

***Jennifer Maiden:
Excerpts from Selected Poems, 1967-2018:***

12 Poems from the 16 poem Gulf War sequence (1991)

George Jeffreys: Introduction
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***12 from the 16 poems of
Keeping the Lid On:
A Gulf War Retrospective***

***(written in 1991, first published in Southerly and later in Maiden's
Acoustic Shadow collection, Penguin, 1993. Broadcast on ABC radio
twice, the second time on the Eve of Bush Junior's 2003 war on Iraq)***

1. 'A Big Idea'
- President Bush on his New Order

The big sand is the place
for the big idea, and
for war's moonface. The sand
has a cinematic purity,
pocked



like a close-up of Richard Burton's face.
We can watch sand relaxedly
and simply, in victory, in
big raid-on-moonlight movies
for relief before we sleep.
And in this *fin de siecle*,
when death has to earn its keep
and we choose an active Hamlet,
the small sand is what we meet.

2. 'We Are Not That Cheap'

(-King Hussein, after President Bush threatened to stop Foreign Aid to Jordan, for criticising the U.S. in the Gulf War, 11/2/91.)

Like most of us, I fear my price is low:
that when they hoist pay packets on the pole
to flutter in a good march militaire,
I will just shrug and watch the Romans go -
admit they are accustomed to the role
and, anyway, the other side are there
to welcome them without apparent fear.
Like most of us, I fear honour's a dream
which rots when it is much in touch with tears
of sentiment, or privacy, or pain.
Still, honour of the intellect can seem
expensive, but less vulnerable to cares
about the aura of one's luck and name.
Like most of us, I understand both men
and understanding is the nerve which stirs
perhaps to rise responsible and blame
that secrecy we must quite welcome when
it saves us from a witness's grey shame,
and obscures any reason, should we try.
Like most of us, I fear my price is high.



3. Keeping the Lid On

It's important not to write or speak in rage
which will truss up the apter words
and the syntax which sharpens the skin.
But it's not a chess-like coolness which
we require, so much as the white-
jowled pit-eyed weariness once
of McCarthy in Chicago or, now, Arnett
in Baghdad. Having seen we must speak
but slowly and with an insensate hand
brushing our lips at times, and all
our reflexes slow with some
clear confirmation of futility: then
we still do what we can: one word
and then one more, forever framed
in a context which ignores, denies
our witness: this will work
if we not unclench one finger or expect
the power to be given us again.

5. Rations

Simone Weil made the point that men
and women would queue for hours for an egg
but not to save a life. What TV wrung
me most - apart from the Gulf War -
lately was the ancient, trembling face
of a Moscow woman whose fiercely saved
higher currency notes had just been
outlawed to serve some higher cause.

I thought:
sanctions always do work, because
eggs give us purpose, reassuring
us that our mother is still here,
at the day's end, and sane beyond meaning



6. The Journalist

27/2/ 91

Sometimes, she wonders if the job
in PR would have been better, but
they don't give a by-line to cadets.

At the cafe, she still sits
apart from older journalists,
who drink - while she drinks
coffee, lots and lots
of clarifying caffeine, but
she makes sure that she does take
decaf, if not often.

She sips the afternoon, watching
CNN on the wall. She likes
the drumroll, at the ads.

It gives her energy, and makes
her feel part of something
happening, just like
when they let her do little things
on disposable nappies, or smokes.

She doesn't smoke, unlike
the older journos, who leave
their tables smelling acrid.

Mainly, they're men who did not write
exposures of Vietnam, Pol Pot,
and so react with irony and heat
if she shows even minimal distaste
for this war. So she does not.

The coffee remembers how she read
Camus for her B.A.: something
like: 'It will always be too late,
thank God.' She stirs herself
and the coffee, thinks perhaps
the PR job might not have meant
this much passive smoking.



7. Miniatures

It is interesting to see
in the Art Gallery, how
much Monet's seas
are like his waterlilies:
the same sumptuous, pastel ruffles,
which still seem soft but cause
fingertips to dream of fish scales,
or the bearded feel from snow.
It is true that in war
we want the miniature focus,
a camera small enough
not to show a mad wind blow,
but reveal the serene molecule -
its tiny crimps and pleats -
calm as a helix, floating through
our heart's brittle holes, when each
sea seems a waterlily, each
lily a sea of peace.

8. The Road

(compared by one U.S. military spokesman to
'the Pentagon car park at going-home time')

It has a name - already infamous -
in Arabic, which I don't want to know,
although in coming months no doubt I will.
I've dreaded writing about it, but
I knew that it would press
like a boil of pus until the words
came out. I will retreat
into an image which for me
is safe because the animals
in it are still alive: a cage
with a pyramid of terrified



wild kittens which I extricated,
tamed. The old image of pigs
mounting each other at
an abattoir recurs, but that's
too blunted and inadequate to show
170ks of road, bombed days
and days beyond decision to retreat,
stalled cars and wild trucks outstretched
six abreast in the black sand,
between merciless horizons.
In time I hope it will become
a hackneyed phrase, with which we
prevent some lies again.

 In the meantime, I have heard
a rumour that we have to leave the city.
I snatch a sequinned dress
for my wife from a shop window.
I think that I remember how
to drive and I have stolen
some Prince's confiscated Ford, because
my feet can't cross to home
in time... they say that time
is running out for us. Ahead,
There is nothing but metal and blood.
Some are burnt up, some are intact
enough for me to recognise their wounds.

 And there are planes
in squadrons coming at me from
both sides of the road - there seems
no difference here between the land and sky.

 My car
is off the road and screams and I still try
to overtake the convoys of the dead.



11. White Flags

The point is sometimes made that the Surrealists were reacting against World War One, and trying to create a peaceful perfection in shape and colour. Perhaps the order in their geometries is still too physical to be abstract, but the idea seems useful, since they are extremely tidy.

As Ronald Blythe observed, there is one sort of Socialism which is really merely an obsession with tidiness. But bold colours, which sing across the room like stars, do compensate for that. It is the white squares and rectangles, however, which stay in the mind much longer growing stronger then much stronger to the power of emptiness.

12. Dodge

(‘They were just trying to get the hell out of Dodge’
- US soldier looking at the dead on the Basra Road)

The strongest thing
in this has always been
repatriation, been
the right to go home again,
beyond
the right to truth or breath.

This
supercedes the image
of a bird in oil



and is not
about guns or gold,
no longer even
about fiery pride,
or long
plotting, long
resentment
bursting out at last in death.

Most of these, out West,
were the crowd at the gunfight
who watched from
the windows, or carried
their rifles barrel-down,
 unless
the deputy was there,
 and then
would echo his distress,
 always
a little unpredictable,
nervous, and a little
unsure about the facts.

It would be wrong,
though, to patronise
what is framed here
and dignified -
a corpse-hand, half-curved, and half
childlike,
 half black, or one
frail stranger sprawled face-down,
 his leg
tucked out for walking back.



13. Measurement

There is not
the kind nod now which ended
many squabbles on the hearth.

The risk
now offered is not measured,
and perhaps
there's that
to be said for the decade:
it offers
true scope for the dissident heart.

15. Grammar

Sibilants curl, succulent
on the sweet part of the tongue.

Even before he
opposed the Gulf War, I could agree
with Chomsky that grammar
was first and physical, as

irreversible
and subtle as a taste-bud, and
as bowel-deep as passion. So
even Chaos flows out in order
we are told:

like buds on a branch,
this way.

The endless pattern guarantees
no apple bloom the same. For a man
with that belief, hope might not be
so dangerous and so false,
so fiery.

The infinitives and conjunctions in
this foreign language stay.



16. Premature Burial

(13/9/91. On the 6-month-delayed news item that the U.S. buried thousands of Iraqis alive in the sand with tanks at the start of the Land War)

We've buried the war. It always was
bad taste to mention it, even
when it happened, unless one
made jokes about Saddam or CNN.
We've buried the war. It always was
a matter of a soldier in the sand,
on his belly, not believing where he was
and seeing a tank as big as the U.S.
- whose movies he loves, where his cousin
still lives - arrive on top of him and take
his air, his air, and fill his lungs with earth.
We've buried the war. It always was
a suffocated mouth, a word not said.
Before the Land War, the Republican Guard
in their bunkers choked on sand bombed down
ventilation shafts. The children
Smart-bombed to bones in Baghdad suffered less.
We've buried the war. It always was
something the good journalist expects
who knows his side will win, who does
understand the wisdom in delay, that good
journalist who always felt a bit
cheated that we lost in Vietnam, who has
now found how easy patriotism is
when you bury the war in you, which always was:
how easily that seems to let you breathe.



George Jeffreys: Introduction

George & Clare Do New York

There had been odd intimations all day. About 8p.m., Sydneytime on September 11, I was chatting to my friend Chris Farmer on the phone. After describing some strange encounters and vibes over the past twelve hours, we decided they word for that day was 'weird'. As we finished talking, he suddenly added, 'And the weird hasn't stopped yet.'

He was right. Thinking to sane up and relax, my daughter and I decided on impulse about 11 p.m. to watch a Happy Family Reunion (Taylor is finally unchained from the mantelpiece) we'd taped on The Bold and the Beautiful. We'd not watched much frothy TV for ages. The first channel was Channel 2. What seemed to be an old tall building was being demolished in morning light in an untidy grey cloud of concrete. A sight many find inexplicably fascinating, as I remarked to Katharine, which was why I supposed it was on the news. At the same time, she glanced vaguely at the screen and said, 'It looks like a beautiful sunrise...no, wait, it's a smog factory...' We switched up through the channels to the shopping and the weather: on the way up, the dull demolition footage was on CNN as well, and I said, 'There's that building again,' more puzzled. This time, it had 'LIVE' on it and was being treated as Breaking News. One realised that the two planes had hit the Trade Centre. The second tower still stood. Soon, it fell.

For hours, the pressure of events (in my old Problem of Evil phrase, 'the drug of immediacy') anaesthetised the human context with adrenalin. A plane crashed, part of the Pentagon burned. One waited for the next pyrotechnic. But then before dawn the trochaic falling effect of the unexpurgated commentary contained names and descriptions such as that of a lady in a black suit who was now 'encrusting the pavement'.

By 1a.m., my daughter had been on the internet checking the welfare of her young New York instant messenger friends, to be reassured over the next few hours that they were still okay. Then she became horrified at all the visuals of falling people. She finally managed to sleep after the sun rose.



The part of my brain that provides new things was often inaccessible about September 11. Then driving along the Monaro and watching the tumbling circus of clouds one day, I thought: what are George and Clare thinking? George and Clare are characters from my second novel, Play With Knives and my later notoriously unpublished novel Complicity, or The Blood Judge. George Jeffreys is a Probation Officer turned Human Rights investigator; also a true descendant of his namesake, the Hanging Judge at the Monmouth Assizes. Clare is his former Probation client and sometime lover (George has acute ethical awareness but relative ethics) who as a nine-year-old child murdered her three younger siblings. The two could clearly do New York and in the process, with the freedom of fiction, the horror-inhibited portions of my mind might speak. This also made sense since the almost universal response to September 11 was that it seemed like fiction. To enter and use that response rather than resist it might have a particular value...but I needed incentive.

At a Varuna launching, Ian Syson discussed a possible September 11 Overland with me. Later, I remembered George and Clare and sent him a note. He responded with a request for both George and Clare and my own voice to context them. I have always agreed with Freud that the imagination is bisexual. It seems to me that you achieve a clearer view when you let the two sides talk to each other. Hence George and Clare:

New York didn't look like Beirut, just itself under siege. But such violent sieges and occupations always bring out the essence of a city. Freeze it into disparate shadows and encounters in which you can say: yes, I knew that's what it was all the time.

Clare wasn't lost in it for long - but then she wasn't lost at all, only to me, as always. I walked as casually as I could through streets in which crowds were still herding like uneasy cattle. They were a little too close together, a bit too polite and anxious to please. Clare had been closer to the Towers than I. I'd been at a UN Human Rights meeting. No one in Security there had



reacted instantly, as far as I'd seen. The barricades were just going up as I left.

From the UN, I tried to remember the way to Liberty Plaza, where Clare had been going to a Medical Rights for Women Workers meeting. And where the smoke was, but still high up, so you couldn't see what caused it. I sprinted south on 1st Avenue to 23rd Street. The buses were still running and I caught the Hudson bus.

Walking south, one realised eventually that one was breathing concrete talcum and that the light, whilst there, had a feathery, tuft-like, uneven quality. Had there been noise? Afterwards, there were rumblings and crashings on the news, but I don't remember noise. Maybe noise did not exist in this special, grim dimension. The dimension was becoming grimmer as I walked. People were gathering, covered in dust and ash, their grey out-lines reminding me of Pompeii, or something Eugene McCarthy had said, staring down from his hotel room at the Chicago Riots, that it was 'like a ballet of purgatory'. It was like a great ballet, too, in that all movements seemed to exist for themselves, like those of animals, with no analogous meaning.

If Clare's prematurely white hair and skin were a biological attempt at anonymity, she had achieved it now. As she walked towards me, I only recognised her, by those strange, dark blue, Coppelia eyes of hers. Even her eyelashes were clogged and ashen. She said nothing: not 'I'm alright', not anything, and neither did I, but a cop was urging, 'Run north. Get out of here as quickly as possible. Run north...!', so we gathered up a limping librarian and ran north until there was no more falling debris. We left him at a café in front of CNN. We walked slowly and for a very long time to the apartment we were renting in Greenwich Village, on 13th Street between 5th and 6th Avenue. It was high up and from the corner of a window we could see at times the new ruins burning in their fumid gap.

In bed, she said...it seems like a set-piece phrase, but it was in bed that Clare, who had become quite extremist lately, did say, 'They still won't understand, of course, why this has happened.'



Many years ago, when I was a probation officer, and she a stimulus-response conditioned adolescent in prison, she had developed a habit of asking and analysing what 'they' wanted, and I had accepted her terminology. Now 'they' seemed to have expanded to all the larger forces at work in the world. As sometimes, I realised, 'they' had for me, too. Depersonalisation always invades you long before you can name it.

I said, 'But anyone who analyses why things like this happen is accused of blaming the victim. I've never heard you blame a victim before.' Indeed she had never blamed her own victims. She argued, 'No one ever really blames the victim. It's not about blame, it's just about tasting blood. Both revenge and blaming the victim are about having tasted the blood. And anyway you could just as easily say all those poor people down there were victims of the American Government. What power did they really have over it, and were they ever really warned about what sort of direct revenge its targets were capable of?'

I considered, 'George Orwell used to argue that things like the London Blitz were good because the public realised that they weren't immune to what happened to soldiers and would be less jingoistic about unnecessary warfare.'

'But it won't sink in. And their logic always comes unstuck on the suicide bombing thing: they can only see the perpetrator in terms of a bad person and they can't see a bad person as being brave. And even more, they have to be able to punish a bad person: being bad is about retribution, about punishment and the death penalty. You have to be able to punish the bad person, otherwise nothing makes sense to them. It's vital to their sanity, their sense of the logic of time.'

I asked, 'So if the bad person is dead, they have to find another one to punish?'

She asked, 'Who?'

I thought about it, 'The only vulnerable Big Bad with a big enough PR machine at the moment is Bin Laden, so I guess it's him.' I sighed, 'Darling, they're about to invade Afghanistan.' But she said, 'I don't object to that. I don't like the Taliban.'



She'd become an extreme feminist, too. Something, perhaps, about our time with the Bedouin...

I said, 'If it stops there. But they need to see an execution, and war isn't about that: it's about war and it always disappoints you.'

Downstairs, in an unbearable synthetic stench, the ballet of purgatory continued in slow motion. Slow, reverential, archaeological digging. Slow gaping machines. Slow crowds in slow grief. Everyone in stylised formation. And insidious around the site lights, the other light like that of a bushfire, rosily oozing its own round clouds. There were similar images on the TV, plus close-ups of victims, rescuers and rubble. I knew that soon it would be hard for my memory to distinguish the real and the electronic view. I had blocked successfully on the anguish. I found I had to re-outline it bit by bit in my head by superimposing Clare's delicate, fragile face and body carefully on that of the victims. Then the anguish hit like a passenger jet. I blocked, blocked, blocked again.

Leaving George to re-block, I wondered as we all do: How dumb is W?

Earlier, I had suggested to a liberal Jewish New York friend (who had been advising me on the city's urban geography) that of course Bush might not actually be that stupid, just pretending to be so in order to appeal to his domestic voters. She had agreed, whilst still obviously favouring the former explanation. I wondered what George would think of W:

New York blacked-out, as it was to our north, had the unnatural, secret air of a violently unconscious human being. Sliding her silken face onto my pillow and whispering in some mockery of girlish excitement, Clare said, 'Tell me how George Bush thinks.'

We'd just seen his 'smoking holes' speech on TV. I knew I had perceived something extra about him, hoping no one would really ask me what.

'Well,' I said, recognising in my voice a judicial authority which could only be genetic, since I didn't have the slightest sense of personal confidence about it, 'he's not a dry drunk like most



Australian Prime Ministers, even though his history might suggest that. He's not dyslexic either. Although he pretends to be since it's really his only pitch to liberal sympathies. He's obsessed with the need for punishment and revenge because he doesn't really feel that need. This means he has killed often for no passionate reason. He does have a compulsive-obsessive need to finish things, like the Gulf War, or to win an election. Killing in revenge is a form of that, but like any other compulsion-obsession it feels completely inauthentic to the person who suffers it. Hence the twitch - it's partly just the twitch of a bird of prey's beak, of course - the thing about being bred to power - but it's also guilt. You can see the guilt in his eyes and hear it in his voice. In those fraternal, ingratiating rhythms, and the small, flat breaths between the lines...'

She interrupted dejectedly, perhaps with auto-biography, 'Guilt isn't good in a violent situation. You keep on repeating the thing you're guilty about. It's as if that will make it real enough to solve something...'

'...Yes, and of course the guilt is also for doing what he's told. To get elected, not knowing all the implications, whether or not he's all that bright. And guilt for knowing, having known that things like September 11 would happen and that no amount of his sort of power - no amount of lethal injections - will ever have any effect on that.'

'So you think there's another sort of power he could exercise that would affect that? I mean I suppose you're thinking of Adlai Stevenson again...' (She always liked my old quote from Stevenson that 'powerlessness corrupts and absolute powerlessness corrupts absolutely'.)

I agreed, 'Well, yeah, but he's been cossetted beyond any spontaneity. He has the intelligence to know he's programmed but not the intelligence to escape.'

She decided dismissively, 'That would fit with him not being able to give or receive mercy. Spontaneity is necessary to mercy, I think.' She looked into my eyes in the phantom light from the window and the TV screen. I realised she hadn't looked into my eyes like that for years. I would have liked to have said there



was new depth and subtlety, more humanity in her gaze. But of course it was still two brilliant deflecting topaz cabochons I saw. The eternal eyes of a Doer of Good Deeds, one way or another. I rolled her over onto my chest, tasted the mercy, the mercury of her silver hair, and whispered, 'And when you have been programmed by your punishment, you have no spontaneity and are not merciful.'

George seemed to me to be prepared for Afghanistan.

George Jeffreys: 1:

George Jeffreys Woke Up in Kabul

George Jeffreys woke up in Kabul.
George Bush Junior was on the TV, obsessed
as usual with Baghdad.

George Jeffreys hummed an old
border ballad which haunted him
often now: 'What's that
that hirples at my side?
The foe that you must fight, my Lord.
That rides as fast as I might ride?
The shadow of your might, my Lord.'
Was George Bush Junior mad?
A plausible US spokesman for one
of those countless right-wing thinktanks
argued on the BBC that W
only pretended to be mad, 'like Nixon',
to intimidate his foes. But
Nixon, thought Jeffreys, was mad,
surely? Is that the price perhaps
for pretending too long? Certainly
on the TV now, W
had the quality of an animal
pretending - as you can see animals
pretend when maintaining
uneasy pack position, and he had
an animal's absence of self-parody,
one lack



which Jeffreys (who had seen
Ronald Reagan) thought Reagan had not.

As with Alzheimer's itself,
there was some self-parody in Reagan.
None in Nixon. None in either Bush.

George Jeffreys looked out
at a paved alhambra of pain,
at the latticed dust of Kabul, which
looked back and pretended to be sane.

Orchards

*(Melissa Parkes' parents had an apple farm in WA,
Julie Bishop's a cherry farm in SA) 2015*

When she met the Christians Bishop had arrested
for protesting detention of refugees, Parke
wore a coat like apple blossom: pink,
white and green, translucently. Bishop
on the day the Bali two were transferred
to the death island wore a dress
the colour of cherry blossom, dark pink,
looked gaunt with anxiety. Politics
will pierce you with its empathy, if you
practise it successfully. Apple flowers
spread raggedly and openly, breeze
dapples through them. Cherry blossom
reblooms so densely, brilliantly that we
plant temples to ensure its resurrection.



Animism

(Julie Bishop has said she was inspired to enter politics by an eight-week Advanced Business Management Course at the Harvard School of Business)2015

The Harvard School of Business woke up next to Julie Bishop, as yet unused to his new incarnation as a human being, but she smiled too wearily and explained, 'When I was trying to save Chan and Sukumaran I became involved with Indonesia, found it more Animistic than Muslim, although of course trees and rocks and ancestors don't give money for education. We tried money for education, of course, but no one has more money for that than Riyadh. Would you like some coffee? I need some. I've just said we should "move on" from the deaths of those poor kids and their coffees aren't even back home yet - sorry, I meant "coffins".' Harvard thought if human meant coffee it wasn't too bad but Julie was a real human problem. He said, trying hard to justify his unexpected being, 'You don't have to move on from anything, except maybe back to that cherry orchard sometimes, angel: no one minds that you threatened consequences. You're scared that Market Forces did approve of Joko taking off the people's petrol subsidy so that it went up about thirty per cent, depending on Riyadh, but we coped with East Timor, still have them over - no joke - an oil barrel. There are always new arrangements. In fact, why would it matter if the whole Indonesian archipelago broke up? You are paying too much real cash to them to torture resistance in West Papua, and Aceh used your aid to establish sharia law. Why fret?' 'I thought,' said Julie, animate with coffee,



