

Launch speech – Ron Pretty, AM

with Peter Frankis reading the poetry

Good afternoon everyone.

Thank you all for giving up your Sunday afternoon, and a special thanks to all of you who have travelled some distance to be here. Special thanks to John and Lindsay Knight, proprietors of Pitt Street Poetry, for making the trip down from the mountains, and indeed for persisting with this project.

Many thanks, too, to SCWC for making this space available, and providing so much assistance with publicity, setting up, catering etc.

And thanks to Peter for agreeing to run the show, and for offering to assist with this speech, should it prove necessary; these days, I can't be sure how long my voice or sight will hold out.

And finally, to my wife, my two daughters and six grandchildren without whose assistance and encouragement none of this would have happened. To my wife, Jane, especially, I owe a huge debt of gratitude; (today she has organised the food) so thank you all. And it's my daughter Saroja who's selling the books. Thanks for that too, Love.

What I intend to do this afternoon is give a combined memoir and reading, to give you some idea of the background to the poems as I read them. I won't discuss the quality — or lack of it — of the poetry; I'll leave you to judge that for yourselves. And I promise, if I see you nodding off, I'll stop...

So, the first thing I ever had published was when I was in Year 7 at Sydney Technical Boys' High School. It was called "A Tourist's Journey Through Hell," and, as you'd expect, it was full of typical teenage angst. It would be 20 years before I had anything else published.

In the meantime I finished school, went to teachers' college, went teaching in the bush, came back & went to Sydney Uni part-time. It was there, in my mid-twenties, that I came across the first major poetic influence on my life: W B Yeats. His poem, 'Sailing to Byzantium,' has stuck with me ever since. This is the first stanza:

That is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees,
– Those dying generations – at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unageing intellect.

Occasionally, I've been accused of writing poor quality imitations of Yeats, and perhaps there's some truth in it, but Yeats certainly started me writing poetry. Spasmodically at first, I admit, and not much of those early fumbblings have survived, thankfully.

A few, though, made it into my first couple of books: *The Habit of Balance* and *Bald Hill with Gliders*. My childhood and adolescence was spent in Sutherland and Helensburgh, so it's not surprising that some of the early poems were, as they say, on location. As a teenager, I worked weekends for Harry Lontus, a Helensburgh mechanic, helping repair cars, and, from time to time, scrounging parts from cars that had been pushed over the edge of the cliffs above Stanwell Park. That led to the title poem of my second collection:

Bald Hill with Gliders Page 18

The Falcon's down there, see it there? Where they
pushed it over. Here, look, the skid marks,
the scrub's broken. There's the rock fall,
brought it down too, the cliff is fragile,
crumbling. Trees at drunken angles, uncertain
in space. The car's nest halfway up the cliff –
or down, depends which way you're going.

We're going down: I want the diff, the gearbox,
the rack & pinion. That's all. But there's no way
down from here. Over Bald Hill then,
down to the Park and round the headland. Below
the cliff then up, up through the lantana.

So we went down, around the hill, the hang-
gliders hovering above us like vultures, like rainbow
vultures, no hiding place, their nylon wingtips
tight & quivering in the breeze. Thermalling off
the cliff face, hanging on the wind's lip, whistling

on the drop. While we on foot set off to find the Falcon
in its eyrie, pushed off the ledge for the thrill
of the fall. Joyriders bailing out, the car
not flying, stooping. At the base, lantana torn
we glance up furtively at overtowering rocks,
the car wedged precariously in the crumbling face.

Bright against the sky the gliders, rimmed with
a light that almost flickers. Hovering or swooping,
climbing against the breeze. Joyflights colourful
as threat. No hiding place, drifting past the cliff face
where we cling and clamber up the lower slopes, clawed
by spikes and sharp shards of rock. Scrabbling upwards,
grabbing at shrubs that pull away from the wall, struggling
for footholds, handheld. Halfway up we stop, the Falcon
hangs a hundred feet above. A hand, a falling stone,
perhaps a breeze is all it needs, or so it seems,
to bring it crashing down upon us
defenceless on this open face.

A glider drifts down, curious, the disks of the goggles
eyeing us blindly. The struts sing in the breeze, the shrubs
wave as it passes. Then another drifts towards the Falcon,
swoops across a foot or two away. We can almost see
the body stir, almost feel it start its fall towards us.
... And here we are, suspended on this rock face
between the Falcon and the air, the pinions of the gliders
drifting past.

Not much Yeats in that, I must admit. But I continued to tinker, and in 1968,
after 9 years of teaching and studying, a friend and I headed for England. I
taught there for a year, met a lot of new friends, and broadened my outlook
considerably.

And after a year in England, I decided to go to Greece to teach English as a
foreign language. I found myself in Serres, a town in the north, close to the
Bulgarian border. During the Greek civil war after WW2, waves of conflict had
washed across the town, a funnel for rebels crossing the border, and the army
pursuing them. There are still signs of the conflict in the hills behind the town.

Outside the Strategakis School of English, where I taught, no-one in Serres
spoke English. So that was the year I became serious about poetry, thrown as I
was on my own resources. I read a lot, especially the European poets. Seferis

and Cavafy made a huge impression on me. And I wrote poetry endlessly until it became a drug I couldn't do without.

Those were the years of the dictatorship of the colonels in Greece. Their slogan was, "Greece for Christian Greeks" and it was plastered everywhere in the militarised country. One of the poems I wrote about it was "The Shoot." It's a long poem, so here are just a few sections of it. Imagine yourself a tourist with a camera. "xenos" btw, means "stranger" or "alien". Hence "xenophobia" which affects so many attitudes to refugees.

The Shoot. 95

Greece 1970

Flick. Truly, there's too much to explain. It's all too long ago. Who remembers the Colonels and *Greece for Christian Greeks* plastered in every school, in every store – who remembers that now? A history safely buried. It couldn't happen here of course, we like our beer too much.

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Flick. See the Parthenon floodlit, or what still stood after the Turks, beleaguered here, took the marble blocks apart to use the inter-layered lead for shot. These tales still inflamed the Colonels and all their camp, reliving former glories.

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Flick. Here's, the town of Serres, troops on every square. We're in the north, now, where even the bakehouse is tinged with red. Troops there are to guard it night and day; the bread comes leavened to the markets with subversion.

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Flick. And then the village, razed in the valley; over the hill is the border. Here, no ruin reaches my thigh. The dark green of the cypress stark against the shattered walls, the silence. Flick. Except the church, battered but standing, a rotted wooden door to the basement, no bolt or padlock. The door pulled open, the sudden sunlight falls on the village people here collected. I peer into the crypt

at skeletons tumbling over one another
in their panic, while the gunmen – black
masks, black boots, black barrels ringed
the village and tossed them into darkness,
pulled their houses block from block till
only the church remained with its dusty
basement and the pockets of wheat
trampled, the vines uprooted until
the wind in the cypress was left to moan
alone. And a *xenos* bewildered, afraid.

Coming back home, one of the worst aspects of my late hearing loss is that I can no longer enjoy music the way I once could. Quite a number of my poems have explored aspects of music. I remember the impression it made on me when I first heard the music composed by Phillip Glass. On first hearing his music, my wife said, 'I like him, but he sets my teeth on edge,' and that led to this poem:

The Glass Piano 68

I like him, she says, but he sets my teeth on edge
like running your fingernails against a chalkboard;
I don't mind him too much but he makes me nervous
minim after minim – a list of notes repeated,
repeated, it sets my teeth on edge, like a kid
thumping a tennis ball against a wall, or rain, rain
on an iron roof pattering, pattering, you don't mind
but it gets to you, the same sound, the same pattern
of sound, hardly any variation, the minimum of change
it almost makes you nervous, sets your teeth on edge
like running your nails against a chalkboard,
like sex so boring it sets your teeth on edge
makes you wonder how you'll stand those first
gentle fingerings that go on and on, never changing much,
never reaching climax, slightly off like barcardi
and orange juice, or a politician kissing little boys,
elect me, I feel an election coming on, there's
a good boy, drink your orange juice while I kiss you,
the mother, her teeth on edge, fingernails on chalkboard
but flattered, the soft moth caress repeated,
repeated, the delicate minimalist fingertips
we like it but we're a bit on edge, fingertips soft
as a moth butting, butting against the glass, the teeth

set on edge, floating like moths against the window glass –
kiss me gentle as a moth or wanton boy ...
I like him, but he makes me nervous (repeating)

One of the major decisions Jane and I made in our lives was to adopt two children from Sri Lanka, that country which is now such a disaster zone through the influence of corruption, COVID and China. Our decision to adopt has enriched our lives enormously. We've taken our daughters back to Sri Lanka a couple of times, once to meet Alana's birth mother. (Sadly, we couldn't find Saroja's Mum). But the meeting with Alana's mother led to this poem:

Translation 152

She could not speak to her mother
when they met. She had just turned
twenty one, but had never seen this
small dark woman until then, except
in photos. Harris sat beside her, his smile
inviting them to break the silence.
He would translate, he said, if only
they had something to say. Mother and
daughter looked at one another, tears
on their cheeks. Tell her, she said to Harris,
tell her I did not know where she'd gone,
which country she went to. I used to
watch the planes fly over, she said,
and wonder where they were going,
and if she was on them. Alana
– for that was the daughter's name –
reached out to her without a word.
She took her hand. Visanthi,
the mother said, that was your name.
And still it is, the daughter cried.
Tell her, she said through her tears,
tell her that's what it is. Star sapphires
falling as tears, and a second mother,
in her pale silence watching
Alana Visanthi there in that room,
Sri Lankan sun streaming in where
mother and daughter are holding hands
having no language except its loss.

The adoptions did occasionally cause some confusion among people we met in the street, as in this poem:

Blue Movies 153

Child in the pram, your dark face laughing up
at your pale mother, the barking dogs that mark
your slow perambulation down the street.
The autumn sun glistens on your skin, the toys
you rattle. Staphylococci are healing around
your throat; slowly you're being fed and needled
into health; almost now you can hold your head
upright. Your dark eyes flicker from toys to mother,
from toes to trees, this new world opening out.
For a moment at the corner the pram pauses;
your face crumples as a truck rumbles past.

Your mother's hand reaches towards you;
quickly your small brown fist is swallowed
as your smile replies to hers. Then your grip
tightens as a stranger's face looms over the pram.
Perhaps it's just as well you do not understand
what follows. *Such a pretty little child. Is it yours?*
Your mother stiffens as she nods. The stranger
looks again from parent to cinnamon child.
Oh dear, she says, the father must be devilish black.
The mother smiles as she eases past her.
I've no idea, she says.

Over the years, I have been very fortunate in being awarded a number of residencies, most in Australia and one, memorably, for 6 months in Rome. Quite a number of poems in this book were written in or as a result of them.

Here is just one of them:

Passaggiata 128

No need to rush. The heat won't crush you
nor the sun stroke you if you keep the shade
or stroll in the cool of evening. No hurry.
Wait till the sun goes down, the crowds
emerge, fathers & duties put away. Sure,
the town's your destination, & the square
where the bars co-mingle & the melody

of hair is loosened. Take your time: the heat
from the ochre facades is fading,
the breeze is soft & warm as the eyes
of the dawdling girls & boys. Why would you
want to hurry when scent lingers in the air
& passion is old as cobblestones,
as fresh as that dark lipstick curving
in a smile. Languid the night
& every move you make as slow,
as casual as the summer breeze.

The most recent of the residencies was at Hill End, an old mining town, now an artists' colony. While there, I wrote this. The epigraph is from a headstone in the cemetery at Hill End. Please excuse the language...

Something Useful 160

He chased the golden goddess till the bitch wore him out.
Headstone at Hill End

He dug through the grit at the bend in the creek,
sieved it and washed it, chased elusive nobbs,
only ever found specks. A way of life, he said, good
as any other, better than some. A rabbit or two
most weeks, a few spuds, maybe a cabbage.

A gram from the pan will buy you
some rot-gut for a headache or two
or a hike into town every month or so.
Is there a better life, he asked as he passed me
the flask. No wife or kids to worry, no boss,

no tax, no shoes to shine or ties to bind me
to any place. I go when I want, come back
when I please. Out here, it don't rain
too much. When it does I watch the creek
for freshets chewing the bank.

That's my pleasure, that's my main chance
for a nob. Never found one yet, he said,
but it's the hope that keeps me going.
Maybe next time, after a decent wet.
She asks a lot, the golden goddess

but mostly ignores our prayers, like
every other bastard you pin your hopes on.
She wears me out, she gives me nothin',
but still I keep on chasen' her. A man's
gotta do somethin' useful with his time.

Earlier this year, my good friend Jack Baker died. I miss Jack, his courage and his humour. Towards the end, Jack and I used to meet to share and discuss our poems over a glass of red. I'd like to finish now with one of the poems we wrote together. It's called 'Late Afternoon'

Late Afternoon 171

My mate is chemo-bald and skinny with it,
though he reckons he's podgy from steroids.
It doesn't show. He looks at me and says,
Where'd you find that scarecrow suit, old fella?

We laugh and pour a red, share tales of doctors,
clinics, treatments. We pause a moment
and watch branches sway in the breeze outside.
Great day, isn't it — wouldn't be dead for quids.

A year ago, he says, the doc told me
I had two weeks. I'm still here. I'll drink to that.
We laugh and sip and chew on cheese.
Try for July is the new mantra. What about you?

God knows, I say, and even he's not sure.
Lost strength, lost energy, lost use of one arm.
Can't move the wretched thing an inch now.
Lost weight too — 20 or 30 kilos. Sumo, were you?

We laugh. Something like that. The pain's OK though;
there's always Jurnista and Cordine. And steroids, he adds.
Yeah. And the blockage in the bowels that goes with it.
Tell me about it. A bit of dynamite helps. Dynamite?

You know — the stuff they prep you with
before a colonoscopy. Jesus, mate, don't go
all technical on me. I giggle into my wine
and start to cough. You OK? he asks.

Yeah. It only hurts when I laugh. I wipe my eyes.
Still, there's always wine. Oh, yes, there's always wine.
Never mind all that. How's the writing going?
Pretty good. He passes over the sheet. A pause

while we scan the poem. Then he reads it
to me. Good stuff, mate. I can see you
there on the ledge, the mist swirling up
from the valley. But do you need this word here?

We toss ideas around a while, then it's my turn.
I had an uncle who caught fish when
no one else could. Two old blokes with their poems
and memories, happy as a couple of cows in mud.

So we talk and laugh and drink a little,
paper and pens beside us; cushions for our bony arses.
We'll do this again soon, we agree.
Who ever thought that dying could be so much fun.

Thank you etc.