Staging the suburb:

Imagination, transformation and suburbia
in Australian poetry.

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Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

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Abstract

The suburbs are an important element in the physical and imaginary landscapes of this country. They are where more than 95% of the population lives and makes its home; and they have become integral to our imagining of the average citizen and their hopes, dreams and political inclinations. But this formulation does not capture the imaginative and dramatic uses to which the suburbs have been put, or their changing representation in literature and criticism.

The two Australian poets that I consider in this thesis – Gwen Harwood and Dorothy Porter – were writing about suburbia in different eras, and against different conceptions of the space, yet both use the suburbs in passionate and theatrical ways. Harwood was writing mostly in the conservative Menzies era, when literary depictions of the suburb tended to portray it as stultifying, homogenous and dull. She often works with pseudonymous personae – including a suburban housewife, exiled academics from Old Europe and a young radical – and with recurring characters to satirise assumptions about suburbia and the people who inhabit it; or charges her more personal suburban poems with a range of competing and contradictory emotions, and with claims for the coexistence there of art and domesticity, transcendence and routine.

Porter’s poetry mostly dates from the 1980s to the turn of the millennium, an era with a more sympathetic view of the suburbs, and their ordinariness and diversity. Her theatricality plays out in the dramatic monologues and masks that she uses to draw attention to the extreme experiences and conditions that are always a part of everyday life, and to the wild energies and vitality which can spring from ordinary objects and spaces.
The thesis begins by charting the shifting cultural and historical perspectives on the Australian suburb, before moving to a close analysis of the poetry of Harwood and Porter, in order to examine each poet’s complex and often ambivalent response to suburban space and the lives lived within it; the claims each makes for the imaginative perspectives, emotions and intensities that are contained within domestic environments; and the ways in which the stuff of the everyday can be used to dramatise the self and its endeavours.

The argument then moves to my creative examination of these themes in the book-length collection of poems titled ‘Domestic Interior.’ In these poems I explore the interplay between memory, experience and place, with how places become symbolic and poetic, and how this process intersects with ideas of belonging, identity, the everyday and the imaginary, the public and the private worlds. They explore what I see as a ‘featurist aesthetic’ – drawing on and subverting Robin Boyd’s description of the superficial elaborations of Australian suburban architecture. I see this suburban aesthetic as employing small details to build lively and multivalent spaces and scenes, by surrounding them with layers of symbolic objects, apprehended details, memories and sensations.
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Introduction: Digging about in the Suburban Backyard

‘He stands there, lost’: The strange space of the suburb

One of the best known, and most complicated representations of the suburb in Australian poetry is Bruce Dawe’s 1969 poem ‘Homo Suburbiensis’. The poem describes a man standing in his vegetable garden of an evening, listening to the sounds of the suburb around him in some kind of thrall, confusion, or strange combination of both. The poem is mystical but also ironic, sardonic but also affectionate, it is simultaneously heroic and mock-heroic:

One constant in a world of variables
– A man alone in the evening in his patch of vegetables,
and all the things he takes down with him there

Where the easement runs along the back fence and the air
smells of tomato-vines, and the hoarse rasping tendrils
of pumpkin flourish clumsy whips and their foliage sprawls

Over the compost-box, poising rampant upon
the palings … He stands there, lost in a green
confusion, smelling the smoke of somebody’s rubbish

Burning, hearing vaguely the clatter of a dish
in a sink that could be his, hearing a dog, a kid,
a far whisper of traffic, and offering up instead

Not much but as much as any man can offer
– time, pain, love, hate, age, war, death, laughter, fever (Dawe, p.357).

‘Homo Suburbiensis’ is a poem built on contradiction and ambivalence, unfolding in the tension between an honouring of ‘all the things’ that the man ‘takes down with him’ to the garden, and the admission that these things are both ‘not much’ and ‘as much as any man can offer.’ It is a poem about ordinariness and the despair of ordinariness, about ritual and recognition, but also alienation,
disillusion and dissolution; it shifts between connectedness and loneliness, between a clinging to constancy and a recognition of vast and unpredictable forces of change, between images of growth and hope and a strange sense of nostalgia and loss. Ambivalence is embedded in the very structure of the poem: as a sonnet, it adopts a very traditional form to deal with the very ordinary subject of growing vegetables, an undercutting that is echoed in the arch mock-Latin of its title. It aligns images strangely disparate in scale and importance in its end rhymes: the vast and universalising abstraction of ‘variables’ precedes the incredibly mundane ‘vegetables’, and the minute ‘tendrils’ of a pumpkin vine are followed by its half-rhyme, the wide-reaching ‘sprawl’, which is itself ironically connotative of suburbia as a whole. Other line endings are undercut by an enjambment: the promise of ‘green’ by the surprising incongruence of ‘confusion’; or the waste and repugnance of ‘rubbish’ with the nourishing domesticity of ‘a dish’. The poem works too by building up small details – of the garden, the plants, the traces of the wider suburb – around the figure of the man, struggling to understand his place amongst them and in the world, or to interpret them and his own life, yet able to transform these mundane materials into grand narratives of ‘time, pain, love, hate, age, war, death, laughter, fever.’

‘Homo Suburbiensis’ is emblematic of so many of the representational functions that the suburbs serve in Australian literature and criticism – as a space of ‘green/confusion’ and ambivalence, of irony and alienation, ritual and comfort, of potential, and of nostalgia and loss. Even in its title, which makes an exemplar out of this man by assigning him a scientific species and genus, it points towards a habit in Australian writing of reading the suburb as a microcosm of the nation as a whole, to find symptoms of wider national ills – political and cultural alike – writ small in backyards and gardens.

The importance of the suburb to the Australian imaginary, and to Australian culture and demographics, has been evident since at least Federation in
1901, when, according to Brendan Gleeson, 70% of Australia’s residents lived in the suburbs of its cities (2006, p.9). Because of this, critics have been quick to name Australia as a suburban nation, even the first suburban nation, a formulation that, for all its grandiosity, does not capture the changing and often-contradictory uses to which the suburban space is put. This thesis explores the ways in which suburban space has been represented and reimagined by writers and critics, as well as how it is shaped and staged – as well as transformed – by the imaginations and emotions of the two poets, Gwen Harwood and Dorothy Porter, discussed in later chapters. It then creatively responds to some of these tensions and imaginative trajectories in a collection of poems titled ‘Domestic Interior’. It asks what happens when we dig about in the suburban backyard: what might take root and grow, as well as what might be exhumed, and how we might situate ourselves between and amongst the things we find in that familiar, but strangely fertile soil.

**Suburiensis: the suburb as a microcosm of the nation**

One of the most prevailing trends in Australian writing about suburbia portrays it – and its ordinary residents – as a site where the broader character, concerns and problems of the nation and people as a whole can be easily observed. The suburb is seen as the nation writ small, and it is significant primarily as a tangible incarnation of the national culture, a place where its effects and influences are evident and obvious. Tim Rowse argues that ‘Australian intellectuals have made [an] equation between suburbia and Australia’s civilisation’ (1978, p.4), and points to three distinct periods of critique – the early years of suburban planning in the 1920s and ’30s, the suburban boom years after World War Two, and the more permissive and socially diverse era of the ’60s and ’70s – which each saw drastically different politicised interpretations of the suburb dominate writing and criticism. Since the time of Rowse’s writing, depictions of the suburb have also fluctuated to
reflect changing discourses around the impending bicentennial celebrations in the late 1980s, and the neo-conservatism and anxieties about globalisation, immigration and war in the Howard era at the turn of the century. The specific implications of this alignment of the suburb and the nation, Rowse argues, the particular ills or triumphs that critics have located in suburban spaces, have continually varied alongside changes in the political climate and social and cultural conditions, but this depiction has meant that writing about the suburb has almost always been a political act. David McCooey states that the discourse of suburbia is always intertwined with ‘the construction of the suburb as representative of Australian life,’ and as such, any portrayal of the suburbs ‘becomes a highly charged act of national definition’ (1998, p.101).

Criticism about the first period of suburbanisation, written during the years immediately preceding the First World War, tends to focus on the political impetus behind the development of new suburbs as part of government-led city planning. These plans were underpinned by the hope that life in the suburbs would be peaceful, prosperous and inspiring, and that its inhabitants would be morally and spiritually improved by their surroundings. As Ian Hoskins states, the progressive political vision of the time saw ‘spatial regulation’ as ‘integral to “progressive” ideas of racial health, identity, efficiency and the maintenance of stable social relations’ (1994, p.4). Similarly, Hoskins argues, the congestion of tenement or terrace living in the city was blamed ‘for a variety of social ills, both physical and metaphysical’ (p.4).

This was the era of the ‘garden city’, the planned suburb of space, light, air and greenery, which would stand in direct contrast to the over-crowded, under-ventilated, diseased and decaying inner city. (The suburb I grew up in is surrounded by bushland, whilst driving there this year, midwinter, I kept seeing wattle trees in full bloom. I hadn’t realised until then that they are missing from
the inner suburbs, where I live now.) Improved living conditions were considered to improve the very physicality of the people of the suburbs: the urban planner J. D. Fitzgerald claimed that ‘the children, in their garden villages, will grow up taller, stronger, deeper in the chest … [and] more likely to be stalwart effectives in the wealth-creating forces of the state’ (cited Hoskins, p.10). Implicit here is the idea that the suburb would not be a space of political dissent but of contentment, even of acquiescence to the status quo. The suburb was designed to be intrinsically non-subversive – the planner W. K. Hancock stated that there should be ‘no fear’ that the ‘vast suburban mass’ created by the policies of the time, would ever consider ‘pulling down the house which it inhabits’ (quoted in Rowse, 1978, p.7) – and because of this, many writers even from this early period denied that suburbia could be a place of creativity and art, or of radicalism, cosmopolitanism or any kind of caring for ideas or ideals that lay beyond the backyard fence.

Dissenting writers, even at this time, saw the suburb as embodying, as Tim Rowse puts it, ‘the antithesis of the fine place [they] hope Australia will be’ (p.3), and they came to portray the suburb as a parochial, small-minded and individualistic place, directly opposed to the outward-looking and forward-thinking cosmopolitanism of the city proper. It was in this era that writers like Vance and Nettie Palmer were working to develop a progressive Australian literature, and to define national culture; the suburb was inevitably implicated in this, and came to represent the existing conservative forces that these writers were working against. The playwright Louis Esson (1912), for example, claimed in his play, *The Time is Not Yet Ripe* that suburbanites were too comfortable and too safe to be interested in politics in general, or in socialism in particular; and the pseudonymous poet ‘George Street’, publishing in *The Bulletin* in 1921, writes that while designing the ideal suburban street, ‘[h]uman philosophy might stand the cost’ (p.30). These kinds of portrayals simultaneously align the idea of suburbia with that of the nation as a whole, and yet deny it any kind of political
investment, imagination or agency, and this strange paradox has persisted across
the later reconsiderations and imaginings of the space. The man in his patch of
vegetables ‘takes down with him there’ the political and cultural concerns of the
wider nation, but at the same time is unable to offer up anything, and always
remains alone.

This perceived disengagement of the suburb from politics and the public realm
found its most vitriolic expressions of disdain in the Menzies era, the post-war
1950s and ’60s, when the suburbs were expanding with a rapidity previously
unseen. Menzies himself had already put the inhabitants of this booming suburbia
to political use, in his 1942 ‘Forgotten People’ speech, which posits home-
ownership, the very core of suburban living, as ‘one of the best instincts in us,’
(n.p.) and middle-class, suburban Australians as ‘the backbone of the nation’ – as
the emblematic core of the nation as a whole. Perhaps as a result, the suburb
came, in the minds of many critics – including, most famously, Robin Boyd
(1960) and Allan Ashbolt (1966), to embody the political and social conservatism
of the time. They saw the suburb as an environment which flattened out any
impulses towards creativity or political thought in deference to respectability and
conformity, and one which fostered both insularity and willful ignorance in its
inhabitants. The literary accounts of this era are highly ironical, often archly
scornful – although this scorn is occasionally tempered with a kind of despair –
and they mock, according to Tim Rowse ‘Australia’s unquestionably suburban
fate’ (p.3). ‘Homo Suburbiensis’ was, fittingly, written in this era.

Allan Ashbolt describes suburbia as a site of aimless leisure and desperate
conformity, a place which, he argues, depoliticises its inhabitants because they are
‘mortgaged to a full belly, to the petty pleasures of gadgetry’ and to ‘high
respectability’ (p.373). He sees the suburban lifestyle – of Sunday-morning
lawnmowers and car washing – as something that distracts people from, and
prevents their engagement with, wider political or cultural questions by narrowing their focus to their immediate surroundings, to denying any discomfort or difference, and to keeping up appearances and saving face. In the process, Ashbolt argues, the suburban lifestyle creates the ideal placid and self-interested citizens of the conservative political environment that existed at the time. (My father, who grew up in the late ’60s, retired from teaching last year, and claimed that what excited him most was the fact that he could now mow on Mondays.) The apolitical nature of suburban existence that Ashbolt insists upon in this essay has since been questioned, most notably by Robin Gerster (1990), and by Brendan Gleeson (2006), who points out that the period in which Australian home ownership rates were at their peak, the 1970s and ’80s, also saw the highest rates of protest and industrial dispute in Australian history.

Ashbolt’s concerns are shared by his contemporary Robin Boyd, who argues that the ‘petty’ and ‘evasive’ architecture of 1950s suburbia is emblematic of Australian superficiality and inauthenticity, and reflects ‘an unwillingnessness to be committed on the level of ideas’ in favour of ‘shuffling about vigorously in the middle … of the road, picking up disconnected ideas’ (1960, p.157). Boyd also claims that the defining architectural style of Australian suburbia is ‘featurism’, an excessive layering of decorative features – feature walls with patterned fabric, picture windows, wood veneers and display cases – and that this exists as a kind of hysterical denial of an inauthenticity or hollowness that Australian suburbanites feel in the face of the huge scale of the Australian continent. Boyd argues that its excessive, layered features are a kind of camouflage or cloaking, an evasion of these deeply-held but unacknowledged fears.

It is interesting to note that it was in this period that most of Gwen Harwood’s pseudonymous poems were written. In an era of criticism concerned with both the performance of respectability and semi-public rituals – like mowing the front lawn – as well as with façades and displays, Harwood was writing playful
and often highly ironic poems, set in the suburbs, from behind a number of masks. Each of her characters operates with a particular delusion or exaggerated sense of self, and so they see themselves and their lives as overly important or even archetypal, and assume a superiority to their suburban environments or neighbours.

Any metonymy relies upon a selection of parts, on choosing from many specific details a small number that might bear symbolic weight, and as such, it is capable of being adapted to numerous purposes depending on precisely which particulars are brought to the fore. This means that the use of the small-scale suburb to epitomise the nation as a whole has been able to accommodate vast shifts in the cultural and political landscape, and so the trope has persisted – albeit changed in its ramifications – across different socio-political eras. Tim Rowse dates the next major shift in suburban criticism as beginning in the early 1970s, coinciding with a more progressive national politics, and the rise of cultural studies and its attendant interest in the practices and performances of mass culture – which it often situates within the suburb, as the home of the masses and the site of their customs and rituals. In Rowse’s formulation, this phase of criticism sees the suburb ‘reborn as a crucible of a more human civilisation’ (p.3), as the key site, that is, in which new social welfare policies and new considerations of cultural practices would be made manifest.

During this era, critics argued that the existing discourses, particularly those that focus on the suburb’s homogeneity, or that treat it with what Robin Gerster describes as ‘blank satire and neglect’ (p.567) oversimplify the suburbs, and fail to acknowledge the differences between specific suburbs, as well as between the particular lives lived within them. Like Gerster, Gary Kinnane (1998) points out that Australia’s suburbs have always been socially, culturally, architecturally and economically disparate, as well as made up of different kinds of
households. Individual suburbs also have incredibly varied landscapes – in Sydney, for example, they stand alongside beaches, mountains, bushland, the shore of the harbour, the basin plains. Kinnane states, ‘the idea of “suburbia” should not blind us to the existence and identities of actual suburbs’ (p.42).

Hugh Stretton is also interested in the diversity of the suburb, and argues that the suburb is an important, and even ideal, form of urban landscape because it can accommodate a wide variety of people, and because such variety is ‘the key to urban excitement’ (1970, p.9). Integral to this is the fact that the suburban house and backyard are spacious enough to allow their owners to carry out small trades, crafts and hobbies in garages and gardens, and so they can pursue their own creativity and industry. (My mother is a patchwork quilter, and has turned my sister’s old bedroom into her sewing room; the wardrobe full of scraps of fabric and rolls of cotton batting. She also does sporadic contract work from the kitchen table.) Stretton sees the narratives of frustration and conformity at the heart of earlier depictions of suburbia as too simplistic, and argues that these narratives are wrongly attributed to the space: ‘Plenty of dreary lives are indeed lived in the suburbs,’ he argues, ‘[b]ut most of them might well be worse in other surroundings: duller in country towns, more desperate in high-rise apartments’ (p.43).

Alan Wearne’s first verse novel, _The Nightmarkets_ (1986) was published against this backdrop, and follows a number of diverse characters, living across suburban Melbourne and embroiled in complicated love affairs, business deals and emotional crises; the poems which comprise the novel are remarkable for their ability to capture different voices, and the characters and social inflections that they carry. Gwen Harwood also published two award-winning collections in the 1980s and ’90s, and her poems from this era are much more personal than her pseudonymous works, often portraying individual suburbs of Brisbane and Hobart, and dealing with themes of domestic ritual, family, friendship and the
consolations of quiet lives. Similarly, Dorothy Porter’s first four collections of poetry, and her verse novels *Akhenaten* (1992) and *The Monkey’s Mask* (1994), were published during this era, and are notable for the ways in which they chart the specific terrain of Sydney’s Northern Beaches, a landscape which Porter’s characters often drive in and through, and which they adapt to meet their own imaginative and emotional needs. *The Monkey’s Mask* is set across three distinct sets of suburbs – the western suburbs of Sydney and the lower Blue Mountains, where the detective protagonist lives and works; the wealthy North Shore, the home of the parents of a murdered student; and the inner-city suburbs near a university – and Porter portrays each of these suburbs as distinctive in its culture and class, as well as its physical appearance.

Also important was the lead-up to the 1988 bicentenary of European settlement in Australia, and the cultural and political conversations about national identity and character that occurred around that time. In these discussions, suburbia was often reimagined as the spiritual home of an Australian character and culture that was diverse and vibrant, but also quietly (even laconically) honourable and ordinary: a culture able to take ‘all the things’ down to the garden and to find there all of the grand emotions, experiences and narratives: ‘time, pain, love, hate, age, war, death, laughter, fever’. Implicated in these conversations was a broader reconsideration of the lives and people who had been elided or willfully ignored in earlier depictions of the suburb (and the nation) – especially women, and ethnically diverse communities.

Robin Gerster, discussing the work of Patrick White and George Johnston in particular, argues that earlier depictions of suburbia had portrayed it as ‘a geographic hell ruled by largely female demons’ (p.567) – the gossiping, trinket-gathering women of Patrick White’s Sarsaparilla and the facile, unimaginative wife of David Meredith, the protagonist of *My Brother Jack* (1964). But from the
1970s onwards, women writers including Thea Astley, Helen Garner and Jessica Anderson – as well as Gwen Harwood and Dorothy Porter – began to re-inscribe these older suburban narratives with female characters, often both frustrated or stymied by suburbia and equally able to inhabit it differently, as what Belinda Burns describes as ‘a realm empowered by the imagination’ (2011, n.p.). This emphasis on the imagination within the suburb, and the imaginative transformation of the suburb, is integral to the poetry of both Gwen Harwood and Dorothy Porter, and is one of the most compelling forces within their work. Similarly, in the 1970s and ’80s, a wave of second-generation migrants – the children of parents who had arrived in Australia as part of the post-war immigration program – came of age in, and began writing about, the suburbs, as well as their own suburban experiences, often bringing a more cosmopolitan perspective, reflecting the cultures of their upbringing, to the space. The suburbs portrayed during this period in the works of David Malouf, π.o, and Melinda Marchetta are populated by non-conformist characters, often defiant in their difference. They are characterised by co-existing tightly-knit communities, and animated by dark risk and the intensity of protagonists attempting to carve out their own sense of identity both within their suburb and in the wider world. Similarly, Ania Walwicz’s 1981 poem ‘Australia’, which is addressed both to Australia as a nation and to individual Australians in the ‘acres of suburbs watching the telly’, includes the lines, ‘You don’t know how to be with me. Road road tree tree … You silent on Sunday … You do like anybody else’ (pp.230-231). (The suburb I grew up in held an annual Celtic Festival, such was its definition of diversity.)

Yet much of the hope, progressiveness and honour that critics imagined in suburbia in this era was undermined, or at least complicated, in the period that followed, around the turn of the twentieth century. The suburb, in the Howard
era of Australian politics, dating from the mid-1990s, was again aligned with a conservatism and insularity evident in national policy, and was again put to overt political use by critics and politicians alike. A great and open admirer of Robert Menzies, much of John Howard’s political discourse relied upon a nostalgic appeal to his own suburban upbringing in 1940s Earlwood – a suburb of Sydney that, importantly, has changed considerably in its cultural make-up in the years since Menzies’ resignation – and this appeal, like all gestures towards nostalgia, relied on, and reinforced, a sense of loss and despair. Svetlana Boym argues that all modern nostalgia is predicated on ‘a mourning … for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values’ (2001, p.8); Fiona Allon argues that for Howard, this loss included ‘the loss of national sovereignty, the loss of cultural homogeneity and the habits of the past … the loss of the family home and all that it symbolically represents’ (2008, p.96). This is a loss, in other words, of the kind of suburbia imagined in the 1950s and 1960s, where a backyard garden might grow perfumed tomato vines and flourishing pumpkins but not gai larn, mizuna or bitter melon, and where one might hear a dish, a dog and a kid, but not CNN on a neighbour’s TV, or Bollywood ballads on their stereo.

The neo-conservatism of the Howard era also linked to wider anxieties about globalisation, terrorism, war and the movement of refugees. Allon sees these concerns as bringing about increases in ‘ontological insecurity’ which in turn drove a rise in anxiety about home and belonging, ‘played out as a yearning for the authenticity of homeliness and wellbeing’ (p.171), or household comfort. These anxieties were again focalised in literary depictions of the suburb, which was now portrayed as an insular, selfish and fearful place, obsessed with protecting itself from undesirable – and unspecified – others, as well as ‘consuming, expanding and renovating frantically to distract from the threats of the wider world’ (p.140). Gabrielle Gwyther argues that many of the depictions of this era relied on a certain elitism, because the same house portrayed as a McMansion in Sydney’s
western suburbs may well have been called a ‘spacious home [in] the city’s leafy suburbs’ (2008, n.p.), and so these depictions perpetuated the idea of an uncrossable divide between the outer suburbs and their inner-urban counterparts.

Many critics were looking to suburbia to explain the origins of a political environment that they could not understand or relate to, and which did not speak to any of their own experiences or values. As in the Menzies era, the scapegoat was most often found tethered to a colourbond fence in a backyard in the outer suburbs. Mike Ladd, in his sonnet ‘Housing Estate in the Howard Era’ writes about a McMansion with huge windows, but drawn curtains, and a double garage and more bedrooms than inhabitants, ending with the lines ‘These structures agree:/ “Don’t relate to the street./ Everything’s inside, and for me”’(2006, p.103). The suburban house stands, in this poem, for the nation as a whole; it is ‘Fortress Australia’ – as a political coinage of the time would have it – wealthy, capacious, but locked up and away from outsiders.

Other critics from the Howard era have been interested in the effects of globalisation, and the rise of networked information economies, on the suburb – which could no longer be charged with the same kind of isolation or disconnection from the wider world once the worldwide web was installed within the majority of suburban homes. The backyard industry that Hugh Stretton once saw in suburbia has far more variety and scope in the age of the internet, with home offices supporting off-site workers, freelancers, sole traders and home businesses alike, and streamed TV services and digital global media breaking down the distinctions and distances between suburbs and cities, nations and world. While writers like Fiona Allon and Mike Ladd see this dissolving of boundaries as leading to a wider insecurity and reflexive suburban drive to isolationism, others see it as bringing the wider world into the suburb, and they use it as an animating force within their work. Jennifer Maiden’s long-running ‘George Jeffreys’ series of poems, for example, brings together world events and
leaders – often televised – and the suburbs of Western Sydney, in recurring lines like 'George Jeffreys woke up in Mount Druitt/… Barack Obama was on TV' (2012, p.14). The tension between localised, personal stories of George and his partner Clare, and the world politics that they respond to, often forms the affective heart of Maiden’s poems.

Influenced by Edward Soja’s (2001) and Doreen Massey’s (2000) work on post-modern cities and geography, a number of critics, including Alan Mace (2013) and Loretta Lees (2004) have gone so far as to describe this networked, globalised suburb as ‘post-suburbia’. While the term ‘post-suburbia’ is somewhat limiting, because it implies that suburbia is most interesting as a category only in its relationship to the city, rather than because of its landscapes, lifestyles, and relationship to the domestic and ordinary, or memory and time, it also problematises the long-standing trope within Australian criticism of reading the suburb as symptomatic of the nation as a whole. The ‘world of variables’ that Homo Suburbiensis now exists within is much wider, more fragmentary, and more multi-directional in its exchanges and transactions than earlier generations of writers could have foreseen – and so the things that Dawe’s man finds ‘down … there’ in the backyard garden may be all the more important for the consolation and anchored experience that they offer.

‘A green/ confusion’: hybridity and paradox

Even before these changes made less useful the portrayal of the suburb as a metonym for the nation, or a smaller, more readily-grasped part of a wider political whole, there were – and still are – many more, and more complex, uses to which the space has been put, especially in poetry and fiction. The political uses of the suburb are rarely of primary importance for either Gwen Harwood or Dorothy Porter, who chart instead more imaginative and personal engagements with the
space – just as Bruce Dawe’s man in the garden is an individual, as much as he is an exemplar.

The man in ‘Homo Suburbiensis’ stands in a space of ‘green/confusion’, urban enough to hear traffic, if only as a ‘far whisper’, and the movements and activities of other people, yet rustic enough to grow vegetables in solitude. His suburb is a hybrid space, between the city and the country, and not wholly of either category. (In my first year of university, a student from Sydney’s lower North Shore asked me if my family kept cows in the south-western suburb where I grew up). Indeed, many critics, including Robert Beuka (2004) and Roger Silverstone (1997) account for suburbia’s power and multi-valency by pointing to its essential hybridity, or strange betweenness as a place. It cannot be defined, except in the negative. ‘As a concept,’ Nichols and Schoen state ‘[suburbia] seems to be based not on what it is, but what it is not: the filling in the sandwich between city and country, distastefully neither one nor the other’ (2008, p.31).

Robert Beuka argues that the suburb’s disruption of ‘the rural/urban binary’, or its existence outside of that binary, has been the source of much of the confusion and ambivalence that suburbs elicit in literature and criticism. But it also means that suburbs have always attracted ‘symbolic meaning’ (p.24); that they have always been fascinating because they offered, even from their early days of existence, a new and unknown landscape, unburdened by the centuries of signification that had been layered over both the city and the countryside.

Similarly, Roger Silverstone warns against misreading the physical marginality and uncertain definition of suburbia for a marginality that is political or social, and claims that it is more productive to look to ‘the paradoxes and contradictions that define it’ (p.5). Silverstone argues that it is the ambiguity of suburbia that might allow it to be a powerful space of speculation and imagination, especially because it is a space central to so many peoples’ lives. Instead of marginality and a disruption to binaries, Silverstone is interested in
suburbia as a site of hybridity: ‘Hybrids,’ he states, are ‘highly valued, difficult to produce yet vigorous … [and] often sterile’ (p.9). Of course, the sterility of the suburbs is a familiar trope within Australian literature and criticism of the Menzies era in particular, but what is interesting about Silverstone’s formulation is its focus on the value and vigour of suburbia, and on the paradox of something that is both vigorous and sterile, and something in between as well. If suburbia is this unfixed, this contradictory and variable as a space, then we are free to make of it what we will, to allow its paradoxes and inconsistencies to be generative, imaginative, and as dramatic and meaningful as the lives that play out within it. We might find, between the sounds of distant traffic and the pumpkin vines spreading over the easement, a space for a full gamut of experiences, emotions, daydreams, longings and fears.

Yet despite this insistence on the hybridity of suburban space, Brigid Rooney argues that in the tradition of writing about suburbia in Australia, ‘critics have used “pro- or anti-” suburbia as they key – if not sole – rubric for reading’ (2013, p.1) suburban texts. This rubric, she argues, is as restrictive as it is inadequate, especially because it does not account for the variety of imaginative and performative purposes that suburbia may serve, or its continued power as a site of narrative, memory, and a full range of complex and forceful emotions – the kind of site that is, for both Porter and Harwood, inherently poetic, dramatic and intense.

Dorothy Porter’s poems especially are often charged by ambiguity and uncertainty, as well as elisions, ironies and uncrossable gaps in understanding or perspectives that leave her characters unable to really apprehend each other, or meet each other’s needs. Porter’s work relies on betweeness as an aesthetic, working with unfixed and mutable spaces, registers of language and hybrid poetic forms; and her suburbs are always elastic, capable of expanding and contracting to fit the imaginative needs of her protagonists. Gwen Harwood is interested in the
competing forces that shape the suburb and the suburban lives of her protagonists. Her suburbs are at once provincial and worldly, sites of highly specific lives and landscapes and universal narratives and transcendent philosophies. They are also the main site in which her pseudonymous characters are set loose, and play their complex games with voice, character and masking, and with what is left unsaid in their individually inflected depictions of suburban spaces and domestic lives.

‘Offering up instead’: art and poetry in the suburb

The strange sense of defeat, or existential lack and loss in ‘Homo Suburbiensis’ also draws upon one of the most common depictions of the suburb, one which sees the space as entirely inimical to art, creativity and individual expression. This was first articulated, in Australia, in the 1920s and ’30s, when the suburb was seen as too safe and too comfortable to enable any kind of artistic thought; but it reached its zenith in the Menzies era – in which Dawe’s poem was written.

Dawe’s suburban man lives quietly, almost anonymously, within his suburb, and contents himself with tending vegetables, just as Alan Ashbolt’s archetypal suburban man mows his lawn and pursues his respectability, comfort and leisure, as well as the accumulation of material goods. Neither is willing to risk his security – or the censure of his neighbours – neither experiences anything intense or painful or profound beyond the comfort of his suburb, so there is no space for art in their lives; and the implication is that any person with creative or artistic impulses must damp them down if they are to remain living in the suburb. David McCooey describes this ideology by stating ‘[t]elevision and Tupperware, not terza rima, are supposedly found in the suburb’ (1998, p.101). (I believed this entirely as a teenager, I couldn’t wait to leave, couldn’t consider that the people I saw around me might also have interior lives.)
Robin Gerster is critical of this imagined schism, which he describes as a conflict between ‘the artistic consciousness and an incompatible suburban environment’ (p.565). Gerster argues that the narrative it depends upon is evasive, and betrays both an uncritical elitism, and a fear of mediocrity or lack of distinction in the writers who perpetuate it. This kind of portrayal of the suburb developed, he claims, because writers dealing with the suburb are often ‘unwilling to explore below the “surface”’, and so they ‘shrink from close encounters with the suburbanites, perhaps because they are afraid of seeing an image of themselves’ (p.567).

Gerster is essentially arguing that the alleged absence of art and politics, or even imagination, in suburbia can’t be neat or complete, that the suburban environment can’t be so sterile if so many people, even (or especially) ordinary ones, live their messy, complicated, and emotional lives there. He points out that the portrayals of the suburbs that focus on this absence are elitist, because they see mediocrity as threatening, and assume that people and their lives are either creative and therefore vibrant, passionate and interesting, or unremarkable, uninspired and dull. Hugh Stretton also challenged this division in his 1970 book *Ideas for Australian Cities*, which championed the suburb for its diversity, and the suburban home for the space it provided for hobbies and creative pursuits.

Other critics, including Catherine Jurca (2001), Karen Tongson (2011) and Belinda Burns are critical of these kinds of portrayals because they elide the experiences of people who are not automatically comfortable and safe within the suburb – anyone who is not, according to Jurca, white, middle-class, heterosexual and male. Jurca argues that the ‘sentimental dispossession’ (p.4) and ‘abasement’ (p.7) that suburban characters typically express in American suburban novels is only possible because they are wealthy enough and leisured enough – as well as racially privileged enough – not to have to worry about survival; nor do they have to bother with the drudgeries of domesticity and housekeeping that dominate the
lives of their sisters, mothers and wives. Depictions of the suburb as antithetical to art often set up the heroic – if thwarted – artistic man in direct opposition to the suburban women in his life. Mothers and wives, as well as gossiping ‘female demons’, therefore function only as embodiments of the anti-artistic, anxiously respectable forces in the suburb, the very things that prevent the male protagonists from pursuing their own individuality, authenticity and creativity. These women are the villains of the suburbs, and they are never attributed a stifled creativity or longing for transcendence of their own.

Scorning suburbia as unartistic and apolitical also overlooks the other kinds of communities that do exist there, or it dismisses their importance entirely because they are not primarily motivated by artistic production or political purpose. Peter Middleton argues that these kinds of portrayals depend upon an ‘assumption that alienation and immersion … are mutually exclusive, and that [alienation] is the necessary precondition for innovative art’ (1999, p.180). This is an assumption that is complicated by the experiences of women, of queers and of culturally-diverse communities, who often encounter alienation and immersion together or by turns within the suburb, balancing their own desires against the expectations, demands or needs of families and wider society. These shifting subjectivities are central to Gwen Harwood’s pseudonymous poems in particular, and are also often the cause of the tensions in the relationships that Dorothy Porter’s extended sequences and verse novels map out.

‘A far whisper of traffic’: The place we all must leave

Even though the idea that the suburbs are antithetical to art has been widely challenged, elements of it persist in literary portrayals of the suburb as a place of origin, or the place from which any larger narrative begins. Andrew McCann (1998a) argues that there is a strong strain of Romanticism operating in this
trope, because traditional Romantic thinking has always understood the everyday realm – and the suburb is the quintessential everyday realm – as something separate from the aesthetic realm of art, and also from authentic experience and transcendence. This means that real life happens elsewhere, away from the banality of domestic routines, the cosseted safety of the family home and the boring repetition of suburban streets. So the suburb becomes a place that expels the Romantic hero into a 'second birth', into the aesthetic world and outsider experience. Romantic tradition sees this expulsion as a necessary precondition for any kind of art, and this second birth as the requisite experience that turns a person into an artist. Anyone who wishes to experience something more profound, more intense, more true – more worthy of literature or poetry – must leave the everyday realm, and the suburb, behind.

McCann argues that this formulation means that the suburb often operates in fiction and poetry as ‘a euphemism for normality’, and an easy counterpoint to any representations of ‘transgression, deviance or persecution’ (1998a, p.xii). The suburb becomes the starting point, that is, against which non-conformity can be measured, and from which it is almost always expelled. Karen Tongston and Catherine Jurca both claim that this escape, or necessary exile, is one of the main tropes of early American suburban fiction (including the work of John Cheever, John Updike, Richard Yates and Sinclair Lewis) where the protagonists are trapped by the suburb in what Tongson terms ‘an ennui born of comfort and convenience’ (p.6), and where liberation and happiness is assumed to only ‘come with leaving behind one’s place of origin.’

But the Romantic tradition that underpins this trope is primarily a masculine one, relying on a vision of the artist as a heroic and independent – and therefore probably male – figure. Belinda Burns argues that a necessary feature of this escape is the discarding of ‘any remnants of femininity, imposed … by a suburban childhood’ (n.p.), because part of the disempowerment that the everyday
realm of suburbia wreaks on these heroic artists is the feminisation and
emasculcation that the house, and homely comforts and routines, represent. Burns
also points out that most female characters who attempt these flights from the
suburbs are unable to escape their suburban and domestic ties entirely. Instead,
they are disappointed in their search for transcendence and have to either return
to the suburb, or vanish completely. The transgression of the everyday, of
suburban normality, is far less possible for female characters, who have to straddle
the realms of the domestic and transcendent, who are never allowed to leave the
everyday entirely behind, whose misbehaviours are far less tolerated and whose
creative impulses less valued or indulged.

Both Gwen Harwood and Dorothy Porter resist this narrative in their
suburban poems, because the escape found by each poet is imaginative – into
poetry and metaphor – rather than a physical departure. Both poets bring the
world into their suburbs by imaginatively aligning disparate places with their
domestic environments, and so allow the suburb to expand to contain
transgression, deviance and persecution – as well as pleasure, artistry and love.
Both Harwood and Porter are interested in situating within the everyday realm
the emotions, experiences and ideas that other protagonists of exile narratives can
only find elsewhere.

The narrative of escape from the suburbs does not leave space for the
possibility of staying, and imagining and creating within the suburb, or for mixed
and powerfully ambivalent feelings of belonging and alienation, affection and
disgust, or of deep longing, both for the suburb and for what might lie beyond its
bounds. It does not allow for the performativity, expressivity and dramatic excess
that are evident even in satirical representations of the space – and which both
Gwen Harwood and Dorothy Porter rely upon to stage their poetry there, or for
mixed uses of, and different kinds of creativity within, domestic space.
‘Hearing vaguely’: Suburban simulacra

The sense of the suburb as a space that is inauthentic or unreal, which underpins these narratives of necessary exile, has also informed some more complex imaginings of the suburb, which reconsider the space’s relationship to mass media and to the new kinds of public sphere that became possible as these media developed. Many critics, including Robert Fishman (1987), Roger Silverstone and Lynn Spigel (1997) link the development of mass media with that of the suburb – in part because the popularisation of radio, and the advent of TV, coincided with the inter-war and post-war suburban booms respectively. But the suburb has also come to be seen as both the embodiment of, and the condition necessary for, mass culture, because it is the home of the masses, and the site in which they watch TV, listen to the radio and interact with the internet. This formulation often sees the suburb as a symptom of some of the wider cultural or political ills that are also associated with popular culture – its alleged superficiality, banality, consumerist interests and so on – and also strengthens the imagined division between the suburb as an inauthentic, or inescapably mediated experience, which stands in stark contrast to both the bucolic authenticity of rural life, and the grit and danger of the urban. Bruce Dawe’s suburban man stands in his vegetable plot, but is unable to really connect with the soil and the plants that move strangely, rasping and whipping around him, just as he is only able to ‘vaguely’ hear – but not see or touch – the suburb around him. The sounds of this suburb also include ‘a dish/that could be his’ but that isn’t, that belongs to someone else, also unseen and unspecified, and also beyond his reach.

According to this trope, suburbia is, at its heart, a site of infotainment, subscription television, chain supermarkets, and concrete motorways, all of which serve to cut its inhabitants off from any real, authentic or sensual engagement.
with their home environment. Accordingly, John Hartley argues, the suburb has become ‘an image-saturated space’ which exists ‘inside homes and heads and [is] extensively abstract’ (1997, p.182), and which is beamed back into lounge rooms and media rooms on the screens of computers and TVs. Suburbia is both inauthentic and hyper-real, and its inhabitants are detached from their physical world and its tangible referents, from each other, and from any shared imagining of their space.

Much of the blame for this detachment has been attributed to mass media, to television – and especially to the soap opera genre, which Andy Medhurst calls ‘the most quintessentially suburban and suburbanising of televisual genres’ (1997, p.259); it was also one of the first genres unique to television, developed during the postwar boom. Robert Beuka claims that soap operas and family sitcoms, set largely within suburban houses and neighbourhoods, were instrumental in ‘facilitat[ing] a psychic, as well as physical mass migration to the suburbs’ (p.72), a migration that also entails leaving the urban public sphere, and the engagement with the real that this is implicitly considered to represent. It is, as Hartley argues, a migration into a new kind of mediated community, ‘whose major public functions … are increasingly functions of popular media and whose members are political animals not in the urban forum but on the suburban couch’ (p.180).

(Each year at Christmas, my brother would ask for a TV of his own to keep in his bedroom, and each year his request was studiously ignored, because my parents thought it anti-social. He now has Foxtel, and invites my parents over to his house to watch the football.)

This new mediated community engages with politics and culture by using, consuming and relating to, popular media, but Hartley also points out that this does not preclude engagement, creativity, or critical thought and discussion, even if the means by which these things happen are less physical, or smaller in scale. This is reflected in the work of the two poets discussed in this thesis: many of
Gwen Harwood’s protagonists use magazines and newspapers to imaginatively construct or comment on their own lives, occasionally ironically adopting headlines or scraps of text from these media; and Dorothy Porter is interested in radio and TV, and in the pop music and transmitted images that often match or amplify the emotions and imaginations of her characters.

The image saturation in suburbia is also often linked to the shopping centres that are seen by many critics as integral to suburban life – or are described as the new, secular centres of the neighbourhood, as what Gary Kinnane refers to as ‘modern sites of worship and community’ (p.44) fulfilling many of the functions – weekly ritual, regularity, public display and contact – of churches, albeit with consumption and advertising, those markers of the inauthentic, standing in for the spiritual or transcendent. (The first shopping centre opened in my suburb when I was ten years old, consisting of a supermarket, post office, butcher, bank, two surf shops, an ice-creamery, a chain café, and no bookshop; my parents still go there sometimes when they ‘just feel like shopping.’)

Other critics focus on the shopping centre as a site of suburban sociality, as a ‘concentrated contact zone’ (p.152), as Karen Tongson puts it, within the sprawling, isolated terrain of suburbia, where disparate individuals are forced to come together and interact in a shared and ritualised, if mediated, space. Meaghan Morris (1999) argues that these interactions and ‘encounters’ (p.400) are an integral part of the ‘social function’ (p.398) of shopping centres. The shopping centre is a site where people must perform their sociable, public selves, where respectability and codes of behaviour are tacitly enforced, and so it becomes a kind of theatre, as well as, according to Roger Silverstone, a modern panopticon. Yet Tongson also points out that the shopping centre is often one of the only public spaces available within suburbia to ‘outsiders’ – teenagers, young people, queer people, women – who are not at home, or not satisfied by life within the family
home, and for them, it can be a site of transgression, risk, and community, independent of the intended purpose of the place. It’s too simplistic to assume that the consumption and conspicuous advertising of shopping centres mean that only inauthenticity and hyper-reality are to be found within them; they are also places of physical and sensual experiences, of public performance and communion, and of the quiet, everyday rituals that constitute so much of both ordinary and extraordinary lives. (My first casual job was in the chain café within our suburban shopping centre; on alternate Friday mornings our tables would fill with the bussed-in residents of a nearby retirement village. It was my favourite shift to work, and I was always overgenerous with the garnishes of whipped cream squeezed from a can.)

Both Harwood and Porter are interested in these suburban contact zones. For Harwood, these sites allow her to dramatise the tension between her characters’ interior lives and performed public roles – a tension that is particularly strained for her Professors Eisenbart and Kröte, as well as her housewives and mothers. In Porter’s work, these spaces are often made sensual and surreal by the intense emotions that her characters are experiencing within them, or they serve as sites of desire or momentary escape for the creative misfits that often populate her poems.

The disconnection and detachment of suburbia is also at play in many critical depictions of motorways, driving and cars, which were integral to the spread of the suburbs because they opened up for development new areas which could be easily linked, by arterial roads and freeways, to cities and business centres. Cars and driving are still an important aspect of suburban life (at one time, my parents’ home housed six people and six cars, the closest train station was a twenty-minute drive away, the buses stopped running at 7 pm); they have also often come be envisioned, as Pauline von Bonsdorff puts it, as representing a ‘loss in concrete,
sensuous experience … [and] a weakening of both place and community' (2005, p.80). But implicit in this envisioned ‘loss’ – and arguably the cause of much of this critical disdain – is that driving actually represents the loss of walking as a primary means of transportation, and an associated break from the long tradition of theorising about walking as a way of being in the world, of thinking, of making meaning and mapping places, by writers as varied as Rousseau (1782), Thoreau (1861), Benjamin (1950) and de Certeau (1984).

This equation of driving and disconnection is also based on a vision of suburban sprawl, low-density housing and distance as things that are inherently isolating and antithetical to any kind of intimacy and community; it imagines that communities and relationships are always dependent on proximity and cannot form under any other conditions. It also fails to take into account the physicality of driving and its own sensual dimensions, which are different from those of walking – faster, louder, more physically complex and more obviously risky – but no less embodied or reliant on the kind of durational, automatic movement that is often linked with imagination and creative thought. The sensuality found in driving and travelling in cars is integral to much of Dorothy Porter’s early poetry collections, the third of which is even titled Driving Too Fast; in Gwen Harwood’s work, driving is often a catalyst for memory, allowing ‘later landscape’ to ‘strea[m]/ through earlier eyesight’, as the poem ‘Driving Home’ (p.385) states, or enabling conversation when in company, and reflection when alone.

These critiques of suburban space as inherently mediated or hyper-real have been further complicated by the rise of digitisation and new media, which bring a far vaster amount of information and images from across the world into contact with domestic spaces, at increased speed and with 24-hour access. Suburban homes are now connected to an increasingly global media landscape of subscription television and internet streaming, as well as internet commerce, online news,
email and social media. Melissa Gregg argues that these connections mean that ‘networked suburbs’ have replaced traditional suburban space, and that suburbs are no longer private retreats from the public, working world, no longer purely peripheral to the city. This means that the suburb and the city no longer exist as ‘carefully segregated sites for labour and love’ (2012, p.243), and that there is no longer a clear division between urban production and suburban consumption. Gregg also argues that networked suburbs make possible new kinds of community and intimacy, no less real or important because they are virtual rather than physical. Hyper-mediation does not necessarily mean a loss of the real or of sensual dimensions; rather, it opens suburban space to new interconnections, new imaginative possibilities and new kinds of complicated citizenship and belonging.

‘A man alone’: loss, longing and nostalgia

Despite this vision of the suburbs as a mediated, inauthentic or only hyper-real space, there is a strong – and almost inverse – connection often made in other depictions of suburbia that locates within the space a fierce nostalgia. It is a nostalgia that comes, at least in part, because the suburb is the site of childhood for many people, and so it persists in memory as a place of innocence, simplicity and an uncomplicated sense of belonging and being wholly at home and in time, in a way that the adult self has often lost. As Robin Gerster puts it, many writers, ‘confused by the complications of their lives … look back longingly to the suburban womb from which they [have] sprung’ (p.571). Suburbia here becomes symbolic of the authentic, and of an authenticity which has been lost to the complexities and self-consciousness of adulthood.

There is a sense that the first home – which is most often a suburban home – is inescapably important because it is the place from which we (most of us, at least) come, the starting point for any narrative of our lives, regardless of
whether this relies upon an imagined escape or not. As David Malouf writes in his autobiographical essay *12 Edmondstone St*, ‘first houses are the grounds of our first experience’ (1986, p.4); Dorothy Hewett likewise opens her 1990 autobiography with the line ‘the first house sits in the hollow of the heart’ (p.3). The house, and thus the suburb, exist in a different kind of spatiality, as well as a distinctive temporality, always held in nostalgic remembering, outside or beyond the ‘world of variables’ that besieges Dawe’s gardening man. David McCooey argues that these kinds of mythical, nostalgic time and space are integral to any writing about origins or childhood, because they depict these origins as existing ‘beyond adult historical discourse’ (1996, p.52), and before any narrative of burgeoning adulthood and identity begins.

Svetlana Boym argues that nostalgia, more than being a longing for a place, is ‘actually … a yearning for a different time – the time of our childhood [and] the slower rhythm of our dreams’ (p.xv), and in these nostalgic depictions of suburbia, the space comes to embody this idyllic sense of childhood time and its almost mythical proportions. Other critics, including Yi-Fu Tuan (1997) and Iris Marion Young (2005), argue that nostalgia is often related to the suburb because it is inherently linked to domesticity and homes. This is because the acts of keeping a house clean and in order, and of displaying and maintaining furnishings, photographs and personal items (even featural trinkets) are often repeated and ritualistic – and so do not belong in a teleological sense of time. Young argues, furthermore, that these rituals of home transcend time, because they serve to preserve ‘the even rhythm of the days and the continuity of the home’ (p.137). Because suburbia is imagined primarily as a singularly domestic space – unlike the city or the country, which have other functions that hold greater symbolic importance, such as industry and interconnection, and nature and contemplation, respectively – its ties to nostalgia, and to this transcendent sense of a first home now lost, are particularly compelling. Robert Beuka claims
that the ‘eulogised’ or idealised landscape of memory that suburbia often becomes is all the more powerful precisely because it ‘contrasts with the banality of contemporary, workaday landscapes’ (p.28).

Indeed, many of Gwen Harwood’s poems about childhood rely on this sense of suburban transcendence, of existing out of time, beyond history, and even beyond language – and as such, she uses music, expressive colour and theatrical tableaux to gesture towards those parts of memory, emotion and experience that language cannot easily express. Dorothy Porter is more interested in the untrammeled imagination of childhood, the primitive energy and magic of the time – and, interestingly, in how these energies persist into adulthood, even within the most ordinary or spaces and lives.

This altered, static temporality also means that the remembered suburb, and the childhood experienced within it, are unchanging – Melissa Gregg writes that the suburb is ‘the space where as children we used to wait for the rest of our lives to begin’ (p.255); similarly, Petra White’s 2011 poem ‘Trampolining’ begins with the line ‘the fattest eternity is childhood’ (p.152). This sense of changelessness and timelessness has ostensive similarities to critiques of suburbia that focus on its homogeneity and lack of variation or tolerance of difference, yet in these depictions, the suburb’s changelessness is comforting; it is, as Susan Stewart states, a ‘pure context’ (1984, p.23) for experience, uncomplicated by history or knowledge, remembered nostalgically because it is immutable – because it remains constant as the world, and our perception of our place within it, continues to change.

Gaston Bachelard argues that this pure context is physical and spatial, as much as it is imagined. Like Malouf and Hewett, he claims that ‘the house we are born in is physically inscribed in us’ (1958, p.14), that our bodily memory is always attuned to the first house that it learned to move through, and that we
have all internalised the spatial memories of things like the height of light-switches, the weight of cupboard doors, the depth of the stair treads in that first home. This means that the body becomes, and always remains, ‘the diagram of the functions of inhabiting that particular house’ (p.15), that we carry the sense of the space of our first suburban home across the rest of our lives, and that our physical and social habits fit best – or feel most natural and most real – within this immutable first home. We continue to carry suburbia, or at least a complicated nostalgia for suburbia, within us, however hard we try to escape or move away.

The oppression that critics and writers often find in suburban stasis, therefore, is always complicated and deeply ambivalent; and this uncomfortable ambiguity is at least partly to blame for much of the antipathy with which many critics still treat suburbia. We may have fled from the uninspiring and stultifying suburb into the outsider experience necessary for art, and yet we long to belong again (even as we know that we never really did). We deride the suburb for its changelessness, but long for its stability, its sense of ‘fat eternity’. Margaret Simons even writes that the problem for many of the people she labels ‘tourists’, those members of the cultural classes with abstract, globalised lifestyles and professions – including critics and writers – is that they may just want ‘to go home’ (2005, p.19). (Sometimes I do just want to go home.)

Of course, reading suburbia as a site of simplicity and stability, or a place before or beyond adult injury, alienation or doubt, retrogressively reinforces the depiction of the space as feminised – because the suburb becomes the eulogised home of children, and of the women who rear them – and as such, this portrayal elides the very real complexities and struggles of the adults who do live there, who have stayed, returned or even moved to the space. These are the people for whom the suburb is not just a ‘lost or forgotten place’ (p.1), in Brigid Rooney’s term, but the site of their continuing experiences and stories – the kinds of people who populate both Harwood’s and Porter’s poems. Nonetheless, few writers rely solely
on this trope in their portrayals of the suburb – the nostalgia and lost time associated with suburbia more often operate as an undercurrent within their depictions, at times acknowledged, but also often arguably unconscious within their work. It is like the plangent, almost elegaic tone of ‘Homo Suburbiensis’, which carries the strange nostalgia across the poem, but never names it, simply allowing its melancholy and ambivalence to permeate the poem.

‘Time, pain, love, hate, age, war, death, laughter, fever’:
A note on the poets

The following chapters address the suburban poetry of two Australian poets, Gwen Harwood (1920–1995) and Dorothy Porter (1954–2008). Harwood and Porter represent two successive generations of poets writing about the suburbs and the people who inhabit them. Harwood’s first poem was published in 1944, although her work only became prominent in the 1960s, with her first collection, Poems, published in 1963. By this stage, she was 43 years old, and living in the suburbs of Hobart, a city she had moved to from Brisbane after her marriage in 1945. Both Hobart and Brisbane feature prominently in her work – Brisbane as the ‘Blessed City’ of her childhood, from which she has been exiled, and Hobart as the place in which she raised her family and lived her adult life.

Harwood’s early career is marked by her playful use of pseudonyms – she published under at least six different names, each of which had its distinct voice, as well as its own fictional biography and postal address, and several of which were employed in literary hoaxes, including the famous 1961 Bulletin hoax, in which the journal accepted a pair of sonnets which acrostically spelled ‘Fuck All Editors’ and ‘Die Bulletin’ respectively. Her theatricality and cheekiness is present across all of her work, and is often heightened in her poems that deal directly with the suburbs.
Gwen Harwood published three more collections, *Poems Volume II* (1968), *The Lion’s Bride* (1981) and *Bone Scan* (1988) with a posthumous collection, *The Present Tense*, published in 1995. She is a much-anthologised and well-loved figure in Australia poetry, although little or no attention has been paid, thus far, to her poems set in or about the suburbs, even though she was one of the first and most prominent female poets to represent the space. Instead, critical appraisals of her work have focused on her interest in Romanticism, her manipulations of memory and time, and her portrayals of love, family and friendship. Yet Harwood’s suburban poems are remarkable for the way in which they insist on the great drama of the everyday, instilling complex and deeply-felt emotions into domestic environments and experiences, and using the homely and familiar as staging points for mediations on the transcendent. Harwood’s suburban poems are also often intensely political, making a claim for both the honour and importance of women’s domestic work and lives, and for the capabilities of suburban spaces to contain, and even encourage, poetry, creativity and art.

Dorothy Porter grew up in Sydney’s suburban Northern Beaches, and lived in Sydney until moving to Melbourne in 1993. Her first collection of poems, *Little Hoodlum* was published in 1975, when she was 25 years old. She published three more collections, *Bison* (1979), *The Night Parrot* (1984) and *Driving Too Fast* (1989) before finding popular success with the verse novels *Akhenaten* (1992) and *The Monkey’s Mask* (1994), which was later adapted to film. Two of her later verse novels, *What a Piece of Work* (1999) and *Wild Surmise* (2002) were shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Award. Porter published three more collections, as well as another verse novel, two libretti and two young adult novels before her death in 2008. But despite her prolificacy and success – or even the manner in which she made the verse novel form her own – Porter’s poetry has not been the subject of major critical attention. Part of this may be due to the perception of her work as
popularist, uncritical or as Richard King puts it, ‘lack[ing] … concentration’ (2002, p.144), a perception that Porter herself contributed to by frequently stating that her poetry didn’t belong in universities. But Porter’s poetry is always startlingly intense and wildly imaginative, as well as finely attuned to the complexity of interactions between people and their peers, environments and worlds, and wide-ranging in its literary and cultural influences.

Porter’s work is always driven by wild energies – an interest in the primitive and primal (she was a self-professed pagan), as well as the magical, fantastical and sensual – and often operates by drawing these forces out of all kinds of experiences and encounters. Often, these are extreme in and of themselves – many of the poems centre on explorers, archaeologists, scientists, travellers, outlaws and outcasts – but the experiences they describe are often also very ordinary, and Porter is adept at capturing the complex emotions and desires that animate everyday life. Where criticism of Porter’s work has occurred, it has tended to focus on her use of the magical and primitive, and on its transgressive qualities, but not on the way in which she uses these desires and extreme energies to animate suburban spaces and domestic lives.

Porter’s suburban poems are remarkable for the way in which they stage extremity – intense emotional, interpersonal and existential dramas – within the everyday sphere, often by drawing on metaphors from disparate times, places and cultures. Her characters often bring much bigger images and ideas into imaginative alignment with the domestic spaces they inhabit, and this lends the suburb vitality and variety, as well as an imaginative importance. Porter’s suburbs are important because they are places of ordinary lives, and because every ordinary life is dramatic, imaginative, desirous and wild – and capable, by extension, of sustaining poetry and art.
In an interview with Barbara Williams in 1988, Gwen Harwood spoke about her writing and her domestic life, as a housewife and mother, as things that simply had to coexist. ‘I used to prop up books of poetry over the sink’ (p.57), she states, ‘They’d get puffy with soap splashes but I read and read’. Harwood made many such comments over the course of her life, possibly, as some critics suggest, in order to protect herself from some of the more condemning or controversial sentiments of her poems, but also because she was constantly questioned about her true feelings about motherhood, marriage, domesticity and suburbia and the possibility for poetry within and in spite of them. In this same interview, Harwood referred to these interviewers as ‘the questioners who say, “Did you really love your children?”’ (p.57).

Much of the criticism of Harwood’s work, and especially of her poems about families, suburbs and houses, has a decidedly biographical slant – and the fact that Harwood lived most of her life in the suburbs in which these domestic poems are situated is certainly a factor in this. Alison Hoddinott (1991) and Susan Sheridan (2007), for example, make frequent reference to personal anecdotes from Harwood’s letters to illustrate or explain the often commingled love and frustration her protagonists feel towards their families; and Cassandra Atherton takes this biographical slant even further, developing a psychoanalytical argument that Harwood’s various pseudonyms are sub-personalities, ‘semi-autonomous region[s] of the personality capable of acting as a person’ (2002, p.151), which Harwood developed in order to express some of the sentiments and emotions that were irreconcilable to her as a mother and wife in the conservative era and environment in which she lived. Atherton uses sub-personality theory as a means
of uncovering what she argues are the poet’s most deeply felt, even unconscious – and therefore most true – reactions to her suburban condition: stifling frustration, burning anger and despair.

But these biographical readings of Harwood’s work are limiting at best, and at worst, problematic. For a start, they are gendered: no such a prevalence of biographical criticism has been directed at the work of Harwood’s male contemporaries, such as Vincent Buckley, James McAuley and Thomas Shapcott; instead, there’s an underlying assumption that her writing, since it is a woman’s writing, cannot avoid having a strain, at least, of life-writing, an assumption that is perhaps all the more forceful because most of the prominent writers and critics at the time Harwood became established as a poet were, of course, male. The poems’ strong personal voice, intimate tone and charm undoubtedly contribute to this as well: the poems speak familiarly, as a friend might; it’s interesting to note that many of Harwood’s most prominent critics – including Alison Hoddinott, Gregory Kratzmann and Jennifer Strauss – were her personal friends.

Biographical interpretations of Harwood’s work also leave no room for the reader, and no room for playfulness and ambiguity, or for the accidental resonances and confluences that can develop over the length of a writer’s career. Most importantly, these kinds of biographical readings, which rely on pinning down an authorial intent as an authoritative means of interpreting the poems, are especially problematic when the poet involved is one whose cheekiness, theatricality and multivocality are as present in her interviews and descriptions of her own work as they are in the poems themselves. It is precisely these qualities – cheekiness, staginess, and playfulness with voice and character – that are integral to Harwood’s portrayals of suburbia and of domesticity, as a vibrant, brimming and emotional place from which the drama of life and poetry are made.
‘Her tribal gods, The Neighbours’

I reached the lace and pastel world
supported by my labours
where my sweet wife propitiates
her tribal gods, The Neighbours – ‘The Clerk in the Park’ (p.35).

Multivocality is the most obvious – and possibly the most theatrical – characteristic of Gwen Harwood’s poems about suburbia. Many of Harwood’s most directly suburban or domestic poems are attributed to one of her various, infamous pseudonyms, whom she often refers to as ‘operatic’ (cited Edgar, 1986, p.75), or as a band, of which she is the leader. These terms are inherently performative, and already gesture towards the flamboyance and the expressive, even melodramatic, scale of the stories and emotions that her poetry stages within the suburb. Harwood’s pseudonymous poems are always character-specific; they offer inflected, monologic descriptions of very different lives and perspectives within the suburbs, and often satirise existing perceptions of them. Walter Lehmann and Francis Geyer, for example, were Harwood’s earliest pseudonyms (their first poems date from 1960); both are recent, post-war émigrés, exiled into the suburb from Old Europe, both mourn the high culture that they have left and find the suburb facile and crass in comparison, and so they come to espouse many of the critical perspectives on suburbia that were current in the conservative Menzies era. But their criticism of their environment is always flawed because they, as characters, are flawed – often elitist or hypocritical, or unable properly to apprehend their suburban settings because of the weight of the nostalgia they carry for the countries and cultures they left behind. Geyer in particular is obsessed with his various losses, and feels taunted by them in every social situation he encounters. As such, their own subjectivity and bias is as much a part of the poem as the suburban setting or story, as is a subtle, but often scathing, critique of their opinions, and of those of the critics and writers on whom they are modelled.
Harwood’s other pseudonyms include Miriam Stone, a frustrated and furious suburban housewife, whose poems express an anger and despair born of her repression and the suppression of her art by her family and domestic duties, and Timothy Kline, a radical, angry young man who first appeared at the very end of the 1960s, and whose voice reflects the changing political concerns and energies of that era. It is unclear exactly why Harwood developed these personae, although she has suggested that Lehmann and Geyer were at least in part an experiment in editorial bias (Harwood termed this ‘a natural piece of mischief’ (cited Atherton, 2002, p.154)) – the famous hoax sonnets ‘Eloisa to Abelard’ and ‘Abelard to Eloisa’ were ostensibly written by Walter Lehmann, and were accepted by *The Bulletin*, a journal that had previously declined all of Gwen Harwood’s submissions. Other journal editors frequently invited Lehmann and Geyer for lunch, extending a courtesy to the male, European scholar-poets that had never been extended to the ‘Tasmanian housewife’ Harwood.1 But these pseudonyms also allow Harwood to take full advantage of her playfulness as a writer, and to give voice to very different cultural perspectives within, and experiences and imaginative uses of, the suburb – indeed, she often uses her pseudonyms to critique various kinds of cultural assumptions or claims to knowledge by allowing them to voice their flawed logic or unconscious prejudices. These pseudonyms allow Harwood to write a suburbia that is never homogenous or unvaried, never empty or spiritually dull; they work to counterpoint and interweave with each other, offering a range of perspectives and experiences on a suburb that is no longer stable or fixed. They also allow her to explore different kinds of role playing, both through the masks themselves, and through the social, professional, and familial settings in which her characters live and write.

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1 This term comes from a newspaper headline published shortly after the Lehmann’s acrostics were revealed as a hoax: ‘Tasmanian Housewife in Hoax of the Year’, quoted in Sheridan (2007, p.140).
It's significant that almost all of Harwood's pseudonymous characters are outsiders – Lehmann and Geyer are exiles from old Europe, Miriam Stone is a Jewish woman, Timothy Kline is a young radical – and as such, are people more aware of, and affected by, the social codes, roles and mores to which they have had to adapt, or which stymie their attempts to live in their own way. As outsiders they are more attuned to the kinds of frustrations and alienation that they detail in their poems, but they would also likely find them in places other than suburbia.

This means that Harwood's detailing of this frustration is not in itself anti-suburban, and does not rely on a vision of the suburb as a static, stultifying place. Frustration in these poems comes about as a consequence of role-playing: it is felt by women and men alike because they are all trying to fulfill each other's unexpressed expectations, to mould their lives to what is expected of them as mothers, as husbands, as citizens. It is felt too by professors, professionals and housewives alike, because none of these roles is free of everyday banalities or mundane, repetitious tasks, or removed from the expectations of others. As a result, the suburb becomes a stage for these frustrations and desires, a place animated and even imaginatively transformed by them, rather than a place disheartening enough to cause its inhabitants universally (and continuously) to want to leave. Strange confluences and contradictions of emotion, commingled desire, disappointment, contentment, frustration, love, anger and restlessness are always present in these poems.

Gwen Harwood employed the pseudonym of Miriam Stone in her best-known suburban poems – which are also arguably her most bitter, or most desperate in their frustrations and desires. Miriam Stone’s first name is biblical, referring to the sister of Moses, she who placed the infant in a basket on a river so that he would not be killed, and also convinced the Pharaoh’s daughter to adopt the child and raise him as her own (Exodus 2:1-10); in later verses she also appears as a singer –
so she is a figure whose relationships to family, children and creativity are complex. The surname ‘Stone’ also suggests that this pseudonymous character is Jewish, and connotes a certain toughness, hardiness and strength. Miriam Stone is a housewife and a mother who writes – mostly about domesticity and its demands – in whatever spare time she can find between the duties that those roles press upon her. Her protagonists, like herself, are forced to give up much of themselves in the service of their families and their respectability, and they have been left lonely or despairing, and often bitterly, if quietly furious, beneath it all. Stone’s 1968 poem ‘Burning Sappho’, for example, has received a great deal of critical attention because of its brutal and forbidden anger, and the flashes of hatred that the speaker directs at her husband, neighbours and children, for the constant interruptions they bring to the poet’s work:

The child is fed, and sleeps. The dishes
are washed, the clothes are ironed and aired.
I take my pen. A kind friend wishes
to gossip while she darns her socks.
Scandal and pregnancies are shared.
The child wakes, and the Rector knocks.
Invisible inside their placid
hostess, a fiend pours prussic acid (p.158).

The protagonist’s writing is interrupted by her small daughter demanding to be fed, and so she imagines ‘stick[ing] her image through with pins’; similarly, when her husband calls her away from her desk and into bed, she envisions in her ‘warm thighs a fleshless devil’ that ‘chops him to bits with hell-cold evil.’ These are sentiments almost scandalous for the time, yet it’s impossible to ignore the playfulness that’s also present in the poem: Harwood includes a rhyme on ‘placid/acid’, and deliberately inverts Byron’s image of Sappho burning with creative energy, passion and accomplishment in her adoption of his title and form (Atherton, 2006). Stone’s imagined reactions to her interruptions – sticking pins into her child, throwing prussic acid at the Rector – are also comical, as much as
they are shocking, in their exaggeration. They are also always attributed to a ‘monster,’ ‘fiend’ or ‘fleshless devil’ within the speaker, rather than to the speaker herself; this monstrous imagination within is also the very thing that allows the speaker to write. This impulse towards poetry, to poetic and imaginative transfiguration, is always present, even – or especially – within the confines of the suburb and the home.

Miriam Stone, most overtly of all of Harwood’s pseudonyms, situates within her suburb a complex drama of competing and contradictory emotions, paradoxic desires, and imaginative intensity. She is interested in the intricacies of the domestic realm, and shares this interest with Timothy Kline alone amongst Harwood’s poetic voices. But whereas Kline sees domesticity, marriage and family life as forces that frustrate the ambitions and artistic impulses of men, and which supplant them with consumerist desires and petty respectability, Stone is far more ambivalent – although no less intense – in her reaction to the space.

Gwen Harwood’s Stone poems are important precisely because of this kind of counterpoint – they often function to offset the voices of the other pseudonymous poets, and challenge many of their assumptions and opinions about women, domesticity and the emasculating effect of suburbia and the suburban home. All of Harwood’s dramatic personae are preoccupied with ideas about creativity, self-expression and art, and with the ways in which creativity – often figured as music or science, as well as writing – is challenged by or coexists with their everyday lives and the places in which they unfold. But, as Stephanie Trigg argues, there is an important subtext to many of the male pseudonyms’ dramatic monologues – even as they discuss art, exile or politics, ‘the less overt point seems to be the one about the knowledge men claim of women’ (1994, p.40).
Walter Lehmann and Francis Geyer, like Francis Kline, frequently portray women, across their respective oeuvres, as the cause of their frustration and stymied creative ambition. It is women who make crippling demands of them, demands that are both emotional and material, always petty, and often inconsistent; and as such, they exhaust or undermine the creative energies that the poets possess or wish for. They also deny the women in their poems any claim to poetry or art. Francis Geyer’s 1963 dialogue poem ‘Poet to Peasant’, for example, includes the lines ‘What rakes your heart in the late night/ – The wife’s prolapse, the baby’s cough’ (p.123): it is domestic concerns, at the expense of poetry, that preoccupy the speaker. Walter Lehmann is the author of ‘A Kitchen Poem’, written in 1963, in which a farmer addresses his pregnant wife, saying: ‘Dear wife, let keen bluestockings grieve/ over their academic wrongs;/ astringent lady-poets leave/ the real world for their unreal songs’ (p.68). What both poets fear, that is, is that they might also be subject to the entrapment, the compromise, the disappointment and the bitter subsumption of self to the demands of everyday life, that is often at work in Stone’s poems about domesticity and suburbia.

Of course, lines like Lehmann’s, referring to ‘astringent lady-poets’ and ‘keen bluestockings’ are also cheekily ironic, as they may equally apply to a person very much like Harwood herself. Veiled references to figures who resemble Harwood – from the titian-haired schoolgirl in the Eisenbart sequence, to the ‘choir-boy face[d]’ (p.41) lost lover who haunts Francis Geyer – are very much a part of the complex game that Harwood plays in the voicing of these poems, serving as they do to more overtly satirise male poets’ portrayals and use of women within their work.

One of the claims most often levelled against suburbia, particularly at the time that Harwood was writing under the Lehmann and Geyer personae, is that it is both a feminine and feminising space. The suburb, in this era, was a separate and separated sphere for women, who were largely excluded from the working
urban world of men. As such, it was women who dominated the social world of the suburb; so too did women’s care of, and control over, the physical space of the home come to be seen as something that somehow curtailed the power of men within the space. Robin Boyd refers to an attitude amongst men, which he dates from the first suburban boom in Australia, of conceding domestic design decisions to their wives with the phrase ‘well, it’s her house’ (1952, p.211) – the suburb has long been seen as vaguely emasculating, and as the small dominion of women.

But the effect of these separations between men’s and women’s social worlds, and of these apparent exclusions, within literature and criticism, was a perception of suburbia as being, in Robin Gerster’s words, ‘ruled by largely female demons’ (p.567). These demons were all the more wicked because their petty, domestic concerns were always antithetical to creativity and art, and to the striving of artistic males for something greater or more transcendent in their everyday lives. It is this attitude that Harwood is satirising in the Lehmann, Geyer and Kline poems, and which finds its strongest counterpart in those ostensibly written by Miriam Stone.

‘Framed in the doorway: woman with a broom’

framed in the doorway: woman with a broom.
Wrappings and toys lie scattered around the room[…]
She stands and stares, as if in recollection,
at her own staring acid-pink reflection.
The simple fact is, she’s too tired to move. – ‘Suburban Sonnet: Boxing Day’ (p.157).

One of Stone’s most famous poems is ‘Suburban Sonnet’ (1968), in which art and creativity figure as very much a part of the housewife-protagonist’s life, as well as her ambition, however faded, for herself. In a typical gesture of Harwood’s, creativity is represented in the protagonist’s music, which competes for space and energy with the drudgery and demands pressed on her by domestic housekeeping and motherhood:
She practices a fugue, though it can matter
to no one now if she plays well or not.
Beside her on the floor two children chatter,
then scream and fight. She hushes them. A pot
boils over. As she rushes to the stove
too late, a wave of nausea overpowers
subject and counter-subject. Zest and love
drain out with soapy water as she scours
the crusted milk. Her veins ache. Once she played
for Rubinstein, who yawned. The children caper
round a sprung mousetrap where a mouse lies dead.
When the soft corpse won’t move they seem afraid.
She comforts them; and wraps it in a paper
featuring: tasty dishes from stale bread (p.159).

The poem is one of two linked sonnets, set across two different days, in what is
very probably this same house. Its form is highly traditional, and has already been
the subject of much discussion: Cassandra Atherton claims that the sonnet, as ‘a
form that progressively tightens’ (2006, p.156) functions here to enact the kind of
entrapment that the protagonist feels within her suburban home, whereas Alison
Hoddinott views it as being used to much more ironic purposes, given that the
kitchen is not a conventional setting for a Romantic sonnet. Susan Sheridan
(2007) and Elizabeth Lawson (1989), furthermore, support this view that Stone is
using the sonnet form for subversive ends. Sheridan claims the poem forces ‘the
traditional form to bend and adapt, to bear the load of domesticity’s “unpoetic”
material’ (p.150), and Lawson refers to this aesthetic as a ‘slantedness’ (p.145), by
which women writers deal with the anxiety of writing within a (mostly male)
tradition where the stuff of their lives has usually been ignored.

But in ‘Suburban Sonnet’, the form allows Stone to manipulate skillfully
the end-rhymes; and Stone harnesses them to undermine and ironise any sense
that worlds of art and domesticity must compete, or are utterly and essentially
opposed, even for non-working women in the suburb. Many of the lines end at
ambiguous points, and are undercut or inverted as the next line begins: there is a
fairly devastating turn built into the line breaks on ‘it can matter/not’, ‘Zest and
love/ drain out’ and ‘children chatter/ then scream’. The end-rhymes in this poem
operate along similar lines. The importance of ‘matter’, which is left hanging, is undercut with the mindless ‘chatter’ of the children; the question of whether she ‘plays well or not’ with the banality of ‘a pot.’ Most damning are the rhymes on ‘stove/love’ and ‘played/afraid’ for the deep emotional ambivalence and contradiction they enact, holding both things in resonance and together.

Even more interesting is the end-rhyme linking ‘caper/paper’ towards the sonnet’s end. The housewife in this poem is a pianist, but almost all of Stone’s other protagonists are writers; and here, the medium of paper is forced to coexist with the children’s play, the very thing that keeps such protagonists, in poems like ‘Burning Sappho’, from their desks. This rhyme occurs too alongside that of ‘dead/bread,’ which brings daily staple of bread into direct contact with the death it usually forestalls, and ‘played/afraid’, which ties fear directly to the protagonist’s music. These rhymes suggest that the provision of this daily bread poisons and destroys the spiritual life of the protagonist, just as the capering of the children keeps her from her creativity, and that she can find no joy, just as there is no purpose, in her art anymore. They suggest that domesticity, and by extension suburbia, are stultifying, deadening forces.

But there’s a real playfulness at work within the poem, as is almost always the case with Harwood’s pseudonymous works. Structurally, ‘Suburban Sonnet’, like the piece of music the woman is practising, is a fugue, a carefully constructed, and subtly dramatic form that works by bringing two disparate themes – the ‘subject and counter-subject’ – together, to contrast and comment on each other, in a kind of dialogue or dialectic, until they are finally resolved. Ostensibly, the two competing themes within the poem are creativity and domesticity, but there’s something else at play here in the poet’s deliberate reference to, and emphasis on, the terms ‘subject and counter-subject’. The words come directly after the hanging line-end of ‘overpowers’, and this positioning of ‘power’ so close to the word ‘subject’ brings to the simple musical term a beautiful ambiguity. ‘Subject’ here is
no longer simply a noun, and it can be read in the adjectival sense, raising a number of questions about just who, or what, within the poem is subject to which forces, to whose will. The inclusion of the counter-subject, furthermore, provides an additional complication, suggesting that any such play of power is always complicated and inevitably reciprocal.

But Stone’s use of the terms ‘subject and counter-subject’, especially so prominently within the poem, suggests a third possibility too: that the poem is also about subjectivity and the creation of selfhood – a theme which is also incongruous in traditional depictions of suburbs and domestic spaces. The protagonist in this poem is constantly aligning and identifying herself both in and against the objects in her space. At the point where her children interrupt her music, for example, a pot on the stove ‘boils over’, even though the woman herself suppresses her own, surely simmering, anger. The dead mouse appears at the very point where the woman’s own fatigue has been made clear, shortly after the line ‘Her veins ache’; the sprung mousetrap is introduced immediately after the children’s raucous play. This kind of imaginative alignment is also very prominent in Dorothy Porter’s work, and her verse novels in particular, because it allows her characters to express the intensity of their emotion through whatever materials are at hand, to find and articulate meaning in their everyday experiences, wherever they are staged. Stone’s poem operates along similar lines, with each of these imagined figurations a small creative act, and an expressive kind of theatrical exaggeration, on the part of the protagonist in her own home.

This play, and reliance on playful ambiguity, means also that there is a great deal of activity and energy always at loose within the house, even though the woman is fatigued. This domestic world is never still or static, and it is always able to be reconfigured to suit the imaginative needs of the people who inhabit it, and the metaphoric alignments they enact are often doubled and ambiguous. The final line of the poem, for example, the newspaper’s text ‘Tasty dishes from stale bread,’
carries the suggestion of the well-managed household and creative cooking that the woman is supposed to provide to her bickering children and absent husband, as well as the tasty dish that she herself is meant to be, and the stale bread that she considers herself instead – she was, after all, a creature so uninspiring as to make Rubinstein yawn. This constant sense of unfixed figuration and switching identification destabilises ‘Suburban Sonnet’, because it makes the role-playing, the theatricality of the narration, the shifting centre of the poem. Because the speaker’s portrayal of her own self constantly changes, both imaginatively and emotionally, a deep ambiguity and provisionality, both of identity and experience, is left behind.

A number of critics have already pointed to Harwood’s use of doubled-meanings and ambiguous phrases in her pseudonymous poems and in those poems that deal with the domestic – especially those which seem most despairing and condemning. Andrew Taylor, for example, interprets the line ‘they have eaten me alive’ (1987, p.65) in the famous poem ‘In The Park’ as scriptural or sacramental, as a transcendent and willing act of nourishment by which the woman in the poem gives herself to her children. Similarly, in her critique of ‘Suburban Sonnet’, Jennifer Strauss points to the ambiguity in the line ‘She practices a fugue’, which allows for an interpretation of the woman’s music as ‘an act of pure choice’ (1992, p.7), an exercising of her own will and pleasure, and her own dominion, despite the domestic pressures that curtail her life.

Harwood even rewrote ‘Suburban Sonnet’, self-satirically, many years later, in 1992, as a part of a sequence called ‘Later Texts,’ which also references ‘In The Park’ and the famous hoax acrostic ‘Eloisa to Abelard.’ In this version, the poem begins ‘She practices a fugue for pure enjoyment, / the graceful C sharp major from Book One’ (p.487). Harwood’s revision does not, of course, mean this reading is authoritative, especially considering how often Harwood commented –
often contradictorily – on criticism of her work in interviews, and how overtly funny all three poems in the sequence are. But Strauss’s reading is interesting because it points towards a conceptualisation of creativity and of art that is not necessarily connected with genius or originality – in the Romantic tradition that Geyer, Lehmann and Kline rely on for their ideas about themselves and their own art. Instead, it is a kind of creativity that is unthreatened – enhanced, in fact – by role-playing and responsibility, and by its attachment to the everyday and the concrete. By this measure, the woman's music is a source of joy, and of expression: she knows, after all, that she is no genius, having failed to impress a master all those years ago, and yet she plays on, despite her fatigue and myriad domestic distractions.

This is a conceptualisation of creativity not unlike that which Hugh Stretton claims is one of the advantages, or even hallmarks, of suburbia, because the archetypal suburban house, with its backyard and garden shed, gives it inhabitants the space and privacy to pursue all manner of ‘hobbies and small trades and storages … arts and crafts and mercifully private disasters’ (p.15). Stretton argues that the suburb enables art and creativity, as well as invention and industry, because it gives people the space to play, in a way that inner-urban environments might not. Of course, Stretton’s argument does not take into account the very real and arduous domestic work undertaken by people like the woman in this poem, and the demands it makes on her time, which keep her from playing and making art. But it is a vision of creativity nonetheless that is connected to everyday life, and even intrinsically linked to it.

This is, perhaps, the resolution of subject and counter-subject in this fugue: art and domesticity can and do coincide, interact and enliven each other. It doesn’t matter that the protagonist’s art is no grand passion, because it is a thing that brings her joy, or comfort, or even a simple distraction, like any other sought by any of the inhabitants of Harwood’s suburbs. This poem offers a vision of
domesticity as the condition in which art and creativity are arguably needed most, but which is also a situation from which art can spring or poetry can be staged, because the contradictions and ambiguities, as well as the alignments, it offers, and that this poem enacts, are generative, and open up a space for creation, for longing and dreaming, desire and despair, frustration and pleasure together.

‘The usual things at the usual hours’: repetition, ritual and desire

‘Dearest, what did you do today?
“Slept late, as is my usual way.
Did usual things at usual hours,
Went shopping, read, arranged the flowers.” – ‘Professor Eisenbart’s Evening.’ (p.51).

The physical landscapes of suburbia that appear most often across Harwood’s oeuvre are those of Brisbane, the place where Harwood was born, and Hobart, the city in which she raised her family. Both cities were considered very provincial places at the time Harwood was writing, isolated both geographically and culturally; they were far-flung, small cities in a country on the very edge of the world. Harwood’s poems about these places pay close attention to their physical details and to the complex rituals of making meaning enacted by the people who live within them; they are alive to, and animated by, the specificity of their suburbs and their importance as sites of her characters’ experiences and emotions.

When these details are filtered through the perspectives of her various pseudonyms, they necessarily become more theatrical and more expressive, because they are charged with carrying character, attitude and voice, at the same time as they portray the suburb and the people who live within it. Harwood’s different pseudonyms select and arrange different kinds of details to meet their own imaginative and political agendas, but they all share a tendency to build their suburbs paratactically, accruing images and objects, often in layers, to create a landscape that is complex and capable of containing a full gamut of emotions and
experiences. Miriam Stone and Timothy Kline are especially focused on the small
details of their suburbs, because their poems are more firmly anchored in the
physical world, and in the problems of the present, rather than in the ideas of
exile, mourning and loss that preoccupy Lehmann and Geyer. Stone and Kline
also write their poems in the first person, and from their own perspective, whereas
Lehmann and Geyer are more likely to create other characters, or employ
protagonists at a remove from their own voices. So Stone and Kline both look to
the details of their suburbs to stage their own dramas of identification and
selfhood, as well as of social relations, obligations and role-playing, and so create
poems that are animated by, and even structured around, an attention to the
features of the suburb.

Miriam Stone’s poem ‘Early Walk’ (1968), for example, takes this pseudonym
outside of her house and into the suburb as a whole. As such, it offers a kind of
physical map of the larger suburb in which the households she more often
describes are contained; it is also one of only three poems in Stone’s oeuvre in
which her protagonist, more usually seen attempting to write between the duties
of cleaning, child-rearing and cooking, appears in public, rather than within her
private home. But she is just as frustrated, just as disparaging and bitterly furious,
in the small public sphere of her suburb as she is in the confines of her home.
‘Early Walk’ opens with the speaker directly voicing her anxiety and discomfort
about her place within the uniformity and respectability that she finds there too:

Well loved, well dressed, well housed, well nourished,
I walk from where the town has flourished
foursquare on money and the raw
neutrality of solid brick (p.162).

The physical description of the suburb here is unsurprising: it is a place of
‘neutrality’ and sterility, of neutral, boxy ‘solid brick’ houses, ‘insecticided shops’
and an abstract ‘citizenry’, a place where the protagonist is too well loved, dressed,
housed and nourished – too comfortable, in short – to feel anything real at all. This equation of the suburb with comfort – and by extension, with inauthenticity, passivity and passionlessness – had been a common trope in Australian writing about the suburbs for at least two decades before the poem was published, and had existed in Australian literature for even longer. It is commonly traced back to Louis Esson’s 1912 play *The Time is Not Yet Ripe*, in which the middle-class suburban home is figured as the dull antithesis of the poorer inner city, and the constant proximity of crime and danger within city terraces means that life there is lived in a more vibrant, vital way. It’s a condemnation of suburbia as something essentially and unalterably bourgeois, and as therefore standing always at a remove from any kind of struggle, any kind of pain (as well as unfettered joy), and any kind of authentic or meaningful experience. Yet Stone holds herself, to some degree, outside of this equation – the speaker points out that she is ill at ease here, and distances herself from the suburb with her archly ironic tone. She sees herself as an outsider – inhabiting the only position, according to Romantic tradition, from which it is possible to make art from the sterility and comfort of bourgeois life.

Yet Stone herself is not immune to this condemnation. Her own emotions, her own frustration, disappointment and thwarted energy, are things that she cannot accept or reconcile within her ‘well loved, well dressed, well housed, well nourished’ suburban existence, and so her own experiences and emotions feel inauthentic to her, and frustrate her, because she equates her own material comfort with the suburban dullness that she perceives around her. The details that she registers – the raw brick houses, the ‘insecticided shops’, the faceless people – she cannot identify with. Unlike the protagonist in ‘Suburban Sonnet’, she sees these objects as having nothing to do with her or her self – and it is precisely this alienation, this perception of herself and her place in the world, that Harwood gently mocks within this poem.
'Early Walk' draws upon a number of well-known suburban tropes from the Menzies era, including Robin Boyd’s seminal book on suburban architecture and culture, *The Great Australian Ugliness*, with its interest in the layered veneers and façades commonly tacked onto suburban houses of the era. The second stanza of the poem begins:

Collage will tear. The citizenry
slap on insecticided shops:
Civility and Cleanliness
which the wind rips away to places
where the old live on crusts and slops;
under the fringe of loneliness
death sweeps too many names and faces (p.162).

These collaged façades resemble Boyd’s ‘featurist’ (1960, p.10) tiers of unnecessary panelling, latticework, haberdashery and paintwork, which he sees as the defining architecture of Australian suburbia. According to Boyd, these featurist façades are excessive precisely because they are fragile (or tearable): they act as a kind of camouflage for anxieties about authenticity and belonging, and as a projection of the aspirations of the people who live behind them. In Stone’s poem, the trope extends from the raw brick of the houses to the more abstract social façades of ‘Civility and Cleanliness’, which serve to hide the fragility of the civilisation that has built the new suburb and the poverty and loneliness that exists right beside the comfortable, brick houses that it is built from. These façades offer the ‘well loved, well dressed’ inhabitants of the suburb an escape from the perceived threat of the people too old, too lonely or too poor to fit within the place’s image of itself; and it is only the poet-speaker – and the poor and lonely, of course – who can see through them.

In a physical sense, it is first the wind that breaks down the façades, as it ‘scours’ away the clean face of the suburb, revealing the people who stand outside of its imagined citizenry: the old and poor, the hungry, the lonely and the dead –
and the alienated and angry figure of the speaker herself. It is interesting too that Stone refers to these façades as ‘collage’, in a moment that reveals what she is making of the suburb in the poem. Collage suggests both artifice and the deliberate work of making art – the selection and combining of different elements (raw brick buildings, insecticided shops, a council tip) to build an image. It is not a realistic or uninflected accrual of detail; it cannot be anything other than constructed and expressive. But the incongruity of this word within this poem ruptures, almost self-reflexively, the physical map of the suburb that Stone has been otherwise creating, and the accrual of details that the reader has been asked to accept as accurately descriptive. This means that this moment is also one in which Harwood is subtly mocking Stone, satirising her own pseudonymous character. In this moment, Harwood is allowing, as it were, the mask that she is wearing to be seen for the dramatic prop that it is. Stone’s sentiments can never be taken at face value, and her vision of the suburb as sterile, civil, heartless and unable to accommodate anything uncomfortable or unrespectable, is just as much a construct as Stone herself.

There is a real staginess always at work within Stone’s diction, starting from the excess of the quadruple repetition of the first line, which ends on the rhyme of ‘nourished/flourished,’ where the very theatrical flourish of the language is directly pointed out. Stone’s diction is littered with heightened, even exaggerated phrases, in lines like ‘heartloose scavenger,’ ‘the fringe of loneliness’, and ‘his bleak wind’; this sets the poem up as a kind of moral fable, with a poor and hungry old man combing the council tip – the only human figure in the poem – placed (even collaged) in direct opposition to the flourishing comforts and neutrality of the suburb Stone describes. Indeed, this old man offers Stone the only imaginative alignment that she is able to make. She finally comes to identify with him, in the line ‘his hunger puckers my firm lip,’ an identification that is almost perverse for the very real social and situational differences (Stone is, after
all, ‘well loved … well housed, well nourished’) that it elides. Stone is unreliable as a narrator – her own aggrandisement, injury and ideas about herself and her world allow her to transform the suburb she is walking through to fit her own emotional and imaginative needs.

Interestingly, Stone’s inclusion of the old, abject and ugly people on the fringes of her suburb, which she takes to this extreme and theatrical end, is similar to the kind of textual ‘perversion’ (1998b, p.56) that Andrew McCann associates with the suburbs portrayed by Patrick White, whose stories and novels set in Sarsaparilla were being published at around the same time as this poem. McCann is interested in the frequent eruptions of decomposition and decay that White allows into his suburbs – bodies and faces that are decaying with age and death, houses that are falling into ruin, or otherwise leaking putrescent substances, and rubbish dumps and cemeteries adjacent to neatly manicured quarter-acre homes. These moments of decomposition radically destabilise White’s suburbs, McCann argues, by forcing them to acknowledge, and even find some kind of liberation in, the ugliness and excess that they seek to banish. Stone’s poem ends at the other extreme to the litany of comforts on which it begins: with the image of ‘the Council tip’, one of the ‘places/where the old live on crusts and slops’ and ‘under the fringe of loneliness.’

An old man combs the Council tip
for comforts, comfort’s refugee.
His bleak wind scour[s] my charming city.
His hunger puckers my firm lip.
Christ, keep my anger sharp in me (p.162).

This final line, ‘Christ, keep my anger sharp in me’ is the only overt emotional reaction that the suburb elicits in the speaker, and it occurs as Stone brings together two kinds of decomposition: the aged body of the man, and the rubbish he is trawling through. This man, another point of rupture, appears directly between a biblical reference to ‘the fall of sparrows’ – from the gospel of Matthew
(Matthew: 10:29-31), which describes sparrows as creatures for whom God will provide, even though they are of little value – and the repetitious line ‘for comforts, comfort’s refugee’, which again draws on the trope aligning comfort and security with the suburb. The old man erupts directly between allusions to safety, provision, faith and comfort, the very bourgeois conditions that the protagonist sees as limiting her existence and her access to her own creativity. And instead, the protagonist aligns herself with the old man’s experience which is less well-comforted, and by extending her logic, more truly felt and real: she actively seeks out decay within her suburb because it affirms her own belief in both the suburb’s artifice and her own estrangement within it. This is reinforced, in part, by the final line ‘Christ, keep my anger sharp in me’, but even this reaction is complicated and ambivalent. It is at once an alienation from the wider suburb, because anger is an emotion that sets up an opposition, rather than inclusion, but also an ethical response to the very real social problems that this man and his poverty represent. Stone’s invocation here allows the suburb, comfortable and nourished as it is, to contain, and even elicit, extreme emotions, and it is also a fitting conclusion to the fable-like set-up of the opening stanzas of the poem.

Yet Stone’s theatrical gestures towards the abject operate simultaneously with an impulse towards the sublime within the poem, mostly figured through a nostalgic recollection of her childhood, in a much earlier, less developed version of the suburb. This recollection is introduced briefly in the first stanza, with the apostrophic lines:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Spirit, you heartloose scavenger,} \\
\text{bring me those mornings when I saw} \\
\text{these tangling weeds and grasses quick} \\
\text{to colour sunshine, when clear air} \\
\text{sustained the swallows’ prophesy (p.162).}
\end{align*}
\]

This ‘heartloose scavenger’ of the spirit is the actual subject of address within the poem; even though it is only referred to once, it is always present beneath the
surface (even, the façade) of the poem – and the poem is, by extension, a monologue delivered by Stone to herself, and a narrative of selfhood in the world. What Stone is recalling, though, is the suburb stripped back to its remembered past, and this past works to complicate the present suburb, and Stone’s relationship to it, because the things that she remembers there, ‘tangling weeds and grasses quick/ to colour sunshine’, ‘clear air’ and a belief that ‘all/ were loved as I was loved’, are memories of wholeness, happiness, or of what Svetlana Boym refers to as ‘a home that is both physical and spiritual’ and which exists within an ‘edenic unity’ (p.8) of self and consciousness. Unity, of course, is one thing entirely denied to Stone in her present experience of the suburb.

Boym’s claim is that all nostalgia is, at least in part, a longing for the uncomplicated nature of childhood, which exists before the equivocations of adult knowledge, experience, and alienation. What is important here is that Stone’s remembered suburb is very much a physical and spiritual home, and so her present alienation and dissatisfaction, her anger and disparagement towards the place, cannot be absolute. The suburb is porous to its own past, and both temporalities, as well as all of Stone’s reactions to it, and transformations of it, are always intermingled and undermined. Boym refers to this porosity of place as capable of ‘creat[ing] a sense of urban theatricality’ (p.77) for the way in which these various temporalities, memories and actualities, interweave and interplay, and this theatricality is integral to Stone’s poem.

Stone’s theatricality is evident in this doubling, but it relies too on the gestures towards large-scale, ‘universal’ narratives – of the sublime, of abjection, of nostalgia and alienation, narratives that she brings directly into the small suburb. So too do Stone’s biblical references – the ‘fall of sparrows’, and the invocation to Christ in the final line – as well as the parable-like quality of the poem, lend the parable-like quality of the poem, lend the suburb the weight of any mythical or biblical city. Stone’s suburb is a place where fables of injustice and spiritual longing can occur, a place that contains stories
every bit as important and large as those that happen in ancient cities and cultural centres alike. Stone’s poem uses the detail of her suburb to stage, and even re-scale and enlarge, the drama she describes, and the importance of the setting – in all of its contradictory features, impulses and emotions – is always clear. Similarly, the theatricality and unreliability of Stone’s voice always inflects the suburb, and reflects its capacity for emotional and imaginative transformation to a variety of ends.

Harwood’s pseudonym Timothy Kline draws on a different set of assumptions to Stone’s in his portrayals of suburbia. Kline was one of Harwood’s last pseudonyms, with his work first appearing in the late 1960s; a young, dandyish man of the Vietnam generation, he is full of swagger, political zeal, and a self-deceptive, youthful arrogance. Like Stone, he sees his creativity as something stymied – because of the way his society values material goods and war over art, poetry and culture, but also because of the expectations and demands that women and domesticity place upon him. For Kline, the domestic, suburban world is ruled by women and their desires for ‘magazine-type lives’ of consumer goods and household comforts. Across his oeuvre, Kline rails against the vision of 1960s suburban life that Robin Boyd describes in *Australia’s Home* as being, ‘for the male … a fruitless search for quietness and peace in the jungle of kitchen and cleaning equipment and dissatisfied children’ (1952, p.211). Klein’s vision of suburbia is deeply gendered – even more so than Miriam Stone’s – yet it is also animated by desires and dreams that are barely suppressed, and liable as a result to erupt into the spaces that might otherwise contain them.

In ‘Heat Wave, North Hobart’ (1969) Kline builds a kind of suburban tableau, set in the stultifying height of summer, in one of the most isolated cities of the world.
Kline’s poem is largely satirical, or haughty and mocking in its descriptions, but it is also riddled with a strange longing and affection; and it is remarkable for the attention it pays to the physical details of suburbia. The suburb is the very intricate set in which Kline’s characters – as mediated by the character of Kline himself – attend to their domestic rituals, and desire and dream of something elsewhere, or something more.

Most immediately impressive in this poem are the line endings, which, especially in the first stanza, continually turn back upon and undermine the conventional or expected resolutions of the small details they describe:

Crammed close against Antarctic sleet
houses that watched the clippers sail
sport multi-coloured plastic strips
as fly-traps. Gardens wear the heat
askew. Small groceries exhale
fruit softening, and fish and chips (p.216).

The wildness and exoticism of the ‘Antarctic sleet’, which Hobart exists near to, is immediately juxtaposed to the simple, inherent domesticity of ‘houses’. Kline elides the actual distance between North Hobart and Antarctica, and in doing so, brings the two spaces into an imagined alignment from the very outset of the poem. Although Antarctica doesloom large in the imagination and industry of Hobart – which serves as a home port for many scientific and commercial ventures to the south pole – it is interesting that Kline draws upon a space so extreme, so inhospitable, and so powerfully symbolic of adventure and heroic effort to immediately offset the small details of the suburb he portrays. Antarctica is also an important symbolic space for Dorothy Porter, whose characters often draw upon its landscape to echo their emotional experiences; and although Kline is doing almost the exact opposite here and undercutting the valence of the rituals he describes, by combining the domestic, respectable and knowable suburb, and the untamed wilderness of Antarctica, both poets allow the suburb to expand,
imaginatively, to contain this space and its symbolic potential, which is far larger than the suburb itself can be.

In this opening stanza, the pun on ‘sport’ undercuts any romantic connotations of ‘sail’ by diminishing the idea of sailing back to a sport, something trivial and everyday, a thing of leisure, rather than adventure. It’s important too that the houses only ‘watched’ as the clippers sailed in to North Hobart, presumably at the end of the summertime Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race, which is an event infamous for its difficulty and occasional danger. Here too, Kline’s juxtaposition ironises the suburb as a place removed from difficulty, danger and adventure, in a similar fashion to much of the criticism of the time. But the Sydney to Hobart is, importantly, also very much a ritual – even for the people who simply watch the race, which begins on the day after Christmas, one of the most highly ritualised times of the year. It is an event that repeats annually, and as such, it is a marker of time and of tradition, especially in places like North Hobart, upon which the celebrating yachtsmen and women descend at the end of each race. The adventure and extremity of the event are not distant, or disconnected, from the suburb, simply because they are experienced vicariously – if anything, they are even more important to the place and its people because they are the stuff of imagination, and dreaming or desire.

Kline, like Miriam Stone, is working with a deliberate theatricality in these opening lines. He begins the poem with a series of inversions and unsettlements, as well as glimpses of the unexpected, the humorous, the imaginary and strange that lie just beneath the physical face of the suburb. Like Stone, Kline builds up these details in a featurist kind of poetic, layering individual elements in quick succession to create his image of the suburb. But Kline’s inversions are a more pointed gesture towards the anxieties and denials that the veneer might be a defense against. The ‘plastic strips’ of the third line, which suggest celebration or ritual, are revealed to be nothing more than ‘fly traps’; similarly, the turns that
occur on ‘gardens wear the heat heat/askew’ and ‘groceries exhale/fruit’ lend strangely human actions, dressing and breathing, to the inanimate domestic accoutrements of the garden and groceries – and this personification occurs long before any actual people become present in the poem. There’s an animation to this gesture, as the odd personifications seem to hint at the life that’s present in the suburb, even if that life is overripe and tending to decay (to which ‘softening’ fruit and flies attend), and even if it is stilled by the summer heat. All of these small flourishes work to build up a suburb that is expressive and dramatic, and capable of staging a range of complex experiences and interactions.

Kline’s inversions work as a kind of cataloguing, a build-up of detail in the initial stanzas that’s almost as relentless and exhausting as the day’s heat. Here too, there is a sense of alienation: there’s no space between the details for the perspective of the speaker to be made apparent, no time for the reader to understand what is being seen. Instead, the details push the speaker, and any overt judgments he might make, aside, and it becomes apparent that one of the anxieties that they mask is the speaker’s own ambiguous discomfort within the place:

Pale men in bathing trunks come out
to hose their cars. Rivers of steam
expire on bitumen. Thickening wives
sprawl on brown grass, too hot to shout
at bickering children, while they dream
of elsewhere, magazine-type lives:

so very cool, so very dry –
silk handmade underwear, thick steak,
thin crystal, ocean at your feet,
hearty yet subtle men close by,
jewels to wear and hearts to break,
children with hearts of gold who eat
what’s put before them (p.216).

There’s no respite from this staccato detail until the fourth stanza, which introduces the ‘first cool breeze’ of early evening; even the small pause that comes where the women begin to ‘dream/ of elsewhere’ is immediately overwhelmed by
the elaborate magazine-style cataloguing of detail from their other, imagined lives, elsewhere. The speaker himself is strangely absent amidst this registry of suburban features, accoutrements and lives.

The ‘elsewhere’ that Kline’s women dream of is the object of another complicated desire that undercuts the lives of the suburb’s inhabitants, as well as Kline’s portrayal of North Hobart as a physical space. Elsewhere is an imagined space, full of things too luxurious, too valuable, too romantic, and too ‘magazine-type’ to exist within the all-too-ordinary, detail-packed, suburb. But the suburb is a lived, domestic space – as the layered details of washing cars, feeding children, and groceries remind the reader – as and such, they must be organised along more practical lines, and with the certain degree of ritual and repetition that is essential, according to Rita Felski (2000), for everyday lives to be functional. Felski argues that habit and ritual are important because they allow people easily to make the continual small decisions that make up everyday life, and to continue to meet the demands of the domestic world, but that in the discourse of modernity, which always favours change over stability, cities over suburbs, exile over home, ‘habit, sameness and routine’ have come to epitomise ‘both the comfort and the boredom of the ordinary’ (p.89). Kline’s characters wash cars and watch over children in their suburb, and they are dreaming of something different, some break from their routine, but the poet never suggests that they are dissatisfied, or longing for a life more critical, creative or transcendent – the objects of their longing, after all, are consumer goods and creature comforts.

This ‘elsewhere’ is clearly an impossible place, a fantasy of escape more from the demands of family and adult life, than from the suburb in which they are found. ‘Elsewhere’ is even figured later in the poem as ‘clouds of nowhere’ that the ‘thickening wives’ lie on when they dream. It is a non-specific site for their desires, an imagined place, and as such, it is every bit a part of the suburb, and its
emotional landscape as the gardens ‘wear[ing] the heat/ askew,’ the ‘bickering children’, the ‘something’ that ‘frets’ at the plastic strips in the houses’ doorways. This act of imagining ‘elsewhere, magazine-style lives’ brings a hidden animation to the suburb that is otherwise stilled by the heat, as well as allowing it to expand to contain these imagined experiences, spaces and luxuries as a part of the fabric of its inhabitants’ lives. But Kline is ironic in his treatment of this imagining. His listing of the small details of these desires – silk underwear, thick steak, gentle men and well-mannered children – is more inflected than his cataloguing of details from the suburb: it contains obvious oppositions, in the pairing of ‘thick steak/ thin crystal’ and strange parallels, in the close connection between ‘jewels to wear’ and ‘children with hearts of gold’ which is almost an act of reversed anthropomorphism, whereby the children become inhuman and as decorative as jewellery. The end-rhymes here are on ‘steak/break’ and ‘eat/feet’, both of which are very comic pairings. The excess and theatricality with which Kline details these desires deliberately enhances their banality, and makes them slightly ridiculous, but this is very much in keeping with his preoccupations – with bland consumerism, and culturelessness – as a pseudonym. But even Kline cannot do away with the longing inherent in these daydreams, the intensity of the emotion that they carry and bring to bear on the stagnant, stultifying suburb.

Kline’s own character, or his own voice, is most present in his portrayal of the families within North Hobart, and especially of wives, and the side-of-stage figures of children. It is the wives, after all, who are dreaming on the brown grass – itself a wonderful image of disappointed hope, a thing which did not grow – whose imaginations and desires, largely consumerist though they may be, are the basis for the second half of the poem. The women dream, importantly, of menfolk wealthier, stronger and more sensitive than their husbands, who are only described as ‘pale’ in comparison; for their part, the description of the wives as ‘thickening’ carries a strong note of disappointment, degeneration, and even
condemnation. Both parties, that is, are expected to play a certain role with in the suburb, and their attempts to do so, as well as their projected desires and expectations, mean that their experience of the space is never easy, never comfortable, and never static.

Similarly, the children in the poem either bicker, or figure in the imaginations of the women as another kind of impossible accoutrement, fantastically polite and well-mannered, eating ‘what’s put before them’: even they are expected to play a kind of role, or fit to a certain social code. When the weather changes – and some of the pent-up emotion of the poem is released – the change is registered in the children being ‘disciplined’, a phrase which completes the enjambed line ‘old ritual debts/ paid off.’ In this construction, children and debts are directly aligned, there’s a sense that they are both a part of the contract of suburbia, abstract things upon which the suburban home is predicated: there will be a mortgage and there will be children, and both are a long-term commitment (or burden). Indeed, Cassandra Atherton sees the lethargy in ‘Heat Wave, North Hobart’ as a symptom of frustration in the family and the suburb alike, as the men and women both see their ‘energy and passion … consumed by the need to sustain and support a family’ (2006, p.155). The children are a vaguely-seen obligation, only mentioned in passing as creatures that need to be trained and fed – and who frustrate the desires and expectations of their parents, just as each parent frustrates the expectations of the other.

This description of domesticity as inevitable disappointment, as a forced kind of settling for something less than, and at the expense of, ambition and desires that still operate across the suburb, becomes all the more interesting, however, when read in the context of Timothy Kline’s poems as a whole. As a character, Kline is obsessed with frustration, and with what he sees as the stultifying side-effects of the conservative, consumerist society – embodied in suburban family life – that he wants to tear down. Kline’s poems include the 1968
poem ‘Poet to Peasant,’ in which a male poet asks his younger lover, ‘Woman, what do you want of me?’ and warns ‘I know a thousand ways of loving./ None of them is yours’ (p.205), as well as the 1968 satire ‘From A Young Writer's Diary,’ (pp.203-204) in which the ambitious but painfully slow, procrastinating writing work of a male poet is contrasted with the frenetic activity of his dowdy but desiring landlady, Frau Schmidt. In these poems the demands of domesticity, marriage, children, and making a living thwart the ambitions of men. Across Kline’s oeuvre, women ask too much of men, both materially and spiritually, and so stifle their ambitions and creative energies – it is women who are to blame for the creation of the kind of depoliticised, gadget-ridden, lawn-mowing suburban man that Allan Ashbolt decried in his ‘Godzone’ essay – women who are dissatisfied enough in North Hobart to dream of and long for ‘magazine-style lives’. Kline’s vision of domesticity, interestingly, is almost a direct inversion of Miriam Stone’s – whose poems centre on the ways in which domestic drudgery, housework, and the demands of men impede the creativity and desires of suburban women. Role-playing, then, as well as a certain discomfort with the expectations of respectability and sociability, are important to all of Harwood’s pseudonyms, and all of her depictions of life within the suburbs. There is always a longing that exists alongside belonging, just as comfort coexists with restlessness, love with resentment, routines with transcendence.

In ‘Heat Wave, North Hobart’, the desire and longing always present in the suburb becomes most acute at the point upon which the poem turns, the line ‘all will be/ possible’ in the fourth stanza. This is the first line in the poem not in the present tense, and a very direct reference to something bigger, more encompassing than the very specific, featurist images that have preceded it. Even within this suburb, stilled by summer heat and deadening expectation alike, there is
possibility, and it is a possibility that can encase all things. This line is reinforced by the near-repetition of ‘All shall be changed’ in the final lines of the poem:

All shall be changed, old ritual debts
paid off, the children disciplined.
From stifling summer slips
the weight of day, as something frets
the plastic strips – a breath of wind?
Children are sent for fish and chips (p.216).

‘All’ things are present, possible, and evolving within the suburb, ‘all’ things are augured here on the wind, on the cool breeze, the ‘breath’ of air that revives and revivifies the heat-struck suburb. Yet the change is barely registered physically, and is only noticeable in the ‘fret[ting]’ of the plastic strips, which, like the fish and chips that end the poem, are repeated from the very beginning of the poem. This too is followed immediately by a reference to ‘old ritual debts’. Ritual, recursion and repetition are, in this poem, very much a part of the suburb, but they exist alongside and at the same time as change. Kline’s suburb is large enough, complex enough, to contain both of these dynamics, and it is partly the tension between them – between ritual and change, enervation and desire, comfort and longing – that animates the poem.

‘Who would trouble// to flesh the unstaged reality/ of Kröte’s dreams?’

Suburbia is also commonly the setting for art, or the backdrop against which it happens, in Harwood’s (also pseudonymous) sequence of poems that centre on the character of Professor Kröte. Kröte first appeared in Harwood’s published work in 1968, although the first poem of the sequence probably dates from around 1961; the first poems were originally attributed to Francis Geyer, according to Hoddinott and Kratzmann (2003). The Kröte sequence predates that which concerns the more diabolical Professor Eisenbart, who first appeared in
1963. It has also garnered far less critical attention than the sequence centered on Professor Eisenbart, possibly because of the different scale of the creation and destruction that the two sequences thematise: Kröte's creativity is his musicianship; his destructive impulses only turn back against himself. Eisenbart's creativity, however, has resulted in the invention of a new kind of bomb, capable of destroying the world – he is very much an Oppenheimer-like figure. Eisenbart's concerns are global and political whereas Kröte is operating on a scale that is always local – even suburban – and personal.

The Kröte poems are also stylistically simpler than the Eisenbart sequence, and are structured, according to Hoddinott, in accordance with the 'clarity and directness of the German Lieder' that he is often forced to play at parties and dinners in the suburbs (p.115). This directness has seen some critics, like Chris Wallace-Crabbe, dismiss the poems as 'pointless' or 'crass' (1968, p.264), yet both of the professor sequences are satirical, theatrical stagings of the clash between the ideals and the high, middle-European culture that both characters embody (which is even explicitly referenced in their Germanic names: ‘Eisenbart’ translates as ‘ice-beard' and refers to a German folk song about a doctor capable of performing medical miracles, whereas ‘Kröte’ simply translates as ‘toad’), and the Australian suburbs in which they now find themselves. Bonny Cassidy (2007) argues that both the Eisenbart and Kröte sequences allow Harwood to satirise Romantic ideals about artistry and genius – and that it is for this reason that both characters have such overdetermined, Germanic names. Just as Harwood’s pseudonyms allow her to comment on the assumptions and discourses around gender, domesticity, marriage and even knowledge, the professors allow her to mock established ideals around artistic practice, creativity and virtuosity. Domestic situations, suburban social rituals, or interactions with mothers, children and, in Eisenbart’s case, his red-haired mistress, often function to undercut and undermine the often inflated, grandiose visions both professors have of themselves and their work. But Kröte is
a more interesting figure here because he has failed in his ambition, his genius, and his work (Eisenbart has only failed as a human being). As such, he is left to play drunk and furious recitals for pretentious suburbanites and bitchy academics, and to give piano lessons to their untalented children from beneath a plaster bust of Beethoven, while a singing student caterwauls in the next rented room.

Kröte’s experience of suburbia – in the early poems at least – is one of self-loathing and rage. He is furious at the constructedness and falseness he sees around him, at the veneers and decorative houses, where the polite, civil and clean faces of the people he performs for hide their ignorance and base desires, and where their interest in the arts is mostly a pretext for gossip and petty scandal. Kröte is painfully lonely and awkward in this environment, and it is very much from his own discomfort that his early fury and disparagement come. Kröte’s derision of his suburban milieu is at its most intense in one of the first poems in the sequence, the 1968 poem ‘At the Arts Club’, which describes an evening performance that Kröte gives for just such an uninspiring audience, in a suburban house.

The house is described from the first lines of the poem as a featurist nightmare – with Kröte performing against a background of ‘knick-knacks,’ ‘geegaws’ and later, an ‘ill-placed ornament’:

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Kröte is drunk, but can still play
Knick-knacks in shadow-boxes wink
at geegaws while he grinds away
at Brahms, not much the worse for drink.

The hostess pats her tinted curls (p.113).
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Even the hostess is disguised beneath her lacquered, tinted curls, which are themselves a kind of artificial, decorative veneer. Similarly, the other members of Kröte’s audience, when they are distinguished from the crowd at all, are represented by single, metonymic details – ginger pearls, a tenor voice. This is mostly indicative of Kröte’s own disregard for the people for whom he is playing –
he despises them so much, and sees himself as so different from them, that he does not see them as individuals, or even people. Instead, he focuses on the layers of small features with which they decorate themselves. But Kröte’s features, unlike those described by Robin Boyd, are not simple signifiers of ugliness and superficiality; they are highly theatrical, exaggerated details, even details which accrue into a kind of grotesque caricature. Kröte’s details are small items that expressively ‘wink’ at each other, right across the poem, to create a scene that is as over-full of colour, movement, sound and drama as it is of attitude. The features Kröte picks out may be crass or tacky or overdone, but they are always lively, and the façades he describes are only hollow because they are stage sets.

Kröte is operating within an aesthetic of the geegaw, drawing on a superabundance of small details and decorative frills to reflect what he sees as the full absurdity of his situation. Indeed, within this saturated suburban house, Kröte chooses to play a theme and variations, replete with repeats, trills, and ‘odd manipulations’ – a musical form that has decorative features embedded in its very structure. And to these, ‘with malice [he] adds some more, his own/ and plays all the repeats right through.’ Kröte’s performance, and the Brahms work itself, display the same artificial, featurist aesthetics as the hostess’s house and her curled hair. But the performance is also interesting because of the doubled nature of the satire that it introduces. No one in the audience picks up on Kröte’s additions to the canonical piece of music, but no one is impolite enough to mention that Kröte has broken the social code of the evening (and deliberately), by playing something long and difficult. The fact that this piece of music – his choice – is very much in keeping with the aesthetic of the suburban house and its visitors, also means that the distaste with which Kröte looks down upon the scene, and any judgments he makes on it and its inhabitants, are deeply flawed and self-deceiving – he is as much a part of this world as any other character, yet it is only he who refuses to engage with it.
But Kröte is refigured, in the second-last stanza of the poem, into a ‘sacred clown’ – a description that is suddenly much larger, almost universal in scale, compared to the knick-knacks and small details that have so far dominated the poem:

Sober, Kröte’s inclined to gloom.  
Drunk, he becomes a sacred clown.  
He puffs and pounds and shakes the room.  
An ill-placed ornament falls down (p.113).

Kröte has, in both his actions and appearance, become increasingly dramatic and forceful as the poem progresses; here, he finally ‘puffs and pounds’ enough to make the very room shake, as if the force and fury of his music has overtaken the building itself. But there’s a strange ambivalence to Kröte’s actions and descriptions across this progression, one that is echoed in the near-contradiction within the term ‘sacred clown’. Kröte is foolish, but he is so precisely because he sees himself as the only person in the room who is truly connected to the sacredness of art.

Most obviously, Kröte’s choice of music for the performance – the Brahms theme and variation – is not at all in keeping with occasion: ‘[h]e was expected to perform a waltz/ or something short and sweet’. He is also drunk – as the opening line of the poem states, making Kröte’s drunkenness the very first detail of orientation within the poem. Kröte has upset the expectations of his audience and their social conventions, and he has done this perversely, almost vindictively, because he refuses to recognise that he is not giving the kind of grand recital to which he feels he was destined, not playing in a concert hall, but at the invitation of a suburban neighbour in her own home. Kröte acts with ‘malice’, furthermore, and delights in the suffering his extra variations cause his audience (‘They suffer. Kröte knows they do’). He has brought his own unexpected, chaotic drama to the evening, because he sees himself as someone meant for something larger, greater, more than the everyday, suburban existence he now has.
But it’s also important that this ambition, as much as it makes Kröte comical and delightfully nasty, also makes him into something of a figure of pity, both in this poem and the sequence as a whole. Kröte’s genius, we are always aware, is dubious – as dubious as his trills. He is described as ‘grind[ing] away’ at the piece he is playing, even before he ‘puffs and pounds’; in later poems, the loneliness that he feels, as both an exile and an outsider within his new suburban setting, moves gradually to the foreground and sharpens within his own awareness. In ‘At the Arts Club’, Kröte as a figure is exaggerated and grotesque, and so too is his narration – and, as a result of this, so is the suburban audience it describes. But Kröte does not escape his own satire – he is condemned, both alongside and by the judgments that he seems to pass on others.

Kröte’s despairing, belittling attitude towards suburbia resembles the approach that Robin Gerster identifies in his essay ‘Gerrymander’ as a failure to engage properly with the place and its people out of a fear of mediocrity, of being everyday, mundane, or all-too-ordinary, just like the features of the suburb that are so despised. ‘They [writers] shrink from close encounters with the suburbanites,’ Gerster writes, ‘perhaps because they are afraid of seeing an image of themselves’ (p.566), an image that, by being so ordinary, is diametrically opposed to any Romantic vision of an artist as a genius, or as a person somehow set apart by a special sensitivity or sensibility. Instead, Gerster argues, satire and dismissal become ‘convenient refuges’ from this fear, and they are the only way that many writers are able to engage with the suburb at all. Kröte’s distaste towards, and even sly abuse of, his audience is born of just this kind of displacement of the terrible mediocrity he both fears and dislikes most within himself – and the mediocrity, or failure, of Kröte’s genius is always made apparent across the poems.
With this in mind, it is striking to consider the suburbanites in this poem as a kind of imagined counterpoint to Kröte, his music and his fearful righteousness. Kröte sees music as sacred, as a higher kind of consolation, but it is one which leaves his audience unmoved – they have come to the arts club as a kind of pretense of higher sensibilities, but as Kröte plays, they only yawn or flirt amongst themselves (‘a bitch in black, with ginger pearls/ squeez[es] the local tenor’s knee’) and think of the supper that is slowly growing cold while Kröte ‘plays all the repeats right through’. They think only, that is, of the more basic desires of love and hunger, sex and food, of their own physical and bodily dramas that continue to exist as Kröte showcases his dubious art. It’s interesting too that this flirtation, between the figures that Kröte dubs ‘Tenor and Ginger Pearls’, finally comes to fruition in the lines which form the end of the poem: they ‘perhaps/ for ever, boldly sneak away.’ ‘For ever’, of course, implies an endurance, an importance to this moment in the lives of these characters that’s much larger than the contained narrative and single evening of the poem. As in ‘Suburban Sonnet’ the physical, basic, everyday and suburban co-exist with music and art; they are competing but simultaneously compelling forces, and neither is raised above the other. Importantly, the final stanza of the poem includes the line ‘there’s still the fugue to play.’ Subject and counter-subject are both present here, so too the mundane and the profound, and they are yet to be finally resolved.

As a sequence, however, the Kröte poems develop beyond this early satire and self-delusion, as Kröte’s emotions, alongside his awareness, gradually become more complex. As the poems progress, Kröte’s derision of the suburbanites that surround him becomes tinged, at times, with great affection and despair, as he encounters a wide range of characters, and as he and they both age. We see Kröte drinking on a beach and harassed by stentorian suburban mothers and their precocious, bratty children, or railing against the in-jokes and intrigues of the
stuffy academics with whom he’d wished to find fellowship, or a community of exiled geniuses, we see him tortured by the ham fists of his uninspiring students. Yet the poems also show him gripped by intense loneliness and frustrated desire when he encounters lovers in a park, by loss and a longing for redemption when he faces children, and by fear and a desolation when he wrestles with illness and encroaching age and when he is coming to terms with his own limitations and failures, especially his own failure to make connections with other people. Despite despising Tenor and Ginger Pearls for pursuing their bold lust before art, Kröte slowly comes to recognise that his fierce and exclusive pursuit of art has cost him any chance of escaping his own loneliness, and this recognition is charted in part in his changing plaints. In the very first poem in which he appears, in which Kröte plays ‘the worst of Liszt’ for another coiffed hostess, he cries ‘Ach Himmel was I born for this?’ (p.118); by the ultimate poem of the sequence, the 1981 poem ‘Silver Swan’ this plaint has become ‘Is loneliness a gift that I / was born with, like my perfect pitch?’ (p.355). These outbursts are highly theatrical, but as uncontained and even indecorous expressions, they become, just like Kröte’s bitter criticism and derision, wider ranging, and turn inwards as the sequence progresses. It is not suburbia that has limited him, Kröte slowly realises, but he himself.

The final poem in the Kröte sequence, ‘Silver Swan’, is interesting because of the way in which it interacts with Miriam Stone’s suburban sonnets, and in particular, because of the different angle at which it approaches the same kind of housewife protagonist that Stone portrays in her poems. The aged Kröte, in ‘Silver Swan’, is visiting a music museum, and encounters one of his former pupils, once a mildly talented, but luminous young girl, who was also his only visitor when he was fever-ridden in hospital (in the 1968 poem ‘Fever’ (p.139)). The girl too, is older, now a dowdy, disappointed housewife with a rude child and no time
for her music – very similar, that is, to the protagonist of ‘Suburban Sonnet’.

Standing before an exhibited piano, this woman states:

‘The first time
I saw this instrument I thought
of you,’ she says. ‘I love this room.
It’s years now since I played a note.
Children, and housework – well, it’s grim.

‘Sometimes I come in here to dream
in silence – an automaton
standing still in a music room.
How strange that we should meet again!
How I loved you when I was young.
I’d often get my fingering wrong

‘just to get you to hold my hand.
I had a schoolgirl crush on you.’ (pp.355-356).

Her intermittently lyrical speech is interrupted abruptly with the line ‘The child
fidgets and sniffs.’ The child brings her back from memory, longing and thoughts
about her music, to the present and to her role and duties as a mother. This
speech is also interesting for the way in which the woman dramatises a symbolic
alignment between herself and her surroundings, just like the woman in
‘Suburban Sonnet’ – although this time the figuration is much more overt and
intentional, as well as unambiguous. This woman identifies herself with ‘an
automaton/ standing still in a music room’ (p.356), that is, with the mechanical
silver swan of the poem’s title, and she maintains this imagined alignment
throughout the poem. The woman describes this swan, in a later stanza, with
‘Well, it carries on,’/[…] ‘it moves its wings/ and neck and head. But never sings.’
It’s a terrible vision of disappointment and entrapment, as well as of the kind of
almost-robotic role-playing that domesticity has pressed upon this woman, an
aimless flapping about and voicelessness – an inability to sing or practise music,
but also, by implication, to speak.

However, Kröte’s seemingly simple response, ‘swans sing only when
they’re dying’ complicates the woman’s vision, and is testament too to the changes
that he himself has undergone across the sequence. The swan’s song, since it is so
rare an occurrence, is a moment of transcendence; but to long for song, as this woman does, is to long for something dangerous, in this case, lethal, something beyond the stability and endurance of the everyday. Kröte remembers the girl who became this woman as having ‘practised till [her] fingers bled’; there’s a complexity to this line, as it suggests that this woman’s music always came at a cost, always involved suffering. Yet it points also to the routine (or even chore) of practising – an act that is mundane and necessarily repetitious, like any domestic task, yet is necessary to pursue any kind of art, even though this is not acknowledged in Romantic conceptions of art and creative genius. It is this kind of practice that the woman no longer has time for (unlike the woman in ‘Suburban Sonnet’). Her fingers do not bleed any more, and her physical pain has been replaced with a spiritual one. Both with and without her music, in the realms of both the artistic and the domestic, that is, she suffers, and her emotions and imagination are similarly at work across them both.

But the woman in this poem also serves as a visible contrast, a counter-subject, to the figure of Kröte himself. Before running into his old pupil, Kröte has been looking at an exhibited piano with a cabinet built into its frame, imagining that it was made for him, in a delightful piece of hubris – especially because the cabinet seems most fitting because of the ‘brandy and glasses’ (p.355) installed on its shelves, perfect for the raging alcoholic that Kröte has become. This vision involves Kröte imagining himself as someone important or famous enough to have his personal furniture displayed in a music museum – Kröte still has these flights of fancy in his old age, although they are never untinged now with regret and loss. He goes on to imagine the craftsman as ‘a cabinet-maker born, not made,/ like a child with perfect pitch’; someone as gifted as he himself is – the alignment is made obvious here on a syntactical level. Yet Kröte quickly moves beyond this almost-habitual reflection on his own genius. Encountering the woman, after all,
reminds him that he was a teacher, not a composer; he is startled that she ‘finds him old’ (p.356) and is no longer infatuated with or intimidated by him. The woman’s revelation of her ‘schoolgirl crush’ reveals to Kröte that he did have some stature or notoriety, some power and importance within his suburb that he could not recognise at the time for his own rage and righteousness, or simply because it was smaller and quieter than the ambition he held for himself. What Kröte is finally left to consider, as the woman leaves to attend to her crying child, is his own loneliness, that final ‘gift that [he]/ was born with’; what Kröte is left with, as he stands alone before the mechanical swan, is regret, a knowledge that ‘that time’, the time when he was an important part of this woman’s life, even when she loved him, ‘is gone from time forever.’

Kröte has lived his life, unlike the woman, chasing his music, his genius, the elusive transcendence that they might both offer; and while the woman feels stifled and dulled by the ‘children and housework’ that now take up her time and energy, Kröte is left tragically and despairingly alone. Kröte and the woman, then, offer two models of what happens when the suburban and everyday and the transcendent and artistic, are kept separate. Neither one nor the other was enough for either character; instead, for both of them, the exclusion of one kind of comfort or consolation has been the tragedy of their lives. Interestingly, this is again registered in the poem as a dramatised plaint, ‘something cries from the past, Alas!’ (p.357). This time, however, the cry both comes from the past, rather than the present, and from the ‘light voice’ of the woman, rather than Kröte himself. It is a loss that belongs to both Kröte and the woman, to the subject and counter-subject, who were both unable to reconcile the ordinary and domestic, and the artistic and transcendent, within their lives.

This is very much in keeping with Harwood’s vision of suburbia across her poems. Harwood’s suburb is a space that places many demands on its inhabitants, that requires them to play any number of roles, but it is precisely this complexity
that makes it interesting, or that lends it its emotional and imaginative intricacy.

Art and domesticity can and must coexist, even if the cohabitation is often difficult and riddled with contradiction, because both depend upon, and generate desire, longing, loss and love, as well as frustration, fury and despair.

‘While the suburbs twinkle around you’: Domesticity as respite

*I’ll tell you how things are*

*in words that will really astound you […]*

*while the suburbs twinkle around you*

*and the ribs of water gleam* — ‘Let Sappho Have the Singing Head’ (p.325)

The poems that Harwood claimed authorship over from the beginning differ from those written in her ‘operatic’ voices in the way they present suburbia and suburban lives. Instead of dramatising the frustrations and desires of individual characters as they move through a specific suburb, these poems offer a quieter, or less contested vision of suburbia, as the place from which things happen – be they painful, poetic, transcendent; the stage on which the narratives of art and life play out. A number of critics, including Jennifer Strauss (1979) and Sarah Goldsby-Smith (2014) emphasise the sacramental quality of these poems, arguing that the poems find grace, or something spiritual, in the everyday, especially in the body and in acts of humility and servitude, the very kinds of acts that constitute much domestic life. Goldsby-Smith argues that because Harwood’s poetry often relies upon bringing ‘metaphysical thought together with musical experience’, her work ties together ‘the cosmic and the bodily’ (p.2), the semantic and the sensual, and insists that ‘the only way of knowing anything divine is through the earthy signs at our fingertips’ (p.10). Similarly, Strauss states that many of Harwood’s poems are essentially about ‘the wonder of art’ (p.345) as a means of revalidating the familiar and everyday, and of acknowledging the divine and numinous within them.

Harwood’s knowledge of biblical texts and interest in religion is obvious across her
oeuvre. She grew up in a Catholic household, briefly trained as a nun, and even attributes much of her musicianship to playing the organ at her family’s church as a young woman. Nonetheless, her interest in this kind of everyday transcendence is more important for the way in which it both claims the suburb as a site of spiritual and artistic fulfillment, as well as struggle, and manipulates the scale of the space and the stories that it holds.

Alison Hoddinott views Harwood’s mixing of the everyday and the numinous, of small suburban stories and grand metaphysical thought, as the defining feature of her work, and links it to processes of memory and self-definition, rather than to a more traditional, sacramental view of transcendence and grace. Hoddinott quotes a 1980 interview in which Harwood described her own process as ‘tak[ing] something concrete and mov[ing] through thought and imagination to abstract reality’ (p.249), and argues that this process is a reaching for a way of making something more permanent out of the transient experience of the flesh. This reaching is also a striving for something more mysterious and powerful beyond the limits of the physical world, the place and space that the speaker inhabits, and it is poetry that comes closest to fulfilling both of these desires, for something more permanent, and more powerful. In this way, poetry comes to be central to the domestic, the ordinary and the suburban realms.

The ‘something concrete’ that Harwood takes as a starting point is very often a home, a garden, a family, or a suburban friendship, and as such, the suburb figures frequently as the small and quiet site from which Harwood’s poetry quickly expands outwards. At times, this is playful, or an almost formulaic structural device: the 1988 suite of poems ‘Class of 1927’, for example, uses the specific suburban architectural detail of slate (itself another Boydian façade) as the trigger for four linked narrative poems, based semi-autobiographically and jokingly on Harwood’s schoolgirl experiences. The suite begins, irreverently (and certainly theatrically) with the stanza:
Quite often in some trendy quarter  
the passion to redecorate  
those areas condensed with water  
results in an expanse of slate.  
Cork tiling’s warmer, vinyl’s neater.  
Slate’s forty dollars to the metre.  
In kitchen, laundry, loo, I see  
the stuff the State School gave us free,  
and very soon my morbid, chronic  
nostalgia swells to recreate  
slate-pencil’s piercing squeal on slate,  
beloved of all those bored, demonic  
infants whose purpose was to make  
mischief purely for mischief’s sake … (p.365).

This is a very literal use of the concrete (or slate-like) and the physical as a base  
from which the poem is built, and its tongue-in-cheek satire of aspirational  
suburbia (with its ‘passion to redecorate’ with materials that are not necessarily  
practical or functional) quickly gives way to more poignant, bittersweet memories  
of childhood and childhood friends (beautifully introduced here by the double-rhyme on ‘morbid, chronic’ and ‘bored, demonic’), and especially of small cruelties  
and mistakes made in adolescence that cannot be undone. The reference to  
‘morbid, chronic/ nostalgia’ is, furthermore, a self-satirical nod towards the kind  
of gesture in Harwood’s poetry that Hoddinott describes – drawing on memory  
and the attempt to preserve it to illuminate the present and the passing.

More often, however, the impulse behind this telescoping is similar to the  
intense emotion – the frustration, the striving and complex and competing love  
and despair that lay siege to Miriam Stone, Timothy Kline and the blundering,  
blustering Professor Kröte, even though this impulse is usually far less furious or  
extreme. Instead, the poems are driven by an interest in, and an honouring of, the  
far-reaching consequences – emotional and metaphysical alike – in the quiet  
events, habits and encounters of our everyday environments. ‘To Another Poet’, a  
1968 poem, charts a narrative of pain and grief in a domestic, suburban experience  
– the kind of narrative that recurs across Miriam Stone’s poems and the Kröte  
sequence alike. But the art that coexists here, and the comfort that the protagonist
finds both through it, and within the space itself, are far less contested – Harwood
is not using the poem to prove the necessity of their coexistence. So too is the
protagonist's relationship to her creativity far more humble than that of any of
Harwood's pseudonyms or dramatic characters. The poem opens:

I hold in the same thought
a pain now bearable
and what could not be borne.
This evening out of time
we talk: the world is changed
never to be remade
of its old heaviness (p.180).

The setting for this poem is a suburban home – although this is not made obvious
until the second stanza, and is only indirectly mentioned by the line 'this usual
room' (p.181) in the fourth. Yet the room, the house, are almost immediately set
up as a space strange and magical – it exists, on this evening 'out of time', and it is
a space from which 'the world is changed', and for the better, as well as one in
which two poets meet, and in which each finds solace in the other's company,
conversation and creativity.

This notion of holding spaces, or evenings like these 'out of time' or
beyond time is something that Susan Schwartz sees as 'emblematic' (1996, p.236)
in Harwood's poetry. Schwartz also argues that this gesture relies on a very
Romantic vision of transcendence, and on the transcendent power and purpose of
art. But it's more interesting to contrast this evening out of time with the various
memories, desires and 'elsewhens' of Timothy Kline's and Miriam Stone's poems:
in 'To Another Poet' there is no longing for a time to come or desire to return to
time lost. That is, Harwood's disruption of time in this poem is not predicated on
nostalgia or a dream of a different future; nor is it a Romantic longing for
childhood experience or time of the kind that is more commonly associated with
depictions of suburbia. Rather, the evening is 'out of time' precisely because the
speaker is wholly present, in the moment and in time, and the poem is an attempt
to hold on to something important and enduring, and to a sense of human
connection and love, which occurs within the most mundane of places, and which
arguably could not occur with the same intensity or significance in any other
setting.

Yet the room within the suburban house in which this poem takes place is
also kept strangely static – and this is a part of its magic, and its imagined
transformation. It is first glimpsed from ‘beyond the glass’ (p.180), through a very
obvious frame that heightens the intimacy of the poem because the perspective is
– in this first instance, at least – very much from the outside, just as the reader is
inevitably outside of the direct address (the protagonist speaks directly to the
other poet). This initial perspective into the room is inhuman, focalised through
an unknown ‘something’ that ‘look[s]/ through stillness’ into the house. The poem
sets up a palimpsest, or another kind of theatrical stage set, which again lends it a
sense of pageantry or allegory, or even a simple staginess, that elevates it into the
imagined, the aesthetic or artistic.

After this initial looking in through the window, the room in which this
poem takes place rapidly expands. It grows and spills imaginatively out beyond its
walls, a movement that is almost directly opposed to looking in – the perspective
moves out to encase the wider world, instead of narrowing down through a
window. The childrens’ play, which the unknown ‘something’ witnesses within
the room, figures large enough to ‘bespeak our century’; their toy soldiers are a
microcosm of entire armies, entire countries, while the two poets discuss
‘enduring themes’ – themes that persist across space and time, and which are,
Harwood hints, universal. By the final stanza, furthermore, the ‘usual room’
(p.181) has become ‘a place, a field, a world’ for both the conversing poets and the
children, and their games and imaginations; in the list-like construction of the
sentence, the progressively bigger spaces are imaginatively held together, and
allowed to coexist. These gestures are flamboyant and wide-reaching in their
emotion and expressivity; and they also work to align the children’s imagination and the adults’ poetry, as things which operate along the same lines, reaching out from and beyond their familiar room into the limitless wider world, into something bigger and more unknowable, even into some kind of cosmic ‘orbit,’ an image which is embedded in the poem’s final lines. Harwood’s vision of the domestic world here is of something inherently and endlessly transformable, and imagination and creativity are forces that operate in all human lives, and at all stages of human life, as she allows the physical space of the suburban home to expand and contract to suit the imaginative needs of its inhabitants.

But what’s also interesting here is the way in which the speaker’s frustration and pain is positioned – as something great, certainly, but not unusual, and also non-specific in its source or direction. The pain within this poem is never named or made personal; instead it too is rendered allegorical, or almost universal. Unlike Miriam Stone’s personal plaint ‘Christ, keep my anger sharp in me,’ (p.162) Kröte’s ‘Ach Himmel, was I borne for this?’ (p.118), and even Francis Geyer’s disembodied and somewhat cold damnations and satires, Harwood here describes a pain that is just like any of the other ‘enduring themes’ (p.180) that the two poets discuss: the fact that ‘no life is made/ of manageable stuff,’ that there is no one way to ‘paraphrase the world.’ This pain is not that of a genius frustrated by the banality of her circumstances, as the pains of Harwood’s various pseudonyms frequently are; the creativity here figures as thinking, talking and writing, which ‘gather together’ and are ‘stirred to life’ within the space, and so are a force of hope and consolation. Instead, the pain in this poem is just that of a person, not terribly unlike other people, who sees in her own personal dramas and emotions an echo of those of the wider world.

The speaker’s frustrations, like her joys, are changeable and transient, and intermingled with this pain: a ‘pain now bearable’ exists alongside one that could
not be borne; so too does the speaker state ‘Today’s love must sustain/ today.’ The speaker’s very specific world, her own unnamed griefs and joys, are the backbone of this poem, but the universal, the general or communal are constantly aligned with them. The speaker’s domestic experiences are never seen as something cut off from the world, or unimportant to it. This is evident in Harwood’s manipulation of space and scale: even as the poem both expands and contracts space, the inverse of this universalising impulse is also at play, and the poem ends with the very ordinary, habitual and domestic line, ‘we smile and say goodnight.’ (p.181) This line, too, occurs directly after an image that is cosmic and of the universe – an ‘orbit:’

... I gather 
nourishment from another 
mind that seeks, and follows 
an orbit like my own. 
We smile and say goodnight (p.181).

This sense of the communal, and of communality and conversation, is reinforced by the address of the poem, which is established even in its title. The poem is a direct address, and is spoken almost entirely in the first person plural – ‘we’ occurs almost twice as frequently as ‘I’ across the poem, and many sentences are formed in the passive voice, omitting the pronoun altogether. While this use of the plural is to be expected in what is set up almost as an epistolary poem, it is also a form of dramatic address, which works again to reach outwards, both towards the addressee and towards a more general, encompassing ‘we’, because the reader cannot help but be imaginatively implicated in this plural pronoun. The reader is positioned differently here than in the poems of Harwood’s pseudonyms or dramatic characters, no longer watching North Hobart from on high, or witnessing a set tableau of chaotic domesticity, no longer laughing with and at the ‘sacred clown’ (p.133) playing for an absurd bourgeoisie. Instead, the reader is aligned with both the speaker and the other poet she addresses, witness to their
very intimate exchange, and to both the ‘nourishment’ and ‘tyrannic grief’ within this particular suburban home. So there is a strange play happening here between intimacy and exposure, between the private space of the utterance and conversation and the public space of the published poem. The suburb becomes a site of the social, and of sociability, both as these two poets experience it, and as all ordinary people do too; it is a mixed site, at once intensely personal and shared, and the great friendships and moments of love, the frustrations and griefs that occur within in it are all the more remarkable, perhaps greater in magnitude and intensity for the fact that they unfold within all-too ‘usual’ rooms.

**Far distant suburbs shine/ with great simplicities: Luminous suburbia**

Far distant suburbs shine
with great simplicities.
Birds crowd in flowering trees,
sunset exalts its known
symbols of transience. – ‘Father and Child II: Nightfall’ (p.277).

Suburbia also figures across Harwood’s oeuvre as a site of memory, especially because it is the most frequently recurring setting for the poems which draw on anecdotes, short scenes and memories from the poet’s own childhood. In these poems, Harwood often draws on the concrete and physical – details from a garden, descriptions of household chores or schoolmates – and imbues them with a sense of the emblematic, or even mythical. This is very much in keeping with Romantic discourse, in which childhood always figures as a luminous, innocent time and a time of imagination and awe – and it is the work of the poet to recapture this wonder, to imbue it back into the adult world. Harwood has made no secret of the fact that she considered herself ‘A capital-R Romantic,’ (cited West, 2015, n.p.) but in these poems, memories and early experiences (which mostly unfold in the suburbs of Brisbane) are important because they exist outside
of time, or seem somehow formative. Their wonder often relies less on innocence (many are about childhood mischief, undertaken by ‘a devil in lavender crochet’ (p.283)) than on things half-understood but deeply-felt, things which, as Hoddinott puts it, exist beyond ‘a purely materialist and rationalist view of the universe’ (p.43), within is the space, that is, where most of Harwood’s poetry, regardless of its temporality or attribution, takes place.

Harwood’s poems about childhood memories reflect the poet’s interest in moments or early experiences that are beyond language and time – some centre on a child’s terror of dusk ‘stealing’ (p.247) the day, or on opportunities missed or not fully appreciated because their extraordinariness was not recognised amidst the wider enchantment of childhood. Others centre on a sense of wonder at everyday phenomena, lost now that science or language can explain them, or they treasure small domestic rituals that have been lost to obsolescence over the years. The 1975 poem ‘The Blue Pagoda’, for example, speaks of ‘the mysteries of refraction’ (p.260) that cause an exotic and very foreign kind of building, a ghostly pagoda, to appear within a cube of that most suburban of objects, the carbolic washing soap Reckitt’s Blue; ‘The Secret Life of Frogs’ revolves around mysterious overheard adult conversations misunderstood by the unknowing child:

We knew about Poor George, who cried
if any woman touched her hair.
He’d been inside a brothel when
the Jerries came inside and started shooting
(We thought a brothel was a French
hotel that served hot broth to diggers.)
The girl that he’d been with was scalped.
Every Frog in the house was killed.

Well, that was life for frogs. At school
the big boys blew them up and spiked them (p.331).

‘The Secret Life of Frogs’ is remarkable for the way in which it captures a vernacular, and by extension hints towards larger social attitudes and stories that the child-narrator does not quite comprehend. Words like ‘Jerries’ and, of course,
the ‘Frog’ upon which the whole poem turns, are signifiers too of a time and place and social set that recur across many of Harwood’s poems about suburban childhood, and which are also always portrayed with a complex combination of satire and fondness, cheekiness and tenderness, held together. More importantly, this poem explicitly links the small cruelties of childhood – spiking frogs – with the much larger violence of the wider world. At the same time, its overheard narrative is both global and extraordinary in its scale and violence; the worldly experiences of ‘Poor George’ (just like those of Harwood’s pseudonymous exiles and displaced professors) are very much a part of the fabric of the provincial Brisbane suburb in which this poem takes place.

Harwood’s poems about childhood are nostalgic, and see the suburb as a place of wonder, illumination and imagination, but also of cruelty, magic, and dark risk. These are, for Harwood, the conditions of childhood experience, and the suburb becomes such a powerful site for nostalgia because it is the space in which such early experiences unfold – and a space separate from the adult world of labour and routine work, as well as loss and doubt. The childhood suburb for Harwood is also always a site of personal significance – and this is usually overtly stated in the poems. David McCooey points out that writing about childhood memory is ‘inherently mythological’ (1996, p.46) and always allegorical, because it pins down narratives of childhood through which adult experience and identity can be in some way accounted for, or at least delineated. In her poems about childhood, Harwood zooms outwards from specific memories, anecdotes or remembered objects, to reach towards more abstract ideas about beginnings and belonging, innocence and loss, but she also charts a particular time, place and society that does not exist anymore. The poems are often triggered by a certain light, or remembered phrase, by conversations with friends, interactions with strangers, or encounters with strange objects from the past, and they dwell on these
momentarily before moving back in time. One of the most obvious examples of this is in the poem ‘The Violets,’ (p.247), in which a sunset, that Harwood describes as ‘melting’ in stripes 'like ice-cream' triggers a memory from the poet’s childhood home in suburban Mitchelton, of waking from a nap in the mid-afternoon, confused and distraught that the morning had ‘gone.’ It is the same liminal light (‘Ambiguous light. Ambiguous sky.’) that links the times and places together, and the poem is as much about the mystery and mutability of time, and its interweaving, as it is about memory and place. Memory works in these poems to layer different temporalities over the suburb that the poet is often moving through, and Harwood brings a richness to the space that is predicated on it being the site in which people, with their ever-present daydreams, histories and memories, live their layered and time-porous lives.

The theatrical impulses of Harwood’s pseudonymous poetry and the shifting scale of her more overtly domestic poems are therefore still at play within these poems about childhood and memory. ‘Affetuoso’, the second poem in the 1988 four-poem sequence ‘Divertimento’, is remarkable for the resonances it has with Professor Kröte’s Arts Club experiences, although the affection of the poet – and the affectation of both the suburban house guests and flourishes in the poetic form – are much more obvious in this poem. (The poem even takes its title from a musical direction to play with tenderness and passionate expression.) ‘Affetuoso’ describes a charity fundraising event – the deliciously Dickensian-named Auchenflower Widows and Orphans Christmas Feast – held in the poet’s childhood home, and consisting of an afternoon tea and a music programme (‘Auchenflower’s tribute to the arts’ (p.380)) put together by the women of the suburb.

The poem opens with a remembered vision of the house, with Harwood’s usual playfulness with end-rhymes evident from the start:
Picture a Brisbane afternoon
about half a century ago,
the air refreshed by sudden rain.
From our old house in Auchenflower
we see the city hall’s fine tower
unrivalled on the low skyline.

Mango, poinsettia, camphor laurel
throw shadows on our wide verandahs.
Someone’s arranged A Musical.
My mother’s rounded up the faithful (p.380).

In these end-rhymes, the humble suburb of ‘Auchenflower’ is immediately aligned
with the grandiose, European-style ‘fine tower’; the evening’s entertainment, ‘A
Musical’ which has been made kitschy and vaguely ridiculous with its
capitalisation, is directly linked to the religious reverence of ‘the faithful’. A later
rhyme of ‘a dish’ with ‘varnish’ (p.381) enacts another of Harwood’s playful
alignments and figurations, both because the of the enjambment on the ‘dish/of
cakes’, which produces around the dish a moment of ambiguity or potential
figuration, and the pun on ‘varnish’, which refers to both a violin and the gussied-
up Mrs Nibbs. This is similar to the alignment Harwood sets up with the ‘tasty
dishes from stale bread’ in ‘Suburban Sonnet’ (p.159), but it also serves to
highlight the artificiality, and careful construction, of both the dish and Mrs Nibbs.

But most important in this poem are the rhymes in the final stanza – the
only stanza to link all of its lines sonically, which lends it a greater resonance and
emphasis. Here, Harwood uses a pair of strong rhymes, on ‘music made/
camphor-laurel shade’ and ‘glow/long ago’ as well as a softer assonance on
‘happiness/release:

If some miraculous cassette
could recreate from memory’s light

those singers and their music made
in unrecorded happiness;
restore the after-rain release
of flower-scent, leaf shine, cumulus glow,
what child in camphor-laurel shade
would bid me welcome long ago? (p.381).
Each of these pairings groups a physical detail of the house or the suburban setting, with something much greater, more enduring, more transcendent. This house, in all of its theatricality and kitsch, and all of its mundane detail, is also the site of music, luminosity, timelessness and joy. But what’s interesting too is Harwood’s direct reference to the effort of recording, her dream of a ‘miraculous cassette’ that could preserve the remembered music, if not the memory whole. This is an image of the work of poetry, as a kind of preservation, an attempt to hold moments and memories out of time; but what Harwood is calling for here is a recording, a means to retrieve a mediated experience, not the ‘pure context’ (p.8) of childhood experience that Svetlana Boym sees as integral to any kind of nostalgic longing. Within this poem, then, Harwood is drawing on the theatricality of memory, its ability to perform and re-perform moments and narratives, and by extension, the theatricality and performativity of poetry, regardless of where it is sited in space or in time. Similarly, the speaker’s reference to the ‘child in camphor-laurel shade’, the almost-ghostly, younger self that might greet her from within any miracle of recording, acknowledges the mutability of both memory and self, as well as the wonder of ‘flower-scent, leaf shine, cumulous glow’ and the afternoon as a whole, a wonder that the child may well have overlooked, not understanding the importance these things would have once they had passed.

This description of the suburb, detailed and beautiful, within the poem bookends a more satirical and always ambivalent narrative of the Christmas feast held in the speaker’s childhood home. From the opening lines of the poem, a very obvious frame is placed around the satire – its first words are the declarative ‘Picture a Brisbane afternoon’. Beyond the theatricality of this gesture, though, this framing also allows the speaker to describe the real affection, even love, and the tender longing with which she is remembering the afternoon. The fondness and warmth
inherent in this frame forecloses any simple or derisive reading of the scene that follows, of the singers, their songs or of their suburban gaucheness or shallowness.

It is also significant that the child in this poem – the poet’s remembered younger self – is very much involved in the afternoon’s proceedings; she works as one of her mother’s ‘staunch helpers’ who ‘bustle’ about the scene and she collects the donations in a dish, and admires, or even comes to identify with, the slightly ridiculous figure of Mrs Nibbs. Mrs Nibbs, one of the programmed singers, is the central suburban figure in this poem (the ‘female demon’ (p.267) as Gerster would have it) and, as such, the most prominent target of its satire. She is ‘notorious/ for make-up: pinkly-lilac powder/ and orange lips,’ and her musical contribution is a song with the cringe-worthy title ‘Soul of Mine’. Yet the child longs ‘to paint [her]self like this ‘glorious’, lacquered woman, to make herself as spectacular and impressive as this figure, who is very much a suburban eccentric.

Importantly, the story of the recital is narrated here by a character very much on the inside of the proceedings. Unlike Professor Kröte, who deliberately tortures the suburban audience that he despises, the child in this poem is not above or separate from her mother, from Mrs Nibbs, or the other women who sing ‘Thank God for a Garden’ or ‘Roses of Picardy’; she too longs for, rather than feels disgusted by, the sandwiches and sponges that come ‘at last’ at the end of the recital. What Kröte sees as base delights, bitchiness and bad taste in ‘At the Arts Club’, the child in this poem finds marvelous, luminous, and a joy.

And it’s the very theatricality of the occasion and its people that appeals both to the child, and to the poet-speaker that she has become. Mrs Nibbs is, after all, a figure larger than life, imperious and glorious and elaborately costumed in her gaudy make-up and lacquered hair; the house is almost stage-lit by the sun, which throws shadow behind the mango trees and camphor laurels. Within this scene, the child’s collection plate becomes a ‘begging bowl’ – an image that’s exaggerated within the poem for comic effect, and is an elaboration on the
Dickensian element introduced with the 'Widows and Orphans Christmas Feast'; this is also all the more interesting considering that Harwood often referred to her pseudonymous character Timothy Kline as ‘Tiny Tim’. (Kline is, after all, a derivative of the German word ‘klein’, meaning short or small.) Even the climax of the poem, which occurs with the mother’s sidelong comment ‘I think the secret’s in the varnish’, is a moment of very theatrical and wicked dramatic irony (and one which points again to an image of suburban veneers). The poem centres, after all, on the staging of a Christmas pageant; it is fitting that it takes full advantage of elements of pantomime and pageantry in its construction.

But the positioning of the speaker within the poem, as one of the fellow-players, and a child at that, is important, because she cannot judge or condemn the charitable suburban singers from this position. For all their faults and excesses, the suburbanites are happy in this poem, enjoying their music and the social encounters it enables, and using it for a social purpose, to raise money for others. They may be crass or gauche, but they are doing good, and they are creating a community around music, charity and joy. They are unconcerned with ideas of genius of craft, but still participate in music and include it in their lives, and enjoy it – they are singing for its own sake, and for the benefit of others, not in any attempt to create great art. And because of this, the afternoon endures for the young poet, as a rich and multi-textured memory, held and preserved out of time, and as a memory from which poetry comes.

There’s a similar sense of joy and generation in the mingling of art and the mundane in Harwood’s 1988 poem ‘Driving Home’ (pp.385-386), also based on memory and its work, and set in suburban Brisbane. This poem is dedicated to Harwood’s Brisbane art teacher, Vera Cottew, whom the poet credited, in a number of interviews, with teaching her about colour, light and luminosity.

Indeed, Harwood’s use of light and luminosity in her poems, especially as a means
of bringing everyday objects and moments to greater attention and significance, has been much discussed by critics. Most significantly, Hoddinott describes light as one of the ‘media’ that Harwood uses ‘when she is most aware of the extent to which too great a cleverness … can obscure the search for truth’ (p.177). Like music, light often serves as a means by which Harwood gestures towards the ineffable, or what is inexpressible through language, and it is her awareness of these limitations of language, and her unwillingness to let cleverness with words, or distance and irony, detract from the emotional experience of suburbia that underlies many of these memory-based poems – and many of Harwood's depictions of suburbia in general.

In ‘Driving Home’, Harwood explicitly speaks of things not quite apprehended, not quite understood – not made clever, intellectualised or rationalised, that is – but loved and delighted in nonetheless. The main narrative of the poem traces a memory, of watching a musical performance at the Brisbane City Hall with Cottew, where a rat running along a decorative ledge within the auditorium steals the limelight from the pianist playing Bach. There’s an obvious thematic link between this poem and the Kröte sequence – the suburban audience are less interested in the great work of art and the performance of the gifted pianist than in the far less profound distraction of the trapped rat running a ‘demented circuit’ along the cornice:

The silvertails are bored. You nudge me,
flick your eyes upwards: on the cornice
running right round the hall, a rat
has found himself without an exit.
Head after head begins to turn

and follow his demented circuit
round the ornamental ledge. It seems
he has to run when he hears music.
Between one item and another
he stops to rest and preen his whiskers.

Nobody listens to a note.
But oh, that applause! (p.386).
In this poem too, the poet-speaker is implicated: like the rest of the audience, she delights in the rat’s antics and describes them in far greater detail than either the pianist (who is treated with just two adjectives, first ‘earnest’, then ‘bemused’), or the Brisbane City Hall itself, which, besides the detail of the ‘ornamental ledge’ of the cornice and its foreboding capitals, is not described at all. So too does the disruptive presence of the rat, something usually associated with rubbish and dirt, in this civic space, operate as another instance of McCann’s ‘decomposition’ (1998b, p.56), of something grotesque and profane enough to unsettle simple binaries and undermine any judgments about art, culture, banality, performance and pretense.

It’s interesting too that the rat is described as finding ‘himself without an exit’, almost immediately after the line ‘The silvertails are bored.’ There’s another game of suggested alignment and figuration happening here, where the rat and the audience are similarly trapped inside the concert, and this is made more complex and playful by the way the rat preens itself – as any member of an audience might – and by the audience’s applause, which is directed at the rat as much as, or even more than, at the pianist, and which therefore positions the rat simultaneously as if it were a performer too. This suggests that within this recital, everyone and everything is performing some sort of role, under the scrutiny of some kind of audience, formal or social. Harwood makes no attempt to reconcile the different positions and suggestions of the scene; its different kinds of performance, different kinds of spectacle, and acts of figuration all coexist, and it is these ambiguities and multivalencies that delight her so. The scene is left as an experience of simple joy, of ‘tears of laughter’, and as a memory ‘sought/ and loved’ rather than understood. Again, art and music are integral to the memory, because they are a part of the everyday scene, not because they offer transcendence in and of themselves.
But the memory of this recital is introduced through a scene quite separate from
the events it describes. It is a scene in which the poet is driving, in a landscape as
devoid of people and their paraphernalia as the concert hall is crowded: ‘Stones, I
think’ the poem opens declaratively, and then ‘Plover’ (p.385), listing the two
small details – the two features of the landscape – that together remind the poet of
a much earlier car trip, undertaken with the now-lost Vera Cottew. The rhythm
of these simple statements too is echoed two stanzas later, when the current
landscape is re-introduced with ‘Miles. Years.’ This list is remarkable for the
understated, economical way it introduces the things that stand between this ‘later
landscape’ that the poet is driving through, and the one that has been triggered in
her memory, and this current landscape in turn becomes something that she
begins to see ‘streaming/ through earlier eyesight.’ This memory is made almost
physical, visceral and embodied in the poet’s eyes; it does not just remain in her
mind. This is reinforced by a later reference to the ‘confused arcades/ of memory
and longing’, which makes of memory a material site.

In ‘Driving Home’, memory has been triggered by something small,
specific and concrete, that then makes of a place – and of a person – something
enduring and storied, and the poem longs to recapture or hold out of time both a
past experience and a lost friend, and all of the myriad emotions and images they
evoke:

You remain
somewhere in the confused arcades
of memory and longing, talking
of light and colour, bird and stone,

‘St Mark’s porches so full of doves’ –
(Ruskin again) – ‘that living plume
and marble foliage seemed to mingle.’
Come from such shades to comfort me! (p.385)

Even in these moments of quietude and aloneness, Harwood’s interest in the
abundant, teeming life of ordinary places is maintained.
This abundance is made even more apparent by Harwood’s interweaving of time within the space that she is driving through. As well as the reference to the ‘earlier eyesight’ that filters, in some sense, the current landscape, the poet also remembers her teacher’s spoken words: ‘I love these lonely places/ waiting for someone to be born/ who’ll make them great.’ It’s a curious moment, precisely because Harwood’s poem works to capture and hold a place and moment, making it, in a way, great; and also because this gesture is similar to so many of the games Harwood plays within her pseudonymous poems, where characters who very much resemble Harwood herself are present on the edges of the action, or on the edges of the texts themselves: Timothy Kline, for example, lists his hobbies in his hilarious biographical notes within a 1970 anthology as including ‘boat-building’ (a hobby Harwood writes about in the poem ‘Iris’ (p.251)) and ‘writing acrostics’ (p.280). So it is also a vaguely self-conscious moment, and one that makes a claim for the kind of work that Harwood is doing with this landscape, and with other everyday, suburban spaces: making them great, making them important, making them, in essence, poetic.

As well as being placed both within the memory of the moment and irretreivably removed from it, the poet is also positioned both inside and outside of the poem, both making the lonely country town and the City Recital Hall great, and remaining aware that this process must involve loss and change. This position, both inside and outside of the poem, is also the standpoint of the speaker in ‘To Another Poet’ and ‘Affetuouso’, poems in which longing and belonging also intermingle, where nostalgia is firmly sited in ordinary, ritualised spaces – a family home at Christmas and a room in which children play, just like the interior of a car and the concert hall in ‘Driving Home.’ This position also allows Harwood to thematise writing, together with memory, within the poems. The two are inextricably linked, and in ‘Driving Home’, writing is also an act of seeking, of loving, and of honouring. This is figured in Vera Cottew’s spoken line
from the beginning of the poem, referring to a presence or a mood ‘which must be sought ere it is seen/ and loved ere it is understood,’ a quote from Ruskin. Ruskin is introduced here in the only rhymed line in the entire poem (another beautiful, and typically Harwoodian, pairing with ‘Baby Austin’), so the quote’s centrality to the poem is highlighted from the outset.

But even though ‘Driving Home’ is set in two very different times, and across a number of different settings, all of these are interwoven and made to coexist – the framing here is far less overt than in ‘Affetuoso’, where the contemporary content is entirely separate from the memory it provokes, and functions mostly to introduce and round off the recalled events of the poem. In ‘Driving Home’, the past and the present, the driven-through landscapes and the Brisbane City Hall, all interact with each other, are all in part constituted by each other, and as such, they demonstrate the important claim that Harwood makes for suburbia within her work. The suburb coexists with other spaces because it too has the capacity to be a site of personal significance, and especially a site of memory and personal myth, all the more so because it is, demographically, the site of most of our childhoods, as well as the space in which most of the ordinary events and routines of our lives play out.

The suburb, therefore, is as important as any other space as a stage for human emotion, especially love, loss and despair. It is, for Harwood, is no less varied, vibrant or important than the European cities that many of her characters have fled, or from which their artistic practices originate, nor less important than the bucolic landscapes that are present in many of her later poems, or the ancient or biblical cities of myth and religion to which she frequently refers. The suburb cannot be held separate from these spaces, because all of the spaces that we pass through, inhabit or imagine become a part of our interior and imaginative lives. This intermingling of spaces and temporalities within the suburb is most overtly demonstrated in the 1990 poem ‘Midwinter’, in which a second-hand book found
in Hobart’s weekend Salamanca Markets, held in the shadow of Mount Wellington, leads the poet to remember Brisbane (the book is stamped with the logo and address of the Queensland Book Depot, the poet’s ‘old lunch-hour haunt’ (p.465)). The poem opens out into an invocation to place and the past, with the lines ‘O Brisbane// have you sent me this text’, and the beautifully direct ‘Speak memory’, before moving on to memories of the poet’s grandmother and her childhood home, which Harwood refers to as her ‘father’s house’ in the suburbs. This phrase, ‘my father’s house’, is one that Harwood often uses in her poems about her Brisbane childhood. She almost always uses it ambiguously, as both a literal descriptor – the house that belongs to her father – and a biblical reference, to heaven and the church. There is often, that is, a spiritual dimension to Harwood’s descriptions of her childhood home that goes beyond any romantic valorisation of childhood and childhood innocence, even beyond simple nostalgia. The final stanza of this poem, which John Foulcher describes as ‘Harwood’s clearest vision of eternity’ (1996, p.68) makes the heavenly element inherent in many of Harwood’s depictions of suburban life clear:

Snow settles on the mountain as I read.
If death prove an experience I live through,
good angel, guide me to a sunlit kitchen
with bread rising, the great black kettle singing
of wisdom and the peaceful life to come (p.467).

Here, suburban domesticity, its hearth and home, is figured as nothing less than heaven, a place of peace, contentment and angelic presences. This is, of course, exaggerated as a vision (it is introduced with the paradox of ‘If death prove an experience I live through’), but it is nonetheless a kind of theatrical endpoint to the kind of claim Harwood repeatedly makes for the suburb across her work, as a place that both contains, and is transfigured by, great emotion, and by poetry and art.
‘Suburbs, preserve your tribal styles!’

Let copulation thrive among
these tedious three-piece-cultured miles.
Suburbs, preserve your tribal styles. – ‘Professor Eisenbart’s Evening’ (p.31).

Suburbia is not a simple, single or easily encapsulated place in Gwen Harwood’s poetry; nor does it offer its inhabitants any simple kind of experience, emotional reaction or imaginary. It is a place always mutable, always ambivalent and ambiguous, and it is one which is capable of expanding to contain other spaces, times and narratives, or of contracting to the metonymic specificity of one small and concrete detail. It is never a space that is antithetical to art, authenticity or true emotion, even though this kind of depiction was very much at the heart of much critical Australian writing about the suburbs or the suburban everyday at the time that Harwood wrote most of her poems. Yet because Harwood writes so often about domesticity, and about writing and art within a domestic sphere, and because her most famous characters are frustrated housewives and mothers or thwarted geniuses exiled to the banal backwaters of Australia, much of the criticism of her suburban poems has focused on the frustration and despair that the characters voice, or on their relationship to Harwood’s own experiences and emotions. This ignores the fact that so much of Harwood's poetry is theatrical and playful, and that her characters are always just that – characters, pseudonymous or otherwise – and she is very often playing games with voicing, with allowing different perspectives to comment on social attitudes, environments, and, most damningly, their own deluded selves.

Harwood’s suburbs function most commonly as stage sets, and the time and scale on which they exist fluctuate constantly. They are sites of memory and sites of loss, sites of love and transcendence, as well as frustration and alienation, and places where art and the mundane constantly interact and intermingle, generating strange confluences and contradictions from which her poetry is born.
They are never static, never fully understood, and they are always capable of surprise, of containing great emotion and experience, and of being every bit as important to storytelling and mythmaking – and music, poetry and art – as any other imagined city, landscape or site. They are not places that poetry happens in spite of, but places that poetry happens because of, that poetry delights in and honours, in all their vagaries and variations, and for all of the small and quiet, but never unimportant lives that play out within them. Harwood’s poems claim that the suburbs are enough for any human life and for poetry, that they are sufficient to contain an entire range of human experience and emotion, to house any number of characters and their faults, desires and dramas, and to contain and coexist with countless other times and spaces, memories and dreams.
Suburban Extremophiles: Emotion, imagination and intensity in the poetry of Dorothy Porter

Dorothy Porter, like Gwen Harwood, grew up in suburbia, in Pittwater, in Sydney’s Northern Beaches, and she was still living in the area when her first book, *Little Hoodlum* was published in 1975. Porter’s work has always been interested in everyday spaces, often placed directly alongside exotic and extreme landscapes, as well as in the stories that people tell about places and their experiences within them, so it is unsurprising that many of the poems in this first collection are set in suburbs, on suburban streets and inside suburban homes.

This interest is evident across Porter’s entire oeuvre, poetry collections and verse novels alike. Her poems are often driven by an attempt to capture the ‘magic’, the essential power behind, or importance of, the everyday, or to show the complexity and vital energy of ordinary objects, experiences and events, and so landscapes and spaces – natural and built, ancient, distant and suburban – are integral to their operation. Lucas and McCredden argue that Porter’s poems work to capture and draw attention to those ordinary circumstances and items that ‘must not become mundane’ (1996, p.143); and because of this, the suburb recurs as a space of great symbolic importance and charge.

Indeed, because Porter’s poems are so often brazen and direct in their address, and unflinchingly sensual or erotic, and because of the intensity of the emotion or experience they portray, critics have tended to focus on her use of the primal, the magical or what Plunkett terms the ‘shamanistic’ (2010, p.21), and of bodies and bodily interactions. Criticism regarding her verse novels has
focused mostly on Porter’s manipulations of genre and form and her blending of high and low registers of expression and art. The rebellious and the sensual qualities of Dorothy Porter’s poetry, that is, have been the main focus of critical attention, but what is missing is any discussion of how Porter uses these qualities to explore and illuminate the lives and environments and of the everyday.

Part of this critical oversight can be attributed to Porter’s own presentation of herself and her work. Like Gwen Harwood, Porter was often mischievous and brash in interviews and essays; she also frequently emphasised the importance of pop culture, pop music and vernacular language in her writing, and often positioned her poems as deliberately anti-elitist and anti-intellectual: for example, she wrote that ‘far too much Australian poetry is a dramatic cure for insomnia’ in a 2000 article (n.p.). It is possible that statements such as these, and the perception that they may engender of Porter as an unserious and uncerebral poet, have contributed to the lack of critical engagement with her poetry’s technical and philosophical qualities, as well as its manipulation of physical and imagined spaces and its reclamation of the everyday and suburban as sites of intense experience and, by extension, poetry.

Porter’s poems achieve their intensity by manipulating scale: her characters and personae constantly draw on images, landscapes and perspectives much larger than themselves, or their immediate physical surroundings, to describe their emotions and reactions. This manipulation is also a tactic frequently employed by Gwen Harwood in her suburban poems, but whereas Harwood tends to use a small, everyday object as a point from which to expand out into the universe and into philosophy and metaphysics, Porter’s poems work by directly aligning everyday objects with strange and powerful others, thereby lending these ordinary objects the same dramatic scale as their metaphoric corollaries. Characters imagine themselves as predatory
animals, as planetary bodies, or ancient goddesses, or see within their gardens and kitchens, glaciers, deserts, sacked towns and florid jungles. Whole worlds – from Akhenaten’s Egypt and Minoan Crete, to mythical cities and ocean floors – are constantly made to coexist with suburban spaces and domestic interiors.

Porter is making a claim, in much of her work, for seeing all people as ‘extremophiles’ (2002, p.134) – as one of the protagonists of her verse novel Wild Surmise explicitly imagines herself – creatures which are only capable of life in extreme and hostile conditions, which even love extremity, as the etymological root philos at the end of the neologism would suggest. All human beings, by this reckoning, live most often or most fully within extreme emotional and imaginative conditions, regardless of how mundane the surfaces of their lives may seem; and all the spaces that they move through – including the domestic and the suburban, are therefore always extraordinary and deeply significant. Porter’s suburbia is a wildly inventive and expressive space, constantly vivified and creatively modified by the people who exist within it. It is reshaped and enlivened especially by their desires, both physical and emotional, and by the imaginations that these desires ignite; it is a site in which imagination, metaphor and poetry can flourish, even need to flourish, in order to contain the extremities of experience, desire and danger that are always present in the lives of its inhabitants.

This chapter will focus on two books from Porter’s oeuvre, the 1984 collection The Night Parrot and the 2002 verse novel Wild Surmise. These two texts represent Porter’s early work and established poetry respectively; they have been chosen because each deals explicitly with suburban spaces and suburban relationships, and focuses on protagonists who imaginatively transform these spaces and experiences to meet their own emotional ends. The Night Parrot is the first of Porter’s collections to include an extended narrative sequence (and it is from this that the collection takes its name); as such, it sets
a precedent for her later work, in the verse novel form that she is often credited with making her own. Both texts have been subject to very little critical scrutiny to date, an omission that this chapter aims to redress.

**Part One: The Night Parrot**

**How fantastic are these/ familiar suburbs**

*How fantastic are these familiar suburbs when the night parrot is driving my car! – ‘Scenes from a Marriage I’ (p.14).*

Even in those of Dorothy Porter’s books that are set in distant and exotic worlds – including the verse novel *Akhenaten* (1992), and the 1996 collection *Crete* – the suburbs are always important. Even when they are not physical settings in these books, they often figure as an absent familiarity or domesticity that is longed for by the emperors, explorers, exiles and poets that populate them; they are longed for by any character in crisis, regardless of whether that crisis is physical, emotional or something else entirely. But it is Porter’s early poetry that is most explicitly engaged with suburbia as a setting. The suburb is a space vitalised by poetry and overfull with the stuff of poetry, and it is territory that her poems mark out as being every bit as fantastic as it is familiar. Porter’s early collections, including *The Night Parrot* (1984) and *Driving Too Fast* (1989), portray the suburbs mostly through dramatic monologues, delivered by characters who drive through suburban streets at night time, visit ageing relatives in their ‘paranoid closets’ (1989, p.53) of houses, or watch bushfires raging around the outer suburbs of Sydney on TV. There are also monologues by ‘whining step-mothers’ (1984, p.40) issuing and not-issuing dinner invitations at will, and a teacher dreaming of bull fights and jungle
flowers whilst surrounded by ‘dull-eyed, giggling kids’ in a private girls’ school (1989, p.20).

Both Porter and Harwood, therefore, rely heavily on the dramatic monologue in their poems about suburbia. Porter’s monologues are less multifaceted than Harwood’s, in that they never rely on pseudonymous poets and their associated games of voicing, delusion and hoaxing. Instead, dramatic monologues are important to Porter’s work because of her interest in plain speech and the vernacular – the spoken nature of the form allows Porter to work with speech patterns and registers of language that are ordinary, and to uncover the lyricism that is often hidden within them. Indeed, some critics, including Simon Patton, have argued that the main feature of Porter’s poetry is the mixing of ‘lyrical bursts with crass imagery’ (1990, p.44) that often results from her use of vernacular speech. But these criticisms fail to account for Porter’s interest in character, and in the ways in which narration, stories and acts of speech can shape both a sense of self, and its place in the world.

Porter has spoken about her use of the dramatic monologue as stemming from the way it allows ‘a kind of masked autobiographical writing’, or can act as ‘a form of mask’ (2000, p.3). This masking, she claims, enables a kind of ‘fantastic dandyism … [and] gives you permission to explore territories that you can’t explore in your own persona’ (p.17) so there is clearly an element of dramatising or staging the self within these poems. This is not to say that Porter’s poetry is always personal or largely autobiographical – her poems are more interested in transformation and imagination, even if these are often sparked by personal encounters and memories. It is the idea of dandyism, and the performativity that is inherent in it, that is important here, because of the link between this ‘fantastic dandyism’ and the fantastic yet familiar territories that Porter’s poetry explores, especially in her dramatic monologues –
territories that are physical, emotional and imaginative, but which are also always linked with some kind of theatricality, extremity or flamboyance.

The dramatic monologue is integral to both Porter’s and Harwood’s visions of the suburbs. Both see the space as intensely social, and consider role-playing, as well as empathy and imagination, very much a part of the lives of the people who inhabit them. Most of Porter’s monologues in *The Night Parrot* and *Driving too Fast* portray uncomfortable social situations – like visiting family, or teaching bored and vaguely menacing teenaged girls – where the decorous or dutiful behaviour required of the narrators is not entirely in keeping with the wilder impulses of their personalities. But this role-playing is never entirely repressive, and nor do the social norms ever succeed in keeping these wild impulses at bay. In the poem ‘Mrs Fern-Smith’, for example, the speaker thinks of the ‘prison’ of the private school and adds:

I dream of my noxious frailty
as a flower
    a jungle flower –

and let the girls
shriek at my voice and clothes,
let the old bitches on the staff
think I’m a drug addict
    because I won’t expose my arms
let my husband
    hanker after more ordinary women,
I’m a flower,
    a wild, hidden, foul
    jungle flower
just get a whiff
just get close enough (1989, pp.20-21).

Even in this environment, Mrs Fern-Smith, whose hyphenated name combines the floral and tropical, and the entirely unremarkable, is ‘wild, hidden’, ‘noxious’ and dangerous, and the social roles that she plays within the school are very much a part of the drama of imagination and metaphoric
transformation that is the substance of the poem – and that makes from the suburban school something passionate, flamboyant and profound.

As well as relying heavily on the dramatic monologue, Porter’s third collection, *The Night Parrot*, is interesting because the extended sequence at the centre of the book portrays a suburban marriage – that most archetypal of suburban narratives, and one which was crucial to early political imaginings of the space. This marriage, however, is always ambiguous and ambivalent, and it is constantly transfigured and made fantastic by the strange and shifting presence of an extinct bird, a night parrot – who may or may not be entirely imaginary – as one of the married parties. Marriage is a subject, like the domestic, and often suburban life that it entails, that Porter returns to frequently across her oeuvre, especially in her dramatic monologues and verse novels. It is possible that marriage is fascinating to Porter because it is an experience or a way of life that is both intensely familiar to her, as a product and inhabitant of the suburbs, yet distant from or denied to her, as a queer poet – although it must also be noted that the lovers that populate both *The Night Parrot* and *Driving too Fast*, are always either male, or unidentified in their gender, and it is only her later collections and verse novels that explicitly deal queer relationships and desire. Yet marriage as a subject is important to Porter’s poetry because it in particular, like relationships in general, so often brings together Porter’s interests in the intense or extreme emotions that are a part of everyday experiences. It is also a context in which she explores sexuality, sensuousness, empathy and desire. The interaction of these impulses, and their ability to imaginatively transform ordinary settings and experiences, is the driving force behind many of Porter’s poems.
‘The Night Parrot’ sequence, which opens the collection, is Porter’s first extended dramatic monologue, her first experiment with a longer form that allows her to work with character, voice and individual imagination to bring a narrative, and its specific intensities and resonances, into the spaces she portrays – and it is for this reason that this thesis will focus on the sequence as an exemplar of Porter’s early work. Her characters move and think and feel across a number of suburban spaces in the sequence, and so the suburbs become the external stimuli for the interior imaginative processes that her characters use to make sense of their worlds and experiences.

The sequence opens with the speaker ‘crack[ing] open a night parrot egg’ (p.9) in an imagined desert – an isolated and almost otherworldly landscape, haunted by human ghosts as well as extinct birds and the radioactive isotopes that the speaker finds glowing there. These are themselves images of decay and ghostly resonance – things lost or past, which somehow remain familiar and all the more evocative for it. But this is a landscape only imagined by the speaker, as she sits on a bus travelling towards Wynyard station – the city interchange for the buses that link Sydney’s northern suburbs and Northern Beaches to the CBD. It is dreamed up out of one of the most ordinary, repetitious and even tedious suburban experiences imaginable, and as such, the two landscapes, the two experiences – one physical and one imagined – come to coexist, each transfiguring the other and each equally important to the emotional and imaginative life of the speaker of the sequence.

Little is revealed about the speaker in the early poems, aside from her extremity. As well as these opening acts of extremely vivid imagination, she alludes to being vaguely and non-specifically ill – in a state removed, that is, from rude health and the ordinary occupation of the body that it enables – and she also reveals an interest in the daemonic, in ‘witchcraft’, ‘belladonna’ and ‘wolf masks’ (p.11). Her sensuality and consuming desire are also made clear
from the outset of the sequence, in references to affairs and sexual encounters which leave her ‘with huge, sparkling eyes’ and with her ‘veins and joints’ ‘luminous’ and ‘glowing’ (p.11). Desire is an animating force within the poem, frequently figured in these images of luminosity, electricity and even radioactivity; and it is these heightened and uncertain territories of desire that the dramatic monologue allows Porter to explore across the sequence.

Porter’s territories of desire are disorderly and wild, as well as non-normative, in that they are often embodied within the poems by the night parrot and the ‘radioactivity’ that is ‘his call/ of courtship’ (p.12), or directed towards multiple partners at once. They play out and across the strange and often brutal marriage at the centre of the poem; and they are also covertly queer territories of desire, even though the night parrot is given the masculine pronoun ‘he’, and the speaker is otherwise pursued only by men. Because the night parrot is untamable and anomalous – he is, after all, a bird – his desiring presence in the poem in some sense prefigures Porter’s overt portrayal of transgressive or homosexual desire in collections like Akhenaten and Crete, and its ‘twittering contraband’ (p.21), its illicit thrill, is one of the most exciting and fascinating forces across the sequence. The fact that it is covert, a repressed desire, may also heighten the intensity of the imaginative transformations always at work within the poem, the furious and frenzied excess that exists within, and overspills into, the suburban landscapes that Porter portrays.

The narrative of the sequence is fragmentary and often elusive, and follows the speaker as she moves through the ordinary spaces of her life – her suburban home, her workplace, public transport and a supermarket, pursuing and desiring the intense experience that the night parrot seems to offer. There are two smaller sets of linked poems, ‘Scenes from a Marriage’ and ‘Trial Separation’, within the broader sequence; the poems in ‘Scenes from a Marriage’ offer snapshots of the domestic life experienced or imagined by the
protagonist and her parrot partner, as well as an extra-marital affair, and those in ‘Trial Separation’ chart the speaker’s frustration and confusion as she tries to choose between her lovers. The sequence ends with the speaker returning to the night parrot, despite his inconstancy and occasional cruelty, because only he is able to match her emotional and creative intensity, and her ability, even need, to imaginatively transform her world.

‘Scenes from a Marriage’, one of the early poems in ‘The Night Parrot’ sequence, opens with an overt statement of the transformative capability that the night parrot stirs within the speaker and her ordinary world:

How fantastic are these
familiar suburbs
when the night parrot
is driving my car!

The ovals, the churches,
the school playgrounds
the hardware stores
all swish
like the high skirts
of a Kirchner prostitute;
the seedy glamour
of memory
at its most piercing (pp.14-15).

Porter’s use of detail is almost film-like here, in that the vastly different suburban spaces of ovals, churches, playgrounds and hardware shops flash past each other in jump-cutting, quick succession – they are not described, simply named, registered momentarily beyond the car window before the next building or playground looms by. But these spaces are also brought together and aligned in this registry, regardless of the different people who inhabit them, or their different uses – a site of shopping for pliers or nails here is treated as every bit as important, or even ritualised, as a church, or a field for playing sport. But this filmic registering of familiar spaces also exists alongside an aesthetic of high art – in this case, German Expressionism, which Porter
introduces with the reference to Kirchner – and so from the very outset of ‘The Night Parrot’ sequence, the speaker’s expressive and aesthetic vision of the suburbs is complex, and capable of being, or appearing as, multiple things at once.

The reference to ‘a Kirchner prostitute’ also suggests the decadence, decay and crumbling eroticism common in Kirchner’s works, and brings the decidedly European art movement, and the inter-war period to which it belongs, into contact with the contemporary suburb, transfiguring and transporting the suburban spaces Porter describes; these spaces are made more strange, and strangely energetic by the verb ‘swish’, which does not quite belong to the static physical landscape that the car is moving through and which it is acting upon. But Porter’s placement of these incongruent elements directly beside the hardware store, the playground, the church, suggests that an aesthetic affiliation is present, even if it is only imagined, and that this imagined alignment is always a vital, energising force within the suburb.

Porter continues accruing and re-configuring the details of this ‘familiar’ suburb throughout the poem, constantly comparing it to places and cultures physically and temporally distant and disparate, both from the suburb and from each other. As well as ‘swish[ing]’ like a Kirchner prostitute, the street smells like the ‘unforgettable cigarette’ of a ‘saucy hoodlum’ – an image lifted straight from film noir – and it looks like both the mythical city of El Dorado, and ‘gory Celtic jewellery’ (p.15). These references are eclectic in their sources – they range across four different continents, and exist in memory, as well as in the present and the speculative past – and they bring vastly different aesthetics, temporalities and emotional and mythical resonances into direct contact with the ‘boring suburb’ and its milk bar – the only other naturalistic (if antiquated) detail that the speaker registers after the ovals, churches, hardware stores and school playgrounds that open the poem.
The image of the ‘gory Celtic jewellery’ itself enacts this combining of the physical and imagined. It is an image that belongs perfectly to suburbia, albeit one which has origins or deeper connotations that lie elsewhere: Celtic knots and twists printed onto silver pendants were particularly popular in the Australian suburbs of the 1980s and 1990s; the designs are still common in tattoos, especially among young, suburban men. This is a detail that is carried against, or even marked on, the body; Porter’s use of the adjective ‘gory’ is, in this sense, less excessive than its placement in the poem – at the end of a list of details and a string of adjectival assonances on ‘gold’ and ‘gamey’ – at first suggests. Excess – be it imaginative or linguistic – is a feature of many of Porter’s poems, and this has caused some critics to dismiss her work as unsubtle or overly explicit, or as somehow hollow, clunky and demonstrating ‘a lack of concentration’ (King, 2002, p.117). Yet it is precisely this kind of excess that makes Porter’s suburbs vibrant and energetic, and expressive and expansive enough to contain the dramas that her poems stage there.

The word ‘gory’, like ‘gamey’, however, simultaneously re-connects the jewellery with the primitive and the primal, to the ancient Celtic tradition to which it, at its roots, belongs, although this tradition has been displaced, ignored or forgotten by the people wearing the designs within the suburbs. The jewellery has become essentially kitsch, as Celeste Olaquiaga (1998) defines the term, because it is removed from any context which would lend it meaning, and is instead reduced to decoration. But Porter does not disparage it because it is kitsch; on the contrary, it is no less important to her imagining of the suburb than Kirchner’s art, the myth of El Dorado, the memory of a past lover’s perfume, or film noir. Porter’s fantastic details have no hierarchy, and carry no judgment or condemnation, but they work together and cumulatively to quite literally overtake the familiar, to build up so quickly and variously that
the churches, ovals and hardware shops are all but overlooked in relation to the sensual and imaginative excess in the vision of the speaker in the poem.

This is a suburb, then, that cannot be accused of being uninteresting, or in any way uniform. Martin Duwell argues that this level of detail in suburban poetry always serves to ‘mark out a territory’ (1998, p.126) of the neighbourhood as something nuanced, individual and important. Duwell compares this sensibility, evident in the work of Alan Wearne, to that of a ‘street directory’ (p.126), because registering the poetic details of a suburb orients a poem to its particular place, and makes the ‘structuring generalisations’ that have often been levelled against suburbia impossible: like a street directory, a poem which marks out this level of detail brings into focus the individual peculiarities of any suburb’s topography, of its built environment, and of the roads and paths that its people must traverse each day.

Yet because Porter’s details are fantastic and wild, and because they are details which reach outward, rather than simply register realistic particularities, it is a different kind of mapping that ‘The Night Parrot’ enacts – a marking out of a territory of imagination and transfiguration, and of intense emotion, within the everyday. The theatricality and drama are always internal: they occur in the constant shifting and mixing of metaphors, and in the imaginative transformation of detail, rather than in the layering of registers and perspectives that occurs in the work of Alan Wearne, or in the outward performances of social role-playing and artistic recitals, that so often animate suburban space for Gwen Harwood.

Porter’s theatrical gestures turn inwards, and the drama of her suburbs is one of re-imagining the spaces to fit the emotional and figurative needs of her protagonists, almost all of whom are misfits, artists, or outlaws in one sense or another. These are people who need to remake the familiar, ‘boring suburb’ into a space that matches their own intensity, their own experiences, their own
felt difference or exoticism or extremism – an extremism that exists, for Porter, in all ordinary lives at one time or another, and which is especially present within relationships, love affairs, and marriages.

The final stanza of ‘Scenes from a Marriage’ returns to a description of the speaker and the night parrot driving through the suburb, listening to the radio; and the speaker’s intense imagination and emotion are able to transform this ordinary and usually passive act into something very much like an act of violence, and an act which is again registered in the body. It is registered in the pulse and hands, and in what is the first use of the pronoun ‘I’ within this section of the sequence. Listening to the radio becomes an act that all but explodes against the ovals, churches, hardware stores and schools of the suburb:

when the night parrot
is at the wheel
the Top 40
becomes hot ice,
and I throw these burning songs
from hand to hand
with my pulse
ticking like a gaudy grenade; (p.15).

It is perhaps because of the relentless, almost breathless, accumulation of clashing details in the opening stanzas of this poem that the impossible image of ‘hot ice’ does not disrupt or rupture it, but is, rather, a logical extension of its energy and imaginative force. The image is all the more powerful because it is generated from two very different oppositions – the more obvious opposition of extreme cold and heat, but also that of the banality and ordinariness of Top 40 music against the kind of imagination that can conjure up something as radical and unsettling as hot ice. The act of driving has become extreme – because driving, actually moving through streets and apprehending the landscape, is not the same as reading a street directory, looking at its details in the flattened-out and abstract. Driving in this poem offers a sensual experience of detail and
space, and one that is animated by imagination and metaphor. It is through this sensuality, imagination and desire that the protagonist and the night parrot are able to fully inhabit suburbia, and transform it into an emotional landscape which is as extreme and varied as their interior lives, and against which their strange marriage plays out.

The radio is a box of Fantales/... I chew on it

*The radio is a box of Fantales; gossip, rubbish and caramel.*
*I chew on it* — ‘P.M.T.’ (*Driving Too Fast*, p.72).

Driving and cars are important tropes in Porter’s poetry, perhaps because they are an inescapable part of both the landscape and lifestyle of Porter’s native Northern Beaches, in which so many of her early suburban poems are set. These are suburbs that are geographically cut off from each other, and from the rest of Sydney, by tracts of bushland and deep bays and headlands, and so driving is by far the easiest means of commuting within and from the area. Porter’s work insists on the sensuous and imaginative – as well as the social – qualities of driving and driving around, because driving, in these poems, is never an alienated or alienating act. It is often undertaken in company, and in desirous company at that; and it is never separated from the body and its senses. This stands in direct contrast to many of the common critiques of suburbia, cars and aesthetics, which implicate cars and driving in the perceived inauthenticity and estrangement of suburban experience.

These links between the suburb and the car are in part historical – the period of most rapid suburbanisation in Australia and the USA alike coincided with the popularisation of car ownership in both countries, and many critics, including Robert Fishman, Roger Silverstone and Catherine Jurca, have also directly linked the development of the suburbs to the spread of motorways,
which brought previously isolated spaces (like the Northern Beaches) into commuting distance from the city. But according to Jo Gill (2013) driving is also frequently portrayed, in depictions of the suburbia, as something that largely replaces walking, an activity which has a long literary history as a creative, sensual, even political act. In this formulation, driving – which is also inescapably linked to consumption and pollution – becomes the sensually impoverished, alienating and stultifying opposite to walking. Pauline von Bonsdorff for example, suggests that cars and driving ‘represent losses in [the] concrete, sensuous experience’ (p.79) of a space; that driving is ‘less multidimensional’ than walking because it is faster and takes place within a capsule-like car, and that it is entirely closed off from the possibilities of community. The relative speed of driving also means that landscapes and places are transformed into ‘obstacles, quantified … [and] distances to be overcome,’ (p.80) spaces to be bypassed, rather than experienced or felt.

But for Porter, the car and the radio – an instrument that is intimately linked with transmissions from someplace else, and also therefore strangely separate from the space in which it is heard – do not prevent the protagonist from engaging with the physical places, the suburban streets that she traverses. Instead, they too are expressive, echoing and amplifying the emotions of the speaker and intensifying the effects of the landscape and her imaginative response to it.

Porter’s use of the car and driving in this sequence, and in her suburban poems as a whole, echoes Karen Tongson’s argument that cars are always important in any ‘queer suburban imagining’. According to Tongson, cars and driving offer people on the margins of suburbia, people who are ‘strange, wild things growing where they shouldn’t’ (p.4), a space away from the nuclear family home or any other suburban model of life that does not comfortably fit with their own identity and experiences. Instead of taking place inside houses,
churches or hardware stores, that is, Tongson’s ‘[queer] suburban sociality transpires in cars, driving around, looking for something (or someone) to do’ (p.26).

This is the sentiment that animates Porter’s poem ‘Driving Too Fast,’ from her 1989 collection of the same title. The poem repeats the line ‘Driving too fast’ with following variations such as ‘I’m wet. I’m nuts. too much pop music’ and ‘be a tiger shark. maul my mouth’ (p.65). Here, driving is sensual and erotic, as well as heightened in its emotional and imaginative effects, and vaguely deviant in the directness and animality of its sexual metaphors. The speed of driving does not represent a loss of sensation, connection or community; rather, it is directly linked with the speaker’s emotional and bodily experience. In ‘Scenes from a Marriage’, the car – and travelling as a passenger within it – enhances the protagonist’s experience of suburban space, especially because the driving here is slow, and as such, a force of tension: ‘the night parrot/ drives slowly/ to counterpoint/ my exhilarated heart’s speed’ (p.15).

Pop music is also important to Porter’s suburbia, not despite, but because of, the fact that it is a medium of mass communication. Like the private transportation of driving and cars, mass communication has also been derided by critics of the suburbs as inauthentic and homogenising; pop music, accordingly, is seen as a banal soundtrack that sprawls as widely as suburbia itself, and that casts its flatteningly consistent and uniform shadow across the landscape. These critiques of mass media in the suburb are usually focused on television, because it is the medium that coincided, historically, with mass suburbanisation. As such, it has long been considered by critics to have been integral, both to the way in which suburbia is and was imagined, and to its speedy and complete naturalisation within society. Lynn Spigel suggests that suburban family sitcoms, which were some of the first television programs developed, and which were, in their early incarnations, set almost entirely
within suburban houses, always broadcast a vision of middle-class life directly into similar middle-class homes, and thereby offer a kind of idealised reflection of the viewers’ lives, or provide a model of comparison similar to peeking over the fence into the neighbour’s windows. Television and the radio, she states, have therefore ‘been deployed … to keep the suburbs clean of those “aliens” that won’t or can’t play the roles required of them’ (p.325), because they offer up only a limited and repeating repertoire of images, and an imagination that has been pruned into shape and tamed, a repertoire, that is, which denies that any kind of ‘strange, wild thing’ might sprout where it shouldn’t.

But the same claims that Porter makes in ‘The Night Parrot’ for the fantastic and familiar suburb, a ‘mass space’ as it were, she extends to the mass media that babble through it and the pop music that often amplifies its energy. Porter’s radios and televisions are almost animate in the way they interact with the speaker and her surroundings; the voices and music they transmit shift registers frequently, at times in direct opposition to the character of the protagonist, at times offering almost an echo, or an answer to, her sentiments. They are never static, never even stable enough to transmit a clear or ‘cleansing’ message that might level out or dumb down the suburbs and its subjects. Indeed, in a 1998 interview with Peter Minter, Porter claims that the mass media and pop culture are dynamic forces in her work. She refers to pop culture as a source of ‘flexibility’ and ‘movement.’ ‘I don’t want to be in an anaerobic environment,’ she states, ‘and the oxygen is pop culture. It might be ephemeral and fizzy, but it’s alive’ (n.p.).

This interest in the energy and ‘oxygen’ of pop culture is evident in the ways in which televisions and radios within ‘The Night Parrot’ correspond with and to the speaker. They correlate her wild emotion rather than cleanse it from the suburb, even though any person like this protagonist – powerfully imaginative, recklessly emotional, driven by strange and competing desires,
and, after all, a writer – should be just the kind of ‘alien’ (p.325) that Spigel’s mass media excludes. In the sequence, the protagonist ‘answer[s]/ the radio/ and it really/ understands me’ (p.19), (in a way, interestingly enough, that no human character is able to do); she also imagines a pop song being ‘shown on TV’, an image that’s remarkable for the layered frames of mediation it places around such a seemingly mundane piece of pop, which increases its expressivity, rather than diluting or distancing it. Later on, she fogs up a TV screen with ‘passionate breath’ (p.23), almost literally projecting the animation – and intense sexuality – inherent in this breath onto the device; and imagines herself watching old, televised movies in a kind of luxurious sadness when her lover is absent. These machines, and the mass culture they embody, are every bit as authentic and expressive for the speaker as the real spaces she inhabits, and the imagined worlds she projects onto them.

This sensibility is not confined to ‘The Night Parrot’ sequence. Elsewhere in the collection, music ‘stings on the radio,/ like my wary sensation/of being a pilot fish/ washed against the rough skin/ of a shimmering white pointer’ (‘No Breakfast’ (p.31)), in another direct correlation of transmitted music and personal emotion and another remarkably wild, tactile and dangerous image of sensuality and sensitivity; a similar correlation occurs in the poem ‘Driving Home at 3 am’ from Driving Too Fast, where the radio is just one of a series of small, sensuous details that echo the poet’s emotion: ‘Window open/ radio on, sweet prickles of pop music,/ warm dazed night/ I’m exhilarated, exhausted’ (p.70).

As appliances, too, Porter’s televisions and radios shift and morph between resembling themselves as physical objects, and functioning metaphorically or sensually, enacting something wildly different, and wholly, intensely, imagined. This effect is similar to that employed by Gwen Harwood in her ‘Suburban Sonnet’, where the housewife protagonist of the poem
registers a dead mouse in a sprung trap, a pot boiling dry, a newspaper clipping headlined ‘Tasty dishes from stale bread’ and sees herself reflected in each of them. For Porter, though, there is almost always a pagan energy at work – Porter has referred to music as ‘my magic’ (cited Fraser, 2012, n.p.) – which imbues the appliances with their own strange agency, as well as both wonder and danger in their constant metamorphoses. But Porter also allows these objects to operate within a threefold landscape in the poem: within a material suburban space that is vast, sprawling and physically isolating, within a mediated space that is imaginatively shared by the masses, and within an imagined space that is shaped or reshaped by the protagonist alone.

Mass media and their transmissions are, for Porter, not alienating forces, but forces of connection, imagined or otherwise. In a similar fashion, Karen Tongson argues that pop music in the suburbs frequently offers its listeners a new kind of ‘remote intimacy’, a term she adapts from Jennifer Terry’s (2004) description of the kind of relationships enacted through online multi-player gaming platforms, one of the new forms of mass media in the digital age. Remote intimacy, Tongson argues, is experienced by people who are not necessarily physically close to one another, but who have access to, and affection for, the same kinds of imagined or media landscapes, the same ‘ritual networks of desire’ that are offered by ‘radio, music, and television’ (p.130). These remote intimacies are only possible because the mass media of radio, television and pop music are all what Harold Innis refers to as ‘space-binding media’ (1951, p.8): media, that is, which transmit the same message in the same form across vast distances, and so ‘bind’ those distances together in a shared public consciousness and imagination. This is not a flattening out, but a bringing together, of landscapes, and of the lives and imaginations of the people who live within them. Space-binding media permit vastly different people access to a common idiom and a shared store of images, sounds and
cultural references. In turn, these allow people who are alone – just like the protagonist in much of this sequence – to mitigate their isolation, to be intimate, however remotely. This sharing is all the more intense because of the isolation from which it is born, and as such, suburban alienation becomes the very precondition for connection and imagination, and relationships, shared identities or experiences transmitted by mass media. Within ‘The Night Parrot’, the protagonist enhances this connection and shared imagination because she also personalises it, metamorphosing its instruments and messages to her own ends, or to match her own imaginative or emotional experience.

‘The Red Sports Car Afternoon’, a poem from *Driving Too Fast*, is Porter’s most obvious depiction of this kind of remote intimacy:

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the beauty of rock music
its sexual
   optimism
every record collection
   collects groupies
   collects dust
   collects people on
      holiday (p.57).
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Music here is social and intimate; it brings people together – even ‘collects’ them. The verb ‘collect’ is repeated here three times, but what’s interesting about this construction is that this collecting is done by the ‘record collections’ themselves, rather than by people. There is also another near repetition at the beginning of the list, over the lines ‘every record collection/ collects groupies’. There’s something obsessive both in these repetitions in such quick succession, and in this kind of relationship with music. Collecting music is something ritualised, as Tongson would have it, and desiring – any act of collecting is always about wanting, seeking out the next item, and no collection of music, at least, can ever be complete. And this desire is also linked explicitly here to the ‘sexual optimism’ of the music itself – collecting too is sensual and exciting, even as it is an act of consumption and mediation.
But the moment in ‘The Night Parrot’ where mass media (in this case, the radio) and the protagonist’s individual imagination come into most intimate contact occurs with the lines ‘I’m answering/ the radio/ and it really/ understands me’ (p.19). This image is at once intensely lonely – this is a young woman in dialogue with a machine because the human voices it transmits are the only ones available to her – and strangely personal, because the radio’s voice, however distant and abstracted it may be, is one that truly understands her, truly sees her in a way that no other figure in the poem – human or parrot – has yet been able to. This imagined – and entirely occluded – dialogue is made all the more peculiar by the stanza that precedes it, which states, ‘surely,/ nothing experienced/ on my own/ is wild’ (p.18), a line which almost contradicts the extremity and strangeness of the speaker’s almost uncanny, albeit imagined, ability to converse with the radio.

This juxtaposition of almost contradictory lines, underscored by a deep loneliness, is the most vivid example of Porter’s continual shifting between an landscape that is imagined and wholly individual, and one that is shared, or bound together with others in a remote intimacy. More importantly, it points, in its emphasis on the word ‘wild’ – both italicised and positioned at the break of a short line – to another important impulse within the poem, a desire to maintain wildness, individuality, extremity, and to live as an extremophile, but also to share this extremity, to acknowledge the wildness in others, and have it recognised and answered within oneself. Poetry is perhaps one way of reconciling this desire, as a way of communicating wildness, of capturing and sharing imagined visions and transformations, as well as emotions, across even such familiar and boring spaces as suburbs. So too are sex and love, enacted here in the relationship that the protagonist is pursuing with the elusive night parrot.
Vision, rebellion, havoc and bird shit

the night parrot
up to his tricks
[...]
wrecking vision, rebellion
havoc and bird shit
in immaculate, boring places. — ‘Scenes from a Marriage II’ (p.16).

All of the details, landscapes and action within ‘The Night Parrot’ sequence are rendered strange and fantastic by the presence of the night parrot – at times personified, or domesticated enough to be able to drive a car, at others, wild and animal, ‘wrecking vision, rebellion/ havoc and bird shit/ in immaculate, boring places’ such as a real estate agency in Leura or an IBM office in North Sydney. It is never clear exactly who, or what, the night parrot is – either to the protagonist, or in and of himself – or even if he is a partially real or entirely imagined presence. As such, he is extremely elusive as both a figure and as a metaphor, and so he is readily available for transformation and appropriation. The night parrot is something of a radical uncertainty, a destabilisation at the heart of the poem. Physically, he constantly shifts between being definitively bird-like and almost human: he has ‘delicate, green-white’ (p.17) hands that can cook, or force a latch, as well as drive, yet simultaneously has ‘plump, yellow/green’ (p.29) plumage, a beady eye, and the ability to fly. He has a voice that screeches, clucks and cracks but also talks, and a body that gets scorched on a ‘cheap, two-bar radiator’ but also ‘perches’ (p.19) in the corner of a room. He is also sometimes tender, even as he by turns laughs and sniggers and accuses. The night parrot is both affectionate and violent, unpredictable and ambiguous in his emotions and reactions, and capable of the same extremes of love and anger as any of Miriam Stone’s housewife protagonists.

Night parrots are almost mythical as a presence in Australian poetry more broadly; like the Tasmanian tiger, they are assumed extinct, but the possibility of their survival, their enduring, secret presence and wild
unknowability is something of an imaginative obsession in much Australian writing. They have appeared in the work of writers as disparate as Dal Stivens (1970), David Campbell (1978), John Kinsella (1989) and Robert Adamson (1977); although in almost all of their texts, night parrots are either something of a ghostly chimera, or a museum curiosity – never the kind of animal that might appear in an ordinary or domestic landscape. By taking this ambiguous and highly potent image and transposing it into the suburb, into a suburban marriage, Porter is again making a claim for the essential mystery and emotional wildness of the spaces we mostly take for granted as settled and known.

Critics have suggested a number of metaphoric readings of the night parrot, and its function, within this sequence. Felicity Plunkett suggests that it stands in for the protagonist’s own creativity, and is a kind of poetic drive or muse, the thing which marks the protagonist out as a writer; John Kinsella sees the parrot as ‘an alter ego, a conscience, counterpoint [and] antagonist’, in what is essentially an ‘internalised dialogue’ (2005, p.52), that is, an essentially imagined figure in a drama of the self and its own doubts. And while both of these interpretations are useful, and point to the speaker’s intense imagination and dramatic staging of herself and her environment, reading the night parrot as a thing unknowable and unstable, a metaphor which shifts and changes and has any number of fluid purposes, opens out the poem, and indeed, the suburb in which it is set, and allows its ambiguities and contradictions to resonate more deeply. The night parrot is able, like the suburb, to take on whatever characteristics the protagonist – and her imaginative life – require of it at any given time; it is as multivalent and magical a force as poetry itself.

Even as a creative force, or as a vehicle for the protagonist’s desire and imagination, the night parrot is always unstable. He is capable of disturbing ‘immaculate, boring places’ (p.16) with his vision, wildness and bird shit, he
figures as an elegant, vampiric apparition outside the protagonist’s window, meeting her ‘trembling’ and her ‘insomnia’ ‘more than half-way’ (p.17), in an intensely charged half-dreamscape which overlaps the protagonist’s home. The night parrot transgresses – and so enlivens – social norms and spaces, and at times, seems to focus or even embody the protagonist’s emotions, or longing for this disobedience, transcendence and wild behaviour. In these moments, he acts almost as an animus for the protagonist, a physical representation of all that is untamed and creaturely – as well as creative – within her. Porter’s portrayal of the desiring and shifting relationship between the night parrot and the protagonist in these moments is another kind of spilling, as if the imaginative and poetic impulses of the protagonist are too intense and too extreme for her to contain within herself, and so need to be displaced to the night parrot and their relationship, just as the imaginative possibilities she sees in her home and suburb always force the spaces to expand beyond their physical boundaries.

But the night parrot also frequently disappoints the speaker’s longing for transgression and transcendence, or seems to try and tamp down the protagonist’s intensity or imaginative capabilities. He is frequently cruel, mocking the protagonist and her visions; as the sequence develops, he is more and more often aligned with images of drought and dryness (the desert is the species’ native habitat, after all). He is also described as ‘cooking up dead things/ as my imagination’s food’ (p.20). The night parrot’s offerings are always illusory, often undermining or seeking to destroy the very things they seem to enliven, or make dangerous and sensuous. This is stated overtly in ‘Scenes from a Marriage IV’:
when the night parrot flies
my eyes glisten
at the words and temptations
of ghosts
that I grab for
and put my hand
right fucking through – (p.20).

It is thrilling, for the protagonist, when the night parrot ‘flies’ – just as fancy, imagination and even escapees are said to do – yet his temptations are ‘ghosts’, unreal, nebulous, and too flimsy to have form or physical substance. Porter’s poetry is often interested in haunting, and in ghosts or ghost-like figures (the night parrot himself could fit into this very category, as a specimen of an extinct species). In her verse novels *What a Piece of Work* (1999) and *The Monkey’s Mask* (1994), for example, the main protagonists at times dream of, or speak to, the dead; and lost civilisations and their rituals are common tropes, especially in her collections *Crete* (1996), *Other Worlds* (2001) and *The Bee Hut* (2009). But what’s interesting here is that Porter is explicitly placing ghosts within a suburban setting – in a space that is both assumed to ‘have no history’ (p.54), according to Jo Gill, and to lack the density of population and experience that Steve Pile (2002) claims makes cities more usual sites of haunting in literary depictions. Porter’s suburbs are always porous to different existences and to different scales of time, as well as space.

But it is the ambiguity between the thrill and the illusory nature of the night parrot’s offerings that makes him such a powerful presence, and such an important interloper (or interflyer) within the protagonist’s suburb. The presence of night parrot is never questioned within the sequence, just as it is never explained; he is, as it were, a part of the furniture (‘The night parrot/ calls and calls/ from a perch/ in the highest corner/ of the room,’ (p.20) Porter writes); the reader is asked to accept such a radically impossible figure, something so untamed, as utterly natural within the landscape of the poem and the room. But normalising the night parrot’s presence is impossible without
opening up the all-to-familiar suburb to other forms of radical instability, other kinds of estrangement, and other kinds of imagination and desire.

**This is your desert, not mine!**

*and I say*

_like a whining suburb*

_sculpted by salt bush*

*and Campbelltown land developers*

*this is your desert, not mine!* 

--“Scenes from a Marriage V” (p.23).

‘Scenes from a Marriage V’, the ninth poem in the sequence, illustrates this instability and imagination within ordinary spaces and situations most explicitly. Its opening stanzas draw on pop music, television, imagination, love and sex in rapid succession:

_Nothing so sweet_

_nothing so obscene_

*_as my lover and me_*

*_will ever be*

*_shown on TV_

This fragment,

_from a pop song I imagined_

_stuck in my throat*_

_helplessly_

*during the coldest night*_

_of the year*

_when mixed passionate breath_

_fogged up_

_every mirror_

_every TV set_

_in my house (p.24)._

The pop song that opens the poem is, fascinatingly, an imagined one, and as such, almost oxymoronic – like ‘hot ice’ – in that it is both an object of an entirely individual imagination and also popular, and so shared by a mass audience. It is entirely unreal, because it is imagined, and yet it still has physical, bodily properties, the ability to get ‘stuck in [the] throat’. The fact that it is a poet who is dreaming up this song is a further complication: the difference between a poem, as a kind of song created by a poet, and a pop song
that she imagines, is unclear. This is all the more interesting because this image, of a song ‘stuck in [the] throat’ is echoed in Porter’s verse novel *The Monkey’s Mask*, in the poem ‘How poems start’, which asks ‘Does a poem start/ with a hook in the throat?’ (p.144). This correlation suggests that the imagined pop song could well be poem, albeit a very strange one, even as it is simultaneously something else entirely, something broadcast through an imagined radio to vast and remote audiences. The complex paradox of this image deliberately mixes the personal and privately imagined with the public and shared, the wild impulses of imagination with the suburban – and in this case, ‘lowbrow’ and the literary forms as well. Here too, hybridity and transformative capability are integral to Porter’s depiction of the suburb.

But despite this recurrent use of pop music, radio and television, and the remote kinds of intimacy that they enable, there is also an emphasis within the poem on things that cannot be shared, on extremity and loneliness, even in the face of a passion by turns ‘sweet’ and ‘obscene’. Not only does the speaker choke ‘helplessly’ on her imagined song, but the poem is set on ‘the coldest night/ of the year’, an image that at first seems incongruous, given the passion that the poem is describing, but which hints at a sense of isolation and wild emotion even within the encounter with the lover that the poem describes. This is an extremity of weather that’s also echoed by the fog that has come to engulf every surface in the house. These fogged-up surfaces, importantly, are usually reflective – they include the mirror and TV sets – but here, these surfaces have become blank. In these useless mirrors, the speaker is unable to see her own image; as in the lyrics of her imagined pop song, she cannot be shown or seen – and she cannot share her experiences and emotions.

This loneliness, or inability to be met or matched, seems to be the corollary to the wild imaginations possessed by so many of Porter’s characters,
in her individual poems, extended sequences and verse novels alike. Even as imagination animates the spaces they move through, and creates vast and varied landscapes and resonances from ordinary objects and environments, its products, magnificent and meaningful as they are, cannot be fully shared. This mismatch is often the cause of the tensions within the relationships that Porter explores in her verse novels – and this is especially the case in *Wild Surmise* – but more often it is present in this kind of quiet sadness or longing in the background of the poems. But this underlying loneliness makes the desire in the poems – the longing for, and seeking out of, connection – all the more intense, just as it makes the moments that approach connection and recognition, such as those sometimes found in the interactions between the speaker and the night parrot, all the more meaningful and sensual. Alienation and connection are both dynamic forces within Porter's domestic spaces, and neither exists without the other.

The fogged-up surfaces in this poem are also surfaces that never offer glimpses of something else beyond them, as a window would, or images of elsewhere, as a turned-on TV should, just as they never reflect back and amplify the interior of the house, and the people who occupy it, as mirrors should. Their darkening here points again to something isolating and lonely, even suffocating, within the house, an extreme kind of environment, despite its apparent ordinariness. But even this intense interiority is far from simple, as is evident in the lines 'the house/ would close around me/ sticky, lukewarm/ but oh, irresistible' (p.27). This is another of Porter's manipulations of scale and space, but here, instead of reaching outward to include disparate places within the one space, the house is shrinking and contracting. The final adjective ‘irresistible’ undercuts the vague discomfort of ‘sticky’ (already a sexual adjective) and the emotional ambivalence of ‘lukewarm’: the emotions and lives playing out within the house are always complex and fiercely equivocal.
The shifting of scale within the stifling interior of this house is at work right across ‘Scenes from a Marriage V’. As well as imagining the house closing in around her, the protagonist’s vision of the mass-scale pop song unable to be shown on TV is an image large enough to encompass thousands of people and households, even as it is entirely interior and personal. Following this, the protagonist ‘collapse[s]’ post-coitally, ‘cosy, trivial/ and tender’ into ‘coffee’s camaraderie’ (p.23), an image that relies on the small, very personal and tangible object of a cup of coffee, the sediment of which, in turn, is compared to the silt of the vast, and hugely distant Lake Eyre. Lake Eyre, an extreme environment of saltpan and desert, has also been much mythologised in Australian writing – just like the night parrot – and so brings connotative resonances of wilderness, doomed exploration, imagination and encounters with the unknown to the house, the coffee cup and the affair. Later too, the protagonist herself becomes aligned with the lake, where the night parrot ‘can’t nest/ and finds my water/ bitter’ (p.24). There’s something devastating in this imagined alignment, something severe, sterile, sad and extremely lonely, all the more so because it is an alignment dreamt up within a small suburban home.

Alongside these images of shifting scale, and of imagined identification within the poem, are images of watching, which offer the speaker a less overt, but no less impassioned means of metaphoric alignment from within her house. Vision and envisioning, watching and imagining, are equally important ways, for Porter, of registering the complexity and wildness of the suburb and the everyday – especially because they are things done on one’s own, and born of an intense kind of solitude. As well as registering obscure visions offered by the fogged-up mirrors and TVs within this poem, the speaker is seen ‘watching through smudged glass/ the wind/ savaging a sapling’, then ‘watching/ nothing’, and ‘watching/ tomato soup/ as if it were “Gone with the Wind”’
Syntactically, each of these images is disjunctive, occurring in half-sentences, or with sub-clauses interrupting the expected order of the sentence. They are disrupted too by line breaks which separate the verb ‘watching’ from its object, and this syntactic estrangement suggests that it is not the object itself that is important to the poem, but the watching subject instead. What is seen is only important because of the way it relates to the protagonist’s vision of herself and her surroundings, and these visions are elemental, nihilistic, wild and surreal by turns, even as they retain their domestic qualities.

Furthermore, the last image in this list, that of ‘watching/ tomato soup/ as if it were “Gone with the Wind”’ draws directly upon a kind of iconography – the Warholesque can of tomato soup, and the melodramatic Hollywood classic *Gone with the Wind*, which could be the quintessential midday movie repeated on commercial TV. This too is a typical gesture of Porter’s. She often uses iconic or popular images as a kind of shorthand within her poems, drawing on the immediacy, vividness and often, the multi-valency of their connotations, and bringing all of these characteristics to bear on the situation they describe. This technique allows her to work with the short, sharp and dense lines for which her poems are known, because they draw in much larger stories and worlds, and their related intensities – and it is used to full effect in Porter’s verse novels, where these allusions become a means of filling in the characters and background information that is necessary for the narrative, but is too prosaic or diffuse to be contained within the poems. In ‘The Night Parrot’, furthermore, these iconic images are the stuff of an international popular imaginary, rather than of lived experience; yet they butt up against images as local and specific as Lake Eyre, gang-gang cockatoos, Campbelltown land developers, a Narrabeen highway. So the protagonist’s act of watching is linked with both the imagined and the physical, as well as with a space somewhere in between, and even though this watching is physically a passive
act, her imagination is restlessly active within it. This watching, the speaker states, allows her to ‘conjur[e] violence/ from the magic powder/ of boredom’ (p.24), a line which overtly enacts Porter’s claim for the extremity of all human life, because even boredom, here, becomes is the material of drama. Yet it also hints at something darker, something controlled but violent within this strange, not always loving, not always fulfilling, and rarely faithful marriage that unfolds within this small suburban house. It is a suggestion that the wilder impulses of the protagonist, those that are already expanding, contracting and transforming the house, already drawing her towards a semi-mythical, untamable animal for a partner, may break open at any time.

The suburb need not be a place in which there is a lot of visible action for it to be exciting, vital, even violent, for it to be the stuff of imagination, magic and poetry. Boredom and loneliness are themselves states of extremity and of intense, sensual emotion, in which the imagination is always active, always transforming physical spaces and objects to suit its expressive needs. The final line of this poem, the last in the sequence before the protagonist’s ‘trial separation’ from the night parrot, is an explicit expression of her ability to find fodder for her imagination and poetry within her suburban house. In a moment of dialogue – a rare occurrence across the sequence – she says, ‘this is your desert, not mine!’

‘Sharper and longer/ than leopard’s teeth’

\begin{quote}
the night parrot parted the man from me on a glacier sharper and longer than leopard’s teeth
\end{quote} – ‘Trial Separation III’ (p.28).

Even as the marriage across this sequence is ambivalent and constantly changing, the night parrot is usually the main object of the protagonist’s desire – a desire that is about companionship, as well as creativity and danger, as
much as it is sexual and physical. It is desire that animates both the suburb and
the poem, desire that is the most urgent condition of extremity in which the
protagonist, like all people, must live. But the night parrot also often stands in
counterpoint to a human figure, referred to only as ‘the man’ who also circles
around the protagonist and her small suburban house, and who also, at times,
becomes another creature desired by the speaker. It is never clear whether ‘the
man’ is always the same man, or several different men, because his appearances,
like those of the night parrot, are not sequential or consistent, and his
relationship, or level of intimacy with the protagonist, continually changes.
This is complicated too by the speaker referring, early in the sequence, to going
to dinner (and bed) with ‘men’ in the plural; and by the fact that the man is
never physically described, or given a voice.

Nonetheless, the man offers the protagonist a kind of desire that can be
fulfilled, a desire that is primarily, even exclusively, sexual, and therefore almost
simple in comparison to that which the night parrot proposes. But this is a
desire that Porter gently satirises from the outset of the sequence: the poem
‘Courtship’ opens with the lines ‘Men take me to restaurants/ because I’m
warm and sympathetic’ closely followed by an image of the protagonist
stretching her feet in tousled beds ‘for the touch/ of down and feathers’ (p.12),
which is ambiguous in its association with birds as much as human bedding,
and therefore with wildness as well as domesticity. The third stanza of this
poem also compares these human rituals of dating to the ‘courtship dance’ of
the night parrot – an interesting image in itself because, as Porter points out, it
has never ‘been observed’, scientifically or otherwise, and so this is also entirely
imagined – and concludes with the voyeuristic image of the night parrot
listening in as the protagonist ‘talk[s] to men/ on the phone’ (p.13).

From the outset, then, the man and the parrot are compared to, and
compete with, each other, they are both disparate and remarkably similar in
their behaviour, and the protagonist too shifts in her ‘sparking’ desire between the possibilities and problems that each offers her. The man and the protagonist eventually do have an affair, consummated on ‘the coldest night of the year,’ and with this the desire that the speaker directs towards the man is resolved, because it is completed. With the end of this desire, the heightened emotions and sensual energy that it brings to the protagonist and her everyday life also cease. Desire, after all, is a state of suspension and of suspense; all wanting ends when its object is obtained.

The night parrot, on the other hand, holds a desiring power over the protagonist that is not finite, but almost transcendent, because it cannot be pinned down, or in any way resolved. This is a result of the impossibility of the figure of the night parrot, but also of his inconstancy, and his radical unknowability:

The night parrot
can’t be snared
for a pet
can’t be tattooed
on my arm
or breast – (pp.14, 28).

This stanza, interestingly, occurs twice throughout the sequence, when the night parrot first appears as a physical presence in ‘Courtship’, and again in the final poem; it is the only repeated phrase within the sequence, and so its importance to any understanding of the night parrot, and his function within the poem, is clear. The night parrot cannot be domesticated or claimed, literally or metaphorically, can’t be pinned down, known or carried as a token on the body.

Significantly, there are no moments of physical contact between the protagonist and the night parrot in the sequence; unlike the protagonist and the man (or men), the speaker and the night parrot never touch, and the night
parrot never ‘come[s] further/ than [the] front door’ (p.26) of the protagonist’s bleak and ‘skinny’ suburban house. Instead, their physical encounters always occur by proxy, or are transferred to other agents: it is heat stroke, for example, not the parrot that ‘grabs’ the protagonist ‘by the heels/ and throws [her]/ into a dry creek bed’ (p.25); the ‘green worms’ (p.10) of a radium cure, and not the parrot’s touch, that leave her ‘sparking’ and breathless. The closest the pair comes to physical intimacy is in the poem ‘Courtship’, where they sit next to each other on a bus, and where the protagonist imagines that they have spent the night together, and have found afterwards that ‘everything has changed’ (p.14). Even though the night parrot is sexualised and dangerous in each of his figurations and guises, he is never explicitly a sexual agent. He is never physically held, just as he cannot be metaphorically held, and he never holds the speaker. Instead, the night parrot, and the strange, shifting desire he engenders in the protagonist, are more vitally linked to creativity and danger, to emotional and imaginative extremity, rather than physical extremity – which is always intensely present in the speaker’s ordinary life. The desire he represents, after all, is far more complex than that represented by the man: by continually unsettling the spaces and rituals in which he appears, the night parrot often operates as a kind of foil for normality, or normativity, a reminder of all apparently impossible things, all kinds of extremities, that exist and flourish within any human environment or experience, and especially within those as personal, habitual and homely as the suburb and the suburban house.

By narrative logic, the protagonist must eventually choose between the man and the night parrot, and the two kinds of desire, the two kinds of existence they represent. The man comes to represent a fulfilled, and therefore extinguished, desire; this is a desire like that which Porter describes in the poem ‘When Desire’s Gone’: ‘your sleep is dry and dusty//and the stars/ are a
pattern/ on a tea-towel' (1989, p.59). These lines have a remarkable resonance with Gwen Harwood's 'Mother Who Gave Me Life, where the last image of the poet's mother is of her 'folding a little towel' (2003, p.361) when she died; in both poems, the whole universe is folded down to the size of a cloth.

Unsurprisingly, the man, and this folded-down desire he represents, are no match for the protagonist's own emotional and imaginative intensity; the man cannot contain or understand her. In ‘Trial Separation III’, the protagonist attempts to live with the man and renounce the night parrot and the danger, cruelty and wildness that he so often directs at her, but this attempt at a comfortable and unambiguous existence is doomed to fail:

and in the morning
I would stare across my muesli
at a man
more confused
than a dammed alpine creek
and just as shining bright
just as featureless and cold – (p.27).

The man’s imagination is as stilted, shiny and ‘featureless’ as a dam, an impenetrable wall that controls and contains the energy and wildness of an ‘alpine creek’ – an energy and wildness that resembles, by inference, the imaginative intensity of the protagonist herself. The muesli she is eating is also strangely connotative of the night parrot, resembling birdseed and grains. So even though the protagonist is ‘fascinated/ with the man’s body’ (p.27), and even though she claims to love him ‘fiercely’, their desire is only physical, and the intensity and illumination it offers is necessarily momentary. Purely physical desire cannot sustain the kind of environment that the extremophile needs in order to thrive within the relationship, within the house, ‘sticky, lukewarm/ but … irresistible’ (p.27) as it is.

At the end of the poem, the protagonist overtly refers to her affair with the man as ‘a warm, comradely/ tent in a blizzard’ (p.28) – an enclosed space
away from the flurry and fury of the outside world, protected from its extreme weather and environment. This is also a space that is comfortable, ‘comradely’, rather than impassioned, ‘warm’ rather than blazing with desire. And occurring outside of this space is another example of the protagonist’s wild imagination, generative contradiction, and her continued searching and desiring:

and outside
that jealous bastard of a parrot
would be laughing,
laughing at my search
for a leopard
on an Antarctic ice floe – (p.27).

Outside of the tent, outside of this relationship, the night parrot is still present, and the protagonist is also still longing for, and looking for, something wild, untamed and impossible, a leopard in Antarctica.

These images – of the tent in a blizzard and the Antarctic ice floe – are later echoed in the final poems of the collection *The Night Parrot*, in the shorter sequence ‘Auroral Corona with Two Figures’ (pp. 60-77), a fragmentary and strangely eroticised imagining of an Antarctic exploration expedition. Exploration, for Porter, often functions as a trope of extremity and an enactment of unknowability, of pushing beyond the edges of human knowledge, beyond the limits of maps. The extreme environment of Antarctica also operates in *Wild Surmise* as a space of wilderness, and potentiality and possibility; it is these very things that the speaker is continuing to seek, even as she stares at the man across her muesli. The kind of desire that the man offers is simply too possible, too easily reconciled, to sustain the imaginative and emotional scale and scope of the speaker, and the powerful imagined landscapes that coexist with her suburban home. Imagination too is the root of the protagonist’s loneliness, because her sweeping ingenuity and vision, and her fierce intensity, make her an outsider, move her beyond the reckoning of people like this man.
In contrast, the final poem of the night parrot sequence sees the speaker returning to her parrot paramour, and the embattled, contradictory kind of desire that he provokes. The first stanza states explicitly that what is at stake here is not ‘possession, consummation’, that such things ‘yield little/ and chase me/ like a swarm of bees’ (p.28), another dangerous and wild image that erupts against the suburban setting of the poem. The night parrot is described in the relationship as ‘pick[ing] spinifex seeds/ from my nerves’ (p.28) – his kind of desire is anything but comfortable; instead it is extreme in its sensations, and involves a wildness that acts on the protagonist’s nerves, on her very viscera. It is an almost feral energy, undomesticating even the body, the thing most familiar and closest to her. And importantly, the night parrot too is afraid, or endangered by this desire; he runs ‘for cover’ as the protagonist approaches, and begs her not to ‘raid [his] nest’ (p.29).

At the point where the protagonist chooses to reconcile with the night parrot – chooses, that is, the kind of desire and extremity that he embodies – the fantastic, alongside a reckless, bridge-burning energy and danger, again overtake the poem:

```
let's burn our bridges
I replied
let's pair-bond forever –

it's a deal, said the night parrot,
and sank our courtship
to the ocean floor;
[…] 
don't meddle, I learnt,
being overcome
by wonder
and titanic pressure – (p.29).
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Again, there’s a shifting within this passage, with the always-human protagonist referring to the relationship by the ornithological term ‘pair-bond’. But this is followed by the movement of the courtship ‘to the ocean floor,’
another space that recurs throughout Porter's poetry, both as a physical place, and as a site of wonder and imagination, of exploration or, occasionally, death and loss. It is also a space that is impossible for a bird in particular to inhabit – except, of course, imaginatively.

Within *The Night Parrot*, deep oceans and underwater landscapes recur largely as images of unknowable wilderness – unknowable because they are both distant and inaccessible and unable to be seen, only imagined. The poem ‘Untitled’ opens with the lines ‘on the ocean floor/ your mandrake root grows wild’ (p.30); ‘Paradise Beach’ (pp.51-57) and ‘No Breakfast’ (p.31) feature vast and unpredictable ‘open, black seas’ (p.57), rendered even more threatening by the presence of sharks. The later collections *Crete* and *Other Worlds* often feature sunken cities and drowned civilisations as emblematic of pagan energy or primitivism, a kind of lost connection with human wildness, very similar to the kind of connection that the night parrot enacts for the protagonist in her skinny suburban house. Porter’s verse novel *Wild Surmise*, discussed later in this chapter, also includes an entire sequence where two scientists – the main protagonist, Alex, and her biologist friend, Rachel – explore an oceanic shelf in a submarine, examining deep-sea animals for clues about space life, while Alex fantasises about her lover and her husband, and sees metaphors for her desires in deep-sea worms and rock faces; it is in this sequence that Porter writes explicitly about extremophiles. The deep ocean, for Porter, is always a space of ‘wonder/ and titanic pressure’, the very conditions ideal for the kind of extreme life, and extreme lives, that she is most interested in, a space of possibility and imagination, and of the unconscious, or primitive mind, made all the more interesting for the way it operates here both literally and figuratively.

Indeed, ‘wonder’ and ‘titanic pressure’ are the twin forces that most often animate Porter’s poetry, operating most strongly in contradictory images like ‘hot ice’, the ‘leopard on an Antarctic ice floe’ and the night parrot on the
ocean floor. There’s a tension between the exuberance, the wild-reaching imagination – the wonder – that such images are built from, and the pressure that their own paradox exerts, as they are forced to hold together, to not collapse under their own impossibility, but rather to generate new possibilities out of their strange internal logic.

Indeed, the poem – and the sequence – end with an image of the night parrot and the protagonist hidden away on ‘a secret crop of sandstone’ (p.29), and the protagonist’s statement ‘I don’t know/ if I’m scared stupid/ or thrilled to the spine/ and never want to be found’. Again, the emotion here is physical and visceral, felt to her very spine, but also deeply ambivalent and uncontained – there’s a wonder to the fear, and a desire for it to ‘never’ end. This kind of emotion holds the speaker in a state of extremity, especially because it occurs in an imaginary, large-scale landscape; but it is precisely this extreme state of being that the protagonist and the parrot both need in order to thrive, and that both are capable of bringing into any environment – a suburb, a desert, a car, a lake, or an imagined space within and beyond them all.

**Part Two: Wild Surmise**

*‘Different ponds’*

> and once again
> they’re paddling
> in different ponds.  – ‘Different Ponds’ (p.24).

The existence of these individual imagined spaces, and the potential for disparities between them, are at the heart of the conflict between the two main protagonists of Porter’s fourth verse novel *Wild Surmise*, published in 2002. *Wild Surmise* also centres on a marriage, between a pair of academics (both
human) – Alex, an astrobiologist, and Daniel, who teaches Romantic poetry and creative writing in a university. The novel is physically set almost entirely in an unnamed, but implicitly inner, suburb of Melbourne, in the home and garden of Alex and Daniel. But the imaginative settings, the spaces that they each inhabit mentally, and bring into constant metaphoric alignment with their physical surroundings, include Ovid’s Rome, Dante’s circles of hell, Lesbos, Egypt, and pastoral England, as well as distant planets and their moons, deep space, Antarctica, and the ocean floor.

Daniel and Alex are both trying to make sense of their world, and of each other, in a time of individual extremity – for Alex, this is a crisis of desire, in a passionate and impossible affair with an old flame, Phoebe; for Daniel, it is a crisis of mortality, because he has been diagnosed with terminal cancer. The novel is very much about the different systems of understanding, and the different imaginative environments, that both characters bring to bear upon the everyday space they inhabit. Alex and Daniel both stretch their suburb and its familiar, domestic world, in order that it may accommodate the drama of their individual interior lives, and their shared environment is constantly transformed and reimagined by each of them, and often simultaneously; it is never fixed or stable or dull.

The same impulses that are at work across ‘The Night Parrot’ sequence also animate *Wild Surmise*. Both texts are about imagination and desire, as well as marriage and adultery, and about the necessity of poetry and metaphor and their ability to illuminate ordinary lives and spaces. *Wild Surmise*, however, is far less fragmentary, and structured more by narrative rather than by the allusive links that bind together the individual poems of ‘The Night Parrot’, and this makes the imaginative transformations that Alex and Daniel constantly enact all the more powerful, because they are offset by a relatively realist structure and setting. *Wild Surmise*, as a verse novel, is also a longer text,
and so is able to explore with greater depth and complexity, these shared themes of extremity, desire and the ordinary.

In many ways *Wild Surmise*, written much later in Porter’s career, extends and develops many of the interests of ‘The Night Parrot’, especially in its attentiveness towards the ways in which people harness the material of their everyday and incidental surroundings – especially their suburban homes and habits – to reflect and match the complexity and extremity of their individual imaginative and emotional lives. The verse novel form allows Porter to deepen her engagement with ordinary encounters and experiences, because it posits them as inherently dramatic, as well as poetic – as the stuff from which the narratives of lives are built, and from which emotional or imaginative resonances are harnessed.

For Daniel, poets and poetry are the source of the metaphors he takes refuge in when trying to come to terms with both his wife’s infidelity and his own impending death. He continually imagines the terms by which a particular poet might envision his personal situation – ‘What would Larkin say / in his sour-quatrain perfect / way / about how Brian Howard / orders his coffee?’ he says, in ‘Prayer’. (p.169) He also invokes or addresses poets directly (‘As it happens, Auden my dear,/ today you’re right// nothing is happening’ (p.185)) or simply finds symmetry between his world and that of the poems he is reading – as indeed most readers do. Daniel even imagines himself as ‘a catastrophically constipated Coleridge/ without the visionary consolations’ (p.177) as his cancer – and his almost co-morbid bitterness – progresses. Like Harwood’s Professor Kröte, Daniel finds consolation by comparing himself with geniuses past – but Daniel is always ironic, gently self-mocking when he does this; he makes comparisons not out of a sense of his own genius, but in order to highlight his
own ordinariness. Daniel does not love poetry because he wants to be a poet, but because it helps him to understand his life, and illuminates it.

Poetry is a vital force within Daniel's life, and it offers the means by which he finds resonance and meaning, by which he orders and apprehends his experiences. He turns to his books, or to thoughts of specific poets, whenever he is in crisis. When he first receives treatment for his cancer, he asks himself, ‘What poet will accompany me/ to hospital’ (p.148), and settles on Dante to match what he sees as his own descent towards hell. Later, he describes himself, reading Ovid, as being ‘happily ravished by poetry’ and feeling the light in his garden ‘expanding/ in his lungs/ like a gust of imagery’ (p.19). These expansive gestures are typical for Porter, in their sensuality and physicality: the latter image brings the light, a part of the physical environment, into Daniel's body, first incorporating it sensually, then transforming it into something expressive and imaginatively powerful, in the same way as the characters constantly transform their home environments to fit their emotional experiences. The reference to reading Ovid also includes one of Porter’s most frequently used words, ‘ravished’, which is physical, intense and embodied, but which also gestures towards both desire and violence, or that ‘wonder and titanic pressure’ that so often animate her poems.

Yet the most important expression of the role poetry plays for Daniel is left to his wife Alex, after his death, and occurs in a poem titled ‘Daniel's Legacy.’ In this poem, Alex comforts Daniel's mother, Sheila, at his wake, held in Alex's home. Sheila asks Alex ‘just what was he about?’ and Alex responds by pointing ‘at Daniel's high-rise blocks/ of lonely poetry/ tottering over them/ “this/ is what he was about”’(pp.263-264). Poetry is more than Daniel’s job, more even than the stuff of his imagination, it is what he is made from, what he is about, and what he uses to construct the substance of his world and his
self within it — and the fact that these ‘high-rise blocks’ (p.263) of poetry books are contained within a suburban home does not diminish this power at all.

Interestingly, this poem also explicitly refers to Sheila’s own outer suburban background and experience, and to Daniel’s trajectory away from it. Before she is able to answer Sheila’s question about her son:

Alex slumps
under the memory
of all the phone calls,
all the drives
to the outer suburbs,
all the loving tedium
of a family outgrown,
Daniel had so cunningly
dodged (p.263).

This stanza is remarkable for the way in which it provides an entire history for Daniel and a backstory for his mother in less than ten lines, and also for how typical this history is for literary depictions of Australian suburbia. According to Belinda Burns, Daniel’s outgrowing of outer suburbia and its ‘loving tedium’ is typically figured as a kind of ‘flight’, one that ‘becomes essential and proliferates as a narrative trajectory in Australian fiction,’ with suburbia itself functioning ‘as a departure point’ (n.p.) from which the main protagonists may strike out, from which their stories begin, rather than where these stories occur.

It is the archetypal nature of this narrative that Porter is drawing on here, and that allows it to resonate beyond and between the short lines of the poem: the stanza itself is a gesture towards something much bigger. This larger narrative also resonates with some of Porter’s much earlier poems, including ‘Flesh and Blood’ from Driving too Fast, where the protagonist, visiting her mother in her childhood home, states: ‘she’s you with no imagination’ (1989, p.54), implying that the mother’s suburban fate was one escaped or mercifully evaded by the speaker of the poem.
Yet this gesture, this drawing in of a larger narrative, is not uncomplicated: Daniel may have left his mother’s outer suburbia, but it is only for the inner suburbs, only for another house and garden a little closer to the city. And Sheila’s response to Alex’s claim that poetry is what Daniel ‘was about’ is a very poignant ‘quiet curse’: “I know/’cause he bloody well/ got it from me”(p.264). Sheila is also ‘about’ poetry, also invigorated by poetry; she also has the ability to imaginatively transform her life and world, even within the outer suburbs, a long drive away from any space where poetry is supposed to exist.

But there is still an essential difference between this mother and son, delineated in part by the different suburbias in which they have lived, but also marked out linguistically in Sheila’s emphatic ‘bloody well.’ Porter’s verse novels are full of such moments of colloquial speech, often butting up against the lyrical features of her work. They are already evident in early poems like ‘The Night Parrot’, in lines like ‘wrecking vision, rebellion/ havoc and bird shit’ (p.16) and ‘that jealous bastard of a parrot/ would be laughing/[…] at my search for a leopard’ (p.27). But as Penny Jones argues in her discussion of *The Monkey’s Mask* (1994), Porter’s colloquialisms are often a ‘linguistic choice [that] enables the text to comment subtly on class … in Australian society’ (2004, p.108), because they appear far less frequently in the speech of privileged characters, and more often in that of those who live in the outer suburbs, and especially the western suburbs in which much of that novel is set. What this means is that individual suburbs, both here, and across Porter’s verse novels and collections as a whole, are also able to operate with a kind of implicit expansion. Just as the reference to Daniel’s ‘flight’ from outer suburbia brings a much larger narrative into connotative contact with the poem, so too do the references to specific kinds of suburbs instantly bring a range of cultural and class-based signifiers to bear upon our judgment of the characters – Mrs
Norris’ North Shore (with Twinings tea, linen shirts and her ‘missionary position face’ (1994, p.246)), or Diana’s and Nick’s inner Sydney, café-cultured suburbs in *The Monkey’s Mask*, Dr Cyren’s private patients from Palm Beach in *What a Piece of Work*, the Campbelltown land developers and North Sydney offices in ‘The Night Parrot’, or even Sheila’s simple ‘outer suburbia’ all carry implications for the characters who live and work there. We know their place and so we immediately know their tribe. These individual suburbs operate as speedy and succinct markers of character for the novels’ peripheral characters, in keeping with the necessary economy of the verse novel, and Porter’s characteristic short lines. Porter’s main protagonists, however, have relationships with the suburbs they inhabit which are too changeable, too complicated, to be captured in these kinds of short, almost throwaway lines. Even her peripheral characters often come to subvert the very expectations that these lines set up (Sheila still reads poetry, after all), so while this shorthand is expedient, it is never entirely conclusive or reductive.

Daniel’s relationship with his home and suburb is constantly changing because of the different poets and poems he uses to construct the substance of his world, and because of the different perspectives and the different allusive worlds they draw into alignment with his domestic space. Daniel uses poetry to elucidate his existence within his suburb, and to make his suburb resonate with ideas and experiences bigger, older, more extreme than it might otherwise contain. This much may be unsurprising within a verse novel: it is, after all, no huge leap for a poet like Porter to write a character who sees poetry as the important force in the world. But Daniel’s poetry is important because the problem at the heart of *Wild Surmise*, the fatal flaw in the marriage between Daniel and Alex, is that the fluctuating, imaginative transformations that poetry offers him are always at odds with the
transformations enacted by his wife, and so the spaces that they psychically inhabit are hugely different, even when they are sitting on the same couch, or at the same kitchen table.

Alex experiences and re-imagines her surroundings and encounters just as intensely and wildly as Daniel does, but the metaphors she draws upon come from her very different field of work. Porter hints at this essential difference even in her naming of her characters: Alex may very well be read as a-lex, an absent lexicon, a removal from the language-base of poetry in which Daniel operates. Instead, Alex’s source of imagination, and of meaning-making, is science. This is not to say that Alex is interested only in empirical knowledge, or even in a more concrete or rational kind of knowledge than that offered by Daniel’s poetry – astrobiology is, in Porter’s own words, ‘the most theoretical branch of biology’ (2010, p.47), since it is concerned with the study of extraterrestrial organisms, none of which have actually been discovered; as such, it is ‘brazenly optimistic’, and every bit as ‘fanciful’, even creative, as poetry itself. Astrobiologists even coined terms such as ‘the Goldilocks zone’ (Porter, 2010, p.48) for the region in a solar system that is environmentally just right – not too hot and not too cold – for supporting alien life.

When Alex imaginatively transforms her world and her experiences, she draws primarily on metaphors of deep space, imagining herself as ‘an icy comet/ burning up,’ (p.65) an ‘exploding star’ (p.103), and a ‘thunderhead/ on violently alive Jupiter’ (p.275). Alex similarly transforms her lover Phoebe into the planet Venus, and into an icy moon, like Europa, the object of her current research (Phoebe shares her name with Saturn’s largest moon). Even Daniel’s impending death she sees in these terms, comparing him to a red giant, a star ‘dying in a horrifying bloat/ across its planets’ (p.248), and stating, later on:
He was now in his dying
even more mysterious
than the Martian meteorite.

And when he finally moved out
of the life zone
what frustrating silent fossils
would he permanently embed
in Alex's heart? (p.254-255).

Even death Alex imagines in planetary terms – as a moving beyond the very alien and almost clinical-sounding ‘life zone’. Grief and its wounds are figured as scientific artifacts, as very concrete ‘fossils’ left embedded in Alex’s body.

Interestingly, Daniel uses space-based images too, although far less frequently, and almost only when he is trying to understand his wife, or attempting to see himself through her eyes. He imagines himself, for example, as Alex’s ‘boring satellite’, ‘minor planet’ and ‘unnamed moon’ (p.196); and elsewhere, in the poem ‘Daniel’s Song’, asks, ‘My wife reads the world/ with a long-distance telescope// how does she read me?’ (p.89). But Daniel’s imaginative figuring of space is still different from Alex’s – firstly, his imagining is here figured as a ‘song’, as something inherently poetic, even bardic; and his use of the verb ‘read’ for Alex’s looking at the sky (and, by extension, the world), and at her husband, shows how inextricably embedded he is imaginatively in his own sphere of language and books.

One of the most telling examples of the cross-purposes at which Alex and Daniel exist, and of the two very separate imaginative spaces they superimpose on their shared suburb, occurs when they are both contemplating outer space. The poem ‘Different Ponds’, which takes places in Alex’s study, opens with Alex looking at images of ichthyosaurs and fossil fish, and speculating on convergent evolution, and what it might mean for alien life on the distant Europa. Daniel brings Alex tea, and as he looks at the images on her computer screen –
'I can't see even randy old Jupiter'
he says pointing
at the ichthysaur
'jumping that bugger.'

Alex nods blankly
and returns to the screen

and once again
they're paddling
in different ponds (p.24).

Where Alex sees Jupiter the planet, Daniel sees the mythical Jupiter, King of the Roman Gods; the disparity is obvious here, especially in the blank nod with which Alex registers it. It’s important too that Daniel’s interpretation is sexual, and that Alex does not pick up on this: Alex’s desire, by this point in the novel, has been redirected towards Phoebe, and so even desire, that most animating force in Porter’s oeuvre, can no longer be an imaginative or emotional common ground for them. But perhaps because Daniel still desires his wife, he is able, at times, to approximate her deep-space metaphors, especially when he is trying desperately to imagine himself through her eyes or connect with her. Alex, however, is never able to reciprocate: her attention, just like her imagination, and her search for life, is directed elsewhere.

Metaphorically and imaginatively, therefore, Alex and Daniel constantly shape their shared physical world to very different ends, and transform the materials of their suburb and their home to stage their own individual imaginative and emotional lives. In this sense, Wild Surmise is largely about the imagination’s methods of making sense of the world; and poetry and science equally offer systems for understanding life, the self, and its place within the world. It is Alex and Daniel’s reliance on two different systems of imaginative interpretation of the world that isolates them from each other – they are not alienated simply because they live in a suburb, but rather because the different spaces, images and energies that they bring to bear on it are too different; they
each make of the suburb something wild and vibrant, but also wholly individual.

The two systems of science and poetry recur as twinned discourses throughout Porter’s work. This is usually figured through characters that are explorers, astronomers, ancient seers or religious acolytes, as well as scientists and poets like Alex and Daniel. Rose Lucas suggests that these recurring discourses offer two different kinds of ‘mythical and romanticised knowledge that [might] close the gap on uncertainty’ (1997, p.162). But in Wild Surmise, Porter is interested in this gap. She depicts uncertainty as a radical instability and unknowability, the thing that animates Alex and Daniel’s lives. Their two very different ways of trying to approach and apprehend the home they share destabilises and defamiliarises it, reconfiguring it from a place of familiarity and predictability into one of extremity and intensity, of the fantastic and the wildly imaginative.

‘The boiling extreme’

I can’t read Plath any more.

But she’s still the only poet
my wife reads
or knows. […]

Alex just laughs
‘Sylvia’s an extremophile’

What does she mean? […]

If my wife can only love
the boiling extreme
she can’t

_ of her own willing accord
_ love me…  – ‘Extremophiles’ (pp.134-135).

Porter’s claim for suburbia is that it is as much a place of extremity as the other liminal, imaginative or mythical landscapes that recur throughout her work – the abandoned ruins of lost civilisations and the ancient world; uncharted
wildernesses, including deserts, jungles and icy tundras; beach heads and bushland; foreign cities, and the deep ocean and outer space. But the suburb is extreme because it is the site of ordinary lives, and ordinary lives are always abundant, varied, vibrant and intense in Porter’s work – just as they are in Gwen Harwood’s poems. Porter is making a claim within *Wild Surmise* – and indeed, throughout her work – that all human beings are, as Alex imagines Sylvia Plath here, extremophiles, usually-microbiotic animals that are capable of life, and which even thrive, in extreme and hostile conditions; that all people exist within extreme emotional and imaginative conditions, regardless of how mundane the surfaces of their lives may appear. Even though Alex and Daniel, as academics, work in fields that are already rich in metaphor and which easily lend themselves to imaginative alignment and transformation as a result, the impulse they have to reshape their world is shared by all of Porter’s characters – including the stiff and reticent policeman at the centre of *El Dorado* (2007), the tough and feisty detective from *The Monkey’s Mask*, the murderer-antagonists in her crime novels, and the teachers and spinster-aunts of her early collections.

Alex’s identification as an extremophile is also echoed in her metaphors and daydreams that are creaturely, and which very often centre on images of fantastically strange ocean creatures – especially squid and octopuses and the kraken, a creature even more extraordinary because it is mythical and so only ever exists in the imaginary realm. These are creatures that are complex, intelligent and mysterious, and which, importantly, live on the ocean floor, a site that Porter metaphorically aligns with the deep space that Alex researches: both are weightless, without gravity, both are spaces that we usually imagine, rather than experience or see, and both are associated with the unconscious, with the hidden and suppressed. It is this hiddenness and suppression that is important to Porter’s portrayal of the suburb in *Wild Surmise*. By imaginatively
overlaying these spaces onto her suburban house, Alex is able to envision the space as capable of containing the secrets and elisions that almost entirely characterise her relationship with Daniel across the text. She never tells him of her affair with Phoebe, or of her own fears and grief at his impending death.

It is in moments of desire or longing that Alex’s use of these creaturely and deep-sea images is most pronounced. After first encountering Phoebe at an astrobiology conference in Sydney, Alex imagines herself ‘slipping’ into a ‘liquid warm/claustrophobia’ and jetting ‘like a nautilus/into the panoramic unimaginable’ (p.61); on her return home, in a poem entitled ‘The Kraken sleepeth’ she dreams of something that ‘quivers and stirs/on [her] steaming ocean floor’ (p.67). For Porter, desire is the most extreme of the intense emotional and imaginative experiences of her characters, perhaps because it is registered so powerfully in the body, and because it ignites both the emotions and imagination. So Alex’s figuring of herself, here, as a squid-like animal—both an extremophile and a creature of instinct and physicality, rather than of language and rationality—is a natural expression of the overwhelming intensity of the desire for Phoebe that has been reignited in her. These images recur in Alex’s experience of grief, after Daniel’s death, when she dreams of herself in the embrace of a giant squid, and is later woken one night by the sensation of ‘an arctic tentacle/suck[ing] hard and cruel/on her aching leg’ (p.288).

Other wild animals populate Alex’s physical and imagined world, as well as her speculations and transformations. These creatures often intrude to amplify emotion, or to undercut her moments of abstracted thought: ‘a wonderful/racket’ of ‘amphibious, swamp-dwelling frogs’ (p.72) starts up when Alex and Phoebe talk about the violence of star-formation after lovemaking; Alex compares herself to an ‘exploding star/[a] pygmy hippopotamus’ (p.103) in Phoebe’s arms, and compares Daniel to a sea urchin in their bed. Similarly, microbiotic creatures, especially germs, viruses and amoebas, which are extreme
both in their size and in their strangeness (as well as their effects upon human bodies), are a constant presence in Alex’s scientific imagination, and in the transformations it effects on the suburb: it is not just the immense, but also the minute, that exists alongside the space.

One of the most interesting uses of this extremophile imagery occurs in the poem ‘Calamari,’ where Alex’s imagining of the octopus is related by Daniel, watching on as she explains to his boss, over a seafood dinner, why she doesn’t eat octopus or squid. ‘Don’t tell them’ Daniel thinks ‘how you marvel at the octopus:’

*tell me again, darling,*
*tell me again*
*the time you saw one*
*lurking in a rock pool*
*until it jetted away*
*in a huff of pink*

*the only animal*
*that really shows its feelings*
*you joked* (p.205, italics in original).

The octopus here occupies a strange position, both animal – and anthropomorphised animal at that – and food simultaneously. But it’s also expressive – a creature interesting to Alex because of the way she can use itimaginatively, can transform it into an expression of pure emotion. In its creatureliness, it is removed from the silences and obstacles of communication that stand between Alex and Daniel, the things they cannot say and cannot share, from the loneliness and inhibition this brings them both; in this instance, Daniel’s and Alex’s use of this metaphor seem to be aligned. There’s a deep irony here, however, because the memory of Alex’s that Daniel is referring to is of an event that occurred during Alex’s original affair with Phoebe, on a research trip in Hawaii some years before. Daniel, of course, does not know this.
‘A kind/ of perverse defiance’: an aesthetic of betweenness

the lemon had a kind
of perverse defiance, […]
refusing to be plucked,
sliced and floated
in someone’s moment
of sweet alcoholic
clink and epiphany — ‘The Only Lemon’ (p.286).

Much of the drama of *Wild Surmise* occurs internally for both Alex and Daniel, and is caused by the uncrossable gaps in understanding between them, the very different visions they conjure from the shared material of their suburban lives. But the instability and transformations that they confer on their suburb are also echoed in the gaps, elisions and recurrent liminalities within the textuality of Porter’s book. Most of the actual events, the immediate experiences and occurrences that form the plot of the novel, are actually elided in the book – the reader is not privy to Daniel’s diagnosis, his hospitalisation or treatment (although, perversely enough, we do witness Daniel’s death from within his own consciousness). Neither does Porter directly portray Alex’s meeting with Phoebe, nine years after their original affair, the re-ignition of their romance, or their break-up. Instead, the characters remember and ruminate on these events, transforming them and making sense of them using their separate repertoires of images and discourses. The novel is built of memories and daydreams, in all of their intensity and strangeness, rather than direct events, and all of these visions, and their shifting temporalities and environments, come to coexist within the couple’s small suburban space.

For almost half of the novel, furthermore, both Alex’s affair and Daniel’s disease exist as open secrets between the couple, things that occupy their internal monologues and their minds, but are startlingly absent from any dialogue between them. This exchange, in the poem ‘Virus’, occurs
immediately after Daniel’s diagnosis, and at the point where Alex’s affair with Phoebe is at its most intense:

I sip my coffee
joylessly
(when did I last enjoy anything?)
and ask about her work.

She shrugs

‘sometimes it feels
like I’ve got herpes,
it lives dormant
in my nerves
then tingles
and burns to the surface
in itching little ulcers,
then it goes away again […]’

we’re both laughing
joylessly
we both know
she’s not talking
about Europa (pp.132-133).

There’s a devastating irony in Alex’s use of illness as a metaphor, even as its tingling ‘nerves’, its ‘itching’ and ‘burn’, are typical excessive gestures for Porter; these too are recurring words in ‘The Night Parrot’ sequence that in so many ways prefigures this later work. In *Wild Surmise*, it is in these kinds of ironies, and the gaps and absences that engender them, that much of the pathos and the tragedy of the novel occur.

These ironies do not occur just through absences; they are often also created by repetitions, or near-repetitions, imagined separately and not openly shared between Alex and Daniel. The third section of the novel, ‘The Dark Wood’, for example, opens with two poems, both entitled ‘Cold’, and both beginning with the lines ‘How can she live/ such a cold life?’ (pp.139, 140). The first is told from Alex’s perspective, in a close third person, and centres on her theoretical work, its ‘dead cold universe’ (p.139) and her distant – in both senses of the word – lover Phoebe; Alex asks ‘What kind of creature/ thrives on the cold?’, in the first intimation of her later-explicit portrayal of herself as an
extremophile. Daniel’s poem, in contrast, is an internal monologue, occurring as he watches his wife. Here, Alex is only cold because she is ‘my distant wife’ (p.140); and rather than seeing her as the ‘frozen sea’ that Alex imagines herself to be, Daniel compares her to the ‘early spring bloom’ of a magnolia tree blown about by ‘the cold August wind’. Daniel’s love for Alex in this poem is almost painfully poignant because Alex is – at the same time, and in very similar words – thinking only of Phoebe, and also because Daniel’s imagining of Alex is so much kinder and more ‘precious’ (to use his term) than her own view of herself; and the tragedy of these two small poems is caused by these disparities, by the chasm of understanding that lies between them.

These narrative elisions, ironies, and instances of the action occurring largely off-the-page, are integral to Porter’s destabilising use of form in the verse novel, and almost an enactment of the shifts within the spaces she portrays. In her discussion of Porter’s *The Monkey’s Mask*, Finola Moorhead suggests that the ‘few words’ (1995, p.177) that Porter uses in her poems work to create, or even enact the mystery at its centre, because so much is left as inference, or entirely unsaid. In *Wild Surmise* the mystery of Alex and Daniel’s relationship is far less overt than the murder mystery that drives *The Monkey’s Mask*, but Moorhead’s suggestion, that when seeking clues, the reader ‘should … look into the spaces’ (p.180) is equally valid here. It is the gaps in the narrative that are important, the spaces in between the small lyric snapshots, momentary and fragmentary, by which Porter constructs the fabric of the text: the space between poems, like the space between Alex’s and Daniel’s imaginative transformations of their shared experiences, is the most compelling space in the book.

Rose Lucas refers to these gaps and spaces in Porter’s verse novels as moving in ‘tentative, tremulous lateral directions’ (p.28) towards spaces and
emotions more unruly and potent than those the poems might be able to contain, and sees these also as a directional tension, caused by the competing demands of the poetic and novel forms that the genre hybridises. In *Wild Surmise*, these ‘tremulous lateral directions’ are usually expressed through Alex and Daniel’s at-odds images of science or poetry; they point to, or look for, beauty, hope, love, hatred, despair and loss beyond both the physical setting and the simple narrative of the story. These tremulous directions are gestures towards the intense, the wild and the poetic, and the moments where these things collide with the everyday world.

Tremulous directions are also what give Porter’s verse novels their ‘operatic’ or ‘aria-like’ quality – these terms recur in criticism of her work from writers including David McCooey (2002), David Gilbey (2007) and Felicity Plunkett, and are all the more interesting given that some of Porter’s last works were libretti. There is a parallel between these poems and the work of Gwen Harwood, whose pseudonymous voices are often described, even by the poet herself, as a ‘band’ of operatic voices, of whom she is the leader or conductor. In Porter’s *Wild Surmise*, the collisions between the different voices of her characters, between operatic intensity and large-scale emotion and domesticity, and between cosmic, microscopic and everyday worlds, create much of the tension and drama within the text.

These collisions are an integral part of Porter’s overall aesthetic, and they are important in all of her verse novels. Critics have pointed out that Porter’s verse novels always operate in a space between genres and discourses – both between the ‘high art’ of poetry and the popular forms of genre fiction: murder mysteries, psychological thrillers, or, in the case of *Wild Surmise*, science fiction. (David McCooey goes so far as to refer to the genre of the text as operating within ‘the minor tradition of “domestic” sci-fi’ [2002, p.11], although this claim seems somewhat hyperbolic.) These popular genres also
collide with the distinctly high-brow concern for poetry that is almost always thematised within the texts: the murdered woman in *The Monkey’s Mask* is a poet, and her poems are some of the most important clues that she leaves behind; the killer in *El Dorado* boasts of his crimes by publishing rhyming verse in tabloid newspapers. In *Wild Surmise*, poetry is always working, alongside astrobiology, to transform and make sense of the domestic drama. Porter is making a claim within these novels both for the imaginative possibilities of poetry and for its integral place within all kinds of stories and experiences, all kinds of spaces – however artless, domestic and suburban they may seem from the outside.

Porter is operating, that is, very much within her own aesthetic of betweenness, relying on the spaces – and the opportunities they open out – between poems, between characters and between genres, as well as between poetry and narrative, between different systems for understanding the world, and between physical and imagined spaces. It’s an aesthetic that’s also obvious in the changeable and shifting desires of her characters, almost none of whom have stable, simple or normative sexualities. Just as the narrator of ‘The Night Parrot’ is driven by desire for an at least partially imagined bird, both Akhenaten and the psychiatrist narrator of *What a Piece of Work* indulge in incestuous desire, and Alex – just like the femme fatale Diana of *The Monkey’s Mask* – has an extramarital affair with another woman. Alex even finds herself aroused, on a submarine research trip, by an underwater pillar of tubeworms, that remind her of ‘a hundred fluttering dicks’ (p.115).

Mandy Treagus suggests this betweenness points to a queering of categories within Porter’s work, which ‘unsettles both categories’ as it hybridises them, just as it always ‘sees sexuality as an unfixed zone of possibility’ (2002, p.2). In Porter’s work, desire and sexuality are always implicated in a more general unsettling and unfixedness within the text, yet the
ramifications of their unfixedness are wide ranging and extreme, in their ability
to drive the action and thoughts of the characters, and, by extension, the
narrative. The kind of claim Porter is making for desire is one of indeterminacy –
desire is important because it’s changeable and unpredictable as well as also
being elemental, something that operates beyond language or theory (or gender
divisions), in the same way that music often works in Gwen Harwood’s poems;
and because it is so fundamental, and so mutable, it is also implicated in the
imaginative transformations that her characters project onto their
environments. For Porter, sexuality and desire are always ‘sticky’ (a word she
explicitly aligns with poetry, in the lines from The Monkey’s Mask, ‘I didn’t
know poetry/ could be as sticky/ as sex’ (1994, p.139)). They are also
mysterious, and always generative, rather than stable categories of experience or
self.

Porter’s aesthetic of betweenness also operates spatially in her work,
and is all the more complex in Wild Surmise, because of the verse novel’s
reliance on its suburban setting: because it is set, as it were, in an environment
that itself carries a conceptual weight of betweenness, of being a space neither
city nor country, not quite, or sub-, urban, but also far from rural. David
McCooey also argues that because betweenness, elision and fragmentation are
integral to extended poetic sequences, they lend themselves well as a form to
portrayals of cities and their suburbs, because they too are intense, fragmentary,
and characterised by ‘occluded views, indirection, and the sometimes fluid,
sometimes fixed relationships between public and private space’ (1999, p.123).

In Wild Surmise, occluded views and indirection are the defining
features of almost all of Alex and Daniel’s interactions, but their personal re-
imaginings of their shared environment can also be considered a ‘sometimes
fluid, sometimes fixed relationship’ with space, because of the way they
constantly shift and draw on repertoires of personal images and memories, as
well as the physical details of the space. Their relationships with space are made more complex because of the liminality of suburbia itself, in both its lack of definition and its ambivalent place – by turns derided and lauded, satirised and beloved – within Australian literature. Many of Alex’s and Daniel’s ruminations and reminiscences occur in spaces that are both public and private – waiting rooms, restaurants, a conference room and a St Kilda greasy spoon – as well as in mediated spaces such as on the internet, and television. They both inhabit their house as both a home and an office, and so live there as both private citizens and public workers. Betweeness is encoded in the physical spaces that they move through and live in; they are liminal and contested, and still largely undefined, and it is for this reason that they are able to be configured so flexibly, to be open to such wildly ranging and constantly changing possibilities of imagination, emotion and scale.

The poem ‘Daniel’s Song’ best demonstrates the use to which Porter puts this betweeness in her depiction of suburban space. Physically, the poem is set somewhere in Daniel and Alex’s home, in a moment of sexual intimacy – which itself is only alluded to, by Daniel’s reference to Alex ‘squatting on her toes/ pressing my kneecaps in’ – but the psychic and imaginative pressure that Daniel brings to bear on the space is enormous. Looking at Alex, he thinks:

My heart signals to her
like a colossal rapacious
alien
flashing frantically
from an overlooked moon.

\textit{oh darling} \hspace{1cm} \textit{oh my love}
\textit{find me} \hspace{1cm} \textit{find me} (p.89).

Daniel’s plangent loss, and lostness, his desperation, are huge enough, here, to transfigure his own heart into something both ‘alien’ and ‘colossal,’ the suburban room into a distant moon. The gap between him and Alex, between the house and his imagined moon, is gaping and cavernous, cosmic in scale,
and it is the gap, this betweenness, that has the greatest presence within the poem, and that engenders this intensity of emotion to Daniel’s experience.

‘My garden is no alien’: rest and respite in the suburb

*My garden is no alien.*

*Greeting me*  
*when it rains*  
*with a goose-pimplying eucalyptus*  
*embrace*  

—*Water* (p.19).

Even as both Alex and Daniel constantly transform their home, it does still exists for them as a concrete, physical space. Their small piece of suburbia has a tangible materiality that sometimes undercuts the more grandiose of their imaginative visions, or returns their flights of fancy to the earth. The garden and the house are the departure points of many of the characters’ imaginative sojourns; and it is the physical details of these spaces that spark off the transformations that Alex and Daniel make of and from them. A grevillea in dry soil, for example, leads Alex to think that ‘she’s living through a taunting/drought’ (p.273) professionally and emotionally, just as the backyard worm farm triggers Daniel to contemplate the ‘seething face/ of his own fate’ and progressing cancer (p.216).

Yet the rude physicality of these garden details can never be entirely suppressed or overwhelmed, never entirely transmogrified into something other. The garden in particular is an intensely sensual, almost desiring space for Daniel, who asks to be ‘happily ravished […] forever’ (p.19) when reading poetry in the garden, and later considers himself ‘ravished […] like a seduction’ (p.255) by the light through the apricot tree. It’s telling that Daniel’s desire manifests itself in backyard images, when Alex’s are more often extra-terrestrial.
– it is Daniel, after all, who is looking for a love close at hand, Alex who desires someone distant and unattainable.

Daniel’s ravishing in and by his garden is another gesture towards the sublime, in this case a kind of suburban sublime; it is an almost transcendent immersion in the piece of nature, tiny as it is, that the garden represents. But this kind of transcendence is also one that has a long history in portrayals of the suburban garden, which has always been part and parcel of the Australian suburban dream – Porter’s gesture towards the sublime here, as well as her use of the intensely sensual and sexual word ‘ravish’ is simply a more exaggerated or extreme manifestation of an existing trope. Ian Hoskins argues that backyards and gardens were integral to even the early stages of the planning and design of suburbs in Australia, because the open space and connection to nature that they embodied was seen as the antidote to the social and physical illnesses of the crowded inner-city terraces they were supposed to supplant or supersede. Green space, light and air, it was believed, would not only ameliorate disease and slow the spread of contagion by decreasing population density and reducing the burden on sanitation systems, but would also inspire moral enlightenment and contentment in the new suburbanites by providing them with more beautiful surroundings.

This view of the garden has been overtaken by the better-known critiques of suburbia from the Menzies era, such as those of Allan Ashbolt and Donald Horne (1965), which see the twin burdens of owning a suburban house, and maintaining a suburban garden – portrayed in the famous trope of the almost-choreographed Sunday-morning lawn-mowing and car-washing men – as a de-radicalising and homogenising force. Instead of being bettered by the house and garden, suburbanites are pushed to keep up both appearances, and mortgage and hire-purchase repayments, and so they are left with no time, energy or inclination to pursue their individuality or think about politics; they
are levelled out and kept in line through fear of losing what they have. The garden here is simply another part of the showcase – or the façade – of the suburban home, another accoutrement and expression of respectable, middle-class leisure, another distraction from larger political realities, and nothing more.

Daniel’s engagement with his garden, however, is imaginative and laden with memory and personal significance, as well as sensuality. The garden is a site of respite for Daniel, a space of familiarity and comfort that becomes all the more precious to him as he faces the destabilising and extreme events of his terminal illness and his wife’s infidelity. Daniel looks for new, green buds ‘with quick delight’ as he struggles with nausea from chemotherapy, thinks of the grevillea and jasmine when his fear of death (‘the world’s too precious/ my soul’s knuckles/ bone-white/ from hanging on’ (p.240)) can no longer be relieved by poetry. Most strikingly, in the poem ‘Resistance’, Daniel chooses to watch the ‘red spider flowers/ on [his] new grevillea’ (p.155) instead of taking the more practical actions of asking the doctor ‘how long have I got?’ or confronting Alex with his suspicions of her affair. Daniel takes comfort in the garden’s beauty, and also finds there a reminder of his mortality and all he has to lose – it is a space that simultaneously alleviates and intensifies his internal dramas. But the space is only able to do this because it remains intimately connected to nature and the natural world; it offers, as David Nichols and Mia Schoen call the vision of the early suburban planners, ‘the appropriate appreciation of nature inside the city’ (p.28), even as it exists in, and is transformed by, Daniel’s all-too-human imaginative world.

The garden, after all, is not nature, or not a purely natural space – it is a space that has been crafted and kitted out by Daniel and Alex, together, over the years in which they have occupied their house. As such, it has come to be a site of memory and personal history for the couple. Daniel often thinks of the lemon tree in the garden – a recurring image in the book – as ‘our lemon
tree’ (pp.13, 241), just as it reminds Alex, after Daniel’s death, of the inexorable progression of time, her own mortality and her loss. In the poem ‘Struggle’ (p.240), Daniel even remembers visiting the nursery with Alex to choose their grevillea in the early, happier days of their marriage. The garden allows Alex and Daniel to locate themselves within the world, to root themselves, as it were, in what Jean Duruz calls ‘a miniature, private place for remembering, imagining and reinscribing … subjectivity within the [suburban] dream’ (1994, p.201).

Above all, the garden is a multivalent space. It refuses to be imaginatively transformed or contained, and it constantly resists allegorisation, even as the characters use it as a site of memory, of personal history, and of metaphorical alignment. This is most evident in the garden-variety birds – honeyeaters, lorikeets and red-rumped parrots – that often erupt into the space, interjecting and undercutting some of the characters’ biggest imaginative gestures, reminding them instead of the physical and sensual nature of the world as it is, alongside and underneath their imagined transformations. The garden, and its animal and plant life, are as real and raucous as Europa’s is theoretical and speculative, and Porter reminds the reader of this most often when the dramatic pitch of the characters’ monologues is at its highest. In ‘Honeyeaters (1)’, for example, Daniel observes:

When you’re fucked
take an old pleasure
and dive into it.

Today the honeyeaters
darting through the branches
of the apricot tree
are an empty swimming pool.

They don’t even give me
a metaphor to swim in.

Just yapping little grey birds (p.187).
The ‘old pleasure’ of the garden remains important to Daniel (and he is able to find within it the metaphor of ‘an empty swimming pool’ to echo his emotions, even though he denies this is a metaphor at all). It is the first place he turns to when looking at Alex, who is physically watching TV beside him, in an almost iconic image of comfortable domesticity, yet is imaginatively ‘millions of miles away […] chip chip chipping/ at her dead little moon’ (p.188). His physical description of the garden is intensely lyrical, for all its sparseness: there’s an almost edible, sweet and golden lusciousness embedded in the linked images of the honeyeaters and apricot tree, and the usual verb ‘darting’ is energetic and wild. But even this garden cannot wholly satisfy Daniel’s need for consolation: his imaginative life is again too big for the space that is supposed to contain it, even as it energises and transforms the space.

It’s interesting too that these stanzas centre on the (albeit empty) metaphor of a swimming pool: another image as iconic and specific to Australian suburbia as Ashbolt’s lawnmower or Martin Boyd’s (1960) brick veneer. But its emptiness is disturbing, and even dangerous within the poem – Daniel wants to ‘dive into it’, an impulse that is violently self-destructive, and a transformation and subversion of what this suburban feature normally represents. This is a typical gesture of Porter’s, a hinting at the violence and danger easily overlooked but always present in these environments of the everyday and ordinary.
The garden is not the only multivalent and complicated space within Alex and Daniel’s suburban home. Alex and Daniel’s house, like the house of the protagonist of ‘The Night Parrot’, is frequently a mediated space, or at least a media-rich space: televisions and computers bring counterpointing voices, as well as distant places, different images, and their related metaphors and alignments, into the home. Alex’s and Daniel’s imaginative territories, which already overlap their home, are also made more complex by these media. The television in particular often seems to echo, or ironise Daniel’s emotional life – just as the radio in ‘The Night Parrot’ answers back and ‘really understands’ (p.19) the narrator of that sequence – especially as his illness develops, and he begins to spend more time at home, alone. Yet the particular pathos that the television beams back to Daniel is not his illness, but his wife’s infidelity; and the function of the TV within the book is made far more complicated because the images it broadcasts are often of Alex, whose career involves speaking about astrobiology on chat shows and daytime TV. (‘Does she never weary/ of her yakkety yak celebrity?’ Daniel asks (p.231)). Already distant and unreadable to Daniel, during her appearances on TV Alex becomes completely hyperreal, an image that Daniel can watch and desire, but that is so removed from its
actual referent that he can longer know or touch it. These appearances are frequent, and they are inescapable (She’s on the radio/ She’s on TV’ states Daniel in ‘Famous’ (p.231)), and in their strangely distant, even remote intimacy, they almost enact the circumstances of her relationship with Daniel. Daniel looks at, and desires his wife, who is essentially, because imaginatively and desiringly, always elsewhere – Alex is, in these instances, present within her own living room, and in Daniel’s consciousness, only as an image on a screen. And it is only towards this image that Daniel is able to express his frustration and his rage:

My wife on television.  
All intense charisma  
and big brown eyes.  
Talking with sexy jokes  
about the sensual sex life  
of an octopus alien.  

I burp  
aiming my stubbie at the screen  
*she’s fucking boring at home!* (p.176).

What Daniel addresses directly here is ‘the screen’, rather than the figure of Alex within it (or even Alex herself), as if the television could answer him, or side with him, in the way that his wife cannot. The image is also startling because Daniel’s actions accompanying this outburst seem almost clichéd, and certainly out of character for the mild-mannered, if embittered, poetry academic that he is. Burping, and aiming a stubbie at the TV are the actions of the kind of brutish and crass suburban male character that recurs in stereotypes of the suburban lounge room space, and it almost seems as if the television itself has performed its own kind of levelling out on Daniel. But this is undercut immediately by the angry and disingenuous nature of his statement, ‘*she’s fucking boring at home!*: Daniel has always been, and remains, fascinated by Alex and the wild theorising and imagination of her work; this outburst is simply another kind of performance, another emotionally driven act of
transformation, another attempt to reinterpret and reshape the world to allay his own despair.

In ‘Honeyeaters (1)’, the television offers Daniel another moment of illusory conversation, or of imagined confluence with his own interior, private life. Here, Daniel watches a documentary about an ‘abused old working elephant’ (p.187) – a correlation to his own vision of himself, abused by his wife’s affair, his cancer, and the increasingly corporate drudgery of his academic work. The association is reinforced by Daniel's reference to the documentary as ‘hurting [him]/ like a blunt needle jabbed in’ (p.188): the similarity to his own experience of cancer treatment is clear. What’s remarkable about the poem, however, is its complex interfolding of scale and space. The elephant is projected, even injected, into the room through the television, and simultaneously interpreted by Daniel as ‘life/ on [our] own planet’, because Alex, who is physically beside him on the couch, is imaginatively, in ‘her mind and heart/ millions of miles away’ on Europa.

So the simple suburban space of the living room becomes a container, not only for Daniel's huge and 'heaving' distress, Alex's cosmic-scale imagination, and the intense emotions of their failing relationship, but also for Daniel's empathy or projected identification, and for both the natural world, and the shared, mass-scale imaginary of television – all because of the simultaneously real, projected, imagined and transformed elephant in the room.

Elsewhere, the television is implicated in some of the small acts of cruelty Daniel enacts on his unfaithful wife. In the poem ‘Breakfast’, Daniel decides to tell Alex a small fact he has just learnt about Giordano Bruno, the sixteenth-century philosopher and astronomer who is something of a hero to Alex. Bruno was the first astronomer to speculate on the existence of other inhabited worlds within an infinite universe – an idea that denied the centrality
of Earth to an ordered, hierarchical cosmology; he was burned at the stake by the Roman Inquisition in 1600. Daniel has discovered that:

they burnt him
for not acknowledging
the divinity of Jesus

not, my deluded love,
for waving the extraterrestrial flag (p.159).

Daniel is delighted to share the fact with Alex, and hopes that the knowledge ‘might just smother/ for a moment/ the hum’ (p.158) which he earlier described as ‘coming off her/ like a nauseating odour/ of happiness.’ This is, of course, the hum of desire that is animating Alex and is denied to Daniel; but what is important here is how Daniel describes the information he has come across. The poem opens with the lines:

It’s strange the scraps
of crap you pick up –

bits and pieces
of smart-arse nothing
like cramming
for a game show
that holds no surprises
or prizes (p.157).

It’s a strange moment of inversion: Daniel’s real, suburban life is transformed here into an imagined game show, perhaps the ultimate cliché of mindless mass-media broadcasting (this verse novel, after all, predates reality TV), and something as impossible or paradoxical as the ‘imagined pop song’ (p.23) from ‘The Night Parrot’. Similarly, the information about Giordano, which Daniel explicitly refers to later on as something that he ‘read/ christ-knows-where’, is something delivered on screen, albeit the imagined screen of the non-existent game show, and simultaneously something read on the page. But it is also another instance of Daniel trying to breach the gap between his own and his wife’s experiences. Alex’s TV appearances are as foreign to Daniel as her
distant moons; and in this instance he literally watches on as Alex
imaginatively exists elsewhere, and yet he still attempts to draw on her
specialised metaphors to interpret their domestic situation, their relationship,
to make the everyday, suburban routine of breakfast into something important
and intense – if, in this instance, deliberately cruel.

The interplay between mediated and suburban spaces in Wild Surmise is also
more complex than that of ‘The Night Parrot’ because the mediated spaces
here include digital spaces – reflecting the changes to the media environment
in the nineteen years between the publication of the two books. The internet
and digital media engender new and complicated ways of inhabiting and
moving between spaces, both physical and virtual, and the most obvious – as
well as the most profound – example of this can be seen in Alex’s and Daniel’s
working patterns, and the access to information and material from their
working lives that they both have within their suburban home.

Both Alex and Daniel work, at times, from home – so their suburb is as
much a site of industry as it is of domesticity, and in some ways, the presence
of their work within the home fuels their imaginations, and places the
materials they need to transform their environment directly before them. For
Alex, this occurs when she looks at images of fossils or planets on her computer
screen, or reads news reports about scientific probes in places like Antarctica.
She is frequently described as ‘turning her back on the window’ (p.275), or
being lit by the ‘heartless’ glow of the computer screen (p.273), as she switches
between looking at her garden and contemplating distant spaces – between
existing in her physical and imaginary spaces.

Having an office at home complicates the distinction between the
domestic and working realms, between private and public roles and spaces.
Alex’s office, and Daniel’s study, are both physically contained within the
house, but the networks of information, of production and communication and
exchange that they involve are far broader than this. Fiona Allon describes this
kind of space as a ‘modern plugged-in, networked and globalised home’, which
‘no longer has … firm boundaries’ (p.159) because of its interconnections with
other spaces, people, media spheres and information systems. By working
within such a space, Alex and Daniel are simultaneously participating in the
world at large, outside their suburb, and moving through, existing within, their
domestic realm.

A number of critics – including Robert Fishman, Roger Silverstone and
Robert Beuka – have discussed the ways in which the changing information
economy, alongside globalisation and, more recently, digitisation, have
changed and complicated the relationship between the city and the suburb, as
well as these delineations between working and private lives. Increasingly, they
argue, suburbs can no longer be thought of as peripheral to, or sub-urban,
both because suburbs and cities are indistinguishable as ‘nodes’ within a
network of information and economic exchanges, and because industry is
equally possible – and equally diverse – within both spaces. This is largely
because hybridised home offices, like those of Alex and Daniel, mean that the
walls of the modern suburban house are no longer the limits of the industry
and interconnections that it might contain, just as they are by no means the
limits of the imaginative geographies of their inhabitants.

Some of these tensions are played out in Alex’s home office when it
becomes the site where Daniel discovers her infidelity, by breaking into her
email account. (‘Daniel can’t believe/ his wife’s password/ is really Europa’
(p.164) the poem ‘Infidelity by e-mail’ begins). Alex’s email correspondence
with Phoebe has allowed her to connect instantly with the different countries
and time zones in which Phoebe, an American, is working. Reading the
emails, Daniel states ‘Her Inbox/ is her trysting love nest’ (p.164). This is an
image that makes the virtual space of Alex's inbox both physical – a bedroom-like 'love nest' – and poetic (the word 'trysting', after all, is archaic and rarely used outside of poetry), if only in Daniel's imagination and reconfiguration; so cyberspace is another multiple space, and another space of desire and extremity, both within and beyond the suburb.

Daniel's work – regardless of where it is conducted – is much less present in the novel than Alex's. This is partly because of his illness, as the encroaching weakness of his body makes it increasingly difficult for him to function, let alone do any work. He is never portrayed actually at work within the home – even though he retreats to his study to think and read – and he makes only three brief appearances on the university campus across the course of *Wild Surmise*. Nonetheless, he also complains bitterly, and frequently, about the 'corporate world/ of the user-pays university' (p.161) which has him writing reports to justify his course on Romantic poetry and listening to students 'demanding a Distinction/ for [...] yet another/ lazy dead poem', or claiming to have 'read every single book/ ever aborted/ let alone published' (p.172). And he does these things, he overtly states, in the poem 'The Corporate World', 'while lucky lucky Alex/ [is] out/ fucking/ the stars'(p.163).

This set-up is an inversion of the usual gendered depiction of suburbia and of the artistic compromise that the suburban world is often seen to represent. Catherine Jurca argues that depictions of the suburb largely portray the suburban realm as one which 'spiritually and culturally dispossess[es]' (p.7) its mostly white, male, middle-class protagonists, who are frustrated by the soulless but respectable life the suburbs represent. It is precisely this trope, as a dominant discourse within Australian fiction, that Robin Gerster is arguing against in his 'Gerrymander' essay. But in *Wild Surmise* it is the world of work, rather than the domestic sphere, that frustrates Daniel, that he finds mediocre and uninspiring; and it is Daniel, rather than his wife, who must come to terms
with drudgery at the expense of his ideals and art – like any of Miriam Stone’s protagonists – while Alex pursues her genius and dreams. Porter is working here against a clear division between both gender roles and gendered spaces; Alex and Daniel occupy their suburban space in a manner that is more complex and more individual, as well as more imaginative and transformative, than the usual or expected depiction of the space – as the feminising domain of routine housework, consumerism and emotional disaffection – would suggest.

You were always/ ardently present

But you, darling,
were no ice-crusted
speck
teasing me
from a cold night sky

You were always
ardently present  – ‘You once asked me’ (pp.282-283).

Alex only really begins to recognise, or emotionally register, her suburb and home – to come to earth instead of ‘fucking the stars’ – after Daniel’s death. Daniel’s death is, strangely enough, narrated in direct third person, and from Daniel’s point of view: in the poem ‘Dante’s stars’, he thinks of Dante, speaks his wife’s name, remembers ‘distantly promising Alex/ that he would lovingly/ haunt her/ if he ever died first’ (p.256), before being transformed in ‘The company of breathing men’ to a ‘hungry fish/ rapidly’ (p.259), moving beyond the stars. These poems are startling for the way in which they mix imagery from both his own and Alex’s repertoires of metaphors, as well as for the way in which they combine the domestic and yet uncanny idea of ‘lovingly/ haunt[ing]’ with the cosmic scale of moving beyond the stars. Alex is now left alone in her grief (by the time Daniel dies, her affair with Phoebe has long ended) and in the company only of Daniel’s cat, that most domestic of
creatures, who is nonetheless elaborately named Marlowe, in a final, lingering reminder of the nature of Daniel’s imaginative commitment to poetry.

But the poem that directly follows the portrayal of Daniel’s funeral, ‘Antarctic heartbreak’, moves to an entirely different landscape and social scale. It describes a disastrous scientific probe on Antarctica’s Lake Vostok – a site explored to collect information on ancient microscopic organisms, which might have implications for Alex’s own work. The robotic probe, Alex reads on her computer, has leaked fuel through the ice, ‘killing the lake with it’ (p.266). Alex grieves for each of these disasters – Daniel’s death, and the destruction of Lake Vostok – personally. Her emotions do not distinguish between scales, nor between public and personal catastrophe, and the frigid, ruined landscape of Lake Vostok becomes a new part of her repertoire of images, superimposed on the suburban house she is now moving through alone.

Even in grief – a grief described repeatedly throughout the final section of the novel as ‘numb’, dry, and silent, in stark contrast to the fecundity of her descriptions of desire – Alex’s imagination is still at work. She still compares her garden to the ‘blinding bergs and cliffs’ (p.287) of Europa, even as it becomes now a reminder of Daniel, and the work he did to build it, as well as of her own terrestriality; she still directs her working mind towards that moon as well as towards Antarctica, still dreams of being held in the arms of an extra-terrestrial giant squid. The garden has simply, finally, become more significant for Alex, because it is now a concrete site of loss for her – just as it had come, earlier, to symbolise for Daniel the loss of his wife’s affection – and it is, therefore, a site of extremity in and of itself. So grief directs Alex inward, focuses her imagination more locally, just as desire made it expansive and cosmic in scale. For the first time, Alex’s space-life metaphors are overwhelmed by her visions of the garden: she watches light rain ‘like a fur of dew/ on the thinly tapering leaves/ of Daniel’s grevillea’ (p.275), is overwhelmed by the ‘colour of grass’ and ‘sticky pairs’ of
parrots moving within it (p.279), meditates on Daniel’s lemon tree, and is woken from a dream of Europa by a currawong in the gum tree.

It is only now that Daniel has died, now that he is physically absent, that Alex is able to address him directly, to ‘talk honestly’, as she states in the poem ‘You once asked me’ (p.281). Alex even says ‘Your ghost/ [is] a far better listener/ than you ever were’, acknowledging that their failure to communicate was as much about being unable to listen to each other’s different registers of metaphor as it was about being unable to address each other, that they were unable to escape their own individual imaginative worlds for long enough to hear what the other was trying to say. Alex also refers to Daniel as the ‘champagne/ glass/ desperate to be heard – // right there singing/ in my careless hand’ (p.283). Grief focuses Alex on her own physical environment, and on what is close at hand: now that she has lost Daniel, she is more aware of his ‘ardent’ presence in her domestic space, but her imaginative transformations are no less extreme because they are now smaller in scale and more intensely localised. Alex’s metaphors have simply become more concentrated, more boiled down, and her transformations are in turn more temporal than spatial, leading back to the past that she and Daniel shared, however imperfectly.

But grief and desire are still intertwined, still present together as extreme emotional experiences, as wildnesses and intensities felt and contained within Alex’s suburban space. The final poem in the novel, ‘Giant Squid,’ for example, relays a dream of Alex’s, full of desire and laden with grief. In this dream, Alex lies on the floor of a black ocean ‘in the many loving arms/ of a giant squid’ (p.288), breathing together with the creature, as they ‘nibbl[e] on/ each other’s preciously/ alien faces’, and she wants to photograph the moment, in order to prove that this lover ‘truly existed.’ The poem is a return to the unconscious,
but once again, Porter’s interest in shifting scales and complex emotion and identification is present. The squid is interchangeably alien and intimate, animal and an almost-human substitute for Daniel, as well as being both cannibal and lover; the squid itself constantly, even uncannily, shifts in size and meaning. Alex’s imagination, her personal drama, is still colossal and terrifying, yet she chooses, in the dream, not to move, and feels a sweeping sense of relief ‘in just lying still/ and not proving anything’ (p.289). There’s a sense here of giving in to mystery, to the unknown and untamed, to the irrational and wild – of giving in to the poetic, to the gaps and hybrid spaces that dominate the text. Alex is surrendering to the forces of extremity that have always operated around and through her, to the wildness that is at the very heart of her suburban existence. She is, after all and still, an extremophile, and so extremity, intensity and fierce emotion are the basic conditions of her existence and experience.

In both ‘The Night Parrot’ and *Wild Surmise*, Porter is interested in the ability of emotion, and of the everyday extreme circumstances that engender it, to transform ordinary spaces into landscapes wild and extreme enough to match the experiences and interior lives of the people who move within them. Desire is the most extreme of these emotional and sensual experiences, and so recurs as the most compelling and fertile force driving the imaginations of the Porter’s characters, who all physically live in the suburbs, but are always alert to its dramatic and poetic qualities. Porter’s suburbs are always spaces in between, understood and encountered differently by each of the characters that move through them, simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary, as well as physical, mediated and imagined; and it is just this complexity and mutability that make them such powerful sites for her poetry, able to expand and adapt to meet the extreme emotional and imaginative dramas of the very ordinary lives that unfold within them.
Coda: on Domestic Interior

I first encountered the work of Dorothy Porter in the dark recesses of a suburban library in Kogarah; my copy of *Wild Surmise* I bought some weeks later, at the Big W in Menai Marketplace, the shopping centre that had opened near my home only a few years earlier. Although I’d always been a reader (and had always been teased for it in a suburb filled with cricket-playing boys and netball-skirted girls), I’d never really touched poetry before this. What poetry I had read, I hadn’t been able to relate to my own life. But Porter’s emotions and intensities, spilling out of schoolrooms, kitchens, over suburban roads, her defiant assertions of difference, and of course, her gutsy, sexy women were something else, something that I wanted, and something that I’d not even considered might already be around me. It was this same sense of urgency and honour in ordinary lives, of the importance of the everyday, that appealed to me in Gwen Harwood’s poems when I came to read them some years later, quieter now myself, and blessedly free of some of the furore and ferocity of late adolescence. I had fled (that was the word that I still used) the outer suburbs by this stage in favour of Sydney’s (grungy and colourful) Inner West, but was slowly realising that my inner life had not altered and would not alter, was still driven by the same desires, frustrations and unidentifiable longings, even though my external surroundings were different. I didn’t recognise that urgency and honour, so important to both Harwood and Porter’s suburban poems, might already exist in my home suburb, until I moved away and didn’t find the radical counterpoint that I had been unconsciously expecting.
It is this urgency and honour that I wanted to bring to *Domestic Interior*, the collection of poems that completes this thesis, and which draws together different kinds of suburban experiences, imaginations and interactions. The poems are all concerned with space and its importance to our stories, memories and experiences, and with the small details that build our everyday worlds, which we ask to carry meaning and significance, or which hold us in thrall in the highly-charged moments of emotional extremity that we encounter in our lives. The poems are largely set across the suburbs of Sydney – both in the inner suburbs where I live now, and the south-west, where I grew up – and seek to capture the physical and social landscapes of these places, as well as to stage stories within them.

In writing the poems in *Domestic Interior*, registering and working with small details allowed me to portray suburbs that are various and vibrant, creative and imaginative spaces. I wanted to write poems that challenge the persisting assumption that the suburb is inauthentic, homogenous, sterile and bland, or a site of what Gary Kinnane terms the ‘blank conformity’ that is only truly found ‘in the clichés about suburbia’. Kinnane argues that instead of this conformity, ‘there is as much suffering and happiness, as much crime and passion, as much art and industry going on in the suburbs as anywhere else, except that it is often … behind the deceptive façades of tranquil streets and respectable houses’ (p.42).

This statement is significant because it draws on Robin Boyd’s famous depiction of the elaborate suburban façades that he terms ‘featurism’, and yet inverts it, so that the ‘deceptive façades’ of suburban architecture (and sociality) hide individuality and creativity, rather than anxieties about legitimacy and self. This means that it is possible to see a kind of ‘featurist aesthetic’ operating in alternative visions of the suburb – and it is this aesthetic that I explore in
Domestic Interior. The featurist aesthetic employs small details, and accrues minute observations and peculiarities to build up a lively and variable portrait of the suburb – and suburban characters and stories – by surrounding them with layers of remembered, apprehended, and symbolic detail. It depicts the suburb as a place where art and poetry are integral.

This aesthetic is, of course, not unlike Bruce Dawe’s barking dog, clatter of a dish, whisper of traffic, tendrils of tomato vines, the list-like registry of detail that situates his suburban man so vividly and expressively within his environment. It is an aesthetic that sees memories and personalities in items that might otherwise be dismissed as kitsch and which delights in the odd juxtapositions and encounters between disparate things – which writers like Boyd might read as ugly or disconnected. It enables metaphor to be made from the mundane materials of everyday life.

One of the interesting and empowering elements of this featurist aesthetic is that it allows for both alienation and belonging within the suburbs it describes. The paratactic layering of details offers an intimate engagement with the space, and an acute registering of the tangible world. It is an act of belonging because it is also an act of memorising, or at least accounting for a space, of capturing the things that make it unique. But it is also often disembodied, because the poet intent on capturing and cataloguing these details is positioned as an observer, by necessity at least partially outside of the experience she portrays. So a featurist aesthetic allows for deep ambivalence when writing about the suburb, an ability to see the space as both abundant and disappointing, joyful and crass, homely and strange – even uncanny – all at once. It also allows for everyday objects to become carriers of symbolic meaning, to resonate beyond their physical environment, and so enables the poet to locate in the suburban space the metaphysical, the extreme, and
occasionally, the sublime – to find there ‘time, pain, love, hate, age, war, death, laughter, fever’ (Dawe, p.357)

*Domestic Interior* revalues Boyd’s claims for featurism. Rather than considering features and façades symptomatic of a ‘shuffling about vigorously in the middle … of the road’ or a series of ‘disconnected ideas’ (p.157), it delights in accidental confluences, and in the wild variety, individuality and imaginative possibility that these layered details can enable and express – and which are integral to my consideration of the suburbs and the lives that are lived out within them.

The first section of *Domestic Interior*, titled (with tongue firmly in cheek) ‘Origin’, gathers together most of the poems about family, and about the south-western suburbs of my childhood. Some of these poems are about the rituals of family and the marking of time – or anchoring of identity: Sunday lunches in ‘Sunday Poem’, Christmas baking in ‘Pudding’, birthday barbecues in ‘Crisis Poem.’ Others deal more explicitly with the ambivalence between belonging and difference and what it means to move away – itself a feature of Australian writing about the suburbs, as Belinda Burns argues.

Some of these suburban poems (‘Inner Suburban Omens’, ‘Inner Suburban Monsters’, ‘Marrickville’) are overtly featurist in their construction, and rely on a paratactic structure to register or list details, the wider contexts or narratives of which remain for the reader to infer. Others find these details in overheard speech, or sport-shirt slogans, and layer them together to build a particular social setting. The overheard poems especially (‘Catfood’, ‘Vibrations’, ‘Sweet Potato’, ‘Too Amazing’, ‘Tupperware Sonnets’) are influenced by Dorothy Porter’s use of vernacular language to signify class, or to gesture towards larger narratives, and also by Karen Tongson’s considerations of suburban sociability, ‘contact zones’ (p.152) – such as cafés, where most of
these were sourced – and the interplay between public and private spaces, conversations and lives.

My interest in these contact zones, and in the importance of shopping centres, is further developed in a number of poems set within shopping complexes, each of which attempts to individuate the space and explore its importance for the people who move through it. I see these poems (‘Ode to the Metro’, ‘Love Poem: Miranda Far’ and ‘Centro: Bankstown’) as affectionate satires, because I wanted to write about such spaces from the inside, as it were, from a kind of belonging, however complicated, rather than from a disparaging distance, and to capture the liveliness, joy and complexity of the centres, and the mixed uses – beyond simple consumerism – to which they are put.

The tension between the public and the personal, or the domestic and social, is also important to the poems about friendship, love, desire, dreams or illness (‘Potts Point’, ‘Winter Reading’, ‘There is Repetition’, ‘Autumn Poem’, ‘Surely’, ‘Post-Treatment Care Plan’). These poems are often about states of extremity – such as those that Dorothy Porter writes about – and many of these centre on my own experience of illness (or ‘pain … age … death … fever’ as ‘Homo Suburbiensis’ would have it), written as I was undergoing treatment for anorexia nervosa and a rare stomach condition that was the catalyst for its development – an intense and intensely interior experience that largely played out in very ordinary environments. But these poems are also about the sustaining kinds of friendship that feature in Gwen Harwood’s poems, that coexist with the experience of extremity and in these spaces. I am interested in the suburb as an intimate space, and a personal space, as well as aware that the act of writing about this intimacy is one of making it public, or at least of blurring the boundaries between the categories. This ties in with ideas about suburban hybridity, but also because it also makes a claim for the poetic – and political – potential of personal stories, the domestic realm, and less overtly, of
women’s lives. I explore this too in a number of poems that play with older poetic forms – including sonnets (‘Tupperware Sonnets’), charms or spells (‘Charm Against Casual Cruelty’, ‘Charm for Unexpected Kindness’) and an aubade (‘Almost Aubade, Melbourne’).

The third section of the collection, ‘Elsewhere’, moves away from the suburbs and from Sydney, into other cities, other countries and other landscapes – but the poems remain interested in small, layered details, in found phrases and overheard speech and in ritual and memory. Many of the overtly suburban poems, moreover, draw on influences and narratives from much larger spaces and longer histories. ‘After Mutability’, ‘A Queer and Sultry Summer’ and ‘Her arms and legs are thin’ respond to works by Jo Shapcott, Sylvia Plath and T.S. Eliot respectively; ‘Candice’ to a news story from regional USA; and ‘Thank you, Internet’ to American cable TV. These poems mix together the suburban and the international, the personal and the public, as Gwen Harwood and Dorothy Porter frequently do across their poetry.

*Domestic Interior* brings suburban space and suburban stories into contact with the broader world – spatially, socially, and intertextually – and charts suburbs that are sites of love as well as sadness, of struggle as well as solace. They are always places in which poetry is present, and from which poetry is born.
Domestic Interior

Poems
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Notes

Acknowledgements
I. Origin
The Astronomer: Belmore

Just stars, and grassland –
    to stand on the limit of the world
    and then climb upwards.

Here is his tower,
    his staircase curled and vagrant
as any dream:
It is pictured
next to the cow.

How constant the constellations,
this city now wheeling beneath them.
Here is his quiet heartbeat.

He must have heard the cries of children
in his sleep,
their lowing.

In his tower
you breathe lungfuls
of sky.
**Bells Line**

We take Windsor Road because you don’t want to pay a toll and hit red lights near *Blacktown Fashion.*

You rev the engine

    with a one-cornered grin. My clever friend,
    I think the irony is better kept
    for Merrylands

the grimmest suburb of them all

(even amongst Prospect, Picnic Point, Mount Pleasant,
Green Valley, Greenacre,
Bonnyrigg and Rooty Hill

    which always sounds like more fun
    than it is.)

You point out the most violent pub in Sydney
and an open effluent treatment plant
as the liquidambars soak in the last sun

    and I am quiet, thinking

of the week the local Tavern held Oktoberfest
and the bar staff wore felt pinafores
and ferried pieces

    of limp pork to paunchy men
    in surf-brand shirts.

I laughed when the accordion wheezed *Edelweiss,*
but my brother’s face was limpid, his arms out-flung:
he called it *awesome* –
I held my bitter beer,
and was quiet.
Love Poem: Miranda Fair

I love the way she orders skinny mugs
of chino and excavates a foamhole for her sugar.
How she stops to look at houses
in the display case of the real estate, their windows
pressed against the glass like yapping puppies’
noses. She’s three-waysing her desserts
these days, now she’s through her Paleo phase.
At the five-ways, yellow-vested councilmen
are whipper-snippering the shrubbery. It clouds
like insects round their faces.
I love the way she loves the cool inside,
the blonde girls with their thongs
and diamond earrings. She looks at Swedish stationery,
French crockpots, scented candles. I love
the way the florist has a second stall beside the escalator
every Saturday, and I can buy
red gerberas on the way back to the car. I love to watch
the women tucking cheese
into the bottoms of their prams and smiling
at security as they coo past. I love the highway
hissing underneath my tyres after
I’ve spiralled down the carpark, passed
the glass-faced gym, the tradies’ club,
the oval and the TAFE, the billboards
advertising pest control with giant cockroaches
perched on top of toothbrushes.
**Sunday Poem**

Rotate the potato. The Labrador is happiest collecting kindling.  
While the football’s on in the other room we salt the pigskin: O, giver of gout.  
Brie suctions the wooden platter. Wisteria bruises on the patio.  
We’ll lock away the candles when the baby learns to crawl. There’s an eggplant outside for you. The stovetop coils sing. You have to take the batteries from the smoke alarm before it crackles. You need new shoes.  
The dogs haven’t had their breakfast. I haven’t used that bowl since Christmas.  
She boils beans until they’re paper mâché. He’s got good wrists for flicking tea-towels. The leather lounges shriek when you sit down. Your old bedroom still has stickers on the ceiling.  
I’m having trouble with my pannacotta. The cap of the sauce bottle has scabbed over. Six proteas sit in a cut-glass vase.  
Take a concrete tablet and harden the fuck up. There are sewing pins in the spice rack. His fingers always get the crisp bits first.  
It’s been a big week. What’s this one infused with?  
Pass the gravy, stupid.
Centro: Bankstown

As the old men displayed
their orchids by the escalator
and pram-strapped children thrashed
at the K-Mart counter

we would watch couples in stiff jackets
unwrap their discs of margarine,
the iceberg lettuce shrivelling in their silence.

We loved the sheen of the one-way mirrors
and lined up quietly before them, both of you
taller, already, than I was, even though
I’d been born between you. We waited

for that day
when we might finally pass behind them,
suddenly unable to see out:
our own faces pinking blankly back.

We wouldn’t touch the cutlery,
just itch inside our handmade party dresses,
still ogling the soft-serve machine.

I imagined we’d imagine
the other children out there
planted on the patterned tiles,
wanting to wipe cheesy fingers
on the velveteen booths, and watching
as their mothers spoke to other mothers
or lined up inside Medicare and didn't let them
try the frames at the optometrist next door,

we'd let dried parmesan float
like snow-dome glitter
on miraculous, tri-coloured pasta.


**Commute**

Your older sisters were round and brown
as hard-boiled eggs,
painted their fingernails blood-red
and ate pop tarts, fishing them from the toaster
with steak knives.
I hadn't learnt yet to dead-end

my thoughts, always said, instead
too much, too earnestly.
We lived on adjacent cul-de-sacs
but I'd be driven home anyway.
I wrote your name
in purple ink on the backseat vinyl.
You owned a flick knife,
we played murder in the dark.

The next year I met a girl with *two ns and an i*
and climbed the rocks in her half-built backyard.
The year after, helped a fish-pale blonde with homework
and shared an airbed on her floor,
inconstant always
for the things I couldn't see.

The next year, I went to high school up the train line
you stayed, and rolled
your pleated skirt up at the waist.
**Tupperware Sonnets**

I.
I just love my Happy Chopper. It’s just brilliant.
I don’t know where I’d be now without it, without my Happy Chopper. I love it.
I have two. I have two Happy Choppers.
That way I always have a clean Happy Chopper. Even when I haven’t done the dishes.
Can I demonstrate the Happy Chopper? It’s so easy.
You just snap on the lid, and twist, and chop.
Look, you can even use your Happy Chopper while you’re holding the baby.
One-handed. Just like this. I love my Happy Chopper.
I use it for mooshing up Billie’s food. When it’s not small enough.
You know how some of them have really big chunks?
I don’t like to give her chunks.
I use my Happy Chopper on raw chicken. I just hate touching raw chicken.
It’s great for guacamole too – you don’t get slimies on your fingers.
I use mine to make nice little portions of chocolate. Happy chocolate. Guilt-free.
And it means you don’t cry over onions.

II.
Now who can tell me what this lime set is,
which catalogue page it’s on?
It doesn’t just come in lime, of course.
You also have the fuchsia and electric pink but I’m sure
you’ve all got little boys as well as daughters. It’s the Funny Much Pack,
Page ten. My littlies both have Funny Munch Packs for school
Who wants to demonstrate? Who remembers the Funny Munch Pack
from the last party? At the last party,
I got them for the boys, but Maddie wants one as well.
They’re great for school. The straps flip out,
so they can wear them like Funny Munch backpacks.
And the colours, nice and bright, so you can see them
when they run ahead on the way home.
The whole way down the road. They love their Funny Munch Packs.

III.
I owe you a Breathables magnet from last week, right?
Terrific! I’ve been terrified to use my Breathables without it.
Why don’t you demonstrate the Breathables? Now you’ve got the magnet,
you should demonstrate the Breathables.
All fruits and veg have different rates of breathing in the fridge
and you look up the rates of breathing on the magnet,
the Breathables have these vents on the front,
and it tells you which vents to have open and closed
so your veg can breathe right and stay fresh and crisp and clean,
and you can see which are Breathable Buddies,
like, celery, asparagus and strawberries go together. Apples with lettuce and beans.
I’ve kept strawberries fresh for three days in my Breathables,
once you realise the different rates of breathing
you’ll be amazed how long things last. And what does that mean?
Less waste. And fewer supermarket trips.

IV.
What about the Munchettes? Tell the ladies about those.
Oh, the Munchette containers are great.
They’ve got nice big tops, so kids can get their little hands in.
And a line here, so you know how far to fill them, how many sultanas they should eat.
And they’re airtight, water-tight, you don’t need plastic.
No plastic? But what about their sandwiches?
No, you don’t need plastic on their sandwiches.
Don’t they go yuck? I mean, I hate using plastic, but always worry, won’t their sandwiches go yuck? They won’t eat their sandwiches if they go yuck. They’re in the bag all day, they must go yuck without the plastic. The Munchette keeps everything crisp and fresh and clean. I don’t use plastic any more. Even tomato? Tomato sauce? My Kylie loves devon and tomato sauce. Or cottage cheese and lettuce. They’d go yuck. Without the plastic. That’s the great thing about this range, you don’t need any plastic. You’re saving the environment as well.
Pudding

Each day there’s more flour on the floor,
a chronic dandruff of the pantry.
We sift through last year’s half-packets,
glacé cherries turned to stones, almonds silvered
with grainy weevil trails, the golden
syrup glued onto the shelf. The spices
press their scent into our skins,
a handled memory that we knead and press,
knead and press against the bench.
Dark chocolate and cooking sherry, we joke about
my mother pinching swigs as a country-town teen.
The oven sweats, we lick the beaters.
Manual and uncomplicated, this
again: we knead and press
and knead.
Crisis Poem

for Ian

And suddenly
the men
are holding beers
and standing round
the trampoline
and not the barbecue,
turning over toddlers
instead of steaks.
The women
make the salads.
2. *Never Simple*
Ode to the Metro

There’s a still point in the afternoon
when the cross-eyed dogs
in the smudged pet-shop window
are a distraction:

no poems, in this stuck point
of the afternoon, I just watch
crossbreeds with shredded paper
stuck to their paws. It’s not that bad.

Amongst the mutterers in tracksuits
and the teenagers in musk-stick shorts,
the drivers of retirement village buses
who smoke and pick their fingernails
against the wall;
it’s the hour of the disinterested and lonely,
and the poets too, I guess. It’s not
that bad,

the bodies overspilling the bulk-billing
neon doctor and nervous men
in polo shirts
pulling honey chicken from the bone.

Past the bakery
where all the bread is cheesed and lurid, and the florist
where the prices droop,
the busker missing a guitar string
and a tooth and the masseuse
who’s asleep at her own station.
I'll take a sample shot
of lukewarm wheatgrass – it's not that bad –
and run my fingers on the pelts of peaches,
become certain of their gravity, the point
where they might overspill
and scatter.
After Mutability

Perhaps the best cells are the ones we can’t kill off,
a persistence of the fittest, although mutation’s
always painful. It’s two thousand and fourteen
and I know no-one who has been
uninjured. It thinks in me,
this shadow. I put on sunscreen, and am surprised
to come in contact with my skin.
In the same day, I’m chatted up in a café
by an aspiring novelist who’s using boldface
and an ugly font, and the woman I pay
to tear the hair out of my legs offers a discount
because my skinny limbs
won’t need much wax. In the same day,
I watch a woman in pink boardshorts
hold out white bread for a spring-loaded terrier,
an ancient cyclist on City Road with bubble wands
mounted on his handlebars, although they say
this place has gentrified: mutation’s
never simple. I dream my top teeth
splinter, turn to chalkdust in my mouth,
so I am in the world’s gaping jaw.
Inner Suburban Omens

A black dog leashed to a bike rack portends fair weather.
A windfall will follow
when spotted – in this order – are coconut water,
coconut water, a coke bottle,
    half-empty or half-full.
Abandoned Billy bookshelves are a warning.

A frangipani or a franger on the footpath both retain good luck
    if you step lightly, and cross the fingers
    of your left hand,
a D.A. notice for a cheese shop
    means your rent will likely rise.

A beard on your barista means persistence will be rewarded
    (beware the hirsuit pursuit lest
    you discover beard hairs
    in between your teeth)
a backward cap augurs forgotten orders.

A gutted handbag indicates a time of prudence, patience
and taking stock,
    the picked-clean bones
    of a barbecued chicken
suggest it is time to gather your strength.

A pair of heels that never made it home
    is auspicious, flat-folded cardboard boxes
portend the time is not yet right
    for making long-term plans.
An untouched weekend newspaper
    still tightly rolled and plastic-wrapped
heralds an unexpected outcome:
the ground may shift and others’ motives
    may not be as they might seem.

Hold your kith and kin close
    if you cross paths with upturned trolleys
because they often signal
there may not be smooth sailing ahead.
No rhyme or reason, you know, no rhyme:
I was going out with Eden’s dad
back then,
he was a chronic shoplifter, that’s why,
well. He wasn’t all that,
as far as the department
was concerned.
He’d wear a coat, go out with balsamic vinegar
stuffed right down his trousers, anything gourmet
that he didn’t want to pay
for. You don’t want to get marched
out for a can of cat food, he’d always say.
He was chased out, though
by a large woman, and you know
what he was stealing? Bulbs. For the garden,
a dozen tulip bulbs. No rhyme. You know
I was in Woolies at the time
and got this call.
I said, I hope
he’s behaving himself, because
he’s not allowed
into Coles any more.
He’s ex-Army, you know,
ex-SAS. All their food is brown.
Fried, battered, bread, no green
at all. No hollandaise.
We’ve never really
analysed that compulsion.’
Suburban Monsters

There’s one that lives
in the hollow heart of a rolled-up yoga mat,
another just beneath
the garage door.
One that nestles in
amongst the scrunched spare plastic bags
shoved underneath the sink and another
in the bathroom vanity – it feeds
off cotton buds and old toothbrushes.
There’s always several hiding in the fridge.
There’s one that lurks
in the last dregs of a coffee cup
and one that eats the last biscuit.
One that sleeps through summer
in the pocket of your overcoat,
and one, glisten-skinned, that shakes loose every Christmas
when you unpack the plastic tree.
There’s one that makes its nest
of odd socks, and you might hear it, weaving,
across the night, its skinny fingers chittering. There’s one
twitching, always twitching,
in the folds of the floral curtains.
Were the shots twinned, in perfect sync? This we agreed.
The splash patterns fall on the opposite walls,
our dark wounds are individuated,
our fingerprints are not.

They named this place
the Family Shooting Centre
and the cardboard target castors on
unperforated. This much we agreed.

Our parents are photographed
clinging to a photograph,
our bowl-cut auburn heads,
two thin-lipped grins

in our uniforms, we are not individuated.
Which head is ruined now, and which is breathing, grim
beneath the bandages:
there are secrets passed
between our fluid limbs.
These things they cannot know.

I remember the metric beating of our hearts.
You were the better athlete, always faster
off the mark. I can choose now, twin.
I can make mine
the better death.
Small sad poem

How did it help us
when we were animal?
Did we carry sadness in our heavier bones?
It rests inside the body, hot and wet,
it sits in the scoop of the clavicle,
all our cavities. How did it help us,
the sorrow in our marrow?
What could we harvest
from the salt of our own skins?
There is repetition

In the dream, there is repetition
In the dream, I cannot make them understand
In the dream, my fingertips itch, and they redden –
In the dream, there is the dream of colour.
In the dream, I trap a pigeon in the ceiling
In the dream they tell me don’t tell me your dreams
In the dream the objects move when I’m not looking
In the dream, I run a bath that overfills and
in the dream, it leaves a tidemark like a sock around my ankle.
In the dream, I watch them watch me
In the dream, I speak of solitude
In the dream I do not dare hold out my hands.
In the dream, I am amphibious, I see my breath fog up the window.
In the dream I know I dream but cannot wake.
In the dream, I hide my face within the bathroom mirror
In the dream the bed sheets twist around my ankle
In the dream I cannot make them understand.
Domestic Interior

I had a mirror mounted opposite the window and the steady hum of light refracting: I have lived in a belly of sun.
I have lived, I have been loved inside this house, and I have cried;
I have danced in this kitchen, and though my potted herbs have always died, I have loved this house.
How do these houses hold us – according to our bond,
no less – I have learnt to walk bruiseless
to the bathroom in the dark. I think I understand
the dream sometimes, the moulded plaster grapes guarding my sleep, the car doors that applaud each movement of the drinkers down the street. My misdirected mail will outlast me, dead skin dusting the most awkward corners, the illegal blutack I can’t peel from the pale walls. She boxes her books up alphabetically.
The bare rooms echo, hum.
3. Elsewhere
All the way from (Perth Poem)

Sometimes a reorientation.
   A different face to the sea,
sometimes you meet a city, neck bared:
they say that nothing has happened here.

There are bush rats that die in the air vents.
They say I visit
   all the way from
and I watch schoolgirls making fish braids,
sitting in each other's laps, that press
   of pelvis bones and thighs.

The skies are operatic.
I watch miners roll their maps
into screw-capped pipes, and know I'm portable
   instead.

I walk for hours past long, striated windows, willows,
   along overpasses, loosened and alone.
I try on lace skirts, buy ginger cubes
dipped in dark chocolate,
   for their burn.
For the way that we were happy here.
For the way this city bites
still, and hard.
Neukölln

I.
Three days, and I’m already
craving sparkling water, each afternoon:

*sprüdeln,*
how it fizzes in the mouth,
this city will not let me. I stand

at the wrong end of queues and think:
*widerstand,* to stand against, resist.
It is a toolbox language.

In this bar,
you can buy the stool you sit on.

A woman on the train
hands me the word *Pfingstrosen,*
a peony plucked from her own front yard.

I love how it unfurls,
its tonguey increments.

II.
I think you should play the piccolo,
it’s not hard, it’s just
two notes. *Scheiße.* Understanding love,
the love of hunger, is nothing.
Mum wanted to abort me,
she told me at my twenty-first.
Autumning, to blue,
I am moonswept and mouthy,
I even laugh at my boss’s jokes.
Make the poems squeal –
I’m making your fucking tea,
and I’m gonna let that puppy steep.
Almost never pink, there’s a Finnish word
that means comma fucker.
Not looking for someone is a vexatious venture.
You can’t tell me no-one’s ever
put a baby in a bath in Berlin before.
This one isn’t mine.

III.
A white lace dress.
We’re drinking gin muddled with cherries,
wine-dark.
You neighbour
finds it absolutely not funny
but the bread alone here
is poetry.

IV.
They tell me all the good cafés
are run by Australians, anyway.
They leave empty bottles on the footpath
so homeless men can get the refund
at the supermarket.
They say this language can't be hypocritical
or overly polite, they shout me down
when I cross against the lights: *das darfst du nicht!*
I learn

three different words for lonely

but they're all too big
to fit my frame.
Flowers and fever

in those first days.

The blossom, soft as cat fur, blown into my bedroom
on the fifth floor.

A peach-haired woman was selling strawberries
    in cardboard punnets,
we used frozen raspberries as ice cubes,
    sucked sour and bloody
    against our lips.

I walked through the city as it still slept,
the morning sun blue on my bare arms, I breathed
the dust like pollen.
    There were bare feet
    and red geraniums
    on tiny balconies,
sparrows and cranes.

The piano, you said,
is the only instrument that can’t sing,
Each note passing instantaneously, playing
its own death.

The door is hinged and makeshift.
The evenings are long,

and our tongues are thick
and useless.
Wallis Lake

The grass grows longer on the easeway.

A pelican swipes the sky
towards the seascape we can’t yet see
its webby legs outstretched.
    I wait for these:

for sunburn behind the knees
for sand between the bed sheets
champagne at dusk
    and pelicans
and their unthinking ease.

They clap their chitin jaws
    when we gut bream up on the sandbank
this they augur:

to swallow fishheads
and stare with oyster eyes
    at the tangle of tackle and flaked scales
that will sandcastle by our toes.

You grew up inland
and don’t yet expect this.

We’ll eat straight from unfurled paper,
and leave our oily fingerprints to refract,
buy coffee at the marina
in the late morning
(and it will taste like sump oil
and salt, with a tiny chocolate biscuit balanced
on the spoon.)

You have no history here,
and don’t yet know this.

You can’t yet read
the ocean
for its undertow.
Riverina

We forget that we live under such big skies.
The scratching sun of late morning,
the rank animal scent of lanolin,
how dry grass itches at the ankles.
It only takes a day to get a handle on the door lock.
To learn to never go barefoot, not ever.
Three days before I find the purple flower
I've been putting into vases
is Patterson's Curse.

But even sleep, here

is bigger.
The valley drops away.

There is a bridge, the Gobbagombalin,
that feels like flight over the grasslands,
yellowed,
studded with cows.

They bellow at the sky at night:
the echo.
‘It’s Apples,’

the petrol hand says,
in short shorts on the Monaro, in July
‘The best thing about winter here
it’s apples.’

It’s a crisp city,
yours. It curls its boulevards
and scatters roundabouts like concrete confetti.

You call its CBD Civic and even the cars
merge more politely,
as if they too appreciate a bureaucratic queue.
I see space enough on median strips
for apartment blocks.

The auburn poplars soon
will turn stiff and grey as toilet brushes.
I gather bouquets of dead leaves
to take back home.

In a bar, the specials board proclaims:
*If you steal my glassware*
*I will raise the price of beer*
and offers a Kevin Rudd Special, *for anyone*
*who’s been beaten by a girl.*
The punters play Dungeons and Dragons.

In your crisp city, you buy a mug of wine
and a fresh-squeezed orange juice at ten on Sunday,
and a Shetland pony fattens beneath gloved children.
The lake wears a border of cold cyclists, 
and police in steel-blue overalls 
   walk labradors sleek as fish 
on neon leashes. 
   The water seems riveted together, 
and the grey buildings still remember 
   the dioramas they were modelled on.

In this staticky city, the air makes my skin 
   feel like toast. 
The road signs are blunt and dented

   Please Don’t Speed. 
   Drink. Drive. Die. 

   and they sell apples out of car boots 
beside the highway.
Winter Pastoral (or Hipster Love Poem)

Over cattlegrids,
each car cast its own brief halo
    on the twisted limbs of trees.
The hairy leg of Winter, you said
and slapped your own
    against the dashboard
your pale arms luminescent
    the white, stone road.

Dead wombats boulder
and wild-eyed wallabies
    vaulted the boundary fences.
I'd forgotten how stars giddy
    out here.

By morning, the frost felted
the barbed wire, the ghost-eyed sheep
bleating like babies.
The grass was crusted –
    stars littering
    the caul of plain.

Your laughter cawed
through outspread air
    drive, you said

    drive us home. My god, I'm missing
my barista.
4. A crack in the skin: on illness
Pasticceria

We ate it first that autumn,
when we pooled
what strength we had
my soft-eyed friend and I,
we took things slowly, kindly
for a change.
For months, we held on only by our rituals.

Soft as ricotta
we had to be,
our texture found by folding:
like this we nourished our chalkhard hearts.

Thing is, the coffee’s rubbish.
But the queue always conceals
the curved glass counter and it’s best
this way, only to focus
on the jube-gemmed shortbreads
right in front of where we stand.

I always start from the pointed end
with a blunt teaspoon.
I called it
indescribable, and was called
on it: poet, do your work.

Still, there are things
the tongue can do
that are important:
cake's one of them,
and so is speaking
of our sadness.
Marrickville

Later that night, I cut
the plastic boning from the bodice of my dress:
o no need for structure, over summer.
There were bruises
on my knees I didn’t recognise.

I saw us all that day, all day,
the whole party projected on a big screen:

the bathtub underneath the orange tree,
crushed grass imprinted on my shins, warm
sangria out of mugs.

My feet grew numb
beneath my hips. A saturation.
I still felt overseen

when I walked home, alone and shouldered.

I watched a black light flick behind a balcony,
a woman, neon-lit,
crush out a cigarette
and turn to kiss, to give
a kiss. It takes

three keys to open my front door.
Winter Reading

That night, with wineglasses budding like bacteria along the table, the paper napkin twisting in my fingers, one cuff of his pale jeans still tucked into a sock from cycling over.

We sat six-to-a-bench behind banana palms and out of sight of stage; we’d scared a pair of we’re-not-poets from the table when we all arrived.

All of us were pressed together at the hips, heads bent, my green dress low across my collarbones and angled downwards – here I couldn’t say it: here, right here.

I can’t read how we were that night, the weight of expectation held between my crossed, cold knees air scurfy on my skin. A woman stood behind me in the toilet queue and said I love your poems, and said

that she wrote mostly

about heartbreak, laced with pain.

My empty hands were angling downwards.

I rode home on a backseat, pressed between an amplifier and a bloodhound, and I lay,
wide-eyed and shivering
awake, right here, for hours.

The moon is set, I said,

the moon.
Potts Point

for Eileen

The light’s older
in these sandstone suburbs,
jam-thick.

A clipped-haired man held a dog leash
that said *one of us is single*
and even the leaves
had hunched their shoulders
in the gutters.

A waiter, golden-brown as a bread loaf
squirited water at the pigeons
that sat cock-headed at the tables. My tart
was soft and skinless. Later, your cat
curled fluidly against my legs
and watched the water fizzing on the moorings.

There are crossed oceans
that must spill still
at the edges of your vision

things we can not understand.

You said perhaps we’re both like this because.
Or perhaps because we are like this, perhaps
it doesn’t matter. We stack
your fridge with blueberries and real champagne. You roll
up the lid
of your old writing desk,
curved in three places
like a spine.
A queer and sultry summer
for Maddie

There’s a fig tree tattooed on your hipbone
but you want, almost,

the fruit to fall,
for the way the seeds within your belly burn

that stalklike feeling in the throat.
The waiter asks if we ate too much chocolate over Easter.
You don’t order, I still put saccharine

in my coffee. Your roommates
hid your gym shoes for the long weekend,

and we complain
about our families who forget we’re not unharmed
or let us know how strongly
they are willing us to health:

it’s an investment, mine say.

In dud stocks, I often think
although it’s how they show
they give a fig. I can’t resolve

your need, but feel it spit against my windscreen
the whole way home.
You wear a talisman that scares you.

A dress to match your orange shoes.

I read, that afternoon, that a fig
is just a mulberry turned inside-out,
perhaps we’re silkless.

But there are things I want for you:
fig jam, fig paste, poached figs, stewed figs, stuffed figs, a sticky harvest.

The ability
to eat them from the ground.
Her arms and legs are thin

for Pip Smith (and after T.S. Eliot)

Do I dare
Disturb the universe? Do I dare to eat a peach?
When I can’t see what remains
and in short, I am afraid
and I cannot know what stands within my reach;
and there is time yet for a hundred indecisions
and a hundred visions and revisions, every time
before the taking of a toast and cup of tea.

I sit in sawdust restaurants of insidious intent
and there is time yet for a hundred indecisions. I wait.
My glass hands lift and drop a question on my plate:
do I dare to eat a steak, the squid, a peach?
Have I the strength to force the moment to its crisis?
(And they say ‘But how her arms and legs are thin!’)
I lick my tongue instead into the corners of the evening.

In short, I am afraid. And though I have wept and fasted
(And they say ‘But how her arms and legs are thin!’)
Although I’ve measured out my life, checked every whim,
They try to fix me in a formulated phrase
and I don’t dare see what remains
I’ve simply bitten off the matter with a smile.
(I know it never can be worth it, after all.)

And this is not what I meant
not it at all.
How can I spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways,
how can I dare to eat a peach
when I know I am no prophet?
They say ‘But how her arms and legs are thin!’
They say I'll learn the moment of my greatness –
They try to fix me with a formulated phrase.
They say it could have all been worth it
but this is not what I meant.

This was never what I meant.
This is not it, not it at all.
Charm against Casual Cruelty
for Kate

Look for lost earrings or umbrellas, ribs
intact or otherwise. Steal some rosemary
from a neighbour’s garden, the single hermaphroditic foot
of a snail.

Take a radius bone, for distance,
the stiff obsidian wing
of an electrocuted bat, some flypaper (if indeed
they make it any more).
Gather the bottle tops
from your nearest park.

Take a small green chilli, an eggshell
a peanut, a wheat husk
a fish scale
the peel of a mouldy orange,
pollen from pigweed or goosefoot, acacia
or oriental lily. Wrap these in raw silk.
Drink gin. Press down on a splinter or an ingrown hair
and thrice chant

foreign body.
Chapter One

for TC

You’re hungover, old friend, though not as much
as you deserve to be –

    even the sun
seems to be shouting. We walk past
lycra people almost glistening
(they are an affront)

    watch women side-roll
planked up on their elbows,
    there's nothing
poetic about an elbow
I read later that day. There’s a reason
they call this place the promenade.

We both move slowly, we always do
but we find our way by following
the sea-line: there’s something
    about water; something
in that glare. One day, I say,

we’ll walk right to the cemetery
where people still see miracles
    in the refraction of the light,
miracles
beyond a headache
or nausea
or a diffidence
or what it means to change.
You’ve changed electorates and internet providers, 
grammaatical persons 
and this new suburb

     might refract you differently:

you choose the café

     called *Chapter One*.

This time of year, I always think
feels like a shedding.

     I’m not the first to hear the ocean hiss

*go well*, I’m not the first

to watch the swell and still feel tumbled.
Coast Walk (WITH TANKTOPS)

for Nikki and Mark

Perhaps this much the body knows: how to unfurl the ground beneath it, how to contract, where to find traction. Regular as breath, even as joggers swirl (NEVER EVER EVER GIVE UP) around the headland, some as thin and brown as kelp (I think they eat it), their hot pink sneakers radiating, even as the water bares its belly to the sky. (SWEAT + EFFORT = MIRACLES) I walk the strip of shadow from the guardrail past the windows of old vans blocked out with beach towels, foil-lined folding shades. What bodies (DREAM BELIEVE ACHIEVE) sleep behind them curled and quiet; I think sometimes we can inhale the ocean, expand with it: so much of us is water, after all. In Tamarama Park, beneath a palm, a pair is stretched along their yoga mats not quite in sync, the sand is narrow-necked but deep here, the morning glory tumbles down the sandstone. (FIND YOUR GREATNESS) The body tracks, its own quiet mechanics, it knows perhaps this much: foot, calf, quadricep, right, left, right. The bluff somehow more certain, here, where rocks stand as monuments, are honeycombed as hungry bones
where glassy balconies are empty and indifferent.
Some days the wind is almost frightening (PAIN IS WEAKNESS LEAVING THE BODY) and I stand myself against it, let it wear away my boundaries, my edges.
Too Amazing

‘It’s also about, I imagine you know this, it’s about rapport, you don’t want to get people in a position.
She goes straight to it but she can be more gentle with victims, with different kinds of women. More soft. She says it’s about judgment. We don’t preach that very much. It’s actually loving, the judgment, doesn’t it make you glad that these people will be judged?
But they’ll have the chance, at the truth, if they want it. It’s loving, the judgment. I recommend her to a lot of people, I mean, she’s very talented, but she doesn’t always have time. Some things are too hard to do not because you’re not capable but because you’re not professional. We don’t want these girls to think we’re too amazing, they need to know that god is looking after them, when we’re not there. Let’s talk about TV. Before we go. It’s cheerful. It’s always good to end with cheerful.’
Sweet potato

‘My housemate was like, here’s some roasted sweet potato, that’s your treat. My colleague took my jellybeans onto her desk. She used to do rollerskating when she was little. Her Dad’s so fit. I’m trying to be good. I love Nutella, and I’m doing hydrotherapy now. You know, I think about it as, there’s two, three meals each week, it’s whatever, totally free, and I don’t feel guilty or anything. I went on a massive health kick, it’s completely normal. At the time I felt so good, I’m so reversed now. I get motivated when I lose as well. My Mum loves Curves, it’s really working for her. My cereals had lots of sugar in them, so now I just eat eggs. Consistency is the main thing. I had to think about the things I really love. Guys are better at it. I’m catching up with my boyfriend, he’s a personal trainer, this afternoon. You’ve got to listen to your body, really listen.’
Post-Treatment Care Plan

for Kabli and Nicole

We're all trying to change our spots
so it's natural we make bad puns around them.

We're all a little bit dotty
we always cross our ts

out! out! damned spot!

et cetera. The muscles stick
beneath my skin and you
have silvery scars in stripes
along your shins and forearms.

We dance

(why walk when you can dance?)

to the blare of beefed-up stereos

wailing at red lights –

it's mostly Bollywood, our fingers drill

at the fat sky

and the rain

when it comes

stabs at the asphalt:

this, it hisses, this and this

and this

and it smells like something new.
Surely

for RG

In these last cold mornings of the season
my hands grow thick and lumpy
as air-cured salami.

I reheeled

my boots last week
and they sound like metronomes again

although I still don’t know
what I am trying to outstride.
I walk with fisted lungs.

I end up walking the length of the city,
wind-skinned and fretful
before breathing again
before blocky paintings of the harbour,
the winging halves of the bridge
holding their emptiness
their own suspension –

I still don’t know
what I am trying to outstride.
This morning, we sit at street-level
and could reach right through the window

touch the people
drifting past, their faces blue-lit
by their phone screens, and beautiful.
You crinkle kale-eyed, 
exclaim at the acid bite of pineapple 
before its season 
    (we don’t believe in super food) 
and the mirror 
    on the landing holds me 
    even as I climb away 

even as I lock the bathroom door 
    and let the cold air settle on my spine. 
The mirror holds me: 
glossy and crimped 

as a garnish, just as liable 
    to be left behind 

and all I want to know 
is that you understand, surely 

you can understand 
this stasis.
Camperdown, St Stephen’s

I eat sandwiches against a headstone,  
the moss plump and wet as over-cooked rice  
and I am greedy  
for the sun, it reaches  
for the ground in tepid patches.  
I don’t want  
a monument.

In Rookwood, I’ve read  
the clerics are re-negotiating boundaries  
or burying their dead  
three-deep. A friend sends me photos  
of the roses laid against  
the headstones of dead poets  
that litter old Europe  
like hostel bedbugs.  
My bones are cold.

I am heading  
North this Winter,  
and I’m afraid.
5. Enviable: Love Poems

for P
Flowering Cherry

There’s a story
in the suburbs where I come from:
that a midwife delivered
jacaranda seedlings
to the backyards of the babies
whose heads she’d held

in her barked hands. You see them now,
a haze along the train line
in these days
of new and cautious warmth
when I walk
along the wide main road
that joins our suburbs

further north, far older.
The white cherry trees
are only just uncurling
and the blossom
is soft as new skin.
When we met

these were dry branches,
barely there.
Autumn poem

for P.

I am ankle-deep in leaves
and though the days burn bright
the fast-falling evening has a bite now:
I watch a small child pointing
with blunt fingers (yours are moon-like,
soft, nails longer and lovelier than mine)
at the dessicating leaves along the footpath,
more rubbish! she cries, more rubbish!
more rubbish!

and I walk home
past three damp-cornered houses
in which I used to live: autumn
is soft and slow
and spacious. I think
of how I curled
away from my cold feet
hooked behind your knees,
each finger in between yours.

I still fear
that there's a hollowness
within me.

For a moment on the freeway
the next morning
a huge crow hovers
in the middle of my windscreen.
They too are smarter than they need to be
and I wonder if they feel it
like I feel it, wing-dark
and sinking.

There's a crack
in the skin of things,
the dry air.
Charm for Unexpected Kindness

Take a kitchen sink (that beautiful object)
two permissions and three confessions,
gather a scattering of excess prepositions and a length
of cotton twine.
Steal a kiss at a traffic light
and hold it in your pocket until lunchtime.

Collect loose coins (legal tender), buttons
and dropped bobby pins
from between the cushions of a couch,
goosedown, a rabbit paw,
an unblown dandelion seed,
a cirrus cloud. Make a grid

out of your fingers, and then
breathe into the bottom of your ribcage.
Hold your own reflection in someone
else's mirror: that you might
grow to fill the outline that you find there.
Almost Aubade, Melbourne

Seven hundred and forty-eight
(give or take)
kilometres of distance. My fingers
are starlike, longing for orbits of their own –
how can I feel gazed upon,
I have lived all these years
as a child.

My small body curled in a king-size hotel bed.
The plastic bottles of pale green conditioner.
Miniature gin, a paper seal
across the toilet seat.

I want so much to be
historical
to myself

although I know
that no one
gets to feel this new, to feel this first
at thirty.

What is this then,
this fragile morning?
What of the cost, if I am
enviable?

What might we carry
in the radiowaves of our own pulses
our own dry-skinned digits

in the spaces
where we coalesce
and where we long, we long
and wonder.
Estuary

Against your breath,
    the three curves of my spine
rise and fall
on soft crests, lapping.
We’re estuarine,
your skin is salty,
    our toes weedy-tangled.
Your flatmate’s shower
sounds the hiss of rubber hoses
of fishermen gutting catch
in concrete basins.
Footsteps on the staircase flense
and clap like fleshy bills of pelicans
chasing entrails.
You have swimmers’ shoulders
    and fingers that nibble like baitfish.
Buoyant against my back
your lungs lifejacket.
The flightpath splutters overhead
like an ancient outboard.
Breakfast dishes clatter the sink downstairs
with the clink and spin of rusted reels.
We net, an estuary.
We mollusc.
Vibrations

‘I just ended that one with the Hispanic boy. I’m always thinking, sexually, mentally, physically, whatever, there’s always an end and that makes it less. Just less. Even if it’s just that one of you dies. It makes it less.
My last one, you know, he’d go down stairs and play the piano, anytime he was happy or angry, or sad, or bored, whatever, he’d go downstairs to the piano, it was instead of conversation. Which was fine, because he was talented. He brought the baby grand home from his parents, they were fine. Downstairs, the vibrations from that baby grand, were really something. The neighbours were fine with the vibrations we got on well, both sides and they just knew if he was playing the piano he was angry or happy, or sad, or bored, or whatever. You know pianos die eventually? You replace the hammers and strings and keys and pedals, and the only thing left is the shell. So economically, he brought the baby one back from his parents. But no conversation, it took seventeen years to figure that out. Well, ten. The other seven I was just cruising. We stayed together for the house depreciation. It was fine, he’s talented, that’s part of the attraction. But a bad debt is harder to get away from than a bad ex. There’s always an end. I’m always thinking. Sexually, mentally, physically. Whatever.’
Thank you internet

‘It was the synchronicity. That was what amazed me, the synchronicity, that sometimes, it’s like the internet just gets you, better than any person ever can. It was last Friday I’d finally broken it off with Jas, properly this time, not like the other times when I’d cried and he’d cried and somehow somewhere in amongst the snot we’d just ended up fucking, this time he’d taken his shit and everything, I’d thrown his razor and his fucking ugly toothbrush in the bin. It was an hour later I was streaming Girls, and some guy, he worked in that café with Ray, he may have been recurring but I always forget recurring ones between the seasons, he was telling Shoshanna to lean the fuck in and not be tied to some dopey man lean the fuck in, Shoshanna, he said and then Adam tried to get Hannah back because the annoying artist dumped him and he even said kid in that throaty growl and she was like, nope, that’s over, no you don’t get to have me back and I was cheering for them both, I thought, that’s just what I needed to see right now thank you internet lean the fuck in, Louise
and don’t be tied
to some idiot man
who can’t even
cook frittata –
it’s just an oven-omelette,
it’s not that fucking hard –
or ever put the lid back on the toothpaste
or squash milk cartons before recycling them
and who always turns the kettle
off at the power point, which I know
is technically good but it’s annoying because I go to make
a cup of tea and flick the switch
and then the water doesn’t boil, just lean the fuck in.
So I painted my nails this you-want-to-bang-me red
and changed the sheets and went to bed
but in the morning I sent him a text
because I didn’t want to have breakfast
on my own and so I think it’s back on now
but we’ll break up eventually anyway I’m pretty sure
and so it doesn’t
really matter
in the end.’
Set piece

Strange, that there are sequences
we live as cinema, if I looked
over my shoulder
I might recognise the front wall
of my bedroom
opened out towards the camera

my furniture as hollow
as a stage prop. I am
vicarious to myself: strange,

that sometimes
we recognise significance
instead of burning it back in, much later
and imperfectly.

Some nights I wake up
gasping at the air, I dream
I’m trying, through my sleep
to speak

to call your name
from the wet depths of slumber
but I can’t will my mouth
to move: if we are unknown

even to our selves
how can we try to hold each other
still? I sit against
the bedhead, my knees
press against my breasts. Outside
are stars, a car door slamming,
the last train shunting back into the depot.
Phone Charger

By the time you said you’ll write
about this later

I’d already thought
that I would miss finding
the charger for your phone
plugged in to unexpected outlets
in my house and

how neatly the curve
where your forehead turns to nose
cups up against my chin and how

already, every golden oldie
piping through the pub’s PA
was angling for my throat, and how

few people ever get the chance
to anticipate
a leaving.

You almost walked
through customs with a drill bit
in your pocket and

that small act
was so maddeningly, perfectly
like you.
I drove back home.
Your empty Coke bottle
was still sitting
in the front seat of my car and

I reached, that very afternoon
to text you
as I walked the sleepy streets
between our suburbs.

I had only trivialities to say.
But it’s the trivial things
that feel so weighty now and

even *miss* itself is
so tiny
a word.
Notes

Neukölln II was written during a residency in Berlin, sponsored by the University of Western Sydney, the University of Technology, Sydney, the Goethe-Institut and the Literaturwerkstatt Berlin. The poem takes lines from a number of poems read out loud over an evening by a group of Berlin-based poets, but because alcohol is so cheap in Germany these lines are not properly attributed. Apologies to the poets from whom I’ve taken them.

Flowers and Fever: Thank you to Hamish Robb for the conversation about pianos.

After Mutability responds to Jo Shapcott’s poem ‘Of Mutability’, from Of Mutability (Faber and Faber Poetry 2010).

Candice: Candice and Kristin Hermeler, a pair of twins from Adelaide, entered into a suicide pact at a shooting range in Denver, in 2010. Candice survived her attempted suicide, and the story was widely reported in the Australian press.

Winter Reading ends with a quote from Sappho’s fragment 48.

Autumn Poem owes a debt to Rebecca Giggs and Aden Rolfe, for conversations on crows, whales and animal intelligence.

A Queer and Sultry Summer takes its title from the opening line of Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar (Heinemann, 1963).

Chapter One: The image of apoetic elbows comes from Debra Adelaide’s Letter to George Clooney (Pan Macmillan, 2013)

Her arms and legs are thin was written in response to a provocation from Pip Smith for the launch of her book Too Close for Comfort (Sydney University Press, 2013), and remixes lines from T.S. Eliot’s ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’.
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