

## Variegated, Fissiparous Animations: An Australian Writing Memoir

By Moya Costello

The space I usually dwell in is the back of my head, what poet Les Murray thought of as a dreaming space. Poet J. S. Harry wrote: “Living in-all-in your-head / is a kind of thistle madness.” An academic colleague once called me “an absent-minded professor.” My sisters thought I would never be a driver, as I’m too vague and distracted. “Reality escapes you,” my partner regularly declaims.

In my final year of primary school, I found pleasure in school compositions. They were a dreaming space for triggering memory, scrolling through narratives, initiating a meditation on observations, conjuring up identity and parlaying into an attempt at understanding the world. What was I reading? Perhaps *The Borrowers* series, *Wind in the Willows*, *Little Women*.

I was in my final year of secondary school when a nun (I was a Catholic school-girl) may have said to my mother, in my presence, that I was suited to journalism.

In my final year of high school, with its weighty exams of the Higher School Certificate, my mother believed I was having a nervous breakdown. And perhaps I was. She sent me on a holiday to a guest house near Sydney.



(“Nervous breakdowns” would flourish much later in my life, at moments of high stress: nascent in the proposed buying of my first property, then full-on with the death of my father, and, again, in having to leave “home” and move house interstate to new jobs—in academic positions teaching creative writing.)

While I don’t remember where the guest house was exactly, I knew, as a working-class kid,

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it was a middle-class establishment: the guests polite and reserved, in elegant, understated dress.

From that time of the guest-house holiday, I still have the journal with cream, blue-lined, sensuously smooth paper: the *Pencraft Australian Diary 1969, No. 14, One Day to a Page*. My father liked to write things down, and, with this gift, from his professional work in printing, he knew I did too. His gifts were usually freebies, or very cheap: “off the back of a truck.” My mother wrote letters.

I met two sisters at the guesthouse, one younger than me and one about my own age. Like Ratty and Mole, we row-boated on the river near the guesthouse:

New World!

I wish I was your old friend.

I do not want to deposit my rubbish on  
your banks.

You let me drift along your back,  
and you proclaim yourself in silence.

Loving water and detesting ugliness were instantiated in the journal as my writing themes and life values—they continue unabated.

That diary followed me into my years as an

undergraduate at Sydney University in therapeutic writing/wannabee-writer escapades. Much later I bought cheap journals in Chinatown, Sydney, hard-covered (one with embroidered silk) or soft (in coloured plastic or card, black, olive or ruby red).

The voices I heard throughout my university study of English Lit were in the Leavisite tradition: Hopkins, Yeats, Marvell, etc. Beautiful voices as they were, they weren’t mine. Not until my final year at university, in the early 1970s, did I hear my own voice. In the last year of my degree, Don Anderson taught contemporary American poetry, and Jim Tulip, Australian. A revolution in language had been flaring internationally: the vernacular overriding the formal, free verse substituting for traditional poetics forms, and the mundane overtaking grand content.

Certain lines of particular American poets from that university curriculum stay with me. James Wright’s, “A Blessing” opening:

Just off the highway to Rochester,  
Minnesota,  
Twilight bounds softly forth on the grass.

Robert Bly's "Hunting Pheasants in a Cornfield" ending:

I am happy in this ancient place,

And in the middle of "I Know a Man," Robert Creeley wrote:

the darkness sur-  
rounds us . . .

The technology of publication and printing was also in revolutionary flare. Small runs of paperbacks were easily and cheaply produced. The University of Queensland Press's choice of name for its ground-breaking series in the 1970s is telling: Paperback Poets. Harry's *The Deer Under the Skin* includes the poem "The What O'Clock," the opening lines of which I have also never forgotten:

A puffball on a slim green stem  
is more attached  
to earth than I . . .

On finishing teachers' college, after my university degree, I went to the country to teach English at Borrowa High School, not far from Canberra, Australia's capital, in the near-west of New South Wales. I now taught school composition to others. My interest in, and affinity with, print and publishing from my father's profession meant I threw myself enthusiastically

into co-publishing with students two editions of the school's magazine, *Canemumbola*, named in the language of the Indigenous Gandangara people of the Wiradjuri Nation.

But in 1975, pushed to leave Australia by an epiphany that I was unsuited to teaching teenagers (my own teenage years being too unresolvedly distressful), by the fall of the Gough Whitlam government (Labor to Liberal usurpation: its dismissal a famed event in Australian history), and by the need to partake in the traditional young antipodeans' European tour, I quit Australia for a time and took to keeping a travel journal.

On my return to Australia and during a period of unemployment, I wrote in my journal in 1977 what seems now like an arbitrary guideline for myself: if I hadn't published anything within two years, I'd give writing up as a serious venture. My poem, "Talking with J. M.," was published in 1979 in the Australian literary journal, *Luna*, run by a women's collective.

That poem came out of my stint in the Commonwealth Public Service as a clerk, as I struggled to find what kind of work I was suited to. That suitable work, I decided, was writing. I never cashed that \$5 first-publication cheque. Among the poets in that issue were Rosemary Dobson and Judith Rodriguez.

*Womanspeak* was also among feminist magazines coming-into-being in the late 1970s. My volunteer work for this Sydney journal entailed proofreading, writing, editing, laying out,

marketing and distribution. I took two buses to Rushcutters Bay, in Sydney's eastern suburbs—a lifestyle far away from Sydney's inner-west where I lived. In the flat, with its brilliant yacht-sprinkled water view, were a senior feminist and her print-publishing husband. They were retired, but not from left-wing activism.

I reviewed the Sydney Women Writers Workshop's first anthology, *No Regrets*, in *Womanspeak*, because I heard my voice, once again. It was 1980, at the third Sydney Festival, where the women held a reading. At the end of the Festival reading, I approached them to join the workshop. Pam Brown, Joanne Burns and Susan Hampton, all of whose work influenced my writing, had left the group by the time I came to the workshop meetings held in members' inner-city Sydney houses: Glebe, Redfern, Paddington. But Anna Couani was an original member and a mainstay. The Workshop was foundational to my writing education, well before creative writing entered the academy as a discipline in Australia. Couani and Barbara Brooks, in particular, became long-term writing friends. I read in later Workshop performances and published in their anthologies.

I went on to do more voluntary work in a variety of publications. I reviewed theatre for *Tribune* and co-laid out an issue of the *Movement against Uranium Mining* broadsheet. Later, I reviewed children's books for *Magpies* magazine.

These writing activities are shoots of the flying/embedding thistle-head seed.

In 1982, I moved, from Sydney again, to Melbourne, Victoria, to live for two years because of my partner's work. Robert Kenny, writer and publisher of another indie press, Rigmarole Books, had an office in the Melbourne suburb of Kensington. I assisted Kenny in a small way.

Rigmarole published Ania Walwicz's *Writing* in 1982. Walwicz read at readings curated by Berni Janssen and Jurate (Francesca) Sasnaitis, who also published, as Fillia Press, the literary journal *Syllable*, which published my work.

Writer and academic Anna Gibbs was at a Victorian university, Deakin, and, with Alison Tilson, co-edited the ground-breaking anthology, *Frictions*, also published in 1982 but by Sybylla Feminist Press. They accepted my writing and Gibbs remained a life-long writing companion, as she has for many women, particularly those writing the challenging experimental.

I began teaching writing to adults at Preston Technical and Further Education (TAFE), taking a train and tram to class. I devised my own curriculum from what experience in teaching, writing and publishing I had. And I also worked in Adult Literacy in the College of Advanced Education (CAE) in the centre of Melbourne, Flinders Lane, near where Kris Hemensley would establish his Collected Works bookshop in 1985, the year after we left Melbourne. Carmel Bird, who much later won the Patrick White Award, was teaching writing at the CAE and self-published her second collection of stories, *Births, Deaths and Marriages* in 1983, the year before we

left.

I was publishing in literary journals such as *Australian Short Stories*, in an issue in which Kylie Tennant, Michael Wilding and Helen Garner had work; *Compass* along with Adam Aitken, Mark Roberts; *Ash* with Nicholas Jose, Tim Winton; *Northern Perspective* with Ron Pretty, Geoffrey Dutton, Steve Evans, Jena Woodhouse, Martin Johnson; *Refractory Girl Writes* with Liz Gross, Drusilla Modjeska; *Voices* with Chris Wallace-Crabbe, Elizabeth Riddell, Peter Porter, John Ashbery, Charles Simic; *LiNQ* with Paul Hetherington, Julianne van Loon; *Going Down Swinging* with Marion Halligan. And then onto *Southerly* with Gillian Mears, Jack Hibberd, Gig Ryan, Beth Yahp, Jeri Kroll; *Imago* with Amanda Lohrey; *Mattoid* with Jill Jones; *Southern Review* with Andrew Taylor, Bronwen Levy; *Heat* with Dorothy Hewett, David Malouf, Cath Kenneally. And more.

Many editors of and contributors to these journals remain as friends reconnecting in the virtual reality of social media in the twenty-first century.

My writing also found public life in anthologies such as Penguin's *Transgressions* edited by Anderson, with that of Gerald Murnane and Elizabeth Jolley; the Adelaide-based, South Australian Wakefield Press' Friendly Street poetry series; and Picador's *New Writing* in which Christos Tsiolkas and Murray Bail had work. It was edited by Modjeska and Yahp.

In 1984, my partner and I moved to Adelaide.

He had grown up there where his ageing parents lived and he favoured living in a smaller city. I didn't have a permanent job in Melbourne, and, as a Sydney girl, I couldn't see myself living there: cold, European autumnal light, no "coastal" feel. In that year I was awarded an Australia Council grant to write.

In Adelaide, Di Brown established Country and City Women Writers, and later, Tantrum Press (named by me). Again, we met in women's homes: Prospect, Summertown. And, again, we published anthologies, held performance readings, and recorded on audio: an early multiple-media press.

There were mixed-gender readings, such as those at Club Foote, in a laneway off Hindley Street, Adelaide's night-club district; Ken Bolton's Lee Marvin readings in a disused shop-front; and Friendly Street Poets in an old box factory.

Adelaide was the first Australian city to get a Writers' Centre, and the University of Adelaide would become an early adopter of the creative-writing PhD. I taught writing again, in TAFEs and to community groups and for the Centre, and, much later, for the University of Adelaide when Jose became the second chair of Creative Writing, and Ros Prosser would head that Department of English and Creative Writing. Both had read at Club Foote and Lee Marvin.

In 1985, Couani, with her Sea Cruise Books imprint, published my first book: *Kites in Jakarta*, a collection of short, creative prose. It was

coupled with Carmel Kelly's *The Waters of Vanuatu*: we were part of the turn to an Asia-Pacific identity for Australia.

Anderson reviewed our Sea Cruise book, along with Jan McKemmish's *A Gap in the Records* (Sybylla), in an overview of the UN Decade of Women 1975–1985 and the writing and publishing it produced, noting: "In the dominant drab landscape of Australian realistic writing, these volumes come like a fresh breath of wind. A southerly buster."

I produced *Writers' Radio/Author's Proof*, on Radio 5UV (currently known as Radio Adelaide) attached to the University of Adelaide, a program of Australian book reviews and new writing, funded by the Australia Council for the Arts.

Arts South Australia awarded me a writing grant. I wrote scripts for Chanel 9's children's program *Humphrey B Bear*, produced in Adelaide.

In 1989, I found full-time, continuing work as an editor in the then Distance Education Centre, University of South Australia (UniSA). UniSA funded my study for an MA (Literary Studies) with a component of creative writing. In the MA, Wench Ommundsen, a metafiction and Bail scholar, fed my fandom for Bail, whom I interviewed for *Author's Proof*.

For a second time, I collected together short prose I'd published, including from broadcasting on *Writers' Radio*. University of Queensland Press published this second collection, *Small Ecstasies*, in 1994, launched at Adelaide Writers' Week by Brooks. Arts SA awarded me another writing

grant.

I pushed along the careers of other Australian writers. I suggested Beth Spencer as a guest for Adelaide Writers' Week, as a committee member around 1999–2000. On the committee, with Kenneally, for the SA Premier's Literary Award for nonfiction, we chose Tim Flannery, a leading environmentalist, who also won, that year, the overall literary award. Meanwhile, I was judging other competitions such as Friendly Street manuscripts and the Bank SA short-story competition.

In 1994, a Varuna Fellowship enabled me to work on the short novel *The Office as a Boat: A Chronicle*, which Brandl & Schlesinger published in 2000. It contained the river poem from the *Pencraft Australian Diary*—a salutary warning never to destroy any of your writing.

*The Office as a Boat* was influenced by Bail's conception of Adelaide in his novel, *Holden's Performance*, and was my song to Adelaide. It got me guest spots at the Melbourne and Sydney writers' festivals. The Adelaide Writers' Festival awarded me a Barbara Hanrahan Fellowship. The writing coming out of that fellowship, and a writers' residency at Monash University granted to me with support from Prosser, is my third collection of short prose, yet-to-be published.

The University of Adelaide awarded me a PhD scholarship. During my PhD I wrote an introductory subject of creative writing for an MA and taught it online for the University of Canberra. The PhD was a study in intertextuality

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of Bail's novel *Holden's Performance*. In my PhD's creative work, *Harriet Chandler*, a minor character in Bail's novel, I used text from my travel journal. Adapted extracts from *Harriet Chandler* appeared in indie press Spineless Wonders' anthologies.

Spineless Wonders is one of the new breed of, but in a sense historically traditional, independent presses appearing in Australia in the twenty-first century, publishing works in multiple media: print, audio, video, live performance, micro films. As Brown reminded me, they are re-seeding Tantrum Press. In their prescience, Spineless Wonders is also a major contributor to the (re)emerging genres of microlit and prose poems.

After my PhD, I worked with Jose on administration of the creative-writing program. I tutored in creative writing at Flinders University (with Kroll and Evans) and at Adelaide. Then I got a full-time, continuing academic position in creative writing at Southern Cross University (SCU), on the far north coast of NSW.

What happens to a writer-become-academic? As a youngling, and wannabe writer, I stupidly scorned superannuation and couldn't imagine a permanent job. But as I aged, I backtracked to get both. So I gained a steady, liveable income,

purchasing a house and car. Apart from facing the blank page and writing into nothingness, the thing about art is time and money. Academia afforded me continuance in writing fields and writing in new ones: ecocriticism, and food and wine.

I had lived in Adelaide for over twenty years, arguably Australia's home of internationally known wine production. The NSW's far north coast is subtropical encouraging mould on grapes. There is, however, a Northern Rivers Zone, further down the coast, Northern Slopes Zone (again with a single region: New England) and the Granite Belt Region across the NSW state border into Queensland. And just up the road from where I lived, in the village of Clunes, in the Byron Bay hinterland, was a young winemaker. I published both scholarly and creative pieces on wines and winemakers.

I commenced a third short-novel manuscript, my song to Northern Rivers, based in the excesses and extremities of the more-than-human and human world of that rain-forest region, from which I have published extracts again in Spineless Wonders' anthologies.

Australia is an ancient place, its ancientness more tangible in the "bush" than in a city with its

concreted environment. I was learning to write with the more-than-human, through the dried specimens of the Southern Cross Plant Science Medicinal Plant Herbarium, and the presence of members of the Northern Rivers' hugely biodiverse environment. The Herbarium writing became *pressed specimens*, Bier Bua Press, my first collection of prose poems.

I stuffed myself into the pod of research logic and argument to write academic articles—unless they were fictocritical in which case I high-wire performed, ungrounded in linear logic. I was granted study leave to read Bail's archived correspondence in the National Library of Australia.

Brooks, Gibbs, Prosser and I co-edited the first collection of Australian women's experimental writing for the 21st century—*Mud Map*—in *TEXT*. I finally repaid Gibbs a long-term i-o-u by gaining her the inaugural guest research lecture in the School of Arts and Social Sciences at SCU in 2016.

I rewrote my PhD manuscript and self-published *Harriet Chandler* in 2014, my song to Sydney.

In an extraordinary gesture of inimitable generosity, Jose, in 2015, reviewed *Harriet Chandler* (self-published for specific reasons: the difficulty of the subject matter; the need to experience my students' preferred option) and revisited my other three books in the *Sydney Review of Books* (SRB), republished in the SRB's first anthology. His last paragraph has, for me, a

haunting quality:

The managed system doesn't always deliver, while outside its walls the making of literature goes on—variegated, fissiparous, animated by other energies.

In that speaking, 'variegated', 'fissiparous' and 'animated' are awesome terms.

In the Northern Rivers, through SCU, as a lecturer, I organised student and staff readings, such as those in conjunction with Lismore Regional Gallery (LRG) exhibitions, and co-published student anthologies in the series of numbered *Coastlines* volumes.

Shut-Up and Write (SUAW) groups were first generated among American postgrad students. Poet and performer Virginia Barratt planted it in the fertile soil of Northern Rivers, and I joined postgrads in a café. I continued with a former student in our village café: Clunes Store and Cellars.

Writers' groups were trialled and failed. But I joined the very successful Clunes Book Club which came out of the local council's concern for community development.

I spoke at several local writers' festivals and wrote catalogue essays and reviews for the LRG. I read at SCU students' Flamingo Writers' Salon. I reviewed for *TEXT*, *SRB*, *Rochford Street Review* (Roberts's project), *Overland*, *Art Australasia Monthly* and *Australian Book Review*, mostly selecting books and exhibitions myself from



independent publishers, or of intergeneric artwork and writing interest.

Among the things I learnt from teaching are that I should continue-to-subvert, however impossible-and-unsuccessful-against-the-forces-of-conservatism that attempt is; that the word is always ever important, no matter a tsunami of words; and that I generate other writings as well as other writers.

Having given up my full-time continuing position as an academic, I have money to live and time to write: to write-up over 100 letters my mother sent me across three states and four decades. I had not written about my mother, and I believed she was envious of my father whom I had written about. While my father was a working-class intellectual, an autodidact, encouraging in his daughters a consciousness of politics, and a love of jazz, I finally, belatedly realised with my mother's letters that it was she who engendered the narrative-writing habit. As I write this, I do part of the work on those letters in a Tasmanian SUAW group, and read in a Tasmanian book group.

I am pursuing publication with my partner, an avid speculative-fiction reader, of his mythic epic. We wrestled . . . but bloodlessly, during drafts. He thought he would write and publish within a year. In reaction, I looked like the emoji for shock: open-mouthed, hands over blushed cheeks. I have a manuscript for middle-school children. And the third collection of short prose and the

deconstructed subtropical gothic romance short novel.

The world of publishing has again changed. I've generated writers with whom I now compete for publication. I used to know of every Australian writer. Now who I know is a slim, etiolated slither of a pie chart.

When I saw that a submission to a particular publisher required writers to have social media platforms and an email list, I instituted most of the former: Twitter, Instagram, dedicated author Facebook page, and new website. Several writers now live by their Submittable record, checking under the tabs Accepted and Declined.

But one of the great pleasures of the 21st century is the second-coming of small, independent publishing, despite the instantiation of paying for submissions and competition entries.

Your words, your thistle seeds, blow away on the wind in mad anarchy aiming to take root.

I may well die or the world as we know may well collapse—that's what it's like to be living in the twenty-first century climate change—before my manuscripts seed and take root with a publisher. I may have had other goals, like sailing and carpentry . . . but writing is my time-and-energy spend . . . a variegated, fissiparous animation.

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Image: "[Thistle Seeds - watercolor](#)" (CC BY 2.0) by [Ken Bosma](#)