

## Writing to the Wire

*The danger is that a global, universally interrelated civilization may produce barbarians from its own midst by forcing millions of people into conditions which, despite all appearances, are the conditions of savages.*

– Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*

*What have we become?*

– Julian Burnside, *The Hamer Oration*

### Surely We Are Better Than This?

The seeking of asylum in Australia has been politicised in recent decades; today, a jaundiced spotlight has been cast over the suffering of people we could and should help. Political cynicism and pandering to racist sentiment has had the effect of dehumanising people who are exercising the UN chartered human right of seeking asylum from persecution (as per Article 14 of the 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*). The pandering and politicking have desensitised and dehumanised the Australian polity at large, and shameless procedural narratives delivered by those speaking from either side of mainstream politics in Australia continue to cause actual harm to real people – adults and children alike. These narratives damage our collective ethics and our nation's sense of identity. Let's be clear about what Australia has been doing: a mean-spirited interpretation has been applied to the *Migration Act* (1958) to enable the so-called 'off-shore processing' of asylum seekers. Whether on-shore or further afield, that enterprise is now commercialised and detention has become an industry contracted out to for-profit Orwellian organizations such as the gaolers *Australasian Correctional Management* and *Serco Australia P/L*, as well as the sardonically-named *Transfield* and *Global Solutions Limited*.

Secreted within sites often resembling high security prisons, those who have exercised a fundamental human right are treated punitively and with prejudice. Indeed, refugees arriving in our country endure what Hannah

Arendt would term the ‘conditions of savages’ inside facilities purpose-built by political leaders peddling narrowed versions of who we are and who we choose to belong among us. Meanwhile, no journalist or employee within these para-governmental agencies may legally undertake to report on the treatment of ‘detainees’. We are actively ghettoising displaced and traumatised people; we persist in treating these most marginalised groups like some kind of waste management issue. Australian governments pretend that no citizen is interested, and that none in the international community are shocked and dismayed at Australia’s abrogation of its responsibilities. This is stage-managed theatre for domestic political consumption. One notes, by 2015, the now well-established bi-partisan support (from both the Conservative and the Labor sides of mainstream Australian politics) for the idea that those who have paid ‘people smugglers’ to arrive in Australia by boat are ‘queue-jumpers’ and generally persons with motives to be suspected. This can no longer be viewed as a Pauline Hanson-era flight of rhetorical fancy. It is a proven election-winning stratagem.

Let us be clear about what Australia is doing. The people in those places where no journalist may go are leaving lives behind, quite simply because they are fleeing *for* their lives. Australia is paying vast sums – current estimates range between AU\$4 billion and AU\$5 billion each year – to ensure that these displaced and disenfranchised people are kept in a constant state of danger and despair, and are given no hope for a better future. As with the US anti-terrorism showcase at Guantanamo Bay, despite the paucity of media coverage, this is really all for the cameras. These people are being made into examples. Our legalistic responses to their plight is fodder for the Murdoch-owned tabloid appetite that makes a difference among swinging voters in marginal seats – the lowest common denominator in Australian politics today.

And let’s not exaggerate the situation: Australia has not altogether shut the door on foreigners or on parties wishing to become Australian, nor indeed on refugees. But there are specific economic and political motivations behind appearing to be tough on people seeking asylum in our country. The populist idea that a ‘line is being drawn’ elicits mute complicity. In a climate of unknowing engineered purposefully to heighten both ignorance and fear, self-interest will always trump acts of decency. And how telling it is that since the year 2000 our Department of Immigration has undertaken re-branding on four occasions, each new name signposting our diminished responsibility and growing collective moral culpability: from the ‘Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs’ (2001-2006), to the ‘Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs’ (2006-2007), the newer names shift

toward a categorical compartmentalization to demarcate ‘us’ from anyone else ... beyond the Kafkaesque ‘Department of Immigration and Citizenship’ (2007–2013) we arrive at the present moniker, a totalitarian-inflected ‘Department of Immigration and Border Protection’, which carries with it all the undertones of a secret police. Indeed, this latest appellation institutionalises an authoritarianism of the kind Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak frames as a ‘reinscription of imperialism’.

Where is the opposition to this despicable politicking? Since the ‘Tampa’ and ‘Baby Overboard’ controversies associated with John Howard’s 2001 election win, the Labor Party has not seriously challenged the premises of Howard’s ‘we will decide who comes to Australia, and the manner in which they will come’ rhetoric. In the lead-up to that election, the government manipulated defence forces and media reporting in order to paint asylum seekers as persons of a callous and un-Australian disposition. On this issue, Howard successfully forged a radically new political consensus that places Australia in contravention of its UN treaty obligations, and that holds to this day, with the Greens as the only major party dissenting. Peer through all the Orwellian obfuscation, and what do we bear witness to?

Until Kevin Rudd made his hairy-chested 2013 election-oriented pronouncement that no one coming by boat could ever be settled in Australia, in fact the vast majority of persons at first detained would eventually become Australians. We also know from opinion polls that it took many years for general Australian public opinion to catch up with the mean-spirited, and targeted (generally Islamophobic) xenophobia Howard’s mob cultivated as a method for hauling in marginal seats to make a majority in parliament. But during the Rudd-Gillard years that sentiment did catch up with the people at large and the polls showed that a clear majority of Australians were in favour of Abbott’s ‘stop the boats’ sloganising. It was a major factor in Abbott’s winning of the 2013 election. The national psyche had changed by that time.

We know that caring for refugees in the community, as in the pre-internment past, was immensely cheaper than present ‘solutions’; we know that it was the best way we had to deal with the traumas faced by persons fleeing persecution to find a new life. Prior to Rudd’s can-never-settle-in-Australia policy, the Australian community and the Australian taxpayer would foot the literal and metaphorical bills for damage done to these people. We know that illegal internment in so-called ‘Immigration Detention facilities’ significantly adds not only to the cost but to the traumas suffered already by some of the world’s most traumatised people. And yet, our politicians would rather have us pay for the long-term detention of asylum seekers in other countries. It is hard to see how

that kind of policy could be continued over the generations required to give permanent effect to such a mean ambition. One needn't be any kind of seer to predict that somewhere in the coming decades a Royal Commission will be undertaken into the abuses currently taking place in Australian Immigration Detention facilities, and that that Royal Commission will itself cost a fortune, that it will recommend very expensive compensation, and that it will sadly regret that the human misery caused by an unconscionable policy in the past cannot be undone.

Back in the here-and-now, we ask whether the expressed 'concern' of a new prime minister, currently in the form Malcolm Turnbull, will translate into doing anything about the plight of these persons? Have we truly passed the lowest point in the Howard-Rudd-Gillard-Abbott trashing of Australia's ethical brand? One way and another, every poem and every poet represented in this book has an interest in this question.

### **Who We'd Rather Be**

*Writing to the Wire* is a collection of poems by Australians and people who would like to be Australians. Its loose thematic focus is the situation of those who have come to Australia, by whatever means available to them, in order to exercise the human right of seeking asylum. This book is about flight from various horrors – from various forms of persecution, from various dangers to life, to culture, to identity, to family, to friends. In an important sense, this is a book about those who have lost a home and who seek a new one because they have no choice but to do so. This is a book about the idea of being Australian. It's about identity in the (unfortunately) national sense – for Australians, for Australian poets, for those who are or could be becoming Australians. This is a book about who we are, who politicians make us out to be, and about who we can be. It is a book of reactions against a collective burden of shame felt by many Australians because of the unkindness our nation has shown, over a long period of time now, to persons in need of help. So, negatively, you might say this is a book about who we, as Australians, would rather not be.

Nothing new here. White Australian history is full of people you'd rather not be. You'd rather not be shot or poisoned for being indigenous, you'd rather not be sent to a fatal shore, flogged for belonging to an underclass. And, in the twentieth century, the ethical flipside of those earlier undesirable outcomes was perhaps that you'd rather not be caught holding the gun or the whip, you'd rather not be building an empire for yourself or for somebody else, you'd rather

not be profiting from the suffering of others, wherever and whomever they might be. Of course we recognise in our country's colonial past brutalities that characterise so much of world history. Massacres, racist riots, the White Australia Policy, our involvement in Korea, Vietnam, and more recently Afghanistan and the Gulf. As a nation of mainly migrants, the history of Australia can be read as a great ethical struggle between cosmopolitan spirit and responsibility on the one hand, and, on the other, wanting to be left alone because either, 'I'm alright, Jack', or 'I've got troubles enough of my own to contend with'. There has in our not-so-distant past been great generosity and a welcoming spirit, a sense that social justice advanced and knit us together as a community – made us more than simply an empire's outpost – because we could give a hand to people who needed our help.

Somehow the national song of colonised Australia, 'Waltzing Matilda' (the world's only national song in the mode of ghost story), captures the ambivalent range of feeling we can have for the suffering of unnamed and unknown others. When we sing together as contemporary Australians to represent ourselves in a manner more heartfelt than our national anthems ever allowed, we sing the story of the ghost – of a man's last moments, of the doubtful moments before the man-with-no-name makes it into our mythology. Does he just drown himself in that puddle? Are the policemen really just watching on? There are different versions of the story/song and there are different positions from which to read it. We can't really know what happened. But we keep singing this text to represent ourselves, and to hail ourselves, in each others' company, as fellow Australians. We bring 'Waltzing Matilda' into the picture because what is happening now with asylum seekers is another 'stuck record' – moment become *mythos* – in the national consciousness. We're the people who keep staring at the tragedy and re-telling it and we're the people who keep standing back from it, as if it were a brown snake and we were poking it with the longest stick possible.

The same media-whipped hysteria directed at terrorism, at asylum-seekers, is directed at sharks off the West Australian coast. Lowest common denominator morals are normalised by the (especially Murdoch tabloid) media and cultivated by cunning right-wing politicians like John Howard (or a less cunning one like Tony Abbott) in order to embed a personal (and dangerously ideological) nostalgia for the-way-things-were as the-way-they're-going-to-be. Thus reactionary political agendas impact the psychological constitution of the Australian mind-and-heartset. Thus contemporary brutalities pass as politically expedient commonplaces, dehumanising but nearly unnoticed. The consistent narratives of Malcolm Fraser (dart-board of the 70's Left) on the

issue of asylum seekers are a litmus test of how much things have changed. Here's Fraser in 1981 –

The less constructively a society responds to its own diversity the less capable it becomes of doing so. Its reluctance to respond, fuelled by the fear of encouraging division, becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy – the erosion of national cohesion is a result not of the fact of diversity but of its denial and suppression.

And here he is again, commenting on the debate between government and opposition on punitive migration policies in 2010 –

This is a demeaning debate, it's a miserable one. It also shows that the politicians who participated in this debate have contempt for all of us, for the majority of the Australian people. They believe that despite all the evidence to the contrary, that if they appeal to the fearful and mean sides of our nature, they will win support.

Fraser was keenly aware that Australia's national ethos and self-image were at stake in the Tory/Labor race to the bottom on asylum seekers. In the past two decades, great damage has been done to Australian ethics, and therein to the idea of an Australia. There are deep issues – of responsibility, of hospitality, which go to the core of ideals around nationhood, and to the core of our cosmopolitan credentials in world contexts – but these conversations have been hijacked and monopolised by impoverished political reactions imagining a narrow, more monovalent 'Australia'.

### **Speaking Against Silence**

Poets in this anthology speak from a range of moral positions, and this book's perplexities shift across terrains of shock, disbelief, disgust, dismay, despair, contempt, cold fury even. In 'Dangerous Communications', the tenacious Janet Galbraith reveals a conversation she may have conducted covertly with a person detained on Manus Island –

'How was breakfast', I ask.  
'Expired', you reply.  
'The meeting with UNHCR?'

‘They brought PNG immigration with them’.

‘Did you sleep’, I ask.

‘I dreamed I was hanging from a noose’.

And the day unfolds.

Why is this litany of horrors a ‘dangerous’ conversation for Galbraith? For the same reason that the *Australian Border Force Act* (2015) makes illegal any reporting by medical personnel of child and sexual abuse, rape, assault, battery: confidentiality agreements have indeed turned the Department of Immigration and Border Protection into some kind of intelligence agency. For so many Australian poets, and Janet Galbraith is one of the most engaged and vociferous, this is an Australia neither wished for nor recognisable. Spivak would suggest an epistemic violence (that is, state-devised and hegemonic) is at work in the ‘persistent constitution of Other as the Self’s shadow’; these are dark days indeed for Australia, loud as it is with an unchanging political rhetoric that is flatly uncharitable, legalistic, and foul.

We know that there is no queue to jump or wait in, just as we (should) know that the United Nations’ *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* insists the legality of the arrival of asylum seekers on our (or any) shores –

14 (i). Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.

15 (i). Everyone has the right to a nationality.

We also know that an overwhelming majority of those who arrive by boat are found by Australian authorities to be legitimate refugees. In her book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1958), Hannah Arendt traces a process in which European Jews were first made stateless, then sent to the Third Reich’s death camps: for Arendt, ‘a condition of complete rightlessness was created before the right to live was challenged’. We note that successive Australian governments have acted legally (by their own, if not international, lights) – and with no moral conscience – by first rendering asylum seekers as unlawful non-citizens (and therein rightless) before next imperilling the lives of those sent back to dangerous regimes; this ‘re-foulement’ contravenes the *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* (1951), to which Australia remains a signatory. The nation state has acted, on its own terms, legally, but at what expense? Arendt again: ‘The crimes against human rights [...] can always be justified by the pretext

that right is equivalent to being good or useful for the whole in distinction to its parts'. How often our elected leaders assure us that they are working for the greater good of the nation.

Since the turn of the century, almost 2000 asylum seeking people have died within Australian territories. And yet the politicking continues: while the murder of Reza Barati in the Manus Island detention centre on February 17th 2014 continues to draw symbolic attention to political determination to place Australia's human-rights responsibilities beyond our own borders, the Foreign Minister is currently trying to obtain a seat for the country on the UN's Human Rights Council. And as we write the introduction to this book, it is reported that female asylum seekers on Nauru are being raped both in and outside the facilities where they are housed. Are we better than this? On his website, Julian Burnside hosts a message from people currently incarcerated on Manus Island –

We are asylum seekers. Sorry but we have forgotten our names because now we are just called by our boat numbers. We have been in detention for years in this hell you call [an] offshore processing centre. We cannot describe our suffering. We are tired of being tired. We are dying every single second because of your inhumane treatment.

The letter is signed by 844 people; each have had their voice, identity, and hope stolen by the concerted efforts of elected representatives and the bureaucracies at their bidding. Politicians on both sides of the mainstream political spectrum have roundly agreed to disqualify all people arriving by boat from being repatriated to Australia, and this remains a policy the director of *Human Rights Watch*, Ken Roth, reads as deeply malfeasant –

What Europe has done is rather than detain everybody in situations of despair, they actually are actively patrolling the Mediterranean and they've decided to prioritise savings lives over defending their borders. And so if somebody leaves Libya and their boat begins to founder, they signal to the Frontex, the European Union border patrol agency, and they send a boat and pick them up, bring them to Italy, they get processed and ultimately they get to seek asylum. So, there is a much more humane approach to the problem of potential drowning at sea. We shouldn't pretend that this is a humane measure on Australia's part. This is just an effort to say, 'We're not gonna have anything to do with this'.

Ours is a state-sponsored brutality delivered to victims who are treated as if criminals: and this, despite clear directives within the *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* (1951) which state that 'The Contracting States shall not impose penalties, on account of their illegal entry or presence, on refugees' (Article 31[1]). Whether we each choose individually to have anything to do with the issue or not, each Australian is involved. In this book, Marion May Campbell's aphoristic and untitled text shows us our collusion. Knowingly permitting ourselves to be 'protected' by a rule of law such as the *Australian Border Force Act*, and echoing Wallace Stevens' poem, 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird', Campbell's survey interrogates the patrolled borderlines of our sovereignty –

I know subtle cartographies  
of silence & fatal shoreline deletions  
but I know too  
that the orange lifeboat is involved  
with what I know

... so we perhaps come to see how our colonised estates are not as free from moral responsibility as we might wish. Many may well choose to be silent, mute, dumb and turning a blind eye but for the rest of us, Campbell asks, what is to be done?

### **Mirror Image**

What is to be done? To begin with, let's take a look at ourselves. Let's look at who we have become.

It's June 2015 and, outside the ABC's headquarters in Melbourne, a group of white Australians are roasting a pig. This is something unusual. Why are they doing this? They are cooking the pig because they hope to offend Muslims, or to offend the putative Muslim-lovers at the ABC. Why would one group of Australians (presumably non-Muslims) wish to offend another group of Australians (Muslims, or those sympathetic to them) in this manner? The answer lies in the repositioning – over the last two decades – of race, religion and ethnicity as unspoken characteristics of the normative Australian national consciousness. Those multicultural ideals of the Whitlam-Fraser-Hawke-Keating epochs are receding into the past. In the context of terrorism debates, we hear the rattling of the deportation sabre (for dual citizens who could be involved in terror activities), and we have recently heard Abbott's

repeated description of Australian citizenship as a privilege, rather than a right. This is not about Tony Abbott's putative dual nationality (British-Australian). Citizenship has become a privilege rather than a right, that is, for those in Australia who are other-than-white.

We ask again: why would one group of Australians (presumably non-Muslims) wish to offend another group of Australians (Muslims)? The answer lies with the word 'terrorism' and the uses to which the term has been put, and particularly with regard to racial profiling. 'Terrorists' are very rarely going to be white people. Terrorists are persons of 'Middle Eastern appearance', of appearance very much like most of those currently seeking asylum in Australia. White, middle-class Australians have been assiduously taught to be afraid; questions of nationality are to the fore here. The people roasting the pig see themselves as Australian in part because they are white; they cannot see Muslims as being as Australian as they are. The pig was being roasted outside the ABC's headquarters in Melbourne because a dog had been whistled up: in late June 2015, the ABC's 'Q&A' program hosted a government frontbencher, Steve Ciobo (then parliamentary secretary to the Minister for Foreign Affairs), found himself expected to answer a question by Sydney man, Zaky Mallah.

Mallah was not just any guest in the audience; he was found not guilty of preparing a suicide attack on a Commonwealth building after being held for two years in Goulburn jail. In a plea bargain, Mallah had pleaded guilty to threatening to kill ASIO officials. Here's what he said on 'Q&A' that night –

As the first man in Australia to be charged with terrorism under the harsh Liberal Howard government in 2003, I was subject to solitary confinement, a 22-hour lockdown, dressed most times in an orange overall and treated like a convicted terrorist while under the presumption of innocence. I had done and said some stupid things, including threatening to kidnap and kill, but in 2005 I was acquitted of those terrorism charges. What would have happened if my case had been decided by the minister himself and not the courts?

Mr Ciobo responded that he would be happy to see Australian citizens of Mallah's stripe stripped of citizenship and deported –

I'm happy to look you straight in the eye and say that I'd be pleased to be part of the government that would say that you were out of the country. I would sleep very soundly at night with that point of view.

It was Mallah's question that set off a witch hunt (accompanied by a Prime Ministerial hissy fit) that ended with the national broadcaster backing down, chastened, and promising to rein in the troops as if they had been somehow wayward in allowing a person who had served a prison term far in the past to ask a question of an elected official on television.

This unbalanced set of circumstances is only possible because of fear, fear that has been carefully cultivated. The word 'terror' has been an important tool in the generation of fear, and makes the post-September 11 2001 world an ideologically divided and controlled place (and a far nastier place for marginalised persons). Words like 'terrorism' have been deployed as a conceptual tool to screw down dissent against authoritarian governance. Linking the word 'radical' via the idea of 'radicalisation' to terrorism reveals the extent of right-wing agendas: not so long ago radical was a word to imply thinking in any direction beyond the mainstream (left, right, otherwise, as in 'a radical new idea'), but now implies murderous religious fanaticism. Lacking our own Guantanamo, it is asylum seekers arriving in dangerous boats who offer the most convenient target for the terrorism fears of tabloid-swilling voters in marginal electorates.

### The Question of Hospitality

So much for where politics has taken our language and our ability to think clearly about ourselves and our others. Let us come now to the issue of our cosmopolitan responsibilities. Some of these responsibilities are legal and some merely moral. There was very little defence of free speech being offered in the ABC's favour in the days and weeks that followed the Mallah-Ciobo exchange. But there were parties who clearly more than agreed with Steve Ciobo outside the ABC's offices trying to offend Australians whose ethnic difference offended them. Let's forget for a moment the question of free speech (Mallah's, Ciobo's, the ABC's, the pork barbeque crowd). Forget the question of citizens' rights, forget whether the individual, Zaky Mallah, deserves or does not deserve to be an Australian. In the aftermath of that 'Q&A' episode, the idea of 'Australia' had (again) been diminished. When politicians pander rhetorically to xenophobic sentiments, we are all diminished.

Jacques Derrida begins his essay 'Cosmopolitanism' with the question, 'Where have we received the image of cosmopolitanism? *And what is happening to it?*' A place to begin fairly early in the story would be with the dictum attributed variously to Terence or Lucretius – *Homo sum, humani nihil a me*

*alienum puto* – ‘I am a human and so nothing human can be foreign to me’. Or there is Diogenes’ disputed fifth-century claim to be a citizen of the world. Despite all those empires and city states and competing polytheistic pantheons, the idea of hospitality, like the idea of democracy, takes form in the ancient world, in the ancient west. And in China, a little earlier, there is the doctrine of Mozi, built around all-embracing love (jianai 兼愛), the idea that every human is as precious to every other as members of a single family.

Unlike Confucius and his followers, Mozi’s doctrine was one that put self-reflection and authenticity ahead of following a ritual and obeying parents and that sort of thing. The Confucianists were also interested in the idea of general human responsibilities (to, for instance, strangers). To explain the idea of innate goodness, Mencius uses the example of a child falling down a well –

Witnesses of this event immediately feel alarm and distress, not to gain friendship with the child’s parents, nor to seek the praise of their neighbours and friends, nor because they dislike the reputation [of lack of humanity if they did not rescue the child] ... The feeling of commiseration is the beginning of humanity; the feeling of shame and dislike is the beginning of righteousness; the feeling of deference and compliance is the beginning of propriety; and the feeling of right or wrong is the beginning of wisdom.

How fundamental is the feeling of commiseration (and underlying that, sympathy and the ability to empathise) for humans, and indeed for the prospect of humanity? Mencius wrote –

Humans have these Four Beginnings just as they have their four limbs. Having these Four Beginnings, but saying that they cannot develop them is to destroy themselves.

For Derrida, the foundation of ethics is hospitality, and hospitality on the human-to-human level is the readiness and the inclination to welcome the Other into one’s home. To answer Derrida’s question (‘Where have we received the image of cosmopolitanism?’), the image of cosmopolitanism in the modern world of international relations derives largely from Kant’s ‘categorical imperative’, based as it is on establishing a difference between what is good for us and what is right (as in universally right, as in something like a *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*).

Kant's ideas, and in particular the categorical imperative, have been a cornerstone in the ethical thinking that makes human rights and cosmopolitan policies and attitudes/ways of living a possibility in the world today. Kant asserts –

Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law.

How have we been acting? In late June 2015: Abbott, then Australian Prime Minister, is refusing to answer a question as to whether or not Australian officials paid 'people smugglers' to smuggle asylum seekers back to Indonesia, which while not exactly being where they came from is at least away from us. Strong evidence is emerging at the time of writing this introduction that people smugglers were offered logistic as well as financial assistance from Australian authorities at the time of the incident in question. Tony Abbott's point was that it doesn't matter that we are people smuggling when we pay people to smuggle people away from our shores. We have been – and we are still being – misled. We are being manipulated. How can we feel and think a way beyond the noise of politically expedient rhetoric? How can we create better versions of the idea of an Australia?

For Immanuel Levinas, dialogue 'proceeds from absolute difference' and has in language 'the power to break the continuity of being or of history'. Levinas claims that the welcoming of the Other is the consciousness of my injustice. And he writes –

The absolutely foreign alone can instruct us [...] *The infinity of responsibility denotes not its actual immensity, but a responsibility increasing in the measure that it is assumed; duties become greater in the measure that they are accomplished. The better I accomplish my duty the fewer rights I have; the more I am just the more guilty I am.*

Here are some hard truths for us. These insights go to the heart of the question as to who we are and who we think we are. *Only the absolutely other can instruct us.* How is it that we progressed toward being a society, as opposed to a prison on invaded territory? *Responsibilities increase in the order that that they are assumed* – is this what people are afraid of? There's no end to what we might need to do if we began to do the right thing. Why, for instance, stop with human suffering – in a world where humans annually slaughter – not counting the fish – sixty billion warm-blooded animals? If we begin to care then where will it end?

The effort to remember is a first responsibility. Surely it's the now-luckiest people in the world who have had the greatest benefit from the way the past has gone? Surely these groups are the ones – surely *we are the ones* – who need to begin to take responsibility for the past, for the way the world is, for those who need and seek our aid, for who we ourselves in fact are. But the Australian nation – and its leaders elected since the turn of the millennium – provides the example of a stunning, orchestrated amnesia. Donald Horne's irony of a lucky country is entirely lost. We don't know where or why we got to be so lucky – and so we won't be blamed for the crimes against humanity that allow us to be where and how and who we are – specifically the crime of dispossession, the crime of genocide and, now, the legalistic and narrowed definitions of responsibility, which serve to create a dangerously narrowed cultural identity.

In recent decades, the colonial amnesia of Australians has been functionally and assiduously underwritten by right-wing thinking. There's no better example of the amnesia than the Gallipoli obsession cultivated so assiduously by John Howard and his friends in recent decades. Gallipoli made us a nation? No, at Gallipoli we Australians were colonials following orders. That's why the countless Australian coffins came back from that conflict draped in Union Jacks. That's why there was no Australian passport until 1949. That's why 'God Save the King/Queen' was the national anthem until not so long ago. It is because we Australians were colonials following orders that the Gallipoli story is so appealing to Australians today. In that conflict we were as brave as we were blameless. And today, in 2015, with the queen's head still on the coins, with the Union Jack still in a corner of the flag, with foreign policy directed in large part from Washington, now, as then, the work of making Australia – of making a nation out of Australia – is ongoing.

In his 2015 *Hamer Oration*, Julian Burnside asks a rhetorical question, 'What sort of country are we?', before retracing the threads of a shameful narrative: from the 'Tampa' and Baby Overboard' scandals, to the privatisation and 'off-shore processing' of detainees in quasi-governmental institutions, to a number of high-profile incidents of harm, self-harm, suicide, and murder, no recent political leader (Howard, Rudd, Gillard, Abbott) is blameless. Burnside asserts that 'by our response to boat people since August 2011, we may have redefined our national character'. What seems clearest is that the work of making Australia – of making a nation out of the idea of 'Australia' – is ongoing. Today, 'nation' is the most deadly abstraction in the world. Levinas writes, 'The event proper to expression consists in bearing witness to oneself'. Who are we,

this 'we' – we Australians? Perhaps we have no choice but to continue in the direction of becoming a nation? Then let us decide how that nation will be and who it will allow us to be.

Consider Odysseus, washed ashore in the land of the Phaeacians, then praying to the unknown god of the stream –

Hear me Lord, whoever you are. I come to you as many others have come, with a prayer. I am a fugitive from the sea and from Poseidon's malice. Any poor wanderer who comes in supplication is given respect, especially by the immortal gods. I am such a man, and I now turn to you after much suffering and seek the sanctuary of your stream. Take pity on me, Master, I am your supplicant.

This man who calls himself nobody prays to an anonymous god: for this an act of openness is required. To ask, one must be open to the encounter and open to receive what is offered through that encounter. And to give, to allow, to accept? In so many ways, we who are here – we of amorphous origins – have become or allowed ourselves to become the gods of our 'antipodean' place. Only an act of hubris remains deaf to the kind of plea an Odysseus makes, to the kind of plea made by those who arrive on our doorstep fleeing death and persecution. Woody Guthrie's lines come to mind: 'You won't have no name when you ride the big airplane/ All they will call you will be deportee.' Those who refuse to hear the pleas of the friendless stranger hide behind their own namelessness, refusing to rise to a higher collective plane of care and of compassion.

### **We of This Book ...**

Were it not concerning the spread of Fascism across Europe, Bertolt Brecht's 'In Dark Times' might as easily map the dark times in contemporary Australia:

They won't say: when the walnut tree shook in the wind  
But: when the house-painter crushed the workers.  
They won't say: when the child skimmed a flat stone across the rapids  
But: when the great wars were being prepared for.  
They won't say: when the woman came into the room  
But: when the great powers joined forces against the workers.  
However, they won't say: the times were dark  
Rather: why were their poets silent?

What should poets do? *The event proper to expression consists in bearing witness to oneself.* Let's see who we are. That's a start. We, in this book – we, the voices in these pages – have responsibilities to listen and to reason, and to speak those truths urgently present to us. We arrive together, between these covers, in a tradition of dissent, in response to what is being done in our name by Australian governments to those who exercise the human and the legal right to seek asylum in our country.

Anne Elvey starts her 'Dear Citizen X' with 'There's nothing I can do', and this may precisely mark a common domain: the relaxed and comfortable so-called battlers of this lucky country may have become so stultified as to no longer understand nor desire now to stand up to the inflections of vote-buying (belying dangerously reactionary political visions), preferring instead to step unthinkingly into line. In darkly ironic tones, Elvey traces contemporary stupifications to their origins –

[...] The Empire tried  
putting them in detention in Van Diemen's  
Land but they mutated and have them-  
selves spread across the mainland like  
a virus, infecting other tongues. You might  
think they have erased such victoriously.

In Elvey's poem, speech is from lips that have become unpicked; we may well spend our days 'recollecting [our] consent, the stupor of our polity,/ the muteness of our unpicked mouths', but Elvey's critique would have us understand silence remains a real part of the problem. To speak, perhaps as 'radicals', so as to participate in shaping language into narratives of self and other is, for Elvey, our enduring challenge.

So many poets in this book return, explicitly or by implication, to examine and explore the nature of who 'we' are. In 'Interlude', Michelle Cahill develops a motif around notions of 'reading'; her text functions as a challenge couched in visible luxuries (a lap pool, board meetings, a daughter skiing with her father) perhaps easily consumed by those populating institutionalised discourses of power and privilege; hers is a lyric of recognizable sites and sounds interrupted by confessions of a pollution not only temporal but aesthetic and indeed psychic: perhaps echoing Auden (is her gesture ironic?), here is a work that explores disease, suicide, and the illogical economies of 'Indonesian boats [sinking] their cargo' while 'politicians waged', but which may also expect to change ...

nothing. This is poetry that understands (to quote from another Auden text) the human position of suffering and indifference.

As is the case with the pseudonymous poet Hazara, incarcerated on Christmas Island and unable to use the name bestowed at birth for fear of jeopardising their chances of being granted a bridging visa, a number of poets in this book elect to remain anonymous; theirs are direct accounts holding each of us directly accountable, sometimes in a language of ‘formidable determination’ and ‘miraculous fortitude’ (as A. writes while suffering incarceration in Nauru), but often without the escape routes of hope, dénouement, catharsis, or the possibility of an easy, comfortable, or happy ending. All of us remember the photograph of Aylan Kurdi, the three-year-old Syrian child whose drowned body was retrieved by Turkish bodyguards on 2nd September 2015; in ‘Child’s Poem’, PH reveals that particular horror as an event which, though not always captured in photographs, keeps happening, a looping trauma in the minds of those we throw into detention –

The first night I came to that room, I had a nightmare:  
Some children were in the green island  
and they sank in the deep ocean.  
When I opened my eyes I saw they had written on my wall  
*Beautiful God please take us to a beautiful place kiss kiss.*

What is to be done? We remain mindful not to speak *for* Spivak’s ‘historically muted subjects’, and we are cognizant that (after Arendt), contemporary Australian xenophobia has ‘next to nothing to do with any material problem of overpopulation; it [is] a problem not of space but of political organisation’. The texts in this book issue from a wide range of speaking positions, from subaltern to privileged, from excluded to empowered, and adopt a range of tropes, strategies, forms, and styles to interrupt the logic of those nodding assent to the anti-humanistic myopias of mainstream Australian politics. Guided by principles of inclusivity, pluricentricity and multivalence, we in this book are a broad group working toward an open and inclusive vision of Australia, not as a nation but as an experimental and imperfect idea requiring persistent revision.

We call for future political voices to ensure that improvements to the idea of ‘Australia’ remain open to all would-be contributors, and we proudly display among ‘us’ those whom the vast majority of current Australian politicians would silence as voiceless, unlawful non-citizens to be treated with all the blunt force it takes to dissuade a person of their hope. We include these anonymised

and pseudonymous poets among us to suggest another kind of nation. We respect and follow the slogan of the ‘Refugees, Survivors, and Ex-detainees’ group (RISE): ‘Nothing about us without us’. We do not speak for the people incarcerated by Australian governments: they are speaking for themselves here, and it is our enduring hope that their voices in this book will be most clearly heard: we echo Sabine Ahmed who, in her poem ‘Dear Bird Send My Message’, offers –

humble greetings and love  
to people who are struggling ...

★ ★ ★

Perhaps *Writing to the Wire* is a little like bashing your head against a brick wall. Or maybe it’s more like speaking to a wall: the wall of public opinion, set on overload (no more compassion) mode. Journalists and eyewitnesses risk prosecution (risk a gaol term) to tell us the truth of what they know about the way Australia is treating asylum seekers. What can poets do? Poetry can help because, as a leading-edge of our way with words and images, it can offer us new ways to understand mundane injustices to which we have become habituated. Poetry challenges us. It can offer new ways to speak out, new stories to tell. Poetry can reveal new truths. In this case, the urgent truth to be revealed is the truth of who we are, who we are making ourselves to be. Poetry can delve into the detail of feeling (and unfeelingness); it can throw contradictions up one against an other, show us how the world is upside down, how it got to be that way. Poetry can show us where thinking and feeling went wrong. It can make us feel as we think and help us to think as we feel. Poetry can help us to hope.

This is very much a book of hope – a book to make us look and think and feel again. And so we commend these many and varied voices to you. And we hope, by reading here, to learn to be better listeners, and to act with compassion and on the best advice of our hearts.

Dan Disney and Kit Kelen

# WRITING TO THE WIRE



## Across the Seas

S.K. Kelen

Maniacs worship War an ancient  
god whose flames must burn.  
Perpetual war is a sacred rite  
the way the world must be –  
every day war delivers misery –  
a gift of politics & military industry –  
pitiless death lottery on the roadsides,  
at the checkpoints, falling from the sky  
murder as policy and tactic; slaughter,  
torture, rubble the only evidence. Brutal regimes,  
crazed ideas / crazed empires clash.

While there are wars there will be refugees  
escaping cruel insanity, they  
risk all for Peace and a decent life.

*And: For those who've come across the seas  
We've boundless plains to share. Remember?*

## Ahmed

Peter Boyle

Rocking awkward in the small chair  
like a giant stranded in a doll's house,  
each day he comes to class to be retrained,  
this young man who might be fifteen, might be twenty four.  
'I sit for five minutes, then I have to stand  
and move about, or my fists  
keep feeling like they have to punch out hard –  
that's how it's always been:  
why am I like that?'  
On his head his baseball cap  
sits neither forwards nor backwards  
but tilted sideways.  
His innocence steps out cautiously to gaze around  
while on the desk his hands  
all by themselves arrange and rearrange  
pens, a mobile phone, some crisps for lunch,  
a folder of lined pages.  
'My parents want me to go to uni,  
be a doctor or lawyer, join the police force,  
shit like that –  
just normal things like other parents.  
So why does everybody hate us?'  
And day after day he comes back  
to tilt again at this bizarre tournament  
of words and numbers.  
Despite everything he's there again  
each five minutes at the desk  
writing the world.

## **Alien Flame**

Anna Couani

sparks in an unknown wind  
a faint lonely flame  
a small alien flame of life  
memories and dreams  
strong and fearless  
the ashes of memory that grind the heart  
vague shreds flutter

a century that is falling to pieces  
the shadows come  
the flapping of wings  
a strange room, night  
outside like remote drums the monotonous  
beating of the rain  
a hut and a little light on the verge of chaos  
a small fire in a meaningless wilderness

an unknown face towards  
which to speak  
'before whom shall the drama be enacted?  
we, the only witness of ourselves'

there are people everywhere  
who belong somewhere  
ghosts  
the city of dreams  
quietly floating in the late moonlight

suddenly full of echoes  
postponement  
the bite of time slowly consuming  
a moment when colour fades and life turns grey

a head made of silver and sometimes a violin  
an exile from the safe gardens of the past

Note: This poem is a collage of butchered lines from the 1945 novel *Arc de Triomphe* by Erich Maria Remarque about refugees in Paris and from the poem *Coming Home* by Antigone Kefala

## **The Answer**

*After Amin Palangi's Love Marriage in Kabul*

Eileen Chong

A boy perches on a roof in the semi-darkness.  
His eyes scan the horizon. The diminishing sunset  
illuminates the low buildings flanking  
the barren fields. The boy holds something  
metallic and long: I don't want it to be a gun

and I don't want him to be thinking of shooting  
someone. He shifts one hand to the end  
of the object – A click: piercing bright.  
Dah – dee – dah – I imagine it spells out  
HELLO or perhaps even I LOVE YOU

All is dark and getting darker  
and the shadows are creeping  
into the pits of the boy's face  
and suddenly we are aware  
of his death that waits alongside

his youth, like our death that waits  
and watches our days so patiently  
as we go about our tasks, ignoring  
its pervasive odour. His eyes gleam  
and he keeps pushing the button

on the torch, its white light piercing  
in its earnestness. The music plays  
and all is dark and we don't know  
what it is we are hoping for – until,  
in return, another light, winking

HELLO I LOVE YOU HELLO

and the boy's face breaks into a smile  
that broadens and fills up those pits  
with warmth and relief. We do not want  
tragedy, even if it is real. Here, take these tears.