



## Sampler:

## The China Shelf: *New Poems*

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## **Hiroshima/ Hanoi /Shangri La, Mon Amour in Singapore**

Hiroshima/ Hanoi /Shangri La, Mon Amour in Singapore,  
rhymed Tom Uren wearily as he woke as he had before  
at an Albanese keynote where mum's china shelf at war  
seemed high pitched, proud and fragile even more.

In the old Left they used to be achingly aware  
of the verb to be 'duchessed', lived with fear  
of the tiaras that Ramsay MacDonald wore  
on his belt as scalps that slowly tore  
out his liver like Prometheus. But here  
Albanese seemed duchessed to the core  
by seductive think-tanks, even beyond a score  
of dainty, dusting women. How could their tour,  
Tom was incredulous, have begun as it had now  
in Hiroshima? Hiroshima. Hiroshima. The power  
of the US megaphoned at China, here where  
Tom as a prisoner of war had seen the tiara  
of fire that what once was Nagasaki wore



with his own eyes, incandescent to care  
about avoidances. Anthony with his local beer  
and need to rescue someone anyone to spare  
his reputation about Assange had asked Hanoi  
to reprieve a couple of Aus mules and they did so  
with a courtesy the US did not need to show  
Australia, Ukraine or any other lover.  
Not even the courtesy of candour.  
Like a Marrickville massage parlour,  
Uren thought, there was no need to cover  
the desperation in diamonds. He knew  
though the china shelf in Albanese through  
and through after many decades, the glow  
of the treasures and the relics still somewhere  
in there at the moments the head would poise in air  
like that of an accomplished actor, the mouth low  
as a gash since the weight was stripped by car  
crash and so much Covid. Tom recognised with horror  
the pity he felt within because after long warfare



as a good man he could not feel anger.

The light in Singapore, Hanoi and Hiroshima

had the honey and the subtlety, sticky amber

of the beer Albanese now brought over.

Even Vietnam was too tactful to remember,

so Tom just held the glass and did not shiver,

non-drinker too long not to remain sober.

He said, 'They believe they can again dishonour

Vietnam by bribing it to go to war with China,

about some problems in the China Sea.' The other

drank the Asian light in sips too small to savour.

He said, 'Australia is engaged. Not as a spectator

or a commentator.' Tom recognised an orator,

practising his speech. Tom said, 'Dear old fellow,

for God's sake don't end with "Working to shape the future,

not waiting for the future to shape us", will you?'

but tiara light on the shelf glinted cosy as the beer,

and Albanese's lines were already there.



## **The China Shelf**

The china shelf glints in the sea's willow pattern.

The china shelf is where our subs will swim.

The china shelf is not our defensive position.

The china shelf swims blue under the ocean.

The china shelf swims like a submarine.

The china shelf is a mother in the brain.

The china shelf dusts its own each possession.

The china shelf holds bushmaster, sub, F16.

The china shelf boasts the first in figurine.

The china shelf girl twirls sumptuous to recline.

The china shelf has chinese lady, chinese lion.

The china shelf has all ancient horse to frighten.

The china shelf fills with gold, dog and dragon.

The china shelf is a dream alone made gone.

The china shelf glints in a sea's willow pattern.

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## **Gore Vidal Woke Up on Julian Assange's 52nd Birthday**

(The *Security State* volume is Vidal's *History of the National Security State*, which Assange held as he was dragged from the Embassy)

Gore Vidal woke up once more in Belmarsh Prison.

It was Julian Assange's fifty-second birthday and the cell was like a china shelf of few but guarded possessions, tea water, Vidal's own *Security State* volume, chocolate biscuits, hi-res photographs of children smiling in misty anxiety with their mother. All the cards, letters, small souvenirs, supporters' mail waited otherworldly in another room.

Vidal had felt dread at the request for all supporters to post birthday greetings to Assange, their time apparently no more use except for symbolism, Assange's time too short except for consolation.

Vidal was braced for an America again which was now he knew a bitter confused hell where Russia and China alternated as demons,



the only freedom left a choice between them.

He said, 'I chose a house in Italy where the wail

from the sea was as sumptuous as Montaigne's

belief that truth was essential to conversation.

It is only for you I'd return where I was born.'

'Would I like to meet Montaigne?' asked Julian.

'Not yet. Not yet. Not yet. I don't think he is well

informed on Videos, Collateral Damage, Operation

Crazy Horse's namesake helicopter with the gun.

I'll parcel them up under "Truth" for him.

Of course it is good to have the truth in common.'

No doubt there were new things in the mail collection,

Julian, thought Vidal, could keep polished here as charms

but the *Security State* was not in as good condition

as when Assange gripped it from the Embassy in his arms.

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## Poets and Spies

Let's say the china shelf in this poem represents  
just the antique memory full of madeleines  
and fantastical conceits of the sort  
17th century metaphysical poets  
adored. It doesn't *just* - a denial that John  
Tranter might have liked, but if it did  
the word 'Madeleine' in itself was one name  
the forged character played by Kim Novak  
in *Vertigo* assumed, and Tranter was fascinated  
often by *Vertigo*. Looking at the British flag  
on the projected submarine on *The China Shelf*  
cover, I am reminded that in one poem  
Tranter was uneasy that Basil Bunting  
the British poet, had worked for MI6,  
and was an agent in the overthrow of  
the democratically elected Mosaddegh  
Government in Iran, resulting in the Shah's





autocracy and then the current Muslim  
government in reaction. John must have thought  
the Empire's spying and poetry don't mix,  
but, anyway, when *The Age* was more itself,  
the poem was published by Gig and Jason.

On the bottom right of the china shelf sits  
on bridge Robert Burns who abhorred conflicts  
engendered by the Empire for wealth.

The figurine has a specially fine glaze,  
and Burns has a stern reflective expression.

Perhaps the function of the poet,  
as Burns recounted about the overheard caution  
'There's a child among you taking notes  
and, faith, he'll print it' is that the espionage  
in writing is too pure and dangerous  
to be contaminated by any secret passion,  
whether monetary, hungry, patriotic.

Did you know the rich blood red  
on the dresses of those great bright figurines



is made lustrous with real gold?

Tranter was also preoccupied when young  
by Rimbaud's need to magic gold from verse.

There are so many fragile possessions  
on this shelf, confronted by the F16s,  
smooth nuclear submarines, wheels on tracks  
of the camouflaged bushmasters, hunting.

If on this shelf there is left only one  
madeleine of Tranter, I would choose the Bunting.

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## **Brookings becomes a bush master**

Brookings loves the china shelf, although there are no  
pombats on it. There are cat groups and a curled one,  
some wild ducks and foo-dogs, babies, although  
none are as cute as Brookings in his pink and green  
coat, pretending to be a Bushmaster. I've told him  
my latest stories of Tritium-kun, the adventure-atom  
the Japanese have released from Fukushima, Koreans  
storing up on seafood and water, but he's stopped  
for a time playing sea creatures, even the navy seal.  
The bush master models on the shelf set him off,  
though, like a cross between a tank and 4-wheel  
drive, crashing squealing across the countryside,  
circling back for a cup of soy milk on my lap.  
The pedagogic genes in me are too strong  
for me not to explain, ' They are giving these  
to Ukraine but the older armed Boxer trucks  
they're selling to Germany are made



in Queensland, I think, to generate jobs, perhaps  
had something to do with Malcolm Turnbull  
and his idea to turn Australia into a great new  
arms manufacturer. At any rate, the scheme  
cost quite a lot of subsidy, but at last seems  
to have come in handy politically for Aukus.'

Brookings is allowed to fetch down the model  
from the shelf now and even to handle  
the tiny gun on top in his careful paws.

The gun was a red cross in one earlier photo,  
but there was general German interest for a time.

So Brookings constructs an automatic weapon  
out of hooked twigs and borrows a hair clip,  
goes lolloping out in his pointed headdress.

'The German re-armament program', I tell him,  
returning, 'is more expensive even than ours.

It is all supposed to be for the Ukraine or Taiwan  
or maybe to defend the China Sea and Japan  
which institutes like your namesake the Brookings



or the Council on Foreign Relations think will last  
apparently for the decades the Masters of Bush  
and Atlantic submarines are built.' It is all  
forever. I am very Summerhill about freedom  
to play in any role and anyway the small  
pombat is not my species to control, but  
I 'd not like to see him dress as a new fascist,  
try out such symbols since all symbols govern.  
He snuggles down beside me in bush dusk  
and I read his favourite *War and Peace* again.  
Is Natasha that lady on the shelf who dances?  
He thinks each ornament a future toy.  
His little paw in my hand is too soft to burrow.  
I do not tell him that they burn Tolstoy.

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## Seeing Blood

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle woke up in winter Brisbane  
for the conference of Wong, Marles, bloodless Blinken  
- child playmate of the Maxwells and Ghislaine -  
at the convivial meeting of Ausmin  
in the gaunt guise of Sherlock Holmes, his creation.  
Doyle was there because Wong had said she read him,  
and it seemed as if he might help release Julian  
Assange, if he could secure her attention.  
In life he had been successful in the freedom  
of at least two unjustly arrested men:  
Edaji, who was a shy half-Indian,  
accused in 1906 of animal mutilation,  
and Slater, a German Jew in prison  
for a beating murder he also hadn't done.  
Doyle financed his appeal and he won.  
It was partly because of all this that in 1907  
the Court of Criminal Appeal was begun,



so Doyle thought he might have weight with Wong.

As a doctor, too, he knew she had trained as one,

but abandoned her studies because of her long

distaste at the sight of blood. However, Holmes

was based, as she would have known,

on the methods of a professor of medicine,

and it was just such a succinct appeal to reason

Doyle hoped would succeed with her this time.

But she was smiling too much at the American

and Holmes in Doyle recognised the panic-stricken

bonhomie of a slowly set up victim,

whose manners are of foes who've already won.

In the press before her, she seemed in oblivion

to the sharp-eyed thin man with just one question:

Assange, Assange, Assange again,

perhaps in shock to the point of boredom.

If it was blood by which she was shaken,

Doyle thought, there might have been an objection

about her enthusiasm for the manufacture of arms,



facilitating their Chinese war to come,  
but he could have shown balance even then.  
He had once signed his own petition  
in favour of the first war with the Germans.  
But of course it was for some Germany reborn,  
partly, in Europe, even Pacific Ocean,  
that these new wars were starting to take form.  
The infinite Paperclip operation.  
Blinken made his merciless oration.  
Holmes' keen eyes were like eternity when  
Wong finally met them with quick glancing scorn  
she'd perfected for dealing with detraction.  
But then she glanced out from the situation,  
as if it had been mortal blood she'd seen  
from her inner reading, like an apparition.

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## AI

Let us consider in the quietness of a poem  
what is held on the soul's china shelf when  
it boasts both ornament and artifice in the name  
of memory, so that artificial intelligence is human  
as it always was, always a matter of the mind  
alternating stress and unstress to retain  
the remembered, so the minstrel saved a rhyme,  
or a contrast-dappled pattern,  
so the binary AI in all its convolutions  
has biology intrinsic to the bone.

Power fears AI because AI is human reason,  
subverts the polished objects on the horizon  
to hold them close and brittle and our own,  
no computer ever really alien,  
and the conspiracy that webs out and in  
from this is one to which a soul belongs.

Let us put on the shelf there with Robert Burns



on his bridge a figure of Imran Khan  
in his cell or the cell-held Julian,  
with their frail graveness in porcelain,  
the wall behind as dappled as a prison's.  
The internet as a china shelf has icons.  
AI has icons that outlast the skin.  
The poem and its binary metrical rhythms  
are the same as when a universe begins.

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## **Eleanor Roosevelt Woke Up in a New York Burger Bar**

Eleanor Roosevelt woke up in a New York burger  
bar where her friend Gore Vidal had once  
learned of her death and, unusual for him,  
had wept. It was now 2023 and she still missed  
her Hillary a bit, but those pretty girls were killers  
and she had returned to the arms of Earl Miller,  
her old bodyguard, to longlost longfound Amelia,  
to Harry Hopkins, to longloyal Lorena,  
or even sometimes Franklin.

The waiter looked a little puzzled by this lady  
but recovered at the money on the red and white  
check tablecloth. There was always ample cash to gather  
in Theme Park Nirvana, to ease the souls of those  
still financially anxious. She was not nervy  
but was used to some money in her wallet.  
She was also never a hamburger  
person but ordered a soup and a sweet:



creamy tomato and then New York cheesecake  
which had a sort of cherry jam on top,  
all on big white china, with a hermitage.  
She had chosen this place because of Gore,  
who had chosen to be, admirably,  
Assange's guardian angel: 'My dear,  
what we won't do for our readers'  
but the ambience was still 19th century, reminded  
her of her mad Uncle Teddy. In *Arsenic*  
*and Old Lace*, the brother lunatic  
who thinks he's him at Cuba's Kettle Hill  
and runs up the basement stairs  
roaring 'Charge!' had got him pretty right,  
she remembered. And this was the start  
of all the wild nonsense about Empire  
and American Rules Based Order, already  
ridiculed so dryly by Mark Twain. New York -  
she saw floods rise outside - would never  
be older than that Teddy Bear century,



nor might this country, where once Uncle Theodore  
sailed in his Great White Fleet, with his Nobel  
Peace Prize, his compulsion for war-glory.  
She thought: halfway up that crazy hill  
his horse got all snared in the barbed wire,  
but he staggered on foot to newspaper victory.  
The cheesecake was traditional but tasty,  
on its simple solid crockery. And she  
didn't know who'd enter that dated door  
from the skyscraper street, whether Theodore  
or Gore, or even Teddy's poor pony, maybe  
with Harrison Ford in saddle. Her shrewd shiraz  
sipped vintage as the doorway rained down empty.

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## Diary Poem: Uses of Chinese Ghosts

Recently when Timor-Leste's José Ramos-Horta  
wrote on Australian anger at his agreement with China,  
he described 'Imagined Chinese ghosts in Australia  
mainstream and rightwing media.' However,  
the use of the metaphor is one I'd like consider  
as much for its cultural perceptions and power.

When I once wrote about George and Clare  
adventuring in Beijing, I made quite sure  
that Jeffreys' favourite Chinese movie ever  
was the indelible *Fourteenth Daughter*  
*of the Hsin Family*, in which a traveller  
is too uneasy at the evening's spectres,  
stays at a gentleman's house for shelter,  
hearing a sad ghost story there  
in which a young man was bereft forever  
of his young ghost wife because he could never  
behave with enough integrity to keep her.



Asked what he did then, the host-narrator  
says: just missed her by day and by hour,  
as that man is he and he still grieves there.

The conclusion is that there are things to fear  
much worse than ghosts or foxes. Moreover,  
in the Beijing poem I could a little explore  
China's legends long in supernature  
and in so much of their silk crisp literature  
but what does it mean a Chinese ghost to Canberra?

Disingenuously, the wily Ramos-Horta  
explained Australian Intelligence was aware  
that there was meant to be no threat of war  
in East Timor's pact with China,  
not mentioning that Australia's phantom terror  
is at the ghostly aspect of the power:  
the peaceful mist that flows under its door.

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## **As real as wine**

After the car accident, the numbing divorce,  
Pickering's brothel jokes, the gifts of Alan Joyce,  
and Covid at least twice, the billions promised  
for Atlantic submarines and planes may have seemed  
as unreal to Albanese as the fall in Treasury Bonds  
and rise in debt may seem to Washington -  
just part of a great intoxication that the Brics  
are lifting their skirts discreetly to avoid.

That might be why Albanese is delighted  
to have possibly saved millions in negotiation  
before his insouciant Beijing visit  
persuading China to untariff Australian wine.

In the warm glass where the bracken-dry  
red is as succulent as chocolate,  
millions are as real as the surge  
in saning serotonin for the veins,  
while the billions float outside the room like death,  
too easy to maneuver to exist,  
as unseen as the Pacific where he flies.





## Picnic

Impressed by the recent celebrations to commemorate  
Martin Johnston and Charmian Clift, including by  
seaside picnics, I like to imagine Martin himself  
and his mother Charmian at a picnic like that,  
stretched out on a spring cliff, the new breeze  
restoring salty rooms to salty childhood. Spread  
out before them on the checkered cloth, like  
pieces of practical china are the objects  
of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights  
as conceived by Eleanor Roosevelt, and they  
comfort each other about the latest  
terrors like the Siege of Gaza, which  
they know they have the courage to oppose  
as they always did when things seemed dangerous,  
when the Vietnam War or the Colonels in Greece  
were seen as necessary by our Government,  
that which now never changes and currently



here fills them with horror at its need  
for war with China, U.S. blackmail and bribery.  
There is always something blue and white and Greek  
about a picnic, though, democratic and ancient.  
Martin observed, to amuse his mother:  
Jim Cairns when vulnerable to blackmail  
at least had the courage to declare: I love  
Juni Morosi, ended up on the front page  
of all the tabloids trying to convert them  
to reading Wilhelm Reich. When Whitlam  
was later actually coupé, Martin returned  
briefly to Greece in private protest, but  
exile only works for people like James Joyce  
who embody their country anyway.  
And now Charmian is his country as they sit  
alone together with their rare shy grins,  
their half finished sentences for empathy,  
enjoying all the coruscating azure,  
the delicacy of the eternal crockery,



the winds that glimmered in with bread and wine,  
and the unexpected gift of the horizon.

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