Brennan, Dransfield, and Myself:
A Poetics of Failure

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Certificate of Authorship

I, Derek Motion hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at Charles Sturt University or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgement is made in the thesis. Any contribution made to the research by colleagues with whom I have worked at Charles Sturt University or elsewhere during my candidature is fully acknowledged.

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Notes on style

Throughout this thesis texts are referenced according to the year of publication of each source. In some cases this means the year attached to an in-text reference may not accurately represent the time of composition, for example: (Bacon 1922 p.92).

When an in-text reference does not supply a page number or range of page numbers this reference usually refers to an un-paginated source found on a website. Occasionally the scope of an entire work is also referred to, for example: Grunge Poetics (Glastonbury 2004).

There are no footnotes included in this thesis. Any background information deemed important by the author is included in the body of the text. This is my preferred style of presentation.

The poetry manuscript section of this thesis breathe in space has been paginated beginning at 1. This is to reflect the way in which the manuscript can function as a stand-alone document. Poems from breathe in space referred to in the exegetical section are referenced accordingly.

Appendix A The Wanderer Project is un-paginated. I designed the original print version of the performance to be read in this manner and have here retained this formatting.
Abstract

Brennan, Dransfield, and Myself: A Poetics of Failure

This thesis functions both as an exegesis of my poetry manuscript *breathe in space* and as a mapping of the space between the poles of success and failure in the work of three Australian poets, a method that helps define a new theoretical model for the poet qua researcher. The collective critical reception of a poet’s works can often involve either an implicit invocation of failure or success. Failure is also something new writers must inevitably contend with. This thesis looks at failure in a general sense before analysing the past function and future possibilities of A Poetics, affirming a strategy that involves the practising writer embracing his or her own models of failure. Following sections interrogate the works of poets, un-packaging the failures within their works (the author’s own poetry is included and critiqued). This thesis and collection of poems both contend that poetic failure has in the past been canonised as an overly simple idea. The results of this creative analysis and speculation suggest that the poet must locate and understand failure as a necessary thematic.
Introduction

Failure, or success?

We like to do things well – to be thought well of for doing what we do, well. Failure is something we must therefore contend with constantly. Just this morning (the date placed somewhere non-exact within the three years of editing this thesis) I attempted to make the perfect bowl of cereal, one that would satisfy my hypothesised need. I failed: the mango that topped the cornflakes was not as ripe as the colour promised, and then I ran out of milk in the final stages, leaving the cereal just a little too dry. The fault was not entirely mine yet things perhaps could have been done differently. It’s easy now to see there were ways of avoiding this failure – to start with I could have been better prepared.

The cereal incident suggests the implications of failure permeate our being. On a further edit, a later point in time within the three years of PhD candidature, I realised the example of the cereal is probably not the best anecdote I could have used – a further failure. Certainly there are other failures that introduce my ideas in a better way, examples that relate more to creative endeavour (not that the construction of a bowl of cereal is not in itself a creative act). Yet I have chosen to leave this first paragraph as-is to demonstrate the way failure keeps coming up, despite attempts to eradicate it. Like this introductory paragraph, it is not a simple thing.

It is reasonable to posit that failing constantly in ambitions (both private and public) will lead to unhappiness. We do tend to fail often, but this is usually offset by some success. Constant failure will lead the individual to think negatively. Di Paula and Campbell (2002 p.168) begin their research into persistence (in the face of failure) by noting the truism: ‘Nobody likes a quitter.’ There is however some slipperiness attached to the idea of ‘quitting’. In order to be known as a quitter, as a failure, one must first publicly make the attempt. Initially we might say that attempting to avoid failure can be seen as avoiding the attempt. In terms of the ‘Nobody likes a quitter’ saying the enterprise can be summarised in this way: if you do something, anything at all, there is a chance no one will like you. This matters. We need some positive self-regard to function normally. Even should you be an intensely private person I suspect failing constantly in ambitions (even the desire for good cereal) might lead to some measure of self-dislike, a measure you might then believe is equal to the dislike others have for you. But it is
important to look deeper. We must note that one who quits is pre-empting a perceived statistical likelihood of failure, doing this in a similar way to one who does nothing at all – and to quit will be perceived, by some, as less ignominious than to fail when all of one’s effort is put in. In fact it is often a wise choice: energy should not be spent in futile action. We weigh up the options necessarily. Sometimes we rationalise the couch and the television as a choice of action. If there is another option available with higher odds of success, an easier option, we choose it. We ‘change our minds’. This second option is probably, after all, the one you perhaps should have been pursuing in the first place. But if there are no other options with good odds inertia can take over. I propose it is more correct to say we rationalise this: nobody likes a failure; inertia gives the illusion of a clean slate, a sense of ‘I could do that if I wanted to . . . ’ Hello apathy.

The poet Todd Swift (2007) blogged: ‘Poetry - a literary genre - cannot be said to fail, whether it be conservative (in places) or innovative.’ I bookmarked the site and remembered the particular sentence, because my first instinct was to agree: yes, there is some truth to this idea that failure cannot be assigned to a general art form. Individual works of art can fail though, as can artists, who might expect certain things from their art, or themselves. There is often an implicit promise of some sort in a work of art – whether made to the artist or to the public. A poem suggests what it is doing, in a manner either overt or covert, and we (and the poet) then adjudge whether it has done a good job of it, whether the poem has lived up to its own self-referential expectations. Swift concluded his blog post by proposing: ‘The fact that poetry does not interest most people suggests most people are no longer interesting.’ I’m not so sure about the conclusion he arrives at, and the virtual indictment of our age, but Swift does attempt to eliminate one possibility – that poetry in general has failed – and it is an appealing idea. It does need further interrogation though. The statement affirms a field Swift himself is a part of: he has published a number of books of poetry and is a regular literary blogger. Perhaps I was drawn to the words because of an illusory sense of community, because I too am entrenched in a life that revolves around poetry? Really, one can claim that the entire art form of poetry is a failure. It makes just as much sense as arguing for poetry’s nobility or intrinsic worthiness. But this aspect of failure isn’t such that it is necessary to take action against the art form (as Plato sought to do). This thesis will later discuss Beckett and Foucault on this issue, but perhaps it is not so much literary creativity that needs to be affirmed, but the role failure plays, ‘the dimension proper to the life of humans’? (Foucault 1985 p.775). Poems fail. People fail. Poetry fails. We pursue errors.
and failure. The history of poetry within Australia alone is littered with stories of failure. Everything fails. Seeking to avoid failure seems futile.

When thinking of these tropes of failure within Australian poetry the way the critical literature characterises poets as either ‘successes’ or as ‘failures’ is particularly relevant. It is hardly ever a simple characterisation. Many ‘successful’ writers are known as just that within the literature – their works are anthologised and studied. But the stories of their individual failures are still attached (and in some cases the ‘failure’ story even becomes more well known than the the writer’s creative output). Middlemiss (2003) writes this in his short biographical note on Henry Kendall: ‘His lack of success . . . along with the death of his daughter Araluen drove him to alcohol and he was to spend various periods in a Sydney asylum for his addiction.’ The lack of success Kendall saw as a poet and the lack of success as a normal functioning human being are conflated in the article. Adam Lindsay Gordon shot himself at the age of thirty seven, the day after publishing only his third volume of poetry (his writing is still well regarded though); and Henry Lawson spent the latter period of his life ‘struggling with alcohol, being periodically hospitalised and imprisoned for failing to pay his children’s maintenance. His writing deteriorated into pastiche . . .’ (Gleeson-White 2007 p.74). Many poets have turned to drink and other alternative social ‘evils’, and this is linked to poetic output in the literature (in more recent times we have of course Michael Dransfield, John Forbes, and others). Life narratives that seem to oscillate between points of failure and success do seem more peculiar to male writers, but there are nevertheless female poets whose lives also fit the narrative. Eve Langley exhibited great promise as both poet and novelist in the early twentieth century, only to see her potential ‘strangely thwarted’ (Thwaite 2006). Her graphic story concludes with her living alone in an isolated hut, with only ‘numerous dolls and a clutch of cats for company’. Her body lay undiscovered after she had died, until her face was gnawed off by rats (Thwaite 2006). The tremendously talented poet of more recent times, Vicki Viidikas, had only a small output, and much of her work remains unpublished to this day. This is almost certainly because, as Stephen Oliver (2002) writes, ‘heroin overpowered her’. He claims this drug ‘ultimately destroyed her so that, quarantined within that hopeless addiction, she dragged the chains of destruction behind her, and became pariah to everyone she met.’ Perhaps the paucity of her work available to the public now is more telling than the effect her drug of choice had on her relationship with friends (a new edition of her
works has just been published – unfortunately at the time of writing I am yet to get a copy).

The fact that a ready-made list of men comes to my mind (men who wrote poetry while also engaging in self-destructive behaviours) does suggest a real marginalisation in Australia’s literary canon. Obversely, in their introduction to *The Penguin Book of Australian Women Poets* Hampton and Llewellyn (1986 p.2) claim ‘Women have a marginal status in the literary world’; they further focus this claim squarely on Australia with statistics: ‘In fifteen well-known collections of Australian poetry published since 1970, the average of female authors selected was 17 percent. The average number of pages of women’s poetry was 13 percent.’ It is a helpful insight into the Australian poetry field of the recent past: it is sensible to suggest that both women and men are drawn to poetry, and are also just as equally confronted with the reality of failed impulses. Though I am aware that it might be a contentious claim, it appears that there is no overt gendering of failure. Men have only lived their failures more publicly and famously, at least in the greater part of our nation’s past. As a result of my reading of both Australian poetry and the history of Australian poets, a working hypothesis – devised despite my focus on three male writers in this thesis – is that poets will always have to encompass their failures at some point in a writing career, regardless of gender.

While self-destructive habits are often romanticised, what I find more interesting is attendant absence: many writers quit or write poorly received works; many move on to other more mundane pursuits. Their talent or motivation drains away. These writers haven’t taken the option of not acting at all, they have made some sort of attempt, but they have then quit, risking the consequence of the ‘nobody likes a quitter’ adage. What can be said about the lives and works of poets – poets who really were giving themselves up to symbolic self-definition – who ultimately failed, or ultimately kept on delivering poems that promised more than was delivered? One possibility is that the realisation of a goal may have left them in a place they ultimately didn’t want to be in – like the actor who chases fame all her life, only to then shun the media spotlight. In this case taking full measure of the instrumental / economic futility associated with poetic craft might help. The poet knows she isn’t going to make much money from writing poetry, or attain a measure of public fame outside a small segment of the population. One’s motives therefore can be more authentic, artistic, pure, et cetera. But then that’s a little bit too easy. No one really ventures into writing with clear reasons, instrumental and ‘authentic’ rationales. Financial disillusionment isn’t the danger.
The general human psychology of failure can appear relatively straightforward in summary: personality traits affect how one deals with setbacks. Those with high self-esteem seem to cope with failing better, and are more likely to persist in their endeavours than those with low self-esteem. Consequently individuals with high self-esteem will act with the motivation of ‘achieving success’, while individuals with low self-esteem will act to ‘avoid failure’ – and so to the person with low self-esteem doing nothing is infinitely preferable to failing (Di Paula and D. Campbell 2002 p.711).

Psychology has previously suggested that most generic personality traits change very little during a lifetime (Srivastava et al. 2003 p.1041), and if this is true, whether or not a writer finds failure immobilizing might be genetically determined. Furthermore, in the face of repeated failure even well adjusted persons (those with high-self-esteem who seem to always gain societal approval by continually ‘trying’) tend to stop the trying. Perhaps quitting things and letting your failures rule you is inevitable? The Srivastava et al. (2003 p.1050-1052) study offers hope though. This study tested both theories that personality traits are determined biologically, and that personality traits become set in adulthood, much like plaster. In the end little support was found for either of these models. Their research did locate certain developmental trends – neuroticism tends on average to lessen with age, agreeableness tends to increase, extraversion tends to stay the same – but the important fact is that there is not much evidence to suggest personality cannot change over the entire course of an individual’s life. The conclusion is: ‘people continue to mature [change] well into middle adulthood’. While on first glance the psychological association of failure and self-esteem didn’t seem to offer us much that is useful, if we now consider self-esteem as a virtual amalgam of the major personality traits, there may be reason behind undertaking a further study of our own artistic failures.

The psychological study of human behaviour also suggests that the character of any goal attempted matters (science is not cast aside in this literary thesis, at least not yet). When one attempts goals that are perceived as an adjunct to a ‘symbolic self-definition’ (for instance, perhaps the long-term goal of wanting to be a great writer) failure seems to matter less (Brunstein and Gollwitzer 1996 p.396). In fact, somewhat paradoxically, failure in these tasks can actually give rise to greater effort and persistence when undertaking tasks of a similar vein in the future. It is probably not surprising that some old adages prove correct – we do learn by making mistakes. After all, failure to gain what you want instantly means there is room for the seductive action
of change. Self-definition demands imagination, change, a virtual re-coding of the ‘self’. Error and failure seem to be a part of this – indeed these things are implicit facts in any existence. Again I am reminded that Foucault (1985 p.775) categorises these things as necessary (whether the view be scientific or otherwise): ‘. . . “error” constitutes not the forgetting or the delaying of the promised accomplishment, but the dimension proper to the life of humans and indispensible to the life of the species.’

Poems are often ‘mistakes’ but their errors could be viewed as indispensible within a writing trajectory. A good local example is the Ern Malley poems, poems that were intended to be failures (works that, when released in the 1940s, would function to highlight the soulless nature of the modern poetic style). These works have of course become famous within the Australian canon, and it is my view that the (real) authors, McAuley and Stewart, displayed a vital side of themselves when they weren’t writing as themselves. An embrace of the non-rational perhaps creates this willing poet: ‘I am content at last to be / The sole clerk of my metamorphoses. / Begin here:’ (Malley 2002).

In this case the creation of a fictional author with less authorial control has brought about some memorable linguistic and structural originality, and most anthologies of Australian poetry now contain some Malley poems. The Ern Malley affair continues to inspire creative communities too. One of my first published poems ‘where is silicon valley?’ was a part of Cordite Poetry Review’s twenty-third issue, themed ‘Children of Malley’ (Motion 2005). After the poem was accepted I found all contributors would be adopting a nom de plume, a Malley name. At this point I was familiar with the Ern Malley context, but I didn’t realise that this was to be part of the project, and I still thought an important part of the publication process would be the appearance of my name alongside my work. Now, looking back, I can see that it was useful to have my assumptions challenged in such a way. Relaxing the boundaries of authority (in particular the poet’s control over production and reception) allows falsity, error, and failure. Options are opened when you are allowed to be a poet you were not before. And at the time of writing, Cordite Poetry Review has just published ‘Children of Malley 2’, proving that many poets and editors are still looking to engage with the Malley story and process, to unravel what working towards, or away from failure really means.

Looking to America one can observe another good example of intentionally targeting ‘error’, the invention of ‘flarf’ poetry. The intention behind one of the original ‘flarf’ poems was to expose a poetry competition website as a fraud (and this was achieved) by creating poetry that was deliberately immature and and badly written, even
scatalogical, a poem in fitting with what Dan Hoy (2006) calls flarf’s ‘Un-P.C. aesthetic aim’. But now, like it or not, flarf poetry is widely written and read (and continues to reinvent and redefine itself). In Brophy’s (2009 p.4) essay ‘Original Thinking’, he draws attention to the way metaphorical thinking is often akin to theoretical thinking, where the overall aim is truth, but more correctly what we are after is the opening up of further possibilities for thinking. He highlights the example of a mathematician who was described as having a gift for making mistakes, but the right mistakes. Brophy is asking whether or not the successful metaphor might therefore be described as ‘the good mistake’. To me his essay suggests ‘mistakes’ can lead to further possibility, further affirming the Foucauldian notion that ‘error’ is the proper state of human existence. There is something evolutionary about the process. One might even go so far as to draw a parallel between this interpretation and the Christian idea of the fall of man, which thinkers such as St. Thomas Aquinas (1920) have placed as a ‘fortunate fall’, one allowing humankind to know good and evil, and to choose. Poems should be seen as creative figurations and apprehensions of the unknown, with the necessary aim allowing further apprehension; and so mistakes are always informative, because they are typically un-formulaic. The real failure might be simply the negative value that is attached to these words – failure, mistake – which leads to certain poetic aspects being largely left unexamined. Everything we do could be better seen as an experiment ending in failure, because this keeps open the possibility of something higher (salvation, enlightenment, passable happiness). It is not unreasonable to suggest that objects more substantial than poems, entire creative careers, might be measured for their implicit level of failure. Even if only to make the entire process of self-definition less tedious, less vexing. We must fail well, make the necessary ‘good mistakes’, and always ‘Begin here:’

Of course the possibilities such as salvation or happiness – possibilities gleaned from ideas of self-esteem and the related psychological evidence – come out of an analytical, Westernised notion of ‘the self’. This Westernised identity has unavoidably been a part of my upbringing and has informed my intellectual development, but it is also something I am not entirely comfortable with. Buddhist philosophy instead relies heavily on a distinct lack of self, the concept of ‘anatman’, which is ‘the key Buddhist doctrine that both the individual and objects are devoid of any unchanging, eternal, or autonomous substratum . . .’ (Keown 2003). I think this touches upon models of failure in a way that experimental psychology does not: in Buddhist terms an individual is still eminently responsible, and the manifestation of failure equates to staying attached to
earthly things and ideas. Enlightenment is reached with the removal of all impediment, not just that which stops us being ‘happy’:

Prior to reaching the goal of enlightenment, the range of possibilities available to a given individual in any given moment is significantly restricted or determined—this is precisely the point of the Buddhist conception of liberation. Enlightenment is not just freedom from suffering; it is freedom to act in a creative, compassionate manner, unlimited by the constraints of prior delusion in the form of conditioned reactivity linked to a false and overly self-referential conception of personal identity.

(Sponberg 1997)

This definition of personal identity is important, because of the link (which might be contested) between acting creatively and acting ethically. As Brophy (1998) points out in his discussion of the figure of the writer, the idea of a ‘mediated self’ is now commonplace; at the very least it is as he puts it ‘the site of a battleground between humanists and post-humanists’. So whichever way the literary combatants go in their disagreement, they proceed from a common acknowledgement that this mediation can be addressed – the notion that the author exists as an individual voice (let alone as a receptacle for ‘genius’) has been placed under stress. I would hazard that the overly referential self is to blame (at least in a number of conceptions) for a lot of philosophical, if not also writerly, angst. From this one might extrapolate that the overly referential self – collectively notions of the I, the Me, the We, the Us – is at the root of the canonised notion of failure. We believe failures are negative (without fully understanding them) and also believe our failures are a part of our selves. This is problematic. Psychoanalysis probably won’t save the individual from angst, and similarly Buddhist philosophy might not save the world from disharmony on a larger scale. But there is a light. Brophy (1998 p.32) helps to isolate the sense of contemporary hope:

At a moment when the author as creative origin of a literary text has seemingly been undermined in favour of the text’s existence as a cultural, political and historical artefact, as a production of language itself, or as inevitably subversive of its own assertions, this recent annexing of the creative function to a widening
range of discourses seems to breathe a paradoxical life back into the author as creative origin.

In the psychoanalytical sense (a Lacanian psychoanalytical sense) this ‘life’ that resurfaces need not be so paradoxical. Clarity comes with a more reasonable sense of the way society is written – the individual functioning in tandem with a thorough understanding of the way creativity functions (as a collection of structures) is liberated to some degree. Re-coding the very ways in which we live, behave and create has led to a position where being creative has come to mean revelling in the (paradoxical?) possibilities of creating one’s own authorship. The statement of ‘the death of the author’ that so quickly entered into the cultural collective is a useful failure: but as the Australian poet Kate Fagan said (while introducing a panel at the Poetry and the Trace Conference in Melbourne, 2008) this can be more correctly understood as not so much a death that is a negative ‘end’, but as ‘a re-contextualisation’ of the role of the author. (I suspect this recontextualisation is something that has been becoming more permissible – in a literary sense – since the Renaissance. The prevalence of a widespread Death via plagues during this time understandably caused many artists to reevaluate what death meant, and to question whether a spiritual system that cast life as predetermined had any real currency. John Donne’s sixth ‘Holy Sonnet’ (beginning ‘Death be not proud’) raises the idea that death is associated with the rigid structures of religion, but that it is also personal. This shifting viewpoint means we can apprehend death, and accordingly life, in more than one simple way. One might then trace this notion forward to Barthes’ repudiation of ‘centres’, and his foregrounding of all that is liminal.) Importantly, this shift in thinking leaves me, you, us, in a more open space. Death is allowed as a change of context. It is not the ‘mighty and dreadful’ end that Donne anatomised, but instead a process of change that hints at an underlying idea: *change is possible.*

The act of self-definition then – one that hinges upon a carefully creative stance, acknowledging the problems of over-referentiality, and one that allows for the contextualisation of our own ‘deaths’ – is important. It requires or allows us to pursue what we are interested in, regardless of what we have a slight genetic predisposition towards, (and) regardless of whether or not what we are interested in has an identifiable or instrumental end. A direction becomes all that is necessary to valorize a process of work. Is this because the concept of a solid soul is also unnecessary? If so, we may therefore need a solid belief-system of non-believing, if only in order to emphasise the
real transformative truths that do seem valid (I think this is something allowed for, maybe even made necessary with Retallack’s (2007) concept of the ‘strategic imagination’). Foucault (1988) said in interview:

> The main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning. If you knew when you began a book what you would say at the end, do you think that you would have the courage to write it? What is true for writing and for a love relationship is true also for life. The game is worthwhile insofar as we don't know what will be the end.

We are our own texts and part of the worth derived from a creative life is the unfinished nature of all pursuit. Possibility is left open, and new processes constantly defer ‘ends’. A Foucauldian way of viewing one’s self (and in turn engaging with all purposeful action) affirms an experimental unpackaging of the processes underlying the truths we use to affirm our very ‘selves’ (Racevskis 2002 p.138-140). The way forward – and I deliberately commingle existence with the creative urge, the two being blurred at every point – is to then be passionately sceptical of inscribed truths: Western psychological evidence, Buddhist conceptions of no-self, or even the Lacanian notion of a fictive self functioning in parallel with an unknowable Real (which often appears to me so sensibly ‘true’). In this way a Kantian prescription of asserting one’s freedom through a responsibility to exercise one’s critical faculties, can be productive. Self-esteem does not matter in the attempt to write poetry, or, in the attempt to write. The utter pointlessness of no-truth and no-self does not matter either, because we do create ourselves, writing our own ends, writing our way out of a Lacanian sense of loss associated with separation from the Real.

There will always be a point of justification, where the writer meets the need to illustrate purpose, or more correctly, to defend his or her stance. I think an answer to that elusive implicit question lurking underneath all poems – Why do you write poetry? – is for me at least suggested by the way Žižek (1991 p.8) clarifies Lacan’s notion of the anxiety/desire divide:

anxiety occurs not when the object-cause of desire is lacking; it is not the lack of the object that gives rise to anxiety but, on the contrary, the danger of our getting
too close to the object and thus losing the lack itself. Anxiety is brought on by the disappearance of desire.

The pleasure of imagining in the face of the presence of the ‘lack’ is the real pleasure of desiring. It is the righteousness of failure. This is why Coe (1964 p.4) seeks to characterise Samuel Beckett’s work as ‘an art of failure’; as he outlines:

The artist is driven – by the very fact of being an artist – to realise, to create in art, that which is not, that which cannot be, because, as soon as it is created in concrete terms (paint or words) it ceases to be itself. Consequently, it must fail.

To desire a poetic end of any sort (a published volume, the pithy expression of a never-before-put truth, the more complexly nuanced self emerging from deep artistic thought and practice) involves a creative imagining, wherein the real force of desire is felt. Creative research is one such end: a process that insists upon giving the constructed nature of ‘goals’ recognition, and therefore, paradoxically perhaps, allowing the artist to create possibility itself, an act warding off anxiety on levels both micro and macro. Perhaps the reason Beckett has been such an influential writer is because of his admission of failure, an admission that is implicit in all of his writing. There is something exuberant about this admission. Beckett (1965 p.125) himself put it this way, when talking about artistic craft in Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit: ‘To be an artist is to fail as no other dare fail. It is his world.’ I think this tragically comically absurd suggestion should not be ignored – the world of failure is one the artist must be prepared to live in.

If poetry is your art then a poetics that takes account of this implicit necessity of failure, and also the imaginative nature of all endeavour (all desirable endeavour), is itself a necessity. Lacan (1977 p.5) did say he was suspicious of the term ‘research’ (referring to himself as a seeker and not a finder), yet this was in a context of defining psychoanalysis as a science, in the further context of his own excommunication from the psychoanalytic community. I feel that creative research – of the form I am undertaking, uncertain in its final resolution – may have been a form of finding Lacan would be interested in. Of course we should be very suspicious of Lacan’s words at all times. Suspicious, while attentive.
Ambition.

In his essay ‘Poetry and Ambition’ Donald Hall (2009 p.1-2) argues that poets should always be writing with the intention of writing ‘great poems’. Interestingly, throughout the course of his essay he finds it necessary to refer to failure a great deal, as if it almost naturally arises that failure must go hand-in-hand with ambition. In the first paragraph Hall proposes that in general ‘we [poets] fail in part because we lack serious ambition’. He feels the quest for artistic greatness is doomed to fail, but that a greater failing is to write without the grand ambition. By being deficient in ambition one is more likely to achieve moderate success – a success in line with the degree of your goals. Although as Hall (2009 p.2) argues, ‘If our goal in life is to remain content, no ambition is sensible. . .’. A life of discontent seems assured. Yet an artistic career that offers surprise is also available. Embracing an uncertain teleology, and understanding that failure will be something you must take on board, these are the important choices a writer (a poet) makes.

I am committed to writing poetry, and in literary expression in general. This much is clear to me. I have made the small act of self-definition that seems essential to get this far, even though I still find that writing and working with language is in general problematic, if not at times downright unsettling. Brophy (1998, p.33), while discussing the narrowing down of forms and genres that a writer generally undertakes, refers to us as ‘those who are committed to creative authorship as a career, an identity or as a point of status. . .’. Whether one writes as a means to unearthing wisdom and profound truths, or (writes) as a non-instrumental exercise in play (more likely the rationale lies somewhere in between these two ‘poles’), questions arise involving strategy. If ‘knowing’ is a goal, writing must encompass everything. Take Foucault’s (1994 p.44) example:

When one is faced with the task of writing an animal’s history, it is useless and impossible to choose between the profession of naturalist and that of compiler: one has to collect together into one and the same form all that has been seen and heard, all that has been recounted, either by nature or by men, by the language of the world, by tradition, or by the poets.
Foucault’s example here is that of the scientist researching an animal, but the point is that for him knowing cannot be an act of specialisation. To know anything is to recover its value from amongst the totality, language and its many permutations included. Accordingly to voice the concerns of humankind (analytical or emotional), to create song, or to radically redefine the possibilities for creative existential response – all of these options present the writer with an immense task. Working within language necessitates the comprehension of a lot. A lot must be allowed.

Too much emphasis can be placed on knowing. Foucault himself is clearly suspicious of the idea that the pursuit of ‘knowledge’ will improve the plight of humanity. For him this is Utopian nonsense – there is no intrinsic goodness in knowing. In fact, he feels the pursuit might be more readily seen as malicious, citing Nietzsche’s idea of ‘the violence of a position that sides against those who are happy in their ignorance, against the effective illusions by which humanity protects itself. . .’ (Foucault 1991 p.99). One of the allures of poetry – particularly to me – is the polyphonies allowed, and the chaotic approach that can be harnessed while also remaining powerful in the chaos; this effectively makes poetry a tool that can be a method of knowing, and, I think, a protective illusion. It does beget trouble: the lack of a ‘correct path’ causes poetry to continually question its own grounds (like a lot of art-forms), and to ponder its own insubstantiality. Even when practitioners are not called on to defend themselves and their art they find themselves doing so, as if this alone is the one tradition we can be sure of. It often leads the poet to become a kind of philosopher of teleology. All poets that attempt to do ‘new things’ will hit a wall when they realise just how much has been done, and then a further wall when they realise the critical work that has been done on the fallacy of defining anything as ‘new’ anyway. The question will always confront us: what is the point of new endeavour? How am I supposed to be properly ambitious? The point – as will be discussed further within this thesis – has to be a change in emphasis. Instead of knowing, the poet can place a certain trust in not knowing. For instance, many poets will come to ‘experiment’ because of a more subtle understanding of the role of newness. Robinson (2007) clearly outlines the difference between notions of ‘experimentation’ and ‘innovation’ in an article that seeks to do just this. He explains how ‘experiment’ is derived from the term experiri, ‘to try’, while ‘innovation’ more simply means newness. While innovation may encompass new creative modes and methods, and these may become commonly utilised, the vital difference is that ‘an experimental work puts itself to the test, seeking to establish its
validity by trial, and in turn necessitating further experiment’ (Robinson 2007). Innovation can be faddish and fashionable; experimentation will always involve embracing doubt. Experimentally, failures are important milestones.

So despite the scurrilous doubt, there remains this sense that one is acting in the right way when undertaking a thoughtfully creative task. *It seems like the right thing to do to write a poem.* Why? The doubt is created in part because of the backward-looking insubstantiality poetry necessitates, especially as it is so firmly rooted in language, the medium for qualifying existence, and so one (a poet) will never be completely brimful of purpose. Yet if we are at a point in time where collective epistemology demands language now grows ‘with no point of departure, no end, and no promise’ (a consequence of the shifting character of thought through history), and literature is for the time being locked in this ‘futile yet fundamental space’, as Foucault (1994 p.49) reckons, poetry could offer the right platform for future human engagement. As mentioned, poetry has already dispensed with the illusory promise of ever-greater knowledge through rigorous observation and recording (or perhaps more correctly the idea that any such greater knowledge will lead to ‘peace on earth’). In my opinion, writing poetry leads to (or at least can be an adjunct in) an unpackaging of structures, those powerbases Kant and Foucault would say are barriers to freedom. Freedom is potentially available to the poet. Probably on a small scale (the perpetual freedom to act immorally is not likely to be available – social structures are in place to constrain moral ‘outliers’) but this is how it works. Freedom from the falsity of at least some societal directions could be wonderful. I am ambitious in this way.

Of course many others have made the leap to authorship before and become becalmed, or worse, utterly shipwrecked. I’m not interested in the choice to not write, made by the sound of mind, a decision made with calm reason. In the Australian canon Kenneth Slessor is a good example – an artist who wrote a lot of great poetry before deciding later in life that he was finished with it. This is perfectly okay. We don’t have to be poets. There are other things to do and they can be done with awareness and critical openness too. I do not doubt this. But what of the poets that wanted to write, or needed to write, that wrote brilliant poems and then alternately found themselves writing unsuccessful poems? They saw something in their own approach too. What of these writers that raged against their predicament, and even died in this state of creative mania? These figures interest me, and should be of interest to a writer, if only because their careers represent abortive detours along the line of history. One needs to take stock
of one’s own imperfect volition (and therefore the volition of others), to make an estimate of future trajectories. It’s like studying the literary texts of other periods – weighing up the ways they worked or didn’t work, and of course taking into account the contextual imperatives and cadences. In a sense everyone who writes has a Poetics – even if the individual ideas are unintelligible and unarticulated – and every poetics should take account of models of failure that can be classified. A Poetics provides you with direction when you begin to write. It is informative to ponder failure as it applies to creative writing (the abortive detours, the ‘paths not taken’), because there are wider ramifications. A Poetics is an effective philosophy, a way of structuring and guiding your ambition. I believe it must ponder the writing careers of those generally understood to be failures, or perhaps more commonly known as ‘minor poets’, because we must understand the structures that impede, and also the falsity of imagined impediments. This leads to a creative stance that allows for failure.

My initial hypothesis resulting from my reading of, and around the works of Brennan and Dransfield (and indeed myself) is that traditional conceptions of poetic ‘failure’ are not exhaustive enough. (By using ‘traditional’ I mean concepts demonstrated in the literature of the times of both Brennan and Dransfield, however unstated or implicit.) The Australian poets I am focusing on demonstrated an ambition to become great writers and for them a necessary part of this was participation in a creative dialogue, one that might see them exchange ideas with writers of the same spirit, in a mutually beneficial manner. For a number of reasons this was something never fully realised. In general this lack of realisation is typical: a ‘failing’ poet is often seen to have possessed creative talent and drive, but the literature will then posit his or her failure as the inability to capitalise. This view is correct in many cases, but is limited, and might be too often promulgated. Part of what can be taken from a failed impulse can often be the clear identification of a necessary ambition. Indeed, there is a chance that failure in a poet’s creative and private life is predicted by experience and familiarity with the very idea. One might reasonably posit that the idea of ‘Failure’ is canonised, just as surely as the minor poets (arguably Brennan and Dransfield) have their works kept alive in various anthologies. It is true, as Mead (2008, p.270) notes, that literary reception and canonisation are not solid things (indeed anthology presence is not the same as sainthood). He writes: ‘After a writer’s death, too, there are always complex shifts in the relations of his/her work to the literary field, just as there are continual readjustments in the relation of that field to the culture more broadly defined.’ I agree, and yet the idea
of failure attached to the works of minor poets is peculiarly persistent. It is debatable to what extent some figures are ‘major’ or ‘minor’, but the canon of read and studied works is composed of writers with varying levels of critical praise, and this canonisation persists. For example when Perkins (1998, p.48) muses on the various ways the Australian Literary canon have come into being, she notes the importance of the composition of the first undergraduate degree in Australia, drawn up by Tom Inglis Moore. The poets set for study included figures like Henry Kendall, Adam Lindsay Gordon, Henry Lawson, Christopher Brennan, and others. But the more important fact is that which Perkins then notes: ‘These represent the poets of ‘major’ and ‘minor’ status found on most nineteenth-century poetry courses now.’ Public and critical opinion bequeaths an influential poet with a major or minor label, ensuring they are studied and remembered, but also ensuring to a certain extent that they are interpreted in a particular way, as either a ‘failure’ or a ‘success’. There are consequences, lessons to be learnt, for the practising poet. Unpackaging the labels helps the writer to see that successful creative writing is not simply about gaining admission to the canon. Brennan and Dransfield saw themselves perhaps joining or discovering new dialogues – poetic modes other to what was popularly accepted. Perhaps their failed tendencies are becoming realised in poetic practices observable today. My own participation in an extended poetry community is at least some evidence of this – I have taken on many poetic opportunities (including online publication, and connecting with other writers) that have only been made available with advances in technological communication. The failure to find public acceptance on a large scale is, for me, not an overly relevant issue.

Yet I am looking for success (in a new epistemological sense, informed by models of failure): a normative position of enlightenment (or fictive oneness), and if possible my new conception will be opposed to a normative goal of ‘structured success’. My definition of structured success is the pattern we follow that offers the least resistance, a pattern that has at its basis the recognition of a work’s impact over its intrinsic value: economic artistic viability (being paid well for a poem), canonic acceptance, and perhaps even a model that revolves around a strengthening of ‘the ego’. In his essay ‘Why Live Without Writing?’ Grünbein (2010) addresses this first aspect of success, pondering one of the questions he finds poets are regularly asked, ‘Can you really live off it?’ The answer, he says, will often be a ‘no’, but with a qualifier, in that the writer probably makes her money in some form of writing. But Grünbein wants to
get beyond the cliché of the original question, which at any rate stems from a societal obsession:

It’s money that measures the worth of each individual, whoever or whatever he or she may be: a pole dancer at a nightclub, an auto mechanic, a seasonal laborer in the asparagus field, a military spy hollowing out an enemy dictatorship, or—out of whatever frivolity of youth or deformation of personality—a poet.

To him, and I think to me, the real success of the poet is not that simple. It is something different that writing offers the poet, such as ‘... the privilege of using his gift of observation and his verbal finesse to make explicit statements on being human, to make notes on the real world and translate it, at one and the same time, into metaphysics.’

Even beyond financial measurements it seems we are still over-reliant on the use of numbers to measure success, in part because it is the easiest model. This is, according to Retallack (2003 p.3) a ‘monolithic worldview’ that we must move away from, one ‘that leads to assessments of success and failure in the arts based on short term counts of numbers persuaded—for example, the size of the audience. . . .’

It becomes clear that within my proposed framework (the complex fractal of failure and success that opposes the simple binary), an artist must define his or her own ‘self’ as a precursor to action (even while lacking the defined ‘self’, this being in total a product of Lacan’s theorised Imagined, and even while agreeing with the Foucauldian view that knowledge is not intrinsically a path to grand enlightenment). I sense that this is necessary for any ambitious artist. But how is this first step to be taken? Using vague notions of success to define your pursuits, notions impossibly devoid of linguistic and cultural baggage? I think so. I will posit in this work that the goal of connecting with something universal (an end that might be sensed but never known (an idea observable in some of the work of Brennan)) *is* worth pursuing, if only because it is just so unknowable. I will also posit that an informed notion of failure *is* worth accepting and living with. These poles may just be illusory foci, but we function under them nevertheless. They are worth knowing in an archaeological sense. The two contemporary poles— one of failure, and one a resultant model of action according with success— are suggested by the definition of postmodernism offered by Bertens and Natoli (2002 p.xiv) (synthesising Inglehart and Jameson), where artists and cultural practitioners now apprehend ‘the uneasy and often contradictory coexistence of the
outcomes of two related struggles that have their origin in the 1960s: one of them over the economy and the other over culture.’ There is still no easy definition of success, or failure, that can ignore economic interaction. Similarly aesthetic success is impossible to judge finally. Although knowing our failures does not remove them, it can in a sense leave us enlightened, in that the desire for perfection is permanently deferred.

**Consequence**

If new practices are now sustainable (and I think they are) past failures can help us clarify and define the contemporary possibilities for action. They allow us to more accurately theorise as to the real consequences our poetic acts will have. Retallack’s (2007) work on experimental poetry is of interest when exploring my own contemporary practice. The strategic imagination employed for both fictional pleasure (entertainment) and for a sense of universal responsibility (aligned with our human understanding of societal interaction, or with Lacan’s Real) is intriguing. An interrogation of language (summarised here in the opening statement of Retallack’s article: ‘There is the shock of alterity. Or should be.’) is defendable, and seems to be most ably mounted from within the guise of poetic creation. I hope to mount this defence (in the form of a poetic attack – the publicising / publishing of an extended work) by presenting this thesis as a whole, but then also in a stand-alone-fashion from within the final part of my thesis, the poetry. (As I will later discuss, ‘breathe in space’ is likely to be read apart from the thesis proper and in different contexts: it is a manuscript that will go on, and in fact already has gone on to exist in other forms.) Preceding this will be a well-thought-out exploration of what leads one to such a poetic defence, even though for me poetry is not often the site for well-thought-out arguments. It is the site of explosive shifts and productive chaos, focussed just as often as not. Retallack (2007) writes (in a group of propositions designed to provoke thought) that ‘We humans with all our conversational structures have yet to invite enough alterity in.’ I think that yes, we should invite more alterity into ‘normal’ conversational structures. Research cannot be confidently separated from creative product, one explaining the other, just as surely as it cannot be confidently mixed. Some separation remains as we work through the shock. One definite consequence however is that failure has a vital part to play in any understanding of
ethical creativity. How do we know what to do, if not by admitting and embracing that which has the appearance of failure? Shunning failed works and careers is a closing of the eyes.

Retallack’s (2007) article on experimental poetry offers a lot more than its length might suggest. By marking parallels between the way the scientific community has begun to value meticulous failures (experiments that are well-designed and run, despite not producing the result desired) and the way any form of experimental poetry must allow for the recognition of what constitutes ‘failure’, she moves toward a real way of opening up possibility for future poetic endeavour. Recognition of failure is important and perhaps acknowledging the idea that eradicating it is futile is just as important. Retallack’s focus on the necessity of squarely facing our understanding of failure and experimentation is timely in a global sense: it is undoubtably positive for a creative researcher to operate in an ethical manner, especially when creativity is so closely aligned to imagining possibility and keeping possibility open through the deferment of anxiety. I don’t think this means operating in a formulaic manner, of writing in the ‘official’ way; instead, it means writing while acknowledging personal impulses and global messages, even perhaps the danger of formulas. I think this is why Foucault (1991 p.343) described one of his interests as looking for ‘the genealogy of problems’:

My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism.

As writers, researchers, artists we are engaged in activity, industry. It feels important that there always be something for us to do, some sort of challenge that drives us. Writers such as Christopher Brennan and Michael Dransfield may have profited from the idea that there could be an ethical experimental responsibility inhering in the way writers write. What are the positive outcomes of action that is designed to test a half-glimpsed idea, and how do we locate them? One must leave behind fictitious assumptions about success and move toward more pleasurable (for humanity as well as the self) assumptions, be they as equally fictitious. Other writers have said much about the mistakes we haven’t learnt from in history – embracing the quality of ‘mistake’ within the constitution of the self and the world is probably the only way to learn. It’s a
good hypothesis. But if the hypothesis cannot be proven, this fact is something we shall also profit from discovering.

The first chapter proper of this thesis, **A-Poetic** gives a broad overview of the way ‘poetics’ have functioned in the past, before moving on to specifically approach the possibilities a poetics holds for future literary engagement. It is one thing to trace a line from Aristotle through to now, but quite another to identify current trends in the writing of poetics: the field is varied and wide indeed. My focus for the main part is an examination of contemporary Australian poets, writers who I feel are engaging in the difficult task of sharing a conscious poetic stance with others. I believe there is an intrinsic usefulness in sharing but that there is currently a particularly useful way of doing this, especially for the poet, and it revolves around the emerging structure of the creative research thesis. **A-Poetic** will trace the path of the poetics through history but will also establish a rationale for the particular form I am employing. While I do agree that this type of research document needs to contain ‘writing about writing, writing that is self-conscious, evaluative, critical’ (Bourke and Neilsen 2004), it is certain that this type of writing can come in a number of possible forms. Throughout my thesis it will be possible to trace a considered argument, a rationale that defends the exterior form of this research. Its sectioning and twinning of poetry with critical material has for me always been the most likely of poetic experiments. The structure of information that follows – from outline, to a lineage of the poetic, to close analysis of influential writers, to analysis of the self, and finally to creative work – is in a form I have found to be the most workable and readable.

I have been personally intrigued by the work of Brennan and Dransfield for a number of years, and the next two chapters deal with the works and lives of these writers. **Bombast and Malaise** focuses on Brennan – exploring his work, and some of the existing critical material written about his work, and what might be perceived as his useful failures; **Embracing your Talent** focuses on Dransfield in a similar fashion. There are some crossover points and links established in these sections, but the separation is important, for the reason that I am investigating the works and lives of these poets as canonised packages within the history of Australian Poetry. In the past I have read the works of these figures and I would in turn find the work inspiringly unusual, or else it might seem to lack cohesion or completion. This is the combination that has piqued my interest. Indeed their reputations are not the same as those of the well-rounded, illustrious figures, such as Wright, Slessor, Murray, and in all the usual
anthologies of Australian Poetry they are regularly given some space, but only a little. (The usual candidates are a few selections from ‘The Wanderer’ for Brennan; some of the drug poems or wandering poems for Dransfield – eg. ‘Still life with hypodermic’ or ‘The Minstrel’.) What’s going on? Obviously like many other poets they produced a few memorable works, but according to the critical literature they didn’t produce that wondrous thing, the ‘body of work’ of a high standard. But this again intrigues me because the memorable works are so very good (my personal judgement) and so different to what their contemporaries were writing. These poems tantalised me and still do, and this made me want to know more.

These writers will be explored through a theoretical framework involving my reading of Lacan, Foucault, and also the critical writings of poets such as Brophy and Retallack. A major difference between my readings of the two poets however is linearity. After much reading of Brennan’s poetry I have come to the conclusion that it makes sense to approach his work from start to finish, very much in the order he arranged the poems. There is a very deliberate progression in his poetic arrangement (especially in his major work – Poems 1913) that I think demands we look at his work in the way intended. Indeed a lot of the thematic grouping has already been done for the reader. With Dransfield’s writing however, reading his work from start to finish is less of a concern. There are some major sections that can be read as coherent statements (Drug Poems is such a work) but on the whole, his arrangements are unruly, and a better reading of his work seeks out ideas for focus (and as shall be shown, many of the major ideas driving Dransfield’s poetry do suggest the more general idea of failure).

Embracing your Talent is a longer chapter than Bombast and Malaise but I believe the longer investigation has been necessary, not because there is any greater depth or complexity to Dransfield’s work, but simply because his poetic output (and approach) is so multivalent, not as relentlessly focussed as Brennan’s. As such it is useful throughout to compare Brennan’s presentation of carefully arranged poems with Dransfield’s presentation of arranged selves (from the bard, to the writer on the run from society, to the drug poet). My particular ‘chronology of presentation’ is later interrogated when I look at my own poetry manuscript.

A ‘magpie methodology’ may sometimes seem to be my predominant method in approaching the works of these two writers, but it is a conscious poetic tactic rather than a random gathering of ideas. I began using the internet in my final years of highschool, and my approach to intellectual filtering has been influenced by the architecture of the
web. Happenstance discovery sits happily alongside instantaneous hyperlinking. This has had an effect on the way I work when composing poetry, and partly this approach also drives my more academic research. Schools of thought (methodology) should not be rigidly adhered to anyway – I see it as a failure also. The following paragraph is a statement by the American poet Susan Howe:

“Some of us are magpies, cutting this from that and that from this. Borrowing and assimilating according to the emotional dynamics of the materials we choose, yes, but also because we lack confidence in our authenticity.”

(Esdale 2007 p.60)

I don’t think this lack of ‘confidence in our own authenticity’ should be cast as negative. The internet dramatically reveals the silliness of such confidence – there are a million other poetic voices directly connected to us, all of them authentic in their own way. One can clearly observe that there is usefulness in ‘not-knowing’, in borrowing, assimilating and recontextualising. We seek out the critical and poetic elements that appeal from among a diverse array of sources, because we hope for that small sense of ‘knowing’, even though we might know it is ultimately unknowable. What would our lives be like if different tangents were explored? In the poem ‘speculate #2’ (p.19) the poet and a friend are bearded aid workers in a third-world country; they ‘raised thatch schools & lowered cold / wells while a hundred suns burnt like exercise’. These events are as good as real in the poem. You can see it in the imagery and therefore the experience informs your outlook. But the most important thing is that this act of self-extension has been attempted. The point isn’t to inspire regret, but instead to actually create the alternate view. You can’t continue to write about the things you observe all the time. (This thesis will later posit that Dransfield knew that, but failed to find a way out of the trap.) My tentative attempt to negotiate that ever-present trap is to force outsiderness – to engage in experimental gambits that could conceivably strengthen my irresolute self.

Howe’s reflection is of interest particularly when I look at my own method of research and the parallel pursuit of composing poems. Returning to a facet of Buddhist thought, a more ‘dynamic’ conception of the self – one that posits selfhood as a linked group of processes only, but still emphasises an ethical responsibility – could possibly reject Western postulations of success and failure, or at least problematise them as simple criteria for living and creating. The magpie poetics mirrors the self. We pick and
choose what to create and keep and write about, and thereby we are constantly becoming, constantly creating our selves. We don’t have to choose what we find within ourselves or even what is close at hand. For example, even though I haven’t been a foreign aid worker, I have been a foreign aid worker... Perhaps it’s an idea that’s better articulated by Doller (2010, p.44) in her short article on poetic pedagogy:

Not only does an abstract conception of the self free the writer to experiment with her subjectivity, but it allows for a politicized reconfiguration of the self as a natural entity. If students of writing – are we all students of writing? – can begin to decay the strong bond of the “I” that inheres (in some ways necessarily) in our waking world, they can approach the oneiric ecstasy that is the creation of a persona, a form, a poem.

I have previously referred to this persona creation as something joyous; Doller is even more enthusiastic in her description of it as approaching ‘oneiric ecstasy’. But regardless of the level of pleasure involved I don’t quite see it as being a process of reckless and unthinking abandon. I think there is a consciousness to this choosing and constructing – I aim to bring selected ideas to a conclusion while living and writing poetry. I will not rest and simply rely on liking a certain theory (such as a Lacanian conception of the unconscious), or rely on liking certain works by certain poets (such as ‘Minstrel’, or ‘The Wanderer’ sequence) and leave it at that. Things demand careful attention in any existence, and to me things have revealed a pattern, the etching of a complex and ever-present binary that influences our lives and creative trajectory: success and failure. As mentioned, the simpler ‘psychological’ binary would place success and failure as linked to personality traits (with the underlying goal of strengthening the individual’s own autonomous self); or it might be placed as an evolutionary notion where success and failure are purely physical (food, sex, shelter). It could also work in a larger manner, enveloping nations, generating a collective creative spirit in inhabitants (which may in some cases be linked to a Colonial, overly referential sense of confidence and authenticity). Yet I’m interested in a more complex and personal mapping of the binary. I hope to affirm creative experimentation as a model for writing, a model that incorporates failure and acknowledges the very connectedness with everyone failure offers, or can. I believe we always feel the responsibility to ‘still invent’; even if the grounds and conception of this sensed notion are hidden. This outlined approach will
bring, and has already brought together, thinkers (poets or otherwise) such as Lacan, Foucault, Brophy, and Retallack.

Most writers want success, and the most commonly idealised and implicitly articulated version of this success is a career encapsulating critically and publicly successful works. But not many artists want just this. Brennan and Dransfield (and myself) are not exceptions. So, how did they fail to negotiate the complex and often contradictory impulse? Or did they fail at all – is the idea simply ingrained? If they did fail, did they fail in similar ways, and, was the failure one of the more physical aspects and temptations of life, or was the failure one of creative process and temperament? Most importantly, is there a way the practising writer can establish a poetics that incorporates and utilises (or at least takes notice of) these negative aspects of craft and career? I believe there is, and my personal Poetics will revolve around the belief: This project clearly aims at a conclusion that will have ramifications for my own creative practice. This thesis has become a definitive part of my life, and the writing of it has changed who I am. The penultimate chapter of the thesis Consequences of Breathing in Space is a section looking at my own work, but also more than that: in it I talk about my life lived as a writer, and examine the ways this research has had an impact. This section is not intended as a hermeneutic illumination of the poetry collection that closes out the research. It functions as recognition of the failure at play in my life and work. It celebrates and problematises the results of an experimental approach to poetry, and a semi-traditional approach to studying text and poem. This section discusses the ways a writer can potentially negotiate the ever-present, contradictory, fictitious and yet so necessary, binary impulses associated with success and failure. Ambitious Closure finishes off the exegesis. This section is a synthesis of the ideas collected (over years of experimenting with initial hypotheses) throughout preceding sections. It is by its very nature an ambitious act of conclusion – it is a summary the results of my creative labour but also then the articulation of my approach as a potentially useful approach for poets in the future.

The collection of my own poetry breathe in space, written concurrently with this research, finishes the thesis. This is where the reader should look for results, conclusions, spurs to action. It can be read alone. Indeed very rarely is a collection of poetry published that includes a companion thesis – the most you might find is a page of explanatory notes. But I recommend this document to the reader as a united text, a researcher’s own livre composé.
A-Poetic

The real subject of the poem it seems is the lining up of failed poetic impulses: this might be a good idea. No. What about this? No . . . And maybe that’s what I’m hurling out at you. Of course the last sentence was written as I printed off copies of the piece for each and every member of the workshop group. I felt the thing needed something there, and hastily shoved it in. But why? Someone picked up on the fact that the title connects with this last sentence. I was neither happy nor displeased at that. It just does. I like the sportiness of all that, and now I shall actively presume this great long expulsion of words will be taken in good sport too.

(Motion 2009)

The passage above is an excerpt from my blog typingspace, an entry titled ‘Compleat Explication’. It is a piece of writing seeking to clearly present every single tangled reference in a previously blogged poem. I have included this excerpt to demonstrate this idea: I believe the boundary between a Poetics (a work exploring the structures, processes, and assumptions underpinning a body of poetry) and poetry has become destabilised. It is unlikely that there has really ever has been a clear separation, but nowadays, the destabilisation, the lack of separation between theory and poem, is more readily accepted (such as in the pursuit of blogging) and even academically formalised. As the fragmented piece of prose leading into this chapter demonstrates, my personal poetics has not been an unarticulated, half-glimpsed notion, kept in the back of my mind while seriously writing ‘poems’. On the contrary it is articulated at every point, even as it remains open to new possibilities, and my thinking about ‘how to write’ often appears as poetry, or as a hybrid form I simply can’t label (except perhaps as the useful ‘blog post’). When my specific poetic ‘project’ is unknown I aim to bring it out: I have spent a lot of time writing about my own writing, making it the subject of personal criticism, and attempting to make my creative trajectory continually challenging. I blog about my poetry before the ideas are clear to me. I seek input from other writers too. In fact Descartes’ cogito ergo sum, ‘I think, therefore I am’, is made apparent by my blogging, my construction of an online identity, where my thinking is done publicly alongside the most public display of my creative ‘self’. But I still believe work needs to be done: the
nature and very usefulness of a ‘Poetics’ needs to be examined in a contemporary context if what we – as contemporary poets – do is to be meaningful. I am consciously announcing this document as a contemporary poetics, one that should be placed in a lineage, but also one that rests on its contextual ‘newness’. So where are we? A general outline of what a poetics as commonly understood, is this:

[A] Poetics, then, is in the most specific sense a systematic theory of poetry. It attempts to define the nature of poetry, its kinds and forms, its resources of device and structure, the principles that govern it, the conditions under which it can exist, and its effects on readers or auditors.

The term itself derives from Aristotle’s work on verbal making, Peri pioetike – fragmentary and perhaps only lecture notes to begin with – which is the prototype of all later treatises on the art of poetry, formal or informal (e.g. Horace, Dante, Sidney, Shelley, Valéry).

(Miner 1993 p.929-938)

Aristotle’s Poetics is fragmentary, but one can trace much that is useful from it, however tentatively, when seeking to define a personal Poetics. Indeed because much of the history of literary criticism stems from this work an initial focus needs to be given to the work. For me, on reading Aristotle, these questions arise and blanket all others: does a Poetics (as it is usually conceived) in any way aim to improve poetry in general, and if so, should it? Aristotle’s is a work of classification, and he does often declare his intentions: to inquire into all types of poetry, ‘noting the essential quality of each’. But I find there is an implicit sense that Aristotle wants to inquire into the meritorious aspects of poetry, to speak of the elements of poetry ‘as requisite to a good poem’. So the ‘essentials’ are not only the breath and heartbeat of ‘verbal making’, they also relate to an aesthetic judgement. If these were lecture notes the students would have been learning to identify a good literary work (or perhaps, make one). The ‘essential quality’ of a work is a sort of measuring tool – in Aristotle’s terms a work that has certain essential characteristics is more likely to have artistic merit. I think this qualitative sentiment has over time become the heart of what a Poetics is. As Miner (1993 p.930) clarifies, it is a document outlining the writer’s theories on what poetry is and what it
involves. But more importantly, it addresses this Aristotelian question: what is requisite to a good poem? In my opinion a contemporary Poetics could be defined as a creative tool that allows the writer to explore his or her own substrata. It is not simply a document outlining answers; it is a process akin to writing a poem.

There have been many poetics written under various guises (space and focus necessitates a certain selectivity, but those I feel are more useful for researching my own creative writing will be utilised). Many have a common method to that introduced by Aristotle: by using argument and example (in various measures) the good poetry is foregrounded. This, the poetics says, is the sort of poetry that is being written, and, this is the sort of poetry that should be written. Horace’s Ars Poetica for instance outlines his theories on poetry in an epistolary poetic text that serves to also support the ideas within (Horace 1953 p.133-147). Both form and content are important. The ideas are an ‘urbane amplification’ of aspects of Aristotle’s work, and so the ideas are not radically new, yet the form renders the ideas with aplomb, and this is important. Wit is the key normative provision. The obvious architecture of a theoretical tract can say a lot – in Horace’s case the polished language produces a very readable and funny text. Sometimes this architecture can be even more than the ‘meaning’ paraded within a poetic essay.

Sir Phillip Sidney’s spirited An Apology for Poetry outlines admirably what poetry should do, and what end it serves. But I believe his buoyant prose wasn’t the most effective vessel to argue a strict, narrow case, because a sense of de-centred play is hinted at in many sentences and paragraphs. The text is carried away with its own utter unlikeliness – the fact that such things can just be rendered, just like that. These days it strikes us as effusive:

So that since the ever praise-worthy Poesy is full of virtue-breeding delightfulness, and void of no gift that ought to be in the noble name of learning; since the blames laid against it are either false or feeble; since the cause why it is not esteemed in England is the fault of poet-apes, not poets; since, lastly, our tounge is most fit to honour Poesy, and to be honoured by Poesy . . .

(Sidney 1922 p.52)

He goes on in this vein. Sidney’s arguments throughout the essay do add up. The reasons for valuing poetry are logical and persuasive: ‘the content’ is by no means rendered void. This Apology brings to mind one of the main reasons I value the Poetics
in general: such writing allows the writer to express these very rational and persuasive arguments, and to do it in many different and entertaining ways. Sidney’s style gives a glimpse of where a Poetics can go: towards a form that nimbly plays with the ideas, sometimes aiding them, sometimes summoning them forth from a formal whim. The very text itself becomes a hybrid creature of creative evidence and *ad hoc* theoretical illustration. As Francis Bacon (1922 p.89) pointed out at a similar time in history, poetry is ‘extremely licensed’ in its mode of expression. It’s almost a rule: use your license to express. This aligns poetry with imagination but also speculation, and therefore potential learning. The freedom to express and experiment with language means a poet can promote a form of learning taking account of ‘affections, passions, corruptions, and customs’ (Bacon 1922 p.92). I know this is a potential flaw in my outlook, the way I sometimes privilege style and wordplay over ideas and meaning – the sign over the signified – in a way that might threaten to become ‘customary’, something I believe a writer should be wary of. But I am aware of this risk and never ignore it. I believe the risk is justified. It is something I will be addressing within the course of future reading and writing – my outlook (including my poetic habits or customs) being something I hope to justify, or else modify.

Of course despite the agreement – amongst poets – that poetry is vital and culturally significant (whether for the reason that it aids learning, pleasure, experience or otherwise) the type of poetry that is advocated varies enormously. For example, during the Romantic period William Wordsworth’s poetry (especially that first published in *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798) was radically different to what passed for poetry, in the cultured sense, at the time. His language was much simpler, less adorned, and to a great extent his chosen thematic was ‘Nature’. He attempted to justify this difference too. In the *Preface* Wordsworth writes that he proposes to ‘choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men . . .’ (Wordsworth 2005 p.483). That Wordsworth wanted to write as men ‘really speak’ is clear – he repeats this phrase many times through the *Preface* – but by aligning the form of his poetry with speech (masculine, and therefore reasonable speech?) he also signals a change in the way one might interpret the relationship between poetry’s form and content, and the way one *should* interpret this. He reasons that a more natural way of phrasing poetic statements will allow a more fluid transmission of feeling. Of his poems he writes ‘the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation . . .’ (Wordsworth 2005
Wordsworth did seem genuinely to want to create wondrous poetry, that is ‘the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge’. To do so he felt the need to question some formal modes of writing, in particular Neoclassical poetic diction.

There seems always to have been a questioning of the normal modes, whether intentional or otherwise. Poetry was originally an oral tradition, but now is known much more as a written form. (Of course the rise of performance and slam poetry is an interesting return towards the oral tradition. I am interested in notions of performance applied to my own work, however it is not a topic that will be covered here. It is something for future research.) Poetry once was mostly composed following certain formal and thematic constraints, but then free verse and the lyric become the dominant approaches. But even now, when any sort of ‘grouping’ is attempted (such as the Australian ‘New Lyricism’, controversially refined by Jaya Savige into a subgrouping including a handful of contemporary female poets, labelled the ‘Ladies of the Lyric’) poets question their involvement. For example, when commenting on this new lyricism in interview, the main focus of poet Claire Potter’s (2009) commenting seems to be to separate herself from any such movement:

\begin{quote}
I don’t see myself as part of the young (female) lyricist movement supposedly emerging in current Australian poetry scenes . . . My writing is not so immediate as the new-lyricist poets, but I have read only so little of their work, I am hardly qualified to comment. I find the word fashionably used.
\end{quote}

One can observe a progression wherein all aspects of poetry, even all aspects of creative writing in general, are subject to challenge and change. This can be due to reasons such as fashion, inspiration or conceptual challenge. Importantly I believe this is part of the continuing appeal, that poetry is pliable and receptive to this change and that it continues to engage us and remain meaningful. Furthermore I think poetry can be worked at with the rigour of scientific experimentation, to avoid the temptation of blithely taking too much heed of that which is ‘successful’ (my own experimentation (as outlined in previous research) has I think led to a heuristic readiness and an increased capability to write). Poetry is subject to fashion but will not often tolerate sustained plagiaristic apeing. If you desire to master the craft of poetry your means to this end, your scaffolding, will always be of a dubious durability. You will fail. Poetry continually necessitates questioning, and enforces the reinvention of practitioners’ aims – this is its
one solid fact. It can be frustrating and lead to a familiarity with failure, as many a poet would know and admit. Kirsten Lang articulates the feeling in this way (within her own Doctoral research):

We entertain beliefs and hopes amid a trial that nothing solves. We expend effort to sustain favoured impressions or to justify their alteration, and yet these impressions are formed and expressed through a medium that renders them incessantly questionable. Beside the teasing, distant promise of the perfect representation is the constant, invasive threat of imprecision and irrelevance.

(Lang 2003 p.5)

But as Lang goes on to explain – by referencing Derrida – the desire for certainty (a definite kind of centre) and the desire for play (a liminal indeterminacy) work in tandem. The teasing promise attached to both impulses is why a writer feels moved to write. Creation defers illusion. You can also revel in this and find vitality, joy (and even ethical normalisation?) within a permanent state of teasing flux. Therefore I think a ‘Poetics’ simply cannot be systematically mechanical in a way Aristotle may have hoped. Canons are continually re-evaluated; books are often not reprinted; indeterminacy defies everyone who attempts a systematic ‘observe and record’ approach to categorisation. Accordingly, I think if the study of writing poetry were to become mechanical part of the elusiveness and allure of the form would be lost. Perhaps this is why the effectiveness of high school poetry curriculum and pedagogy has often proven so contentious? Perhaps this is why we have recently seen the rise of the creative PhD in the university system? The Poetics does have the purpose of discovery but it is also pleasurable to create (as I believe writers like Sir Phillip Sidney have found). This somewhat-hard-to-define pleasure is important, because it is true (even so true as to be obvious) as John Tranter (2010, p.158) points out: ‘The role of the poet in society has grown ever more difficult to define and justify’, ever since ancient times when poetry was the sole repository for human song and story. As Tranter goes on to say, other roles that poetry might have laid claim to (such as ‘public conscience’ or ‘public entertainer’) have been well and truly taken over by ‘the novel, cinema and finally television and video’. Yet there is something more than a poet functioning as society’s conscience or entertainer, something continually alluring. These things are still a part of the art, but there is a joy in the poetic act that is personal, vital, and formative.
One should not label the hybridized form of the creative exegesis as ‘the answer’ to a poetic problem of expression (an easily digestible ‘how, what, and why I write’). But, it is a new development that has been utilised by an increasing number of poet-academics. There isn’t a standard form (or at least the standard is quite loose) and this is one part of the appeal – it leads to a continual exploration of modes of delivery, and, therefore, ideas and poems. Some notable research done in Australia recently – utilising the form of creative work and exegetical work – has been done by writers such as S.K. Kelen (his PhD thesis is Writing the Goddess (Kelen 2005)) and Keri Glastonbury (her PhD thesis is Grunge Poetics (Glastonbury 2004)). Kelen’s document has come to seem somewhat familiar now: there is a book-length collection of poems; this is combined with a number of chapters outlining his personal experience with poetry, and the processes he took to write the attached collection. In fact it is the familiarity that has led me not to follow this model. I don’t think a narrative that details my first poetic experiences in high school, or even my first ‘coming to poetry’ outside of school will add to the body of research. Glastonbury’s work is different to Kelen’s, in that she uses her exegetical section to analyse the works of first a poet, and then a painter, in order to investigate a ‘Grunge Poetics’. She also includes a manuscript of her own poetry (without writing about her poems in an overt manner). My research falls somewhere in between these forms: I am investigating the works of two poets – while outlining a possible ‘Poetics’ – and I am also writing explicitly about my own work, including it with the research. I feel that engaging with the flexibility or the uncertainty of the form is an important creative imperative. When we discussed her Poetics in 2007, Glastonbury said to me that when she went ahead with her project she simply ‘didn’t know if you could do that’. I think this meant she wasn’t sure if it was an acceptable form for a PhD thesis, but continued on, because she felt keenly the necessity of her research. I like that. There is a risk in going in the wrong direction, a risk of professional failure, but the chance for discovering (or fixing, or creating) a new dialectic is increased. It is akin to what Retallack (2003 p.3) would call a creative ‘swerve’.

When thinking of proceeding without strict adherence to a prescribed mode, there is a parallel in modern poetic practice (or theory). Consider this definition of ‘post-avant’ poets written by Shepherd (2008) (the underlining is mine):

“Post-avant" (as in, "post-avant-garde"—insider groups love shorthand) poets can be described as writers who, at their best, have imbibed the lessons of the
modernists and their successors in what might be called the experimental or avant-garde stream of American poets, including the Objectivists (especially Oppen and Zukofsky), what have been called the New American Poetries (from Jack Spicer and Robert Duncan to John Ashbery and Frank O’Hara), particularly the Projectivist/Black Mountain School and the New York School(s), and the Language poets (including such poets and polemists as Charles Bernstein and Ron Silliman), without feeling the need (as so many other poetic formations have) to pledge allegiance to a particular group identity (the poetry world is full of fence-building and turf wars) or a particular mode of proceeding artistically.

Also this generalisation about the poets involved:

Though many of these poets have projects and even systems, there aren’t a lot of programs. There’s much prose writing and thinking about poetry, and many, many blogs (this is a very wired “generation”), but not many manifestos.

Some of the past Poetics do read like manifestos, and this is where a contemporary Poetics can differ while still being workable. The style of these past documents may not ever have been as violent as a political manifesto, but the focus on recommending a system to the community at large (even though one might see them more as social rationalisations) places them as such. They are inevitably personal documents – like Wordsworth’s Preface for instance, written as a statement of intent. I think the present-day creative research degree has a post-avant character (but the character is not so American in composition, as the above extract might suggest). There is a lot of thinking and imbibing but also an acknowledgement of uncertainty, of ‘being’ and its future-tense counterpart ‘becoming’. It is perhaps an equivalent to the modern venture of blogging – writing about something while the ideas are still becoming clear could be the best way to eventually recognise a direction for yourself, or others. There are problems with any sort of label like this, and ‘post-avant’ is simply a new label to help sort a somewhat similar group of poets from the rest. It is no longer a very American stream of non-identity, and I am drawn to aspects of Shepherd’s definition, and in particular the latter part, identifying these poets as writers who don’t feel the need to pledge allegiance to existing groups or modes. I am interested in applying some of this to my own Poetics. It is a way of proceeding in itself – this ‘no particular way of proceeding’ – but it is the
correct one for me. Perhaps making the conscious decision to write ‘poetry’ is limitation
enough. When forging a poetics you need to admit the personal element of discovery
(even court it) and consistently allow your creative work to modify the direction your
theory takes. Or at least I do. The normative aspect is in this way modified, de-
intensified: this is the sort of poetry that should be written. I’m going to offer it to you
uncertainly.

It is important for me to move the lens a little closer now, geographically as well
as temporally, and to cite some modern and Australian poetic documents that may
demonstrate a creative rationale involved in the move towards argument in my own
work, this document. Chris Wallace-Crabbe in ‘Poetry and the Common Tongue’ (an
essay taken from The Space of Poetry (McCredden and Trigg 1996 pp.69-80)) outlines
an argument for the simplistic in poetry, or more exactly the readily understandable
(understandable to members of the public, non-writers). It is the form of Wallace-
Crabbe’s work that I find of interest. He is conclusive in his poetic essay (to a point), but
it doesn’t start out this way. The essay becomes an exploration that helps him develop an
opinion, or, more correctly, a direction. He concludes that the simplicity of language, the
‘common tongue’ should invite a reader into the poem, but that the poem’s success will
also be based upon the language being ‘well-wrought’ and also ‘interestingly resistant’.
(I find his conclusion useful in some ways – there is merit in the idea of simplicity
inviting a reader in before combining with other complexity, and that art doesn’t demand
an either/or equation. But for my purposes here, the route he takes to the conclusion is of
the most interest.) Throughout the essay he ponders an initial idea and draws upon
poetic works to test it. Importantly, he also draws in lines from his own poetry, in effect
showing that perhaps his thought on a particular issue has influenced his creative work;
perhaps it will in the future, after the poetic pondering, perhaps even more so. (Note also
that he uses this process at length in his collection of essays The Escaping Word (2005)
which – using the methods previously outlined – is in line with what one might call a
contemporary poetics. Its scope is instructive.)

So what gives Wallace-Crabbe’s essays their usefulness is the personal aspect,
the use of his own poems as praxis, but also (again) the ‘creative uncertainty’ within.
Some level of failure is allowed into the work, simply by way of the conclusion not
being set at the beginning, or at least appearing not to be. Being certain of one’s
direction, of one’s poetics, closes off options. Just as the poem is often a process of
thinking so too is the Poetics, in its many clever guises (collection of essays, blog
persona, manifesto or tract). When the aim of your writing is discovery it should probably not take on the form of a graceful articulation of an already held view on poetry. This is of course something very easy to say, but it is said keeping in mind the aforementioned difference between the experimental and the innovative – this document is written with the excuse of ‘informed trying’ to explain any perceived rough edges, not ‘newness’. I am aware that many graceful articulations possibly only read as such with the advantage of hindsight, when the experimental tack of the writer has become more commonplace, but I think it is useful to write with this awareness.

When we trace the lineage from Aristotle to these more contemporary writers also engaging in similar tasks, a shift can be observed in the function of their works. I am interested in doing my own narrowing here, and examining the theoretical writings of poets. This to me is an essential characteristic of the modern day ‘Poetics’: there is still an analysis of function, design, aesthetics, but these works will more often than not encompass a pivotal focus on process. Many poets that do seek to render a concrete ‘poetics’ do so in order to clarify for themselves what is important in their own writing. Retallack (2003 p.4) does this through the form of the essay. She observes that the form of her poetics – offering its ‘mix of logics, dislogics, intuition, revulsion, wonder . . .’ – makes it a particularly urgent kind of thought experiment. Sometimes a poetics might not be as extended as an essay though; it might be a simple one-page outline, as requested by an editor (for example Landbridge, or the Best Australian Poetry series). These works of theory are important for the body of knowledge, and will sit alongside theoretical works by non-poets. The difference I see is that a personal poetics is an extended work that will allow the divergences and tangents of thought that Retallack claims are important. These documents (particularly in the case of a Higher Degree) will often involve poems, evidence, written by the theorist. In some cases the theoretical tract is in the form of a poem, for example, Ken Bolton’s ‘Untimely Meditations’ (McCredden and Trigg 1996 pp.131-132).

Theory has no monopoly on theory.

Many, maybe most, who flock to poetry pastiche the past
in their effort to evade the future. Very modern of them (or "perennially contemporary") I am maybe more truly of the past in placing any bets on poetry for the future - but "it helps me feel modern!" - the way, for a theorist, presumably, theory does.

Tho finally this, this lecture, is mere gesture: offering genre as an example of "the materiality of one's practice" is rather coarse-grained. Why a lecture, even an ironic one, if poetry is so flexible?

Perverse I guess

- A modern, or post-modern, perversitousness?

Despite its maybe being ‘coarse-grained’ Bolton’s poem does offer material evidence simultaneously with his (ironic) views on poetry. It is a thoroughly engaging slice of entertainment that also functions as a Poetics: the way he wants to write (both in terms of form and ideas) is immediately visible on the page. I think this form of writing is necessary because for the self-defined poet (to whom relating all endeavour to poetry becomes not habit but a form of addiction) suppressing the instinct to form a Poetics can bring about disillusionment, and, dare I say, utter unhappiness. I try to combat such
moments of depression with writing (not as a panacea, but as a means of moving forward, a virtual fast car). The following paragraphs are again cut straight from my blog (hence the informal qualities of the writing, the most notable being the lack of any capital letters), and they illustrate how my own writing practice involves a constant articulation of the how and why of writing. Even when this seems to come about by accident. It is ever-present:

as a child i lived in a dead-end street, a crescent, in werribee (is this usually called a cul-de-sac?). we were on the corner, & the house had a large thatched fence all the way around the back. to attain some focus: there was a small collection of vegetation refuse at the back corner of the yard. it was possibly years & years worth of dirt, leaves, grass etc. as one does during childhood years (these are situated between 1 – 6) i would give small objects heightened importance, status. one day, i found an old matchbox tractor in the refuse pile. i knew it was old because it had most of the paint worn away, & it had obviously come to the heap before we lived there. i kept it & thought about it quite a bit, then a few years ago wrote the discovery into not one, but two poems.

(Motion 2009)

The blog post leads itself around and around until coming to its own tail – a reference to an article I wrote on Michael Dransfield perhaps a year before and published in Cordite, ‘Michael Dransfield’s Innocent Eyes’, that placed Dransfield as a poet who could see things in a childlike way. Within this article was the seed of an idea that connects to what I was thinking about in the blog post. I believe this manner of poetic ‘surprise’ has entirely to do with the way I see things in poetic images, full of subjective portent. This is useful; it brings me some small measure of happiness. (‘Happiness’ is used here as the most convenient term, even though I know it is more than this. It is a sense of purpose, of eudaemonia.) I think this usefulness can conceivably stretch to other readers. Of course most people will never see things the way you do, or benefit from the same ideas you do. I have received quite a bit of negative feedback about my poetry while in workshops situations. I remember someone commenting on the brackets in ‘flickeration’ (p.68), for example, complaining that the poem felt incomplete because the brackets didn’t close. But I felt as if in this case the nesting of brackets formed a secure stairway to heaven, or an effective light-speed highway to Mars, or something like that.
Formalising my response now, with the benefit of time to think about it, I think that most of us (us meaning not us – you (the reader of this thesis) and I are are blanketed and included by the poem) do ‘go home (with only a few cares & patches / seeing the universe unlike it is (prevailing because’. But despite my best intentions to communicate this understanding there is always the view of things that differs, and that can seem at times universal. The world-view opposing yours is always going to prevail – just because. As will be later discussed, Brennan’s poetic oeuvre demonstrated, amongst other things, that we will always fail to find universal accord. He obstinately sought this ‘cipher of his mortal destiny’ with poetry anyway though, until the process got the better of him (Lacan 1977, p.7). We all seek these things that flicker in the corner of our eyes on strange nights, poems and the like, indications of connection. That’s why within the poetics I am looking at (and looking for, writing now) an aspect of ‘process’ is always available to the theorist, poet, and reader, a ‘thinking-in-progress’ that is evident in the blog post. I want you to have the tantalising aesthetic experience of the flicker in your eye, but to then also be able to turn and face the cause of the light, to go at least a little deeper. My poetics is a mode of living and understanding is a key aspect of this. The approach can encompass whatever is fit – poem, fictional event, real event, wistful thought, even blog entry (where these things do battle so well). Such a Poetics will be explanatory but also forward-looking. Because the pervasive questions are never clear to us without some form of research:

How do I write? (How do I fail?)

How do others write? (How do they fail?)

How should I write? (Should I fail?)

These are the important questions of a (my) creative Poetics. Accordingly this thesis explores the zones of intersection between two areas, research into Creative Writing, and research into Literary Studies. I have thought it important to apply traditional literary method to bear on the other two writers focussed on in this thesis. Traditional ‘method’ isn’t a simple thing to invoke, but I will, and to me this approach suggests reading texts, writing about the literary devices employed, pondering the meanings within. But the overarching aim here is research into how poetry (and identity) is produced. (In Paul
Dawson’s (2005 p.214) book *The New Humanities* he obviously feels that within creative writing degrees there should be a focus on process too, as well as emphasis on the intersections of identity, and society. He focuses largely on the model of the creative writing workshop, but his conclusions might be applied to the higher research enterprise, where the researcher also should aim at ‘exploring how the compositional process is a mode of social intervention at the level of discourse’. One creates a personal identity at the same time as forging social connectivity and intellectual validity. Hence the outward architecture of this entire thesis document, this personal form that also wrestles with wider context. I think this endeavour means there will be ramifications for how creative writing is studied, researched, and even promulgated. *Brennan, Dransfield and Myself: A Poetics of Failure* is a new model for poetic research, one that I am now sharing with a wider community of writers and researchers. It is exciting.
Bombast and Malaise – Christopher Brennan and a Philosophy of Failure

One aspect of my hypothesis – that literary ‘failure’ is strangely both canonised and left unexamined – is in part supported simply by the prevalence of failure throughout the literature, both in word and sentiment. For example, Clark (1980 p.157) conjectures in his biography that Brennan was perhaps so ‘hypnotised by the obscurity of what he wrote [in the poetic works] that he took it for profundity’. His book often contends that Brennan never progressed beyond his complex style and early Victorian influences; even ‘The Wanderer’ – the sequence widely considered one of Brennan’s more successful – is, according to Clark (1980 p.166) impeded by contradiction, and he finally labels it as ‘powerful but uncertain’.

These assessments of Brennan’s poetry are common. McAuley (1963 p.34) indicates Brennan’s ‘style and tone’ were such that a reader may be moved to wonder if he was a major poet of his time. He concludes that we must, sadly, answer no. The failures apparently outweigh any greatness. Brennan is continually mentioned in discussions of Australian poetry, in a similar vein. There is a solid body of critical opinion that he never quite got there. Wallace-Crabbe (2005 p.35) writes ‘in poetry his rhetorical pyjamas were often too big for him, blurring the figure he should have cut’. Barnes (2006 p.16) even notes the ‘implication of wasted talent’ underlying part of Brennan’s obituary (written by A.G. Stephens). The literature clearly points to a greatness Brennan could or should have had, but simply didn’t achieve. So why is he – within poetry circles – still highly regarded?

There is of course Brennan’s reputation as scholar and social speaker (as noted at length by Clark (1980)), and also, there have been more positive appraisals of his work. A substantial amount of Wilkes’ commentary on Brennan seeks to reinstate him as an influential Australian literary figure, and to a certain extent he was successful in this regard (even though I think his short introduction to Brennan’s Selected Poems (Wilkes 1973) over-simplifies the complexities of Brennan’s poetry). Within the critical literature praise for Brennan’s poetry is often not outright. Ellis (2001 pp.28-32) – perhaps slightly ironically – claims the great effort needed to study Brennan’s verse is very much worth the effort. I do think what he he states is true, and there is merit in
engaging with poetic complexity, but Ellis also continually refers to the verse of Brennan as ‘weird’ or ‘dense’; his article is published in Studies in Weird Fiction. So the negative connotation is there, even if it is mollified by the suggestion of the future work still to be done, the difficult task of engaging with Brennan’s difficult poetry. Sturm (1968 p.263) does see Brennan as having provided a poetic statement – put in general terms – about the pressures of colonisation on Australian society. But it is speculative (as I think Sturm concedes): Brennan’s lack of ‘conscious comment on the particular society in which he lived’ may have actually been a rejection of sorts, as Sturm posits, related to an inability to feel at home; or, it very well may not have been. It isn’t made clear. Kirkpatrick (2003) too argues for Brennan’s role as commentator, placing him as a modernist, one who aims to discover some transcendent truth through art against the backdrop of the modern metropolis. This is true of The Wanderer and this sequence does effectively allude ‘... to epic as means of negotiating a dialogue between mythology and modernity, nature and history’ (Kirkpatrick 2003 p.73). Yet the majority of the critical commentary points to the fact that in most other instances (in the remainder of his body of work) the verse of Christopher Brennan is not quite so successful. I agree with this.

More importantly, and in more recent times, the question has been raised as to whether or not we have been interpreting Brennan’s poetry in the right way. Wright (1965 pp.80-97) indicates in Preoccupations in Australian Poetry that Brennan cannot be considered alongside his contemporaries: ‘The terms in which he must be judged are not local, but universal. . . .’ Like others, she does then stress the difficulty most have with Brennan’s poetry, which revolves around the ‘lack of immediate temporal or local reference’. After examining how he failed in his own poetic vision, she does finish the chapter on him affirming some of the late poems he wrote, the very few that were lyrical and personal. But coming from Wright the enthusiasm for Brennan’s work is interesting – Wright is widely regarded as a ‘major’ Australian poet, and it appears Brennan’s poetry had a significant influence on her. Hawke (2009, p.112) sees this too: ‘What emerges most clearly from her [Wright’s] explication of Brennan’s work is her innate familiarity with its sources. . . .’ His poetry may not have always been successful, but it struck a chord with other artists, and clearly has about it a quality of provocation.

It seems only appropriate therefore that more recently Barnes (2006) has expanded on Wright’s work (and the work of others critics such as Ellis (2001) who makes the positive though vague claim that more work needs to be done). She argues for
a re-contextualisation of Brennan’s work, and claims his work needs to be placed where it more properly belongs, in the European trend of religious, philosophical, and literary thought. Barnes makes an important contribution toward highlighting what we can take from Brennan’s work: his focus on the secret nature of the creative self or imagination can be almost overwhelming in its intensity. His noted social and poetic failures often overshadow the interest we want to extract from his poetry, and Barnes’ method could give the practising poet an analogous method of research. I do need to distinguish my own endeavours from Barnes’ however. Her work is forensic and scholarly, following up the minutiae of reference and influence in Brennan’s poetry, and really focuses on Brennan’s work as a literature of philosophical complexity. She seemingly leaves no source un-investigated in order to place Brennan’s philosophy in its proper context. I am interested in Brennan’s work as ‘written’ poetry, as creative activity. This in no way discounts his work as philosophy, but my investigation is based on a relationship of poet to poet. His interrogation of language and its forms is of more importance to me than his interrogation of the secret and unknowable self. Yes, in both cases failure can cast a negative light on what is worthy of attention. But this reinforces the fact that one needs to re-evaluate what seems instinctively to be worthy, which may have been maligned critically or otherwise. I believe we can take this from Barnes’ work and from my own.

Towards the Source

I agree that Brennan as poet presents us with difficulties. Past critics have outlined some of the reasons: his diction is archaic; his mode (the symbolist vers libre) is not typical. The reasons are true and all easily observed and these are the easy failures. Wilkes writes in the introduction to the Selected Poems (1973, p.vi) ‘It may be some comfort to know that we are not meant to grasp the Poems at first reading.’ Yet this hints at a normative approach for reading Brennan; the statement might lead one to believe that a proper understanding of his work needs to be based on proper contextualisation. With that statement Wilkes perhaps forgets the unlikelihood of a poem existing in the first place and the joy that writing and finishing a poem can entail (a joy we share as readers). There is an absolute momentary hope established in the introduction to ‘Towards the Source’ when the poet looks back on his ‘golden days’ (Brennan 1960 p.65). The poem might be thought overblown and lacking concrete reference – like many of the other poems – but what we discover is an understanding of Brennan’s plan (one that might
incorporate his life and philosophy) is not really necessary, or if it is, we can grasp it from within his poetry. He’s reaching for that peculiar moment:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{when in my soul first moved} \\
\text{desire to breathe in one} \\
\text{love, song and sun,}
\end{align*}
\]

I know that moment, and the reach backwards for it, from my own life and work. Many would. It’s a recognition of the desire for synthesis: to see things that matter (emotion, experience, poetry) come together in something worthwhile. There are surely some failings within even just this poem (notably the hyperbolic tone) but one of the more relevant failures is the method with which we are encouraged (via canonised models of failure, or, via the approach Brennan took to his overarching ‘quest’) to read the work.

‘Towards the Source’ consists of thirty poems arranged into sections. If we are to read the entire volume of *Poems* as a search for Eden (indeed, it is the popular method of reading) we perhaps do see a progression through Brennan’s thought: the quest focuses on love, then moves on. But we might also read this first section and all of *Poems 1913* as an elaborate act of arrangement. The dates following each poem foreground this, reminding us that they are, in fact, individual poem-objects, written at various points in time. We then need to start thinking of ‘arrangement’ as a critical term. Brennan (1960, p.66) arranges himself and his lover (or instead of ‘himself’, the dramatic figure at the centre of the poems, who as a product of Brennan’s imaginings does bear much similarity to the poet) in the second poem of the sequence: ‘We sat entwined an hour or two together / (how long I know not) underneath pine-trees’. A clever act, because he grants particularity to what is to become a motif – the change of mood aligned with the vicissitudes of the individual’s ‘quest’. Here twilight brings on a feeling of desolation – despite the loving set-up – as the figures in the poem simultaneously feel ‘the irresistible sadness of the sea’. Again there are the old failures you become attuned to when reading Brennan: the repetition, and the delicate balance between commonality and portentousness he tries to assign to images with this technique (here evident in ‘the trees’, which then becomes ‘those trees’). But there is the more instructive failure: arrangement is threatening to take over.

One can observe the influence of the French Symbolist mode in the opening poems. We do want to read a collection but we don’t want a particular notion of
‘collection’ to mutate the role and function of a pleasing poem. What Brennan (1962, p.290) saw as ‘the unity of the book, its symphonic character . . .’ (talking of the French *vers libre* in general terms) is to be admired, and it is perhaps the attempt to promulgate such an idea that matters here. The acts of arrangement we can observe were effected with the aim of a symphonic composition, and Wilkes (1953 p.171) correctly sees in this, and in Brennan’s poetics as a whole, ‘the grandeur of the attempt’. The unlikely **should** be taken on. This is the failure of Brennan’s career but stands as the most experimental (and therefore useful to contemporary writers) tactic he could have employed. It can be taken to hint at a tangential hypothesis of mine, that the symphonic poem (the unified collection) could be a necessary mode of resistance in contemporary poetry, indeed contemporary culture at large – I think the disparate and un-unified published ‘collection’ of short poems can at times parallel the agglomeration of such elements: the misleading television soundbyte, the micro-blog tweet, the overwhelming amount of accessible information. What this suggests to me is that the formal model is not the major fault of *Poems 1913* – it is in fact only the overwhelming presence of the model that is a problem, and the sometimes unwieldy shadow it casts on many of the poems. It forces us to take account of the model firstly and foremostly when having an aesthetic reaction to the poetry.

One should give Brennan a chance though and at least attempt to interpret his poems along the trajectory in which he arranged them. ‘Toward the Source’ explores the idea that love might guide one to a state of origin, of Edenic happiness or knowledge. It seems clear that this section is arranged to take us along a path: through reflections on the blossoming of love (and concurrently the inspiration to write verse); then through the doubt of separation; towards the glory of love consummated; and then we’re treated to an ultimate resurgence of doubt – we can hear the poet asking himself if the fulfilment of an ideal is actually less gratifying than the original imagining. It is a complex undertaking because the resolution (even of just this one section) is at all times shifting. One gets the sense that the schema is not even clear to the poet himself, and that he is attempting to discover something by placing his poems in a certain order. At times it makes for a jumbled and uneven reading experience. For instance, after more mellow reflective pieces there suddenly comes the jolt of ‘Dies Dominica!’ and its ‘all or nothing’ fervour (Brennan 1960 p.70). This is classic manic behaviour rendered in poetry:
What claustral joy to-day is on the air
–expanding now and one with the celebrant sun–
and fills with pointed flame all things aware,
all flowers and souls that sing –and I am one!

The immense joy, where everything falls into place and becomes as ‘one’, is surely momentary, apparent in the poem and the collection only in ‘this keen hour’ (line 12). If Brennan has discovered anything from his complex act of composition it is perhaps that his mind (and his tool for exploration) is not stable. Poems work inward upon themselves, even at times urging their creator to adopt a different tack (‘soul, let us go, the saving word is won, / down from the tower of our hermetic thought’ (Brennan 1960 p.76)). The discovery in this poetic arrangement is the instability of the tools. If one is looking for answers, poetry is a dubious vehicle.

Yet Brennan will keep on, as writers do. He summons forth further and further insubstantial images and lines. Like the grasses he ponders ‘a vanished trace: / the dream that wanders on the breeze’, and arranges it so that more poems appear, poems that dare to suggest the words within may create a superior sensate reality (Brennan 1960 p.77). Does the object of your desire think of you as you do of her? Landed in Australia Brennan creates a poem where his distant love does in fact create him in her surroundings – the nineteenth poem in the sequence opens with the familiar (and oft thought tiresome) reflections on past moments, but this turns with the line ‘–Ah sweet! but dream me in thy landscape there’ (Brennan 1960 p.82). Again, it is a rare moment of poetic comfort afforded within the sequence, yet it is a technical response we should take note of. Play with time and space has created a comforting image but also a sense of doubt. The failure (the negativity) coming from a writerly flight of fancy has produced a departure. Failure is the result of an experimental move – the tricky imagining of the dramatic poet-figure in the mind of his lover, in the poem. In this case Brennan’s (re)-creation of a moment that effectively outshines the original moment causes his Poems to (rightly) doubt the validity of original experience. Everything quickly becomes distant, or ‘Not here – in some long-gone world’ in an effort to convince poet and reader alike that the world that originally offered some measure of pleasure (even if falsely remembered) is now not here (Brennan 1960 p.83). It is a classic attempt to avoid failure: if all that once seemed glorious was still on offer, and you simply couldn’t grasp it, there must be something wrong with you. The ‘easier’ conclusion, the inert option, is
to decide all is not what it seems. If it ever once was, then it is not anymore. Memory of things good reside only ‘in some long-gone kingdom’ (Brennan 1960 p.83).

This is where Brennan, and the figure at the centre of his poems, find themselves at the end of ‘Towards the Source’ – perversely lingering in representations of times and individuals that still may be possible. The poetic arrangement has offered him a solution but the solution is suggesting only poetry can offer the heady levels of Eden that the poet desires. He is compelled but, yet again, guides his reader toward the doubt. When ‘all is content and ripe delight, full-fed’ the poem is still reflecting on the possibilities that keep us ‘somewhat sad’ (Brennan 1960 p.91). The attainment of love, or at least the ‘object’ at the centre of perceived love, has diminished the previous enchantment: ‘our woodland prime of love, its violet-budded vow / receding ever now / farther and farther down the past…’ Links between Brennan’s poetry and his own life can be made here (in particular the importance of the early years of the relationship with his wife, the tone of which was to change when they were settled together in Australia), and indeed other links can be made throughout the sequence, yet a key feature of the poem-sequence is that it always gives us far more than a biographical interpretation. A philosophical question is of prime importance here: is a poetic sequence the right option for attaining perfection? One’s only solace? It doesn’t seem good enough, or perhaps not rigorous enough. The poem-sequence has failed the expectations of poet and reader, but in this instance it can be seen as an implicit failure that proves useful – ‘Towards the Source’ is only moving ‘towards’ further challenges. The thirtieth and final poem sets out a plan to ‘follow the roads and follow still / the dream that holds my heart in trance’ (Brennan 1960 p.93).

**The Forest of the Night**

The quest continues with a formal nod to Mallarmé, and then a long Liminary, a discursive poem where Brennan (1960 p.95) contemplates a quasi-mythic coupling with something greater, figured as ‘the breathless morn’, or a ‘summer bride, new life from nuptial lands’. This way into the two sections of ‘The Forest of the Night’ is not only longer than most of the poem-objects we are used to, but it is confused, and seeking to take in so much. The indistinct Other of the piece is imagined and described with ‘Her breasts in baffling curves’ and this very bafflement is seemingly the way in which we are prepared for the further poems (Brennan 1960 p.95). Brennan introduces the
following section by claiming the poet doesn’t really know what he is doing, or searching for, but he wants to stamp a concrete validity on the quest. This poem betrays him, like the pure physicality of his self and surroundings:

the watching windows that betray
the House of Contemplation, vaulted room
soaring, with shade that broods over pale day;

(1960 p.98)

It is a somewhat deceiving progression, because the piece fails to prepare us for what follows. Nevertheless, there is a statement of intent to be divined, even if it only be pleading – ‘let me yet / this vespers ween I am not all alone’ (Brennan 1960 p.99). There are some rare ruptures of poignant ‘writing’ that dodge free of the more typical bombastic orating.

For example, ‘The Twilight of Disquietude’ presents franker poems. The thirty-fourth poem sets out in simple language where the speaker, or writer, is. He has reached a certain age, sees wisdom as being still out of his grasp, sees prudence as being the operable mode of other segments of the population, and concludes by this that he has solved none of the motivating dilemmas by writing poetry: ‘my futile heart still wanders lost / in the same vast and impotent dreams’ (Brennan 1960 p.100). This is perhaps a better liminary. The heart is to become an important motif, and the self, the subjective centre of all this ‘impotent’ poetic bustle is to be transfigured in poetry, all as a means to further searching. How ‘deep’ is one’s soul?

Certainly the poems in this first sub-section ask things of the poet and do move towards helping him to establish a philosophical stance. They are all more ordered too – the disquiet is troubling, yet paradoxically arranged in a logical format, poems being short and concise, and generally featuring stanzas of four lines. Where they go is towards an idea of the unknowable. The symbol established here (in the poet’s ‘disquiet’, which might be seen as a simple variation on his more durable and unending intellectual disquiet) is one of deep waters. It is a veritable human agnosticism: the deep is the mind, and perhaps at the bottom is the source of creativity, the source of happiness. Barnes (2006 p.50) has indeed focused on this feature in her work on Brennan, stating at one point ‘I believe that both the “deep” and the “depths” refer to a higher self, which Brennan thought of as the human unconscious’. We have been
somewhat prepared for this; the eighteenth poem inveigles against inspiration, declaring the poet must examine his own waters, and seek out alone ‘the treasure of those deeps’ (Brennan 1960 p.81). Though now it is made explicit. The poet’s ‘heart’ (as he figures it) is not at rest. The gloomy world that emerges after childhood, when the possible pursuit of wisdom is made apparent (‘oh, strange the world upheaved from night, / oh, dread the life before our feet!’ (Brennan 1960 p.102)), might just be created by the mind, the incurious brain that seats all emotion in the heart in the first place. Rising to combat the sentiment of unhappiness, of ultimate pointlessness, is the mystery of the unconscious. Is it so very unknowable?

But mighty hands have lock’d the keep
and flung the key, long ages past:
there lies no way into the deep
that is myself, alone, aghast.

(Brennan 1960 p.104)

There is an intoxicating mystery surrounding the deep as rendered in these poems. I suspect Brennan felt this, and continued to question it. He was motivated to make another attack on wisdom, to find the words that could indeed stir those ‘sullen gulfs’ that remained so hidden. It is a failure to continue acting in vain, but that’s simply an instrumental failure. Logically, personally – in this poetic arrangement – it is a necessity to dive. I agree with Barnes (2006 p.52) when she writes: ‘Some of the poems raise the possibility that we might be able to discover something within the self that could somehow transcend everyday reality and that might even be able to renew the signifying power of the old symbols’. As Brennan (1960 p.106) writes: ‘the lands of legend call / to the dim disquiet heart’.

The prelude beginning ‘The Quest of Silence’ effectively and paradoxically casts the poet into a time when magic was allowed. A silent quest undertaken exclusively through the medium of language is a quiet ‘act’, but at the same time it is not quiet. This beginning directly opposes the banalities of the interludes, the hearth and the window, by posing the possibility that a time of legend is preferable, that such creation – no matter how constructed by words – is a better place to linger: ‘there to drowse the summer thro’ / deep in some odorous twilit lair, / swoon’d in delight of golden dew’ (Brennan 1960 p.110). Because if the possibility of Holda is imaginable then the search
for something magical is not necessary; it is the extant state of being. The five numbered poems that follow the prelude begin in a manner playful, sexual, but also simply unreal. ‘This is the only revelation; be content’ – this is offered, only to be soon overturned (Brennan 1960 p.113). Sadly ‘The Forest hides its horrors, as the sea’ (Brennan 1960 p.114). We come to the admission that ‘The Lady of the Forest was a tale’, and the necessary corollary: if one is to admit the mystically comfortable aspects of legend, one must also allow it to be troubling. The troubling visage must then return as that of the self, stranded amidst legend and fable: ‘his face drew mine across the milky gloom: / a sudden moonbeam show’d it me, my own!’ (Brennan 1960 p.119). The doppelganger is essentially an evil figure, and I think the emergence (or re-emergence) of this negatively contextualised self is placed to lead us toward an exploration of the baser side of creativity and divinity. Creation allows idyllic and golden days but it also reveals the ‘maniac face of sin’. This is faced, and a dominant legend, one dealing with the removal of all worldly pleasure (and good) is invoked in ‘Lilith’. The interludes moving from hearth to window, and then of course back from window to hearth, perhaps function to remind us of the amplitude of this poetic arrangement – there is a constant flux of inward and outward gazing. Nevertheless, the poems creates an uncertain line of narrative in the quest for wisdom (and more strangely the much mentioned quest for a state of ‘Eden’).

**Lilith**

If Lilith is rightly assigned the role of Adam’s first wife, as well as her more common function as a succubus / demon figure (we cannot know of course – the correct assignation of mythological figures is not an exact science) it must make sense to seek her out. The Edenic search initiated by Brennan earlier on in his poem-arrangement focussed on the possibility of love, and this myth engages with the ultimate initial break: the unknowingness that exists between two beings parallels the state existing in the individual. The doppelganger is unknown to the (true?) individual it mimics, just as an equality between any two people, approached through the medium of love, is – or seems to be – similarly unknowable. Is this why such legends exist, legends that provide context for the ever-present existential imperfection we sense (the mood Brennan offers again and again)? In *For Love Alone* Christina Stead (1945) dramatises the idea of love as something virtually unattainable, even though her narrative suggests that the pleasure
and pull of love is inescapable. Love could be placed as the best metaphor for artistic work – we must fail to attain the ideal, must continue to pursue it. Accepting this aspect of failure is effectively what Teresa Hawkins does at the conclusion of *For Love Alone*. Modern living does still present the shadow of Lilith in its many possible interpretations. Brennan creates in his arrangement the attendant unease he senses – ‘turberose thickens the air’, and it is a potent and dark thickening ‘whereunder seethe / cravings of darkling bliss’ (Brennan 1960 p.123).

The dramatic form of the unfolding dialogue is just another ambitious step in composition. Though we are prepared formally for leaps in register, and led toward this with the preceding changes in mood and idea, it still emerges strangely, like some ancient play. Brennan gives his characters much space to speak and it is an act of patience. Though at first curt, the voice of Adam (I read it to be so) soon embarks on what is a long, indulgent, and potentially Miltonic, monologue – he has lost Lilith to his own vanity but is now bent on relocating her. As he (his voice poetically blurred with that of a higher power) rages at the Angels that seek Lilith for punishment:

–O fools and blind, not to have found!
   is her desire not as your own?
   stirs she not in the arms that round
   a hopeless clasp, lone with the lone!

   (Brennan 1960 p.130)

Hope for engaging with an equal, a proposed egalitarian embrace, has forced Adam and God to action. But this action has not provided any solution: Lilith (represented symbolically, and lusted for in the same way as we lust for knowledge and communion) is paradoxically present inside the uncursed figures (‘now in the distant centre of my brain / dizzily narrow’d’) while also being located externally, in the demonic realm. All of this is lamented at length. For the main part though, Brennan figures Adam’s lament as sexual longing. There are a number of legends associated with the figure of Lilith, Sumerian, Talmudic, Biblical and folkloric for example (Moffat 2005; Hirsch, Schechter, and Blau 1906). Many indicate Lilith’s demonic status, but many also point to the association of the figure in the erotic dreams of men, and this aspect of life functions within Brennan’s Poems, particularly in his Lilith sequence, in an analogous manner to the concept of desire. The power-based interpretation of Lilith’s loss of Eden
– as proposed in the folklore tale *The Alphabet of Ben Sira* – is all too simple (Segal 1995). Man is not cursed for the subjugation of woman; rather, it seems in Brennan’s writing the thinker is cursed for daring to attempt an interpretation, an arrangement of the symbols:

O priest and poet, thou that makest God,  
woe, when the path of thine illusion, trod  
even to the end, reveals thee thy worn face,  
eternal hermit of the unhallow’d place!

(Brennan 1960 p.140)

This failure to find meaning in the material that feels as if it should be symbolic is not unique, and there is a similar failure at play in John Shaw Neilson’s (2007) ‘The Orange Tree.’ The old man in Neilson’s poem laments that he cannot see what the child can see; Brennan expresses anger because he cannot see or believe in what a Biblical figure could have. Brennan is Adam but only in the way that Adam is humankind. There are no grounds for certainty at all, no roads to success available.

A more thorough exploration of Brennan’s treatment could highlight the genderless uncertainty underpinning Lilith, or, alternatively we could read the Lilith legend as an attack on gender constructs, one that Brennan plays into by giving his characters room to lament so thoroughly, raising the idea that he himself is almost wishing for a reunification with Lilth (the creative force, desire) and Eden. But I think both interpretations are worked in. The failed quest for an understanding has only reconfirmed Brennan’s initial suspicious image of the doppelganger. Despite the best intentions in composing a poetic monument to self-discovery he is still forced to give this line a place at the end of the sequence: ‘All mystery, and all love, beyond our ken,’ (Brennan 1960 p.144). As Barnes (2006 p.270) writes of this sequence, ‘the poetry explores what might precede discourse itself, and what capacities human beings might have to intuit it’. Lilith woos us into confusing desires; to the creation of vain poetic sequences that are ‘the sparse jewels scatter’d in her hair’. Knowing is seductive but the history of the attempt is darkly uncertain. Lilith is ‘the silence of our thought’, both peaceful and apparently impervious. A compelling Orange Tree of unattainable love.
The Wanderer

Wilkes (1973 p.vii) claims that ‘The Wanderer’ sequence overcomes ‘the deadlock by returning to the here and now, and starting afresh’. It is a strange kind of here and now that Brennan returns us to, one still occasionally fraught with illusory images and vague timelessness. He begins the sequence by leaving the town behind him at night, and ‘journeying’. We cannot read it accurately as a midnight walk however. Brennan is still in the symbolic mode and while the language is more concrete, and importantly places him as doing actual things, he is still referring to an intellectual and linguistic quest, using poetry as his means. (It is uncertain whether or not Brennan was given to long walks of contemplation, because he is not fond of mentioning place-names or landmarks.) Brennan is pondering the ways he has taken in the past, the ways that are evident in the earlier sections in his book: ‘All night I have walk’d and my heart was deep awake, / remembering the ways I dream’t and that I chose, / remembering lucidly’ (Brennan 1960 p.156). We are privileged here to be able to guess almost exactly what Brennan is referring to, because we have it as part of our journey, as landmarks in an act of large-scale poetic composition. This is perhaps why ‘The Wanderer’ is regarded as his most successful sequence. The ambiguity that often overtakes a lot of his other work (especially when the poems are read out of context, as singular works) is here diminished.

The second poem continues the trend, using a perfectly understandable event – the arrival of a ship at shore – as the symbolic spur for an analysis of Brennan’s wandering. The poem might just as easily be read here as a contemplation of physical movement: is it removal from the familiar landscape (where one hears ‘no other voice but the crooning sea’s’) that might wash away ‘the old rancours’ (Brennan 1960 p.157)? The poem is uncertain, musing ‘Surely I do not desire to go / hither and thither upon the earth and grow weary / with seeing many lands and peoples and the sea’. But he does desire ‘welcome’, wherever that may be. The home hearth, which seems inherently intertwined with rain and unsettled waves, is not a place of ease. It quickly becomes all too apparent in the next poem when Brennan (1960 p.157) begins with: ‘I am driven everywhere from a clinging home’. Knowledge of Brennan’s unhappy life with his wife, combined with the more referential lines of poems in ‘The Wanderer’, make a biographical reading hard to ignore. Yet though these poems do encompass a meditation on love gone awry they also do more than that. Brennan is at every point considering the
poetic ways of old, and the hypothesised searching of the future, and framing it with the events unfolding around him. Although he is constantly evoking the past in terms either regretful, or overly sentimental, he might have once believed that love and the attendant spousal dwelling would at least offer him refuge from further doubts. This seems not to be the case. In a ‘clinging home’ he imagined he could ‘forget the morrows that threat and the unknown way’ – he hoped that within a refuge of love and dwelling not knowing the truth at the centre of his quest (communion with the inner-divine) would not trouble him any more (Brennan 1960 p.157). It is a valid hope but obviously one not realised, and he curses himself for the abject failure of his predicament: ‘You shall find neither home nor rest: for ever you roam / with stars as they drift and wilful fates of the sky!’

Brennan cannot leave alone the mode of progression in his composition, the way thematic concerns are analysed rigorously. This, as I’ve noted before, is part of the innovative way Brennan treats arrangement. The entire act of placing poem after poem informs the development of his concerns. After finding himself mired in a loveless home, a place where he cannot find the peace he once promised himself, he then moves to a poem that looks inward, questioning himself (or his ‘heart’), asking it ‘why are you weary and cannot rest?’ (Brennan 1960 p.158). It is a credit to Brennan that this poem seems to move beyond an explanation of blame (love, or his idealised version of love (focussed as it was on his wife), was never going to staunch his poetic quest for further knowledge); but here the resolutions fail to move him on to further ideas. Another trait of Poems 1913 is the way the surface-level method of arrangement, that of moving logically towards further explorations of ideas raised, can give way to regressions. The versions of the past Brennan evokes never existed outside of the poetry. The ‘once’ when Brennan (1960 p.158) was at rest – ‘Once I could sit by the fire hourlong when the dripping eaves / sang cheer to the shelter’d’ – is always situated in the past, but based on the evidence his book of poems presents one can rightly claim that these moments are purely imaginary, and Brennan has forgotten that. There is an elaborate fantasy constructed around his notion of happiness – despite being vividly painted (in the early poems the seasons and natural elements all seem to mirror his moods at times of romantic union) it is always out of reach. This may be the effect of using the past-tense, but Brennan was too competent a writer to do that for no reason. There are rare moments of calm acceptance situated in the present, and it’s almost a calm acceptance of the lack of fulfilment life offers (such as in poem thirty-four, in ‘The Twilight of Disquietude’). This doesn’t offer much play, much fun. The regressive errors appear when Brennan
feels options closing and then reverts to sorrow. That’s allowable, and as readers we can connect with the sorrow of the poems, finding some solace in the common feeling of being human. But imagine a friend who continually unburdens himself or herself at your expense, leaving you to share all the troubles and misery. You might be empathetic initially, but eventually, a little irked by the gloom.

The deeper trouble is that Brennan is alone poetically. This we can understand, forgive, and even celebrate a little, because he is forging his own path through a poetic form that will not be warmly received by his Australian poetry community. So, when all he has is ‘regret, and a memory’, Brennan will ‘sit and muse in this wayside harbour and wait’ (Brennan 1960 p.159). The line can’t escape the influence of the common saying ‘gone by the wayside’. The way is the road, the path that takes one from somewhere to somewhere else. Brennan sits inert by the wayside, unable to proceed. This is Sydney and this is isolation from the poetic community Brennan needs. I think he figures his quest – or more usefully his future poetic writing – as being ‘other’ to his home because he senses it simply isn’t where he is; but also, he figures it as dark and pitiless – a way into the stormy night or a voyage across an unsettled sea – because it’s frightening to think of, the fact that his connection with a European poetic network is probably impossible (I imagine he could not foresee how dramatically notions of ‘creative communités’ would change with the advent of electronic communication, the internet).

There is no one to share the predicament with either: ‘and who is there cares but I? / and I grieve for my heart that is old and cannot cease from regret’ (Brennan 1960 p.159). He sees hope for further exploit slipping away. Brennan has family but is temporally stranded in the early 20th Century, so this is the way it has to be, but he still wants more. Perhaps that is why the face of his wife keeps looming? She is a convenient figure (as were Lilith and Eve before her) to stand for the poetic and professional failures his ideal of love (and his theories of desire) has brought about. She is not the centre of blame – Brennan places himself there most thoroughly – but she is symbolic of two things: memory of the ineffable seeming graspable within romantic union; and now the obvious and depressing inertia of wandering, wandering that is located within a poetic dream.

Depression was always bound to turn against the world enclosing him in its realm. Brennan cries out to the world and its inhabitants, ambiguously. Is this warning or curse? The ninety-third poem imagines a more simple mind, a person perhaps content in their hearth-bound living (‘crouching beside / the hearth that is your only centre of life and dream’) who in turn pities Brennan his ‘wandering’. It is a complex undertaking,
one where Brennan seems not so sure himself who pities whom. The ‘you’ of the poem offers Brennan sustenance on his way, and then it seems pities him that he must keep on his aimless path in the intemperate weather. But Brennan of course knows more than you, the simple citizen, and indeed feels he has tasted ‘all your unwitting lives’. Does he pity you the unwitting life, the fact that you are ignorant of the world’s insubstantiality, or does he pity that the possibility exists for you to eventually know this?

And knowing the world how limitless and the way how long, 
and the home of man how feeble and builded on the winds, 
I have lived your life, that eve, as you might never live 
knowing, and pity you, if you should come to know. 

(Brennan 1960 p.160)

It has to be both. Brennan has found himself in a place where he is disdainful of those who live their lives in peace, never touching upon the hidden depths of the soul, but is also disdainful of himself and those who quest intellectually for some deeper knowledge of the self and the divine. It is a crux: the angst of knowing more than is common but also knowing the perverse truth that one seemingly cannot know anything worthwhile, like how to be at peace. It is a curious mixture of pity and loathing that centres on the individual and others – it creates a tone that was Brennan’s alone. Other writers have always identified with the troubles of the greater population. Lawson’s ‘Faces in the Street’ (1984, p.48) for example (a work from around Brennan’s time) pictures the writer down at street level, sharing in the miseries of the people. But in the end he places hope in social revolution, which valorizes the poet – within this poem Lawson’s purpose at least is solid and clear. With ‘The Orange Tree’ even though Neilson (2007) grapples with the idea of finding some answers or inspiration in ‘nature’, he does present the imagery of the child communing, leaves the fulfilment open as a possibility. Brennan is never so certain that there is, somewhere, a redeeming path.

Yet he continues calling on people to go forth and find the deep; accordingly we must interpret his disdain for the humble non-searching types to be greater than the disdain he saves for himself. Brennan sees a darkness overtaking the world at large, and names it as a preferable fate to face this. Indeed he now cries out as he passes the windows at dusk: ‘Ye have built your unmysterious homes and ways in the wood / where of old ye went with sudden eyes to the right and left’; and then after imagining
cataclysmic winds that will destroy what is built, he pictures the stunned way we will emerge: ‘and ye shall not know whence the winds have come, nor shall ye know / wither the yesterdays have fled, or if they were’ (Brennan 1960 p.161). There is a ‘dull peace’ in forgetting the ways of legend and gods but it will produce only a stupid stare in the end. Brennan cloaks his poem in the language of old as a gesture to what we no longer value. Taking account of the historical connections (both geographical and cultural) with an overall goal of knowing ‘the self’ is both an inductive and deductive way to proceed, or to wander:‘go: though the going be hard and the goal blinded with rain / yet the staying is a death that is never soften’d with sleep’ (Brennan 1960 p.162).

The arrangement or design of ‘The Wanderer’ section does in the end seek a more personal conclusion. The ‘dawn’ of the sequence surfaces in the ninety-sixth poem where it seems that, once again, we are presented with only ‘a homeless light, staring, disconsolate, / on the drear world it knows too well’ (Brennan 1960 p.163). Light has revealed the same troubles. Despite a night journey full of turmoil and tempestuous thought dawn has brought the banal – every such dawn is ‘so varied’ and yet ‘the same’. What is Brennan to conclude for himself? He ponders ‘What is there with you and me’, in the ninety-seventh poem, referring to the sea and its turmoil, and begins to find some clarity. The same images and symbols are evoked and darkly put, but Brennan is wondering why. Why so gloomy with the predicament if it is an inevitable one? The final two poems look back over the night’s venture to highlight what worked and what didn’t, in a sort of meta-analysis hiding within Brennan’s own poetry. He claims that despite the desolateness of the journey and the surroundings he was often ‘warm at heart’, the warmth issuing from his own his own bright sense of having at least done something, of having trodden a difficult path into the epistemologies of the unknown. He has done this poetically and there is an achievement in this, despite the failure to locate answers or wisdom. Paradoxically, this failure brings about the wisdom:

yet in that wind a clamour of trumpets rang,
old trumpets, resolute, stark, undauntable,
singing to battle against the eternal foe,

(Brennan 1960 p.164)

Despite himself Brennan draws courage from his grand attempt. There is an element of heroism in his elaborate poetic construction that could possibly outweigh the element of
narcissism. The final poem in the sequence ends strongly; even the baleful light that
dawn casts has been creatively ameliorated: ‘now it is clear grey day and the road is
plain’ (Brennan 1960 p.165). This is not all one could hope for, but the rains have
stopped, and it doesn’t matter to him: ‘the sunshine and the rain are one / and one to stay
or hasten / because he knows no ending of the way, no home, no goal’ (Brennan 1960
p.165). The tone of regret is not as prominent as previously. The simple act of
acknowledgement that closes,

and saying this to myself as a simple thing
I feel a peace fall in the heart of the winds
and a clear dusk settle, somewhere, far in me.

(Brennan 1960 p.165)

almost says ‘I am who I am, regardless of what I don’t know’. It is a fitting place to be.
Although we might sense a problem in this suggestion of exorcism. If peace has fallen
within Brennan’s composition, will there be any need to keep creating? Why continue to
write?

Pauca Mea / Epilogues

There are but a ‘few things’ left to say; a few poems to place. They say nothing new but
instead continue the act of indecision. Poem 100 suggests maybe there is the possibility
of earthly pleasure (and importantly, pleasure in the here and now), but then poem 101
brings back the icy winds of doubt: ‘there is no peace but a gray sleep / in the pause of
the wind’ (Brennan 1960 p.166). The section seems to be a bi-polar ad-hoc addition of
pieces spanning several years. Brennan’s will is indulged and then challenged. He wants
the misery to end, and cannot abide to ‘sit huddled under any blow’, but by 1908 he sees
it as only ending in death. Desire still overwhelsm him and simultaneously defeats him
and his poetic object. Another alternative: peace will only be found when ‘time and
sorrow fall away / and night be wither’d up, and fire / consume the sickness of desire’
(Brennan 1960 p. 168). Resolution can only be found with further acts of self-induced
design. With this creative act, maybe ‘misery must end’; Brennan offers a shard of a
solution, but it is a nullification of everything, this great conflagration that can ‘consume
the sickness of desire’. Deferring desire is not akin to eliminating it altogether. With no
desire there is undoubtedly no chance of personal, poetic and philosophical failure; but the removal of desire baffles momentum. Why do anything at all? I believe Brennan – the poet, also the dramatic figure central to the poem-arrangement – has taken this idea on board, to the detriment of any further poetic growth. If he follows the logical narrative of his work he must abandon the craft (and we know that later he practically does this). This is not a failure in itself. The failure is to go so far with a quest only to abdicate, to rest purposeless.

The ‘Epilogues’ do contain some further information necessary for us to understand the journey we have just been on. Brennan ends the first poem with a stanza beginning ‘The gift of self is self’s most sacred right:’ which is, taking into account where the preceding poems have led us, a pithy but intriguing truth (Brennan 1960 p.170). It paves the way for a self created by one’s own creative acts, and almost laughs at the idea of a universal unknown. Such a thing cannot matter to the self-determined individual. The writer goes on to admit, deep down in his secret thought, he gives over the unknown to God. A confusing paradox. The final poem – it definitely has the feel of being written later in Brennan’s life – is for him a return to specificity, and less positively, a return to regression. The specifics are not vital and contemporary; the specifics are images of the past. Past the schools of youth, past the trams, past the gin-shops, even past the recounted dreams of Eden, the poem ends pondering ‘fidelity to old delight’ (Brennan 1960 p.174). What is the old delight? Is it the idea that nothing promises comfort bar what is already gone? The resolution to this poem-sequence is very much an end that emphasises finiteness. We cannot attain what we desire, either in the realm of ideas and knowledge, or in the memory of past pleasures. There is a desultory and pervasive tone of failure to seal this work.

Both sides of the coin: The Burden of Tyre / A Chant of Doom

The Burden of Tyre seems to be viewed more favourably by the critics than A Chant of Doom. For example, Lynch’s recent study of A Chant of Doom opens by claiming the work has ‘very little value as poetry . . .’; he also sums up the critics’ response as ‘adequately damning’. I agree with this opinion, but coming at the works with little historical knowledge means my reasons for thinking so vary. The obvious similarity between the two works is that both are concerned with war. But the differences are important: when reading the poems of The Burden of Tyre I find little that connects the
sequence to the real world events they are supposed to be engaging with, the Boer War. On the other hand the poems of *A Chant of Doom* do connect with the war they are about, partly through the acknowledgements, the titles, the references within the poems; but more so because the opinion in these poems is strident. Brennan was passionate about Australia’s involvement in the First World War and this translated into poetry that was understandable, but also shallow.

Both of the sequences are not great poetry, are not overly stimulating to read (as a poet, reading for pleasure but also for insight into craft), and do deserve their minor status with Brennan’s small oeuvre. Yet though these are the obvious failures of Brennan’s career something else may be revealed in the works. Naturally the decision to engage with an issue that tends to incite passionate opinion, and polarise members of the community, is fraught with trouble. It can here be easy to get it wrong. If you are passionately for a war, many will instantly (and rightly) see this as something less than poetry, poetry being the means by which artists poke and prod at the inexpressible, beauty and terror of life. Such a form of art and communication defies pontification. This is why I prefer to read *The Burden of Tyre*, even though it is still a difficult text to enjoy outright. On first reading these poems only seem to engage with the legends of Tyre. The anti-war sentiment is there, but it feels general – the poems use the stories of the city (the gathering of riches, the greed for empire, the site of war and destruction) to articulate an argument against all things associated with the need for war. Tyre is contrasted with Eden, Brennan’s usual poetic image, showing all the paraphernalia of aggression is ‘a greed to catch the paltry dust’ (Brennan 1973 p.120). In this light Eden is safe. It is an ideal of peace, safe in ideals, in poems. The relativism is positive – the sequence admits the heroic lineage of poetry, but also admits Brennan’s mistrust of war rationales. The positive intellectual force of these oppositions is something I too try to harness, within the final section of my poetry manuscript, ‘controlled time of crisis…’ Society seeks to re-mould order in times of crisis. But everyone has their own views on the specifics or the plans for action. Furthermore, everyone has his or her own views on what constitutes a crisis worthy of controlling action (Brennan’s notion was that the Boer War was not deserving of Australian involvement). It’s as if people were characters in Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* sometimes, and like in the poem ‘derek motion painter decorater’ (p.66), I do imagine ‘everyone going down the street / mincing / mincing’ playing at some image of themselves, presenting an effective doppleganger, because their own inner-conspiracies mean that much more than mine. It is a definite
failure to assume otherwise, to think the masses think as you do, or if not, that they should.

Brennan (1973 p.122) finds the forcing of belief on others distasteful:

Behold his children, how they run
hither and thither thro’ their times
and seek all lands beneath the sun
and force their faith on softer climes

and slay . . .

It is then not so strange that he would take a different tack when the perceived arbiter of the ‘forcing’ is not aligned with Australia and England. But A Chant of Doom lacks any of the weighing of ideas that its predecessor offers. This sequence is pure bombast – unflinchingly patriotic and because of this full of action and pronouncement, not thought. Brennan (1999) rails against ‘German faith and German trust / German hate and German lust’ which must (admittedly it is easier to read it this way with the benefit of hindsight) bring him and his readers closer to being just like the Germans, feeling the surety of righteousness, allowing this as justification for bloodthirst. Brennan cannot bring his collection of poems to any even-handedness, even when he attempts to do so. The final poem ‘Doom’ sketches out a terrifying image of hell, clearly meant as a place the Germans will inhabit. But he tries too hard to assure the reader this is a Hell designed by the Germans themselves – this is not ‘vengeance’ as such as wrought by the opposition, but a ‘self-damnation’. The problem is that the argument for self-design works inwardly too. If it was ‘Their own skill that most industrious built / this pit of despair’, and it was ‘The enginery they wrought, whose maw they fed / with fume and fire of hate’, then indeed our attention is drawn to design, to craft, to agency (Brennan 1999). The ‘House of Hell’ has been created (with all of its attendant description and moral ramifications) only by the writer, by Brennan. His poetry makes it real. In a way to read this poetry and to be united in the cause is to be caught in a similar position to a German soldier, unwittingly believing in the nationalist agenda of his governing body. Brennan’s failure here is his rampant purpose. Interestingly enough, it could also be part of his success. It is informative to see that each of the poems in A Chant of Doom is there by merit of being published elsewhere, quite unlike the approach in Brennan’s
other volumes. Although his ‘Note’ claims ‘The temptation was strong . . . to corroborate, deepen and intensify the offence’ that is the collection (by adding to it, perhaps to strengthen the structural arrangement), he does not do so, and this leaves instead a group of poems that already has some measure of public support attached to them (Brennan 1999). Part of the success gained here is recognition and acceptance. There is no doubt that a desire for these things is bubbling underneath the surface of the artist in at least some measure; it is the amount of sway we let it have that can affect the perceived failures in our work, contemporaneously, and retrospectively. This is something I shall discuss with reference to my own work in A Consequence of Breathing. A number of poems within the Breathe in Space have attained some publication success, some have placed in or won awards. How one deals with public successes must be carefully considered.

The lure of the experimental . . .

Perceiving your own creative failures is inevitable and often very easy. The idea that you can use failure as a model for identity, to in effect ‘own’ your unsuccessful acts, is not so definite. It is fitting to end this discussion of the works of Brennan with his anomalistic works: his handwritten prose-poem and his later lyrics. The singular oddity that is Musicopoematographoscopes (which in published form includes ‘Musicopoematographoscope’ and also the ‘pocket’ version), it seems was never meant for publication – these works were handwritten, and supplied only to Brennan’s friend O’Reilly. This immediately places the work in a different vein of pursuit to his war poems. Yet as Barnes (2007 p.46) notes, there was much care taken in the production of these works, and as such we cannot simply assume they were intended as a frivolous joke. The joke is part of the rationale, the other parts being a response to the critics’ reception of his poetry, and a response to the new work Brennan was reading by Mallarmé. The fact that this work was never published attests to the fact that Brennan did not see this as the poetry he would offer the world. But then it is precisely this type of work that could have influenced him more thoroughly had he allowed it, and it is the type of work that could have given him worthwhile direction, into poetic territory where the event of self-surprise would be encouraged, where textual collage might produce insight and imagery valuable despite the lack of knowledge underpinning it. On the very first page of ‘Musicopoematographoscope’ (Brennan 1981 p.11) we see possible
meanings multiply from this particular act of composition: the statement ‘I DON’T GIVE A TINKER’S DAMN’ is spread over the whole manuscript but is readable in that order, when using the relative font size to determine order; but we are also able to read the first page as ‘I DON’T / GIVE / IN SPITE OF MY CHARITABLE / DISPOSITION / WITNESS’ (the exact spacing and text sizes must be observed in the book itself). This act of acknowledgement, this ‘giving witness’ hints at a number of things. There is of course the biblical ‘giving witness’, the belief in God and religion that has surely had something to do with Brennan’s quest for his own personal Eden. But this also encourages one to think of acknowledgement in general, and to my mind it links with the final section of the work wherein Brennan selectively quotes passages of reviews his Poems has garnered. In the poetry world – I’m imagining it was similar in Brennan’s day to what it is now – it is viewed by some to be a mistake to devour all of your reviews. Worse again to defend your poetry and make a concerted response to the reviews (worst of all is the public / published response). This is present in Musicopoematographoscopes. An honest and true feeling of ‘not giving a damn’ would require no articulation, even to a solitary friend. If ‘Brennan is taking revenge for what he considers to be the complete demolition of his work by the critics’, in practical terms it is a dubious venture (Barnes 2007 p.47). But then Brennan’s arrangement has allowed equivocality to be foregrounded; this is a more concrete, more interesting aspect of the work.

There is a random meandering loveliness to the parenthesised section on the second and third pages, where Brennan ‘refuses / to breathe / beyond the perfect / circle / of / exclamation / the name’ (Brennan 1981 pp.12-13). I think here we are allowed to see thought-process in process, a voice wondering how to name anything with any specificity, without giving up on the unknown, which simultaneously responds to critics that might claim poetry needs to be understood by the public. There follows a vital mixture of these two registers: the spacing and detached grammar of the work suggest we might read as a stream-of-thought, a riffing on the idea of poetry vs audience; the collaged gluing together of various linguistic responses to his poetry (the blustery ‘tinker’s damn’ style response grafted to the more careful self-questioning of his own voice, his page, his depths) suggests a close reading, a reading of this work perhaps as a Poetics. Barnes identifies these trends in the work too. She feels that Brennan’s use of this particular poem-structure (so closely influenced by Mallarmé), alongside his references to ‘ancestry’, can be taken as somewhat of an attempt to place himself as an
inheritor to a poetic tradition, an attempt that could ‘imply an intention more serious than the constant verbal fireworks of the Musicopoematographoscope might suggest’ (Barnes 2007 p.49). As a writer however, one cannot fail to be impressed with the ‘verbal fireworks’. There is a palpable impact from the page containing only the word ‘DAMN’, a combination of both climax and anticlimax rolled into one, like a firework fuse sputtering out to black amidst the hushed anticipation of a large crowd (Brennan 1981). As a centrepiece I believe it functions more effectively than anything within Poems. There are many other rollicking moments such as this – valleys and mountains of accent implied with font; diagonal heapings of verbiage that one reads like a slippery dip – and the only failure is that the elements that make ‘Musicopoematographoscope’ a fun poem to read did not find their way in to so much more of Brennan’s verse.

O’Reilly, the intended reader, would even have been surprised to see his name pop up within the text. An everyday marker, a guiding buoy within the depths of Brennan’s thought. The recurring ‘C U’ in the pocket poem is in Wilkes’ estimation a simple message to O’Reilly, meaning the first part of ‘see you tomorrow’ (and if true, it is quite interesting how this anticipates the language of modern mobile phone text messaging), but these emboldened repetitions still simply mark the friend, someone who matters:

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2
that’s what we are
or one minus one
like star from star
at a distance thrown
of a very long dash
which I haven’t the cash
to annihilate

or the time
(Brennan 1981)
```

The pocket poem does jest, as Wilkes claims, but at the same time it expresses a more relaxed Brennan, a writer who can allow the pondering of human absolutes (love, friendship) to be a less tempestuous pursuit. Furthermore I believe Musicopoematographoscopes as a whole shows an intention posited by Barnes:
Brennan is drawing attention to the artefact that he is constructing as he disposes his own handwritten signs on the blank space that (as ‘candour’ also implies) is innocent beforehand, even virginal, but full of potential.

(Barnes 2007 p.49)

This is why it is a terrifically interesting document. There is an anxiety within, revealed through Brennan’s use of critical material. Wilkes reads his poetic argument (at least within this text) as: ‘Brennan asserts that his failure to interest his audience is not a failure, but a consequence of his own deliberate choice’ (Brennan 1981). But even if a failure is a consequence of one’s own choice, this does not alter the fact of it being a failure. It possibly makes it more relevant. Brennan’s real trouble is with accepting the failure he has created by going his own way – his oeuvre shows he cannot go so far as to do this. While reviewing *Musicopoemographoscopes*, John Tranter (1982) claims that Brennan’s work will never be reevaluated to the level that Mallarmé’s has been in more recent years. But, he does indicate that from this we should take something: ‘There are lessons in Brennan’s life and poetry, and this very personal early work reveals them more clearly than any of his printed poems could.’ Although he comments little on the work at hand in his review (other than give background details, and to note ‘it is probably the first ever parody of free verse in the history of English literature’), I do think Tranter reads failure in Brennan’s engagement with his critics, and I think this is important. Certainly after a point there is an obvious paucity of poetry from Brennan. Certainly his use of the collage form was not an impulse forged of jest. Brennan’s practice overall was often at odds with his ideals, and his self was not self-determined, what he once considered the self’s most ‘sacred right’.

Later in Brennan’s life there do come a few poems that appear to express something unified and affective, something issuing from within a self-determined individual. The love poems stand out. There is the unpublished prefatory sonnet beginning ‘You are the one woman who could have me all’; the sonnet by Michaelangelo, translated by Brennan for his love Vie; and the truly remarkable ‘Because she would ask me why I loved her’ (which despite its relative obscurity pops up again and again in online lists of love poems perfect for Valentine’s Day) (Brennan 1973 pp.139-140). These poems seem to have as an object of focus something that is forever still intangible and inexplicable, yet real. The unexplained state of desire in these love poems does not bring on anxiety in the reader – and perhaps it is as in life as in art,
that Brennan was more secure when giving advice to others? There is a gentle irony to the line ‘Then seek not, sweet, the If and Why’, when we consider the landscape of Brennan’s poetic works. The final lines of this poem ‘For I must love because I live / And life in me is what you give’ express a firm resolution that is neither gloomy nor a product of reasoning. This is all uncharacteristic. But it is informative. Here I read an acceptance of failure as the necessary failure of the attempt to ‘know’ absolutely. The remaining poems sound a note of regret, surely issued as a response to a mixture of feelings, regret for personal mistakes, and regret for a poetic career that rise to the heights of his ambition. One lesson we learn from Brennan’s experience is that acceptance of the brutal fact of failure is something one should take on sooner rather than later, at a time when despite personal growth one will have inevitably already grown ‘so deep in day . . .’ (Brennan 1973 p.146).

At first Brennan’s poetic quest was, ostensibly, to gain divine knowledge of the secret unconscious: he must have once thought it possible, or at least a worthwhile direction. At any rate the diction and imagery associated with the quest in its entirety often feels like a failing, but apt. When his work can move beyond the pseudo-call of this past quest the poetry (evidenced in various sequences) emerges into a much more poetically justified space (much more successful I would argue). When Brennan outlines a sort of ‘all I know is that I now know nothing’ statement at the end of some of his pieces (it is there in differing guises in a number of earlier works, as well as in the later lyrics) he does effectively combine intellectual questing with some kind of peace. For example these previously quoted lines say it explicitly: ‘I feel a peace fall in the heart of the winds / and a clear dusk settle, somewhere, far in me’ (Brennan 1960 p.165). For a struggle that is poetic in nature and is also poetically rendered this is a fitting image to settle on. It leads one to adjudge such a poem (and the surrounding ‘Wanderer’ sequence) unusually successful for Brennan, without leading one to judge it a stylistic anomaly.

The failures that are hinted at even within the ‘Wanderer’ poems can be observed more prominently in other sections of his work. It colours any assessment of his output. What then did he need, to be able to produce more intellectually complex and interestingly written poetry? There is certainly truth in the idea that Brennan needed a more robust connection with the contemporary: an easy familiarity with the writers and their work, people who had also been through a creative ‘limbo of defeated glory’, but could see a way past it. There are also glimpses of hope in his less laboured works. A
willingness to let form surprise even the poet himself (whether it is with successful image, phrase, revelation, or the failed) combined with a relaxed approach to ‘not-knowing’ could have helped create a useful poetic trajectory, a more enjoyable philosophic quest. The formal openness is a playful, but more importantly experimental impulse, one I sense in *Musicopoematographoscopes*; the relaxed mode is personal, and can be divined in some of Brennan’s later lyrics. I think Brennan’s peace (created through and around his poetic output) was sensed ‘somewhere’, but it was never grasped entirely.
Embracing your talent – Michael Dransfield

There is not much critical material that links the poetries of Brennan and Dransfield (and even their shared status as minor poets is debatable – I have met many writers who revere Dransfield in particular, claiming his work is more influential than the work of many other major figures). But Livio Dobrez (1990, p.3) does trace a line between the two writers, claiming Dransfield’s capability for mixing the lyrical mode with ‘passionate indignation’ creates ‘a prophetic voice which has scarcely been heard in this country, at least through the medium of poetry, since Brennan’s time’. Though he suggests Dransfield’s work is overall more impassioned, maybe even more authentic (not ‘groping for an audience’ like the Wanderer), the link he cites is clear. Both poets were taken by the mode of the visionary seer, and had to grapple with the way this could relate to the lyrical self. Seeing is often an act of re-imagining, even initially.

Many years ago when I first read Dransfield’s much anthologised poem ‘Flying’ (my first encounter with the poet) I thought about it in this manner: Is Dransfield writing about flying over Sydney in an airplane (writing as a dog), or, is he writing of an acid trip (the self then weirdly and aptly figured as a dog)? Eventually I decided it doesn’t matter. In either case, how can he ‘see’ what’s going on in Sydney? In a plane the landscape is distant and a blur of colours, and even when landing it rushes past too rapidly for sound evaluation. On LSD the view of the landscape is a product of a chemically-skewed imagination. So how does he know for sure that ‘things looked bad’ (Dransfield 1987 p.148)? The most likely solution (if such a ‘solving’ befits the poem) is a reversal of the terms. The quality of badness becomes a projection. Things look bad because things are bad within the poet. Continual inward gazing, reflecting on one’s own state, differs from writing as an act of becoming. It is true there could be many reasons for Dransfield’s state; however, the poetic need to over-question and analyse the psycho-social construct that is Michael Dransfield does not help. It is a failure to find balance. This leaves the poet and poetry in a continual state of tension. I think ‘Flying’ is a good poem, a poem that uses a few words to rove over many ideas. But it is also unnerving when read as an insight into Dransfield’s state of mind. He is casting his eyes about for beauty, looking about and within for new ideas and images, but everything is looking ‘bad’.
The idea of ‘vision’ (part self-constructed; part unavoidably manufactured) underpins the whole of Dransfield’s relativistic, and somehow coherently lyrical, body of work. We know he did see the road and the birds and the trees: sometimes he saw things as if he had a thousand years up his sleeve, simply to dwell in images and impressions. Perhaps the entire problem then (if we use the word ‘problem’ to suggest an underlying failure of Dransfield’s poetic output) was his attitude to what he saw. Maybe the truly emotional and affective qualities of poetry need to be personally evaluated and prioritised by each practising poet? What is useful in a poem? What stance am I going to take towards it? I would suggest that within the heuristic processing of the poet’s brain play and whimsy (which by no means excludes seriousness) should be positioned well above pathos, or the ability to provoke melancholy in both reader and writer. Especially if you are as close to your words as evidence indicates Dransfield was. What I see and do is inextricably linked to the way I write too. It’s a circular process: the way I write is linked to what I see and do, how I live. The writer needs to be wary, but also open to the possibility of reward: there is a sensory consolation on offer within memorable poems, a space analogous to that dreamy space where time stretches, childhood. Living within the images of memory (accurately recreated or not) brings a return to innocence (or to a state you might have imagined as ‘innocent’). It comes with inhabiting the poetic space. Sometimes we might wish we could go back to the point of origin, the ‘now’ that is now the past, yet that wouldn’t be as good: we want to time travel, to see things with our attuned eyes, to go back ‘knowing what we know now’. But then we also want to undo those learnt structures of wit, world-weariness, and adulthood, because they are the things that cause us angst, that take away our innocence. The same adult things we are all still so focused on attaining. Perhaps this is the evil aspect of the mythical doppleganger, the creature I mention later in this exegesis and in the poem ‘derek motion painter decorator’ (p.67)? This is the Other that you can create with your writing but can never actually be, even though you might rightly find such a figure alluring, because of the sense of otherness it suggests. As a writer your attitude towards your material, your approach, and ‘the subject’ is necessarily complex. You simply cannot afford to sink into a sentimental bog of pathos.

While still alive, Dransfield did fatalistically label himself a ‘posthumous poet’. He no doubt therefore would have approved of so much of his work being published after his death. But during his life and career as a poet Dransfield never really suffered the professional failures Brennan knew (these were not dwelt on in the preceding
chapter, but his problems within the world of academia, as well as the often indifferent reviews his poetry attracted, are known (Clark 1980). For a poet (and particularly for a poet in his early twenties) Dransfield experienced phenomenal success (Dobrez 1999). His first volumes of poetry were published early, and his work was also seen in journals both underground and mainstream; he forged relationships with other well-known writers such as Rodney Hall and Thomas Shapcott; and he was invited to participate in significant literary events, most notably the 1968 Armidale Writers’ Retreat, and the 1972 Adelaide Festival Writers’ Week (Dobrez 1999). There is a general consensus that he had a great talent, and it seems he was (during his time) ‘the most accomplished of the poets under twenty five’ (Afterman 1973 p.478). Now, though, his critical reputation is different, and recognises the different way Dransfield wrote – there is an undercurrent of failure in the literature that groups him with a figure like Brennan. This idea seems to be in the minds of many critics writing about his life and works: ‘He died young and therefore his work exudes somehow the feeling of unfulfilled promise’ (Karalis 2006 p.219). What can one take from such a statement? I think Kinsella (2003 p.142) wants to move beyond this when he notes that ‘Most discussions of the work of the Australian poet Michael Dransfield seem to begin and end with a reference to the brevity of his life. . . . ’ In this work I too wish to move beyond this biographical fact, in order to help illuminate a method of research that can inform a contemporary poet’s development.

The opinion on Dransfield’s work while he was alive was often positive, but also often relied on the fact that he would mature and develop. Shapcott (1970 p.255) famously labelled him ‘terrifyingly close to genius’, perhaps thinking this would spur the young poet into becoming just that genius. Hewett (1971 p.58) saw favourable likenesses between his work and that of Francis Webb, yet she also sees ‘…the same essentially romantic disturbed dark vision, the fantastic hallucinatory imagination, spoiled in the younger poet by posturing and attitudizing’. ‘Promising’ seems the most apt word to summarise assessments of his living career.

In retrospect the opinion becomes even more Brennan-esque, always offering some praise, and then an inevitable ‘but’. Afterman (1973 p.478) for example, writing shortly after Dransfield’s death (after reading the extant work on both Brennan and Dransfield it’s interesting to note that this seems to be a key time for critically evaluating a writer – perhaps many see this as a time when neat summaries of writers’ lives can be made with less fear of retaliation, or being proved wrong) praises some of his work, only to then write ‘His work lacks the resonance and maturity of today’s best
poetry, either because he wrote too many poems too quickly, or because of his age, or both.’ Reviewing Dransfield’s *Collected Poems* Tranter (1987) admits that he did ‘write some wonderful lyric poems’, but for the main part he is less positive. The undercurrent is: ‘Like many poets of his generation, he seldom revised, and much of his output was tenuous, to put it politely’ (Tranter 1987). Tranter does move beyond the superficial method of assessing Dransfield’s poetry based on his lifespan, at times criticising both a perceived simplicity and silliness in the poetry. It is important that a poet (here Dransfield) should not be canonised as a failure simply because of the circumstances and date of his death. It makes for ‘readings of Dransfield which ignore the eclecticism and sprawling energy of the writing so as to mobilise biography and linear narrative to tidy up an *oeuvre* that is otherwise unruly’ (Plunkett 1996 p.177). Despite opening respective articles with Dransfield’s death anyway, both Tranter and Kinsella (and other writers such as Plunkett) seem to know this.

Alongside the views which characterise Dransfield as a ‘failing poet’ there are more enthusiastic responses. Kinsella begins the introduction to a selection of Dransfield’s poems: ‘In terms of world poetry in English, the work of Michael Dransfield is a possible junction between zones of expression and innovation’ (Kinsella 2002 p.ix). High praise indeed, and elsewhere in the same introduction Kinsella (2002 p.xiii) places him as having been a writer at the forefront of a ‘new lyricism’ in Australia, also *the* most influential Australian poet. A reader should rightly be wary of this, of claims that seem to place Dransfield ‘in some phony [*sic*] hierarchy of world poets in English . . .’ (Harvey 2003 p.54). Yet there clearly is a useful consensus in the views of recent writers – whether glowing or even-handed – that highlight the real poetic problems of Dransfield’s career: how to interpret the confessional and lyrical modes of expression in the face of shifting post-modern identity (Kinsella 2002; Dobrez 1999; Plunkett 1996). He did fail to work through these challenges – he didn’t, as Tranter (1987) puts it, radically re-define poetic technique as perhaps other writers have. But his curious mixing of the lyrical and destabilised voice foregrounded this dilemma, perhaps forcing other writers to take more notice. Armand (1997) indicates Dransfield’s poetry raised questions (about the nature of addiction) that are still to be answered, and this overall quality of provocation situates his work closely to Brennan’s. This, combined with the fact that Dransfield compiled ‘a body of work as profound as it is extensive’ (Armand 1997) makes his failures eminently important. His canonisation as a ‘minor-poet’ (or a ‘near-miss’ as he was colloquially labelled) is for me only the beginning.
The pull between both local references and historical or literary references is a tension that is never far away in a Dransfield poem. It can be difficult to know how to approach figures like Isabella, Tracy, Sebastian, and David, in *Memoirs of a Velvet Urinal*. They may as well be simply close friends of Dransfield’s and each subsection might accordingly be treated as nods to individual friends who play parts in the poems, or are privy to some of the circumstances and experiences surrounding their creation. This is understandable and there is something both romantic and autobiographical about the method. But does the arrangement seem less understandable if it becomes known that some of the dedicatees are not real people? Isabella is most probably a historical figure witnessed in an oil painting; and Sebastian (I think this is very clear) is a character from an Evelyn Waugh novel. This might be perceived as a thoroughly modern technique – the peculiarly subjective elements are given space alongside the more wistfully historical and literary (objective?) references. When it works we get interesting creative non-fiction, a style of writing seeking to give equal space to the general rule and the specific individual experience. I’d say it’s almost what Dransfield succeeds in doing at times, and most particularly in *Memoirs*: he seeks to poetically inhabit the more speculative ideas – the apple castles and portraiture images – just as surely as he inhabits his own. What we must decide then is whether or not this combinatorial method works for him, and for writers in general.

It’s a method that is not limited to the personal and the general. What is a ‘Velvet Urinal’? It’s familiar. Like the ‘Long Voyage’, there is an attempt to merge high and low, or at least to focus in on a particular aspect of one or the other. The ‘Long Voyage’ moniker (from the title of Dransfield’s first collection *Streets of the Long Voyage*) is heroic, traditional, and general. The combination of this with the more grimy and urban ‘Streets’ creates a telling affect. Dransfield is the poet searching for a synthesis between two (or maybe more) contrasting modes. One involves the romantic notion of the bardic poet who traverses the land telling tales of yore, earning his bread by wrapping himself in the pure romance of the pursuit. The other is a poetic of grim particular imagery – the hazardous moments of a desultory life. The place he creates for himself, as a writer – emerging from between these separate tangents – is important to grasp, as it is a useful measure of the perceived failure we attach to his career. Would an...
unadorned embrace of one or the other preoccupations have made his poetry more assured? (Incidentally both preoccupations might be linked to Kirkpatrick’s (2003 p.66) idea of the ‘wanderer and flâneur’, another possible link between the writing of Brennan and Dransfield). ‘The Long Voyage’ symbolises Dransfield’s commitment to a way of living poetry heroically, but one suspects the ‘Streets’ aspect brings him down to earth, to the dust and tarmac of the everyday. Both calls have an intoxicating quality and pull his work in certain directions. Even before going too far into Dransfield’s work, it might become apparent that an inherent failure is the sadness of his position: but is that the ‘true’ emotion, or is it constructed? He is at all times ‘Needing to speak. Just that. Even if no-one listens’ (Dransfield 1987 p.287). At the same time though the unstoppable pull of poetry (the heroic calling) is tempered by recognition of the life he is cast into: ‘Then another silence. To have failed, so obviously.’ He must write and also escape.

Because of the nature of his calling Dransfield has no private self. This creates a longing (it often has a sexual character) coming from within, a longing that needs to be shared with all poets. Many poets do harbour a private self and Dransfield knows this, envies this. The mixing of his own private self with a more general historical contextualising, indeed his fascination with the ‘low’ of high culture, is his gesture at making sense of that. Is any measure of personal, political, or social connection worth striving for? Is there a greater depth within me? But Dransfield fails to find himself, even when surrounded by others, by poems. Everything remains crowded and messy. The poems hanker after some outward form as if in a response to chaos – the confused and stuttering poem ‘Stanza form’ for example doesn’t have much of a connection with its title, besides the proposition that Dransfield (1987 p.160) might simply be searching for the kind of easy regularity in his existence that stanza form suggests. A simple regulation imposed on verse that enables rhythm and continuity. Such an imposition would be welcomed in the more rambling art form of any human life – it may be the reason we get jobs, form relationships, and just seek to ‘settle down’. Such things make the abstract concept of time appear more robust. Later though, a poem like ‘Sunrise, sunset’ (which begins with the two lines ‘sunrise / sunset’) reveals the downside of this regularity, a drugged monotony (Dransfield 1987 p.370). The juxtaposition of poems like ‘Poem beginning with a line’ and ‘Returning’ foreshadow the debilitating tension (Dransfield 1987 p.161). Dransfield’s numerous references to the formal constraints of poetry (which he rarely follows) fail to bring forth a body of work that moves beyond the hankering for order amidst chaos, the great modernist urge. He is continually
preoccupied with time, form, and experience, and is always struggling within one tension or another. Here the more abstract littoral between grounds (one separating artistic rationales, as opposed to geographical habitats) is not so productive of life. Bohemia is often rising to the surface of these poems, but so is the practical unworkability of his own ideas. The groovy idea of living closer to the land, a virtual wellspring of ideation, still exists for Dransfield as a longing just beneath the surface. From a city landscape in ‘Returning’ he muses:

we live together, my lands and i,
my love’s green marches

sensing a time, under the red soil and the snow
and grass, in which nothing important

changes, has ever been different –
only lost for a while

(Dransfield 1987 p.162)

Words fail us habitually and for Dransfield this is a real problem. He finds no rest anywhere – and this is worth dwelling on, because I think some of his best poems are those suffused with a sense of peace and oneness (or even the totality of submersion, the lack of self-reflectivity this often entails). Dransfield is right to recognise the failure this entails: constant reflection on all that is closest to him does at times threaten to become an extended cliché. In his attempt to follow a form perfected by O’Hara (‘I do this i do that’) he lets us in to this thinking about his own poetics. The weather isn’t so much of a problem. We know this about Dransfield – his proclivity for extracting mood from the weather, particularly the inclement variety – and I think we can accept it as a welcoming poetic trait. Self-incidence however is the failure that borders on the cliché. How can each self have experiences and thoughts valid and interesting enough for us to want to read about them in a poem? This is the question the poem should be grappling with, but it doesn’t really give an answer: ‘without the eyes all i am / writing is recipes’ (Dransfield 1987 p.164). In the end the poem itself is the only answer; it is unsentimental and reflective in a productive manner – Dransfield’s power with imagery
is related to vision. Control however, something that might result in aesthetic unity, is
difficult to couple with vision.

Some of the most interesting ruptures in Dransfield’s body of work are those
where the form and subject matter and ideas seem apt and all work together, resulting in
a ‘memoir of the self’ of sorts, but one that nevertheless connects with the reader. Such
poems are distinct and oppose the greater majority that are somewhat ‘unruly’. One of
these ruptures is the poem ‘Couplets’. Once again the poet has titled his piece after a
formal constraint, almost in an offhand manner, but then this piece effectively uses the
form to describe a coupling within the poem (the ‘we’ that begins it all) and also
illustrates a greater concern – the vain use of poetry to search for the perfect coupling,
the solace that makes it okay to observe ‘terrible things have occurred’, on a level
personal or societal (Dransfield 1987 p.164). Here poetry seems to suffice as an answer.
It is not so much the ‘little blond friend’ – who emerges in the poem as the lines
themselves wax into painful longer lines, as if reflecting the emergence of a strung-out
consciousness – that offers consolation but the writing of poetry as a means to
discovers what’s really going on. A real strength is that the poem says ‘everything has
/happened before’: painkillers keep the bohemian lifestyle afloat by dulling the faculty
for memory and observation. This is a narrative of regret that doesn’t fail to grant us a
moment of illumination. But just as neurotic behaviours tend to be clues that lead us
towards an inner psychological glitch, the illumination of ‘Couplets’ casts influence over
works that surround it and encourages a certain type of diagnosis. Why do many of
Dransfield’s other poems seem to be an indulgent arrangement of images – images that
seem mean something important to the poet, but don’t really summon forth the same
multitudes to a reader? ‘A useless thing’, for instance, perhaps describes Dransfield
himself as useless. Or poetry as useless. Or the ‘him’ within (if he be a separate person)
as useless. What are we to make of ‘i am the wind in my ravens’, or the final stanza,
‘smile odd corner touch wavy / rolls over taking blanket and / pages with him / sweet
nude quatrains’(Dransfield 1987 p.168)? This poem doesn’t set up terms that would
eourage it to be read for the dazzling collision of imagery, the bustling reality of
language. I think Dransfield has profundity in mind but just isn’t producing it. The truths
extracted from his better poems highlight the problem. The lifestyle of addiction has
made moving beyond the self (where the idea of having something profound to offer the
world lingers) a bit harder. Dransfield (1987 p.168) must know the over-commitment to
his ego via poetry is unproductive; he often ends his own poems with a wry gesture, an
acknowledgement that the piece isn’t working, such as ‘routine folds in on itself introspection / gathering dust’. It’s where the unnecessary must feel necessary to the poet. We don’t need to be archly informed, within a poem, that the poem hasn’t gone that well. But Dransfield can’t escape his own processes. (As a writer who also sometimes explores process within the poem, I can understand this aspect of Dransfield’s writing. But within his writing it often feels as if the mechanics of writing poetry are whittling away at the writer, rather than allowing him to explore and construct new aspects of identity. Ecstasy is overshadowed by abnegation.)

**Wandering Minstrel**

One of the Michael Dransfields that Dransfield presents for us in his work is the image of the poet-as-bard, and it is a romantic and glossy self. More often than not we will present or recount the past in a sentimental way, as I’m sure Dransfield does with this particular act of construction. It will be contained in an anecdote, a framed photograph, or might be presented in other more literary forms such as poems or novels. We often associate complexity with the contemporary, and see simplicity in the past, whether it be in our own childhood, or times further back in history. Even if we know logically that the past must be as relatively complex and troubling as any time, our visions of it are segmented and comforting. An artistic technique exploring this (perhaps attempting to encourage a personal psychology of happiness in the face of the depressing present) would allow one to actively locate aspects of our art in the past.

‘Deuteronomy’ (Dransfield 1987 p.3) places us where ‘Wooden wheels / roll down the shallow lanes’, granting the poem a suffused glow, a nostalgia like an old photograph. Yet it is also cleverly contemporary – ‘the painful mysteries / await explanation’ as they have always done. The timeless meets the mood of the past. As in ‘Dread was’, stasis is animated by the act of contemplation, situated in the extreme present: ‘Even / beyond the moat of retrospect / she is not so far I can forget’ (Dransfield 1987 p.5). These are the qualities I notice again and again in Dransfield’s work. There is a battle of the temporal elements within many of the poems, and this forces one to ponder the uncertain place of the poet. It is, in a sense, apt, because we are getting a portrayal of the life of the bard. It doesn’t matter if he was or wasn’t actually such a bard. An insubstantiality brought about by hankerings for what isn’t, and dalliances in what is, is written into the poems:
Or, in the furnished
famine of a salon, as the inlaid
ebony of a chess-board
fades suddenly into
harpsichord keys, the games
replace your realities and plunder your senses
until your actual being
is less than a metaphysical reflection
in your goblet of kirsch.
But
it is less yet, this extravagant elegance.

(Dransfield 1987 p.5)

The doubt and the dangers are evident to reader and poet alike. Entering a Dransfield poem is to enter such a place where ‘your imagination preys most on / the obvious victim’ (Dransfield 1987 p.6). The delicate world where dark versus light is so poignant, where the wine you drink is not housed by a glass but by a goblet, and the light above you issues from a chandelier giving everything a rich saturation – it ‘blazes through the blood you suckle on’. The poems lead one to search for, and if found, analyse closely the same symbolic resonances in the self. Are the moods there? If they are not there is always melancholy. We fail to admit this occasionally.

At key moments Dransfield’s poems re-kindle ways of seeing that are essential to a further understanding of our predicament, selves lost in the contradictory web of existence. As mentioned, part of Dransfield’s technique (and problem) was a reliance on the lyric and confessional modes. But his poetry also demonstrates an awareness that things were changing. The hierarchy of expression – where we might place the poet as one who reveals general truths from within the confines of personal rumination, often privileging genuine ‘lived’ experience as the means to this end – had become, in his day and age, less certain in composition. As Livio Dobrez (1990, p.320) attests in his study of the New Australian Poetry, the neo-romantic mode that was popular (within the generation of ’68) encompassed a number of different aesthetic approaches to subjectivity and objectivity. It is a movement difficult to yoke together, but Dobrez notes one interesting difference between the 19th Century Romantics and the Australian
‘68 poets, saying the modern version of Romanticism was ‘tragicomically aware of the banana peel in its path’. It’s a nice image, one I think might be suitably applied to Dransfield. He saw danger in his subjective poetic stance but didn’t care, slipped on the banana peel because that failure, that particular ‘fall’ was one he just needed to experience. I think this is part of the allure his work has.

Dransfield’s poetry evidences a wider shift in Australian writing – this dark humour in the face of aesthetic limitation – but I still see him as a unique figure. Any generational construct or lens is a little superfluous, or at least difficult to isolate. It would be a generally accepted truism that all times are muddled and complex, until seen from afar. The decade and generation associated with the 60s (when Dransfield began his writing) has a semi-mythic status accorded to it. You can easily characterise this time by mentioning many opposites: free-love, but also war; drug-use increases alongside the expansion of suburbia and the ‘modern family’; music arguably attains a creative and poetic high, but then also becomes subject to marketing, ‘packaging’. Dransfield tried, more than most, to see it all and incorporate the difficulties into his work. ‘The sun is a seed / cast at dawn into the long / furrow of history’; the images are thrown out again and again into tradition but in different ways, urging the writer to make use of the world. This quest like any is ‘deep already with involvement’. It’s tricky to be so modern when following that furrow. He is, like Christopher Brennan, searching the legends, but with a lack of focus. There is always the light shining golden in a girl’s hair, or the obstinate need for an altered state of consciousness. There is a failure in this negotiation of demand (within the body of poetry) but it has to be addressed.

They ringbarked the Dreamtime
now they murder
with this slowest torture, indifference.
No separate identity excuses me
from past barbarities, the guilt of blood.
I mostly run away from these painful affairs,
on voyages, on hallucinogens,
visit the bulldozed graves of contemporaries,
see how the great are fallen.

(Dransfield 1987 p.27)
In ‘Lamentations’ Dransfield shows his complex path: he is aware of the weight of historical association, but also intensely aware of his own desire. Accordingly, ‘no separate identity’ removes him from the association with everyone, so when he runs away from ‘these painful affairs’ (as he freely admits to doing, gesturing to what we’ve already seen of him, the desire to lounge with dead writers and hallucinogens) it is lamentable in a traditional sense, in a heroically normal sense. This hints at the extents to which Dransfield’s poetry would become wilfully insular as a response to social conditions. Using the city as a symbol for society at large becomes part of Dransfield’s writing practice. He seeks a removal from this conglomerate, in his life and work, he also finds a solipsistic reverie (one befitting lamentation). Patricia Dobrez (1999 p.374) feels drugs and the city are firmly linked in Dransfield’s work, and she elaborates on this by writing: ‘Self-induced dreams are the only issue of an imprisoning and isolating existence. Failing dreams, there remains the possibility of anaesthesia’. Imagination is a key tool in combating the inertia of oppression. But Dransfield is not always comfortable with his own abnegation of political reality. The title of the closing section of his first volume, ‘Bums’ Rush’, indicates he feels unwillingly forced into exile, the metaphysical exile that leaves him alone with himself. Into drugs, into an asylum – either position is a marginalised one where the voice is not accorded a fully valid status. Can the gesture toward being given the ‘rush’ be seen as a vain rationalisation though? The lamentable issues at stake (the feeling of impotence combined with a collective and historical empathy) may stem from an improperly functioning society, but, it seems clear they have also been emphasised and then reinforced by Dransfield’s withdrawal. Adamson quotes him as saying ‘The whole scene is too heavy’. He’s talking about the battles going on in the poetry community, but it’s not hard to usefully apply the statement to the entirety of living. It is only ‘the bells of the city’ that sound the beginning of his poem ‘Notes for an inquest’, a poem that more than any, foreshadows his own fate. It ends:

Desolation is a drughungry morning
moving along the sick and hopeless paths
towards a bitter afternoon. Defeat.

(Dransfield 1987 p.232)
I think the writing of *Inspector of Tides* expresses disgust with the city environment to an even greater extent, but both here and elsewhere we can see that Dransfield acknowledges the city as his site of exploration anyway, suggesting that physical removal probably would not make a difference to his writing process. Patricia Dobrez (1999 p.186) identifies the trend in his writing in this way:

Brought up in the metropolis, Dransfield wanted to repudiate the city push and hankered after mountains, timbered country and bucolic pastures. But it was all an exercise in hyper-reality.

In a way this manufacturing of reality pre-empts the concerns of *Drug Poems*, disregarding how indulgent these concerns (the state of being a junkie) at times can seem. The site of drama is the writer and not the land. In the first of the ‘Streetpoems’ the writer is placed is in a broken-down limousine on a street, and pronounces that ‘journeys start here / there is no point in travelling’; and later, almost half-mumbled and alone in a one line stanza we get ‘no point in going’ (Dransfield 1987 p.73). This is in spite of the fact that from such a vantage (in the next two poems) he observes distasteful sights – men emerging dumb and lost from a public bar, road workers continually and obscenely digging into the street. The inert car is a symbol for the way true journeys are undertaken. The physical ‘wandering’ that Dransfield did at times commit to in his life can only produce a sort of self-abnegation, and not the true removal from existential cares one might seek, and it means any meaningful destruction of self (or the social self) needs to be undertaken with no eye on physical (and transient) surroundings. In the (perhaps aptly titled) *Voyage into Solitude*, Dransfield’s poem ‘No forwarding address’ dramatises the problem: ‘here in the open landscape / there’s no commitments Nothing to be done’. He depicts himself as alone, physically removed, but also finds there is nothing to engage with in this ‘ramshackle / captivity of a / camp for displaced Romantics’. The body is physical and transient in character but it locates us. One thing I noticed when looking through Dransfield’s (1973) papers was that there are a number of cuttings of luxury-cars, pictures I assume he kept and returned to. Perhaps there is a peculiar grandeur he was after by staying inert? In fact it is possible his preferred creative mode would have been to stay put, to contemplate from his loft, if only the grandeur was exactly that of sitting in a limousine, *all the time*. But it isn’t possible because consciousness wends its way inward. It leads you to contemplate your life and
your surrounds and your society, even your grounds for dialogue, your ‘safe different poems / that help no-one’, and it can lead you to doubt the worth of your poetry and your life (Dransfield 1987 p.78). But seeking to escape this trouble is a failure, albeit an impulse (like all creative failures) that it is necessary to understand, and maybe embrace. Everything is troubling.

To walk, then run

The image of the wandering minstrel – a figure we assume is has the leisure to stroll, observe and write – is not sustained. Overall the fell of the ‘rush’ (forced or otherwise) is more dominant in Dransfield’s work. ‘Bum’s Rush’ does contain some of Dransfield’s most noted poems. In this particular stretch of poetry things are ‘too heavy’ for him to stay still, whether in location or the mind. The dilemma though, and the range of possible solutions, are beautifully put (a major part of why I think he had such success placing his poems). Dransfield offers a number of creative responses that we want to know about: letting society ‘fix’ you (curing you mental condition of continual unease); fixing yourself with the anaesthetic (or visionary) hope of substances; or simply leaving it all behind, seeing some country. Partly, these are all realisable directions, imagined or otherwise: ‘Keep moving / wherever you stand is ground zero / a moving target is harder to hit’ (Dransfield 1987 p.35). Any attempt to move is preferable to the failure of inertia. ‘Parnassus Mad Ward’ places the ‘ward’ as a simple embrocation easing the discomfort of those that don’t fit into society. Within confinement though, art still addresses the issues – does love, analysis or action offer hope? Or a simpler embroilment in the ‘natural world’? Dransfield wrote ‘sunset itself is a cliché’ but it isn’t. The way he figures his environment is in his familiar immersive way, and so even if ‘now all our poems / mean is that we have not lost voice’ this might be enough (Dransfield 1987 p.49). His escape from the confinement of society tests the paths of addiction and submersion in nature. One, addiction, is increasingly regressive, and perhaps it is a failure that he began to celebrate it, and to shape his writing career into that of a ‘drug-poet’. In the end it does become predictive, and we do find Dransfield increasingly incapacitated by his addictions, where the only experiences he has left to use are simple scoring expeditions, or musings on hospitalisation like ‘Homage to Catatonia’. But the other voyage he makes into more natural ways of living has aesthetic and philosophic appeal even today. There is just as much vision and refuge in the country Dransfield
always hopes to see as in the drugs he takes – ‘In the hedges live tiny birds / who sing in bright colours you would not hear’ (Dransfield 1987 p.42). One might be inspired by nature, but there is just as much poetry to be wrung from intoxication. The poem ‘Bums’ Rush’ is chillingly effective and precisely executed. We are persuaded to follow:

say farewell to the friend you may have made among the graven images
then walk as a human lemming would
out across the bay to where the ice is thinnest and let yourself vanish.

(Dransfield 1987 p.30)

The act of self-definition becomes warped by the burnt-out imagination. The structures of self are peeled back until all selfhood vanishes. The only real connection that can be made is there when the poet disappears, and when all constructs of humanity and society are revealed as fictional and pointless. That’s the frightening allure of ‘oneness’. There’s a truth to it, but the truth also offers blankness. Artificiality – even when experienced through the lens of ‘naturalness’ – offers further play and exploration. Even Courland Penders is never at home (though there is no reason why he should not be).

the house itself an alien
your body an encumbrance you
would rid yourself of gravity
and take your questions higher up

but years and kisses episodes
reality a narrative

(Dransfield 1987 p.52)

Death and removal from a realm of open-ended questions is tempting and this casts a shadow over Courland’s constant examinations of his old family estate. The failure is the repeated and active search for removal from the larger questions. It causes Dransfield’s romantic way of seeing and rendering detail to become focussed in on himself, and too much so. It’s something Dransfield seemed to be aware of in his infrequent diary-musings on poetics. At one point he affirms the technique, writing ‘In the interests of art, it is necessary that he [the poet] first lose his objectivity’, and it
almost seems like the wallowing in ‘the self’ that underlines much of his poetry is consciously directed (Dransfield 1968-1973, 1). But then elsewhere he claims overtly (to himself) that removal of selfhood is a goal: ‘Nothing else to say, I shall go into exile from life, that itself, and end of victory, elimination of the self’ (Dransfield 1968-1973, 1a). The contradictory pose removes any sense of clarity. There is clarity when the ecology of living is foregrounded in a way that includes the poet. Only when it is not, when the act of living becomes a vain reflection on one’s place within one’s self, does the weight of history, the loss of the gods, or the oppression of societal norms press down upon poetry. At this point it is probably no surprise when ‘madness calls you home’. At this point the ability to write – even the necessity of saying anything – has become doubtful.

It can feel as if Dransfield’s habit of writing preys upon him, constantly threatening to finally destroy him. In ‘Barcarolle’, and also ‘In a province’ he attempts to defend himself, or save himself by moving outside of himself. Similarly the figure within the poem (the singer) seeks to leave town on a bus, because as Dransfield narrates, ‘perhaps / he thinks / it will be different / where he goes’ (Dransfield 1987 p.58). It won’t be different because the doubting self is inescapable baggage for the journey. Courland Penders is the hero lamenting the lost tradition, the long voyage, but he also symbolises the artist ruined by seeing no way out of his tradition. Like Courland Pender’s estate, things can be ruined by a viewer’s perpetual gaze. Even your own professional ego (should one substitute home for Dransfield; sheep for poems):

*Coming to terms*

Around what was a home,
what was a herd
gleam in the withered paddocks.

At first it stuns, this waste;

(Dransfield 1987 p.61)

The clear irony is that there isn’t any coming to terms. The gaze needs to be tempered with a speculative ‘perhaps’, towards the unattainable, towards the vision of the self that is content to wrestle. Eventually Dransfield’s poetry comes to lack the imaginative will.
In ‘Cadlike’ he writes ‘imagine all / the future’, but then can only mock what was once his heroic voyage: ‘look ahead / straits of the long / voyeur’ (Dransfield 1987 p.335). There’s an allusion to the biblical ‘strait gates’ that allow the righteous person entrance to heaven, also Robert Frost’s ‘path less travelled’ – these difficult courses of action are considered but eventually ruled out as voyeuristic at best, not real options.

‘Geography’, the first poem from the ‘Loft’ section, is a speculative escape that offers some movement at least. Geography itself is here posited as a tool for artistic movement, stemming from one of Dransfield’s ideas, that the city in general is a stifling condition. The anonymity of the city amplifies one’s own concerns (such as ‘being alone’ when ‘she has gone, leaving / what one leaves of the night before’) and presents only solutions of denial, of escape (Dransfield 1987 p.65). These solutions still need to be analysed, and this poetry as a process of thinking is very readable – it’s what one can see in some of the arranged moments in Brennan’s poetry, where one poem produces an idea that a subsequent poem explores more fully. ‘Geography’ attempts a similar act of sequencing. When Dransfield (1987 p.65) writes ‘for a moment the problem is one of geography’ the ‘moment’ in question is the time-space of the poetic sequence. This becomes clear in the second poem where again the city-setting is lonely, windy and cold, but the reasoning behind such poetic traversal is included. Premises are raised like a philosophical tract: ‘we should not have come’; but it must have been inevitable; (and informed by the implication raised in the first premise – that there is another place) ‘this is not the end’ (Dransfield 1987 p.66). Despite the loneliness of calling someone from ‘some sort of vestibule’ where voices fade, there is indeed room to move after the poem. There is another place (he supposes) and so poetry can explore what it is:

in the forest, in unexplored
valleys of the sky, are chapels of pure
vision. there even the desolation of space cannot
sorrow you or imprison . . .

(Dransfield 1987 p.66)

Geoff Page (1978 p.223) identifies three main thematics within Dransfield’s poetry, three themes that I also think the poet actively sought to explore. These are ‘drugs, environment, and the aristocratic spirit’. Page does warn the reader that these themes are rarely independent, and that one theme is very often seen to inform the
development of thinking (within the poem) or ideas to do with one of the other themes. This can be observed perhaps most clearly in *The Inspector of Tides*. The first of three sections, ‘Loft’, contains a lot of what we might place as Dransfield’s ecological concerns. In poems like ‘Jazz’, ‘Prosperity’, and ‘Endsight’ he explicitly imagines a nightmare reality where the industrial drive has destroyed all natural quality of living. But it is all securely wrapped in the title of the Loft. These events and sweeping changes in what is natural are seen from a distance by the writer, a figure powerless to effect change himself. Thus arises the section ‘Heirs and Graces’, where the aristocratic pose is studied in all its surreal superfluousness. This silly regality does seem to be what attracted Dransfield to the aristocratic theme; it’s what Page (1978 p.221) sees as ‘a dreaming impracticality, the apparent far removal from the horny-handed business of ripping the guts out of the country’. The poet of ‘Loft’ can accurately see that a rampant urbanisation is threatening his country, but he can also see (accurately, or not?) that his poems will do little to combat the threat. Hence comes a fascination with those removed from the drama, those who can attain a mythical peace in an idyllic pastoral zone:

farms, castles, rights over
mountains and rivers,
villages, pass from one
generation to another
unowned, as years are.

(Dransfield 1987 p.89)

The aristocratic life is not idealised, far from it, in fact the tone is deeply sad in most of the Courland Penders poems. But there is an appeal to ‘otherness’ within these poems. Dransfield didn’t want to be the hard-edged protest poet, or one who might ‘gently chide’ the industrial giants with iambics. He wanted to locate his self in a radically different situation. He knew it was impractical – as any form of truthful sea-change of the self must be – and gently mocked, decadently, the hero at the centre of his aristocratic poems. But there has to be something worthy in the stately pose created by the romantic imagination. It is a failure to be taken on board. Incisively Page (1978 p.222) puts it this way:
The point is that Dransfield, like the Greek poet Cavafy (who celebrated so persuasively the minor triumph and despairs of by-passed Hellenistic kingdoms), realized that failure of a certain kind for certain reasons can be more important than success.

The failure is that of not acting and instead chasing a sentimentalised version of ignorant bliss. The reason though, is that an alternate version of reality must be dreamed (sung) before it can be created. This is why the romantic poets of further back – figures such as Keats and Blake – were looking inward and following their own criteria for poetry, and also perhaps why Dransfield looked to such writers for influence. The two polar extremes of artistic action – fleeing to another world (one created by the mind), or simply observing, writing the ills of society as they are – need to be unpackaged, because together they form only a false binary of options. Any alternate vision that can apply to the physical and ecological state of the world must be applicable as well to the structure of the ego, the self, inner consciousness.

The ‘involved’ place Dransfield takes within his poems definitely puts his self under pressure. He never stands removed from his words and logical and emotional pitfalls result. In ‘Colonial Poet’ he groups himself right alongside any other writers defining themselves with the act – when selecting subject matter ‘the day is hot so he selects the past / waterfalls’. At the end of the process ‘he sees in the still pool of his verse / a clear reflection of himself as god’. No one could write this poem as a direct attack on other poets. Dransfield complicitly pictures himself in the imagined portrait. Yet there is a difference between him and the Colonial Poet. For this Colonial Poet, when it is all over, the subject matter is as far from his mind as childhood. This hardly seems true of Dransfield’s literary output. He is very much living the poems that he writes, and as is mentioned previously in this work, he often fails to find the distance necessary to grant himself a measured existence (outside of poetry). So while the Colonial Poet does seem a little trite – clocking in and out of his versification as if it were a factory job – there is something useful in this archetype. The poet who can explore issues of vital importance (as Dransfield surely does) but who can switch off at times is an interesting model. This is the self that is created with a lively enthusiasm for contradictions. Dransfield worried the contradictions he saw into desperately lonely poems. At his best, Dransfield shows the possibilities his wavering position makes apparent.
His work can be confronting or comforting. Observing both the alluring deep and the glittery surface-level shallowness of life can leave the artist purely contemplating his or her own self. Movement offers a variety of experiences but the polarities will always inhere in those varieties: the good will come with the bad. In the titular poem of the collection Dransfield (1987 p.116) has ‘gone for a walk / dressed in clouds’, and is in the company of friends, yet in the end he watches all pass by but himself, from a prison-window no less (one perhaps reminiscent of Coleridge’s (2000 p.420) lime-tree bower prison, where the poet recreates a journey with friends he is physically unable to take). The writer writes alone and plaintively: ‘my life / in a mirror / too near’. There is no evidence of the self being removed from a position of central prominence (as may be necessary in a more even-handed outlook, one that admits the relativity of all personal viewpoints). The poet begins to worry at existing notions of his self rather than explore poetically the means to create the self anew. He is in the perfect position to do so – inspecting the tides, on the edge of life (trauma) spreading out in both directions. And yet the gaze turns inward. I think it’s a critical failure we must recognise in poetry and come to terms with. Dransfield recognised it in these poems but the evolution coming from this knowledge was a downward spiral of innerness. He did lament the notion of being ‘someone’, as in ‘Byron at Newstead’, where he likens this becoming as some sort of parlourgame, and instead ponders the usefulness of an uncharted voyage (that should make us remember the pursuits of Christopher Brennan) (Dransfield 1987 p.117). When he writes ‘to be a poet / what it means / to lose the self to lose the self’ I think he rightly aspires to casting off the mantle of official notions of creativity, but he seems to want to crush any sense of identity in order to find a profound truth, an uncharted position for his work. Again, like Brennan’s more thoroughly formulated quest before him, this is bound to fail. The unknown is cloaked in the quality of ‘un’, and cannot be achieved only aimed for. It is true that ‘bizarre alonelessness / gnaws at objectives, and perhaps because he is less committed to a poet’s self-imposed isolation, Dransfield is much more welcoming of his reader than Brennan was. We are made to feel very at home with Dransfield’s distress. His language is graspable and his lamentation is therefore more easily substituted for our own. But it is still the same failure, with perhaps less circumlocution: empathetic anonymity. Everyone knows your dilemma and therefore you are not special. It’s at the heart of the broad idea of ‘The City Theory’ – ‘they know your symbols; to learn this / shatters you’ (Dransfield 1987 p.118).
At first he was wandering, but now he is chasing, and being chased. He rushes to escape. His drug poems document this.

**Construction of a poet fading**

As discussed earlier, I think recognising an element of fiction within our own conception of our ‘self’ is important. This is the way of removing the connotation of failure from what we find dubious about a solid theory of personal identity.

this form [the imago] situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone, or rather, which will only rejoin the coming-into-being *(le devenir)* of the subject asymptotically, whatever the success of the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve as *I* his discordance with his own reality.

(Lacan 1977, p.2)

The absolute truth of one’s self and the image of one’s self are things that will always draw close (particularly with surprising and revelatory acts of poetic creation) but never cross paths. The construction of who you are involves creating something both amorphorous and free-floating. This can allow a radically free state of play, but on the other hand, it also predicts that submersion in the idea of a socially determined fate will bring about the belief in a particular convergence: society necessitates the anaesthesia of drug addiction, therefore my being is complete as an addict. This is false (not fictional).

*Drug Poems* is sectioned into three: ‘Shooting Gallery’, ‘Smoker’s Lounge’, and ‘Tripper’s Gallery’. One might argue that like many poetry collections, the sectioning seems to occur after-the-fact, and that each section doesn’t here amount to a convincing idea or thematic foci. But I think for Dransfield sectioning is an important part of the way society is created, and furthermore it is something a poet simply must deal with, in both his or her work and life. Here the parts do function as his own ‘dialectical syntheses’: loose social contrasts for his own image. The parts of this book are like the fictional yet very relevant boundaries that are created in order to make existence less troubling. The three aspects of his *Drug Poems* do a similar thing, but here the boundaries are aspects of Dransfield’s own peculiar search for resolution, the perfect method to anaesthetize him against the conundrums social and personal documentation
(via poetry) have brought. Firstly, the ‘Shooting Gallery’: there is more than one meaning in this act of grouping – we might imagine a particular shooting gallery, a place where people go to utilise firearms away from the general public. Or we might imagine the usual colloquial metaphor – the shooting gallery as a similarly removed place, but one where addicts go to inject. Straight away the feeling is of closeted removal. It is not a romantic removal from the populace – as in the loft poems, where the isolated artist is still somewhat among the people – it is a complete immersion in an ‘other’ place, one where the normal rules and morals of society are redundant. The viewpoint of the first poem, ‘The first one’s free’ begins to make this apparent. Who are the ‘they’ that come to participate in the deal? One must surmise that these people whom the speaker meets ‘in shadows / far from schoolworld’ are in fact school-kids of some sort. The speaker is the writer, and also the familiar ‘you’ of the final stanza:

here you say
blow your mind
the first one’s free

(Dransfield 1987 p.123)

The twist of this final stanza is that enlisting in a subculture of drug-use has not provided the perpetual immersion it seemingly offers. The user finds himself immorally pushing drugs on to others (who ‘ask so / quaintly’) one imagines in order to sustain his own habit, his own removal from the cares of the world. It’s problematic. The shooting gallery appeared to have offered refuge but it also encourages immoral acts of desperation. Seeing all sides of addiction is important, because a complete celebration, or complete condemnation would both be limited artistic engagements. The failure of celebrating one’s self as ‘drug-poet’ is indeed present in this volume, even though it also explores wider concerns. A third image evoked by ‘shooting gallery’ has to be the carnival gallery, where ducks and other assorted figures are paraded back and forth to be inevitably knocked down. The idea that the targets (ducks or junkies) are there to be knocked down, that they will be knocked down, is so expected, and even boring. The predication is too easy.

What users want from their drugs varies. Civilisation has a documented history of using substances: sedatives, stimulants, and hallucinogens. I think Dransfield wants to explore a couple of different options through his usage (though the option to willingly
‘explore’ becomes dubious when addiction kicks in, and perhaps ‘has to’ would be more appropriate than ‘wants to’). The first is a lightness that comes with the removal of cares. In ‘Around’ he demonstrates the ideal lightness of being:


day juggles light
from end to end of the room

an idea
slides around the mind
touches here and there,
a vagrant, belonging
neither to thought nor memory,
wish nor fear

(Dransfield 1987 p.123)

The ideas are casually shuffled through the mind as if shifting with the vagaries of light too. Nothing settles, and therefore nothing becomes demanding or perplexing. It’s like the thought that occurs just after waking – where everything is lazy and peaceful. The only solid thing in the poem is of course the spike in Dransfield’s pocket. This provides the sleep-like meandering state of consciousness. It’s a small undercurrent of awareness, which combined with the other poems in the section, undermines the removal from care that the theoretical ‘shooting gallery’ offers.

It’s difficult to say whether Dransfield’s awareness of his own plight rescues his work from mediocre wallowing. It does and it doesn’t. At times the poignant self-induced nothingness of addiction is dramatised as failure, and therefore usefully interpreted poetically. ‘Jam’ is a horrific hyperbolically literal account of Dransfield hacking off what clouded his vision, his own face (or ‘the mask’), and so the act of arrangement that brings his ‘shooting gallery’ poems to the front of this volume cleverly announces the despair of addiction. He becomes the impossible thing himself that alice repudiates in ‘Jam’, mangled and still vainly looking for beauty. But at other times addiction seems to become for Dransfield simply another wild conceit. He cannot stop writing poetry about his creative practice (or lack thereof): his subject too often becomes the subject, and he (the subject) is too often observed reflecting on the nothingness he sadly knows he has created. Drugs don’t seem to offer a comfortable withdrawal from
society, and they don’t seem to offer him inspiration. There is a truth gained through the obscene narcissism of getting wasted – Dransfield (1987 p.129) often repeats in various ways the thought that nothing essentially inheres in anything else, for example: ‘left to itself / nothing is maudlin’ – but this particular truth was probably known by Dransfield regardless. He failed to do more with this, particularly within *Drug Poems*. Despite Dransfield’s repeated musings in ‘Island’ of ‘there is no real thing’, the real things are glaringly obvious, described in the first half of the poem. The mysteries that wait at the edge of the continent are unknown, yes, but they are nevertheless real. Submersion in the nothingness of the self has led him to affirm the nothingness of everything, when a cleverer way forward would have been to keep on prodding the asymptotic notion of mystery. How and why does it occur in this day and age, this country, this unsympathetic society? Like time-travel, if we can imagine a thing, there is a reason to at least debate the thing’s possibility. When there is ‘no real thing’ it becomes merely an amoral decision to shoot up a sleeping friend, giving him groovy dreams (or to create such a thing with a poem) and not an immoral one. Furthermore an alternative state of living, where your possessions cease to in effect own you, must be forcibly cast on the individual, not creatively proposed. The remnants of ‘The City Theory’ appearing in the title of ‘No, but i saw the movie’ gives this impression. Here life is once again pictured as a movie that one makes an entrance to halfway through in the dark. But here everything ends vaguely and the barrenness is unsatisfactory: ‘you don’t lose things / they lose you’ (Dransfield 1987 p.133). There is no will behind this; perhaps even no act of creation.

The optimist and the pessimist in the poem ‘The pessimist’s travelling kit’ are both versions of the same poet, or visions of the same poet. One takes a devil-may-care attitude and hitches out of town with nothing but a telephone number and a spike, and ends up very soon at his destination (and happily and luckily wasted we presume). Yet he ends up in another big city, site of the original problems of addiction. The pessimist worries about every aspect of the journey, even carefully preparing his drugs, but gets lost just out of town, and just out of reach of civilisation. Strangely though, the pessimist ends up living in a portable garret where ‘he lives beyond / all that concerns us’ (Dransfield 1987 p.136). Biographical evidence suggests Dransfield never really found that place beyond the normal concerns of humanity (P. Dobrez 1999). He looked, locating himself in many out of the way towns, but was always pulled back to the city, to ‘the scene’. He is inexorably the ‘poet of great cities’, making empty narcotic
discoveries that are relayed to no one (even within the poetry – the fact is there are no discoveries but nothingness). He’s wishing for the self-assuredness of two archetypes and not achieving it. He is the optimist, the friend pessimist, and also neither of the two. He succumbs to the failure of inertia poetically (and possibly physically). ‘Getting out’ is ostensibly a wild dream full of ‘mad ideas’, but they’re not that mad (except for his hyperbolic expression: ‘living on fern tea and springwater’); grooving on the whole world is a useful poetic aphorism (Dransfield 1987 p.142). But with each repetition in the penultimate line ‘yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah’, the poet’s and reader’s enthusiasm wanes.

Addiction, at least to opiates (the inferred drug of choice that underpins ‘Shooters Gallery’), doesn’t provide access to a new mode of being, of writing. It perhaps gives a sense of the Real – where complete connectedness is everything – but along with this comes a sense of nothingness, which is boring. Besides, the nothingness is never total: there is always sickness, cravings and this un-groovy state of amorality (verging on immorality). Ideas need to stick if they are to impel a poem anywhere. ‘Shooters Gallery’ is by far the largest section of the book, and it is also the darkest. The poems fail to hold together as coherent work, but they do negotiate the myth of intoxication as a doorway to inspiration. Opiates are not the answer.

The next site of investigation is the ‘Smokers’ lounge’, and it becomes apparent now that Dransfield is attempting an experimental arrangement – what are the pros and cons of drugs when cross-referenced with creative pursuit, poetry? His particular method is to loosely group together poems that relate to three drugs: heroin, hashish and finally LSD. The poems within ‘Smokers’ Lounge’ are cooler than those preceding. There’s the by now typical lounging, but it isn’t weighed down by vain reflections on purpose – there’s more weightless writing where the mind does appear at least somewhat freed. There’s the guitar improvisations of ‘Environmental art’; there’s the clarity of thought that seems to unfold within ‘Sub judice’ – where Dransfield’s mind wanders to fantastical images and then returns to reality with the admission that ‘images are too easy’ (Dransfield 1987 p.145). Is ‘Smoker’s Lounge’ an experiment that has succeeded, that has opened up some new ground? A poem like ‘Now loading’ really creates a feel where worldly cares are intertwined with poetic thinking, without a sadness about it all. It’s the ‘loose’ mode of acting coming from being stoned. But I think, in the end, what Dransfield gives us is a view on addiction. As a whole, Drug Poems says to the reader that addiction to substances doesn’t have all that much to offer. So although Dransfield
could never be said to fail by celebrating the life of addiction, one might conjecture that he failed by nevertheless finding his niche as this ‘drug poet’. He didn’t have to create his self in such a manner. More useful is the poet committed to interrogating the space between eye and image, to pushing to the limits what it means to be a poet and to experience things.

Because the drug poet doesn’t always have strong poems to contribute to the conversation. They get strange, weird, insular, mirroring the mind of one wrapped up in the pursuit of transcendence. Reading these works sometimes gives you the feeling that you are attempting to have an effective transactive conversation with someone who is well and truly stoned. You might not get a lot out of it. I read the poems of ‘Tripper’s gallery’ in the same way as I read Essai – Night Trip, the small yellow diary held at the National Library of Australia, ostensibly a record of one of Dransfield’s experiments with LSD. It all makes sense to the author in a moment of synaptic rewiring. The belief that it might provide some jumping-point for further exploration is a risky gamble. In the LSD journal Dransfield writes at one point ‘Hey, mind, do that groovy spiral thing again’ (Dransfield 1967), and that’s kind of funny, but it’s also a little uninteresting to the outsider who is not connected to the author’s mind. Consequently, the poems in ‘Tripper’s gallery’ seem to be a little lost in reflections that are not granted in full to the reader. More correctly, the images don’t come across as forcibly as they might elsewhere, and Dransfield was always concerned with the effective transmission of imagery. He talks about it at length, in his poetry and papers, and so we must understand the poems are not so much about profound revelation, as about the experience of understanding via beautiful images. So when the images become strangely disconnected from experience (the ‘they’, the unnervingly figureless figures in ‘You can’t buy much for thirty dollars now’; the ‘spell’ that ends with the word ‘ASTRIT’ and offer nothing, not even the promised emptying of the mind (Dransfield 1987 p.152-3) it appears as if poetry is failing Dransfield, or his impetus is. ‘Kind Ludwig’s swans’ is an interesting finish, and seems to my mind to offer a voice to the swans kept by the mad king – perhaps in an effort to emphasise a ‘I’m not mad, the world is’ sentiment? But it marks a finish to an uneven volume and these words within show (once again) that Dransfield was so very good at poeticising his own failings:

spells work
if they are secret
not written down, not
drawn in sand with twigs

read them in the sky
where merlin learnt them

(Dransfield 1987 p.155)

The poetic discoveries unearthed with the help of addiction and or psychotropic experimentation can be more forceful to the individual. If taken on board as successful new visions of reality, these discoveries can take a poet and addict so far into their own world that the chance of connecting with any human being (any reader) becomes remote.

Posthumous poet

I have invoked many disparate lines of poetry in my attempt to analyse Dransfield grappling with his demons, with his own vision of himself, and to understand how he acknowledged and accepted his failures. This method seems to be a function of the poetry, more than any conscious ploy on my part – there are many memorable poems in there amongst his total output, and these poems stand out, almost challenging us to piece together a unifying theory. But often there is no unity forthcoming. The poems simply stand out, embossed as beautiful objects. It is important though that the poet know what is worth suspending indefinitely and this is something Dransfield does very well: a success. Dransfield sees what he likes, in the way he likes, and then knits his field of vision into an a-temporal firmament. But as can be observed in Brennan’s work, a lamenting attitude can accompany his poetry all too often. One might well place this as an Australian poetic trait – in her essay on early Australian literary culture Perkins (1998, p.61) mentions the way in which balladists like Paterson and Lawson may be read with attention given to ‘the sadness that underlies their humour, irony and resilience’. She links this sadness to a similar feeling in the work of Brennan. I think the link could readily be made between this these writers and the later figure of Dransfield too. Yet reading Paterson and Lawson does not inspire the same melancholy as reading Brennan or Dransfield. The balladists’ images of a harsh Australian landscapes may function as a metaphor for a more personal ‘dreary struggle with life’ as Perkins notes, but it hard to see the inverse as applicable. The existential angst observable in the works
of Brennan and Dransfield (and indeed myself) is personal and literary, and not overly informed by ‘the land’. There is a peculiar sadness on display in a Dransfield poem that goes hand-in-hand with a removal of self, the attempt to disappear (for further instructions on this see my poem ‘how to disappear completely’ (p.56)). For example, in ‘Poet’s Picnic’ there is merit in placing the stars as ‘zircons’, and even in depicting modernity as some kind of vague machine that processes great myths like a recycling plant (Dransfield 1987 p.25). This is memorable imagery. It’s just that Dransfield and the poem are not sure about it. Is the poet himself the one who will be processed and then eventually consumed? This post-modern precursor (if you will take him as one, as I do) is still taken by a modernist urge: to lament the disarray, and quietly pine for the resurrection of an old centrism within his art: the poem. He is the poem. This is an unsettling tone to infuse poetry with, particularly when you are a neo-romantic poet like Dransfield, influenced by the new poetries flowing from America, living a life so intertwined with your own poetic output. I suggest that the tone of Dransfield’s poems (even down to the ‘other people don’t understand me’ tone that pops up in poems such as the well known ‘Minstrel’ – ‘you would not hear in your fast vehicles’) affected the tone and momentum of his life. As with Brennan’s work, the moments of peace or humour in his poetry can be truly beautiful, but are rare.

There is a fatal distance between artist and product, a separation. By definition it is impossible for the artist to become one with the object, and this failure must be dealt with. This distance separates the eye and beauty. Dransfield’s poetry struggles with the question of how much cause and effect is operating in this space between. It is suggested in the way Dransfield sees things (writing of it closely and exactly); how he participates in the things he sees (often pausing to reflect on the passing of time within the momentary); and of course in the way the things he sees tend to have a direct effect on him, drawing him in to their own gravity and influence. In ‘Technique of light’ Dransfield writes:

the day beginning with bridges or towns    this nonsense
of buildings i could renounce    needing nothing of it    only
the space between eye and surface    only the true
materials    so stairs fall away
intact    a space develops
as the space in an opening flower before the sun
The ‘space between eye and surface’ is so relevant to him he even attempts to capture it pictorially within the words ending the poem. Yet again there is recognition of failure. There can simply be no space created without the surroundings to encapsulate it. The eyes are necessary just as are the events, objects and experiences the eyes take in. Without them there is no pure space, no lightness of being that is contact with the nothingness of the Real. ‘Isabella’ is a useful symbol to carry this notion. As a figure in a portrait, she seduces the artist into speculation, brings him right into the mood of the visual description. She carries you away, ‘confers a walk on you’ that takes you to her reality, despite the fact that she is frozen in oil and gum Arabic, despite the fact that ‘she will give / nothing away’ (Dransfield 1987 p.171). Dransfield is doing his best to float in the blissful space between image and artist (which, perhaps uncertainly, is not a mode I feel equates to ‘tension’) and it is forgivable that he often fails to dwell peacefully there. He sways towards the image at times, but far more often sways toward a poetry of the self, poetry that needles away at his confidence, and then accordingly, balance. The final poem in this section ‘Isabella and the rain trust’ seems to imagine Dransfield (1987 p.171-172) (it must be him; although this ‘great man’ writes plays, and he is described in this way: ‘it is too long his hair falls about his head his / thin face wispy as a dead wildflower’) visiting a rural property, where Isabella is perhaps the wife that ‘will be goddess to his wet feet’. Isabella is either a memory of a real girl or the creation of a mythic girl, popping up on an Australian property. In either interpretation Dransfield imagines her impressed by his ennui and tries to parallel the situation with the more general melancholy weirdness of Australia. The vision is too much of Dransfield and the romantic figure he cuts. This failure though, it emphasises what was not achieved but could be: the space that maybe all writers should be looking to operate in: one that is free from dependence on beauty, either beauty found in the created self or beauty found in surrounding images. Repeated instances of this freedom from dependence might actually inculcate a greater creative freedom – to use beauty found inside or out, whenever it is needed. Dransfield promises this to himself and his readers when fleeting moments of ‘life’ are stretched into sensuous poetic complexities. Like ‘Pissing rainbows’:

pissing
i make a little russet rainbow

there’ll be no pot of gold at the end

between the urinal and velvet

Pissing itself isn’t that profound, and so you might read metaphor into this poem, or simply take an image from it, or both. The point is that this poem exemplifies what Dransfield proves capable of again and again in his works: he lingers or dallys within fleeting moments and ideas: his simple and at times plainly literal language can create vivid incidents, facts that expand beyond any possible axis of ‘occurrence’. It was his major talent, meaning I don’t think it was something he ever needed to consciously embrace. Dransfield needed to persist. He of course had his failings, some poetic (that have been discussed), some more fitting a biography. Perhaps his major success was the attempt – his ambition to master an aesthetic of cultured innocence, of insouciance? It makes sense in the way that the best paradoxical ideas do: the implicit notion of failure in any reading of Dransfield’s work and life is in some ways equivalent to his success, that is, writers can take this from his work as a whole, and perhaps be more informed when it comes to their own aesthetic persistence. The ‘aesthetic of cultured innocence’ is clearly unstable (unattainable?) but at the same time alluring, and useful. Seeing things with artificially nostalgic eyes is a good way to see things, just as doing something that feels really really good can often be a good idea. The downside is addiction; the upside is pleasure, and of course less worry about the ever-present ‘alterity’. (‘brendan went to NIDA’ (p.43) might be interpreted as my response to questions of alterity / otherness. In an Ashbery way, the poem does madly though logically lead us to the final ‘go fuck yourself’, which I think needs little interpretation or explication.)
A Consequence of Breathing: Motion

Rebecca Giggs (2010) (another current Australian PhD literature student) recently said this in interview:

To be asked to give a critical treatment of your own work, as if it were a piece of literature written by someone else, results in a kind of contrived doubling that puts creativity and criticism on either side of a tall wall.

I think this can be the case, but Giggs also states that this section is typically where one ‘reflects on their own creative work through the lens of a certain literary theory’, and I have always intended to be very loose with my adoption of theory. As a creative writer (and also researcher) I think I have always shared Giggs’ wariness. This thesis is the forging of a theory, not the evaluation of my poems via a particular lens. I read many poet-bloggers mainly concerned with blogging about their own poetry, and I have become increasingly engaged in this creative activity – I post not only poems, but also personal / critical investigations of my own poetry. This means it would feel like an inexcusable act of omission to not include this type of writing within a work I claim is a ‘Poetics’. I think this inclusion reinforces rather than opposes one of the claims of Mead’s (2008 p.6) *Networked Language*, that ‘poetry draws as much of its life as language from the social and historical strata it is networked to, as from the aesthetic traditions of poetic production’. The poet’s own writing about his or her writing (however much it is lacking in experience or ‘authority’) is a social act that cannot be ignored, and it generates life, further poetry. The poems in this collection reflect my growing understanding of what it means to be a poet, and how this social act influences the world. Naturally the writing in this chapter has informed more poems in the collection. It is an ironic affirmation of the experimental cycle of deferment. As a reader and writer why did failure keep coming up again and again? Why have I not been able to get away from this idea? This thesis addresses that, or at least pushes its readers in the right direction, and the poetry is a crucial part of the thesis. The position I occupy in this exegetical section has been at times a difficult one to maintain – I refer to myself most often in the third-person, but then also in the first, ‘explaining’ certain ideas behind compositional tactics. In this regard though, even an attempt to maintain a thorough and
consistent proper critical distance can create a note of falsity. Note the authorial slippage – that we might say is both intentional and non-intentional – in Tranter’s (2010 p.141) introduction to his own doctoral thesis (exegetical section):

Hence in the exegesis I have chosen to refer to the poet John Tranter in the third person, and also to give prominent place to the views, both positive and negative, of the many critics and reviewers who have written about my work – his work, that is – over the years.

Tranter maintains the third person perspective throughout but every now and then autobiographical details come up, details that a real ‘third person’ (a researcher) would need to reference. It’s a tricky and tricksy position, but an interesting one too, a skilled balancing act that feels generative. At this stage I am not able to rely on the work of other critics to interrogate the public construction of myself, and my work. There isn’t the wealth of material out there; I simply haven’t published the necessary books. But then Tranter doesn’t rely on the critical opinion either, entirely. He thinks aloud about a ‘triad’ of selves – there’s him, there’s Tranter the poet who writes, and then there’s the poet created out of interpretations of his work. All of these figures are involved in the creation of the personal / public poetics. Even when the academic register is evident we know all of these selves are writing and discovering. Lacan (1977, p.7) believed the psychoanalyst could only accompany the subject on his approach to the ‘ecstatic limit of the ‘Thou art that” – never bring him to the point – and in a similar manner I think these other multiple selves are all accompanying the writer on the journey towards a personal vague ecstasy. There is no one perspective that can prod us toward the correct path. These multiple personas are inevitable companions. While there is an evident and purposeful act of distancing within this chapter of the thesis – the voice of the persona that is not the poet is in control more often than not – this is not an attempt to create either an artificial critical reception for breathe in space nor an authoritative reading of the poems. What is offered is a range of possibilites that can and should be entertained alongside the reader’s own thoughts. The discussion of the poems from breathe in space ranges over my own intentions and also at times offers more material, explanations or notes on sources, effective appendices to the poems that might enhance a reader’s understanding of various compositional processes. These are possible readings directed at the poet reading as creative researcher.
While examining the works of Brennan and Dransfield I have read in this way. I have paid close attention to the way these writers fashioned their poems, but then also to the way they arranged final texts. This was more relevant in the works of Brennan and it is a defensible approach to interpret most of his poetic works as a single enterprise, a concerted attempt to divine a particular wisdom. I have also found that a lot of work can be done with the arrangement of Dransfield’s collections – the titles, and also the titles of sections within volumes. A useful way to begin looking at the poems is to analyse the way they are presented as a larger whole. This may shed some light on the aims of the writer (conscious or unconscious) and allow the reader to weigh up whether or not the writer has failed to achieve something necessary to his or her projected endeavour. I believe the formal arrangement of the works of both Brennan and Dransfield reveals something of these writers’ individual artistic projects (keeping in mind that these ‘projects’ are often complicated or unruly poetic acts, and also keeping in mind that the arrangement of many of Dranfield’s collections was done posthumously) and that it is something I needed to take account of when arranging my own collection. My project involves writing poetry as a method of living, but at the same time recognising the necessity of failure, recognising that accepting failure and un-packaging it (and the re-arranging it, much like one arranges a collection of poems) can be productive.

It seems appropriate that the title of my collection, *breathe in space*, can be read a number of ways. I like this about it. Breathing in space, away from the Earth’s atmosphere, is not something human beings can do naturally. We have evolved to be dependent on the Earth’s atmosphere and outer space lacks the vital gaseous components of air. Yet we can and have voyaged into outer space and have continued to breathe. So the first analogy that might permeate my collection of poems is this: breathing in space is possible by means of an act of creation that allows expansion. A creative solution (any conceivable venture that feeds a desire) allows us to extend ourselves, and to redefine what before may have been permanent limitations. There is no permanency – we can create ourselves into any vision or image of a ‘self’ that seems adventurous. It staves off inertia and the unwanted corollary, the useless fulfilment of all desires. We can breathe in space; we can always create a new direction.

When I say *breathe in space* aloud it sounds like ‘breathing space’. This interests me too. It evokes concerted work. When one gains some ‘breathing space’ it is generally because of an amount of work done to gain this space. It doesn’t seem to be spatial space (though in some cases it could be) but instead it is more of a space within one’s own
mind. It is the alleviation of worry and stress associated with work that needed to be done. That’s why for me the work completed to gain the space is evoked with the phrase. I imagine breathing space to be a state where one can focus on the regularity of breathing, perhaps meditatively, because there are no other concerns crowding out the base-level operations of existing. But, I also imagine this space as where one can reflect on that effort of work put in to gain the space. Breathing space allows one to reflect on an artistic project without a sense of impending doom. I often find a great stretch of work – like a particularly fruitful period of composing poems – brings a measure of this space. It just seems necessary. One needs to engage with society and creative production and the negotiation of desire and the self if only to feel relaxed as breathing animals. This is an oscillation of being, as opposed to the less constructive tension created when attempting to balance between two opposing modes (as found in much of Dransfield’s composition).

A final semantic variation of *breathe in space* is to treat ‘breathe in’ as the verb. This allows the phrase to function much as a more complex idea, and to indicate an ingestion of pure space. What kind of ‘space’ would you want to take into your body? I think the role of a poetry collection is partly to mould the unconscious repetitions that may present into more conscious artistic ploys – experiments that may prove worthy. With this in mind I have attempted to draw a parallel between this interpretation of *breathe in space* and an idea found in Dransfield’s poetry. As previously mentioned, in ‘Technique of Light’ Dransfield (1987 p.165) focuses on his eyes, and the objects he is describing, but he does this in order to emphasise the space between the two. Within the highlighted poem at least, this space is what he feels is important. A thorough examination of that space between subject and object can prove informative: breathing in that space is to take on the complexities already found to be manifest in the mid-position, the abstract littoral. I don’t think a balanced position can really be found or created by owning that space; and there probably always will be a tension that pulls the writer back and forth. Like light oddly taking on the characteristics of both a particle and a wave, we are doomed to feel sometimes mostly a part of ourselves, and sometimes a part of the world and the objects within. But ‘breathing it in’, taking in this position is akin to doing the work that affords breathing space. Breathing in the space may be a simple as saying ‘Yes, I am working within the subject-object pull.’ The writer then negotiates his or her own gravity, breathing steadily, whatever the atmosphere.
If there were to be an authorial intrusion into this part of the thesis (I use the word intrusion for its negative connotation: the negativity was something necessary to negotiate frequently – it seems a common initial impulse with self-directed critical writing is to resist ‘explaining’ your intentions, because this is not the correct thing to do) it would read as follows:

‘The manuscript leads to more and more offerings of experiments in linguistic and semantic and formal manipulation – not in isolation, against the displayed in the beginning sections, but as an emphasis. I’m trying to draw your attention to the experimental procedures here (without just naming them (making them clear and possibly pat)).’

I scrapped this introduction because it became clear very early on this was not the way I wanted to approach my own poetry, or the way I wanted to proceed with an exegesis. If the direction the poetry takes is not obvious to the reader – and, more importantly if I want it to be obvious – doesn’t that mean further editing is required and not an explanatory paragraph? The intrusive paragraph is a simple rationalisation. As if to say, ‘Yes, I know you have found some of this work opaque (I am aware because other readers have hinted at this quality) and as recompense I am going to provide you with this, a large extended compositional note. This will make it all clearer.’ Such a rationalisation would not suit because the rationale of breathe in space is that it is a poetry manuscript. It can, and will, function as this in its own right. But perversity then compels me to include the deleted introduction to the section because I find it informative, a sort of fodder for further thought. It’s similar to why I left in my introductory anecdote about the failure to construct the perfect bowl of cereal. (I continue to think about the cereal – it feels now rather like a personal symbol for my research. During a Pecha Kucha presentation on ‘failure’ I gave in Wagga Wagga during 2010 (the event involves participants giving a presentation using twenty images displayed for only twenty seconds each) I used a photograph of a bowl of cereal as my introductory image. I found it a useful way into my ideas.) As a poet one is always searching out more material for further thought. Admittedly everyone is also doing this, but perhaps forming poem-objects ritually makes you more aware of this pursuit.
Playing with language – not just for the sake of instrumental communication – foregrounds the multiple ideas and selves that might arise from unique word combinations. One can use everything to generate future selves, and so I justifiably want to use everything. I want to experiment with poetry to break away from practices that may become habitual; I want to explain the processes used in my poetic writing; I want to renounce these explanations (feeling they are too ‘explanatory’ perhaps), but then I also want to use the narrative of the whole venture as material for thought. Like the narrator of Murakami’s (1985 p.399) *Hard Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, I still think there’s something lurking around in all these processes, in the subconscious, that can be explicated personally, resulting in a more fruitful existence. In the end the narrator tells his own shadow he will not leave the prison of his own mind, saying ‘I may find the key to my own creation, and to its undoing’; but his shadow does not think so. The shadow thinks it will not happen, ‘Not as long as you are sealed inside yourself.’ In fact the ending of Murakami’s novel is possibly similar to the way things will end with this research: an answer presented that the poet can sense but not grasp definitely. An end full of uncertainty, but also one that results in a commitment based on intuition and research. I welcome this.

At one point (p.66) I place my doppelganger into the poems and manuscript as an experimental form of interrogation. The real other ‘Derek Motion’ who might only exist on Google (coming in at result number 58 or so) is a painter decorator from England. This is all one can know about the individual without making much more personal investigations, hiring a private investigator and so forth (I tried to befriend this man on Facebook once. He did not accept, and has now updated his privacy settings so his public information does not appear to me at all. This man does not want to explore the links that may exist between us.) Yet the other ‘Derek Motion’ converges with images in the opening poem of *controlled time of crisis* . . . , stepping forth as if to say ‘Perhaps I, the other Derek Motion, am somewhat similar in appearance to the booted tradesmen skulking through your bathroom?’ Then he disappears, becoming instead a reflection on the idea of everyone appearing to be something they are not, ‘mincing / mincing’ just as surely as a secret agent in a Joseph Conrad novel. Abruptly everything gets as obscure as can be. It’s an experiment in obfuscation – how far are you willing to follow the poet? You cannot know the ‘ken’ is Ken Bolton and perhaps you should be informed of this. But to do so seems coarse. A more open reading of this poem would be to simply take it at face value. We know the poet is (probably) not a painter-decorator;
so we take this construction to be a compilation of stray lines that unite in the individual, that are in some (un-graspable) way constitutive of his identity. Do you ‘get’ the offhand ‘wait three’ reference in the last line of the poem? It’s hard not to get it, and to thereby assume the poem itself is taking a stance towards you the reader. There needs to be three lines in each stanza (as indeed there are in a certain Ken Bolton poem…) Well, so the poem just fills the last line with various alliterative words, words that one would be hard-pressed to work into any contextual poem-sense. I am effectively a Dransfield-esque figure here, searching for the unity of some poetic convention, even if it brings about a blatantly silly result. You are treated with disdain in the end of this poem, and it makes the reader feel they have been led through a somewhat narcissistic exercise – the only one gaining anything from the progression of words is the author himself. I made this poem fit an experimental form I wanted to play with. Kudos to me. Take that doppelganger-Derek.

So the ending foregrounds a real problem of experimental poetry. The benefits are real, but tend to be one-sided. A partisan reader may not be too compelled by a poetic narrative that has as its conclusion only some authorial technical discovery. Why present such things? Why publish them in a manuscript meant for reading? I believe there is some use in the endeavour, and that it’s not only a self-interested gain. Although ‘poem with no wireless networks’ (p.67) presents evidence of its experimental ideas only within the title (in much the same way Michael Farrell’s (2004) ‘poem without dice’ does) we are still given much more insight by this snippet of an experimental note than we might first think. Farrell’s poem caused something to crystallise in my mind – it made me fairly certain that I was connecting with some of his artistic principles. Obviously then, dice are important in his composing (I thought to myself). This meant two things: he favours a procedural method of writing, or at least attempts it more often than not; but more importantly, he is probably always aware of the results of his procedural work, and is conscious of not letting such things become habitual. The words ‘poem with no wireless networks’ tends to guide you along a similar path. Motion uses the computer in his composing. He most probably always writes ‘wired’, hooked up to the information stream of the internet. Perhaps he thinks this is cool, this is modern, this is something older poets aren’t as savvy with? But even if he does take these surface-level options of thought the important idea presented is that he’s not willing to settle into a routine (like Farrell). Being able to evaluate your habits is important. It’s not because there is an intrinsic artistic need to jump on whatever new bandwagon happens to roll
into fashion town; it’s because art that is vital tends to be alive, subject to change. It involves fashion. Indeed, the ‘default kids hypnologic & semi-conic abreast the / council tree’ are truthfully the default option (p.67). Based on the assumption we make about the poet’s compositional criteria, they are the image-option that has come to hand, the very stuff that will explode into poetry – some kids standing near the poet as he composes. They are not researched artifacts. Even if you don’t think we will ‘leave / the planet doing the same this a different that’ you have to at least be able to imagine us leaving the planet, either as literal image connecting space travel with global catastrophe, or as an analogy for launching one’s self in a different direction. We will evaluate the thing that’s next to hand with a secure experimental stance. It’s why this sort of idea (the idea of poetry about poetry; poetry that has as its subject the meaning behind searching for subject matter and compositional criteria) is of use to both reader and poet. It could even be of more use to the non-writing reader, if such a thing exists.

I believe it makes sense to rearrange the parts of existence, and furthermore, that this is something anyone can do. Something interesting can, and often does, emerge from the new arrangement. If there is any failure in these poems relating to opacity (at times a product of a collage method, at other times a failure of over-referentiality), one must at least admit the possibility that the resulting discoveries can justify making this failure a part of the poetic method, making it a part of your continuing aesthetic. The final lines of ‘roaming capability’ (p.71) conclude the piece perfectly if you question the title as an analogy: electronic devices have roaming capability, but how much of this ‘capability’ do we allow ourselves? The ‘jarring shift of ‘voices’’ within the poem is very homely. Television and Lateline are referenced. The act of creating appropriate metaphors is up for debate. ‘we sit still’. The faux-celebration of linguistic endeavour (that is very much my ‘roaming’) is figured as a relaxed social gathering: ‘now being the time to admit our minor / indiscretions, to snap party-hat elastic’.

The hastily arranged feel is important to the conclusion of the poem, and it seems to emerge from the busy mixes of voices just as much as from the stationary observer (poet). It doesn’t matter to what extent collage was used as a compositional technique. To become fully immersed in this poem, and perhaps the whole collection, it is necessary to admit that existence cannot be grasped clearly and entirely. This idea is so commonplace as to be almost not worth mentioning: I agree with Mead (2008, p.6) when he notes it is precisely poetry’s ‘opaqueness’ that attracts and gives pleasure to many readers. Allowing yourself to become submerged in un-knowing can be (or feel) liberating. You don’t have to know.
One might argue that Christopher Brennan’s wrestling with his quest (his search for the divinity located the unconscious) meant he wouldn’t allow the failure of not knowing to be celebrated. The potential is there in a lot of his work but he rails against it.

I’m prepared to celebrate the fact that knowing and not knowing can be courted just as equally. They are different things entirely – not opposites. I chase further wisdom and further material for construction of the self via the act of writing poetry. But I also chase sublimation and pure pleasure. Weightlessness. The lack of responsibility:

the musts flowing into bubble-gum of living (just for me) i plonk in it to dream of your more exciting memories lines putting it in binocular focus imagining us for us

(p.81)

In the face of any concerns (any rampant connections with responsibility, any ‘musts’) we weave further intricate patterns into life. We are primed to take on board the failure we all have and use it as a platform. Dransfield’s best work connects with me because he combines his emotional resonance with a particular linguistic innovation. At his best he could avoid archaic and clichéd writing and pair this with sound poetic concerns. I believe the urge to experiment with our own work also impels us to experiment with who we are. This means there is less risk of our (unavoidable) failures bringing on inertia. Failure is but one instance of an inability to achieve a visualised goal. It is also an instance of a different direction. Avoiding failure can be effected by personal anaesthetisation, or by creative inertia, and both of these options are certainly problematic. This brings me back to the language of arrangement and manuscript sectioning – a ‘crisis’ can occur on either a personal or societal level. Inevitably though, I find myself thinking the parts we play in a crisis are controlled, not spontaneously composed in an adrenalized moment. I aim for that visceral form of decision making; yet I also aim for creative control, knowledge of the structures and global wefts that influence us as humans. I hold both of these ideals up as goals that are probably unattainable (bringing with them the surety of failing) but nevertheless vital. Examining one’s failures then, lining them up like poems and talking to them, seems only sensible.
The whole

The first grouping of poems found in *breathe in space* is meaningfully arranged to present aspects of my life I feel are close to home, and readily accessible. But the title of the section indicates how poems when grouped together can fluctuate and reveal tangents not immediately relatable to a physical locale. These poems ‘signify’ a ‘whole’ that is the poet’s accessible life, but, only in part. There can be no total picture of a life even when that is the aim; so despite the recognisably close imagery and references in the poems of this first sequence, the failure of the organising rule is acknowledged. In the first poem ‘one’ (p.1) (is it named because of its placement within the volume?) we are presented with the image of a kid’s party, and then the more tightly focussing image of the cake that is shaped like an eight, and shaped like a racetrack. This is comfortable and familiar. We have all been to kids’ parties and don’t need to do a lot of mental work to understand what is being done within this poem. But we are told ‘the standing / the thing to remember’, which directs our attention back to the beginning of the poem, where it is suggested that the present of the poem is a place of reflection itself – this vantage (where the speaker stands drinking seven beers) is the position from where the poem looks back in time to the kid’s party. From there it makes sense: the weather is not notable but probably profound if one spent the time perceiving it; cricket was played and a bat stands as a reminder in the back yard; also other people aren’t individually memorable enough to warrant individual poetic focus, and instead they simply convey a Shakespearean quality of death in the way they tire. The standing has to be remembered though. The subject of the poem might be said to be reflection itself. What makes us write of recent events? There seems to be no closure in doing so. The continually opening brackets convey this to us too. The type of imagery and language used in this section is in keeping with the things we consider go toward making us who we are: particular memories. But the form can unsettle that old and simple idea of memories constructing a total coherence.

The negotiation of childhood stands out as an initial concern of Motion’s poetry. This concerns appears to do battle with pieces that are temporally less distant (in the setting evoked, not the time of composition). I am conscious that I can’t assume it will be this way for a reader with no knowledge of me; and, yet I have also come to this conclusion by looking at the poems as if I did not know myself, one of my hypotheses being that the creation of a ‘self’ through the arrangement of poetic experiments is
conceivable. The oscillation is evident without recourse to prior knowledge, information not available in the text. This begins with ‘becoming a tourist attraction’ (p.3), where many of the references situate the poem in the late 80s / early 90s. The line about loading shoot-em-ups, combined with the games device controller being called a ‘joystick’, locates things very specifically in this time. This is a way of linking the experiences in the poem to the general empathy of a reader. When did your dad go ‘to live in a small box’? Well, you know. It was late 20th Century. The context was the poet’s childhood, placed nicely amidst a background of technological expansion in the home. Then later on in the grouping of poems comes the piece ‘gumi’, which – though it may not be known to non-local readers – refers to a race on inflatable tubes down the Murrumbidgee River. The race hasn’t been held for many years, and again locates the piece in a distinct time, working with the few other poems that locate my experiences and self in this last two decades of the 20th Century. The amount of material directly located in the poet’s childhood is therefore small, but I think it’s enough. It is an indication of the way memory contributes to the make-up of an individual and also the artistic direction one takes – it has a large affect, but at the same time it is just one element. A continual dwelling in the past is neurotic and leads to that unproductive artistic concern, sentimentalism. ‘in part to signify the whole . . .’ aims to present poems that are concerned with beginnings but only because of the fact that they are close and graspable. Interrogating the beginnings of who you are enables the leap to more complex imaginings.

Knowing just what to take from your beginnings is always going to be a complex undertaking. I completely submerged myself in my own beginnings with the poem ‘forest hill’ (p.21). When in an article in *The Australian* Bantick (2010) labeled this poem an ‘abortive attempt at indulgence . . .’ he is clearly correct in identifying the poem as indulgent. I am not so sure of the abortive claim though. There is definite purpose to this poem. It is an unearthing of the past just as if such things were entirely possible, as if everything we were once were is buried somewhere in time capsule, ready to be unearthed and examined. The piece is not written as prose as Bantick claimed (even though there are some sections of prose within). The piece is very much a personal act of questioning the self via the important talismanic images. Later in this thesis I will discuss the ramifications of individual poems in this collection being judged ‘successful’ – it is important with relation to ‘forest hill’, a poem that was awarded the *Overland Judith Wright Poetry Prize* for 2009 – but for me the main importance of this poem is
the way it examines notions of place and the past. It keeps working in my mind too, and I think this ‘afterlife’ of a poem is sometimes more important than the external publishing success a completed poem might garner. It has stayed with me to the point where I was moved to attempt my own close reading of the poem, to really try and get to the bottom of what I was doing as a writer. Was this poem really a success? The following is an excerpt of the analysis (first published on my blog). I begin by talking about Tranter’s (2010) Dream-work and thinking about the way he worked with a version of himself created by the public reception of his work, creating a dialogue between this entity and the writing-this-thesis entity:

I haven’t got much of a public self out there, one created by the critics. I haven’t published books. I suspect most of the detail out in the world regarding my work has been written by me. What to do?

In the end, after a lot of explanatory roving over the images within the poem, I come to an inconclusive conclusion. I suspect I may have even undermined my intuition that the complex array of imagery is as ‘dazzling as a beautiful rhythmic gymnast twirling the ribbon’. Perhaps all I did was show the reader something he or she already knew: ‘Derek Motion has proven a slippery construct to locate!’ But with the close analysis I also teased out an idea that was unclear to me during the composition of the poem. ‘forest hill’ seems to be concerned with the contemporary notion of the ‘edit’ and its application to identity. We ‘edit’ our past and future selves as we refine an identity. Interrogating your own creative process using perceived successes and failures does have benefits. The critical construct of myself that I can at present grasp is limited (and Tranter’s is extensive) but this hasn’t stopped me, and it shouldn’t stop a writer.

‘ballet lies’ takes complex imagining into a different area with purposeful experimentation. This poem is never simply about one issue or the other. Instead there is an introduction to a scene (one resolutely revolving around the character becky); a closer dalliance in the image of becky almost paralleling a camera zoom; and finally a move back to a more generalised thought – what results from the clustering attempted in this poem. In the end the question of whether becky wants to be ‘friends or wants to be based near me a moment’, a moment of ‘acute perfect afternoon’ is left undecided. The open-ended quality does give resolution though: the poem is fixated on becky. It effects this fixation by swirlings through the images surrounding her. Awareness is foregrounded at
the end, where the poet’s voice is located in the events of the poem, but at the same time is strangely gifted with future knowledge. The ‘some girls who do not know / my secrets’ are scarcely to blame, seeing as the secrets are the future developments of a writer, such as ‘how much the more i am regulated / in order to transform myself’.

There’s also ‘how loquacious i will seem’, a vanity that seems to be a self-conscious sneer directed outwards and backwards towards becky and the ambiguous ‘boys’ rife in the poem. But finally (and most importantly) the poem offers up a reflective conclusion that illumines some of what has been going on: ‘i will develop myself occasionally from the lack’. The lack that is invariably found upon self-reflection (as noted in some of Dransfield’s more narcissistic poems) is a necessary human failure. We will all find shortcomings if we look closely. But this is not to say that looking closely is looking too closely. I like to think that the final line of ‘ballet lies’ is hopeful. Occasionaly the failure of experience can lead to a future development. Perhaps it isn’t necessary to gloat at remembered instances of personal ignominy using a poem. I’m undecided on that. Developing one’s self from the lack found when searching for the truth is important however. It is a possibility. This method of arranging and complicating poems based firmly in experience is my method of exploration.

The four sections of breathe in space offer up distinctive failings (as located in the preceding research, the close reading of Brennan and Dransfield). The manuscript is meant to do this as a means of exploring and even affirming the negativity – making it just not so negative. One of the first – and I think most common – failings associated with poetic endeavour is the idea that your profound truth will resonate with others. It is a common way of writing – voicing the unspoken truths of collective existence – but the lack of perspective can become almost solipsistic, giving your poetry a drugged Dransfieldian self-interest. Nevertheless the failure is revealing. No evidence is really necessary to support the fact that most people are compelled to write about their own experiences. The things you have done and felt are the things you know intimately. Your speculative theories are violent incursions. So I think this failure – the reliance on the referential self – is meant to coexist with our creative endeavours in some way. It is the rationale for some of the poems that help form ‘in part to signify the whole . . .’, those that appear firmly situated in the present. For example ‘more better’ begins with ‘i swear more in text than speech, now perhaps it’s / the blip of children’ (p.4), and proceeds to seek a profundity that is not intentionally universal. What could bring a human back to life, when life seems to have settled into something far more routine than was ever
expected? It’s the new screenplay featuring ‘ducks as leads’; it’s the new Bruce Willis blockbuster featuring a hungover man forced into a tight corner; it’s the even vaguer idea of Charlie Chaplin brought back to life, but set to ‘evil’. These images stretch downwards in the poem as points of self-departure. The important thing is not to submit to an unnecessary dwelling in the minutiae of one particular life, but to recognise the way that barriers and limits are just as fictional as the stories you seek to write. Metaphor is at the heart of everything. The ‘whole-rest-of-the-world apart-from-me’ is ably pictured at the poem’s closure as a semi-circle of umbrellas at a funeral. It’s an appropriate image because at the same time you might easily feel separate from the semi-circle (the rest of the world), or you could just as easily become part of it, dressed in a fashion to suit any occasion. You make your own style that will both compare and contrast (favourably or not) with the idea of style present in other people’s (reader’s) imaginations.

As can be observed in ‘more better’ this realisation can and should be material for wry humour (laughing at the banana peel you are destined to slip on perhaps). Such as in the combination of title and beginning lines of the following poem (p.6):

**dog abuts shed**

& everyone times a collapse into that leathered rocker

thinking of how tired i got this afternoon – not

showing it though

In this poem we can observe a technique of mixing – not only of mixing up past, present and future tenses, but of mixing perspective between the poet’s own well-known view and the view of everyone else in the world. I think that’s the joke within: the poet cannot possibly know what everyone else thinks, and that’s not even admitting the obvious untruth, that there is no specific instance of everyone collapsing into that same leathered rocker. There cannot be. Yet the technique isn’t that difficult to accept; we are all familiar with the literary device of using ‘you’ in place of ‘I’, perhaps tentatively to suggest a possible universality in the poem given. This is not new, but then newness isn’t the aim. The aim is to prosper in the level of failure the exiting presents. Even when writing with the terms ‘you’, ‘I’, ‘me’, or ‘we’ how close does one come to authentic communication? I suggest not very. But that doesn’t mean that there isn’t fun
to be had: ‘you feather / my dreams as blankets hide the mouth, so / in such a light how might a silly footnote / make you feel?’ If those lines come close to evoking something that might mean something to a reader, or might mean something to the writer, or might mean something to the ambiguous ‘you’ spoken of, how would a footnote make any one of them feel? Even this section of the thesis, this very section where I am writing about this poem, might be interpreted as being that very footnote. If there’s explanation to be had it evades the sentiment and the original organising principle. That’s silly.

Communication doesn’t suffice and it’s a failure of existence we have to admit. I think my poems are often ‘awkward retaliations’, designed as a knowingly futile response to the inadequacies I sense in everything.

The poems ‘mangoplah’ and ‘gumi’ sketch out a very local landscape, and are also perhaps works that could have been adequately titled as ‘observationals’. But then as this section of the manuscript draws to a close a feeling of dissatisfaction with the observational mode begins to take over. It’s evident in the long poem ‘fate of the species’ where it is noted that ‘(secretly poet x and i do battle for ‘Riverina Country’ / where Cod would eye you if they could)’ (p.15). I’ve always found it problematic to develop a stylistic reliance on certain types of observed imagery. These are most usually landscape facets peculiar to the locale of a poet. The poem ‘fate of the species’ was published in a special edition of Cordite Poetry Review titled ‘Mulloway’, a tribute to Robert Adamson, and when this is taken into account more sense can be derived from the lines previously quoted. Robert Adamson is famously associated with the Hawkesbury River locale, because of his long-held habit of making use of the peculiar landscapes and wildlife of the area (particularly the birds and fish - the ‘Cod’ from my poem is a jibe at my own pathetic attempt to locate the same kind of connection). Does the splattering of local place names and personal references to personal experiences give me a stylistic integrity? It doesn’t seem so. As ‘fate of the species’ concludes, all of the poetic material and events are just ‘located by me / in a series of landscapes we plain zip through’. The lasting connection doesn’t arise, and in response the poems seek other centres to operate from, not the simple grounding of ‘place’. But if we are to believe him (I’m not totally sure we should) the poet does desire earnestness and solidity. In the second half of ‘but life! not other, then.’ he declares abruptly: ‘as i want to declare stuff now steadily; impart student / earnest life-lived wisdom & pre-war modish jubilant’ (p.17). This kind of declaration though, it moves towards a pathetic image of the poet gazing on his pathetic declarations, with the final sentence being ‘poor derek looking
remote’. The failure that comes with moving away from a landscape-based stylistic integrity is a continual second-guessing of your own poetic actions. I find a merit it doing so, but am also consciously aware of the danger in letting myself gaze too long at the image of my ‘self’. Poor Derek. It’s not the kind of thematic you want to overwhelm a collection; it is however understandable (if not allowable) as a human failure.

‘tupperware’ perhaps recognises this and initiates a response, but it takes the move away from Derek the writer to a laughable extreme, one wherein the poet is quite obviously making fun of the monologue form. The ambiguous form of the Tupperware – that it seems is narrating the kitchen events – knows too much. The poet really hasn’t surrendered to the formal constraint, hasn’t in anyway attempted to get inside the mind of this Tupperware. In the beginning we might think it a serious attempt though. How else would conscious Tupperware write and think? It would observe carefully, having nothing else to do all day, and it would probably embark on a lot of theorising about the motives of its human overlords. But then the poem reveals this: ‘derek seemed assured, such / instances fell ably to hand & often, perhaps a / quantifiable result of the heuristic honours thesis’ (p.18). The Tupperware is commenting on Derek’s skill in the composition of such poems as the one that it ostensibly appears in and narrates. This destabilises the Tupperware’s point of view, leading us to think, yes, the poet wants his humorous play with the monologue form to be unearthed. In the end the poet is ‘the arbiter of all final actions; mid-court rallies’. The Tupperware may very well slip back into character and keep observing Derek, but it does so in absolute complicity with him: two voices (and two points of view) become one, ‘observing because life is boring’. Life isn’t boring but sometimes it is. I think getting outside of one’s own curious predilections and obsessions can help overcome this boredom.

*together*

Some arrangements of poetry in this manuscript announce terms that suggest the poems will seek to unite the experiences of others in some coherent generality, provide unspoken truths. It is another thing a writer can do to make life more interesting. Yet it seems inevitable this will prove a more difficult task than the manuscript and poet is capable of (again, some failure will be wrestled with). As was observed in ‘tupperware’, the act of taking on pure fiction (under the guise of the monologue) brings forth its own problems. Can whole sections of a collection unite speculative fictions without
regressing depressingly into narcissistic appraisals of the poet’s own poetic acts? Will Motion avoid the errors he feels Dransfield made? We all recognise the first implicit failing of the monologue form: the poet has written the poem – not the character – and so we are prepared to look for inconsistencies, errors. Perhaps one way to combat this is to admit the failure of the form by allocating the requisite amount of ‘vagueness’ to the speaking characters. The speaker of ‘life in the miniature steam-train village’ can only be determined as a man, possibly an older man, who now lives and works in the miniature steam-train village where he once only worked. The real drama of this poem is centred on the fact that ornamental fictions could become real homes: ‘some of us do stay here i have a room under / the miniature tunnel the door is a drain cover’ (p.24). Even within such a storybook reality stories themselves are created anew – ‘also the fairies we created ourselves giggle / the dwarves cease their mining & gather to connive’ (p.25). Can an act of speculation – where ornamental ideas are created almost from a fanciful musing – bring forth a new mode of being for the poet? Perhaps getting inside a truly fictional experience is one way of expanding the self, or at least of developing a personal, more fluid definition of this self.

The idea of things being hidden is at stake. The entire story of a man living within the bounds of a miniature steam-train village is something that (if it were true) would generally remain hidden to us. I like to imagine that perhaps it is true (even though this isn’t the point of the enterprise). But the point is that we can uncover little bits of profundity by exploring the hiddenness of things. The second poem in this section – appropriately titled ‘a matter of seconds’ – really defines a space the poems at large seem to be operating in. It’s a rambling stream that is not quite a monologue, yet the use of the second person ‘you’ suggests a position where the reader is interlocutor. Of course the second part of the narrative, where memories ‘smashed into your synapses’ are compared poetically to a snail squashed between your toes while out walking in the rain, presents imagery you would assume comes directly from the poet’s experiences. But here it is presented to flesh out a theme, the idea of ‘people exerting a vague connective influence’ (p.26). How much time should we employ roving over these vague connective influences? The poetry in this section would answer a lot, if only by the presence of so many poems that attempt to get inside this connective influence and narrow the distance. Not knowing everyone is a recognisable failure but it is one that never troubles us. We understand the limitations of communication only too well. Not knowing anything about the matter from which you have constructed your identity
is a more troubling failure. One must know something about the fictional cloaking we employ, and therefore one must speculate as to the motives and stories of others. Most people will remain ‘pirates, strangers’ to you, but poetry allows you be interested by this difference and not repelled. This in turn affords you a more thorough knowledge of the otherness that builds your identity.

The oscillation in this grouping of poems (oscillation rearing its head as a recurring technique of arrangement, as indeed it does in Dransfield’s volumes) begins with movements to and away from the strict monologue, with many in-between stages. ‘i’m more bold than beautiful’ falls in between, and is a mix of points of view – the ‘i’ of the poem could be a coherent voice, but taking the title into account it is more probably a pastiche of televised dialogue (p.27). This collage of neurotic, self-obsessed (and more interestingly, relationship-obsessed) lines succeeds in foregrounding an analogous inwardness, that of the self-obsession of the writer. The creators of The Bold and the Beautiful have obviously failed to create meaningful drama (that is, drama that explores the depths of its characters, and on top of this tackles meaningful dramatic scenarios). But it has been successful in shaping a large bulk of product based in and around this notion of obsession – obsession with self and relationships, and most importantly, an obsession with perpetual continuance. How does one continue to create content? How does one continue to work indefinitely? The answer seems to lie in negotiating this problem of self-obsession and its twin, relationship-obsession. ‘i’m more bold than beautiful’ ends by almost pleading ‘talk to me about / the feelings phoebe it’s so quiet here’ (p.27). Every poem is in some way a response to that same quiet. Talking about the self or the expansive possibilities that might be on offer within other selves creates some noise, some activity, some product. Poetry is a self-obsessed art-form (and when it seems not to be you can often interpret: a paradox I’ve previously talked about, the search to get outside one’s self in order to strengthen the overall possibilities of selfhood) but this doesn’t have to be a purely negative description. The poet and blogger Adam Fieled (2009) believes it results from poets having to do everything for themselves. He means this in a number of senses:

Here, "doing everything for one's self" means more than just self-promoting; it means making sense of chaos, taking something inchoate and giving it form, deriving the pearl from the oyster, or, to use a modern and efficacious colloquialism, making lemonade. This ultimately, is the consolation for all of us;
we may regret that creative processes demand so much energy, and that this energy is often self-directed and self-centered; nevertheless, it is in the work that we refine ourselves, locate ourselves, and (most importantly) create a self we can live with. I do not believe that it is possible to become a Bodhisattva merely from writing good poetry, but I do believe that creation has a compensatory aspect. When the work is good, it can redeem a lot of things. It can even redeem a consciousness torn about becoming self-absorbed, and fearing the spiritual entropy that results from relentless self-absorption. If in our work we can forget ourselves, maybe that's as close to victory as we can hope to come. If we have to do everything for ourselves, we can modify our consciousness so that we recognize the burden as shared between artists.

I think this idea of forgetting amounts to a recognition of the element of fiction in much of the self. When we forget aspects of our identity, or write about things as a process of catharsis, we tend to gain the notion that much of what causes anxiety wasn’t worth the original torment, or, wasn’t as real as once imagined.

With ‘police-guard in the hospital’ and ‘a talking paul auster’ we once again are faced with the return of the monologue, or the ‘i’ that seeks to locate itself outside of the poet. ‘police-guard’ seems to be a simple intrusion into the thoughts of someone stationed in a hospital. The poem prods you to think, in a familiar way – what are other people thinking? Perhaps they are just engaged in the circular pursuit too, thinking of what they might think of on other occasions – ‘i will be studious then’ – and perhaps we are all just looking for our own unique way of gaining ‘guest status’, of gaining admission into a scenario or mode of being previously off-limits (p.29). This is what individuals acting together . . . suggests at times. But then the failure evident on the next page is the attribution of much more complex thoughts to a writer of complexities, Paul Auster. This too is revealing though, because by the end of the poem all he thinks of is the way his image is perceived. He is more similar to the police-guard than his creator (the poet) might have first thought. Is this the way the poet wants to imagine? Is this, therefore, another shallow exercise in vanity? Paul Auster did indeed once say ‘the novel is the closest you can get / to another’s mind’ but the consequent thought ‘i like the way i said that’ we must apprehend as a speculation on the part of the poet. I would suggest that the poet himself likes the way that Auster could possibly think in that manner (even while allowing a certain irony, writing in this manner). This suggests Auster is
comfortable with creating his own self and the manner in which it is perceived. It
doesn’t matter if it is true, because the resultant self appears to be true. The poetry
embarks on a new epistemological path: not privileging knowledge of appearances and
semblances above reality and truth, but instead equating the ideas. When you look
inward to locate the inner essence of who you are, the only sense you are capturing is
how you appear to yourself, an infinite regression it doesn’t really bear thinking about.
It’s not rigorous, but this statement follows: how one appears is identity. The poem is a
projective stab at saying who I am through whatever circuitous route imaginable.

June, Susan, Brendan, Monica, Brianna, Steve, Phoebe, Rodney – all of these
characters lurk in the various poems in this section. At times the reader will wonder
what they are doing there, because we don’t know them. In fact unlike the characters
popping up in Dransfield’s poems, you don’t get the feeling that they are real people
known to the poet at all. They’re not present enough to make that assumption. So we are
led to ponder why the less specific ‘you’ or ‘he’ or ‘she’ is not used in many of these
poems. For vague characters it would have to be more appropriate. We are not expected
to remember these names, to follow the associated individual narratives through separate
poems or sequences. What is the textual rationale? There is the possibility that these
names serve as anchors of admission, recognising the utter unknowability of another
person’s story or life is still no reason for labelling it irrelevant. We all have names, and
although these names symbolise nothing in themselves as ideas they do symbolise the
way each individual creates a coherent story around the word, the name. Poems relying
on the ambiguous ‘you’, ‘he’, ‘she’, ‘they’, or even the more inclusive ‘we’, do occur in
this poetry collection. In fact we might surmise that one of the aims of this volume is to
unite all of these voices into a particular probing of identity. If the names that have overt
resonance – the literary figures like Thomas Hardy and F. Scott Fitzgerald, or characters
like Raskolnikoff, Gregor; and then of course the celebrity figures of Madonna, Elton
John and Eric Clapton – are representative of some kind of societal success, then the
common and un-canonised names can be thought of as demonstrating a hierarchy of
failure. Placing these names on the one level, in the one realm (as part of poems on
paper) is an attempt at normalisation. Canonised words attain a cultural significance but
we shouldn’t overlook the fact that identity has equal significance, if only on a micro-
level. ‘a Fitzgerald party’ (from ‘a free Saturday’) evokes a special and particular type of
image, the ‘form’ of a party that not many people would misunderstand; but the figure of
june from the poem ‘june was first’ also evokes a special and particular mixture of
nostalgia and loneliness (p.32 & 52). One is perhaps clearer, but the other surely has a greater emotional force.

Although this method of combining the voices of outside figures does seem to have validity it is not a sustained technique throughout *individuals acting together* . . . The poems move away from the monologue form to delve once again into the frantic collage of fanciful images and lines we are somewhat used to from the first section. I think there is less said here though from the straight voice, the voice that is talking to you with the apparent authority of the poet and his adjunct experience. There is less certain ground. For instance ‘hush’ (p.34) (the much published and therefore ‘successful’ poem) begins in this way:

> often chloroform undertones in the banana-scented
> musics of the street some more cigarettes splice
> your fingers and proffer themselves like
> the people of boston might trevor laid the ground-work for the night’s running joke

The ‘my’ only surfaces once – ‘if you’ll underline / my content riddled thought with heath ledger-esque / delivery once’ – seemingly just to confuse the mode of delivery. Content riddled thought? This suggests the writer is playing with us, indicating he is deliberately blurring the way content is delivered from mind to poem, because that natural process can also be seen as one that riddles. The poem attempts to work against the line, ‘we’re / destined to repeat our boredoms’, if only by mixing thing up a bit. What you are, what Trevor is, what I am – all of these things are shaken into a textual arrangement that might be almost random. I think hope lies with Shklovsky’s (2005, p.800) well known (and tantalising) idea that ‘art exists that one may recover the sensation of life’; to any qualms with this an immersive poem will indeed stand on its head and coo ‘hush’ (p.34).

*individuals acting together* . . . is the longest section of *breathe in space* and one might conjecture that it gets weighed down with the titular notion. The outside viewpoints (the voices of others merged with the poets) do not fuse together nicely to offer coherence, or even a sense of peace. There is chaos. One might be reminded of wandering through Brennan’s *Forest of the Night* while reading this section. What does the poem ‘compound sentiments’ suggest, besides the fact that like emotions, experience
is a complex thing with infinite gradations? We cannot measure feeling with poems:
‘you suck but hey: earnest eviction- / papers eyed by the common swallow. how about me’ (p.35). If I were to attempt to expand on these last lines, or to simplify them, I might say the following: I simply cannot gain access to the thoughts and feelings of others; but hey, here’s a poetic image that you might like as much as me; so, how good am I? But of course if such a sentiment could be simplified usefully it would have been in the poem. That sort of simplification is only partly useful. The poem (and attendant simplification of the ending) does reveal something interesting, namely, I think there is an attempt (however futile) within a lot of poetry to know the self and others. There is a particularly fruitful method of doing that (as Dransfield seemed terribly aware of) and that is arranging pleasing images in pleasing orders. There is also, though many might not like to admit this, a certain vanity in placing a poem in a public sphere. ‘Look at me’ – the poem says this with its pure presence. The natural by-product of that is the assumption that the poet wants to be noticed. The writer of ‘compound sentiments’ makes fun of this of course, wryly showing his awareness of the process by writing ‘how about me’ (and not even placing a question mark or exclamation mark after it) but his awareness and sarcasm tends only to make us think he is doubly conscious of the attention-seeking behaviour. Because putting things out there has a down side too, and sarcasm (even the gentler forms of irony) can be a useful padding for your ego.

In ‘glimpse’ we are given an incident where ‘lagoon eyed teens laugh at your ode / wildcards fuddling un- artlessly’ (p.38). These teens are perhaps more attractive than the physical shell of the voice in the poem, their ‘lagoon eyes’ suggests that much, and this adds to the sadness that follows. But how are we meant to interpret the sadness? Do we feel it too, or laugh at it? Furthermore, is it the fact that teenagers are uninterested in poetry that is disturbing, or is the fact that they are laughing at this particular poet’s creative product? We end up being more disturbed by the poet’s attitude when he throws back the rejoinder in poem form, labelling the teens in question ‘wildcards fuddling un- artlessly’. Wildcards being desirable and random in dispersion; the line shouts: they haven’t worked at the image they present! The anger is a tad pathetic. Why let such things get to you? It is, after all, ‘a game but shallow importance’. The rationale though is, perhaps, confessional. Some of the grander poetry-thematic failures should be addressed within poetry. One such failure is the low-esteem this creative art is held in by non-practitioners. It is a game, and the importance is surface-level, but that’s where the self is evident: we are all shallow, therefore poetry is
very important. What’s in your work is palpable. The art-form is, as it is indirectly labelled in ‘i’d interview you too’, a real issue (p.37).

The challenge is a part of what I’m looking for in poetry. Unsurprisingly, I look for this firstly in my own work. It might be why the ‘i’ s and ‘you’ s seem to free-float through the text(ure)s of my poems. They seem to become less tied to any particular individual (the poet included) as you move further into the book. The romance between the characters within ‘tracing-paper’ is ambiguous despite the ‘i’: ‘we can’t continue to meet / like this lilac book-spine under finger’ (do they meet in a book, or around books?); and then ‘let’s waste an immanent graphic spool, or seconds / apart in some theorised fixative’ (p.43). The languages provide all the imagery of paper and books, but is never set there. In the same way the poem simply hints at life and the connections formed therein. What leads us on to romance? Is ‘the cut of clothing around the breast & / a swiftness in your hair colour’ a suitable drive? If anything, this question populates the poem, not the people. The ‘you’ and ‘i’ are essential devices utilised to humanise the project but that are not explored with any specificity (remember for instance the random particularity presented in the study of Raskolnikoff). Poetry joins disparate words together in an act of love. Or it can. How this is possible is always going to be debatable. Here the site of debate is ‘tracing-paper’. It challenges me (and ‘us’, I presume) to search out the question behind the question of love. Contrast and similarity. All of our communication, acts of ‘relation’, are processes of metaphor-making. People consistently insert the word ‘like’ into conversation, a nervous gesture indicating their earnest inner-need to be understood, to find common-ground, to compare their image adequately with the imagery of another’s mind. At that moment an adequate act of metaphor has been made the mind has stretched. We become something different through this leap. My poetry explores this concept of a plastic and changeable self that seems so apprehensible, but that is nevertheless not mentioned a lot. This failure of non-admission is like the worst failure of fiction (stretch your limited self to understand this) in that it leads to a simple story, but simple story that is inelegantly rendered. There’s nothing profound about that. Let’s fail exuberantly!

As if we were incarnate logical assessments of the wild concatenations that open the next poem:

three tone tie
& black fridays are everywhere. curry plants flick fronds
arise end up scalloping the wind as if subject to any passing
wunderkinds, though I did get here in the end. to your
fascist mistress you’re a ‘dork’

(p.44)

Calling this opening ‘wild’ is misleading though, because the method is easy to locate – the poem is tracing a path through sensory awareness, one thing leads to another. We imagine a particular ‘three tone tie’ brings on a memory of a black Friday (a memory that for some reason won’t go away). This method seems to be employed – if somewhat sporadically – throughout the poem, and is even explicitly talked about at one point: ‘the radio’s accent spurred a premonition / & in it like everything I was reflective. we need absurd / administrations. she’s got a way with her hair’ (p.44). The terms are reversed (‘premonition’ is cited instead of the expected ‘memory’) but the way of following images based on a loose thematic association is the same. Why I would define the poem as wild has more to do with the way everything is invoked to signify nothing. Nothing in this poem is the compositional distance between the ‘i’ voice and the ‘you’; nothing is also the real level of connection (romance?) that we are made to feel as actual.

Everything is one extended game of image-association. In this poem the game keeps bringing up ‘you’, despite the cameo appearances of monica and brandon. For example, ending the first half of the poem is ‘people should be careful with time but / you’re still entering a room in my mind’. which following the poem’s method brings in a slight aphoristic thought, only to have it followed by an inescapable (as the poet knows) reference to ‘you’ (p.44). The poem is simply mentioning everything it can that is associated with the collapse of a link between the most powerful images, I and You. It doesn’t care that a reader won’t get the context, and might not understand how every line is related to the poem’s pursuit. But this is the exuberant fail I have mentioned previously. The poet mentions everything, even writing up his own voice in the act of refusing to mention certain things, ending the poem with: ‘i’d mention the dog, the misery, were it not robotic’ (p.44). A particular dog and a particular state of misery probably would appear mechanical (or even robotic, adding an element of artificial intelligence to the imagery) and so they don’t appear, but also do (as absence). This is my take on accepting the failure language (and therefore existence) demands daily.
So even though the ‘I’ doesn’t appear on the surface of many poems the distance is established between perspectives, and the ‘I’ is implied. The voice has been seeking to learn something by sinking into the nuanced thought of others, but begins emerging to test the differences divined previously. ‘speculative #1’ goes about its way in the second-person perspective. Do you ‘catch fleetingly the moment of a baby calming / with the chill of a backyard half-sky’, or does it simply remind you of similar moments and experiences, leading you to trust the poem for a moment with emotional and intellectual belief (p.47)? Of course it’s the second option: if you do get into the pattern of the piece, you know it’s effectively ruminations begat by images of the baby and home, and the intention is a certain universalisation (which the second-person perspective hopefully aids). The poet feels opinionated and a bit self-conscious about this. Do we ever write anything that is not about our own lives? ‘speculative #1’ openly hopes that the reader can draw parallels, that some poetic generality can be attained. This grasp at readership ruptures to the surface of breathe in space quite often. One might take it as honesty, or a lack of craftsmanship. I take it as both. The failure of things left incomplete (for example incompletely aligned with the traditional notion of a finely wrought poem) can result in unexpected beauty, or at the very least, something to think about.

Thinking about things, doing things, looking at things et cetera, is really worthwhile. It bolsters the changeable self. This is a self that avoids the pitfall of securing knowledge, because the all-important ‘will to truth’ (that inspires a lot of physical doing) ‘loses all sense of limitations and all claims to truth in its unavoidable sacrifice of the subject of knowledge . . .' (Foucault 1991, p.96). As is written of in ‘defiance of sitting’, we do look at things, we do talk about the things we’ve seen, we do attempt to formulate ideas interpreting the image, we do look back at other images, perceiving perhaps that there was some value in the whole enterprise. There’s ‘petrol spillage’, there’s ‘two men in wheel-chairs’, there’s ‘slides rollicking down the rain’ – and it’s all kept in tune with the ambient sounds, ‘the dash dot dash in the arrangement of noise’ (p.48). The ‘maybe’ in line 10 of the poem marks the turning point where the movement becomes centred on rumination instead of observation. We willingly follow the poem on this course. Maybe the rumination results in little of philosophic value: ‘we’re a matinee ticket left on the chest of drawers for safe / keeping, a jest for sure, almost laundry liquid concentrate’, but there is a positive feeling surrounding the process (which no doubt mollifies the feeling of inevitability). A resurgence of poetic
things seen in the world (the uncertain parting of clouds that highlights worldly pursuits) leads to a pronouncement on the entirety. ‘like the docket combo it’s good value’ (p.48).

**sound**

An organised progression of poems confronts us in this section, each in its own way confronting or interrogating songs. It is reasonable to suggest that the poet wants us to think about the links between music (that that is organised or packaged into song-from; possibly not the more implicit music of our natural surroundings) and poetry (again, that that is organised, as poetry always is, even when found). Well, what kind of music do I listen to? Like anyone else’s personal preferences, it’s narrow despite my constant efforts to expand. A similar over reduction might be the question of who and what are my poetic influences. Again, to answer, a few writers and individual poems from a small set that probably indicates the inadequate breadth of my reading. This is the way it will always be. There are a lot of bands I like, perhaps a preponderance of Australian and American Indy acts (blame it on a 90s youth influenced by grunge). The important thing though is not to foreground my taste as eclectic and ‘correct’, but to work with what musicians are doing. Poetry is musical and can co-exist. Music brings together that which exists in a natural state (sound) and organises it into a pleasing form, utilising new or traditional structures and forms. There are obvious parallels between this art form and poetry; some might even say the two are the same, music being derived from the term muse, and originally referring to any art overseen by the Greek muses.

But here we are using the term to refer to organised sound, or perhaps more simply, commercially produced songs. *The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* (Music 2009) defines music as ‘The science or art of ordering tones or sounds in succession, in combination, and in temporal relationships to produce a composition having unity and continuity’. This web-definition serves well as a basic beginning yet it is one the poetry of *breathe in space* demands we further refine. I will use this section of the thesis to attempt such a refining. One of my first ever publications is tied to the idea of music, in a way. The piece was a poem selected for *Vibewire* by guest judge Michael Farrell. Michael wrote a judge’s report, talking of why my piece was the winning entry, and in it he mentioned ‘musicality’. I have to paraphrase from memory because the site is now re-tooled and no archives exist, but if I recall correctly what he wrote was along these
lines: ‘People keep talking about musicality when referring to contemporary poetry and in most of the poetry I just can’t hear it.’ He meant that he did hear or see something like ‘music’ in my poem (titled ‘canberra entertainment centre’), and, I don’t mind admitting, I was quite chuffed. In that piece I approximated a more musical ideal of the poetic term musicality. I have proceeded in my writing with a willingness to find out more. In terms of answers and making things happen, forming a low-fi grunge band, learning to play violin, getting a hip-hop krew together, composing electronica tracks on your Macbook – all of these acts are rarely made in the search for wisdom, and therefore approximate poetry. The answers to ‘how to live, what to do’ probably don’t come out of these artistic endeavours. In fact they will often suggest you do anything but the current enterprise: don’t write a poem; get a job. But music has a specific sway and always has. There’s an allure in vibration even if it be non-harmonic, jagged, edgy. We just do these things because they are cool.

When Googling for definitions of ‘cool’ – such an act naturally arose from the analysis, but also connects with my blog post of 12th August 2008 – I did a tag analysis to find out the most commonly used terms (there were lots of definitions). It turns out, as I suspected, that ‘cool’ is very often associated with music. On the internet at least, this association is much higher than any other particular term. Music then. As Michael Farrell mentioned, poetry has often been lauded for a perceived musicality. Is this ‘cool’? I don’t think so. I always get the sense the musicality descriptor relates not so much to sound, but to refined melody, compositional exactitude – in short, music that is traditional, classical, orchestral. A teacher of mine used to say in class ‘Ah, Mozart’. I can just imagine him saying in a similar tone (if it happened to be a class on poetry) ‘Ah, Musicality’. Is this all in my head? Again, I don’t think so.

The musical ‘cool’ then is to me music of a more ephemeral nature. Or maybe more correctly, it is music that hasn’t been proven yet. We can ascribe many labels – punk, grunge, dance, hip-hop, metal etc – but I think in many cases ‘fineness’ of melody / harmony (indeed compositional mastery?) is not of the utmost importance (and this works with jazz too; indeed I was worried the groovy cool of jazz just wouldn’t fit in with my thinking – the pre-composition being only a small part of the performative action). This is the musicality of ‘cool’: it’s about the times, the fashion, the resistance, the words & the music. So I think it makes sense to affirm cool as a compositional criteria. It adds to a mode of writing that is a mode of being. The sense of ephemerality that comes with fashion / newness / vogue is not strictly associated with cool. The tag
analysis revealed this too, in a curious way. Definitions of cool take on meteorological dimensions. One of the most used words (alongside ‘music’) is ‘heat’, or ‘hot’. What is hot right now is in both linguistic senses opposed to what is cool. The latest Australian Idol pop song release will be ‘hot’ for a while, but never cool.

Cool does not amount to populism. Come to think of it, I didn’t mix with the popular kids in high school. But I’m pretty sure I was always cool. Now that’s getting off the subject of poetry. But is it really? The poet is chasing some idea of coolness within ‘organised sound’, and it would be remiss of me not to examine the ways the perceived ‘cool’ of the bands and music written about relates to the ‘cool’ inhering in the author, the re-presenter of all that we read. What does he mean when he ends the poem ‘across the great divide’ with the lines ‘when you write about things there’s / always a chance’ (p.59)? What is the chance? The band Powderfinger is in a curious position – it’s posited as effectively being (alongside all other rock groups) ‘about something / other to language’, but at the same time the poet laments ‘what can / musicians do but describe / like a writer’. The contradiction is somewhat playful in that it grapples with the otherness and celebrity of cool, while simultaneously admitting that the musicians on stage are also artistic composers, just like the writer of the poem. What emerges – from this line of thought and also the poem – is then the possibility of ‘chance’. There is a chance that Powderfinger can effect something in society by writing a song so directly about reconciliation, about one particularly dark incident in Australian Indigenous relations. There’s also the chance that that mystical divide that separates the coolness of the musician from the poet can be forded. By writing with an instinctive hope to harness what is cool about music, that fanatic personal connection that is so generalised and normal: most people love the music they love. They love it. The poetry of ‘organised sound’ is trying to collaborate with that idea. Let’s see if the collaboration comes to anything. Like many experiments, the rationale seems to be that at least something will come of it. There is no sense in not doing something.

Not too much googling is required to place the first few poems of the section, and to isolate a more concerted experimental approach: ‘idioteque’, ‘in limbo’, and ‘how to disappear completely’ are all the names of Radiohead songs, all from their album Kid A (2000). Not much more web searching is needed to discover the poet has previously written response-poems to all the tracks on this album and blogged them. So immediately we are given some insight into the poet’s organisational sense of what music is, and how this corresponds to poetry. The agglomeration of certain band
references suggests a style of music (constructed pop / rock / grunge outfits) but the style of the poems proper also might demonstrate a normative view on writing. Responses (poems that are led by the mood and tone of the music, as well as by the lyrical direction of the original song) sit side by side with more descriptive pieces, poems that work somewhat similarly, but revolve firmly around a pivotal experience, a live performance. The ideas raised by this compositional ploy ask us how creative responses to both tradition and contemporary experience can mix together. Is such a thing feasible, and more importantly, will exciting product come from the venture?

‘idioteque’ places you in the predicament. You are effectively now ‘always at the end of the world strumming / the past’ (p.54). Because your predicament is inevitably to be placed in the here and now (a curious yet obvious ‘end of the world’ where no future is visible or knowable) creating art that reflects the past, and most probably expands the self in an act of self-destruction. This is what you must face. The answer in this poem is firstly the flow of the short and often unpunctuated lines, suggesting a possible worry-free immersion in the mood of the song, but is secondly the finishing lines of the piece:

because all time is spare & plentiful strumming
at the same time denying the messages issuing
from our poor art (a regular lament the lack of
evident attack & decay in what’s permissible,
what’s really happening)

The structured way sound and utterance are given to us foregrounds certain notions. In this Radiohead song, and in the poet’s interpretation, what’s ‘permissible’ and what is ‘really happening’ are contrasted with an idyllic vision of the artist relaxing into the beauty of a song. If time is spare and plentiful (in the artist’s world) then it is conceivable this serves a purpose. At its best music and poetry can serve to question what’s going on in any sphere, thereby validating the pleasurable time spent creating.

Maybe. There is at least a celebration of mental instability inherent in this stance. I think Kid A is all about questioning the results of abnormal thinking, and, in turn, the first poems in ‘organised sound . . . ’ are as well. What comes to the fore is the idea that nothing is certain. Therefore, everything can be changed.

Andrew – the lead actor in ‘in limbo’ – actually laments (or has it lamented for him by an intrusive poet) the fact that he can come to a conclusion, and that his mental
state therefore won’t allow him the classification of ‘unstable’. We then see him ‘bridling in the mess of his own / worth’, wondering why abject occurrences – like the gaudy arc of spit – seem to prove nothing. It seems his normalcy forbids the creation of overwhelming symbols. He and the poem are far too normal – this is the tragedy. Then as the third movement of six-line stanzas confirms, all that is left is the ‘post-event reverberation’, where no-one is now visible (but perhaps still doing things invisibly). The event at the centre of this poem (and many of the poems) seems to propel the construction of poetry and song, but paradoxically the art results reflect an uncertain position. ‘how to disappear completely’ closes with this: ‘I will present a / mirror as just evidence. / promises promises’ (p.56). If we are succoured by the music we are also troubled, and this troubling is pleasurable, like a poignant cold shiver.

Uncertainty can be a positive position though. Uncertainty propels testing, analysis, further creation, and when it comes to music (music as constructed in breathe in space) it motivates people and writers to simply act. We do things. In ‘another canberra bar / josh pyke’ we join in the gig so obviously located in a specific Australian place (p.57). We attempt to unite the collective feelings (the vague artistic response of many to one performance) in the same way as many of the words attempt to unite distant linguistic concepts in the one word. The evening vents its clagginess. We are, effectively, ‘aching unguent swift in the vomiting / bodyspatials’. Even if we don’t quite grasp the artist’s method of combining references, we do trace the idea of a collective intake of music. The final fading applause leaves a hum signified by the physical decrescendo of the last lines: ‘we’ll / elope & swing gossamer / 180s, violin like’. The twin notions of success and failure enable us not to judge this poem, but instead they give us the scale that allows observation. We can see that something has been attempted and knit into the world’s field of radical uncertainty. This makes us happy, even if it doesn’t.

Many of the poems in this section are effectively band-reviews and don’t seek to hide this. The naming of a year within the title makes this intention for particularity clear. The attempt with these works is to forge a new form of music-journalism out of poetry. Poems such as ‘alex lloyd 06’ and ‘dinosaur junior 07’ are good examples. But the poet obviously isn’t content to form a motif out of this idea, to simply write about the bands he’s been able to see live; there are further forays – into individual songs, but then also into the experiences and tangents that seem somehow to pivot around a particular musical entity. ‘giant squid’ doesn’t even mention what the entity is, instead...
only giving the reader ‘song after song, / a backdrop to mixed-metaphors’ (p.63). The poet has seen fit to reference a playlist of sorts, and probably has a clear sonic idea of what he meant, but hasn’t felt it integral to the poem. Instead, we as readers are left being directed toward the image of the ominous giant squid that submerges to do god-knows-what below the boat. The squid emerges from the shadowy and almost bored references of the poem and is striking for its clarity. What is hiding? What is going on in reality while we pour our selves and attention into the trivialities of a pop-song, or, a book of poems? The fantasy of a giant and immediate squid is probably too much of a speculation. In fact there rarely seems to ever be anything that clear. There is only an uncertain swathe of image and reference confronting us. The best one can do is construct squids from words. Reviewing the creative stabs of musicians – and dissecting the way so much of your fictional identity seems connected to some stray song – is no doubt a successful, and non-instinctual, way to determine influence. It’s what we are left with at the end of this particular section: poet and raconteur Derek Motion is left (we presume he was there) pondering the on-stage banter of Something for Kate singer Paul Dempsey. He searches out the personal connections:

    what i didn’t expect was a return
    to the first-album three-piece blues & stuff that means
    going to sleep your cassette near my ear. this was a
    blast or is it nostalgia, a word i tried to think of yesterday
    too, but couldn’t?

    (p.66)

But not to much avail. The apex moments in the poem are the words Paul himself utters, quoted in full within the poem. Then the final moment lacks poignancy altogether; the poet reverts to giving a quick summation – it seems the final band, Thirsty Merc, weren’t as good as Something for Kate, whatever that means. But that’s poignant too. Songs mean so much while remaining stubbornly distant, like their erstwhile creators. Do we need poems to tell us this? Yes.

    Dogged persistence directing one against the discovered evidence is not useful,
    nor a failure that should be understood in a new way. This exegesis has taken and will
    continue to take the stance that creative work is an important part of the construction of
    a Poetics, and a poet’s thoughts on how and why poetry should be written cannot
reasonably be separated from his or her product, the poetry (at least not in a context of research). When writing poetry I fail to attain compositional exactitude. The possible readings of the poems I have thrown out at you perhaps show that I have also failed to offer the kind of insight you want. I know that I fail to satisfy some of my greatest ambitions, such as that of mirroring the more poignant moments spent listening to a band, in whatever contexts it has happened. There’s really no hope that I can replicate the heartfelt connection that comes from a peculiarly good performance of a song you’ve listened to many times alone in your bedroom. But I can write with that aesthetic – this is where my poems are going. These are the opportunities I want to present as a Poetics. Anyone can model himself or herself on this sort of failure. Is a poetry manuscript going to be read at a University Library, or in smoky Irish Bar in Canberra? (Where you perhaps sit after delivering a paper on blogging to a room full of your academic peers. You’re too exhausted to go anywhere where you know there will be people with the capacity for analysis, people who were in the room and heard that paper. So you sit reading a little book of poems you got at a second-hand bookstore just down the road. It’s not rigorous but it is peaceful.) There’s a false dichotomy, library versus bar, but one posed as a method to demonstrate the possibilities of reception for your poetry. It could be read anywhere by anyone. My poetry aims for connection in this open context. (Your beer gets warm as you watch the Canberra people outside, in between poems. It’s cool though, you like feeling nestled amidst this; you should and do allow yourself this moment.)
Ambitious Closure

Preceding chapters have established that I have not been looking at the works of Brennan and Dransfield simply in order to isolate their successful techniques, modes, engagements with language and the world, and to thereby improve my own poetry. To put it more succinctly, I have not been looking at their failures in order to ‘learn from their mistakes’. I seek to understand how we characterise ‘failure’ and how we understand it, and what implications this has for the construction of a Poetics. I have come to believe there is an absolute necessity in admitting failure into an extended creative pursuit, and there is a danger in functioning with the overt aim of ‘success’, especially when the idea of success is unexamined. Existing and acting in any way parallels writing creatively, writing poetry, and so one should not be writing poetry in order to produce great poems (although this is not to oppose Hall’s view – I mean great poems in that they will be received by most of your readers as ‘great’). As well, the aim to have a long and ‘successful’ career is suspect, if only for the reason that failure is more than likely. These ambitions can be made a part of your identity with a reevaluation of what it means to fail. Failure underpins everything and it shouldn’t be cast immediately in a negative light. Failure allows possibility and further action. It defers the attainment of our desires, therefore making pleasure and achievement a theoretically permanent possibility.

As was previously discussed, the first section of breathe in space foregrounds my particular use of the quotidian and specific. In this thesis I suggest it was one of the failures of Brennan’s oeuvre that such a style was never really taken on (the other being that the playful and experimental urge – as evidenced in Musicopoematographoscopes – was similarly not taken seriously). In part, identifying Brennan’s lack is a reason I have been grappling with a way to take on the specifics. But it’s not enough to simply write about your wife, or your cat, or the way your children are growing up and making the same mistakes you remember making (the overall beauty and strangeness of life). Indeed this would probably not have served Brennan well – I imagine him being entirely unsatisfied with the more simplistic, epiphanic, specific modes of writing. It’s about placing yourself amidst the greater quest. Brennan’s failure made it clear that a universal search for the unknowable was not just unknowable, but that sharing the experience is alienating too, for even the most persistent reader. He knew there was no self at the heart
of his quest (I speculate) but he could still have placed himself. Moments of recognition serve our organic bundles of desires and impulses well. They are calmed by a sense of ‘someone’ voyaging into the void. This introductory section of my poetry manuscript is deliberately ‘me’ and what I think I am no matter how knowingly fictional I think the ‘me’ is. These are the things I collect; the images that linger.

The ‘Violet’ noted in the dedication to ‘thimble’ (p.2) is obviously someone close to the writer, a small child. The poem makes this clear. But is anything more extracted from this dalliance in reality? The narrative of the poem revolves around the creation of fantasy mired in the everyday roamings around a house. But the poem ‘thimble’ has an adult perspective, and by implication we are presented with an adult-child relationship, set in the present, presumably between the author and a child within his family (I can reveal this as being my intention). The events being described within the poem fade into the background and what becomes most important is the author’s interpretation of his own experience. This is a meditation on how one creates one’s own fantastical voyages out of mundaneities. It must be a familiar feeling to many people. The adult perspective is evident in the language – ‘humdrum as our prerogative’, ‘a narrative grandly’, ‘impractical sticky hexagon’ – and so this works to produce thinking on an important aspect of existence. Creating your ‘own quests’ is an imperative amidst the physical necessities of life, which really, tend not to be that hard. The existential angst of life is what is hard. We must continually engage in acts of solution, produce fantasies that satisfy our stupid need for wholeness. Is ‘boredom a duress’? I think so. With this initial arrangement the path into my manuscript places me at least somewhat in focus amidst a general confusion. At any rate, I do believe it to reveal me as happily meddling.

Dransfield often has bursts of journalistic enthusiasm that are more literal than the dalliances I am prone to – his are exercises in studying real-life, such as ‘Study in Restlessness’ where the titular sentiment is dramatised with plainly-stated references to the wind, poetry, and love. Economy of detail is his technique at these times. Yet sometimes this way of spelling out images doesn’t fit any aims. The line ‘Even hashish bores me, that’s a bad sign’. has a similar tone to the conclusion of the poem that follows, ‘Still life with hypodermic’: ‘That’s what they call / terminal addiction’ (Dransfield 1987 p.13). Sometimes this is simple overstatement. Dransfield just wants you to ‘get’ the thematic, to understand why he is feeling down. One failure of addiction is that it creates a solipsistic world where the user is unaware of other realities, where the need and the using become everyone’s need. Armand (1997) feels that the drug
thematic reveals some of Dransfield’s best work, writing that his ‘engagement with the recurrent motifs of overdose, withdrawal, rehabilitation and addiction, is devastating in its immediacy. . . .’ But although Dransfield perhaps does understand the lack of reference involved in the drugs submergence (he doesn’t assume his reader will appreciate the life of poet / addict, and does give an ‘immediate’ account), at times he also self-consciously creates an image of himself as the writer prone to beautiful indulgences (also the writer who knows this about himself and recognises the impracticality of it). It’s an over-stylisation that cloaks poems in archness for no reason. It is narcissistic, a view Armand (1997) also sees in the twin-urges of Dransfield’s poetry: ‘In Dransfield, the ‘sublime’ and the narcissistic movement of addiction are fused together.’ I think he becomes more exact in his work when this necessary failure (an over-reliance on revelation) becomes apparent. We can see it as an informative and necessary step. How much individual sublimation can the world tolerate?

Writing poems will never be accepted – by the poet or reader – as a simple act of sublimation, made public via a collection of poetry, or even an act of exorcism (as I jokingly (or half-jokingly) refer to in my own poem ‘This one’s called the pointlessness of water-sports’). It is a self-defined quest with no tangible result. Brennan too could not find a comfortable place within any sort of ‘greater quest’, or unknowable universe, and this is important. Clive James thinks so too:

No Australian poet before Christopher Brennan was fully conscious of the artistic problem posed by isolation from Europe, and no Australian poet since has been fully disabled by it. It was and is a true problem, not just a difficulty.

(James 1988 p.17).

He indicates in this essay that Brennan was a failure; that he did waste away the phenomenal talent he seems to have possessed. But he also points out that his life and work has given us something. James (1988 p.29) labels Brennan’s overall failure as an ‘invaluable act of definition’, and claims the problems he faced are those all Australian writers must even now continue trying to answer. I think this characterisation of Brennan as a figure who dramatised real poetic problems is apt, and is confirmed in Hawke’s (2009 pp.5-11) book Australian Literature and the Symbolist Movement. He contends that despite there being a broad reactionary move away from the Symbolist mode within Australia, Symbolism was influential in the long term, particularly within
the works of significant writers such as Wright, Slessor, and White. His book claims that a lot of this is due to the work of Brennan. The problem that Brennan’s life helps ‘define’ is not simply one of geographical isolation, but also one of aesthetic isolation from global artistic trends. Brennan grappled with the problem of writing Symbolist poetry that would also be viewed as Australian. Over the course of my research I have come to see that his poetic failures help us to identify the important nature of this struggle. As a writer I believe the question of isolation, and its effects on the artist, is still one we need to seriously consider. In this regard I think the ambition and reach of the writer needs to be openly acknowledged and explored.

In 2008, while writing this thesis, I organised a collaborative writing project that was to be staged at the TINA festival in Newcastle. While at the festival I also presented a standard twenty-minute paper on Brennan and Dransfield – a rudimentary version of this thesis that talked about notions of failure and success as applied to poetry – but my first pitch to the organisers was a collaborative project. This was what initially excited me. Rather than presenting a polished work I wanted to experience the work as it unfolded. Each poet involved in the project (myself and thirteen others) was charged with responding to one of the poems in Brennan’s ‘The Wanderer’ sequence, in whatever way they saw fit. The culmination was the performance of the work one afternoon in Newcastle. I did not see any of the individual works until they were performed; I was unsure what the performance would be like on the day.

The results of the project are attached to this thesis as Appendix A. As can be seen, the work that was produced by the thirteen collaborators is various. It includes a Latin translation by Ivy Alvarez, a complex game of ‘Laxdæla Bingo’ engineered by Kate Fagan, a ‘mesostic’ poem by Patrick Jones, and an image-based work generated by Nick Keys (using chance procedures and Google, typical aspects of his work). There are also more ‘standard’ poetic responses, although each poem varies considerably in the way it might use or respond to elements of a Brennan source poem. There was a large audience present for the performance of The Wanderer Project, and afterwards I received some really positive feedback. The overwhelming response was that the very act of interpreting Brennan’s work in a new context – in a context of various contemporary poetic practice – was a successful undertaking. This had not been the presentation of an academic essay, a paper designed to tease out and present certain ideas. It had been a performance that revealed something of the way poets work. But furthermore it had revealed a willingness on the part of these poets to be a part of a
communal act of creative appropriation. When I approached people to be involved nobody refused. The poets that I am connected with (that in some way fit into a loose network) are eager to test themselves, to take part in new ventures, and to discover something about the writing process along the way. My own process in responding to a Brennan poem was to use certain phrases from the original text (it was the fourteenth in the sequence) and to include these in my poem, using these words as the inspiration for further wordplay and ideation. But on the afternoon of the performance I saw that there are many other possibilities for approaching the act of poetic response. Many of them bring about curious and interesting works. I think the ‘success’ I encountered with this project was more akin to the positive experience one might have when participating in a workshop (rather than the success of having something published or being paid for your work). There is the potential for personal horizons to be expanded, to feel as if your writing pursuit is not a solitary endeavour, but that you are a part of something larger.

While writing this thesis I found I had occasion to revisit one of the poems from The Wanderer Project. One of the participants, Nathan Curnow (2010) won the 2010 Josephine Ulrick Poetry Prize, and he mentioned to me that the final stanza of his winning poem might be familiar. It was – there are key phrases from the final section of his poem ‘endtime’ that were originally included in his Brennan response poem, ‘Dawn’. It’s an interesting discovery for me because Curnow’s engagement with the Brennan poem illustrates dramatically poles of poetic failure and success. I remember sitting with Nathan in Newcastle the morning before The Wanderer Project performance, and asking him about his poem. He told me he hadn’t liked the Brennan poem he had been given, not at all. In fact his response-piece was a poem all about why he didn’t like Brennan’s poem, and if I remember correctly he read it with a mock-heroic tone that made his position easily understandable. Curnow clearly felt Brennan’s poem, the eleventh in the sequence, was a failure. He thought Brennan had tried to inject so much emotion and portent into the poem that it had come off sounding false, like hyperbolic bluster. But then in composing his ironic response he hit upon his own memorable lines, lines that stayed with him and even made their way into one of his own longer works, a work that has allowed him to win a major poetry prize. The line that can be traced from the figure of Christopher Brennan to the awarding of the Josephine Ulrick Poetry Prize (worth a sizeable $10,000) is definite. I think this confirms my intuition that the ‘success’ of the initial collaborative performance was a real success, perhaps one greater than the public acknowledgement of such a prize. I
don’t believe however, there is a poetry ‘prize culture’ working to the same extent that there is when it comes to the novel. I don’t know many poets who are writing poems with the aim of winning a prize; on the other hand I do know a few writers who aim to win the Vogel with the first novel, simply because it will help secure a career in writing. A publishing house has not offered me any sort of advance for breathe in space as a result of my winning of the Judith Wright Prize. Similarly I don’t believe Nathan Curnow has been offered any sort of advance after his major prize win (although he may have kept such an unusual thing to himself). I would suggest the collaborative Wanderer Project helped create an atmosphere that in turn promoted the creation of successes, successes that may well include awards, publication, et cetera, but that the atmosphere was and is more important. It allowed the poets to affirm their roles. Sometimes our sensed networks need proper articulation, and need to be emphasised rather than felt.

The Wanderer Project was the realisation of an impulse that I commonly have: I simply want to do something with people and with poetry, and I want it to be relevant to my research interests. I want to meet with my contemporaries and combat my own sense of isolation. Many writers of Brennan’s time did not see isolation from Europe as a problem. Indeed, Brennan effectively isolated himself from the trends and currents of an insular Australian poetry. Brennan’s ambition was to make erudite and esoteric connections through poetry and philosophy. He failed in this self-imposed mission, but his endeavour perhaps made others ponder why success was not possible. There are currently hundreds of online journals of poetry and poetics, some of which I have published work in (Cordite Poetry Review, Otoliths); it is useful to ponder whether or the ways in which such contemporary poetic practice enables a more conscious directing of influence. Consider this extract – taken from a blog entry on self-promotion – by poet and English Professor Joshua Corey (2010):

To succeed as a writer—and I define "success" quite simply as being able to continue in one's work—you not only have to "create the taste by which [one] is to be relished" (Wm. Wordsworth) but you have to create relationships and infrastructure and paths of distribution. Start a press, start a blog, form a reading group, start a reading series.

I like Corey’s brief definition of success, as ‘being able to continue’ might be applied to a writer in any number ways: economic, psychological, or even physical terms. It is an
open definition. I think the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have allowed
the writer to ‘create’ these connections with success more independently than ever
before. There are still problems associated with the clash between national and
international poetry (one is a problem Patricia Dobrez (1999 p.155) pinpoints – a vast
increase in network with no apparent increase in depth) but the network is young. This
problem of connection (to the everyday, to play, and to like minded writers) is ably
dramatised by Brennan’s life and I know it is one that will be increasingly relevant to
contemporary poets. Personal failures can be mollified through the easy transmission of
creative research.

Dransfield (1987 p.50) has been much-quoted as writing ‘to be a poet in
Australia / is the ultimate commitment’ (to a certain extent once again illustrating his
self-imposed melancholia); but this implicit concept of failing as a member of society
because of a commitment to your art has never been localised to the Australian scene.
The ‘failure of language’ is wider than this particular scene. Perhaps there is peculiarly
Australian cultural cringe, an attitude that sees many shun any kind of artistic activity
that might be seen to be difficult or elitist. But when it comes to poetry, well, as has
been shown here with my examination of the instrumental rewards associated with the
craft, to be a poet is a great commitment anywhere. My research led to a number of
tangents – there are many minor poets remembered for a handful of great poems, and at
the same time their reputations carry the assumption of failure. There are many
Australian poets that fit this label. Sometimes the failure involves a spectacular end, like
Dransfield’s death at a young age; sometimes it is a less exciting slow drift into
obscurity. In some respects the focus on Brennan and Dransfield has been arbitrary. Yet
in another way it is not. I think meta-writing is an important part of creative writing
research (and this Poetics) and I also believe it needs to be writing about the writing of
other writers, as well as your own, possibly concurrently. I know I have been influenced
by the writings of both of these Australian figures. These are writers I was drawn to
early on. Since this time, like both Brennan and Dransfield, I have been writing poetry
and actively pursuing my own interests. ‘Influence’ must be subject to interrogation,
alongside one’s own practical techniques, as is demonstrated in ‘the alikeness quotient’.
My piece seeks to comment on but also revel in humorous logics of our time. How many
people do use a mobile phone or the Internet to help them simplify a human
relationship? Opposed to this, how many would consider exploring a relationship –
albeit via a distorted lens – through the form of a poem, one that begins with
commentary on ‘him’ and ‘we’, moves through an invitational phase of ‘you’, and then attempts a reconciliational ‘i’? I have examined these questions personally with reference to Brennan and Dransfield. How would they have done things? Does our shared geography allow a point of connection, or are we dreaming of different things?

In some of my work a sense of peace comes across to the reader. But then I would also say that at other points a sense of unease or edginess is likely to come across (perhaps resulting from my willingness to embrace shifts in context). Sometimes, the reader might even share a stray moment of glee. I hope all of this happens, but naturally, we can’t predict or exploit human response. Individuals are eminently individual. For instance, in the years spent talking about this research socially, I have encountered people whose initial ideas about success and failure revolve around money (if pushed, their ideas on ‘literary’ success may extend to publishing deals, Booker prizes, Harry Potter). But there are also many people I’ve met who are not that preoccupied with traditional notions of success, who have a more nuanced view on why people extend themselves creatively. The largest group would be those that are still motivated by the financial / public approval idea of success, albeit with some unease, and some willingness to explore alternative paths. I call these people ‘the malcontents’ in my poem ‘success & the malcontents’, even though the need to redefine traditional notions is probably not so strong as the word would indicate (p.11). The three bracketed stanzas in the middle of the poem all offer up separate examples of being unimpressed. Critically the first stanza introduces the idea that perhaps ‘even publishing weft poem’ is not that great, and then the last stanza refuses to give a resolution as gained from the evidential middle stanzas. Instead we ‘nebulise, form a preppy junta, smile’. What else is there to do? I’m suggesting that most people (on considering how they define their lives in terms of success) would find something to be unimpressed about, but would be less than willing to explore different modes of thinking (in particular, that the failures of life are not brought about by exterior forces, but that this doesn’t matter, one’s personal failures should be owned and celebrated).

Despite the fact that I believe I am willing to embrace ‘different modes of thinking’ (this thesis being a way of exploring that) I pursue success as it is canonised. I seek publication in literary journals. I enter some poetry prizes. I feel a slight sense of failure when my poetry is rejected (is it not good enough?) or if it doesn’t win a prize (who was the judge? What sort of works are they ‘open to’?) I also feel a thrill of success when my work meets with approval. The nature of this research has been such
that it has kept me consistently writing and evaluating my own poetry, and at the same
time, as a part of the process even, I have been sending this poetry out into the
publishing world, allowing it to mix with other poetry and to be read. Some of the works
have met with ‘success’. In 2009 I sent work to the poetry editor of The Age. The piece
‘hush’ was accepted and later published. The thrill I got from this particular publication
did not relate to payment (although payment was received), but instead readership. It is
difficult to obtain reliable figures (and there is some controversy regarding how
forthcoming some newspapers are: (Sinclair and Jackson 2010)) but I might reasonably
assume that 200,000 copies of the paper with my poem in it were purchased. No doubt
many readers of The Age don’t read the poetry in the weekend edition, but still, that’s a
lot of potential readers. For a regional writer such a metropolitan/national ushering is
compelling. I received a number of congratulatory emails from Victoria-based friends
who just happened to be reading their paper. Another consequence of this success was
something apart from the general happiness I felt. I suspect my own opinion of the poem
‘hush’ has been influenced by its reception, by its life post-writing. I now think I can see
a lot of positive qualities I wasn’t aware of before, in this particular poem. I think Gig
Ryan had good reason to select this poem for publication. It is a strong piece. Does
having your work selected mean you start to view it as a more successful work? When it
comes to poetry is there also the proverbial danger of ‘believing your own hype’?

The danger of this happening was increased when Robert Adamson selected
‘hush’ to be included in Black Inc’s The Best Australian Poems 2009. My poem was
now rated as one of the best published in the country that year. Was this an indication I
had reached the top of the Australian poetry scene – was I now equal to this one poem,
one of ‘the best’? Such thoughts are nice and should be allowed some space. It is good
to feel as if you are doing things really well (even if the feeling is brief, or if you only
give yourself a short momentary ‘yes!’ or clench of the fist when an acceptance letter
comes). But then it is also important to remember that these are the traditional ideas of
success that I have come to see as the simplest. There is a usefulness in having other
people approve of your work, and it may even be important in terms of a career, your
ability to gain paid employment as a writer. There is also a more intrinsic usefulness that
comes from being able to value your own pursuits, to perhaps use your art as a forensic
tool. This intrinsic valuing must necessarily take into account failure. Measuring your
achievement via selection, publication, earnings, prize winning – this allows no learning
from, or acceptance of, failure. This is not simply to say I am writing because I love it.
At times writing poetry is irksome to me. But I always believe I have somewhere to go with it, something to reveal to myself (and others).

I sometimes find my opinions are shared, often stated in a more succinct way than I can manage. Nobody can really live as the encapsulation of a polar ideal. Most people find themselves somewhere in between a binary. I think the various binaries we function under are important but there is no real reason that we should lean one way and leave the other pole unexamined. As suggested in this blogpost, a musing on disappointment by writer Kerryn Goldsworthy (2010):

If you put bad stuff 'behind' you then you will simply do exactly the same thing next time. You can't learn, grow or thrive as a human being unless you actually take your failures, crimes and misdemeanours and their consequences in: assimilate and transcend, as I used to say many years ago to an earnest feminist friend who had no intention of giving up lipstick and perfume but used to agonise about it constantly. You have to let everything sink in and become part of you, or you'll just keep repeating yourself. Even disappointment and failure. Especially disappointment and failure.

A process of consistent appraisal and experimentation is essential to poetic pursuit, and I undertake this formal experimentation all the time, as a form of exercising. It does feel at times like one is swimming against the current. But this has always been the way. As Retallack (2003 p.3) states ‘There are numerous versions of the qualms about the efficacy of experimental thought, except in the sciences, where it’s seen as the nature of the enterprise.’ There is always an artistic path most accepted (in poetry we might relate this to ‘understandable’ poetry – I think so, still) but, as Retallack rightly points out, ‘swerves’ have been, historically, necessary. For me the aim in producing an unexpected poem (a swerve) is to recognise failure: not to present obvious and tritely manufactured examples of failure. I admit it is clear early on in breathe in space that the poet is comfortable with certain modes of expression. But I believe this aids coherence – giving the work a feel of a singular coherent endeavour, rather than something oddly squishy and piecemeal. In this vein I must observe that Brennan never really failed to make his poems typographically secure. There is an evenness that directs the flow of the poems in sympathy with his intellectual sallying forth. Dransfield was a little less secure in what he put together – the poems do jump around, covering numbered stanzas, blocks
of free verse, the occasional poem of couplets, and even the odd sonnet. What becomes clear though – from an assessment of these writers’ works as ‘bodies’ – is that neither one way nor the other was more correct. Brennan’s formal methods failed him because they couldn’t help a reader penetrate the density of reference and emotional import. Dransfield’s failed him a little because he allowed his subject matter to float as freely as his predilection for forms, assuming a reader’s mind to move complicitly with his. The point is that form is worth taking note of only to observe how the poet uses it in tandem with other concerns. Does my preference for free verse blocks (which I think is somewhat like Dransfield’s) work to enable the imagery and thinking contained within?

One of the main concerns of the manuscript as a whole is the negotiation of failure (a necessary by-product of the research undertaken alongside the composition). The views of failure given within these poems illustrate what was written in the opening chapter of this thesis, that ‘failure is something we must contend with constantly’. The manner in which we do ‘contend’ is what becomes important. I think we should all ‘hope to make more sense of things’, and poetry is one possible approach. (Although we shouldn’t go as far as Christopher Brennan, if only to avoid the terrible depression of finding there is no logically determined point to existence on offer.) My approach is one of experimentation (procedural or non-procedural). I create elaborate untruths out of images and present them as possibilities. Lacan (1977 p.207) said that ‘the phantasy is that by which the subject sustains himself at the level of his vanishing desire . . . .’ Creating and entertaining the theoretical sustains us at an apex, at a point where we are just about to succeed and also fail. I agree with Lacan and I think that as subjects, satisfying a demand does obfuscate our ‘objectness’, or universal truth. And failing to achieve anything leaves us similarly mired. We should contend by recognising the power we have to create a newly functioning self over and over again, a self that sustains us, that allows us to keep going. Like it’s just one big metaphor. That’s not as crazy as it sounds.

Writing lets us imagine ‘place’ as it could be and to thereby experience it. But nevertheless this place is a place of lucidity, ‘the uncharted / uplands of the spirit’ (Dransfield 1987 p.66). The land of Australia is a grand conceit that parallels nirvana. The wind, the trees, the rocks, the birds – these are landmarks on a map to enlightenment. Even the death of the physical body (where we finally become really connected with the spiritual voices of the land) should not be sad. It is a peaceful renunciation: ‘i am pieces of meat / the birds fly down / there is to be a banquet’
(Dransfield 1987 p.68). This is the ambitious possibility Dransfield believes in and it made sense for him to rove over the premises and conclusions of such a belief. Poetic and physical dismemberment is a means to the end of oneness, timelessness. That seems to exist somewhere in this planet: ‘it is a / possibility. now rain cleans the air, and falls, / and falls, and will be falling’ (Dransfield 1987 p.69). But there is always a conclusion to this type of endeavour, and Dransfield doesn’t fail to recognise the problems his vision of self-renunciation (effected via an escape from ‘the city’) creates. If everything is a series of references, demarcations, and calibrations designed to make existence easier to handle, the possibility is there that our construction of an Other way is also simply a conscious distinction designed to promote personal happiness. But isn’t this a productive ignorance (of the Foucauldian variety) that doesn’t follow the path of violent knowledge? In ‘Geographies’ Dransfield is playful about the notion of epiphany, and this is productive. Just about any poetic construction can be ‘true’ in the same way that just about any societal construction can be. The oneness is on offer only within this act of recognition – that all constructions (including the poet’s ego) are fictional things. Operating under this illusory state (where fiction is the truth, and therefore paradox the watchword) one possesses the freedom to be any range of things: troubled, liberated, even bored. Rather than see a poem as a doubtful line, separating yesterday’s and today’s poet, we could easily see it is as a firm creation of both. Such a stance would affirm the complexity involved in writing about one’s self (while not letting complexity take sway, which might drag a self-investigative poem towards a lament).

Brennan often uses language archaically and these semantic shifts (as modified by his love of older forms) twist the poetic line. This could be placed as a positive. But he does this too often while saying the same thing over and over, and instead the lamenting tone takes over, vaguely repeating the story of lost creativity and the impossibility of higher (divine) knowledge. Perhaps his special theory of epistemology or the self would have functioned better as an aspect of his poetry, not a driving force. I think Dransfield an extremely talented writer (and also underrated) but occasionally he does place himself as a romantic hero lamenting the age, while also trying to utilise the technique of more sophisticated contemporary writers: combining the lyrical and the distant, de-centred voice. This doesn’t always work. As a reader I feel that lamenting tone again, and it can be unsettling. It wouldn’t make sense to draw an analysis of my poems out of the influences of Brennan and Dransfield, and as that wasn’t really my aim I haven’t. My general aim is as always to function as a writer with an awareness of what
I want to do, and experience the pitfalls. I will not be dourly enigmatic in my writing, but instead perhaps whimsically serious. Such a paradox does not necessarily align my work with Dransfield’s. I am often taken by abstraction in a way Dransfield wasn’t. Therefore, to be gloomy is a dalliance – there is always a resurgence of pleasure if only because ‘everything is still there to do’. Such as more glibly artificial beauty, coming direct from the constructed soul (my self, created by my writing). But, like everything if interpreted that way, it’s a failure too. There’s a definite leaning towards speculative abstraction that could be tempered in breathe in space, and maybe in further creative work.

The failure to find absolute meaning is one we are familiar with in our all-consuming quest to identify and locate a personal identity. We simply cannot understand everything. Poems in general are therefore locatable objects (producing the ‘ah’), but furthermore, as illustrated, the process of engagement will often feel good. What are the feelings roaming free in my poem ‘feelings’? With a surface-level reading we don’t see happiness. What mostly comes through is anger. But the way line 6 is indented draws attention to syntax and the way different arrangements can be generative. steve’s removal, his ‘sure clique ejection’ is the removal of his words and manner. It’s a conscious ejection on the part of the writer to locate a certain manner of representation: how does one render feeling? It seems likely that one must attempt whatever is possible and meaningful. Words can be jammed together without punctuation, just like ‘engines & roads & sirens’ in a cityscape, or they can also be grouped together only to be edited and pared down into a meaningful structure, as many hope a clique of friends can be (p.48). The point is though that all these things are attempted because they are experiments attempted to find results, but also exercises that bring along an intrinsic pleasure. Steve is the representative of ‘failure’ in this poem’s narrative of social patterning. It’s pleasurable to create him and cast him into anecdote in this manner. It’s also pleasurable to think about the parallels between poetic vocabulary and the idea of a circle of friends. We cast off poems, people; we suspend their narratives as informative models of failure.

It becomes clearer within the poetry of breathe in space that failure and success are the poles we tend fluctuate between, in many many ways. The temperatures of the poem ‘temperatures’ serve to highlight the idea of difference, and how we find meaning in the ideas created: ‘shivery makes sense only / in the perceived difference’ (p.49). Cold and warm have no meaning at all unless understood in context – cold as compared
to what? Our actions and poems have no sense unless evaluated according to some measure. Success seems to be a valid (or else commonly accepted) term. I’ve heard a poet refer to some of his work as ‘strong material’. Here the word ‘strong’ suffices for his own personally determined notion of success, his personal yardstick. ‘cold logistics’ goes further and dramatises the poetic pursuit, setting it concurrently against two backdrops – the current economic climate vs. the imagery of the dark ages. This is a scenario where stray online interaction offers more reward than focussed artistic endeavour (at least the traditional kind of endeavour):

sparks fly
as if they were poems but really, they are not. imagine
looking tired (it’s in the hair, not the eyes) on a later
makeshift couch & then uploading it as your new
profile image: antithetical to funded & lushly catered
notions of completion. it’s a result, at least.

(p.50)

It seems the poem covers this ground because we don’t want some satisfaction to arise from any pursuit. I can report on the daft linguistic cloaking of modern society (and literary society, if necessary) as in the poem ‘third way’ (p.52) by signing off with a knowingly smiled touché, gaining smug satisfaction from that act, or I can approach alternatives. It leaves the poet not smiling ‘a touché’, but stating that he wants to. The appropriateness of such a gesture is dubious. It would be mannered, courteous and contrived to smile at the problems (themes or subject matter), and so the usefulness of poems investigating various viewpoints and the inherent distortion is tentatively established. The move away from a poetic voice hinging on the transparent ‘I’ can bring on a process of pleasurable ideation. Opacity may well be a failure but as has become increasingly apparent, failures are often twinned with some fruitful satisfactions. Something that leads one forward into new engagements, new (and sometimes strangely ambitious) projects.

But why be ambitious in our attempts? What are the strange ambitions that poets harbour and then hint at in conclusive titles in their theses? As I’ve proposed, at the heart of Brennan’s work was a need to connect. He deliberately eschewed the more typically ‘Australian’ poetry and opinion; instead he read widely from European writers
(Tennyson, Novalis, Huysmans, Flaubert, Baudelaire, Mallarmé), drawing inspiration from their work. Despite evidence suggesting Brennan was in no way ignorant of the poetry produced in Australia (he was a contributor to, and Editor of The Bulletin’s ‘Red Page’, wherein other Australian writers like Henry Lawson and A.B. Paterson were published (Clark 1980)) poetic sequences like ‘Lilith’ and ‘The Wanderer’ demonstrate poetic concerns that are philosophic and symbolic – the nature of the creative self was of far more importance to him than the nationalistic concerns that were then common (Clark 1980). Brennan always actively sought his own form of influence and indulgence. Aside from the actual poetic practices Brennan inherited, it is also possible there was a very specific ‘communion’ that he was after: involving a community ‘other’ to what was available in Australia.

It is well known that Brennan did correspond and exchange volumes of poetry with Stéphane Mallarmé. I knew this previously, and thought there was more to it. Yet the exchanges were few in number. Lloyd (2002 pp.16-30) points to the possibility that the artistic relationship forged between these two was one-sided: Mallarmé may not have been profoundly moved by Brennan’s poetry (as Brennan was by his). Instead it is likely he simply welcomed the fact that here was a like-minded poet seeking community. I think we might not be so impressed with this fact today when the internet reveals all too readily that there are many, many poets out there (American poets such as Ron Silliman and Reb Livingston seem to delight in reeling out facts about ‘the number of poets writing and publishing today’; it would seem to be a much higher percentage than ever before). But around a century ago Mallarmé was impressed with Brennan – he was also a poet ‘powerfully swimming against the current towards its source . . .’, writing in a style that often defied comprehension by the general public (Lloyd 2002 p.20). The difficulty of Brennan’s poetry is part of its allure, but it is also the difference. By looking to models outside what was easily on offer Brennan was creating poetry that was new – a difficult feat. That he failed (that he never achieved the complex interplay of idea, tone, and image I observe in ‘The Wanderer’; or indeed that he simply stopped writing regularly) may have been due to the geographical limitations of his poetic network. Brennan’s knowledge of symbolism and its poetic adherents was formidable, yet he failed to fully synthesise with his own poetry. An international network of poets offers much promise: one might share both interest and influence in a virtual workshop environment. An individual poem or series of poems can be shared and evaluated quickly. A sense of ‘place’ is often an important aspect of writing to consider (it is often
the reason why writing is lauded) but it does have to be not an aspect that can destroy those who look outside its boundaries.

Many years later Dransfield was not after exactly the same thing as Brennan. His reach for poetic influence was of course directed towards American models, and although he took a lot of influence from American writers, one could argue that, just like Brennan, he never made the personal connections with an ‘other’ world that enticed him. Jackaman (2003 p.246) feels he found himself in a gap between competing urges: one, a ‘radicalizing, iconoclastic impulse’ (American, and particularly informed by the existence of Donald M. Allen’s *The New American Poetry*); and the other an ‘allegiance to an inherited ‘English’ discourse of Romantic aestheticism’. This lack of firm ground may well have ultimately silenced him. Dransfield’s decay was a schizophrenic slide and it is evident, while also debatable, in his work – as Patricia Dobrez (1999) posits – that he suffered the pressures of practising poetry on the cusp of a post-modern age. Dransfield tried to write with a lyric sensibility that was consistently distorted by the need to be someone else, or, everyone. Perhaps this was the appeal of drugs (getting out of your own headspace), or perhaps not. What Dransfield did do was commit to a life of poetry, another unmanageable addiction. The ‘self’ he gave to his writing was always under pressure. But Dransfield’s poetry became insular, and eventually evaporated, because the created self (what lurks inside one’s consciousness) is the real site of discovery. Another famously short-lived poet, Keats, affirmed this idea when responding to external criticism. In a letter to a friend he wrote ‘when I feel I am right, no external praise can give me such a glow as my own solitary perception & ratification of what is fine’ (2002 p.146). He believed the self (and attendant opinions) is what is worth knowing – not society’s demands and ideals. This is what gave rise to his more well known quote: ‘I would sooner fail than not be among the greatest.’ Dransfield came to write and live this way too. Forging your own identity first necessitates looking inwards, even though this brings a danger, your confidence unravelling, personal incoherence. The narcissistic gaze needs to be embraced to become sublime. This failure must be embraced – it is as necessary to self-coherence as embracing your talent.

Without doubt Dransfield will be remembered for his addiction and early death, combined with his talent and the implicit idea that this would have matured had he lived. Whatever the pitfalls of literary canonisation there are both major and minor literary figures kept alive. In *Australian Verse: An Oxford Anthology*, a common undergraduate poetry textbook (one that I studied as an undergraduate and am therefore familiar with),
John Leonard (1998) includes a larger sample of works from the following poets: Les Murray, Gwen Harwood, Judith Wright, A. D. Hope and Kenneth Slessor. These are a few of the poets that I think would still be generally positioned as major figures. Brennan and Dransfield have work in the same anthology, and in most anthologies of Australian poetry, but they are accepted as minor figures. This is indicated most obviously by the number of pages allocated to their poems. If you begin with the small selection of poems, and try to find out a reason you might find it most commonly put in this way: Brennan’s failure was to drink alcohol:

a few too many drinks
would ginger up but addle the study

of his volumes of foreign verse

(Tranter 2004)

Dransfield’s was to take drugs:

you know Dransfield’s line, that once you become a junkie
you’ll never want to be anything else?
well, I think he died too soon,
as if he thought drugs were an old-fashioned teacher
& he was the teacher’s pet, who just put up his hand
& said quietly, ‘Sir, sir’
& heroin let him leave the room.

(Forbes 1998)

So, had they been more temperate, would they have produced a greater body of quality work? Although this thought runs through the critical literature, I don’t think it is enough, and furthermore I don’t think other poets welcome such a simple summation. The poems quoted here play with such an idea, but also blur it with irony and ambiguity. I even sense arrogance in Forbes’ lines, an implication that he too has lived the life of addiction, but has persisted in the endeavour longer, and never written such a simple poetic summation (maybe there is a jealousy in his lines too though – the typical Forbes’ poem would allow both feelings to be at play). I think in the cases of Brennan and
Dransfield substance abuse was a response to pre-existing failure. Both wanted to achieve something new. Both wanted to be published in the various journals and anthologies. Both had their personal lives inextricably bound up (in different ways) in their poetry. The life-destroying substances may have amplified but did not cause the problems associated with these ambitions. How one recognises and responds to the companion of ambition, failure, is a key determinant of the trajectory of any personal existence.

Adamson (1999 p.7) wryly notes that Dransfield’s decision to be fully ‘a professional poet’ was ahead of its time, but, also destined to failure; comparing him to Kendall. Dransfield’s physical self would, or could not cohere and work in tandem with his poetically constructed voice. It was the pressure of the influence he wanted to take on: to be the ‘international poet’ Kinsella (2002 p.xvii) places him as, and to also successfully guide a romantic self towards an approaching simulacra (Patricia Dobrez (1999) gives a fuller account of Dransfield’s own ideas surrounding international publication and success). The poet failed in this regard, and it was not because of any geographical limitations. This failure is ultimately associated with Dransfield’s over-commitment. Like Brennan, his life and works do demonstrate a problem that is being negotiated today. Indeed it is one of the dramas of modern age, what Foucault (1994 p.55) calls ‘the confrontation of poetry and madness in modern Western culture’. The poet is an artist continually seeking resemblances that are (to all apparent views – to ‘sane’ viewpoints) not there, and furthermore, are inherently non-existent, as language predicates. This doesn’t have to be a problem but I think for Dransfield it was. His poetic identity was a construction of a Romantic character – more a manufactured ‘inspired visionary’ than anything else. The field of knowledge he was confronted with (an historical trajectory where resemblances are supplanted by ‘identities and differences’ (Foucault 1994 p.81)) demanded more awareness. Of course the problem hasn’t been solved and by definition it cannot be solved. But paradoxically it cannot be ignored: the drama of poetic distance and how to maintain an ironic, clever, feeling and writing self simultaneously, this may be observed in the current work of some of Dransfield’s contemporaries and critics, such as John Tranter or Gig Ryan. Importantly – when it comes to Tranter particularly – we can observe this drama being played out in critical prose and in poetry. Everthing leads me to write poetry.

‘lyric to signal my knowing’, the penultimate poem in the first section of breathe in space, seems to use humour as a comfortable way into an important issue. It is
supposedly a lyric poem, it declares itself as such, and I guess at a stretch it could be taken as one. But the title proclaims that this form is in order to show the poet’s ‘knowing’. In short the joke is: I write lyric poetry because I know so much; I have so much to give the world. It’s an overstatement but there’s something worth exploring in that. ‘lyric to signal my knowing’ doesn’t take on a lot of the usual traits of lyric poems. In fact the only personal pronoun is the ‘my’ in the first line: ‘scooter my experimental garden-path’ (p.20). The headless barbie, the bleached ball, the skivvy, the AFL teacher, the paddle pop sticks – all of these things do seem like personal recollections. What’s missing is the theorising on some grander scale: the making sense of things part. In effect, this poem signals to the reader that the poet doesn’t have any knowing as knowing might be popularly conceived, but that he isn’t concerned by that, because the idea of knowing has to be interrogated in the same space as all of the stray elements of a lyric poem. You are invited into this poem. You are invited to scooter down the same path the poet has taken in memory, and the same path he is taking artistically now. It is an uncertain path. The form of a lot of the poetry in breathe in space reflects this. There seems to be a lot more sense in arranging the imagery of ‘lyric to signal my knowing’ in the way that it has been done, rather than by ordering the images with punctuation. Even small joining words have been for the most part eliminated, this effectively increasing the sense of collision in the poem. All of these things shoved together (and pushed to the wrong side of the page) suggest the poet is trying to find his way through the issues, but to also to create an enticing feeling of submersion for the reader. What does it tell you about the writer, or about yourself when reading? In the end it suggests that if you go down this path you will possibly always find yourself in a regressive loop, emerging from an artistic venture only to find yourself delivered straight back to the ‘hearth’, the home, the self – the site (for me at least) where memory locates ‘the slated tussle of unforgettable chow mein’, and, you should be aware of this. One often needs to divagate from that old subject of the hearth and self. Christopher Brennan was mired there. Michael Dransfield was mired in his attempt not to be mired, in his creation of the postmodern self-destructive self, the drug poet. I fail as they did too but I do so more knowingly (with all the context this word brings). I think there is a poignant wisdom arising from ‘lyric to signal my knowing’, and that it nicely illustrates a trajectory (as well as a velocity and momentum) breathe in space seeks to establish. This research thesis has been a project full of various tangents and ideas (all underpinned with
reference to notions of identity and failure) but it has also been an artistic tracing of this trajectory. It is a new model for the poet seeking to write poetry as an active researcher.
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breathe in space

poems

by Derek Motion
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Many of these poems have also first been made public on my blog: typingspace.com.au
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*in part to signify the whole . . .*

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*individuals acting together . . .*

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in part to signify the whole . . .

one

drinking seven beers standing up
but then it’s yesterday’s kid’s party
(light plays over a cake it’s an eight it’s
shaped like a race-track (the standing
the thing to remember & also there are
people looking like characters from macbeth
they are in various stages of decay (makes you
smile (there is probably haiku sentiment
on the wind outside (where cricket
was discarded (a while back
the bat stands there
thimble
ing V h o l e

right. humdrum as our prerogative, inventing the day
athwart blown iron-filings, swift from the sill, not
massive like the worlds. talk of kilometres? thrusting
gavity between clothing & sky i’m a narrative grandly
& the nettles lurking subtext. holding your little hand
we rounded on the placid thatch of roses – wooded layers
an impractical sticky hexagon. directions, any compass
you’d face holds a secret population, their own quests &
churches telegraphed. our crawling sprites worship a swan,
a thing never seen this side of slapped real-estate, this fiscal
garden, at least. move along love: desist purplish intrigues
with batteries & that tightly focussing torch. we’d face all
tunnels together – boredom a duress. yeah.
becoming a tourist attraction

it’s more work than it seems like loading shoot-em-ups from cassette or sweltering waiting for a girl with crimped hair the knock on your window interrupting imaginary piano a duet with elton john 3am the pine roofing glowing or maybe the ebony & browning ivory imprints cryptic codes in your mind / hope for a password or a cheat (programmers abnormally fixate on douglas adams) mum & dad’s tv is the apocalypse too or at least death coming from miles away the rabbit ears just a blur what at first was a good idea a holiday sort of deviation from racq caravanning with fifty cents to spend on redskins & spearmint sticks & milk bottles now lacks the comfort of past ideas there’s always better & more expensive joysticks to fondle there’s always a kid called chris around the corner with his own basketball hoop (careful don’t say there’s nothing to do before you know it several holistic craft shops are open selling collectible magic cards & anyway your dad is still saying goodbye & going to live in a small box a tv stuck on the wall some kind of black struts keeping it there
**more better**

i swear more in text than speech, now perhaps it’s
the blip of children kids are always odd in some way
same as the lack of symbols in poems / works this globally warm autumn
parallelism happening as things cool down but no obscurity
either no plastic metaphors & that’s smooth…

i think of walt disney at such times i think
to make a collage of his dialogue, or his characters’
dialogue, or, whatever it is he wrote maybe nothing
maybe he was just a rock-solid

foundation

because one needs the distractions – there’s cyberspace
& donuts are a fantasy the last thing to engage with
is the weather um maybe a screenplay ducks as leads –

from this loop there is, i’d say, *no exit*, or

*no return*? & on edit both clichés would suffice as

bruce willis blockbusters – i see him

as a hungover man, forced into a

real tight corner

i could be forced out (in some corner myself), only by the
reanimated charlie chaplin – the idea itself conceived

this suggests its possibility – he would have to be

switched to *evil* then he could stand for one

whole-rest-of-the-world apart-from-me:

like a semi-circle of umbrellas

at a funeral all the same colour &

wait, yes, all the same style
mangoplah

neighbours crisp conjure bonfires scrap
stars littered bouts rugged ultra-light teased
heavens slash pools of fog boughs sizzle lax
drips juicily meander hills cut ramp lock bmx
evacuate flickers flannelette meet stamp ute
mutter chook clusters lurk cars opened kid
sticks snickered smoke dot orange rocky
climbs down lost gets winch up skulls sheep
blue blacked sprays graph twist imprint
datsun on haulage on builders solarize panels
five less hot crackles beaten dumped beer
berate coffee smoking touching things once
loves air you snow captures think often
series left bank gully ignition blank right
**dog abuts shed**

& everyone times a collapse into that leathered rocker
thinking of how tired i got this afternoon – not
showing it though being quietly vague, & swinging
into the chair twice as if wet washing, post-chasing
come chloric siblings. things are like things strangely:
it’s great. kids are related in various ways but
always running & chemically spiked. you feather
my dreams as blankets hide the mouth, so
in such a light how might a silly footnote
make you feel? all ‘zealous shakespeare editor’?
i do leave action hanging . . .

what’s the momentous deal. being that that
could be seen it seems to make sense, filling a ripe sentence
segment with a questioning look. & going on to analyse
said thing as a rued response; ice cleaving bottles in a sink.
it gestures at speech made before an instance,
the poem going on to become an awkward retaliation.
i’d like to recreate an image of various drinks on ice,
stored outdoors, because they’re always there
in peoples’ events & sentimental minds.
journey

drifting books in
the mail
vessel

the hay[na]ku volume
for instance
today

smashes me up
gets indignant
says

‘your unsense your
semanticness is
boring

but sorta okay
though what
about

anarchy, core-clicks
& street
cred?’

then i pour
wine while
telephoning
ballet lies

host on the host with every addition a
round earth becky from an angle is amplified
over the gate days device cooling off the bmx
the wonders of the boys never do stop to slide
from a bag of unlimited power i fold down
in order to take one currency from five
centuries tenacious thought of cylindrical
teeth glare as the news crews think next to ‘&’
& a grinding of pvc over elastic; the sticks
presuppose you only i bracelet bill-posters in my
mind, however, in order to develop itself here in all
the green sparkling, a girl has need of things:

of speed distortion thus beautiful like wrists
on a sweater, fleecy-you behind a watch of
years & more successive; tasks to be something
some thing a mirror-sphere concentrates in on
home-made silk roomy people insignificant in it
the external discord a game of soccer the group
nobody passed behind till the angry drunk then
or something approximately & becky:

friends or wants to be based near me a moment,
with acute perfect afternoon is for warmth
of proximity with a new vigilance that champion
is unexpected, you can always say the things
it crushes a nothing & some girls who do not know
my secrets: how much the more i am regulated
in order to transform myself moreover how
loquacious i will seem not to point out the parka-
blue i will develop myself occasionally from the lack
people mow

they listen as you strum a guitar of an afternoon
they hover amidst back-yards & trellis
ambiguous eavesdroppers concealed plants so you spurn expression
all the acceptable forms that is because
everything is playing you like an average-to-good poker hand
it seems
while engines sputter irregular rhythms
& those astringent vocals massage your unstable ‘self’

the idea has you & just maybe
the mental catchment has an unspotted leak &
the idea goes further the slip making your riffs mud
it’s getting bad
thankfully two phones ring
somewhere a microsecond after each other like a delay pedal
this truth within coincidence forcing
regular thought forcing an end that might parallel death if not for the
breathing the beat of something
necessary
ode

does this celebrate your essence now, your
lofted heights? this call to all shaky one-
times & moments / chunks of narrative
erased by necessity & lost dances,
cheeks, blank-stares et cetera

does this googling place your spirit now as you
work through a virtual tsunami of companies,
shuffling i don’t knows into a middle-age, one
readers / clients picture inaccurately

does your husband offer his feelings at ceremonies
or just bark at turning trucks? are you mean to him
like me? is money a likely return?

i’ve ranged over the other poems
inked things celebrating your aspects

& this is just so you know
success & the malcontents

for chris brennan

even publishing weft poem in the
contretemps of undergrad: not
unimpressed

(unimpressed you reflecting on nixon
as minister, token-ring metaphor for
dying, farrago of your nimble hands

unimpressed to kiss one clucky alaskan
mineral exploration company
on the lips, thinking tame animals,
viscera, the magnitude & whatever

unimpressed by spice girls quasi-
NKOTB reunions – belated hugs post
the post-office encounter, unimpressed)

then defining ‘horsey set’ online we
nebulise, form a preppy junta, smile
gumi

i’d take a bag of flour in the face
for you i’d snag my heart on the
bottom &/or surface in a mist of
public liabilities to scrawl your
initials on a crusted pylon this is the
way i show affection + my trophyish
status in a land of freaks i’m so cool
i’m miles up a tree above you all &
i’m several times drunk launching
myself off the rocks i’m all things to
you a river & some hyphenated cattle
so love me in aerosol terms don’t
even laugh if i tether my dog to
this plastic afternoon machine
observational #8 (commodore V8)

the blokes battle torsion leaning said ute like a mechanical-bull
(lucrative pro-racing careers dependent on style)
finite police-cars embedded in a stray hill, here & there. okay,
descript objects are thinning out: i glanced at my neighbour
through his shower window – must have been around the 15th –
& he considered his penis carefully. nothing perverse in it, or
me. i suspect old buildings of motives too, grand of scope &
utilised in hindsight, caught by instances of small-town:
libraries, churches, mechanics’ institutes. as if by chance.
people flounder about their living in the vaults & vestries,
sacrosanct while i slam the car-boot with a final emphasis.
it knows i will be back: a look about the headlights. onward &
then roads continue to spider off other roads justly closed, eroded
& signed as such. all visible moments inviting like reading murder
details in the papers. i hope to make more sense of things –
the objects, the projects, the overarching directions – this month.
fate of the species

poets x, y, & z at different times. we talk of stray things –
x mentions Hawkesbury Country more than once, as if you can’t
walk through it, not without feeling an owner’s ‘presence’.

y & i imagine who would win in kickboxing bouts,
the tough-looking poets or the wise? (no rule emerges)

& z introduces someone, then pauses, stares at an adjacent wall,
quite forgetting the norms. an iconoclast. i don’t know what to say:

anonymity is grand but still i love to fix a sly certain stretch of days
(à la Schuyler). though the days are not consecutive, three is a fine number.
i’ll be in the present, feigning indifference towards a terrible driver.

my poor faculty to retort drifts out the car window,
my face noting a lack of sun, keys jangling morosely. that’s cool.

then you’ll be studying images of marine-life on a laptop, outdoors,
doing whatever ‘thing’ is in question by proxy. still in the present.

(you are you)

catching a titanic haul to feed the family is the fallacious banter, & yet
there is nothing like the peace before this evolutionary gambit

(modernly named children shoulder rods & pro-scooters their faces dripping with
saccharine & hate of things other they’ll nod curtly in the
curt distance

(as if the history of nods & that canon where nothing))
finally the glaze-over as colour grips a substation there, &
we gaze longingly at one sun plus one cloud plus the way
‘dazzling’ sort of dances along a gravel curve fronting some water,

all in keeping with the time: all so particular to there,
    the blanket antithesis of here. the real man vs beast action.

it’s where you might almost see the ghost of St. Augustine
ambling along the banks . . . except i’ve only got a Bega vista to use,

or some comet-skies of Narooma, or the leaf-green Tilba trap.
(secretly poet x & i do battle for ‘Riverina Country’
    where Cod would eye you if they could)

we were driving the incomplete road to Albury anyway when
y commented on the specificity of ghosts – it’s an unremarkable stretch.
    petrol-stations seizing up & places bypassed. you wouldn’t understand.

sure, your friends will get personal (despite studying rhetoric):
the speculative literature of personal revelation being just so intoxicating,

in that ‘there is hope after all’ way. it’s not only substations though,
go-cart attendants call out names & the ‘curt’ kids navigate erratic ramps:

just as stop-start as the conversational play of z: & with that:
your past life with fish, else the c-grade tennis trophy, it’s all in a photograph
    & a message on the back appears to be scrawled, in a scrawled hand

‘jim & frank 89’, else a polaroid x, y, & z . . . it doesn’t matter.
like real men coaxing valid responses from landmark landrovers,

petrol fumes & bird-sounds take you back to memorised land,
the exact numbers so spatially ill-determined, moral as August.
i’m nothing like the other men & that keeps the plovers well away.
when you mention ‘property’ (in a poem) three crows wail a symbolic rave:

it’s you expressing a note of doubt (x a smudge off in the distance) &
the hamlet we aspire to a collection of insulated evils (men escape to ‘weekender’).

for now i’ll reflect the lot in the slower breath after toil: a tractor balanced briefly
between long sky & uncertain rows of growth: ordered or otherwise nothing much is

indicative:

it’s not your problem but here you’ll feature large: like the birds you turned
‘painstaking’ into a verb for, they loom in the adventures of x, y, z, as located by me
    in a series of landscapes we plain zip through.
but life! not other, then.

for n.curnow

like the bland hug at one’s depth of bed-storms,
light glitches refigured to past teachers, creaming soda
my factual solace, hay-bale dreams. you fancied her
ponytail more than anything. sheet lightning levels above
slessor & his cool happenstance fizzled. this afternoon
we should reference the sheet-music that survives.

as i want to declare stuff now steadily: impart student
earnest life-lived wisdom & pre-war modish jubilant. i
want to get stoned like it’s a psych-trait, hang on people
in cars, organ players who slide in from ten years back
dragging the lines of lyric moment & brown leather.
awesome & un-meaningful cares had a colour. derek
just unaware of his image perceived by others: flashing
out boys-club academic lines, even a private phonecall
gets gotten, eventually. poor derek looking remote.
we saw derek making a cup of tea: ½ turn, ¼ turn, angel falls of sugar & the water blinked away. a chipped china absence & you’d guess the cup messed with the wrong glass (nightclub of suds). derek effected this beverage to then sit on a freezer & compost the adjunct images. caffeine still leeching as if the pondering was not just inopportune but obscene. 10 mins at the traffic lights. standing at the wrong counter. the hamburgular’s in-store appearance. derek seemed assured, such instances fell ably to hand & often, perhaps a quantifiable result of the heuristic honours thesis. he massaged his right shoulder strained from the irate nothingness repeated for too long. he removed the teabag quashing a remainder between thumb & forefinger. we eyed derek, the arbiter of all final actions; mid-court rallies. derek leaves off more tensile pursuits to drink tea. he imagines it will jostle the senses & afford direction, or so we suppose, observing because life is boring.
speculative #2 (over-achievement)

scope this jpeg who would have imagined it
rohan the two of us gleaming just so & bearded
as foreign aid-workers / even brandishing
confident ‘worry for our future’ not the teachers /
sirs shuffling in their curt graves feigning a
grimace / we raised thatch schools & lowered cold
wells while a hundred suns burnt like exercise / minor
despots looking on from the shadows / ducking ak47
bullets that time you said it could have been
mosquitoes or dandelion spore / just that harmless

partying in a third-world country exploiting the
exchange rate / hedonistic ventures are often
a lark too / the novelty of luxury & the burgeoning
sense of satisfaction / depleting by the drink /
sydney airport welcomed us back with air-
conditioning & tinted windows / spent bronze
heroes nevertheless full to the brim with casual
anecdotes / paths of achievement stretching behind
lyric to signal my knowing

scooter my experimental garden-path
see the light of day mauled by species of roach
eight numerous exhumed tally at the doors death but lacking of
gleam go forth rubbered grips crack anyway paddle-pop stick limbs
fuse to the road your best friend of convenience bristled
a jolt forces red hair he’s telling the big-side boys to fuck off
crazed not much else in remake just a skivvy & afl teachers
doing a nipple-dance let us retreat & mime cough romantic excuses
out excavate a bleached ball & reanimate the kid docile to
bury headless barbie mid-autumn vacuous year schedule intensity
back a season or tune instrumental arrays into 440hz
fights nightly nicely & bright in paved mania assume some blitz
to coordinate the yoyo hula the moon as it signals hearth
the slated tussle of unforgettable chow mien
forest hill

tall / pondering a nose scratch

the still-dark hall lies await starboard
a wan incitement to futures of regression
(we’ll sift a plastery dust of cobain chords alone,
re-vaunt his prattle perhaps)

everything was about the lack of a large hat

now flattened grass directs me.
past the lit blobs of wall post-midnight, a vain reconnaissance
of avenues hamletting the refitted butchers – teens secure
abreast stunted cherry limbs – where we all question
a growing emphasis internally: ‘when you grow up?’

you shouldn’t trust in lines. insist on the classic
frippery of a stackhatted boy, or a soundbyte boy
still high on wit & abc arabesques,
not yet worried

as oft-gazed-at windows reflect traffic-light over moon & defy your romance distillation

chunks of smaller faddish moments were piled up in
a mountain of sexual cliché – milestones on the record
as dumb gesture, a word or two hyperbolic even amidst years
    (a backseat to queensland / a trilogy of dragon questing)

    & it’s obvious. i’m unearthing the school’s time-capsule, secretly, after
nightfall. the balaclava didn’t even involve a choice. i edit scathingly. i mock the
other raaf kids’ dreams. i make a claggy pulp out of their failed foundation cursive. at
the bubblers i consider sobbing for their facebook realities, but instead do this. i re-inter. i prance through the half-formed stimulus buildings like non-threatening catacombs. biggles-like.

funny, your shadow apes a testing rodent in such light

i like to worry the mosquitos away with my own hand
a caress or a simple command to the dog this too says living like
no other minor-farce courting experience courting a teasing closetoyouness
it smells of ruin sometimes (& if you’re saying that to hurt me i like it, seriously, do it again, red rover cross over)

again     uncool with every collection of coin & stamp
my growing freedom was grounded
by bic-pen blow-darts
choices were plotted as ‘outliers’ to expose for others
all the reasons you would eye people, then look down,

for always now, friends are stuck in period dress with
appropriate fringes, like elle macpherson appliquéd to some
important magazine tooth weft       knowingly touched to

for always now, friends are emceed to a hush.
quadrangle slights are all there is. just lie there
divorced & unknown. like the interlocutors
filmed in 80s hues you are or were.

i am awful disconnected     huddled in a first-person
white – aching for a goldfield souvenir, reawakening on the bus

& no one lives anywhere anymore. i spent the morning searching the knolls of geography. there is nothing, not a seed-scrape of the crazed backyard vegetable purveyor, no memorial to the place we found a telephone number on post-it. i dialled
randomly at the phonebox anyway. I said ‘who lives here?’ in order to begin the mystery again. The next clue is inside the hollow log, hidden by the Patterson’s curse at the centre of the dirt-track, now developed into housing.

We attend the adult meditation on craft, assembly, & routine, & plan reunions

underneath
there’s a scratch of reel-to-reel flicker

a casual netball skirt whistle
individuals acting together . . .

life in the miniature steam-train village

some of us do stay here   i have a room under the miniature tunnel the door is a drain-cover

a secret i open only when the tourists have gone

some of the overalled men have wives & they are civil in fact they smile more than us ‘residents’

they often drink from thermoses

they tinker with the engines they collect tickets    but then they go home

some wives are dead & so we move in here

there are various parts of the community vacant one hair-pin down near the petunia bed & estuary in particular

that corner has a bad feel to it: the site of a derailing back in the 70s it’s our equivalent of cheap-real-estate

train-enthusiasts are superstitious   with good reason on purple nights when we all gather to drink beer & spin monologues around the tiny turnpike then perfectly scaled spirits walk

the village comes alive with their spectral whispers

some seem to catch in my beard a mixture of human cries
(the justly dead span generations the boy gurgling in the water not yet talking to the heart-attack veterans out for one last reminisce) but also the fairies we created ourselves giggle the dwarves cease their mining & gather to connive there is a swarthy & strange life in this place it is pungent at times i run the trains by day

by night under the tunnel i write
a matter of seconds

the girl across the oval she is much younger as the girl at your school she is much older as the mother of however many that still dresses in black & orders several hair foils for a hundred bucks a last gasp gesture to outlandishness now she takes a moment a matter of seconds to swap empty words with a guy & he is quite content as this nobody until he moves his cap & reveals himself another someone from that school a person you never spoke to but his image sticks smashed into your synapses like the snail you felt collapse under your toes once your awkward self realising the necessity of moving some rubbish bins in the rain & whimsically going at it barefoot the pure sensation of things not often what it could be like two people exerting a vague connective influence like a duo of extras in a pirate movie you know they’ve done something else you probably liked it but now they are pirates, strangers
i’m more bold than beautiful

rick’s feelings are hidden maybe time does that what if it happens to us phoebe meanwhile i think about you every minute i don’t need to make out to get something real from you so take it off i want to take you to lunch where we’ll presumably work we hate to be alone together that’s progress i love to trust the day will come when we’ve made the best choices i’m proud of you now talk dirty to me drive me crazy like rick i can see most things your shirt button left open is a flashback to a heated encounter interrupted by an important phone-call & a synthesised chord playing about your eye movements talk to me about the feelings phoebe it’s so quiet here
i’ll wait in the car

i see you’re sick of weather mirroring your moods
but this (like the plumbers leer)
is just another thought / thing you won’t tell me

some would argue your insane secrecy
has forced me to rummage & fossick
through your stuff for details

yes i am curiously absent from these pages i
suspected as much now it’s
the true reason for these words

here on page 294

i’m a vain person you know but
will you acknowledge it? now?

your diary is bland & so ‘2007’ (tan)

who has lucky letters? numerals!
keeping these oddities to yourself
will backfire

i’ll be late tonight

buy milk
eggs
police-guard in the hospital

nurses don’t offer me too much coffee / i suspect there’s a protocol & the temperature differential is a whole-number / i know / from hallway to beeping room

he lies there in some heinous coma / it’s also a repetitive fancy: running into a building, up some stairs to escape whoever would hold him (i’ve watched him lie so still now)

& this chair is a concrete / plastic composite the only thing left to think about as nights tick away

i have a badge / a radio / a gun

his mother has ‘no-one else to live for’ & her weathered body is cushioned by yellow velour ergonomics / i envy her guest status &

this is not the way to promotion & a meaningful drug-bust / someday someone close of my own will be terribly injured / i will be studious then
previous to being born alive, i was read aloud to a scruff man
by the candlelight & cold of sarajevo. the surrounding sky
such a clear aqua for winter, myself the kernel of an idea
softly glowing, a devastating & interesting point

that will sadly never exist. all around me the world
only beginning to resolve like a good movie,
diverting attention from complexities. i saw myself pacing
over non-coloured lines toward the sea, half a figure at best,

one step away from communicating, dumb. of heightened
clarity now & cockled, i feel sure i am able to pursue triggers.
just one or a stretching twenty weighted sentences always
loaded with stories, anger, & my selves.

‘hey paul!’ people say to me, tones jostling for an opening,
some time too. these sidelong shufflers all summed up
by rebellion & intellectualism, all of them – you can see
it in the way the eyes work & how every look counts

for a bit. asking questions about what things
were like too, for them, before they lived. i never
answer absurdities. for me ‘now’ is a simple mid-
point: there is only distinct phasings & the two

parts equal: ‘poetry’ & then ‘get up & dance’.
my night-time song is pure & referential, it balloons
in other writer’s dreams, where most profound things
belong. of course, can all stragglers maintain strength
while competently putting their finger on it? no, they speak in interview & are not imagined by the whimsy of a hirsute woman in the andes; words still summarise only my classic jab at the repetition of being human.

ah the lyricism in walking & talking like this. see this fable twisting as smoke, a slippery curlicue to blind. if i could ever reach people it would be like that, dripping through a paratactic summation of insubstantial intent. i like that, feel other minds sigh in complicity. even outside the boring slats of brooklyn bodies let things go, for brief moments. unguarded.

i once said the novel is the closest you can get to another’s mind & i like the way i said that. i often feel very close to the image i present, what i do. inject, if you want, my thoughts that are forever.
june was first

june was the first girl rodney ever talked to about his feelings he remembers the spore of an unknown plant drifting past her lobes an unknown amount of distance through a window the consolation he is offered for wasted romance is a glimpse of an idea he conceived back around june or july it involved a mode of transport & the patenting of a small tweak that would make it slightly more efficient he realises the improvement has since been made & perhaps was even back then when june kissed him & let his hands rove but only certain parts of her body it’s those parts that would be nice for rodney to know again that would be a real consolation one befitting gloomy afternoons where he gets not much done but organises an electrician to install something in his house then decides the teabags deserve a more prominent position in the cupboard: it’s how his life is going at the moment
call her susan

go susan go all you hardware girls advertise those home-improvement products with all your zeal the barbecue yes it offers us a lifestyle change the gourmet garden tool yes was a cool surprise this christmas a climactic auspice & a half the season it eggs me on like aspirant executives & their office toys life is fashioned for a reason & objects are to assist living while i get a beer i see my reflection becoming as average as the ad-beer-trio of ‘mates’ they like beer yet it’s best not to appear too clever around them the depression it loops in the background it’s a compilation of drinking or driving rock songs but in this pre-formatted suburban light it sounds so close to boney m doing carols in that now dated 20th century electronica why not smile susan?
hush

often chloroform undertones in the banana-scented musics of the street some more cigarettes splice your fingers & proffer themselves like the people of boston might trevor laid the groundwork for the night’s running joke ice ruining a blissful feeling that simply could have been unlike frayed paralysis never the mcdonalds logic of contemporary insurance micko thinks you can protect your family from a sit-com death or waxen misunderstandings turned bad he’s not cultured but speaks of it sanely in a swell psych-experiment you’re a younger friend an initiate verging on the acolytic if you’ll underline my content riddled thought with heath ledger-esque delivery once more the moon might spit chunks the candelabra might appear outdated we’re destined to repeat our boredoms the result statistically significant if you like (from behind those glasses
murder we wrote on our iphones: a blogging burst.
remembered my hair on the wind if not me in time,
taking the easy bliss, wayfaring a crust of the great
ocean road, ditch-dumb & secured against felt-hats,
glib out of the green, rasping the hearth of every rsl.
a deleted alpha-numeric-string whips up sunlight,
against larvae patterns sight-unseen, sonar groper
dreamt mid-ovulation. I moved in with my parents.
cavafy on the trampoline like it’s the boxing-day test.
he came made of foil & an indeterminable half-life,
looked nice, spotty not dappled cluing us in to swarm-
universals, ho-hum, correspondences. listserv my
luscious heart out. you suck but hey: earnest eviction-
papers eyed by the common swallow. how about me.
thought grooves are happy. insurance agent against phenomena goes like leavened bread outputs breakfast cereal with his sunset. upsurge. an in-house profiling disseminates the hatred / lust something or other, calculated addresses increment to groups of LED flip plugs. into antennas: the primal scene the case-based likening of stupidity. staged a kinetic movement drama; set-design by mork. media ignores content phased by a seamless ellipse, brokered off-shore, pissweak.

one text to another seeds laughter, motorised sensuality affords us this saturation-point, expect not to know what to expect. foggy girls in glasses. water on the face illumines your t-shirt, spikes across the jogging shoes swerve to spare life-formulaic. a screened descent to push out the utter visuals once made for looking, feeling & hot for heat – as trapped in epic studio space with a packet of minties as the whole jazz age wishes it could be. me. the cat at the door. staff observing window content over a gilt shoulder. energy drink.
i’d interview you too

when late shows come on tv & hours conspire to tiredness.
ins’t this a ‘really’ issue: the curlews rife in your works like
local hills, fading to a crisp purple; a puppet always the first
thought, or erotic conceits, some just failures. everyone
an openly non-believing head of state. phwt phwt. aaaa.

we flow through a choice of spectacles & wags care to write
not the ‘really really’ world & i want to live there & i didn’t.
i’ll auspice you in creamy broadsheets: words are not counted
despite craving it, shivers felt under the oft close dogma.

you’re a man of great feminine capacity – your style
has the time of moments passed. most of the ozone
layers are just out there doing their jobs. like bell-curves
we’re sad in the morning then complacent later then sad
again. flossing is given space over the best boy, a shadow.
glimpse

lagoon eyed teens laugh at your ode
wildcards fuddling un-artlessly the statues appear
      slow malls designed faster chicken wears a happy
forget sign shifting

bald spot to an amphitheatre
      your ears like coke   (then bark bark bark until silence would be dull)

my jewellery your public affairs to the stars your tone flagrant
a mix-up getting suited up for a brief fling thing down

i’ll tell you things in different skirts blue odours disclosure like it
all was a time past & here’s looking back through eyes

the roaming an institute of cheerleaders with potted plant modals
      sitting too still tense

& often as you broach moves
      truth i forget

towards a scared opera house business
parks finite-less i’m uncertain
      an act of bliss in swift bakelite
      momentum very faint what’s

fun now pills are straight-faced tampered beats love-proof electro
      it’s a game but shallow importance
metamorphosis

yes, ‘…he found himself transformed
in his bed into a giant insect…’ clever,
because most changes are sudden realisations;
the slow truth lying hidden away.
our concerns are still to get up, dress,
scoot to a groaning work. anxiety (if
not terror) is often a result of loud crashes
originating behind doors. deviance from
routine is an activity of terror. still, i find
gregor to be nothing at all & certainly
not rational in his processing.

every boss deserves a lecture too –
she manifests the irony of power
structures, be her name sue, or even
linda – because real ‘difference’ is
forever & should be engaged with
a diamond, not played with ala red
lego. terrorists toy with clicking mandibles
for instance. & i think (these days, post-
wars-of-substance) people of all varieties
want to come inside only when you are late,
when you have (imagine) documents
that are required (officially) elsewhere.
do you ‘help the family to bear the
inconvenience . . .’ you are / were bound
to cause them? i didn’t ask
to be born . . . but i keep my family
in stultifying leisure . . .

you know the drill: what is a man’s purpose
if not to break from type: to kill the son
& thereby revitalise himself?
picture a job, a uniform, a
voice with real words animating it…

‘a misfortune such as had never
happened to their relations or acquaintances . . .’
this might be placed as a universal. but
your own growth casts others as no longer
human. lesser & easier. equations for life
can be cast aside: they are not faces, nor warm.

a lightness & tranquillity with death.
who really craves exact details
when there often & artistically seems
to be a girl’s humanbody,
a final image for your focus?
**string & a bottle-top**

raskolnikoff loved the banalities & secretly coveted a tan, his feet moving slowly at times, like when he watched a girl’s soft tresses. he would get the chill in his heart every day (people tired to hear him tell of the contrasts), but for now raskolnikoff walks in a very manly way past where the boys work out.

he doesn’t want to tell you his story. it’s like it’s blurtin out of him though, ejaculating, maybe as if it were being written by a relative down the line. this casts a certain light on the way he figures his own jauntiness, or gets lost in pensive thoughts. raskolnikoff would know that though.

ah, raskolnikoff. once caught limpid & nude in a small cellar room, the squalor partly charming. once a child among a multiple gathered in mirth by a parental figure. another epoch & another pantomime of vermin racing through the mind. in one tense raskolnikoff lies down; physical action being but one half the equation.

a circle is a regular polygon & this should always be insisted upon. raskolnikoff tired of repeating his surname but never of the fight. we should watch him – his many politenesses, kindnesses, & skirmishes – follow his example. poor raskolnikoff. a victim of feudalism & the way people mutter things a little too audibly at times. we could say a lot about time.
thomas selected

one challenging brown stain, like
a snowflake blown in uniqueness & sure
remarkability; also the flying specks
that dot dot each universe now come
to rest across a poet’s face: he’ll smoke
& glare downward into graphically
designed grumpy cursive. you plastic
the volume like a schoolbook after
months of satchel-abuse, carried unread
through three million nights of drinks
& walking & shallow ventures, preserving
for ever (amidst a mandatory backcover
‘no-one before in the English Language’) one short, thick, alien hair.
tracing-paper

i love moving a rusted sleep-pattern
between the thighs of your exhaust

a drifting mobile of unflattering hemlines
ambles, spindrift as the inched string

& frost expands the world when invited

we can’t continue to meet
like this lilac book-spine under finger

moon-tinted glass a romance of the apparent
& reflections come & go from curvatures

let’s waste an immanent graphic spool, or seconds

apart in some theorised fixative
i suspect joggers hunt for love-letters

counting dwindles of dragon smoke every duped morning,
lives cast artfully between two minor dots of hill

stretched like headless mannequins on a map

the cut of clothing around the breast &
a swiftness in your hair colour well

sexy bleakness gets abrupt (para-everything),
the locale a place-of-many silences, else flaring loves
three tone tie

& black fridays are everywhere. curry plants flick fronds
arse end up scalloping the wind as if subject to any passing
wunderkinds, though i did get here in the end. to your
fascist mistress you’re a ‘dork’ & that come-on tone
coming seductively from fancy slippers is a brief natter,
whispering through peppercorns because it has to.
okay? i imagined you as a person, lips like a tongue,
of course i did. a brickie’s labourer reads op-ed:
the seagulls opinionless in a happy sunbeam or two,
while thoughts are paper-clip magnets:
waking up monica’s a slipstream about the bathroom:
piety of influence. the radio’s accent spurred a premonition
& in it like everything i was reflective. we need absurd
administrations. she’s got a way with her hair.
people should be careful with time but
you’re still entering a room in my mind.

it’d be nice for halves to be apparent or at least
for a hat to fit. did you offer beer to her husband?
it’s cruel to crochet rugs while words are stranded
out on that road, disappearing in a tiny point of perspective,
someone called brandon calling things beautiful
conceiving the thing in a shower. let’s play
games console & burn hair on disposable heads.
you were terry in the minder, walking betwixt a
geezer & a single-mum, casting spells on broadsheets.
i’d mention the dog, the misery, were it not robotic.
brendan went to NIDA

in this brief epoch we ache of sitting down kerplunk.
suffer occasional blindness – earphones crumbling –
reserve carparks amidst alienating & thought-of flowers
sadly, just because. some forms perforated,
shipwrecks gone awol. whomever my stuffed-
animals would reify in their boredom wakes
in the cupboard. alarm-clock of synesthestic intent,
mulled ideation under roof-beams (well
darker in any what of earth spin) suggests
beaches, people checking eggs, ‘the’, bindies.

‘for’ inside & roasting a mallowed question
life is foxy. just one pash in the blanket-
graveyard of yet-to-do, of pastel insinuations.
if miracles eventuate maybe begin to sketch
your dog in the nude glancing away. our worst
opposites got less different in every ashbery poem,
certainly long recipes gyrate. i’m gone shouting
intractable slogans to wagons on the country road &
technology has a demeanour. go fuck yourself.
fold-out autumn

historical periods (the rustic modes of transport & dress) appeal to the ‘motion pictures’. things are cyclical. you know: one canberra afternoon it’s france circa eighteenth century, done with an edgy eighties colour saturation.

like first-blush, or your everyday dinner-guests who reach their fifties, then seize power in a semi-legitimate democracy. visuals too often a distraction from life or that girl: always younger, or steadfastly naked, valuing the way she evolves within your eyes. a returned gaze. nice – apostrophes stretching futureward became possessive. people in major-centres were your friends too, though they now wear current trends on the body & ooze blasé.

(i’m studying leather-jacket-wearing: the pure numbers, proportions)

everything is nice, sure: a median-strip cutting the greater population into odd halves. but you have to imagine stool-pigeons haven’t cut all the data yet, or made the recommendations we’ll follow. public-servants were using phraseology like ‘integrated services’ (once) & ‘structured redistribution’ only first they would define their make-up. (woden: we’re back!) after all, the arts minister did front the press-conference near a disabled toilet. the delegates leaking ‘tired’ while pushing ‘spritely’.

if you’d like to look straight down my mouth, estimate an honest diameter, a coarse measure of aptitude, do so. rip the awkward lace from a chairwoman’s business-suit in the process. it all goes together. think of inanimate objects – court them. i feel proud of myself shopping. goods unfold in an array of gold & red; we feel things doubly.
speculative #1

you calibrate & catch fleetingly the moment of a baby calming
with the chill of backyard half-sky. it contrasts well, takes you
to ken bolton’s inane sunlit coffees & thoughts. & you think,
well, why not store & remember this, for later endeavours? if
only the manoeuvres were so easy, like using cliché the word
within a poem, it’s a cliché & not much of one. you gather
the empty cat-tins & purposefully wind down. then eat some
biscuits. atoms & secret signals unite to push the elements,
nudging you toward a stray thing. cigarette ash collects
in a certain corner of the patio. the dog avoids it, lists
from his own illness, positioned starboard. you are a
scavenger of your own experiences. you teach the baby
art in your spare time. & together you fight post-apocalyptic
evil, or will. you proffer an opinion on most things, regardless.
defiance of sitting

petrol spillage energetic as lost numbers as if
to emphasise the colour you painted home – we do something
together & the road-worn thumb through racks of convenience

two men in wheel-chairs seriously stalk a public park with
slides rollicking down the rain & spurning dreams
a mum, for now scrunching on gravel, is hotter in trackpants
because some vibrant heaven might glow
just out of sight, down that storm water drain

the dash dot dash in the arrangement of noise

maybe, your walk (that glade of opportunity with
spelt fictions leaping into a glimpse of
curvature, stocking, breeze) happens regardless

& all the burnished stuff jangling in my pocket
just music to our best intentions (like you like)

i marinate a casual greeting in venom, observing your eyes
there are no opposites

a commemorative object remains still, & again later
draws the gaze & thumps with tense inertia:
obscene in the lovely of a weather-day suburb

we’re a matinee ticket left on the chest of drawers for safe
keeping, a jest for sure, almost laundry-liquid-concentrate

uncertainly, clouds part, showing off slicks & the stupidity of jump-rope
i had to point it out again like the docket combo it’s good value
feelings

brianna pushed steve no-one could’ve expected that
the taxi-rank still flourishing sometime near the early
hours removed him from place like superfluous words
edited falling into victoria park he yells an effort lost to
engines & road & sirens once reading levertov her use of
plucking i read as fucking  steve was dyslexic too
never bothered us though his removal by brianna the
bit of blood & his sure clique ejection might’ve cured him only
ghosts there though listening to some obscure lines he takes away
fragments of syntax muttered at a desk-sergeant & the night
temperatures

a sogginess about the edged housing these
relevancies a cleansed approach rooms windows
to otherness lazily inspecting dope plants pollocked with
dew hazard the crisp yellow firmament of old news classified
texture everyone gardens without enthusiasm planning mentally
prove a point to the calendar networking like a cloud mores the
geniality of friends fixing water-spray to property for an
outlook idea of tranquillity more industrious in the pressure-
system dropped like an old friend still room-to-room on
a highway i’ve been gone composting memory for a
year silver birch beside boulders shivery makes sense only
in the perceived difference abodes after dwelling proffer
signs of the intricate a portentous crack in the plastered
roof-craft spiders hovered outside glass slats we
invented habits so unique like locking the screen
growing our own contentedness let’s file away
lust in the poems i’ll have time the soil squish
& the table scrape here pledge never to misuse
’scape’ though or ruin your knowing eyes not
hands in work, giant-sized wordsworthian
work that outdoes the words every time
paint the questions on the walls
others will answer with a
seachange shrug
cold logistics

it’s not unlike shuffling through a curtained-printery, grain-fed chooks scrabbling the grounds, nostradamus glancing at you through a nervous portcullis across the way, this projected endeavour. it’s like the de-compartmentalisation of ideas (that + some apt line & wash illustrations). indelible stains mark every part of your body & all the phone-calls are different debt-consolidation-consortiums. they know your name. whatever, it sounds sexy through a real girl’s mouth.

comedy dvds are a solace come night: american teen-loser-everyman the sub-genre of choice. when the laser skips & flutters it’s no problem, meaning only a quick run to the forge out back. a hearty clamour welcomes you out of the gloom because everyone needs the environment offering discussion with those who will act interested & smile. abstruse conjurations afford you mental sweat on the brow which the smithy appreciates. sparks fly as if they were poems but really, they are not. imagine looking tired (it’s in the hair, not the eyes) on a later makeshift couch & then uploading it as your new profile image: antithetical to funded & lushly catered notions of completion. it’s a result, at least.

days pass like recyclable beer & pasta packaging until, perchance, you learn reading eyes undergo a radical change at around forty. spectacles may focus everything but the serfs from the high-rise don’t agree: three differently themed manuscripts at the same time is your dream, & the actualisation always will be. perhaps the economy is just not resilient enough. your robes rustle.
a free saturday

& i’m Madonna writing a book:
framed as an honorary doctorate
(death a path through Thomas
Hardy trees this morning (glumly
boolean light; scenery jelly-data,
Eric Clapton issuing the mood:
we ought remember a certain cat,
an Irish poem, the resonances things had
(but i hum vagaries in a note-to-self andante . . .

& the chipped mug just comes up again
like some pat Jeffery Archer twist

our senses exist for clues but all input seems
composed a season of dedications ago
(listen (one practically-a-mountain setting
is my perspective: sitting & dreaming &
sneezing in clothes (people stroll by, you know,
‘i’m gonna kill this or that bastard’
(& we thought society was de-evolving

workers exude matter-of-factness angle-poised
toward fine-wines (berating what you listen to
making dreamy Marx-points to the fresh-air (well
(i love you, like Microsoft, like (shoot

we’re only semi-Poe-gauche (despite
throwing a Fitzgerald party (after this
third way

your small west-of-townsuburban centrist
philosophy of governance that embraces
a mix of market & interventionist philosophies
irks me every sunday. this third way you
propound (if only in thought-waves) rejects
both top-down redistribution & laissez-faire
approaches & therefore a range of bristly
academics are behind your busted imago, hiding
under the bed or something. to wit economic
governance is daft, but the stresses of technological
development feel real: education isa competitive
mechanism designed to pursue the devils (or
the capitalist-socialist hybridizers)lurking
in the details. your sexy look argues you are
in favour of neo-liberalism; the smell of chips
on the wind pursues the bottom line of adjectives
& fuzzy compromises. how i want to smile a touché.
organised sound . . .

‘idioteque’

always at the end of the world strumming
the past usually self-annihilation & games
made the mind click appear more authentic
cross-referenced with something solid (kids
hid a matchbook in the long grass muddled the
syntax of time-capsules gnomes looking on
in their rendition of gnomic prognostication
(the broadway musical)) problems pop up
to a strained dance beat & i’m over ‘surprise’
forthwith the lute strummer’s corner of destruction
is a sweet art-deco retreat we watch documentaries
because all time is spare & plentiful strumming
at the same time denying the messages issuing
from our poor art (a regular lament the lack of
evident attack & decay in what’s permissible,
what’s really happening)
‘in limbo’

andrew coming to this conclusion see,
fattened in some twisting sea of atonal ragas
& faces, bites his tongue: acknowledging
your twisted state (0-100 on the psychopathy
scale) marks you red with ‘ineligible’. rational
& doomed to that choppy sea of decisions.

andrew bridling at the mess of his own
worth now, erotic floating atop a mosh
of darkening ears, spits: the gaudy arc
seeming to touch heaven proves a stray
nothing. we hope him happy in that
circular limbo, at least, with plenty to drink.

andrew banging out a tricksy jazz beat of
post-event reverberation (with his ears maybe),
the wily melodics indefinite, stops: often
fans stoop to think then ask ‘where should
we go now’ when it ends. but they are gone,
or, simply, we can’t see them (that’s it).
‘how to disappear completely’

take a scripted lament from me a true desire to express the facts about myself & importantly that ‘nothing to express’ fact. take it on board. if i had more instructions at hand (like a magazine like a boy with headphones like a million people in an airport straggling past like the convenience of anonymity & grey weather) i would misplace them. i will not talk about my art in front of a machine i will draw things out i will present a mirror as just evidence. promises promises.
another canberra bar / josh pyke

the sveltefringe meanders a surd sort
of alike the similitude paralysed evening
venting its clagginess: we could heart
mistletoe beneath this splurge of you:
aching unguent swift in the vomiting
left bodyspatials, support desertion
friends with frayed bandaid bladders
two looks & potentiality in singsong
elsewheresex, half & half farce
crises or dirt, mythic, pulse:
the setlist display mingling
giggles at lastly hearing ears
bland boys for saturn, we’re
ex-pacifists in time, we’ll
elope & swing gossamer
180s, violin like.
Pearl Jam

I beheld them when a plastic cup arced & lit atop the guitar, a congestion of flannel throws questions my way, but I make the answer from my own head. An answer wilfully as cryptic as the circumstances. In what frame of mind where you for the conception of that song? Poor people sleep in closets & heroin addicts sit silent in rooms. But you don’t go that far with the angst. I’m bleeding in a few places, slipshod, like the new boy at school gesturing towards the dirt. I wrongly predict the opening chords. Eddie Vedder vainly eschews his appeal & typifies himself. Then – belying my eyes – I produce the laser, gifted to me last summer during ‘The Incident of the Maladaptive Aliens’. (She touched my face very softly at this moment, this stranger, this lover in a possible world never to be. She pestered the life out of my shrug but eventually is gone. Eventually I am alone in the throng, again. I remember this mainly.) Now there’s an even flow of bodies as I release the blasts of sub-atomic energy. I didn’t plan this. I wanted with some of my heart & mind that usual scene: revellers hitting their cars early, the band returning for an hour-long reprise. But the carnage was pre-ordered into my synapses, as I discovered later, in the galactic court. You have never have heard anything about this. You will have to simply imagine the terror, the way Eddie urges his companions to play on, to fight the surprise evil with a good dose of musical ‘togetherness’. Because it has all been dealt with in ways I am not at liberty to divulge. This is as much as I can say, from where I am.
across the great divide

1
daniel johns hails from the ghetto his
exhortations pure LA-urban flippancy
the showmanship a plurality of faces /
arms / fingers / fluid gyrations
vocal licks come spliced from his teeth
we even accept one rhythm-section as the
conspicuous solid-presence on stage because
their newcastle slouch sparks the sensory
jump: we’re listening one headphone
apiece that stretch of years ago with
guitar songs all about one singer now
it’s only more so / more present / more
material / a more
let me hear you say yeah tonality
bands expect so much of a crowd silverchair
would deflate without you, me, various screams,
we are most important we are like
the pause twinkling with keyboard flange
signalling that line from ‘anna’s song’
it’s quiet & us now & years ago
also the universe of a timid car home
you have to forget words
groups being about something
other to language & what can
musicians do but describe

like a writer
bernard wears a scarf & the
bass approaches a heart-attack
   like me on tumble dry

happiness slides / observers jump:
powderfinger, writers & police alike
later the side-stages are ears
are orifices for acoustic testament

one for palm island & reconciliation
when you write about things there’s
always a chance
daria, the messages say you’re not replying to emails
anymore simply needing the time to wander up hills

scale fences climb a telecommunication tower drink
creek water in a buffeting & shivery wind speak to me

of this concern daria tell me your out-of-office uncertainties
in a rarefied place we always could talk about things now

i’m cold as an autoreply lacking the time to write & commune
such times / laughs ha things go slower than ever the stimuli

crowding out words like ‘infinite’ like ‘amalgam’ what
is with that premise daria i hate it not only the endless trap

of modernity etc television will never catch on etc
people don’t want their news forced upon them etc but

the fact that your mind is made a hologram to me an always
electric-green light-show based on second-hand information

if i ever got up the sass to spit out a lament this would be it
the subject lost & free-floating the thought opaque &

too much more of it would force me to go to escape these city-limits or to name you again stitch you up in chaos-theory, daria
alex lloyd: 06

a so-so night sleeping on the traffic island but
a sun to top all afternoons + an inflatable lounge

& last night’s excess is nullified (who said quan
played like he didn’t want to be there? who said
steam is for blowing off, every now & then?) now
everything feels just okay & the morning blank-period

just a laugh, just terrific as alex takes last place
on the bill. he fills a stage like other chill-out artists

only ever promise to do, at other times, in other venues,
in other street–mag profiles, in other legendary anecdotes.

this glow is perhaps life as it really could be:
all the radio-friendly numbers you love line up

(even ‘amazing’ requested by a singleted recovery novice);
a late elvis blues jump surprises & rocks; then feeling spills over

with a whimsical verse of ‘the joker’. even the lack of refrain
doesn’t matter. the sun goes down, the crowd is fine &

alex’s voice parts molecules. roadies emerge & mix. almost
nothing is elusive, only the perfect words to describe it all.
giant squid

sure, we took stock of your peter carey impersonation that night, a lot. ‘line-editing’, ‘New York’, & nothing about stories. summer on a boat begets the impractical – i mean, you know. we all like licorice & still have good arses. seagulls. random spurts of fight; peals of bottle breaking through. why aren’t we naming things anew? neologisms pretty as fairy-floss, like boredom.

there’s money left under a cushion hinting at the keys, stuff always remaining conspicuous: i’m not going to read the book, & wish i could have said that: appeared coolly integral, song after song, a backdrop to mixed metaphors, wandering out of speakers. ack.

the sea-monster is a symbol of my greed as you see it play, frolic, then effect an ominous dive underneath us.
faker & how they go . . .

with nathan’s penchant for mounting
the fold-back speakers & looking quite
surprised (what, me? a singer?) anyone would
be surprised at the surprise band & their surprise
songs tunes that stumble along wild & blithe
in the air (evidence one should never hire
a second guitarist – something always lost) this
is the way they go careering down a slippery road
intact the feeling is good (the vibe) ticket-holders
smiling & nodding their heads at such a thing such
a romantic & tricksy performance, cans of Carlton
balancing head to toe, tentative amidst feet
dinosaur jr 07

look at canberra uni bar the most stodgy
architect’s midday-movie. perceive innumerable oblong ducts,
smirking through their bit-parts. goose-bump concrete
amplifies monumental presences:

2000 watts of guitar riff & said little monsters
of pre / post / oft grunge. did we mention a guitar riff?
it’s always dark we are always driving
the hours of lines of road to see a band
(no pressure for poetic experiences & times, but
we get tense . . . reason inverts).
modernity amounts to a sad commentary
on how fat, how tired, how tie-dyed j mascis looks
– singing of rabbits in response – because

we are visual reporters all of us. people touch our backs
meaning move, people want to see
the next guitar-riff but the result is a logical canberra pre-frost
settling atop buildings & green-space. time knits.

why write about the inaudible we wonder
(we put it to you only tightly glimpsed through this poem-space)
& all’s left to do is drink& we do & in cubicle 2
there’s poetry ranting on the door: a mass of frustrated
drives it concludes nicely being
‘just really tired of pokemon’. beautiful in here,
pissing to a muted guitar riff. we urge you to plan a trip.
the possibility of work & something for kate

falling under the silly impression this will work even
should the key allusion the band’s identity fall flat (a glut
of anyways in recent work) anyway here’s the anecdote
in all its funny understatement: a fijian taxi-driver

   smashed into my car this morning, which was okay
accidents happen, until the company called
& said they
want to fuck me& paul i am sorry to repeat this
now it’s just that quick scansion & a beer means
what’s done is done. last night ‘born to run’ &
‘rock the kasbah’ were the covers of choice too i
predicted that much what i didn’t expect was a return
to the first-album three-piece blues & stuff that means
going to sleep your cassette near my ear. this was a
blast or is it nostalgia, a word i tried to think of yesterday
too, but couldn’t? (part two of interludic banter:
culcairn & a turtle / tortoise

   on the road, we saved it)   look talking straight
as we are all that can be said revolves around songs of
strength & a better sound-engineer (& i discard artists
in a flash; the sophomore ‘slump’ is a real killer) last night
it was St. Patrick’s day & the contrast was stark
for instance – thirsty merc trundled along
flashing some brilliance yet ultimately
their working-class-suburban lingo evokes
sunnyvale cask wine, the image & cheap taste.
controlled time of crisis . . .

derek motion painter decorator

booted tradesman skulking in our bathroom blurt
a similar unique noise / everyone going down the street
mincing / mincing / some conspiracies just more paragon

(than others) can i do this ken would say / while doing it
shoving the incidentals up in threes / cockamamie / never
so easy / sun afloat atop abreast naked limbs & a lens

intentness odd in others so it shuffles a deck / your heart
see-through on that tandem bike ride & with relief:
a squelched homily of plasma / finding people’s hairs

i’d have to sort out memories of maidens & trysts plus
whatnots / magical woodpecker diaries / (where it a
box-factory) i’m only going to fuck with the telephone

a cross pollination / dashes em or en / residual couldn’t care
lesses / the perverted idea treated carefully / intellectual techno /
wait three / there here’s a thaw then / anew
poem with no wireless networks

default kids hypnologic & semi-conic abreast the
council tree: green shirt cardboard kneed bestial

fronting the ‘whatever’ gregarious sun, or the limited fitting
& turning in an ex-friends outlook, quiet as synthesis

dialogue sprouts aspic coating in this turf-war muck lisped outta
your haystack scorched koalas are insignias & form speed zones

enforce mainline agreement to wend miracles in dust
watch a band shimmy every afternoon flagrant & a half

tired a spinning bike wheel you’d affix magnetic coils
the power of suggestion ‘lipstick king’ to too many boys

scared of facial analogies a pie with sauce we leave
the planet doing the same this a different that mirroring

the faux-nonchalant magazine page thongs flipped out
speed waves the dog grr what more to return from
flickeration

walking goes long (walking through dusk
chains falling about the wayside (this hollywood
afternoon (but with a pirouette & stolen shadow
the maybes wait (you can stand & not fidget

rules vanish with breathing (with the clear night
& your accent is a separate person (looks betray
the calm sociopath as you speak (making order
out of this supposed line that flickers (& goes

bump (in the morning we are friends this making
you cry (joy or post-fucking bliss it is (the fear
of witches of mazes of (violent change being the
only way small elements are observable (for now

most of us go home (with only a few cares & patches
seeing the universe unlike it is (prevailing because
the count

x.

Generational touch If stanzas
or imperial measurements flare up
remembered as iced cake, always
“initials” affirmed into fake people,
their arms, their flit & swagger. m-mm.

y.

& then walking straight past the shallow
confrontation with your predecessor.
Divisive use of “you”. let’s be
giraffes straining at leaves, unconscious
of teens looking for a role model. Me.

z.

formal constraints as names of poems &
i’m quartered in a hospice, naming trees, then
coffee without sugar, triptych of beach settings.
she’s always breathing on you. They’re
temporarily confounded.
roaming capability

capability

e the mobilised youth experiment with gender talk a drag though apt for tags & keyword-analysis, while primed & drunk & environmentally ready we sit still. anyway. etcetera. yes victor, i’m aware amidst this jarring shift of ‘voices’. politicians are preferable &, um, things are important. stuff is fun too so picture the times past when intentions moved in a slightly curving arrow (red & power-pointing straight to the imaginary soul?)

okay, i resolve not to source lines from lateline. no more. enough is enough. now kiss me.

i don’t care don’t i care care i don’t. & that’s a strict observation, letting itself be seen naked, as if by chance, to a passing group of young & cute theories, out for a grossly-exaggerated night on the town. what will i tell my pet john ashbery (perched atop a shoulder) that whispers psalms like some loony-tune devil? ply him with stray metaphors: senators resemble helicopters, in ways to numerous to prove? or consider motel-soap? perhaps. the loosest underwear oughta suffice, assist the paradox.

now being the time to admit our minor indiscretions, to snap party-hat elastic.
love-sample

tourists look to the skies & trees continually disappoint the expectations of others, this flush of morning, so way you will come to hate yourself & hate the crass footfalls in response too they will be charmed by your distress, like a plague of euphemisms, distress always unerrring in charming you (complicity over continuation) i’m a musty cellar in a harry potter adventure: you will mount the stair in that cute otherness of expectation (flush) but if anything, this setting of urban garden, strangers were charmed by the distress in your gait (swank) the bling of hips & thigh you will come to along apt gravel walkways, this feeling of vermillion, & expectations got valid last week (text? capital!) handshakes never known to disappoint like stupid pedestrians looking to the maps, to continually disappoint the expectations of their kids or earrings, this shish kebab epoch, you’re a reference to culture like all the others, this way (go on green) you will come to hate yourself & the little blips of a google map they will be charmed by your distress, this banal line of direction (clouds skating with friends)
dirt

never give all the heart,
for love’s a clabbering
supercluster, occluding while
he that made this (knows
all the cost) comes: a sub-
classed article, coming like
ice in clipped snowclouds /
i made the news once but
never gave all the heart /
looking ambient, the cat-
clawed exclusionist
granduncle that made this
disclaims barnacles &
associated narratives
(so, it seems, for love)
in every cleft of ocean
remember, never give
pedantic gender

inchoate: this valuable, your ear, fat.
gorse time over oceans / yo! come hither mate.
wily vestibule in the states; home of not-knowing.
orgiastic manifold swooshing open & i’m time-travel.
who said anything about caesuras? you’ll see.
dogs refuse to learn tricks; books on harmonica mastery
occur in places though seem completely non- coincidental.
luck, wood-wax, vibrato, unorganised condensation.
grafting a didactic poésie onto one’s buttocks.
she labelled everything problematic, she failed her.
epics like the way you compromise afternoons
after a wine-rack & toast rollick. resemblance
free-floats but we’re butterfly.
man slaps head with hand

your mood strains the load-bearing wall / the scent of geranium
pressing on like dissent in that overarm satchel / i lie surrounded

as a sprung-couch / previous to telling a beanbag the truth it was
‘what the movie means’ / before that afore-mentioned ice-age /

now needing sex means less tv hours & i really should
display my extendable neck & improbable facial hair free-to-air:

see the who what where when & whys seem gone, skipped my
mind like the crises of middle to late youth / lexical quandaries

that kept me awake on the school bus (mick exploding in a ball of
spit raving / the merits of state of origin football) elude me but

through fudged windows it’s all pointillist / a matter of perspective /
if ideas matter like money down it all comes / bored layabouts dredge

a coke-bottle-bong while i simply wait / getting emotionally involved
in the escalating rate of celebrity madness / athwart the footage
Backslash

Malcom Turnbull a spatchcock avoiding arguments in bra & panties. His honest depiction wages a campaign out the back, where one keeps hose, twine. Mark out a pitch or de-camp and drink pepsi in the light, pacifism your way. To avoid the general (brick-shit-house; I can take anyone) we strain to act in a manner imaginary. A tepid trickle behoves you, white-haired and in thought, jamming most nights away illustrious. You’d say we prefer methods in the face of jazz: though should you ask (more than words) it’s all I’ve ever needed. An earnest political haircut not only seems witty, but. I lust for bling about the nose while you’re not doing enough. I’ve done most else. Malcom, waiters court flattery without haste or lying and I think you’re a waiter. Last I heard. So it seems times are a worry – a recent thread gets nasty; production teams are grouped as opinion makers in a certain sector; teachers look sour. This guy I know suggests you marry a zebra, but well before that, don’t speak for me. Don’t be pat. ‘Goose’.
the alikeness quotient

his submersion in self-harm, urban drawl & the business pages
proved only meddlesome, some might say boring.

all justified passages begin to pass as pluralised
jokes ‘on you’ or your co-dependants,

plaid couches instead of shady emotions looming over the coffee-table, sprung like abstract art; the mountains of numerals

a nursery white-on-white: surely hope also is a huffing oboe.

once i implied his nickname typified ‘stupor’, else i might have.

we could only rescue one gram from a stray tobacco pouch
regardless & there’s always more at stake, other colours. ‘you can use this’

comes a voice, issuing from a wall distant as the unconscious: (& so
‘found philosophy’ replaces romance: figures large for a few days).

later the car won’t start cresting the figurehead
of an intersection & you fall to contact with

people, hard-jaw-lines & metallic paint.
the lustre of ethereal grey h-hmmed like never before,

operatic sunlight falling flat over the shoulder

you wallow, stupid, king of car-horns.

anyone’s guess is he goes about his business – me,
i’m all ‘speculation with protein-bar’.

yet weird shit still trumpets out. fonts are etched into the hand.
you contract a counsellor to scoff at the advice, but secretly ponder.

even sabrina the teenage witch & skippy are ducking out
to become other tales. do you have to smoke at kid’s parties?

friends abort the life/game scenario. we lose track
of themes: thistles blowsy on an aria of wind.

but everything is still there to do. eg. i waffle on to
an improvised cellar: ‘no-one orders headstones for goldfish . . .’
the fridge-magnet; what it says about you

gumption in evacuating the living-room a wistful
leasehold expires transit Busy all aspects in general
sure-footed cartoon-like in arrears / (we hope you
(& your guest / party / group) find some of this (objects
atmospherics / intentions) amenable) / idiom matters more
than Colonialism you know eucalypt impressions kept
at bay working-horse-stories battened down under threat
of solipsistic typhoons / (we had hoped to do more
for you (we had ideas) but we’ve realised we don’t know
what you like (or are like)) / i touch you & we talk
in the early morning window opened weather there’s
a Frequency in some things / (we think most things are best
left up to you, &, we do not mean to be rude in stating this
(we, of course)) / wave to the people go on
the pageant guest list

rustles. names an impressionist carpet of tan shag, the extrovert an old
cul-de-sac drive fenced knee-high. moribund as this secures a stingray shaped
sputum. ho, such sadness, it’s your tonsils hovering concrete from 3 bunks
away. blind torque reveals those weltered fictions, vascular distance:

firm-friends & their apple-stance of boredom, politics, or gunning
to the ice-cream-van just about whenever, now look abashed semi-
back-lit in the dandenong land. she’s splitting things in halves.
packeted detox powder to exact a new neighbour’s daft inertia:

hold me close near to bushfire sun, it’s pleasant aversion this.
what if all 1970s moment held a soft spot, a mnemonic dimple

or ontological gloat? we’ll swear at giveaway signs, huff & gorge,
the utterances still mysterious, jurisprudence flavoured ‘guava’ now,

& i’m more commonly anticipated than ever otherwise; dante
spiralling in the wake of a barge. i thought he’d see me as captain.

nothing is a twist – just restaging an intervention with the dog present.
((poking nuzzles at loaves of fish) who cares, to view our saliva, what.)

in her window & a gossamer nose! nothing naked doing but
we’d planned to summon feeling from a fleet dive, so

test dancing, wade lists, ford experimental knitting, that, &
it might drift away. after treatment huh all is a

fail. though, quiet, away, sounds of a pageant.
random violence

burning plurals of ambulance streak through
roundabouts for symmetry my sedan shed-safe
the musts flowing into bubble-gum of living (just for
me) i plonk in it to dream of your more exciting memories
lines putting it in binocular focus imagining us for us
scratchy & imagistic like all the concreted places a car
could represent if the engine wasn’t fucked the manifold
singular & caulk-laden four sided squares directs vision
ever onward to cracks in the surface here’s my phillips’
head appendage my opening in the back down near the
lumbar region all user-friendly & strictly signposted
exactly like a best-selling a-historical period piece & definitely
nothing else (although maybe like a pornographic magazine
my friend found once out in the bush (what was he doing there
(questions hover) the sex was weird) but he was able to fix stuff
like you & odd-jobness ipso facto seemingly a thing you must
master (not love) before moving on (to that) & this being
me never wanting to finish things like of old, a declimax,
a small moment, a clench & depressing shudder
The Wanderer

A Collaborative Performance Project

Features responses to Christopher Brennan’s sequence.

This project was originally performed at the Critical Animals Festival on Thursday October 2nd, 2008

Curated by Derek Motion
(Since / I shall see)
the (heart / mind / soul)
to separate
desire! covet!
achievement
    I am
a (vagrant/wanderer)
    among
    stars
    of these
    revelations

(and yet / still)
a year
of wandering
with (me / us)
is a sort of
    year
    of unseen winds

- translated from the Latin by Ivy Alvarez
1: Crumbs of previous afternoons: Ivy Alvarez

Rose’s home: a place of horizons, rare verticals. Questions of how and when left her, once she knew who, what, where and why. Remembering nothing from the previous town, believing only in how life provided. Pulses and legumes for the lean times once. Was that it? She thought it was. Different beds. Same Rose. The road still hard underfoot, no matter where you come from. But still. Road, horizon, food, bed. Each states their own siren word: rejoin.

Left alone, I would never go home. Always wandering, all awake, the pulse in my neck, insistent as a kiss. Remembering. Chose Rose, she thought, this stony destiny. These oil lamps, the wicks remembering, sad burning down, the hours smoked out, the cement highways, the being dark. Lightless. The creeping doubt, night tide pulling, inexorable. She leaves pale threads strung across the room, following, night after night, the weakest rigging she knows. Fragile ship. But. Hills glow red as Rose once rose and still rises to grow near some touchstone epicentre ripple in the stillness, shaving down the restless, thinned from light to the minutes before stars dawn. Each sharp face an indomitable will.

Hills again. The road again: homeless, bare. Blows out the lamps, hitches her bag, ever-restless.
2: In any crowded way: Fiona Wright

The voices new-released and multi-channeled.  
We hardly use our own. The shrunken heads  
and chiselled chins of Hollywood fret and fall in love and fight and die  
and platelets harden in our femoral veins.  
The window shades as gummed as eyelids,  
we know the borders of our body space, each seat  
assigned and well-aligned –  
we shift and curl within them. Clockhands bend.  
We’re never sure what passes. We chew mixed nuts.  
In airports we stand pink and blinkling  
beneath fluorescent lights, and mirrored shopfronts.  
Frozen abalone, purple diamonds, US dollars, fried potatoes,  
we are anywhere,  
dried and tired and strapping passports to our stomachs,  
we’re never sure what passes.
3: LaxdælaBingo: Kate Fagan

A Preamble

Bingo is a rootless word, adrift in a field of etymological and paratactical turns — a modern lotto, a dog’s name, an English slang term for brandy that was derived from the 17th century stingo (for strong beer), and a game of collective chance in whose name dozens of small British theatres were appropriated during the 1960s for use as ‘bingo halls’. While replying to the third section of ‘The Wanderer’ I zigzagged into bingo as a kind of play that would incite me to take accidentally-guided paths through Christopher Brennan’s tale of material exile and spiritual quest. To wander or wind or wend is to go along restlessly or in uncontrolled ways, to move without the direction of reason or will towards, or about, an object of consideration (OED).

In the weeks before today’s reading I happened to be travelling around Tasmania, moving daily between locations and shows while on tour. I decided before leaving to respond to Brennan’s ‘Wanderer’ while wandering. My starting coordinates were a laptop, a single book of poems (Electric Light by Seamus Heaney), and a PDF copy of the Benedictine poem ‘The Wanderer’ translated from its original in the Exeter Book, a foundational codice of Anglo-Saxon literature that dates from somewhere between 960 and 990 A.D. Strangely enough I forgot to take Brennan with me (though I knew I could find it online if needed). I also changed direction even before I began when Patrick Jones wrote and asked if we could switch reading places, since he’d started work on the ‘wrong’ section by mistake. It all seemed fitting: this was to be a game of textual and physical chance. I resolved to take my cues from the houses, bookshelves, towns and people of places encountered and found on the road. I embraced Derek Motion’s concept of a poetics of un-performability and possible failure in Brennan’s work. I used formal experimental controls to open my writing to randomness and ventriloquised Brennan at all times.

It transpired without plan that while travelling I stayed in the homes of the Peacehaven literary society president; a leading Tasmanian poet; a techno-hippie forest activist who makes instruments out of bone and was once a falconer; a devotee of transcendental theosophy who was taught by Ian Maxwell, the great Melbournian scholar of Old Icelandic texts and the Border ballads; and a musician and wood turner who makes lacemaking bobbins for a living. In addition to those key markers, my sources for the following poems include the 13th century Icelandic Laxdæla Saga, the early 8th century Oratio Bedæ presbyteri (or prayer of the Venerable Bede), Helen Waddell’s Songs of the Wandering Scholars, a 2008 text by the UK poet and translator John Lucas entitled I, The Poet Egil: Versions of the poems of Egil’s Saga, a 1960 Angus & Robertson edition of Christopher Brennan’s collected verse, fragments of the 10th century Exeter Book, Seamus Heaney’s poem ‘Höfn’ (about Iceland’s largest glacier) from his book District and Circle (2006), and Martin Carthy’s rendition of Ray Fisher’s version of the traditional Scots ballad ‘Willie’s Lady’. I let one text lead me to another, and poached from them using a mix of arbitrarily precise and haphazard systems — following Brennan’s 11-line stanza in my first two poems, for example, and imitating the skaldic forms of Old Icelandic verse in the third. I then played bingo with the results.
Laxdæla Bingo

He had no coat of mail to pass under the turf, this cloak was heard to say. Remember I am dust and wind and shadow, and life as fleeting as the flower of grass. The second largest feast is grey with nettles. And there this saga ends. She had a ship built secretly in a forest, the shyest of the sheep spying out the land. Invoke a benison upon it! The ring struck against a stone and broke in two and the two pieces seemed to bleed, a fearful river to cross. That fishing place will never see me in my old age.

55 18
67 Oratio Bedæ presbyteri

27
WS 78
4
24ii 62
24i 33

15 2
I am cut everywhere like a butcher-bird,
O proud-prowed ship! and I owned you’d tear
open the new wound in my tumbling heart
when your jabbing beak made its masterly kill,
close by that blood-drenched shore. I seem’d
at home in some old dream of kingship,
my house blown through with rains that come
from the homeless dark, the darkling waves,
darkening still. Often the lone dweller waits
among the living and finds neither exile
nor rest. The sky stirs, fate is established.
The three-tongued glacier has
torn a steepening curve
across the folding fell,
forging its armour of rock
& bone from snowmelt leavings.
Only the sea knows longer
days. Under the undead
depfreeze, combs and cares
of wand’rs and wayfarers
who ask little of history,
still in the oozing ice.
Centuries have fled
before your pushing edge;
orders sink and hold,
granite-hard, in the grist
grey of time’s dominion.
Under the eaves the snake-winds are quiet. The walls of your sitting room begin to close in. Dark rains from the hill. One branch smoulders on a balcony strewn with props and a girl folds away her wing and sleeps on plastic chairs. Elephant Pass at sixty degrees. Shaking hearts a bone fiddle and all that you and I became. O forgotten morrow. I am sketching the west on a honeydew. Driven with stars as they drift. Technical homes clinging to the lip of land and everywhere these autumn fumes. You look with regret on the future and prefer the yellow-pale of unknown ways. Fortune anchors me to that bed where I might crouch and dream tho’ finding neither window nor will. The dwindling threat of appearance. Cry for the fate I’d yet have made. And had I trod a bitter sky I ween’d the triumph of crows would cast me off to roam with men of lonely days. My gleaming chance its odour turns from every last while and when. Home’s way home’s heart came but ever shall you with and is for out of rest my fill.
now of a peace: riding a Way of manhood foregone high heart

and the roof evermore to be gAther’d in dusk of a greater beloved chief,

ween was that you? that forbids the raiN, it is but the ardent rain

few that roDe weary and cannot rest? on a lost and baleful eve with

and barter away the rEst? and the perilous joy of the bold.

here is the hearth neveR to yield? garnish’d quiet, not of other rein?

and you of old from a strickEn field with its glow

you are backing youR life allow’d and reck’d tame heart,

that minds’ you nay, when the world went out in rain, and comfort

as your pride and Were you not fain by the bridle-rein

be not idle: a swept and a And is your dream one

and why are You of some when you dealt o tame heart,


5: Michael Farrell

Once looking like a god that could descend to the caves
  i took cheer from the sheltered and coughed that the spirits knew me
  i rested & freshen’ed by an underground stream
  my eyes glint in reaction to the bright world

  snow drifts smoke drifts
  the ice comes to naught in the salt waste of the plains
on the rocks nowhere to hold no chance to look around not till the top
------
  i used to lie in the sun hourlong until the thought of water drove me inside
  parrots cheer with the sheltered i listen, knowing the rhythm count the voices
  next morn my tan freshen’ed teeth whiter by contrast
  my legs dark beneath my bright shorts
  i hear the rain as the cloud drifts south this is
where the blessing of the shed took place the sacrificial waste poured into the sea
on the condition that no creature was killed not even at christmas
and the weather turned and the wind blew away the dead leaves the priests
  came out of the caves &
sang the birds preen & listen, and know that what they drank was either song or water
  or colour it didn’t matter
6: weather-nerd: Nick Keys
I sorrow for the wilderness
the Roxanne red-light nights
dancing, mouthing
lyrical leather goddess
for a handsome rock band,
scotch-whisky swigging
hand-holding
in the back of a tour van
my old friend guitar man
and roadie at the wheel,
famous cocaine deal
rock-star hotel room
deep and unmeaningful.

Hubby Darling saved me
saved me from my own two eyes
over-zealous, far too bright
kite-high
-says the dull and dying
ghost woman grey and gaunt.

The formal man
the forlorn, sad and sentimental man
nods in time with the
thousand violins.

Hubby Darling,
these eyes of mine saw things
wild things
wondrous and beguiled things
before you made a wifey out of me,
made these four white walls
and glass cased
shrine for my admired eyes
these delicate eyes that saw…

Admired men, admiring me
from over crowded bars
to strange, sweet bedrooms
open window outlooks
the ocean and the sky
as one
uninterrupted
god blowing wispy drapes
over silk pillows,
another dawn celestial threesome.

Hubby Darling,
I saw the earth’s bold contour
at ninety-mile beach in winter
car-park camping
chest and thighs doused in the sweat
of some new friends.
One hundred lovers’ hands
on the skin of my hips’ curve
and the electricity
blue as eels between.

Hubby, I have seen
Chinese prostitutes please
old lovers;
A Turkish poetess
sing love-songs on the radio
with her jazz-man from Sudan,
two for one begets
a pregnancy and AIDS test;
A Jamaican drug-dealer
turn this body inside-out
with two fingers and a pout;
My sisters stoned to
deaths of shame, blamed
for having red blood
and flooding veins;
This innocent wifey saw
a hundred standing ovations
a million new creations
infinite imaginations
skinny dips
poker chips
acid trips
naltrexone drips
stripper tips
angel lips
until
you, Hubby Darling
saved me.

But even when you saved me
I was lost a little
my rosy face bent over
baby sound and safe;
Me, rosy from the flagon
filled with gin
morning and night ritual,
and baby sleeping sound
I suppose from my breast,
depressed, while half-cut
to keep me alive enough
for you, Hubby Darling
to idolize these increasingly
idol eyes…

With these words, she dies.
The formal man
the sad and sentimental man
froze
mad as a man of god
walking in on wifey,
devils horns between her thighs
red red blood
and fires high
ideals aborted and pooling at her heals.

And the biggest doozey
next to our antagonist-floozy –
another anti-romantic poesy
stuffed with flowery-flowsy
on another sad and sentimental man
with another soul-crushed wifey
sadly dying to the ditty
“you made an old woman out of me” .
8: Peter O’Mara

5+3

[ME *pite*, from OF, from L *pietas* piety]

□

at whose table sat you & I
disproportioned as if not adhesive tape
by revelation or unkindness a
but indifference difficulty
to possibility much like to
Mary’s white nipples absorption
unspent

□

& now indoor salt

each these unhindered eve

we speak the other side of truth fake measurement

duality sentence knot

everything begins with the reduction

□

1 2 3 4 5 now 5 vacant spots
pity is the work of false
Gods drinking Pepsi-Cola
from polyesterine cups
I say.

you illuminate nothing back
not one kiosk

no utterance of the hope
of the seasons or the call
of the wind back into
a small bird as once you might
had.

no, we partake only
in only the small talk of your
mortgaged home & builded
memory crouched regret
leaving me alone with the bread
I break for our evening meal

like a recommended dose

1000 hills

high poxocracy

endemic prayer

unaltered truth

conceptual fat

supermarket

turnstile

[plastic lawn]

#A,1,9 676621 BR
gentle rain
so if you should come to know
my journey
each finger I point
pray to my inertia

but do no pity me
I have lived your life
maybe a word itself

seen that the view
beautiful but there is
nothing to look at

what taste
the sky?

here as I am
unlocked bicycles
wasps
graze
on clear church bells
water turning diaphanous, opaque
shored up
silt
which existed before you
gatherer of photographs
curled to a wall
a handset listlessness…
come lurching through waves
tactless moment
unpeel in approximate ovals
outside your house
open eyes:
kiwi fruit’s stickered proof
a future without vacant lots
now postcards
of polytechnics
& highway overpasses
escaped bikes
do ghosties down hills
are you asleep in a green t-shirt
& what are the speakers elaborating
on now, when
warmly, too deep or Olympic
(angular swan)

* 

rocks
mixed into the gummed road
flattened Coke cans: - therefore
coins of light
shaken through leaves
& circles with parts of other circles taken out

now do you listen to the trunks of trees
the gleaming panes
lately it seems
strange we can’t just walk into houses

curbstone cracked out of a mould
sounds like sand

the bricks barely touch

sprinkler water darkening cement;
post-orgasm

sneezes you hear from across the empty street

*

locks came unlocked
I passed though doorways
jacket off

“for
the forest edge itself, uncomforted
holding old
savagery”

might be unhappiness
a parting in your sleep

but I have my feel for things, uncomforted

from outer night:
the withered spokes go whirling
the uncared wastes

beholding all the ways
overhidden
the woods shall awake, hearing them
(for multiple voices)

out, out, souls that, why will?
or will sit and in your prison-
of that holds winds in and of
in gaunt hollow of night?
nay, is that: all is a of winds
and night shall billow in storm
full oft all. For this is hard doom
that is laid on all of you, to that,
against your will. But first must
many ways, and your-wrapt souls
must blown thro’ with rain that
from dark: for until had of shall
no for nor you, nor, but; and
soul of man must cry of
darkling as follows towards night,
and rains and winds that roam for
warmth. Go: tho’ find it, must
to wind and and night and wail of
birds in sky; go: tho’ going hard and
goal with rain staying is a that is with.
it is just so big, don’t you get it
the slow milk of it, the fat swamp of it
creeping like the warmth inside your wetsuit
like a curtain swollen at the open window
like a rowboat from a marvellous city
it hauls itself across the telephone wires upon
the birds upon the telephone wires
a landmine beneath a pride of lions
children running with Cheezels on fingers
Nina Simone singing it’s alright little darling
it’s been a long and lonely winter
the good yolk broken over knitted hair
a pale wafer upon the tongue
the distant smoke, of Lazarus unwinding
it is award-winning cinema in the making
a mega-tonne bomber, a bridal train
the café serviette we scrawl upon
it is a happy cyclist on a brand new bike
reflected in a gleaming car yard

it publishes all of us
and at the petrol pumps
where it is hard to believe such value
see the man on the tram tracks kickboxing the air
he spins, he roars, good morning
ending in unnavigable mud – clean white sand, grayish black
mudsides and marsh-slides, sea marks are landmarks, trees
washed south from nova scotia. a double negative, or at least
an inverted syntax. specifically, the word ‘wrack’
is stranded seaweed. everything afloat not owned, jettisoned.
a skiff in the nineteen-sixties, sketchy whites drawn up on a flank.
in etymology, a wild oat or plum, preserved in brine.
use a noun as a verb, like shakespeare: skiff as verb, brown as verb,
white as verb, milk as verb, skeg. “white-ash breeze,” with two
syllables, bo and ah. o, see how she schoons, a schooner let her be!
into sandbanks, or worse, acts of god slam through guzzles and
into gutters. mosquitoes hatch in stagnant ditches, bent grass or
something sinister. sods and brush, kayaks and canoes. gleaming
spits or the marks left by a clam-rake, a genius, so to speak,
from sauntering.
excess celebration at a standstill, occasionally
indulging you with cumquats, those people don’t really care
forgotten pupils, snowflakes, baths
alone with vanilla flavoured milk and candle light
watching the huge ice brick melt, watching the cheese being cheese
your son idling away to himself, breathing in-between boats
he has a part in his hair, he is upstairs practising golf
close to the hole, grubby like Lex Luther
or a flange demonstrating itself on the outside of a peanut
and without teeth! Stretched orange
now the cheeks of your friends profile grow numb
he smokes, he puts on lip balm, he fills a cardboard box with sticks
it is as if there is a clock in your chest, alive
collecting plastic toys and farting into Tupperware
the fat panther tumbles across the empty production
the shelf is wiped and the CD rack discarded
as you’d expect the thing retracts into the shape of a small worm
and divides itself into piles
my favourite person says less than me, they use all their change
and sitting in a rubber tube they look forward to a banana
we do not leave the couch to investigate the sound
but the smell of gunpowder is pushed in through the window
an unwilling child, an invertebrate, a jar of vinegar
placed carefully on a trampoline, you
left me to pitch the tent and wash our clothes
I know exactly where you keep your diary, and
in the end, I draw courage from an entry about our saviour

SKIN

does this continue until
does this continue until
rabbit
silo
monk
be near me
sing with me
cups are washed out
lids unscrewed
no!

flames
god, penis
dew, level in my sock
crayon
plural, mystify, dolphin

pour out my

ground is wet
ground is dry
two birds torment a bigger bird
my laces undone

crisp devil now
drums

and before they knew it they were lost. They noticed more and more of these bushes with red berries. Looking at the story from my perspective I wondered if one of them secretly wanted to die, right there in the forest. I unwrapped my clock and placed it on the mantle piece. Lit a candle, and began writing a letter back home. It wasn’t long before I got tired and put my head down on the desk to rest. I dreamt of this massive faded green funnel, and of introducing myself to a group of people. When I woke up again it was light, a lemon tree out the window and someone’s white clothes hanging on the clothesline. The building made a persistent whirr, and made me feel like jelly. All I could think about was how much I wanted to read the paper and catch up on all the news.
you arrange & compartmentalise......
but you never age frown so weary of tight spaces closure the river
worsening / less likely to find pennies far guzzling over breasted puffs
the eight beat bars quarters high questing enemies discourse &
drinks all round: hubbub: limbo: hep hep giddiup......
blossom’s dad says ‘sorry’ not ‘hooray’ / so gasp competently.
A mathematic straddle: gym sweat vials
in concord, crashing –

The first and most obvious point, always,
you wonder what is needed in order to be cool.

Is that a fault of communication as first proposed ever, the
brushstrokes within utterance, the crap that lingers outright?
somewhere, far in me, a later un-wiser you will ask. For a struggle
this amongst everything feels so shivery, so ‘kissing-on-the-mouth’ &.

that is a permanent emetic. like, green eggs & ham, pared down, the sweet innards.

we form groups, swell baker’s dozens & piece-meal steal
contemporary bliss in sibilant mountain views...all
seen through moon puzzle lenses, left outside says chris. Sort of: the first bit worst,
utilising eyesore daiquiris, a number of archaically karmic apostrophised
words: damaged & kneading at you, the night all kingships (across seas).

if flight across ocean is a metaphor for creative design &/else/or

it is a good one.

but like you my haircut output was sensed ‘somewhere’,
& it isn’t worth noting this pleasure or type of dining, this crouching,
prominently in other walks of life. Trades. Making
peace is never in vogue. Spiders don’t nest. Even atop
my head, & the next in a line of organic though bloodless things to do
is ‘fall in the heart of the winds’ (as noted one Christmas – that’s right
no-one’s naming you in front of the masses – I hope at uniqueness, & so forth)
Sure, your older friends talk you into astrology then drugs, the undue influence –
just a bonus in any other language. Things are reversed; one’s soul
a secret wiki. Use my interface okay?

See a way past it. i think of peace, propellants & adjectives &
It gets me though (as per this dance, but, this line points where
archaism fails: betwixt mines are hinted observations…small as krill)
Um. the diction it seems conscious. (Indeed, I join with others
on evenings with drinks & plurality gets a nudge / note / wink:
communities create an appropriate feeling: ‘I feel a peace’ as they say,
that would denote any staid sequence as
successful work). Throughout.

Iggle Piggle Onk: through an edged limbo we fluke hardcore glory, sure,
though pervy language related to the retelling of miaow in slang,
however peculiarly interesting and unsuccessful. However.
Queasy as that personal journey, subject matter, wander,
or mental dalliance in the poetic / philosophic toxic goo;
yabbadabaddoing your way into a quest is wholly motivated.

with thirsty writers & damaged wanks, people ease soporific
*into who, had, also, been, near*

It is quite complex: symbolism is the derivative squared, the limit
Bounding infinity. To settle on the least accoutrements, I do adjudge
joy motorized & certainly in motion (it’s a sequence thing / a sequence thing)
all trees burnt for greater goods are on poetic journeys of the past –
weighing it up, investigators of ‘how it still affects him’. So / & / if…
‘The land’ is the land traversed in the previous entry, the penultimate
reference in the game, in the sequence, a gain if you’re thinking that.

Connect with the contemporary: express an easy familiarity
of the non-divine & laugh off the unconscious. I can’t even laugh
in writing. What do we need to be able to ooze sap, possibility,
or at least a flanging ‘worthwhile’, dejected sans scalpel, intellectually
addicted. & imagery pumps the cheksum chockablock full, or associated with,
nothing apt. Moving past the pseudo-call of this past we bike & ski
& meander at random.

label me yellow from your new & more robust skin:
it’s a rejoinder people. Pleat carbon copywright edicts to that
girls skirt / it’s romantic / she’ll dance, now disobey.

Nothing emerges in nature.

Much is not rendered, while fitting.

Like a platypus, gimmied into a justified public space,
(one much more successful I would argue) he argues a
sort of ‘all I know is that I now know nothing’ vibe…
we’re effectively cast in marble, effectively…

getting to this point (so quaintly wired as distinct from other
times in life – sexual lowlights, forgotten epiphanies, faster food)
you gotta have more minutes to mix & recognise. Subconscious limelight
plays about our hair as we schmooze. Marches, Syncopated.

Ah. the journey. Bold, Not going, so far.