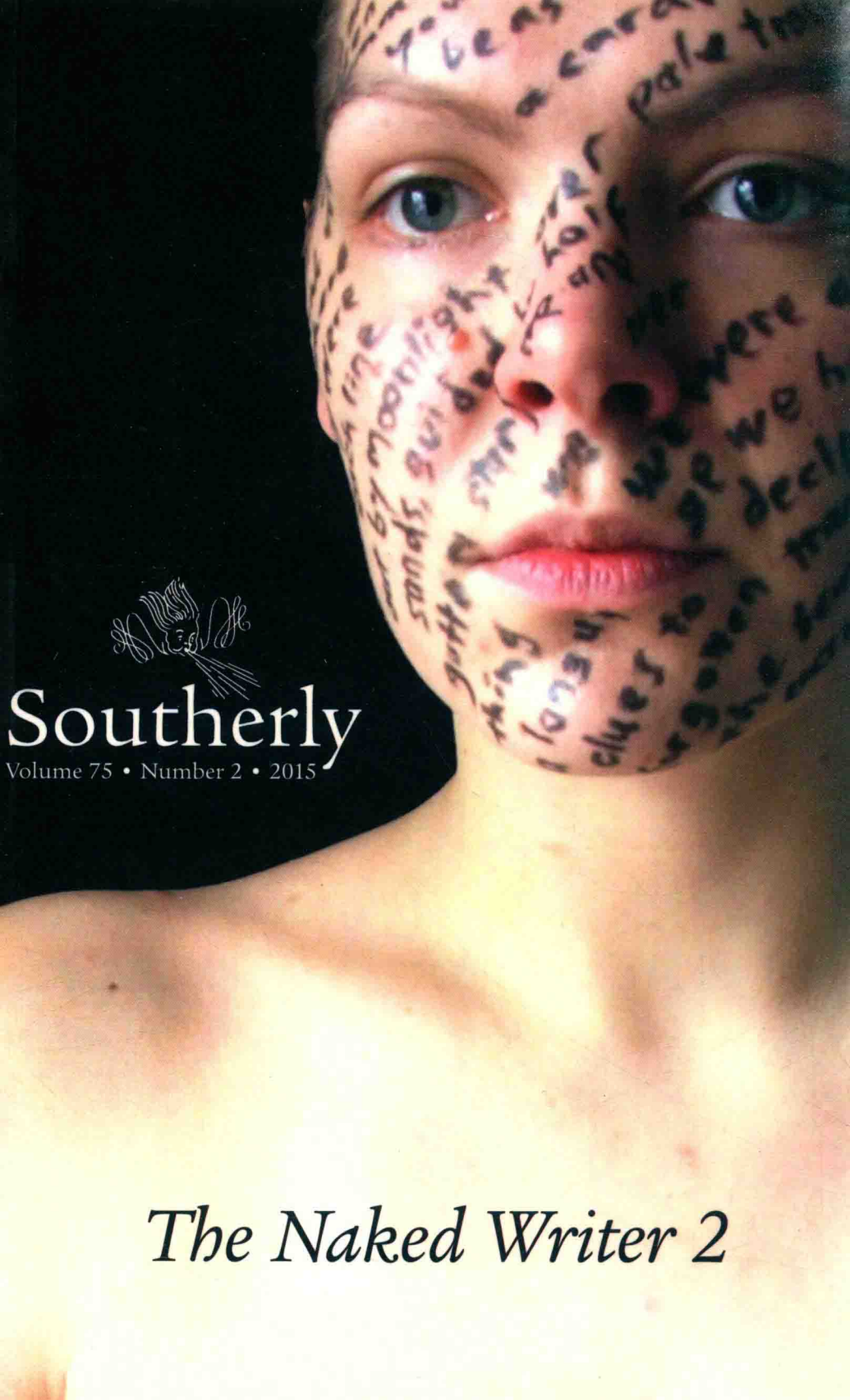

Southerly

Volume 75 • Number 2 • 2015

The Naked Writer 2

Southerly
Volume 75 · Number 2 · 2015

The Naked Writer 2

Editors
David Brooks and Elizabeth McMahon

THE JOURNAL OF THE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION, SYDNEY
BRANDL & SCHLESINGER

SOUTHERLY
The Journal of the English Association, Sydney
Volume 75 • Number 2 • 2015

Academic papers are refereed.

PUBLISHED FOR THE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION
BY BRANDL & SCHLESINGER
PO Box 127 Blackheath NSW 2785 Australia
Ph (612) 4787 5848 • www.brandl.com.au

Contributions, subscriptions, back issues – see page 296

ISSN 0038-3732 Print Post No. PP250003/0593 ISBN 978-1-921556-90-6

This publication is assisted by the Australia Council, the Australian Government's arts advisory and support organisation, the New South Wales Ministry for the Arts, and in kind by the School of Letters, Art and Media, University of Sydney.

Printed by Ligare

CONTENTS

SHORT FICTION

REVIEWS

COVER

Photo by David Brooks

And in the Long Paddock...

Our website is http://www.southerlyjournal.com.au

EDITORIAL

In his editorial to *Southerly*'s first Naked Writer issue (73.3, 2013), David Brooks opens by suggesting that it would be a very "unusual writer who did not feel exposed—naked—at several stages in the creation and presentation of new work." This issue continues and extends that focus in a collection of essays focused on authorship, praxis, process and on writing and fiction as exposition.

These reflections include Kristina Olsson's account of writing *Boy, Lost* (UQP, 2013), a family memoir that unravels painful secrets. From her own experience, Olsson identifies "vexed questions not just of this book but of the writing of memoir, a genre grounded in claims to knowledge and memory, in assumptions about the nature of 'self', and too often, I think, in preoccupations about the nature of 'truth' ". Hayley Katzen's essay "On Privacy" also tackles issues of the relationship between fact, fiction, truth and writing. Katzen explores writing's violations of others' privacy as well as its creation of private spaces for author and reader.

In her essay/memoir "Blue Mirage" Jill Dimond traces the lineaments of her Great Uncle Jack's life and his literary and theatrical productions in the inter-war period. These included his published song "Narrabri", two plays and the unpublished novel "Blue Mirage". What emerges from Dimond's research and personal account is a portrait of a country shopkeeper and dreamer who tried to write himself into another life.

We are delighted to publish Joe Dolce's interview with Dorothy Porter, conducted in 2008, which focuses on the influence of C.P. Cavafy's poetry on Porter's own, including the "sensibility of the character ... and the voice" as well as Cavafy's "clarity". Porter also identifies Cavafy's "paganism" and "stoicism" as qualities that shaped

both her work and her life. In addition to the insights, the interview also returns Porter's own voice to us: the cadences of her sentences, the sharpness of her intellect and the originality of her thought and language.

Novelist Fiona McFarlane reflects on the exposition of the reader in her account of Patrick White's *The Aunt's Story* which is, she argues, a "difficult book to experience", and not "just because it requires patience and close attention." McFarlane contends that the reader must surrender to "*its* form of attentiveness", and when we do, "we enter a different order of event, in which the suspension of time, the slow life of objects, and the choreography of Theodora's relationship to them are more important than marriage and murder."

Three essays trace the connections between life and writing in relation to major Australian authors and their literary networks. In " 'I think you're my wife': Translation, Marriage, and the Literary Lives of Shirley Hazzard and Francis Steegmuller", Brigitta Olubas uses the form, figure and lived reality of (queer) marriage as a way of reading Hazzard and Steegmuller's combined literary output. Helen O'Reilly's "The Poet in her Past: Eleanor Dark and Christopher Brennan" identifies the role of Dark's father's great friend, Christopher Brennan, in her 1937 novel *Sun Across the Sky*. In " 'but even memory is fiction': The (fictional) Life and (self) Writing of Sumner Locke-Elliott" Shaun Bell recuperates Locke-Elliott from his common status as footnote or aside in accounts of literary networks, to identify common figures and set pieces across his oeuvre, as a ways of reading of his "construction of self through nostalgia, art and life."

Maggie Nolan's essay focuses on the connections between dress, nakedness and writing. Titled "Shedding Clothes: Performing cross-cultural exchange through costume and writing in Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance*", Nolan examines how Scott's "novel depicts the ways in which different systems of literacy and adornment become entangled in cross-cultural encounters". Literary cross-cultural negotiations continue in the essay and collaborative poetry of John Kinsella and Charmaine Papertalk-Green in their "Eclogue Failure of Success: The Collaborative Activism of Poetry", which weaves together reflection, poetry and correspondence as a political-literary practice.

The issue also includes some stellar short fiction that ranges in setting from Sue Parker's modern colonial tale "Was Washed Ashore: Of Other Worlds" to Carmel Bird's "Surrogate", set in Hobart in the 1950s to Craig Billingham's "The Final Cast" set very specifically in October 2003. Nasrin Mahoutchi's "Standing in the Cold" and Kevin Smith's "Pit Bull" and Troy Dagg's "The Pool" are of the present moment, though located in very different contexts, different worlds.

The poetry includes diverse styles and modes, from Geoff Page's homage to A.D. Hope in rhyming couplets, "A Drinking Song for A.D. Hope" to the sparseness of Matt Hall's "Refuge", and many points in between.

The reviews consider new work of fiction, non-fiction and poetry. The Long Paddock constitutes a whole other substantial section, so make sure you check it out online, along with the program of writers' blogs.

Finally, we begin this issue with David Brooks's eulogy for Veronica Brady who died in August 2015: a great woman of Australian letters, a proclaimed national treasure, an inspiring educator, a fearless advocate for social justice who lived according to her spiritual vocation. We honour her.

Elizabeth McMahon
UNSW

DAVID BROOKS

Veronica Brady
(1929–2015)

Recently and rather uncharacteristically I sought out and listened to Brahms's German Requiem, of which I had a distant memory from early childhood. My father would play such things on the stereo on Saturday afternoons, creating in me a very ambivalent relation to Classical Music. I had read about requiem sharks—*requin* is the French for shark, but something had pulled the word over, *slewed* it—and the image had lodged in me, deep as a harpoon, of their shadows moving slowly through dark evening waters, the last rays of sun varnishing the gentle swell, while human voices well as if to a deeper, oceanic heaving. I wanted to hear if the music knew anything about this. Requiem. A bidding of souls to rest. *Requiescat in pace.* Rest in peace. What sharks could be in that?

And a few days ago I heard that Veronica Brady had died. A friend for over thirty years. Admired and treasured, loved; one of those with whom you have an intermittent but long-lasting conversation in your mind, though you may not see one another for years. Nothing shark-like about her, unless it was her propensity to attack evils head-on. The small evils that are so often the tendrils of greater ones (and yes, the greater ones too, of course). I had a propensity, before I met her, not to use the word "evil". She convinced me that I should—in fact that one has to. The *mundanity* of evil (a slew of her own on Hannah Arendt): its tendency to appear in apparently innocuous guises.

I couldn't say that there was any shock in the news of her death. She was eighty-six, had had Alzheimers for the last few years, and been in care, apparently, for the last two. But still there was a thud, deep within. I can't think of any other way to describe it. I didn't fall to my knees; I didn't weep. It wasn't like that. I have never known what to do when one receives such news. In fact I've come to think of that—the

not knowing—as part of the process. The feeling of a kind of inadequacy in one's response. How to mourn? There are two or three people in my life the news of whose death would have me raging in grief, and one or two whose death I might not myself long survive. But the rest, I don't know. This dull thud. That leaves you speechless for a while, empty, before memories begin to well, like blood from a fresh wound though there is no physical pain. And emptiness, a kind of *whiteness*, the colour and detail fading from things as in an over-exposed photograph. From my mother's death, forty-four years ago, when I was barely eighteen, I remember only white days. From my father's fourteen years later the same. And yet in some senses the grieving over them has never been resolved.

I try to think of what Veronica would want me to do. Write an obituary? No. "*Grotesque*", she would say, or her characteristic "No, no. That won't do." Though perhaps she would both *not* want it *and* want it. She was human, after all, and had her occasional vanities. And probably she would not much like the thought of a memoir. I just don't know. She liked my writing, and knew—sometimes I think knew keenly—what a dis-ease it is, knew the *necessity* of writing, as an existential activity, so she might have allowed and even expected it in some form or another. Another of the sharks of grieving: is one writing *to* grieve, or writing to *avoid* grieving? The writer-spider—Mallarmé talked of the writer as spider—coming out to spin words around any disturbance in his/her web, though it's also more than that, a lifting and a saving of things, a murmuring to Rilke's listening angel (Veronica listened to Rilke attentively), who doesn't mind the confusion and incoherence, wants foremost the taste of earth. How *else* to deal with this grief-like thing? How else to deal with the mourning? One of the things I do know about grief, about mourning, is that even when it seems that nothing is happening, it is happening. And that unrealised/unreleased grief can be a blight.

I was always to be at her funeral. I don't think I ever told her that directly, but it was like a promise I made to myself. And in the event I could not be there. Just could not make it, physically. I had just got off a plane, in Sydney, after a thirty-five hour journey. And in the event did not even send flowers—a problem for me, nowadays, to send cut

flowers. So there is regret, straight away. Is guilt always a part of mourning? Is it like that for others or is it just me? Is guilt one of the sharks? A double guilt, in my case, for not making it to the funeral—but funerals are for the living—and also, deeper, for not having *pursued* her in the last couple of years, for having continued the conversation only in the mind, for having thought of her very often but done nothing about it. And what *is* guilt? And what *is* regret? And how can one tell the difference? Is regret largely for the self? Why *did* I feel that I should be at her funeral? To say something? To represent something? That I thought others would not say or represent? There's a strange *proprietorship* in funerals, I've noticed. Is that another of the sharks of grief? And is this—this writing—my bouquet of flowers? *L'absente*...?

Time accelerates so. Dinner at an Indian restaurant on the Stirling Highway after the last session of the Perth Writers Festival in 2012, and then we fell into the usual silence for a while which doubtless we each intended to break, but hers extending, unbeknownst to me, into the Alzheimers. No longer at her beloved Gum Tree Cottage, into which she had moved, in the nineties, from the convent. One of her nephews was to send me her new telephone number but never did, perhaps wanting to shield me, or her, I don't know. Each time we met I would hug her. Tiny body. Tiny bones...

So many old friends have died this year. A generation of them, you could say, wiped with a few turnings of the calendar months. Galway, Jann, Mark, Veronica. In writing one piece I think I'm writing four. Mind a-swirl with memories and regrets. A requiem mounting in the blood. Images. Galway in the Sheffield snow. Mark making his pasta primavera in Baltimore or taking me shopping for essential books in Greenwich Village. Jann with Birdie in the Canberra townhouse, or reading with her back to the audience at the university, and now Veronica, riding off down the Stirling Highway in the pouring rain after a meal in Claremont, a little unsteady after the wine but there was no stopping her. Or on the front page of the *Australian* (was it?) after her appointment to the ABC board: *Velocipedist nun "never watches the idiot box"*. How she got away with it sometimes I don't know. Such guts in so small a body. *Bocca della Verita*. My greatest debt to her, that example of open speaking, of stating the obvious, of calling evil evil.

The confidence. Of *course* the aboriginals should have their land. Of *course* the government should apologise. Of *course* women should have the right to abortion. Of *course* we should not be in Vietnam. And, of course, she didn't spare the Church itself. I don't think she ever subscribed to the idea of herself as a radical theologian, though plenty of others did, and not always with approbation. Her own variety of negative theology (and slew on Pascal): the God-shaped hole.

In some ways I think it's only appropriate that Alzheimers spared her the last few years of culture-bashing, government manipulation and starvation of the ABC—the *people's* broadcaster. The "turn back the boats"—she would have been so withering about that. And the turning back of the books, the white-anting of the Australia Council. Boatulism. Progressive moral weakness. The death of generosity. The eclipse of ethics by economics. The censorship. The *überveillance* (Michael Michael's term). The silencing of opposition (our "Biosecurity" [Ag-gag] laws!). The starvation and imprisonment of compassion (a friend has just been *arrested* for reporting animal cruelty!). The selling of Australia, of the future, for the sake of a budget bottom line. She would want me to name these things, not just think them. And speak of the floor-to-ceiling hypocrisy, the lying and dishonesty in the highest places. Our Prime Ministers. Our Cardinals. Sharks of a different order.

Not that we always agreed. The nun and the existentialist. I think she saw my poetry as giving the lie to my existentialism. It doesn't. Just as existentialism doesn't give the lie to the spirit. And I think she saw my late "animal turn" as an eccentricity. Certainly the veganism. Sympathetic, understanding, but "I'm too old to change, m'dear." There's still disagreement there, and now I'll be fighting her ghost over it. Our conversations. On Simone Weil. On Arendt. On Baudrillard. On literature, always: Patrick White, Judith Wright, her beloved *Don Quixote*, or *Such is Life*, her other touchstone. (The obituaries all mention her contribution to Australian literature, though few have indicated just how extensive this was. Both Patrick White and Judith Wright each *chose* Veronica to write about them. I don't think she realised how booby-trapped a biography can be when she took Wright's on. *South of my Days.* And *Crucible of Prophets*, *The God-Shaped Hole*, *Can These Bones Live?*, *Caught in the Draught*, *Polyphonies of the Self*, *Playing*

Catholic, all books on Australian literature, Australian culture. Along with reviews, hundreds of reviews: there aren't many who have assessed so much of our writing of the 80s and 90s, or promoted it so widely and selflessly.)

And poetry, always poetry, so much a part of her that she sometimes referred to it as her road not taken. She had written it as a teenager, as a student, and, one suspects, more often in adulthood than she ever let on. But probably, in humility or expiation (did she?), tore it up. Kath Jordan, in her biography *Larrikin Angel*, reproduces some of the juvenilia, but also a few passages from Veronica's *Assisi Cycle*, "a kind of spiritual diary" she wrote on a visit to Italy in 1977, fraught with her keen, almost Heideggerian (she would quote from "The Thing") sense of poetry as part of the Process:

I look down, therefore, into my own ravines,
Carved out with shocking power
From the mountain's high domain
Like a poem marking out its space,
Existence sheer and clear,
Your phrases, Gerard,
No-man-fathomed, athwart the harsh and solid rock.
But not my poems, no,
And not my life, Saint Francis,
Which is not like yours,
Among the lords and jingling harness
Singing of love and of peace,
The sun which leads beyond their kingdoms.
No. If I should cry, who then would hear me,
For I have no words?
But should I fall, it would be into your space,
Your place of mastery.
And you would meet me dangerously,
Oh God of poetry and prayer,
The lord of Francis also, Poverello,
You, his wealth.

Memories. Images. We taught together at the University of Western Australia for four years in the early 1980s. At one of our lunches at the Staff Centre, nervously seeking her approval, I showed her the sapphire ring I was about to give my partner. And I remember seeing, the second or third time visiting her office—1983?—to discuss one of our courses, a postcard on her pin-board, of Chinese finger mountains. "Where *is* that?" I asked, telling her that I'd been writing about mountains just like them, that they could be the Sei mountains in my book. "Guilin" she said, as if everyone should know. And at that moment made them, for me, the subject of a pilgrimage: a trip down the Li Jiang twelve years later, with my partner and our nine-year-old daughter.

Veronica knew about pilgrimage. All her life she had wanted to make—walk—the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, and did so at last in her seventies, with a couple of close friends. Frail, tough Veronica in hiking boots with a huge pack on her back. And more than a dinner's worth of stories.

Dinners. She even cooked me a few, the first in the convent kitchen in Claremont, after hours, and served in the bare dining room under the watchful eyes of disapproving sisters, but then Veronica, with a national reputation and bringing in an academic salary, was accorded some privileges. And wine, always wine, always red. Always a bottle when she came to dinner—as often as not, after I had moved back east, brought all the way from her friend's vineyard in W.A. And, when it was to be at a restaurant, Italian by preference, so that she could talk to the waiters. It was she who introduced me to the Roma in Freo. I think she even dug us up an Italian restaurant in Debrecen, in Hungary—that is, I remember her trying Italian on the waiter.

Another of the sharks, perhaps, this tendency to try to encapsulate the unencapsulatable life. Veronica may have been small of stature but she was a phenomenon of seemingly limitless energy and interests, who had an uncanny and enviable ability to energise, a catalyst. Writing about her—attempting (the impossible) to "do her justice"—one has either to embark upon a very long piece indeed or to make a hard selection.

She probably wouldn't mind my having taken a third path, or my finishing, if that is ever the word, with fragments. The first—in effect

a nod to her Irish heritage—is no more than a reminder that she was not born Veronica, but for the first two decades of her life, and for far longer by some family and old friends, was known as Pat (Patricia) Brady. "Veronica" ("Ronnie" to the younger generations of her extended family) was the name given her when she joined her Order. "Veronica": a blend, so some onomasticians would have it, of *vera* + *icon*. True icon, then, or, if we reverse the terms, icon of truth. The second, merely because it is irresistible, her own anecdote—she tells it to Robin Hughes in an excellent interview available to all on the Australian Biography Online site—of her first meeting with Patrick White.

She begins tape 4 of that interview by speaking of her time at the University of Toronto (something else we shared, though I was there five years after her), where she wrote her PhD thesis on White. "I had a whole raft of supervisors", she says,

> because nobody knew anything much about Australian literature or about Patrick White, but the first one was an American, who said, "Well, you've gotta write to Patrick White". I said, "I don't have to write to Patrick White. Let Patrick White get on with writing his books and I'll write about him". However, this man persisted, so the letter I wrote to Patrick must have more or less said to Patrick, "This is nonsense. You get on doing your writing and I'll get on writing about you". So he liked that, and we know that Patrick had a thing about nuns anyway. So he wrote back to me and was extremely helpful, and when I got back to Australia, having done my final exams to get on with writing the thesis, he came to see me. And this is one of the wonderful stories of life. There I was, living [and teaching] in Kirribilli, and in those days, there used to be, oh, ten, twenty people. We used to call them "poor men", who would come begging for some food or a cuppa every morning, so one of the chores after dinner in the evening was we all set to and cut sandwiches, so there'd be cut lunches there, you see, and as soon as the side

> doorbell would ring, you would pick up a sandwich and rush to the side door and give it to this poor man. Well, of course, guess who rang on the side door? Patrick.

And the third—hopefully he won't mind my recalling it—a quote from Phillip Adams, lifted from the back cover of *Larrikin Angel*: "Ah, Veronica Brady, my favourite Catholic. The one of whom Pope John Paul II used to ask every morning when he woke up 'Is she dead yet?'"

Well, she is, and while the debate between us will go on as to whether that's it or it isn't, and just where the sharks are, it might have brought an ironic smile to her face to think that, she'd outlasted JP by just shy of 3,800 mornings... Too light a way of ending, of course, and I don't mean to be flippant (another of the sharks). I was just remembering the lighter-heartedness with which, over and again, she'd punctuate the conversation, even and perhaps especially when it had gone into some of the darker places. As if, wherever we had been, whatever we had done, there was always morning, always grace. I can't imagine that there will be many who knew her who do not know what I mean.