

Star Struck

David McCooey

David McCooey is an award-winning poet, critic, and editor. His debut poetry collection, *Blister Pack* (2005), won the Mary Gilmore Award and was shortlisted for four other major national literary awards. His second full-length collection, *Outside* (2011), was shortlisted for the Queensland Literary Awards and was a finalist for the Melbourne Prize for Literature's 'Best Writing Award'. His work has appeared for nine out of the last ten years in Black Inc.'s annual anthology, *The Best Australian Poems*. McCooey is the deputy general editor of the prize-winning *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature* (2009), and he is the author of a critical study on Australian autobiography, *Artful Histories* (1996/2009), which won a NSW Premier's Literary Award. McCooey is also a musician and sound artist. His album of 'poetry soundtracks', *Outside Broadcast*, was released in 2013 as a digital download. He is a professor of writing and literature at Deakin University in Geelong, where he lives.

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Struck**

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To the memory of my father,
Wyndham McCooey (1928-2013).

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This Voice

It goes without saying
that it sounds like your voice.
But is it yours? And if
not yours, then whose?

It could be the voice-over in a film;
not a war movie, but a
tale of contingency and
darkness that begins and ends

with summer's teeming
insects starting up at night,
phantom traffic, and the
enduring noise of a goods train.

1

Documents

‘Two other facts I know are these. Nobody ever confides a secret to one person only. No one destroys all copies of a document. Also, that it is children really, perhaps because so much is forbidden to them, who understand from within the nature of crime’.

Renata Adler, *Pitch Dark* (1983)

Habit

In his bedroom, your son looks at pictures of Ancient Egypt. Dark-haired workers moving giant blocks of stone in the pale air. 'What were the workers buried in?' he asks. He turns the page to show jackal-headed Anubis, presider of the weighing of the heart, laying his hands on a pharaoh's coffin, a brightly coloured wooden sleeping bag. Custom is tool and pathology, you think.

And so is habit. While you set the table at the appointed hour, laying out the cutlery, your wife jokes with your son that you are 'a creature of habit.' After dinner, there is the ritual of cleaning away the mess of eating. The dog is given some half-cooked meat. Your son has his bath, and returns wrapped in his Egyptian-cotton towel to suggest that you write a book called *The Monster of Habit*.

In the morning, dressed in his gaudy pyjamas, he builds with his mother a room-sized construction out of chairs, cushions, and blankets, filled with unblinking stuffed toys and plastic jewels. They are playing tomb raiders. You are invited in. In your sacerdotal dressing gown, you get on your hands and knees to enter the labyrinth. You are shown the bewitching everyday things that have been set aside for the afterlife.

Speaking the Language

And then one day you appear
in Accident and Emergency.

You state your concerns,
and you're rushed through,

like you're holding a special pass.
You are put on a bed and hooked

to a machine that soon confirms
a cardiac event. Almost as if

they were not yours, tears start
coursing down the side of your face.

'What's the matter?' a doctor asks.
'I'm just labile,' you say,

and the doctor is satisfied.
You are speaking his language.

Music for Hospitals

i)

Sunday morning.
The sound of church bells;
a patient answers her phone.

ii)

Nurses recalibrating equipment:
'Four, five, six become
seven, eight, nine.'

iii)

The elderly patient leaves
his TV on all afternoon
while reading the paper.

iv)

When told his patient's
former weight, the bearded
nurse yells 'That's massive!'

v)

Everything happens at once:
a nurse with a needle;
the synaesthesia of breakfast.

vi)

The doctor appears with his
silent, staring students: graduates
from *The Village of the Damned*.

Cardiac Ward Poetics

1. Hospital light, like any other light, is rarely 'lemon-coloured'.
2. Any verse form will do, but the catalogue may seem most apt.
3. Try to remember everybody's name.
4. Loretta, Alison, Ron, someone, someone.
5. Anecdote lends itself to a satirical tone.
6. Satire is the audacious mode of the healthy.
7. Words to avoid: 'bravura', 'filigree', 'burnished'. The usual.
8. Is there any need to be so Spartan about everything?
9. Nausea, more than pain, is poetry's teeming limit.

The Hunter

When you were young,
the nurse would have been
called a 'male nurse'.
The patient opposite—
middle-aged and jockey-thin—
cracks small jokes
through his shifts.

The nurse is short, thirty-something,
and excellent at taking blood.
His arms are pale and hairless.
On the last day, as you are packing,
he approaches like a conspirator.

With a phone in his outstretched hand
he flicks through a small cache of images.
There he is dressed in fatigues
with *Apocalypse Now* face paint;
there his guns rest on a bed of grass;
there he stands with a fellow hunter;
and there lies a pretty, long-legged animal
on the bonnet of a four-wheel drive.
You sense him searching
your face as you look.

Then he turns to the other patient,
who is sitting in bed in his striped pyjamas
and too far away to see anything.
He holds the phone aloft like an offering
or a promise.

Invisible Cities

i)

Back home from hospital again.
You read *Invisible Cities* outside
in the morning sun. A small lizard appears.
Its solar-powered musculature moves
across the paving stones. Its skin is both matte
and jewelled in the sunlight. It stops and flicks
its front legs down to its sides, like an ingenious
Edwardian gadget snapping itself shut.
You and the creature take in the sun, then
the lizard heads for the maze of grass,
hiding from the hard-nosed suburban birds.
You take yourself indoors into the dark of the house,
clutching Calvino, the old fabulist.

ii)

Later, the sun performs its drawn-out
power-down, summer already merciless.
You take the dog for a walk, its gait ginger,
while it fusses over what to piss on.
Around the corner, the audacious stadium lights
vie against the sunset. The smell of frying meat
is in the air; the bitter taste of Anginine
under your tongue.

iii)

You read at night, while a lawless wind
upsets the house. You lose your thread.
Calvino engenders fantasies. Dark staircases
frequented by music students and government men;
a forest in which night squats;
an empty Ferris wheel, with all its moral weight.

The dog in his fur
sleeps on dusty floorboards,
and twitches like a muscle.

Animal Studies

You read a story about a mouse,
which—in addition to the mouse—
features a woman, a man, and a cat.

The cat reminds you of the moment
in one of the Canterbury Tales,
in which a man, a monk perhaps,

pushes a cat off a seat, so he may sit on
the warmth left by the cat's body
(which is the same as saying 'the cat').

You remember in turn your first year
at university: your Middle English tutor
drew the class's attention

to this moment, a recognisably
human action, something familiar
from that alien medievalism.

This memory—these memories—come
to you almost three decades later,
your own personal Middle Ages.

You remember, too, how that same tutor
invited the class to his home
for an end-of-year barbecue:

meat frying in the suburban Spring air;
two pale stone cats by the fly-screen door.
You left early, despite your tutor's

evident hospitality—he had
shown you photos of the renovation
of his 1950's house. It was to see

your girlfriend, you had feebly said.
And now your ex-tutor
has emailed out of the blue

to ask if you could assess
a PhD thesis, in animal studies,
which you decline for 'health reasons'.

You remind him of the barbecue,
and he in turn recalls your leaving early.
Apologies all round, and Time

again shows its strangely patient nature.
The tale about the mouse ends with
the woman throwing the half-dead mouse,

caught in the trap she had laid, into
the unmoved snow outside her house.
And this reminds you of a time

involving a real mouse that you had caught
inside a cardboard box
(though there is no memory

explaining how that came about).
Like the woman in the story,
you were afraid of killing that creature

of fur and soft bones, finally
deciding upon the miserable
coup de grâce of smothering it in sand

from your child's clam-shaped sandpit,
knowing then your ancient,
human cowardice—

as if a choking mouse would have cared.
That memory, the cat, waited so long outside the
un-renovated mouse-hole of your life.