[373] Norman K. Denzin, Yvonna S. Lincoln & Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2008), p. 2.

[374] Denzin et al, *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*, p. 6.

[375] Denzin et al, *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*, p. 12

form, content, and vantage points. Counter-narratives embody this kind of unsettlement through border-crossing. They shift and disrupt the central hegemonic white settler narrative. In an Australian context, both Indigenous and Persian ways of knowing actively engage in this kind of unsettlement.

As Wiradjuri writer Jeanine Leane argues, 'White Australian settler culture is nothing without theft, and this intergenerational mentality extends into the spheres of cultural production and literary culture.'[376] The theft begins in the dispossession of First Nations people from their country and kin, and continues not only in the ongoing dispossession, but by also keeping exiled, migrant, refugee voices to the margins. If Jackson's work effects a turning inwards to write from the body, Alizadeh's writing prompts a looking outside again. How does the individual body engage meaningfully with the social and political world? Armed with an understanding of what lies underneath, and what dwells inside, I am able to work through what the shape (of my poetry) will hold. I look to Alizadeh's work as an exemplar of a successful coalescence of the personal and the political in an Australian postcolonial context.

It is this careful juxtaposition of the personal with the political in Alizadeh's ghazals that has had the most effect on my own practice (beyond the ghazal) since undertaking this project around five years ago. Where Jackson's ghazals seem more personal and directly embodied, Alizadeh uses the ghazal to take the aerial view of the systems and structures of capitalism that limit us, and then homes in like a bird of prey to his own experience within the juggernaut of the social system. This play between the personal and the political is used to deliberate effect—to envision a social reality that serves our humanity better. Of the three poets studied for this project, however, Alizadeh's work seems the least similar to my own in terms of content. The territory I explore is not so much about pushing boundaries of form and content (as in Alizadeh's case) but in interrogating the threshold as place of transformation, personally, artistically, culturally. But to solve a particular creative problem, I looked to Alizadeh's technique of juxtaposition (personal experience against a wider politico-cultural moment), in the writing of several of the poems in 'The Blue Archway' collection: the poems 'truth-telling', 'the well in blue Arab quarters', 'the blue archway', and 'juxtaposition' are resonant examples.

When it came to writing the title poem 'the blue archway', for instance, I could not find a way into it. Each attempt to evoke or invoke or respond to the image did not sit right. Using the technique of keeping myself out of the frame as I had in 'through the archway to the sea' undermined the dialogue I wanted to engage in. I needed to get at the painting, or more specifically, at the poem in an alternative way. I had been hesitant until this point to bring myself more directly

[376] Jeanine Leane, 'No Longer Malleable Stuff' in *Overland* 241 (Summer 2020), pp. 11-17, (p. 12).

into the poem(s). But this is what I needed to do. The dialogue I hoped to enter was with the image, yes—the blue archway and gateway to the city of Tangier—but also with the artist and her experience of travelling solo, painting thresholds, making space for her creative practice:

> The light here a portal, how awake I am now
> and crossing the Strait of Gibraltar —is a meditation on blue
>
> did you feel it too—on arrival? In your skin? Eyes smarting from the glittering port
> & the white of the arch promising more than a gateway to a city.

Once I allowed myself into the narrative, I crossed a threshold. I conceived more poems for *the blue archway* section of the poetry collection beyond the ekphrastic ones. In a writing workshop I did with the writer, teacher, and author Sarah Sentilles,[377] we were asked to use a juxtaposition exercise to write a poem. At the top of the page we were to write a line that was personal or came from something we had already written, and at the bottom of the page, we were to write something political, or else use a political/provocative line taken from somewhere else. The igniting point of this technique was the restless movement from the top to the bottom of the page. The jump cut. The slippages. I noticed that Alizadeh's poems seemed to embody this kind of mercurial movement.

At the time of the workshop, I had also been wrestling with an ekphrastic response to Rix Nicholas's pastel on paper *African slave woman* (1914). The drawing depicts a young African woman who was rescued from the slave trade by a French official. As Rix Nicholas often had trouble procuring models, this woman was offered to her by the embassy. The portrait of the woman embodies a tenderness, as if the artist was seeking to give the woman agency despite her predicament. Art critic Jeanette Hoorn describes the drawing as 'a subtle study of a woman deep in thought and seemingly worried as she contemplates an uncertain future'.[378] But I was troubled by the words of Rix Nicholas' sister Elsie, who wrote in a letter to their mother of the difficulty they experienced in getting the model to be comfortable: 'They asked her if she would pose & she said yes—but she just curls up with fear every moment and doesn't know how to stay still'.[379] These words pierced the tenderness I was seeing. I wondered if I could use those words to pierce the poem using the top to bottom technique.

---

[377] See: http://www.sarahsentilles.com/the-word-cave
[378] Jeanette Hoorn, *Hilda Rix Nicholas and Elsie Rix's Moroccan Idyll: Art and Orientalism* (Carlton: The Miegunyah Press, 2013), p. 170.
[379] Jeanette Hoorn, *Moroccan Idyll*, p. 169.

truth-telling

African slave woman
Hilda Rix Nicholas
1914
Pastel on paper

clearing out drawers I find the necklace I bought in Marrakech
the loose orbs of blue tied up in a cloth bag
to be restrung one day
I remember it sitting heavy at my throat
chakra for truth-telling
and I recall the adornments
the women wore—bright scarves
slim bangles, elaborate earrings
anklets, charms, kohl, tattoos

and you are adorned too

for all time Pastel on paper
the copper twined at your wrist
and your white djellaba stitched
together from scraps

I read that the French embassy rescued you
from the slave trade
but offered you up as a model
prisoner your future
undetermined

the serious soundless poise of you—
sitting for Hilda
*(but she just curls up with fear every moment and doesn't know how to stay still)**
pretty details on your head-scarf
suspending your sentence—

*Elsie Rix, Letter to Elizabeth Rix, Tangier, Morocco, Monday 30 March, 1914.

By entering into a conversation with the artwork, the artist, the model, and the time and place of its production, I move forwards and backwards through time. I have the privilege of placing this image in its historical context, and of knowing where the long lines of colonialism have brought us today. And yet the picture disrupts this moment. It is here. Material. This ambivalence between image and text, subjectivities and temporalities, sounds the threshold. The dialogic experience is a hallmark of threshold poetics. Another reason I was attracted to Alizadeh's work was because his poiesis is in direct dialogue with the philosophers, thinkers, and poets who have influenced and inspired him—his work builds on an artistic lineage and pays homage to the influences that underpin his work. Alizadeh's work, for me, is a doorway. The dialogue that *I* hoped to enter in this threshold project was with other artists, especially poets and painters, who have articulated the threshold. And for this, I looked to a range of experiences of the threshold from a range of vantage points.

wall with green door

Georgia O'Keefe
1953
oil on canvas

more aperture than door
the clarity of desert lines
restfulness of green

ribbon of sky
wall of mud
belt of sand

these are the materials
of thinking

5.
Statement of Threshold Poetics

A poetics of the threshold suggests transformation. It considers the receptive and generative space of the in-between as dynamic, productive, and unsettled. In an Australian postcolonial context, the threshold as a locale is a useful site to consider the unsettlement of language, form, and content in contemporary poetics. Such a praxis is enacted by poets writing *into* and writing *of* the productive/uncomfortable/harmful/galvanised/potent space between cultures, identities, and subjectivities. As the linguistic and social centres of power continue to disrupt and shift in Australian letters, the present generative moment—or poiesis—reveals a poetics that attends to the past and the continuing injustices from the fallout of dispossession, colonialism, and dehumanisation. It reveals a poetics in transition and of transition.

A poetics of the threshold engages meaningfully in the ways in which the individual body can interact with the natural, social, and political world.

A poetics of the threshold is one that sees borders (between languages, voices, cultures) as porous. In this region, there is not a border to cross, but a coming together, a meeting place, where something new can be made. In this transformative space, the world-building occurs at the sentence level.

Writing on the threshold, a multiplicity of voices and languages show what is possible and what is in the process of becoming. A poetics of the threshold is active, fertile, and essential.

6.

Conclusion:
Generating Connections
(unsettling/forging/transforming)

In taking up the conversation prompted by Philip Mead's *Networked Language* and Michael Farrell's *Writing Australian Unsettlement*, this project interrogates contemporary Australian poetics as a site for the unsettlement of language and form, but also for the unsettlement of content and subjectivities. In Cobby Eckermann's spacious 'noise of the in-between' and in Jackson's testing the edges of skin and of language, and in Alizadeh's coalescence of the 'here' and 'there' of inheritance and transformation, we find exemplars of the changing landscape of Australian postcolonial poetics. If 'the language of poetry'[380] as Mead attests, 'is always a meaningful human response to the time and place of its creation'[381] then the poetics of the present socio-eco-cultural moment is one where the counter-narratives of First Nations' subjectivities, the unique cadences of the non-normative body or identity, and the Migrant Australian stories of resistance, reciprocity, reimagining, and redress, can enter the master narratives. And enact unsettlement. I am interested in the way in which a threshold poetics may be a gateway to understanding the multiplicity of voices that braid us together as individuals, community, nation. These words mean nothing unless they are a verb—a *doing*. Artmaking is doing. Poiesis is active. In thinking on the overarching question of this thesis: 'how might I investigate the threshold through my making (poiesis)/practice?', I answer with, *attendance*. Attendance to craft, attendance to other bodies, attendance to other voices/poets/artists/thinkers.

The initial prompt for this project, *Writing on Thresholds*, was to better understand the field of contemporary Australian poetics. In this search for understanding, I have discovered a poetics that is in the process of transforming. This change, which has accelerated over the last ten years and especially in the latter part of the decade, sees a wave of First Nations' (mostly younger) women and non-binary writers, as well as writers from non-English-speaking backgrounds, getting published, winning awards, editing anthologies, and headlining major literary events.[382] This is not to say, however, that those writers are equally represented in the publishing juggernaut.

---

[380] Phillip Mead, *Networked Language*, p. 1.
[381] Phillip Mead, p. 1.
[382] Hannah Story, 'First Nations women and non-binary writers are making waves in Australian poetry' A*BC Arts: Art Works*, posted Thursday May 27, 2021 and updated Tuesday August 24: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-05-27/first-nations-poetry-flourishing-evelyn-araluen/100160654>

In the most recent mainstream survey of Australian poetry, *Contemporary Australian Poetry* (2016),[383] published by Puncher & Wattman, the editors claim:

> There are […] many more migrant voices in this anthology than one would find in collections from previous periods: the emergence of writers from non-English-speaking backgrounds is an ongoing and long-term process, which will surely have an increasing impact on the Australian imaginary as ever-greater numbers of culturally diverse voices appear […][384]

It is the case that this anthology features many more marginal voices than its predecessors, *Australian Poetry in the Twentieth Century* (1991),[385] *The Penguin Book of Modern Australian Poetry* (1991),[386] and *Contemporary Australian Poetry* (1990),[387] yet we must continue to privilege those voices. If I am to understand the incremental but profound transformations taking place, it is not only important but necessary to turn towards the exceptional voices engaged in poetry-making. By paying attention to these voices, I am better able to make sense of my own vantage point as a poet.

Five years on from the publication of *Contemporary Australian Poetry*, it is the smaller presses, such as Recent Work Press, Cordite Poetry, Giramondo, Magabala Books, Upswell Publishing, and University of Queensland Press, that are making the progressive shift towards disrupting dominant hierarchies and publishing a multiplicity of voices. Recent examples of anthologies are *Fire Front: First Nations Poetry and Power Today* (2020),[388] *Maar bidi: next generation black writing* (2020),[389] *Borderless: A transnational anthology of feminist poetry* (2021),[390] *Homings and Departures: Selected poems from Contemporary China and Australia* (due September 2021),[391] and *Solid Air: Australian and New Zealand Spoken Word* (2019).[392] Independent presses have always been charged with testing the edges, pushing the boundaries, revitalising the form. And so, while I have narrowed my focus to the three case-study poets and their work for the purposes of this research, there is a stunning breadth of

---

[383] *Contemporary Australian Poetry* eds. Martin Langford, Judith Beveridge, Judy Johnson, David Musgrave (Glebe, NSW: Puncher & Wattman, 2016).
[384] Martin Langford et al 'Introduction. A Luminous Field: New Paradigms in Australian Poetry' in *Contemporary Australian Poetry*, p. viii-ix.
[385] Geoffrey Lehmann, *Australian Poetry in the Twentieth Century* (Port Melbourne, Vic: Minerva, 1993).
[386] *The Penguin Book of Modern Australian Poetry* eds. Philip Mead & John Tranter (Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1991).
[387] *Contemporary Australian Poetry: an anthology* ed. by John Leonard (Knoxfield, Victoria: Houghton Mifflin Australia, 1990).
[388] *Fire Front: First Nations Poetry and Power Today* ed. Alison Whittaker (St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 2020).
[389] *Maar bidi: next generation black writing* ed. Elfie Shiosaki (Broome, Western Australia: Magabala Books, 2020).
[390] *Borderless: A transnational anthology of feminist poetry* eds. Saba Vasefi, Melinda Smith, Yvette Holt (Woden, ACT: Recent Work Press, 2021).
[391] *Homings and Departures: Selected poems from Contemporary China and Australia* eds. Lucy Dougan & Paul Hetherington, trans. Iris Fan Xing (Woden Act: Recent Work Press, 2021).
[392] *Solid Air: Australian and New Zealand Spoken Word* eds. David Stavanger & Anne-Marie Te Whiu (St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 2019)

single-author collections and anthologies that demonstrate a fertile poetry scene in Australia. Those works inform and deepen my thinking on threshold poetics. A focus on the work of Ali Cobby Eckermann, Andy Jackson, and Ali Alizadeh has allowed me to demonstrate three different but interconnected ways the threshold may figure in Australian poetry: a productive middle between cultures and identities, a thin bridge between the body and language, and a transformative space between the personal and the political, between memory and inheritance.

A survey which considers the nexus between culture, language, and history in Australian poetics focusing solely on contemporary living poets has not been undertaken. *Writing on Thresholds* is situated in this gap. One of the difficulties I encountered in researching contemporary living poets was keeping up with their creative output. Both Jackson and Alizadeh published new collections during the writing of this thesis. Jackson has another collection due October 2021, and I look forward to seeing the direction it has taken. I would have also liked to include the works of a transgender/non-binary/queer poet as another demonstration of threshold poetics but did not have the scope to take on a fourth poet for the purposes of this thesis. I hope to attend to this gap in my knowledge in the future, as there are many exciting new voices in this space such as Alison Whittaker, Ellen van Neerven and Zaachariaha Fielding to name just a few. I also aim to continue interrogating threshold poetics as a site for transformation, decolonisation, and synthesis.

I will continue to write the doorway. I will continue to look for doorways in the artworks of others. By engaging with the work of my case-study poets, as well as with the work of a range of practitioners, scholars, and artists in the field of both poetics and practice over the last five years, my writing craft has deepened. The poetry collection composed during this thesis marks an apprenticeship. I write with my body on the line. This is not a rhetorical flourish but a statement of intent. I have come to know the cost on the body of writing, and the reward. I want to write in full attendance to the writing body. I write in the productive space between the receptive and the generative, between self and self-expression, between belonging and dislocation. I write on the threshold.

In Grace Cossington Smith's 'Open Door' (1960) a blue gown and a green coat or dress drape languorously over chairs that frame the partially open French doors. Beyond are the pixelated oranges, yellows, and greens of a late summer garden. Cossington Smith says of her work, 'It has to shine; light must be in it' and in this painting the light is honey drenched in sun—the interior ablaze (with sensuality) and the outside a call to refuge and beauty and a sheltering tree. What subject is framing the view? Is it lovers looking out from a tangled bed? Is it the artist herself painting at the threshold of the studio and garden? Who has stepped out into the sun and left the door ajar? In this painting the angle of door frame beckons us to follow the artist through the open door.

The Hinge in Between

Two

'the line of words feels for cracks in the firmament'[393]

—Annie Dillard

It is a kind of awakening, a transformation of self, when a creative project comes to its fruition. Especially a long-haul project. For all the germinating, researching, receiving, generating, looking, perceiving, synthesising, growing, boundary crossing, and creating to *become* something tangible, is to understand the materials of the invention. The *invention* might be a poetry collection, a novel, a dance, a work of art, a musical score, or something else. At the beginning, there is a 'throwing forward of the mind',[394] a step into the void, the entering of a threshold state. At the end there is the distance the artist has travelled—the things put on the altar along the way. The doorway stepped through. I have made a poetry collection of and about the threshold. When I consider what materials have been used and handled to write this collection I come first to my body—hands, skin, brain, eyes—and next to the call and response from the work of other artists and poets toward my own thinking through of thresholds. And then there is the material of instinct, visions, dreams, as well as physical thresholds such as the shoreline or where the river meets the sea. There are doorways, arches, altars, bridges and rivers. There are rites of passage and personal transformations. There is acknowledgement and recognition of what has come before, and what is still to come, on the storied ancient Country where I create.

Walking today along the bush track not far from my home on Peramangk Country, I was thinking on what American writer, George Saunders, might call 'the physics of the form'.[395] He says, 'we might imagine structure as a form of call and response. A question arises organically from the story and then the story, very considerately, answers it'.[396] If this is true, and I am learning that it is for me, the structure is built from the material of the particular invention in question. I took the walk, in fact, because I was having trouble coming up with the best way to arrange this thesis. Poetry Collection before Exegesis, or afterwards, or spread throughout, for example? Should I outline the Methodology in three parts as they relate to the chapters on the exemplar poets or

[393] Annie Dillard, *This Writing Life* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1989), p. 29.
[394] Paul Carter, 'Interest: The Ethics of Invention', in *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*, ed. by Estelle Barrett & Barbara Bolt (London; New York: I.B Tauris, 2007), pp. 15-25 (p. 16).
[395] George Saunders, *A Swim in the Pond in the Rain (In Which Four Dead Russians Give Us a Masterclass in Writing and Life)* (New York: Random House, 2021), p. 19.
[396] George Saunders, *A Swim in the Pond in the Rain*, p. 19.

would that be too confusing for the reader/examiner? Would it confuse myself? As I entered a graffitied tunnel, everything darkening for a moment, I came upon a structure. Each footfall, *thud, thud*, an idea in place. I would write two short essays to be the hinges in between the exegetical and creative components. The door itself—the exegetical frame. The act of stepping through—the poetry. And this got me thinking about walking and writing and how I must always enter a particular space for creativity. And often it is walking that takes me there. A need to move my body in order to think, or rather to free up stuck places of the mind has always been part of my writing life. As a child I invented stories while trampolining until the sun went down and I was called inside. As an adolescent and undergraduate I studied contemporary dance. I now practice and teach Iyengar yoga and I belly dance. I am lucky (every day, grateful) that I have the physical capacity to yoke together these two passions of writing and moving my body.

I remember being shocked first and devastated second to learn that Gillian Mears, the brilliant Australian novelist whose work had always been a revelation of craft and imagination to me, had a diagnosis of multiple sclerosis. She talked openly about her failing body and its effect on her writing. Eventually Mears could no longer take the daily walks that were so much a part of her creative practice. Of this loss, she says:

> I'm now at this kind of impasse in that all of my old rituals associated with my writing table have been busted apart by multiple sclerosis. As I emerge from this novel and face life presently in a wheelchair, I haven't yet worked out a way to work on a sustained work of fiction. It's a huge loss to me. Walking used to be so much a part of my writing. As I wrote *Foal's Bread*, I would work intensively in the morning, getting up very early, at about 4, working, working, working, then writing; and then the delight of my writing day would be walking – with a walking stick – but still walking. You still have a rhythm, and things just coalescing, and percolating through my mind. So yes, I see it as a bit of an obstacle at the moment.[397]

The working, walking, writing (expressing in language) rhythm is not only a distinctive feature of our humanness (two-legged thinking creatures) but has been a practice for writers and thinkers throughout history that bears fruit intellectually and emotionally. In *Wanderers: A History of Women Walking*,[398] Kerri Andrews considers the walking practices of ten women writers from Dorothy Worsdworth to Virginia Woolf to Cheryl Strayed who have walked for inspiration, solace, respite, escape, desperation, wonder, self-preservation, creativity, equanimity, thinking, grief, and to return their inner landscapes to themselves. Woolf famously stepped out the structure of *Mrs Dalloway* by

[397] Gillian Mears, "Some Incredible Story Told': An Interview with Gillian Mears' in *Kill Your Darlings* [online], August 24, 2012: <https://www.killyourdarlings.com.au/2012/08/some-incredibly-story-told-an-interview-with-gillian-mears/>

[398] Kerri Andrews, *Wanderers: A History of Women Walking* (London: Reaktion Books, 2020).

walking the London streets of the novel's setting. She also walked in an effort to maintain psychological equilibrium. Melbourne artist, Clarice Beckett, walked only the streets of her neighbourhood pulling a trolley of materials behind her so that she could paint what she saw—predominately the liminal spaces of dawn and dusk. And so that she could immerse herself fully in painting when the time was made available to her, curtailed as she was by domestic and caring duties.[399] As Andrews points out, while both men and women writers and thinkers have walked for similar creative or personal need and transformation, women have been considerably more constrained and circumscribed in having access to walking/thinking. *Wanderers* is written as an acknowledgment of 'the effects of material circumstances on women's ability to walk, or write, or reflect'.[400] The access to a room of one's own has cognitive, spatial and material considerations.

An even deeper and more chilling rupture to this consideration of agency (and what is needed in order to think, write, walk) is the restrictions/aberrations to humanity imposed by imperialism and colonialism. In Australia, Indigenous men, women, and children were prevented by law from moving freely around the country until well into the 1960s, under the Aborigines Protection Act of 1909 (NSW)[401] and other state specific Acts.[402] All legislation served the same purpose of removing and 'protecting' Indigenous people. A Certificate of Exemption (colloquially known as a 'dog tag') could be applied for to travel distances without penalty, but only if all connections to family, therefore heritage, kinship, safety, belonging, were relinquished.[403] To move meant losing identity. To not move was a condition of law. As I write this, the Australian government is now considering prosecuting Australians who return from virus-ridden India—citizens stranded without sanctuary. The asymmetry of belonging.

---

399 Tracey Locke, 'Exhibition Notes: *Clarice Beckett: The Present Moment*', Art Gallery of South Australia, 27 February—23 May, 2021.

400 Kerri Andrews, *Wanderers: A History of Women Walking*, p. 32. See also Rebecca Solnit's *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (USA: Penguin Books, 2001).

401 For information about the Aborigines Protection Act of 1909, see:< https://aiatsis.gov.au/collection/featured-collections/remove-and-protect>

'This Act gave the Board for the Protection of Aborigines statutory powers in relation to all reserves. Duty of the Board to provide for the custody, maintenance and education of the children of 'aborigines'. Board may apprentice `the child of any aborigine or the neglected child of any person apparently having an admixture of aboriginal blood in his veins' subject to the Apprentices Act 1901. (The Apprentices Act 1901 provided for a minimum age of 14 years for apprentices and regulated the terms and conditions of apprenticeships.) The Board vested with power over all reserves including power to remove people from them. Entry onto reserves by non-Aborigines forbidden. Regulations may be made for the care, custody and education of Aborigines and prescribing the conditions on which certain children may be apprenticed under the Act.'

402 Note, for example, Aborigines Act 1911 (SA); Aboriginal Protection Act 1869 (Vic); Aborigines Protection Act; Aboriginals Ordinance 1911 (NT); 1886 (WA); Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897 (QLD); Aborigines Welfare Ordinance 1954 (Commonwealth) (ACT): <https://aiatsis.gov.au/collection/featured-collections/remove-and-protect>

403 Anita Heiss, 'Government Policy in Relation to Aboriginal People' Barani [website]: <https://www.sydneybarani.com.au/>

Listening to the *thud thud* of my feet as I take the Heysen Trail through Mount George and Aldgate Creek (note the colonial names of these places) I think back to the lockdown of Easter 2020 due to the pandemic. I walked this path over and over, grimly holding on to the regularity of one foot after the other and the impossible beauty of stringy barks shedding skins. I wrote a poem that Easter while walking and worrying into the void of the unknown that we were all entering—*& our footfalls/ on the bush path will be tender/they are more tender/now /knowing this could be taken from us, too/ this walking/in sunlight/among the straight backs of stringy barks.* And now I am walking and thinking about where I have travelled—personally, artistically, cognitively—since beginning this project, interrogating thresholds as a site for generative and restorative practice, and as an in-between space where a synthesis, a third element, is created across and between cultures and/or identities. The threshold firstly has a personal dimension. This project has allowed me to claim a writing practice, to give it a name (threshold poetics), and to recognise the conditions required to ensure the psychological safety needed for creativity. The threshold is a slowed down receptive place where I can pass through or stay a while to dream and think. This does not mean that the work comes slowly or is wholly (or ever) peaceful, it simply means that I must demarcate a space that is protected, so that when the words come, I am there. This is as much a practical endeavour as it is a psychological one. Entering the generative space of the threshold has its obstacles, both economic and cognitive. Even now as I write this I am taking unpaid leave from casual work to push this thesis out. I write at a table in the corner of the living room. My teenage children come and go and chat and bang doors. The bush path beyond the window beckons. I worry every day about "putting bread on the table" as a solo, single-income, parent. How much does it cost me to be a writer? But how could I ever manage without this essential practice?

I write because it opens me up. I write for the sentence—those units of measure—that bring down the divine. I write from the body. I write for you. I write as dancing. I write to return. I write into the dark, scrubbed through with light. I write in blood. I write for bread. I write to say what cannot be said. I write because once I dreamt of a blue butterfly landing on my mouth. It vibrated exquisitely against my lips, saying you must speak you must write. I write for my grandmothers (gone) and grandchildren (still to come). I write without theft. But I know I have stolen. I write from the fault lines. My heart, I write.

In *Art on My Mind* bell hooks explains that her relationship to artistic practice is underpinned by 'reverie' but that the act of reverie is not inviolable. She also states that reverie comes before the actual writing. The writing is 'not an easy passion' and it is where the hard work of hauling words across a page begins. But dreaming, thinking, lingering as starting points are essential to the creative process. She writes:

> I think often and deeply about women and work, about what it means to have the luxury of time—time spent collecting one's thoughts, time to work undisturbed. This time is space for contemplation and reverie. Work for women artists is never just the moment when we write, or do other art, like painting, photography, paste-up, or mixed media. In the fullest sense, it is also the time spent in contemplation and preparation. This solitary space is sometimes a place where dreams and visions enter and sometimes a place where nothing happens. Yet it is as necessary to active work as water is to growing things. It is this stillness, this quietude, needed for the continued nurturance of any devotion to artistic practice—to one's work—that remains a space women (irrespective of race, class, nationality, etc.) struggle to find in our lives.[404]

And so how do I create the inviolable protected space where devotion to practice can be nurtured? Closing the door, embracing the in-between, turning down the noise, blanking out the calendar, taking care of my body, walking, saying no, being gentle, being fierce and having faith, faith, faith in the creative process. It is about being aware of the sacrifice and devotion required. Charlotte Wood names the inevitable struggle that comes during any creative project 'the nine processes of grumpy struggle'.[405] I could just as easily stand in the terms 'grapple', or 'bash', or 'wrangling' for 'struggle' because to make something is to be active—it is to be *doing* something. Creating is a verb. In *The Writing Life,* Annie Dillard discusses the 'peculiar internal state which ordinary life does not induce'[406] that a writer must enter in order get themselves going or 'set [themselves] spinning',[407] especially at the beginning of a project. Dillard's threshold state relies on shaping a 'vision of what the projected work of art will be' and this first glimpse, 'chip of mind', 'initial charge' and 'blurred thing of beauty' is to find the dangerous edge of the work and then to summon the strength to climb it.[408] Choreographer Twyla Tharp calls this initial primal stage of creativity 'scratching'[409] characterised by 'digging through everything to find something' or 'clawing at the side of a mountain to get a toehold, a grip, some sort of traction to keep moving upward and onward'.[410] The idea or 'scratching' will undergo many transformation along the way, and it is not until the culmination of the project that the practitioner comes to understand the higher purpose of the endeavour. And so in the beginning of this project, what did I have? A threshold

---

[404] bell hooks, 'Women Artists: The Creative Process' in *Art on My Mind* (New York: The New Press, 1995), pp.125-132 (pp. 125-126).
[405] Charlotte Wood, Keynote Address at the 22nd Annual Conference: Australian Association of Writing Programs, Flinders University, November 29—December 1, 2017. An extended version of Woods' keynote will be published by Allen & Unwin (*The Luminous Solution: Creativity, resilience and the Inner Life*) late September, 2021.
[406] Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*, pp. 46-47.
[407] Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*, p. 47.
[408] Annie Dillard, p. 56.
[409] Twyla Tharp, *The Creative Habit: Learn it and Use it For Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006 [first published 2003],p. 94.
[410] Twyla Tharp, *The Creative Habit'*, pp. 94-95.

sensibility; the influence of other poets whose writings seemed to be of the threshold and whose work had a profound affect; falling in love with paintings or images that articulated the threshold non-verbally; and a search for understanding of the sharing spaces I inhabit as a non-Aboriginal woman writer living on Permangk/Kaurna Country.

There is a rocky outcrop that I like to reach upon my ritual walk, where I sit and dangle my legs over the edge of an abyss. The gully falls deeply away and the extremely upright gums and pines make long thin lines to the sky. Sunlight makes it through but the light is very diffuse as if mediated by a stained-glass window. A thatched shelter of saplings has been constructed to my left. By teenagers perhaps? This room made of leaves seems a protected space nestled against the outcrop but I never enter it. I prefer the open vantage point of the rock ledge. The air on my shoulders, the feeling of suspension. I jot some things down in my notebook about hinges and entranceways. How to line up the chapters. I lie back on the cool flat stone. Here is the stopping-place before I loop back and return home.

the blue archway

for my father, Alan
who showed me what art can do

So much like an extraordinarily beautiful dream that I'm afraid to wake up and find it all gone

—Hilda Rix Nicholas

passages

solstice
wall with green door
dove
cyan fox
invocation
sleeping apart again
persephone 1
persephone 2
yield
39
the mother and the son and the holy ghost
transmute
a threshold
bride
votive

the blue archway

the well in blue, Arab Quarters
Imilchil or Garden of the Hesperides
through the arch to the sea
jambiya
the blue archway

fault lines

no words
poem for a sister
drought
only skin
landing party
Oratunga Station, winter
rock shadow
shadow dream
washing
worship
truth-telling
body on the line
the things we can't see
find me a garden
reciprocity
meeting place
white
rainforest wife
doorway
juxtaposition
if today is an altar what will I put there

passages

solstice

it is right to begin here
at the turn of the hinge

coming to the desk
this morning

auguries of light
fell across the drafts

I stood and rested
my hands on the back
of the chair

as if my own shoulders
were there & for
a moment words

combusted. I watched them
burning no longer

mine but yours

and through the window
a winter tree
heavy with birdsong

wall with green door

Georgia O'Keefe
1953
oil on canvas

more aperture than door
the clarity of desert lines
restfulness of green

ribbon of sky
wall of mud
belt of sand

these are the materials
of thinking

dove

i
the child sleeps bright hair bright pillow
silvered morning shadow soft

the dove makes a scratching sound
an almost purring
tilting and lurching in its box

and tenderly on tender carpet flowers
the father carries the box across the blooms

places it beside the dreaming child
her eyelids wing tips fluttering
the cool morning cool in his bones
  ragged night dissolving her lit-up hair

the dove is trembling, injured
  the child wakes

for you, he says
I found it in the night

she reaches in wonders at its alive-ness, its inside-ness
buries her fingers in its feathered throat
  her thumb on breastbone a little plug to keep it safe

grey light spreads and grey wings fold

child dove white edges of this night

ii
the dove
  hurtling into paint tins & silk screens
perching on bookshelves

  in the father's studio

  restless rustling
    like all artmaking

and when the child comes home, she looks for the dove

its world pushing out to the edges

its down drifting down over pictures

iii
days later, the father is ill his face sheening white in grey bedroom light
where is the dove now, she says, and why are you shivering?

you can't keep a bird inside he says

the child panics—goes looking
finds only a pouch of syringes
and studio doors flung wide

the sunlight quivering the sky leaching

to the palest blue like the father's eyes

iv
the dove is gone

curled beside him, she remembers
the heft of the father's shoulders
as she clung to his back in a surging ocean

riding waves all the way into the shore

her turn to keep him from going under

for you, she says, and makes a bird shape
with her hands

the white edges of the morning glinting
her fingers fluttering
fluttering

cyan fox

Meaghan Shelton
2018
cyanotype on arches paper

could it be dear fox
that you are the part of me
I call upon

for seeing in the creaturely light
for making in the half dark &
for the deepest of revelatory excavations

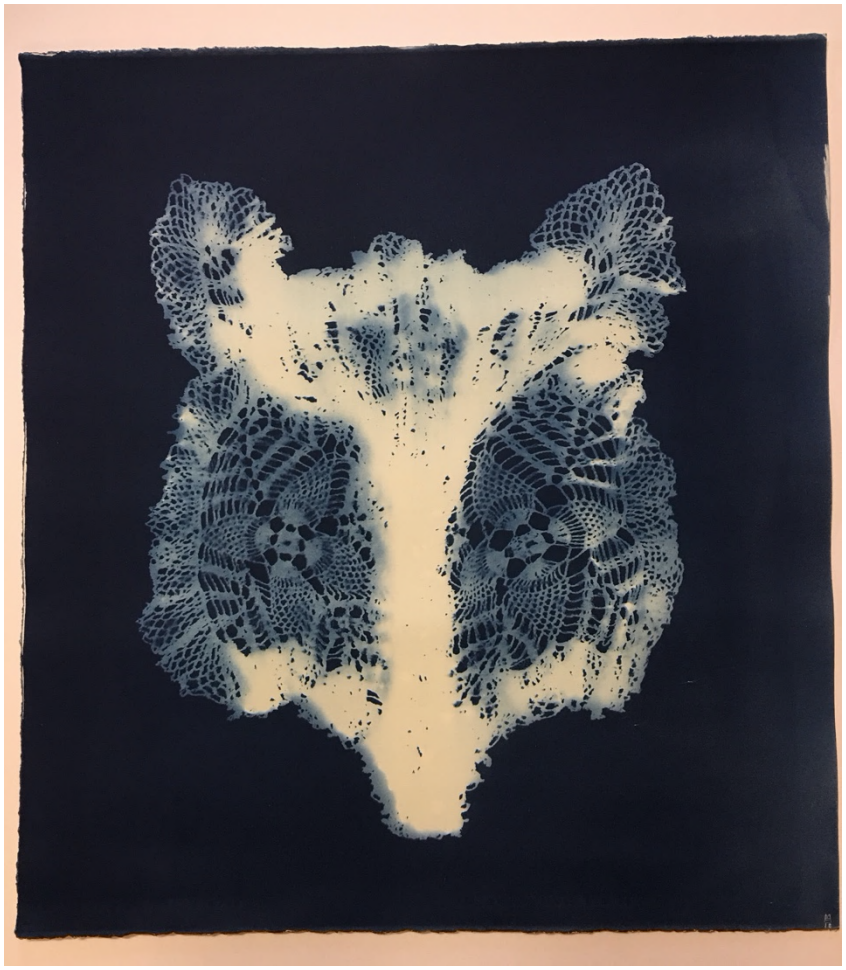
could it be that the bright bones of your skull
carry as many songs as the cradle of a woman's pelvis?

& animal instinct
primal urges
xray vision

you have the tenderest tongue when you lick my wounds

dear fox shapeshifting

I am rousing you



[fig. 1]

invocation

shoulder-high in roses (has there ever been so much colour?)
grown—this year—as if on steroids as if they knew they were

needed. Dead-heading snip/snip they spill in my hands
—battered rosaries or invocations. Have the birds gotten louder?

Or is it that I am better at listening? Frightened in my burrow.
Traffic stilled. My car just something mineral for the cows to lick

in the paddocks. The sky scrubbed too clean
& the linen hanging on the line is just a membrane between

what I once knew & *no dancing allowed*. Between innocence &
my birthday month: jacarandas blooming & 1.32 million dead

I count every petal at my feet.

sleeping apart again

Not yet midnight, and I wonder where all this dreaming goes
— the footfalls, the whispers, and all those unseen tributaries?

The frogs know, declaring like they always have before,
the oldest of lullabies: where there's water there's song.

The creek, it sings me to sleep, and the frogs. And the fog
that clings in the valley would be low & even, were it to sound.

All that muted water. Like an Om. A prayer. This I know.
Not yet midnight—please let me hear you inside this song.

persephone I

I will go down into that deepest
chamber, inmost cave, place
of mourning, on this the longest night.
I will go there to listen to the thud thud
of (my own) blood as I surrender,
cheek pressed to ground; and like
finding the ocean-song in shells
and the silent heart of speaking trees
I will cup the void to my ear
to hear to hear what
it is that must slip finely away—
silk rush of gown falling
shoulder to floor—
or what it is that must rage and burn—
fire that cleans to the bone—
for I must show you winter's tale
of granting death its rightful place,
that everything may rise in flaming
colours, when once again the earth
is bathed in equinoctial light.

persephone II

when the bees agitate, their sound high and sweet in frigid blooms
when the wind comes rousing, slamming doors and opening them
when the light begins to lengthen, showing your face almost fully lit
and when the crickets stay up late because the night is changing pitch

I see something new from the window and it is not the naked morning
or the magpies stealing so much song, or even the trees greening awake
but it is that I could be carried along in the rush and gambol of spring
as if all the quiet griefs of winter were settling in the undergrowth—dark
matter for new saplings and a soft place to lay the bones

yield

In yoga I go upside down. I teeter forward and back trying to find the plumb line. My centre has moved. For you. I find it. This steadiness. You ballooning forward. Tumbling in the rush of blood. You graze the edges like a new butterfly. Wings quick. Already I creak open. Hip bones shift and settle. Ligaments yawn and stretch sonorously. An instrument with all the strings loosened. I swell and yield. Swell. Yield. I turn the right side up. Or is it that the world has swung around?

39

To live inside a seashell would be to know
how to be carried along

I am three times my daughter's age
three times her luminous waiting beauty

the year before she was born, I collected
spiralled shells in Thailand and egg-shaped

stones in Greece. At stalls along the river
Seine, I found sepia postcards of undressed

women—talismans for a lost sensuality.

In Morocco I wore lapis lazuli for
the Virgin Mary & the gold flecks
came from space

How fragile a home can be.

At twenty-six, I was danced awake in
her vivid wake. (& my perineum—torn).

I line up shells on the mantle
trace their whorls we all have an imprint

It is my birthday on Sunday—thirty-nine
what will I tell my daughter

thirteen, of things? *Your hands are slim like mine*

But this she already knows. There

is always somewhere to go, something to
keen to—a lighthouse, a burrow, a doorway

a garden love that changes the shape of you.

the mother the son and the holy ghost

my child
taut skin over serration of shoulder blade
marks you as sharp-winged new creature

whose unbearable seclusion & flinch at my touch
I no longer recognise

as if those chubby-limbed years where you lay your cheek against mine
or reached for my hand or ran and ran with your elegant stride

were just some cruel ballast of memory
to haul up every dark night of the soul

I pray those ghostly nubs of wing I've seen

mean something—a rite of sorts
that I will one day come to understand

I wanted to give you shelter, dreams a father even

your gentleness is your umbilicus

your holiness
your earthliness
your combat

if you would show your rare new self to me I would return it to you.

transmute

it is a kind of grief, leaving this house
that I've barely had time to know

my words are so small sometimes
drops of rain disappearing on concrete

we talk so late into the night, my eyes water—
but it's because I never want to say goodbye to you

partial eclipse

I am easily distracted nowadays
which is no good for poetry

even bleeding has become erratic
even reading you is something new

is this desolation or a slow light spreading?

will it always cost me something—
making things from blood & skin?

a threshold

Meaghan Shelton
2018
oil on linen

tread softly because you tread on my dreams
—WB Yeats

urchin landing place
hold me in grace

patterned aquatic
for heart-making

shape-shifting

submerged dreams
hold

the sweetest

gravitas

fragile ecology
fine as lace weaves
me to this

stopping place

[fig. 2]

bride

Meaghan Shelton
2018
linen/tea/pyrography/starch

unfold me
on this hitched up
sheet

my dancer's feet
drawing lines

in the sand and

upon this topography

the folds we fall into
the seams between us
the gathering up
  and smoothing apart

of our mending hearts

burning
all that is lost
  all that flowers

    take off my dress

[fig. 3]

votive

Meaghan Shelton
2017
found lace and doilies
crocheted kitchen twine and silk
starch

there are pieces of me—curled in as shells
I want you to see

my offerings, woven heartstrings
I place before you

pink-touched and private
frilly coral
hanging bare

I am bare

embroidered rite

of
intricate passage

[fig. 4]

glisk

listening to *Ghost Dance* (Patti Smith) & knowing

we shall live again *we shall live again*

while outside the streets are divinely

quiet and the light glances less briskly

for Autumn for falling & our footfalls

on the bush path will be tender they are more tender

now knowing this could be taken from us, too this walking

in sunlight among the straight backs of stringy barks & yet

the skirting away from each other (on the path) while fragilely connected

is all we have. Later, I will sink to my knees in pine-needles

and try to wake from this dream. Only yesterday it seems we touched.

Easter Sunday across the earth & all is quiet. Will be

quiet. Prayerful. Resurrecting. While we wait to know

just what this will come to mean in the long lines of history poetry songwriting

Later still I will hold your head in my hands and I will not worry. I will

know

that for one small glisk in all of time I loved you. I loved.

Glisk: a glitter of sunlight; a glow of heat from a fire; a glint or twinkle in a person's eye. Figuratively, a glimpse of the good, a brief burst of warmth or hope. (Scots, esp. Shetland; archaic), Robert MacFarlane (@RobGMacfarlane)

the blue archway

the well in blue, Arab Quarters

Hilda Rix Nicholas
1912-14, Tangier, Morocco
oil on canvas on board

she does not travel light—canvas crayons parasol stool
but becomes light

Is it thirst or sunstroke or
an unravelling of the senses?

the colours shift across the wall
but names for all the ways to be

blue cannot get at Lapis Majorelle Ultramarine

A dream of water scooped from the
well in Arab quarters shows us both how

to paint the sky. Sweet and mineral. Endless. A longing for water

I long to know this blue hour this palette

the conversations she couldn't quite hear.
I long to know how her body withstood the hours *en plein air*

I look up and she sees me.

writing magenta with cyan.

Imilchil or Garden of the Hesperides

dropped off by a supply truck, we did not realise Imilchil
was a one Inn town. The riad a monolith of tiles
& columns
too much of an apparition to be believed, plummeted from

space onto a bare dune. Oh but the stars brisked our shoulders
in the desert void and we exhaled. Droning song of the Gembri
a fever dream a lifeline:

there could be music here, too. The men were kind to us then.
And the horizon spooling in all directions from underneath
the flap of a Berber tent— was a call to prayer.
Sobered from heatstroke with sugary mint tea & golden
apples I wondered

what it was to shed a skin. Yet my new skin could not stand it.

How many layers of cotton does it take to keep out the sun?
How many bruises does it take to hold up the sky?

We didn't see the English wife but she screamed all night. And the
bathroom doors would not lock. The men became surly if we

asked for too much. A towel, a key, a bottle of water. Soap.

So we hitched a lift out of there as soon as we could (begged
for a place in the Land Rover tour of a Spanish caravan).
(they held a conference/put it to a vote/solemnly agreed)

I sat among the luggage bracing myself for potholes
in the back of a jeep & high in the Grand Atlas
I did not know that air could be so dry. Rough as sand.

I did not know that when a nose bleeds onto cotton & hands
it makes a pattern like snakeskin. I did not know that a mountain
could be dust & stone or that a scoured-to-bone road could
be so many colours in a day
—ash gold white granite skin

I was dumb with this English tongue

I did not know that a woman could emerge from silence
with a voice like water. I can still hear her singing

I can still hear my desert awakening

from an immeasurable distance.

through the arch to the sea

Hilda Rix Nicholas
1914 Tangier, Morocco
oil on canvas and board

I have known mornings like this before—the sky
high and pale: the light blanching the sides of stone

so that everything feels clear again. Even the Soko
smells of cold salt air, and not of fruits spoiling in the sun

I watch you with your mother. The women's voices
are like the sea—quiet, murmuring, always there—and

I know you would run with me, through the arch
if you could. Our sandals slapping against the uneven

ground would be loud. Louder than the Call to Prayer.
I know you see me, even through all those coverings.

Sometimes it's the only thing that keeps me going,
knowing the sea through the arch is there, knowing

that you are there. And that on some mornings
even the way the light spreads on yellow tiles

is a promise, a prayer.

Jambiya & other acts of grace

for Emma & Gerard (who gifted the knife)

taxiing through the Atlas Mountains
a Marabout sharing our ride travelled
only with a bag of rotting meat
but was impeccably dressed

the 70s Mercedes with leather interior
was spacious enough for elbow room
& with the windows open the smell

was more dust than dead animal.

A jambiya corded to the Marabout's belt
was bone-handled and slightly curved
and lay in the folds of his white robes

he fondled the knife as we swayed
across the back seat vertiginous

mountain descent. And I wondered
about the glint of silver on the hilt
of the hill. Could there be water here?
a blade of green slicing the rubble

When the knife is pulled from the
sheath, it sticks a little. There is a bird

engraved on the blade. I don't recall
seeing any birds in the Atlas. Perhaps

there was a falcon just out of sight
cutting a swathe above undulating
ranges of memories

the Marabout was taking offal to
his family. I wondered on such
currency. Nursing of bloody alms.
The jambiya no longer a hunter's
knife but ceremonial

when we arrived he threw out
the precious bag. It'd dripped

putrescence onto his robes.
He cleaned the knife devotedly
& our driver aired the Grand Taxi

Westerners Only said the sign at
our riad—the old man and his
dagger refused. He gave
us dates—wrapped in palm leaf
(& spirited from where?)—hidden
cargo (& never will I taste
such polished sunlight again)

my own initiate's dagger
sits on an altar
of my making
reminding

write blood
taste sun

Marabout: a Muslim holy man or mystic, esp. in north-western Africa, usually living apart as an ascetic.

the blue archway

Hilda Rix Nicholas
1912 Tangier, Morocco
oil on canvas and board

The light here a portal, how awake I am now
and crossing the Strait of Gibraltar —is a meditation on blue

did you feel it too—on arrival? In your skin? Eyes smarting from the glittering port
& the white of the archway promising more than a gateway to a city.

On this side of the wall a man occupies the foreground obscuring
a woman who looks over his shoulder —you give her such radiance
a state of being she already possessed

the sun igniting the wall is revelation (how long did you sit in the chalk of a Tangier street?)
while the bowaabs, gatekeepers, on the other side noting who enters and who leaves
are not delineated dark folds of their hand-woven clothing contrast

the only certainty the sky

I crossed through Bab el-Assa one day too

barely knowing then what a blue archway could do

fault lines

no words

She lies on the concrete path between back door and chicken shed.
The seam between outside and in. And the hardness holds—
the heat of the day remembered on skin and on concrete. She pleads
the moon—tears slide uselessly into her ears and the bruises
are gathering. He tore her clothes. She hears him lunging in the kitchen
whisky fuelled and devastated.

poem for a sister

(for Ali Cobby Eckermann and after Judith Wright)

Ali my sister with the warrior heart
I am sorry. For all that was stolen.

umbilicus cut too many times; too
many severances, down the lines

you show me how to be a poet: the
stops in between; bird song words

gifted like water in deserts; keening
from the heart, and not too afraid to

cry; kneeling lonely between stanzas
listening for what cannot be taken:

skin, rain, longing, sisters, the moon—
scars heal like ragged words

drought

ear to tree
the wind inside
a kind of speaking:

water water water

[fig. 5]

only skin

roof and forest falling
blood skies reeling
the new year begins

on fire fire fire

we only have skin as a covering
or bark leaf dirt fur scales feathers hair
we burn easily

& ash adorns ashes

landing party

We are a handful, just a boatful, carrying too many skies
between us. Folded skies packed neatly in trunks—not

this endlessness above; not this stretching into the void,
upside down. At night, the sky is cut through with holes

moth-eaten and starry. Not to be stashed away. And now
we're washed up on the edge of the world. Landing party

on the moon—the sun, heavy in our clothes, drying them
stiff against us, like we're cut-outs of our former selves.

As if we could cross the shoreline and the sand would
cradle us. Wash us clean. Take our skies and names and

wounds of home. Rowing ashore, the sky high and knowing
there is smoke in the trees and old smoke in our clothes

and we utter not a word between us because what is there
to say when the trees look so strange, and the moon hangs

on a hinge, as it never has before.

[fig. 6]

Oratunga Station, winter
Flinders Ranges

Windmill on the left. Abandoned stock yard to the right. Cattle grid. Gini's gate. Footsteps sounding in your chest. Smallest disturbance. Vegetation sparse. Grazed. Go past the corrugated iron—sun damaged. Satellite dish. Water tank. The scattered bones—sun-blanched. The homestead. Aunties' bush garden lovingly tended. Quandong sapling. Drone of generator. Whiff of diesel. Climb the fence beyond upended bath—its incongruous green. The rusting iron bed. Remnants of another life. And two kangaroos lying prone, giving up together—their arms folded neatly across chests. Follow the creek bed—its memory of water. The ancient stones chiming underfoot. The crows *wakarling*. And more kangaroos watching—edging closer as if to say this way this way this way. Preening. Unwind their tracks through the native pines (vimba). The rocks pockmarking the hillside. Black moss and green. Don't tread on the old man's beard. Don't tread on the young man's whiskers. Don't break the law. Don't take the fern that belongs to the child. Red boulder at the top of the hill. Broad and hospitable and taking the sun. An eagle scores the sky and the ranges ring out. Listen. Clouds striate the sky holding nothing. Ants sieve red dirt like flour. Step lightly. Beneath their mounds feldspar, quartz, dolomite, malachite, copper, mica, uranium. Faultlines. Water table. All the folds of the world. All the songs. All the scars. Here I am.

* The old man's beard and the young man's whiskers and the fern that belongs to the child (for its first meal after breast milk) refer to an Adnyamathanha story of the green and black moss and delicate ferns that grow together on the rocks in the Flinders Ranges in Oratunga country, as told by Aunty Enice, Oratunga Winter School 2018. The story is concerned with male initiation rites, kinship laws, tribal laws, tribal boundaries, and Adnyamathanha songlines.

[fig. 7]

Rock Shadow

Tracey Moffat
From the series *Body Remembers*, AGSA
14 July to 1 October 2018
2017, Sydney
digital pigment print on paper

blunt grass remembers
what it was before
as my shadow
remembers dancing

we are all baked dry
to stone to rubble
abandoned on the edge
of a dream

Shadow dream

Tracey Moffat
2017, Sydney
digital pigment print on paper

through the window—a
gap in the ruin
there is more sky
than desolation

I always turned to the light

Washing

Tracey Moffat
2017, Sydney
digital pigment print on paper

I peg out my shadow
on the skin of the land

take my body with you
bury me in your womb

a bloodstain
wrung from the washing

Worship

Tracey Moffat
2017, Sydney
digital pigment print on paper

the body remembers
the apron tied neatly
the scratch of cloth

how long I prayed for
the roof to fall away
for the sun to expose
every corner of my prison

truth-telling

African slave woman
Hilda Rix Nicholas
1914
Pastel on paper

clearing out drawers I find the necklace I bought in Morocco
the loose orbs of blue tied up in a cloth bag
to be restrung one day
I remember it sitting heavy at my throat
chakra for truth-telling
and I recall the adornments
the women wore—bright scarves
slim bangles, elaborate earrings
anklets, charms, kohl, tattoos

and you are adorned too

for all time Pastel on paper
the copper twined at your wrist
and your white djellaba stitched
together from scraps

I read that the French embassy rescued you
from the slave trade
but offered you up as a model
prisoner your future
undetermined

the serious soundless poise of you—
sitting for Hilda
*(but she just curls up with fear every moment and doesn't know how to stay still)**
pretty details on your headscarf
suspending your sentence—

*Elsie Rix, Letter to Elizabeth Rix, Tangier, Morocco, Monday 30 March, 1914.

body on the line

—after Andy Jackson

rond de jambing over and over again
on the same small patch of black

how to write this dancing body
the shift from distil to proximal

the radiance of unfolding desire
the duende of the subjunctive mood

if I could I would trace circles
of belonging skin tearing

in bloody welts on pointed toes
inking the body on the line

the things we can't see

—for Matina

our bones
music
how the cells of our blood will behave

a tulip bulb resting in the frozen ground
the moon when it's new
the mystery of our spine—what's behind us

where love is going to fall
and pain of course—that awful arbiter
taking us much further into or
out of our bodies than we ever knew
we would be asked to go

what lonely chasms what terrifying thresholds
you have crossed dear friend

Let me tell you of the things we can see
grace—yours—the way you stretch your hands
and make beautiful things
the memory of your asana
what the body knows

the courage we practice for you

we can see the tulip turning to the sun
the light amassing
in the veins and sheen of its
skin

find me a garden

I find in you the space to turn and swing,
and slowly wing the poem to its end.

Each stopping place along the way slakes
the thirst, and sings the traveller to its knees.

Find me a garden, and I will go there—she
says—*I want to know the heart of you.*

Every carapace shields the tender centre;
every hummock makes the journey longer.

Yet, you lie open as the uncluttered plain—
the bones, the blood, the heat, the sand.

I come to you to gather the quiet refuge
of my words, to utter the beat of the heart.

And now, turning inward, to return, return
again, let's leave the poem where it ends.

reciprocity

A woman stands at the lemon tree
and sets her basket on the ground

her feet are bare the skin tough
the rocky slate she stands upon

warms the hard bones of her heels.
The tree is generous with bright fruit

and she handles each lemon pressing
cupping asking if it's ready to come

the skin tough the flesh beneath just
yielding, the sugars rising in the sun.

She takes only what she is given. Twist
of branch and the lemon surrenders.

The woman bleeds; the basket fills
with its yield. The pull of the womb

to the earth. She stretches her back
where the hip bones spread and ache

and lies down beside the rosemary
the press of dirt into her shoulders

the handprints of blood at her thighs
every cycle a precious happening now.

Leaf mound to cheek, she notices the
kindling she will soon collect, she sees

wild parsley seeding. She is born to resin
feather stone ant soil root wind tussock

she gives words blood dreams vows hair
hands that will water hands that will tend

the basket of lemons more than enough

meeting place
Goolwa, South Australia

from the other side of the dunes, the
sea croons, pulling the river closer

our boat stands in bulrushes
is held in place by egret song
leans sideways into its moorings

your shoulders shine wet in the sun
and there are daughters between us
they make tracks in the water:

its darkly amphibious
secrets—its bright
offerings

later, I taste the river on you
our children rocked asleep
in slanted bedrooms above

the water slapping lewdly below

and the stars are falling to the water
and the lilos are bobbing on their ropes
and we are sinking to the river's song

it's searching for the sea—
(only the birds can truly know it)
loud as tears

your body river slick against mine

white

full moon light spilling over the paddocks
and over the white-washed wall where I lean
on a ledge
you lift my skirt—also white. Too hot for any other
colour
your lips between my legs are hot
the wall at my back holds the earlier sun
and the cows put themselves to bed
folding into the grass

[fig. 8]

rainforest wife

Huon Valley, Tasmania

I never knew that the light here was painted water, mirror
silver and so very gentle. Not the brittle glare of home.

We are moss and mud and loam and tubers. We are just
skin. In forest gloom and rain kiss, we are naked bright

we are slipping barefoot deep and the moss will grow over
we are cum and blood and rain and mucus. We are water.

I am yours no more than the forest is ours, yet I'm steeped
in eucalyptus water and our blood from the leeches. And

so I am your dryad. I am your dear muddy girl.

[fig. 9]

doorway

St Brigid's, Goolwa

I stand in the open doorway
lit up from the ocean side
& lit from the trace of your hands

behind me
bed, stairs, you & the
hull of this ship-like room

where we've pitched and listed
and clung stars on our tongues
salt in our hair & the sea the sea the sea

we stand in sunlight now
my red dress on fire
the outline burnt in your retina
and you undressing outside the frame

the floorboards pool between us

and before us
the gulls, the dunes, the ocean lift and shimmer and surge
as if the bones of this church could still hear the angels eclipsing

the sea the sea the sea

[fig. 10]

Juxtaposition

First, a principle of attention, simply that. A faith that if we look and look we will be surprised and we will be rewarded.
—Mark Doty

when I left for work this morning
my neighbour (who never looks this way)
was on the rain slick street
leaning on his bin—poised—he'd walked
the length of the gravel driveway
to drag the bin home but had stopped for a moment
as if to enact a small escape.

Perhaps he smoked a discreet cigarette, or surveyed
the storm-wracked street for signs of collapse (but
again) he turned from me and I recognised the slump
of shoulder as a mark of private turbulence.

Later, I read Mark Doty's *Still Life with Oysters and Lemons*
in the outside bath. Bird claws skittering on corrugated iron;
a TV blaring, fading. And Doty writing of being drawn into
the orbit of a painting—its particular gleam, its alchemy of light,
the commingling of oils and pigments …

The glass balanced on the rim of the bath is candlelit from
underneath and the wine is stained-glass with sun refracting

but there is shouting and screen doors slamming.
A woman's voice shreds at the lull of rain. The man's
tone is low—severe. I wonder what blows he delivers at
this imperceptible register. There is a child. Perhaps it is
sleeping. More hurling words above the V8 engine. And
then full throttle, the car skids away down the long
gravel drive. Another door slams. All is quiet. I suppose
the woman must remain with child. Just another ordinary
marriage.

I return to *Still Life* and Doty—the painting & poetry
nexus. The rain falls convincingly. Bodily.

Deafening the bruise of night.

And the Aspidistra at the end of the bath slips
its papered fingers in the water. Veined, lined;

a thousand hands looming in the half-light. In the steam.
Bone of soap. Whelk of shell. Gold ring in a lip of water.
Used band-aid. My feet draped over the edge, cooling.
What kind of still life is this.

If today is an altar what will I put there

writing to the hum of the washing machine—an undertow
noticing the impossible red of grapevine through a window
the fire lit by midday/scratching for kindling
sitting up straight in my chair
wearing new lingerie very expensive
(didn't pay the school fees)
rolling shoulders lengthening neck
stones and pictures newly arranged on the sill—
Camel (1975), Brett Whiteley, charcoal on white wove paper—
hairline fractures in the teacup
biscuits made by sister
all the books you've given me
thinking on a sentence—its alchemy and utility
camp smoke in son's clothes (means he's still of this earth)
a steaming bath for daughter (just home from the dawn shift)
composing a list
lentils
cheese
a perfect apple
or maybe wine
not drinking
poking the bills in the flames
wondering if I should drive over to you
wrapping the shawl
lighting the candles
setting the scene
asking for silence
summoning mercy
submerging/igniting desire
claiming this corner of room
& priming the canvas
for a self-renewing act

*Clarice Beckett regards each work that she creates as a 'self-renewing act', Tracey Lock, Curator, *Clarice Beckett: The Present Moment*, AGSA, 27 February-16 May 2021

List of Images

fig. 1:
cyan fox
Meaghan Shelton
2018, Imbil, Queensland
cyanotype on arches paper
Collection of Emma-Leigh Berry

fig. 2:
a threshold
Meaghan Shelton
2018, Imbil, Queensland
oil on acrylic
Collection of Emma-Leigh Berry

fig. 3:
bride
Meaghan Shelton
2018
linen/tea/pyrography/starch
Cross Gallery, Bundaberg, QLD

fig. 4:
votive
Meaghan Shelton
2017, Imbil, Queensland
found lace and doilies/crocheted kitchen twine and silk/starch
Collection of the artist

fig. 5:
Oratunga Station
[photograph: Molly Murn, 2018]

fig. 6:
Landing Party
State Library of South Australia
Kangaroo Island Collection, B32245

fig. 7:
Black & Green Moss
[photograph: Molly Murn, 2018]

fig. 8:
Earthship
[photograph: Molly Murn, 2019]

fig. 9:
Huon Valley
[photograph: Molly Murn, 2015]

fig. 10:
doorway
[photograph: Molly Murn, 2017]

Bibliography

Ali, Agha Shahid, *Ravishing DisUnities. Real Ghazals in English* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2000).

Alizadeh, Ali, *Ashes in the Air* (St Lucia, QLD: University of Queensland Press, 2011).

Alizadeh, Ali, 'Against Representation: Louis Armand and the Limits of New Australian Poetry' in *Antipodes*, 25:2 (2011), pp. 191-196.

Alizadeh, Ali, 'Interview with Ali Alizadeh' by Michael Brennan, *Poetry International*, (July, 2011): https://www.poetryinternational.org/pi/cou_article/19028/Interview-with-Ali-Alizadeh/en/tile

Alizadeh, Ali, 'Modern Persian Verse' in *Six Vowels & Twenty-Three Consonants* ed. & trans. by Ali Alizadeh and John Kinsella (United Kingdom: Arc Publications, 2012), pp. 95-98.

Alizadeh, Ali, 'Sufis of the Antipodes: the *ghazal* in contemporary Australian Poetry' in *La Trobe Journal*, 91 (2013), pp. 140-148.

Alizadeh, Ali, 'Marx My Muse. Towards a Far Left Poetics' in *Axon: Creative Explorations*, 4:2, (2014): https://www.axonjournal.com.au/issue-7/marx-my-muse

Alizadeh, Ali, 'Leaving God' in *Coming of Age: Growing Up Muslim in Australia* ed. by Amra Pajalic & Demet Divaroren (Sydney, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2014), pp. 68-80.

Alizadeh, Ali, & Nanquette, Laetitia, 'Editorial' in *Southerly: Persian Passages*, 76:1 (2016), pp. 6-9.
.

Alizadeh, Ali, *The Garret: Writers on Writing*, transcript, 26 March, 2020: https://thegarretpodcast.com/ali-alizadeh/

Alizadeh, Ali, *Towards the End* (Artarmon, NSW: Giramondo, 2020).

Andrews, Kerri, *Wanderers: A History of Women Walking* (London: Reaktion Books, 2020).

Anzaldua, Gloria, 'Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers' in *This Bridge Called My Back. Writings by Radical Women of Color* (2nd edition) ed. by Cherrie Moraga & Gloria Anzaldua (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983).

Anzaldua, Gloria, 'Foreword' in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (2nd edition) ed. by Cherrie Moraga & Gloria Anzaldua (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983).

Anzaldua, Gloria, *Borderlands: the new mestiza = La frontera*, (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987).

Ashcroft, Bill; Griffiths, Gareth; Tiffin, Helen, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures* (London; New York: Routledge, 1989).

Atherton Cassandra & Hetherington, Paul, 'Ekphrastic Editorial: Poetry that Sees' in *Cordite Poetry Review* (2017): http://cordite.org.au/essays/ekphrastic-editorial/

Atkins, William, *The Immeasurable World: Journeys in Desert Places* (London: Faber & Faber, 2018).

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 'Aborigines Protection Act of 1909': https://aiatsis.gov.au/collection/featured-collections/remove-and-protect

Bachelard, Gaston, *The Poetics of Space* (New York: Penguin Books, this edition with a foreword by Mark Z. Danielewski and an introduction by Richard Kearney published in 2014 [first published in the USA by The Orion Press, 1964]).

Badiou, Alain*, Ethics: an Essay on the Understanding of Evil* trans. by Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2002).

Bardon, Geoffrey, 'Introduction: A Way into The Continent' in *Papunya: A place made after the story* by Geoffrey Bardon & James Bardon (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2018), pp. xxii-xxiii.

Bell, Diane, *Ngarrindjeri Wurruwarrin: a world that is, was, and will be* (North Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 2014 [1st published 1998]).

Benterrak, Kim; Muecke, Stephen; Roe, Paddy, *Reading the Country: Introduction to Nomadology* (Fremantle, WA: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1984).

Bolt, Barbara, 'The Magic is in the Handling' in *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Art Enquiry* edited by Estelle Barrett & Barbara Bolt (London; New York: IB Tauris, 2007), pp. 27-34.

Berger, John, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books [first published by the British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books in 1972; Reissued as part of the Penguin Design Series 2008].

Brien, Donna Lee & Brady, Tess, 'Collaborative Practice: Categorising forms of collaboration for practitioners' in *TEXT*, 7:2 (October 2003): < http://www.textjournal.com.au/oct03/brienbrady.htm>

Bringing Them Home Report—National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children From Their Families: https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/bringing-them-home-report-1997

Brophy, Kevin, 'On Recognising Collaboration' in *The Poetics of Collaboration. Axon: Creative Explorations*, 6: 1 (2016): https://www.axonjournal.com.au/issue-10/recognising-collaboration

Cahill, Michell, 'Transcending the Conventions' in *The Weekend Australian—Review* (August 13-14, 2016), p. 22.

Carter, Paul, *Material Thinking: The Theory and Practice of Creative Research* (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2004).

Carter, Paul, 'Interest: The Ethics of Invention' in *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Art Enquiry* ed. by Estelle Barrett & Barbara Bolt (London; New York: IB Tauris, 2007), pp. 15-25.

Carter, Paul, *Dark Writing: Geography, Performance, Design* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008).

Carter, Paul, 'The Forest in the Clearing' in *Halfway House. The Poetics of Australian Spaces* ed. by Jennifer Rutherford & Barbara Holloway (Crawley, Western Australia: University Western Australia Publishing, 2009).

Carter, Paul, 'Introduction: The Interpretation of Dreams' in *Papunya: a place made after the story*, by Geoffrey Bardon & James Bardon (Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, 2018), pp. xiv-xx.

Clark, Julia, 'Poetry Against Neoliberal Capitalism in Ali Alizadeh and Melinda Bufton' in *Cordite Poetry Review*, October 2020: < http://cordite.org.au/scholarly/against-neoliberal-capitalism/2/>

Clarke, Robert, 'Reconciling Strangers: White Australian Narratives and the Semiotics of Empathy' in *Travel Writing, Form, and Empire. The Poetics and Politics of Mobility*, ed. by Julia Kuehn & Paul Smethurst (New York; London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 167-170.

Cooke, Stuart, *Speaking the Earth's Languages, a theory for Australian-Chilean postcolonial poetics* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013).

Crozier, Lorna, *Bones in Their Wings: Ghazals* (Canada: Radiant Press, 2003).

Deleuze, Gilles & Guattari, Félix, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. and foreword by Brian Massumi, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

Denzin, Norman K; Lincoln, Yvonna S; Smith, Linda Tuhiwai, *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2008).

Dillard, Annie, *This Writing Life* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1989).

Doolittle, Hilda (HD), *Trilogy: The Walls Do Not Fall; Tribute to the Angels; The Flowering Rod*, Introduction & Readers' Notes by Aliki Barnstone (New York: New Directions Books, 1998 [*Tribute to Angels* 1st published Oxford University Press, 1945; *The Walls Do Not Fall* 1st published Oxford University Press, 1944; *The Flowering of the Rod* 1st published Oxford University Press, 1946]).

Doty, Mark, *Still Life with Oysters and Lemons* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2001).

Dougan, Lucy; Hetherington, Paul, (eds.) *Homings and Departures: Selected poems from Contemporary China and* Australia, trans. by Iris Fan Xing (Woden Act: Recent Work Press, 2021).

Eckermann, Ali Cobby, *Little bit long time* (Warner's Bay, NSW: Picaro Press, 2010).

Eckermann, Ali Cobby, *Too Afraid to Cry* (Elsternwick, Victoria: Ilura Press, 2014).

Eckermann, Ali Cobby, *Inside My Mother* (Artarmon, NSW: Giramondo, 2015).

Eckermann, Ali Cobby, 'Inside My Mother: Ali Cobby Eckermann' *Radio National: Earshot—Other Mothers Series* with Mike Ladd. Aired Monday May 2, 2016: http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/earshot/inside-my-mother-ali-cobby-eckermann/7319198

Etherington, Ben, 'An Interview with Ali Cobby Eckermann' in *Wasafiri*, 31:2 (2016), pp. 13-17.

Farrell, Michael, *Writing Australian Unsettlement, modes of poetic invention 1796-1945* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

Find & Connect—History and information about Australian orphanages, children's Homes and other institutions: https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/guide/sa/SE00146

Findlay, Carly, 'Introduction' in *Growing Up Disabled in Australia* (Melbourne: Black Inc Books, 2021).

Freiman, Marcelle, 'Ekphrasis an Enactment: Towards a poetics of contemporary diaspora practice' in *Axon. Contemporary Boundary Crossings and Ways of Speaking Poetically*, 7:2 (2017: http://www.axonjournal.com.au/issue-13/ekphrasis-enactment

Gilbert, Kevin, 'Introduction' in *Inside Black Australia: An Anthology of Aboriginal Poetry*, ed. by Kevin Gilbert (Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin Books, 1988).

Grant, Stan, *Talking to my Country* (Sydney, NSW: Harper Collins, 2016).

Harjo, Joy, *Radio National—The Book Show* with Clare Nicholls, broadcast December 28, 2020: https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/the-book-show/poet-joyce-harjo/12813486

Harlow, Barbara, 'Introduction' in *The Colonial Harem* by Malek Alloula (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. ix-xxii.

Heaney, Seamus, *Preoccupation: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London; Boston: Faber & Faber, 1980).

Hecq, Dominique, *Towards a Poetics of Creative Writing* (Bristol; Buffalo: Multilingual Matters, 2015).

Heffernan, James A.W, 'Entering the Museum of Words: Browning's "My Last Duchess" and Twentieth-Century Ekphrasis' in *Icons, Texts, Iconotexts: Essays on Ekphrasis and Intermediality*, ed, Peter Wagner, pp.262-280.

Heiss, Anita, 'Government Policy in Relation to Aboriginal People' *Barani* [website]: <https://www.sydneybarani.com.au/>

Hildyard, Daisy, *The Second Body* (London, UK: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2017).

hooks, bell, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1995).

Hoorn, Jeanette, *Hilda Rix Nicholas and Elsie Rix's Moroccan Idyll* (Carlton, Victoria: The Miegunyah Press, 2014 [first published 2013]).

Hoorn, Jeanette; Petersen, Julie; Taylor, Elena, *Une Australienne. Hilda Rix Nixcholas in Paris, Tangier & Sydney* (Mosman: Mosman Art Gallery, 2014).

Hoorn, Jeanette, 'Painting Portraits in Private: Hilda Rix Nicholas and Henri Matisse in Morocco', *Third Text*, 30:1-2 (2016), pp. 117-137.

Hunter, Lucy, 'The long and the short of it: Marfan Syndrome' in *Independent*, March 18, 2008: https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/features/the-long-and-short-of-it-marfan-syndrome-797095.html

Hustvedt, Siri, *A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women: Essays on Art, Sex, and the Mind* (USA: Simon & Schuster, 2017).

Jackson, Andy, blog at https://amongtheregulars.wordpress.com/

Jackson, Andy, 'Free-Verse Bodies. Or, Is Poetry Deformed?' in *Meanjin Quarterly* (November 12, 2014): https://meanjin.com.au/blog/free-verse-bodies-or-is-poetry-deformed/

Jackson, Andy, *The Thin Bridge* (Geelong, Vic: Whitmore Press, 2014),

Jackson, Andy, *Immune Systems* (Melbourne: Transit Lounge, 2015).

Jackson, Andy & Brooks, David, 'Ramps and the Stair' in *Southerly: Writing Disability* 76:2 (2016), pp.12-27.

Jackson, Andy, *Music Our Bodies Can't Hold* (St. Lucia, Queensland: Hunter Publishers, 2017).

Jackson, Andy, 'Andy Jackson: An Introduction' in *Transnational Literature* 11:1 (November 2018): http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html

Jackson, Andy, 'Unsettled Inhabitations: Bodily Difference in Poetry' in *Inhabitation: Creative Writing with Critical Theory* ed. by Dominique Hecq & Julian Novitz, (Canterbury, UK: Gylphi Limited, 2018), pp. 215-230.

Jackson, Andy, 'Question Marks and a Theory of Vision' in *Growing Up Disabled in Australia* ed. by Carly Findlay, (Melbourne: Black Inc Books, 2021), pp. 1-5.

Judge, Daniel P & Dietz, Harry C, 'Marfan's Syndrome' in *Lancet*, 336 (2005), pp. 1965-76.

Kanowsky, Sarah, 'Ali Cobby Eckermann' *Book and Arts*, *Radio National*, broadcast March 8, 2017.

Kearney, Richard 'Introduction' in *The Poetics of Space* by Gaston Bachelard (New York: Penguin Books, 2014 [first published in the USA by The Orion Press, 1964]

Kimmerer, Robin Wall, *The Democracy of Species* (UK: Penguin Books, 2013).

Kinsella, John, 'Preface' in *Six Vowels & Twenty-Three Consonants* ed. and trans. by Ali Alizadeh & John Kinsella, (United Kingdom: Arc Publications, 2012), pp. 9-10.

Kroll, Jeri, 'Living on the Edge: Creative Writers in Higher Education' in *TEXT* 14:1 (2010): http://www.textjournal.com.au/april10/kroll.htm

Kroll, Jeri, 'The creative writing doctoral thesis: insights from genetic criticism' in *New Writing*, 15:2 (2018), pp. 148-169.

Laing, Olivia, *Funny Weather: Art in an Emergency* (London: Picador, 2020).

Langford, Martin; Beveridge, Judith; Johnson, Judy; Musgrave, David, eds. *Contemporary Australian Poetry* (Glebe, NSW: Puncher & Wattman, 2016).

Lasky, Kim, 'Poetics and Creative Writing Research' in *Research Methods in Creative Writing*, ed. by Jeri Kroll & Graeme Harper (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp14–34.

Leane, Jeanine, 'No Longer Malleable Stuff' in *Overland* 241 (Summer 2020), pp. 11-17.

Lehmann, Geoffrey, *Australian Poetry in the Twentieth Century* (Port Melbourne, Vic: Minerva, 1993).

Leonard, John ed. *Contemporary Australian Poetry: an anthology* (Knoxfield, Victoria: Houghton Mifflin Australia, 1990).

Link Up—Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies: https://aiatsis.gov.au/family-history/you-start/link

Locke, Tracey, 'Exhibition Notes: *Clarice Beckett: The Present Moment*' (Art Gallery of South Australia, 27 February-23 May, 2021).

Macquarie Compact Dictionary (Sydney, NSW: Macquarie Dictionary Publishers, 2017 [1st published 2014].

Malek, Alloula, *The Colonial Harem* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

Mead, Philip, *Networked Language. Culture & History in Australian Poetry* (North Melbourne, Victoria: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2008).

Mead, Philip & Tranter, John, eds. *The Penguin Book of Modern Australian Poetry* (Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1991).

Mears, Gillian, "Some Incredible Story Told': An Interview with Gillian Mears' in *Kill Your Darlings* [online], August 24, 2012: <https://www.killyourdarlings.com.au/2012/08/some-incredibly-story-told-an-interview-with-gillian-mears/>

McLoughlin, Nigel, 'Writing Poetry' in *A Companion to Creative Writing* ed. by Graeme Harper (Somerset, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), pp. 40-55.

Moffat, Tracey, *Body Remembers*, Art Gallery of South Australia, 14 July – 1 October, 2018. [First shown at the Venice Biennale 2017 as part of 'My Horizon' curated by Natalie King and commissioned by the Australia Council for the Arts. Collection of Neil Balnaves AO, Courtesy of the artist and Roslyn Oxley Gallery].

Mukherji, Subha, *Thinking on Thresholds*: *The Poetics of Transitive Spaces* (New York: Anthem Press, 2011).

Murn, Molly, Interlude' in *Slippery When Wet: A Collection of Australian Short Stories Volume One* (Victoria: Australian Roadside Services, 2002)

Murn, Molly, '*Overland* Emerging Poets Series: Molly Murn' in *Overland* online: https://overland.org.au/2012/11/overland-emerging-poets-series-molly-murn/

Murn, Molly, *Stones, Rivers and Deadman Dances : Negotiating the Meeting Place : Contemporary Australian Fiction as Spaces for Reconciliation* & *Heart of the Grass Tree*, Thesis (Master of Creative Arts (Creative Writing) (Flinders University of South Australia, Department of English, Creative Writing and Australian Studies, 2013).

Murn, Molly, *Heart of the Grass Tree* (Sydney, NSW: Vintage, 2019).

Nelson, Caleb Azumah, *Open Water* (UK: Penguin Books, 2020).

Noonuccal, Oodgeroo, 'Municipal Gum' in *Inside Black Australia. An Anthology of Aboriginal Poetry* ed. by Kevin Gilbert.

OED Online, Oxford University Press: <www.oed.com>

Page, Geoff, 'Poet finds neat ways to send political message' in *The Weekend Australian Review* (August 7-8, 2021), pp. 14-15.

Pascoe, Bruce, *Dark Emu: Black Seeds Agriculture or Accident?* (Melbourne, Victoria: Magabala Books, 2014).

Pedersen, Courtney, 'Exhibition Notes for Meaghan Shelton's *Woven*'(Tacit Galleries Fitzroy, Wednesday 24 October - Sunday 18 November 2018).

Pont, Antonia & Atherton, Cassandra, 'Introduction' in *The Poetics of Collaboration. Axon: Creative Explorations*, 6: 1, March 2016: < https://www.axonjournal.com.au/issue-10/introduction>

Probyn, Elspeth, 'Writing Shame' in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Siegworth (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2010).

Rose, Deborah Bird, *Nourishing Terrains. Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness* (Canberra: Australian Heritage Commission, 1996).

Ryan, Judith, 'Valedictory: Remembering Geoffrey Bardon' in *Papunya: A place made after the story* by Geoffrey Bardon & James Bardon (Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, 2018), pp. 505-506.

Saunders, George, *A Swim in the Pond in the Rain (In Which Four Dead Russians Give Us a Masterclass in Writing and Life)* (New York: Random House, 2021).

Sakr, Omar, *Lost Arabs* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2019).

van Gennep, Arnold, *Rites de passage*, trans. by Monika B. Vizedon and Gabrielle L. Kaffee with an Introduction by Solon T. Kimball (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960 [1st published Paris: Émile Nourry, 1909]).

Schoenfeld, Myron R, 'Musical Magician and Marfan Mutant?' in *JAMA* 239:1 (1978), pp. 40–42.

Scott, Kim 'Covered Up With Sand' in *Meanjin* 66:2 (2007), pp. 120-124.

Sentilles, Sarah, 'Creation Stories' in *Griffith Review 73: Hey, Utopia!* ed. Ashley Hay (South Brisbane, Queensland: Griffith University, 2021), pp. 31-41.

Sepehri, Darius, 'Judith Wright's *The Shadow of Fire*: Making the Ghazal Appropriate in Australia' in *Southerly: Persian Passages*, 76:1 (2016), pp. 184-210.

Shelton, Meaghan, *Intricate, infinite: Addressing the ineffable aspects of women's experience through the lens of traditional craft practice*. Masters by Research by Creative Works, Queensland University of Technology (2018).

Shiosaki, Elfie, *Maar bidi: next generation black writing* (Broome, Western Australia: Magabala Books, 2020).

Smith, Paul, 'A Life with Hafiz' in *Southerly: Persian Passages*, 76:3 (2016), pp. 78-84.
Smith, Linda Tuhiwai, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous People* (London; New York: Zed Books, 2012).

Stavanger, David & Te Whiu, Anne-Marie, eds. *Solid Air: Australian and New Zealand Spoken Word* (St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 2019).

Stilgoe, John R. 'Foreword to the 1994 edition' in *The Poetics of Space* by Gaston Bachelard (New York: Penguin Books, 2014 [first published in the USA by The Orion Press, 1964].

Stonebanks, Christopher Darius, 'An Islamic Perspective on Knowledge, Knowing, and Methodology' in *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies* eds. Denzin, Norman K; Lincoln, Yvonna S; Smith, Linda Tuhiwai, (Los Angeles: Sage, 2008), pp. 293-322.

Story, Hannah, 'First Nations women and non-binary writers are making waves in Australian poetry' A*BC Arts: Art Works*, posted Thursday May 27, 2021 and updated Tuesday August 24: https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-05-27/first-nations-poetry-flourishing-evelyn-araluen/100160654

Tharp, Twyla, *The Creative Habit: Learn it and Use it For Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006 [first published 2003]).

The Monocle Travel Guide Series*, Marrakech, Tangier + Casablanca* (Berlin: gestalten, 2019).

Thomieres, Daniel, 'H.D.'s Trilogy: The Multiplicity of being' in *Enthymema* (2015), pp. 2-5.

Turner, Victor, *Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1967).

Trevorrow, Tom, *They Took Our Land and Then Our Children* (Adelaide, South Australia: Migration Museum and Ngarrindjeri Land and Progress Association. Year not supplied).

Unbound Collective: Ali Gumillya Baker, Simone Ulalka Tur, Faye Rosas Blanch and Natalie Harkin: https://www.artspace.org.au/program/52-actions/project-1/unbound-collective/

Vasefi, Saba; Smith, Melinda; Holt, Yvette, eds. *Borderless: A transnational anthology of feminist poetry* (Woden, ACT: Recent Work Press, 2021).

Wagner, Peter, 'Introduction: Ekphrasis, Iconotexts, and Intermediality—the State(s) of the Art(s)' in *Icons, Texts, Iconotexts: Essays on Ekphrasis and Intermediality* (Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter Inc, 1996), pp. i-iv.

Watkins, Ross, 'Writing the half of it: a challenge unique to picture book authorship' in *New Writing*, 16:1 (2019), pp. 3-15.

West, Errol, *Inside Black Australia: an anthology of Aboriginal poetry*, ed. by Kevin Gilbert (Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1998).

Wheatley, David, 'Black Diamonds of Pessimism: David Wheatley on the final correspondence of Samuel Beckett' in *Times Literary Supplement*, (January 20, 2017): https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/beckett-letter-volume-four/

Windham-Campbell Prize website: http://windhamcampbell.org/2017/winner/ali-cobby-eckermann

Whittaker, Alison, *Blakwork* (Broome, Western Australia: Magabala Books, 2018)

Whittaker, Alison, 'in-conversation at Sydney Writers Festival 18 May 2020 with Daniel Browning from Radio National's *Awaye*: <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/awaye/alison-whittaker-in-conversation-at-sydney-writers-festival/11757426>

Whittaker, Alison, ed. *Fire Front: First Nations Poetry and Power Today* (St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 2020).

Wood, Charlotte, *The Luminous Solution: Creativity, Resilience and the Inner Life* (Sydney; Melbourne; Auckland; London: Allen & Unwin, 2021).

Wood, RD, 'The Raw and the Cooke' in *Australian Poetry Journal* 5:2 (November, 2015): https://apj.australianpoetry.org/issues/apj-5-2/essay-The-Raw-and-the-Cooke-by-RD-Wood/

Wood, RD, 'Heartsick for Country. *Inside My Mother* by Ali Cobby Eckermann' in *Plumwood Mountain*, 3:2 (2015): https://plumwoodmountain.com/r-d-wood-reviews-inside-my-mother-by-ali-cobby-eckermann/

Woolf, Virginia 'Pictures' in *Oh, to be a Painter!* Introduced and selected by Claudia Tobin (New York: David Zwirner Books, 2021), p. 38 ['Pictures' written in 1925, was first published in

Virginia Woolf, *The Moment and Other Essays*, ed. Leonard Woolf, in 1947 by the Hogarth Press, London].

Worby, Gus; Tur, Simone Ulalka; Rosas Blanch, Faye, eds. 'Writing Forward, Writing Back, Writing Black-Working Process and Work-in-Progress' in *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature: JASAL* 14.3 (2014), pp. 1-14.

Wright, Judith, 'Two Dreamtimes' in *Collected Poems 1942 to 1985* (Sydney; Auckland; Noida; London; Toronto; New York: Fourth Estate, 2016 [first published in 1994 by Angus & Robertson]), pp. 294-295.

fin