

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

Part Two of The Problem of Evil from ***The Problem of Evil***
(Prism, 1975)

The Windward Side from ***For The Left Hand*** (South Head,
1981)

12 Poems from the 16 poem Gulf War sequence from ***Acoustic
Shadow*** (Penguin, 1991)

The Butler
The Case of the Pharaoh's Penis
from ***Mines*** (Paper Bark, 1999)

George Jeffreys: Introduction
George & Clare Do New York
George Jeffreys: 1:
George Jeffreys Woke Up in Kabul
from ***Friendly Fire*** (Giramondo, 2005)

Diary Poem: Uses of the Female Duet
Orchards
Animism
from ***The Fox Petition*** (Giramondo, 2015)



*From **The Problem of Evil***

Part Two

I'd give the names, but they
don't need to ask the names.
Graph-confidence is wearied
by old techniques of question:
I'm useless if I speak
to them, but silence
can still be re-employed if I return.
I'd give the names,
but they don't ask the names.
I test the brink of politesse, explain
'I haven't guts for active treachery:
the sweat of indecision stays about me.
My friends have always told me when I lie'

This, though, is still the tiny
ring of the arena,
& choppers turn outside.
Intent on lethargy,
the soldier overhears our interview.
Predictable at last, the M.I. offers
his hand-cupped match & roll-your-own to me.

Outside, the choppers climb

Smoke's taste

is saline, & it contradicts
anxiety. Her eyes
obsessive as opals, coil
arid in my memory. They parch
the patience from my trust.

Irritable, I glance

at, my hands for comfort.
I am numbed until alert
as a sacrifice ('be careful'...
says the lamb,
& leads us to the slaughter.)
Cul-de-sac. The floor
mottles like a carcass. Rooms, fanned



as polar as an abattoir,
freeze breath.

Outside - incendiary clouds -
grenades/ a helicopter
boils down to oily
hiccoughs of spray and blood.

My fingers, now unguarded,
clench, torturing the cushions,
& act out my impatience
which like a child's, pleads
pain-subdued to be 'outside, outside'

Lights program me my task
but, aiming from her absence,
the woman's hand is steady, pours
the gracecup of a death.

Outside in uniform revenge
the helicopters swarm

Half-absolving me, they teach
me of my 'conditioning'. The graphs
prove it by recording fear's
inadvertent reflex in my heart.
But since I'd learned before to speak
conjunctions with precision; hot
nonlexical agreements; hate
& all the asterisks which wink
starrily of Other Place,
so now at last their language serves me:
tailored to me like a home.
My voice explores unhurriedly
their new machine: its own.

Amused,
but drunk for sleep, she follows
the smoke-scald of her brain, maybe
defines me once again: a man
whose fingertips were always smudged
by the cinders of the rich -
who bit his fingers, laughed: now who,



bone-taut with plans, can gnaw, aloof,
the weakness at bone-marrow.

The radar-drifts abruptly
convulse into scintillas, sweep
each curtain of trees in shudders
naked as magnesium on fire.

She hides in webbing shadows,
slants the darkness like a mirror,
closer to her, to decide.

Desolate with confidence,
the days agree like bricks,
set thick in solid shelter,
& dried bland.
Clouds recreate the skin of fear
outside in sumptuous chaos.

& with a tic of secrecy
the M.I.'s finger curls
in superstitious elegance
from tea like clouded metal.
Involuntarily, my lips
will compound to a smile
& say 'situation ethics,'
as he nods. Co-operation.
'Works both ways.'

Erect, the multi-screens
still wall us in with visions,
&, near at first, explosions weld
the processed rooms together: limbs
of furniture spill, careless now,
as intimate as toys.

The nights are conversational.
Through flaccid plasma engines float
mutating on the dark.

Trussed by rugs a dead boy sweats
& gobbles for breath in his dream.
We squint against a perspex tube
at feathery intestines in his side



while I think of Rembrandt: 'so
immaculate that paint
& so like lard...'
my words enforce, anatomize
prolong their flippant safety...
perhaps his safety, too, & so
I justify the wait.

Inert,
the beats of time streak, won.
Projecting on the dark, I screen
the normal sex conventions. Fear
domesticates to farce again
&, doorway-framed, sleep's surge careers
across the void of glass, becomes
the insurrecting rain.



The Windward Side

This island has a windward side
walkless long & crossless wide
& winds across the cliff-face ride:

a woman's face

caved in with pride

that craves for every blow.

And here again beware - think how
the imposter is imposing now

as if she learnt to speak & grow

as children do

by rhyme almost

as if - before - she learnt to know

as children do

by lies, by what

she was obsessed to hide.

This island has a windward side
calloused by coral & gnawed by the tide
as grey as a volcano.



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.



The Butler

Australian diplomat at the time of Operation Desert Fox, December 1998

They don't understand that you grew up near the sea,
that blue indifferent organ, factory
washing up death constantly. The radio
you heard at school warned regularly
against diphtheria, polio. Child actors
with 1950s voices died slowly in great
pain and medical detail. Now you fear
AIDS and campaign against it, now
you fear mass destruction: germs
and the doubt-germs in your heart.

At last

now you have a police escort, but
you still fold your arms and glare, as if
that made father safe from mother.
They scold like a woman: the Russians,
the Chinese, only mothers are so concerned
about 'honour'. You know in your soul that germs
have no honour and that comfort
for the body is not just sweet but safe.
When the U.S. welcomed you it was not
about bribery but safety: you deeply understood
their long cold need to be safe: the years
and years of it when the sea threw up
face after face in the white dark
- enemy after enemy -
the long paralysis of night when you drowse
on a plane in a New York trenchcoat, which slicks
like a boy's sick snot under your thumbs,
as the lights
of Baghdad infect your window. You reject
the natural rhythms of peace, as you did at Bondi,
because
they are also the rhythms of death, not clean
enough: the invisible germs which if you cease
counting your heart will stop in service, lost
in strange sea-sounds from planes and crowds and bodies



The Case of the Pharaoh's Penis

My amber-eyed cousin walks on the beach
at Norah Head with me. My own eyes
have tiger-spirals in their brown. She talks
about taking her working-class school class
to the Museum, that all the kids discussed
was how the mummy's hands were crossed
over his penis. I thought the conversation odd
because the night before I had
been reading how King Tut's cadaver
these days is sans the penis anyway.
God knows who has it. He was buried, of course,
without a sternum, chest full of amber resin,
perhaps the result of a chariot fall.
But in the famous photograph, he lies
re-assembled after autopsy, by Carter
who had actually left him out in the sun
for a couple of days to try to melt off all
the resin, which had stuck him to his coffin.
Apparently, his incinerated aspect
is due to this, not the aging process.
When first revealed, he would have looked
quite nice: much more like his mummy-case
in which the pallid gold was carefully hued
to hint at death's virile calmness.
But even after barbecue by Carter,
the Pharaoh's penis was quite clearly there:
not large or thick but firm and friendly-looking.
When he was last disinterred, however,
it was gone. I think Dot Porter
might combine her three best subjects: murder
stories in verse, sharp sex and ancient Egypt
to explicate the mystery someday. In Akhenaten,
her characters are true to Ancient Egypt
in that they are like shrewd familiar children
as sensual as cats with no abstraction,
or pity for their prey. Dot said
my *A.B.R.* Akhenaten essay
is the one the universities prefer! On the phone,
discussing amber trees, Chris Farmer the painter



used the phrase 'the luxury of the process',
and I pounced on it, 'Yes!'. The cat-caught concept
reminded me of all the great embalming
(which sand did for the peasants, and much
faster), that my daughter sings of in her Egypt project
'Fair go, Pharaoh', making gold
life-masks and pyramids, 'It's not funny,
tell King Tut I want my Mummy...'. The lapis
lazuli luxury is in the process
itself, the outline of the eyes
on his wide, smooth-lipped sarcophagus.
A penis is always first person.
Dot Porter wrote Akhenaten
in his own person, and earlier my three
novels about men were by them, causing
much publisher distaste (and still does).
The penis of Tutankhamun
took away my residual horror
at comic curses and necrophilia. My cousin
discusses the Maiden Family Reunion
that night over glasses of red, confirms
my knowledge of our Indian blood. Perhaps
embellished a little, my ancestor,
a Hindu princess, eloped with a British
civil servant and both were undone,
disinherited by their kin. Well done,
I thought, and drank to them. The Maidens
always drank red. My grandfather
was an amber-skinned old man, a thin
headmaster with a hawk-nosed, deep-eyed face,
devoted to the Gould League, ornithology.
In his eighties, before dying, he first found
The Arabian Nights, asked my father
'Have you *read* this, Alf?' in wonder,
as if fucking were the finest finch of all.
Scheherazade, I think and imagine his wiry finger
caressing down the page, his eyes
hardly daring to flicker, as if something
precious on a farther branch might fly.
Apart from her burgeoning necklace



of Egyptian charms, my daughter's new ring
is blonde amber in silver, and full
of graceful embalmed insects, wings.
If you look in my eyes, they are such chiaroscuro.
The Indian amber is there, the stealthy princess
in her inky cloak slips through her golden window. First
person is always vagina, clitoris. Some
woman friend of a quick Cairo curator
still has King Tut's penis in her wallet,
with a residue of amber,
shrugs, 'Maybe he'd have liked that'.
And she knows
it brings her luck if carried on her heart.



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, Coppelias 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 hircles at my side?'



Diary Poem: Uses of the Female Duet

Considering requests to write a poem about Julie Bishop, I wondered who she felt had been her inspiration but found out she'd stated she was inspired to enter politics, give up a wealthy legal career, by an eight-week Advanced Management Program for Senior Managers at Harvard School of Business in Boston. I thought I can't write: 'The Harvard School of Business woke up next to Julie Bishop', but maybe I should have. Would it wake up in Canberra or Adelaide? She grew up on a cherry farm in the Hills. That sounds a bit more like poetry, except the Hills worry me since that Boarding Kennel there let their animals burn. My nose twitches at the smell of kindled cherries. Let's begin with her in Canberra, then forget the passport scandal in which she said it was okay for Israel to forge Australian passports because we do that sort of thing as well, forget her having defended asbestos bosses against sick workers, forget as Education Minister that she almost said State Education was run by Chairman Mao, tried to introduce teacher performance pay. When I last saw her on TV, she seemed less smooth, more wistful and fragile, less aloof. If I were going to crystallise her performance now I would simply give you a picture of the limpid respect on her face the day Tanya Plibersek described in terms which were sheer Clarence Darrow the way her husband had reformed from the heroin trade, become a public servant in education, and given her three children, how her brother was murdered in Port Moresby, so she understood how hard it is to desire mercy. Bishop too had just made a speech for life for the Bali



prisoners and the two women stood on either side of the Parliamentary table, linked in cadence by their purity of purpose.

It reminded me of the duet from *Norma*: when Rosa Ponselle and Marion Telva sang it, they maintained the difficult rhythms by holding hands as they sang to steady and inform their voices' passion. There was never a more persuasive melody than that duet by two women. On YouTube, it is Sporty Spice's 40th birthday. Emma - formerly Baby - sings a duet with Sporty, exclaiming, 'I love this girl!', the whole robust with convincing affection. When Katharine was ten or twelve, the songs she sang and danced with each friend were often 'Stop Right Now', or 'Two Become One', duets with enthusiastic emphasis. At the time, someones Big Sister said the Spice Girls' Big Shoes and short skirts were tarty, but I thought needing a person 'with a human touch' an acceptable priority for women, likewise the recurrent theme that a relationship be on the woman's terms or not at all. Not to forget, as well: their bouncy loyalty to other women had significance. To signify, transcend commercial constraints, was a small victory quite obvious to children. 'I thought you might like to hear a man's voice,' Liberal Senator O'Sullivan roared across the Main Committee Room in Canberra to the Chair, Liberal Senator MacDonald, as Penny Wong went on questioning Gillian Triggs, the Human Rights Commission President about whether Brandis' Secretary of the Attorney General's Department had offered her a job as an inducement to leave her post and therefore not present her report on refugee children in detention.

Triggs



said she was shocked by the offer, stopped
short of legal accusation, but left
it open for the Labor opposition to refer
the matter to the Federal Police. They did. I
wonder if shock helps the female duet,
in that its tone is mother-powerful, hid
in magistrate-black, glove-white, gone quiet
as if

that helps in digesting the Black Cloud.
There is a form of domestic argument
that deliberately lies on smaller points, entraps
the woman to refute them, miss the larger
issues of untruth. Katharine and I
have always called this being quite set-up
'to argue like a girl', and we avoid it
as much as possible, but Liberal senators
seem gloriously adept at the tactic. In
the Triggs event, the ATD Secretary was
accidentally misnamed by Wong as 'Moriarty',
not Moraitis, and if that mistake was apt,
she still apologised that she had read too much
Conan Doyle. Said Senator MacDonald. ' I
am glad I did not say that. I would have
been accused of other things, but anyhow, carry
on'. Wong asked, 'Reading the Classics?', but
Brandis added, 'You might have been
accused of sexism, Senator MacDonald.' Wong
asked 'How is reading Conan Doyle sexist?',
almost caught in an obvious trap, but didn't swerve.
I wondered myself, though, would it serve
me here to ask if Conan Doyle is sexist. 'Moriarty'
is what Katharine and I called a neighbour's cat
who would watch her steadily for hours
in a black reverie after she imitated a cat
and charged at it to keep it from self-harm
on the mad plants and pots on our terrace. We knew
it still thought she was another cat. It thought:
'She walks on two legs and the humans accept
her as one of them.' It wanted that power
terribly for itself and studied her



for clues to the magic process. 'The Woman',
to Sherlock Holmes is clever Irene Adler, not grave
Queen Victoria or a demoness. His emotions
for her are as much as he can do, in
the romance position, a deficit Doyle
sees perhaps as sad as his cocaine addiction.
Holmes is pathetic in measure to heroic. This
is why Holmes stories survive when Bulldog Drummond
barked his last in the literary senate, long,
long ago. What survives in the Senate now
is the quiet questioning between Wong
and Triggs, that process which acquires
some police-importance Holmes would know
and recognise as worth the concentration.

On YouTube,

Joan Baez and Mary Travers still sing
'Lonesome Valley' in 1963, with over
246,000 views, 704 likes, 13 trolls and the bling
women thrilled by their own daring:
the lyrics at ready-for-anything Newport
aren't just existential, religious: 'No one
else can walk it for you', but instruct
hearers to join a union, picket, 'go down
to Mississippi', their uneasy/easy harmony
blends Mary's deeps and Joan's odd heights
in a way that probably did send some
to the union rep, the pavement and
deeper days in the deepest south.

In age, however,
do we all succumb to the softer
doss on a signposted left, welcome
Global Warming like a familiar
script for an Apocalypse we need
to hide our own in, keep the audience
close under our prised coats and not disperse
them out on the winds of caring? I can't
listen so much to their later solos, their so
vague, sure, sentimental meaning, lack
of detailed instruction.

Anyway, my favourite politician



now is Melissa Parke, particularly since she'd guts to sign the Fox Petition to allow some foxes desexed and vaccinated as pets, and said she wished they had that in WA. Her Facebook shows her with her pet Scotty, Haggis, but doesn't state Haggis' gender. Her duet here therefore must be with Jenny Macklin. In two photos, they address over 130 pensioners on Families and Payments. Parke has her arms in front of her, Macklin tends to have hers behind in royal style. Macklin is compact, squared, and Parke taller, rounded, but slender, her dress black and white without Macklin's grey. The pensioners are on small blue chairs, alarmed at the threat to their money, after Abbott's budget. Macklin and Parke have humour, composed mouths, composed hands, to look like good teachers or schoolgirls: honey smiles not a threat to any body's second biscuit, cup of tea. They make each other credible, which is any duet's requirement. Earlier, Parke questioned the metadata legislation, which Labor now supports, but she will often form internal opposition. Yesterday, in Parliament, she said, 'It is we the political class who should be ashamed of ourselves - all of us' about the attack on Triggs, and about Children in Detention. After the Bishop Plibersek duet, she made a reasoned legal speech against the death penalty as such and asked 'Why is it that blank bullets' are given to nine of the twelve firing squad members, so they don't know if it was them, if killing sits well with human values? All this in keeping with her work to build the UN Ethics Office. She drank the tea of Kevin Rudd with the first Rudd for the RSPCA, but perhaps the best



female duet for her would have been
Haggis, if a girl' as Parke does seem
devoted to the innocence in living.

My favourite politician
of all time is Charles Fox and indeed she
seems fitted above all I see to sign
that lonely Fox Petition.



Orchards

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

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)

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, and closing her eyes less often because behind her lids were the bullet-slumped bodies, 'Would just a string of islands give your forces



