

## Late Night Nerves: Poets of the 1980s and 90s

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The title allusion is to 'Death, an Ode,' by John Forbes, who died in 1998. The 'nerves' referred to in the poem are directed towards the advent of 'our beautiful century,' meaning the twentieth. Most of the poet subjects in this feature did not get to see how beautiful the twenty-first is. The articles that follow are responses to a request for essays on the poets and poetry of the 1980s and 90s: there was no suggestion they all be about the dead. But that is what happened.

They could, then, be called, roughly, the recently neglected. That is not true for all: but there has been little written about Bellel, Duke, Gilbert or Johnston in the last twenty years. The emphasis given here by having two essays on Johnston is coincidental, but suggests the need to fill a critical gap. The poets, then, are, as follows: John Anderson, Lisa Bellel, Jas Duke, Kevin Gilbert, Martin Harrison, Martin Johnston, and Vicki Viidikas. Anderson's *the forest set out like night* was recently reprinted by Black Pepper; Viidikas received renewed attention when a selection of poems, *Vicki Viidikas: New and Rediscovered*, was published by Transit Lounge in 2010. Since beginning this feature a selection of poems by Bellel, *Aboriginal Country*, has appeared from UWAP. Harrison, who died in 2014, has a feature dedicated to him in *Plumwood Mountain*, and a posthumous volume, *Happiness* (UWAP 2015).

The idea behind the feature was to provide recent historical context for what preceded Australian poetics' contemporary moment, as well as provide a sampling number of critical essays on a period which has received little attention, as a period. What has been written up till now has largely been attached to major figures (or groups): often those who were active in preceding decades.

One aspect that interests me about the period, apart from it being the time when poets of my own generation started publishing poetry, is that it is the period just before the internet. Retrospectively, there are, perhaps, intimations of the networked world to come; regardless, these are poets who are our near contemporaries, who—excepting Harrison—had no experience of the digital possibilities that, without necessarily taking them for granted, are readily available to us: online publishing, online research, email correspondence, poetry and event sharing on social media, et cetera.

Locally, as Cassidy's and Hall's essays, in particular, show an awareness of, it was a period that brought to the fore both the nationalist discourse of the Bicentennial, and also, that of Reconciliation. These discourses not only impact on poetry and poetics, but some of the best thinking about them, both critical and imaginative, is done there.

A small sample such as this is necessarily limited, but for now it brings to attention some aspects of relatively recent Australian poetics, thickening and enriching our sense of the local poetry of the twentieth century.

I hope the following brief indicative remarks provoke interest in reading the featured essays in full:

A.J. Carruthers' 'Jas H. Duke and Avant-Garde Poetics' makes a (networked) case for Duke as a major, critical, transnationalised, yet localised, proponent of neo-avant-garde practice in terms of the page and sound, for instance; and, as well, for paying greater critical attention to the tradition of invention in Australian poetry.

Bonny Cassidy's 'Undulating Separate / Locality and Nation in the Poetics of John Anderson and Lisa Bellear' is a comparative study of the (nationally inflected) poetics relations of these two poets, who were writing in Melbourne at the same time: one writing from a settler perspective, the other an Indigenous one.

Matthew Hall's 'Reading Kevin Gilbert: Nuclear Weaponry, Media Ecologies and a Community of Memory,' in using a nuclear war framework, recalls the (long) cold war ambience—and real damage—of that time. Hall's essay, like Cassidy's and Carruthers's in different ways, makes meaningful correspondence of the late twentieth century with aspects of the twenty-first.

John Hawke's "'Infinite shall never meet": Perspective in Martin Johnston's "In the Refectory of the Ognissanti"' is, with Ann Vickery's, one of two essays on Johnston. Hawke's reading of Johnston is meaningfully informed in its thinking about perspective, not just by the precedent of Jorge Luis Borges—an essay subject of Johnston's—but also that of Yves Bonnefoy.

North American scholar Brian Reed brings a rare international perspective to contemporary Australian poetry in his essay 'Poet, Tree: Martin Harrison's "Red Gum,"' asserting Harrison's phenomenological approach in a poem on the cusp of what, as Reed notes, we would now call ecopoetic. Reed temporally reaches both forward and back in connecting Harrison's poem to poems by David Campbell and Fiona Hile.

Prithvi Varatharajan's triply-frameworked essay, 'Confessional Surrealist Feminist: Vicki Viidikas's Poetics and Politics,' challenges the reduction of Viidikas's poetics to any one mode of understanding, and also questions the assumption that it was her drug use that explains her withdrawal from poetry publishing.

Ann Vickery's 'When Person and Public Are Hard to Square: Transnational Singularity in Martin Johnston's "In Transit"' also notes the influence of Borges—and others—on Johnston, reading the 'sonnet square,' 'In Transit,' through Johnston's bodily movement between Greece and Australia, as well as through more textual, and conceptual movements: such as comparisons with chess and soccer.

My thanks to *JASAL* editors Brigitta Olubas and Tony Simoes da Silva for giving me the opportunity to bring together these essays on the poets, poetry and poetics of the 1980s and 90s, and for their support during the editing—and to ASAL itself. I thank the referees for reading earlier versions, and for their thoughtful responses, and, finally, I thank the seven featured critics for giving their time to respond to the theme, and for contributing to the history of Australian poetics: a problematic, complicated, history, to be sure; but we can't think about how these problems and complications relate to those of the contemporary, without knowing it.