

‘Trouble, on the Rocks’: On Getting Down and Dirty in Dorothy Porter’s Verse Novels

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David McCooley has accurately observed that there is a ‘discourse of decline’ surrounding the status of poetry within public culture, and it is most keenly activated when a putative renaissance is felt to be brewing, a concomitant ‘discourse of return.’ As McCooley notes, in a slow news week the media will from time to time report on performative modes like slam poetry or hip-hop as if they’d freshly arrived as the vital answer to all that supposedly boring page-based verse one was forced to read at school or university. Poetry thereby becomes ‘something resistant to its own elite-cultural history.’ Endlessly deferred, ‘the discourse of return is often based on nostalgic models that emphasize the poet as seer, bard, presence, performer, spokesperson, and/or purveyor of special knowledge generally’ (McCooley, 2018).

The popular success of Dorothy Porter’s *The Monkey’s Mask* is adduced by McCooley as an example, although as a verse novel in the form of a detective thriller it fails to conform to the ‘bardic’ model, but is rather a case of literary slumming. Porter actively embraced a genre that was inimical to the romantic-modernist conventions of poetic estrangement, of conscious opposition of the language and forms of mass culture, and thereby achieved a literary coup. Even today, undergraduates are surprised by *The Monkey’s Mask*’s combination of imagistic poetry and what might be called ‘dirty’ realism. I use this latter term because it highlights the seeming disjunction between the genres at play here and elsewhere in Porter’s long narratives, but also because *The Monkey’s Mask* coincided with the short-lived ‘grunge’ moment in Australian literature. As Porter said, ‘I wrote bad because writing good definitely did me no good’ (Porter, 1999).

This essay analyses the tensions within Porter’s verse novels, between their desire to mark out a wider readership for poetry and what this populism brings with it, in terms of the logic of their poetics. Critics have mostly celebrated them as boundary-crossing experiments whose success was crowned by sales, but what strikes me most forcefully is their contradictions, notably in the way that poetry becomes linked with both crime and deviant sexualities in texts which are themselves, in the main, overdeterminedly queer. In the words of Cath in Porter’s last novel, *El Dorado*, ‘Why did sex create / such chaos?’ (142). Porter’s protagonists may invite all kinds of poetic trouble—the *femme fatale* is a favoured trope—but they also hanker after closure, both narrative and psychological. Only two of the novels, *The Monkey’s Mask* and *El Dorado*, explicitly adopt the thriller form, but all involve sex, death and mystery, linking narrative and erotic desire in such a way that the sordid and unsparing *manner* of the thriller becomes a keynote. With the thriller in mind, in what follows I also wish to tease out Franco Moretti’s insight that detective fiction is ‘*literature that desires to exorcise literature*’ (146, Moretti’s emphasis) with respect to Porter’s work.

Big Sexy Risks and Reckless, Careless Sex

Porter believed very strongly in the discourse of poetry’s decline. In 1989 she saw herself in bardic terms as one who wanted to write poetry ‘as tight and as gutsy as good rock and roll,’

concluding: ‘I want to write as Ginger Rogers dances—with verve and imagination. I want to write poems that move and spellbind’ (‘Statements,’ 61). A decade later, and describing her intentions for *The Monkey’s Mask* (1994), her scope had darkened:

I wanted ingredients that stank to high heaven of badness. I wanted graphic sex. I wanted explicit perversion. I wanted putrid language. I wanted stenching murder. I wanted to pour out my heart. I wanted to take the piss. I wanted lesbians who weren’t nice to other women. I wanted glamorous nasty men who even lesbians want to fuck. I wanted to say that far too much Australian poetry is a dramatic cure for insomnia. But I *still* wanted to write the book in poetry. (Porter 2000)

As her metaphors suggest, the sleep of poetry must be shaken awake by bodies which are variously eroticised and abject, capable of generating both high emotion and disgust: Ginger Rogers performing a *danse macabre*. *The Monkey’s Mask* thus became the ‘poeticisation’ of a demotic form, the detective thriller. As Porter’s PI heroine Jill Fitzpatrick says in the poem ‘Sex and poetry’:

I never knew poetry
was about
opening your legs
one minute

opening your grave
the next

I never knew poetry
could be
as sticky as sex (139)

There you have it: sex, death, and a style of poetry in which ‘opening your legs’ is anaphorically linked with ‘opening your grave.’

In her next published collection, *Crete* (1996), Porter compared poetry to Minoan bull-leaping as a ‘big sexy risk.’ The critical tendency has been to take Porter’s statements about her poetry at face value, as if it really was as risky as she said it was, and that the risk consistently paid off. Felicity Plunkett has labelled as ‘daemoniac’ the chthonic energies—both erotic and violent—celebrated in her verse, ‘her subjects’ and speakers’ bodies bloody, pulsing, slippery with desire, or saturated by weeping’ (19), linking them with both the ancient view of the poet as magus or magician, and the modern tradition of confessionalism. Of *The Monkey’s Mask*, Rose Lucas wrote that ‘For Jill, as well as the reader of this cross-genre text, poetry is seen as the characteristic pulse of sex, the inscription of the myriad significances which mark the desiring, interactive body’ (Lucas 1996, 206). I detect a more critical and corrective strand at work in Porter’s fiction. The generic elements of *The Monkey’s Mask* in particular have tended to be glided over as merely a base from which Porter could experiment, but I’m interested here in tracing the limits they might impose. The volatile body—to borrow Elizabeth Grosz’s phrase—may be front and centre in these works, but they also contain sexually abused and dead bodies.

When *The Monkey’s Mask* appeared in 1994, the local literary landscape was at a point of transition. Australian fiction at the time was wracked by a moral panic surrounding Helen Dale,

aka Darville, aka Demidenko, and her novel *The Hand that Signed the Paper*. Debates about literary multiculturalism, real or performative, were soon overwhelmed by a larger crisis of what Mark Davis called ‘The New Generationalism,’ whereby several younger writers of so-called ‘dirty realism’ or ‘grunge’ were seen by certain older critics as marking a new low ebb for serious fiction in this country. In his 1997 book *Gangland*, Davis argued that ‘grunge’ had been deployed as a way of caricaturing the works of these first-time authors, whose experience didn’t reflect the complacent humanism of an older cultural elite, the Baby Boomers. For him, the grunge tag expressed the contempt of the literary establishment for an up-and-coming generation who, having lost their parents’ faith in political change, were disillusioned by increasing social disadvantage under neoliberalism, and concerned to express its ill effects. For Davis, this contempt wasn’t purely generational, though, as he regarded these younger writers as part of a wider group of ‘dissenting voices’ (137) that included Rosa Cappiello and Ruby Langford Ginibi: marginalised authors who struggled in a literary environment in which ‘authenticity always seems to be elsewhere’ (130), namely in a white middlebrow culture that Davis would later describe as a fading ‘literary paradigm’ (Davis 2006).

Porter’s move into the subversively sexual verse novel tends to be seen in isolation as a wholly new direction, but it is also consistent with its cultural moment. Born in 1954, Porter was a little too young for the Generation of ‘68 poets, most of whom were born in the 1940s, and in any case wasn’t attracted to experimental modes or to male cliques. ‘Like Frank O’Hara,’ she said, ‘I go on my nerve,’ and hated ‘heavy, pretentious “boys” poetry’ (Minter, 2008). It’s also worth recalling that Porter was only a decade—half a generation—older than Christos Tsiolkas, Justine Ettler and Andrew McGahan, who were the major stars of the grunge phenomenon, and who each wrote with a sexual frankness that was variously queer (Tsiolkas), sado-masochistic (Ettler) or abject (McGahan).

Immediately prior to *The Monkey’s Mask*, Porter had published the extraordinary *Akhenaten* in 1992, the style and gender fluidity of which looked forward to her later novels. Its imagistic storytelling in the fragmented voice of an Ancient Egyptian pharaoh, however, suggests a kinship with late modernism—H.D.’s *Helen in Egypt*, say—rather than the seeming postmodernism of *The Monkey’s Mask*, with its crossing of high-low generic boundaries. Porter stated that she turned to crime fiction after her second young adult novel, *The Witch Number* (1993), was proscribed by what she called ‘the children’s lit gatekeepers’ for its occult content and candid treatment of menstruation. Having tried to ‘write good’ in order to make money, she therefore resolved to please herself and ‘write bad’ (Porter, 2000). Small publishers, UQP and Highland House, had brought out *Akhenaten* and *The Monkey’s Mask*. After the latter became an award-winning bestseller her other verse novels—*What a Piece of Work* (1999), *Wild Surmise* (2002) and *El Dorado* (2007)—all appeared under the multinational Picador imprint, and either won or were shortlisted for major prizes. Porter had cracked a seemingly impossible case: how to make poetry popular.

Here’s one way that she did it. This is ‘Trouble,’ the opening poem of *The Monkey’s Mask*:

‘Jill’
I challenge the mirror
‘how much guts have you got?’

I like my courage
 physical
I like my courage

with a dash of danger

 In between insurance jobs
 I've been watching
 rock climbers
 like game little spiders
 on my local cliff

 I've got no head for heights
 but plenty of stomach
 for trouble

 trouble
 deep other-folks trouble
 to spark my engine
 and pay my mortgage

 and private trouble
 oh, pretty trouble

 to tidal-wave my bed

 I'm waiting

 I want you, trouble,
 on the rocks. (3)

'Trouble' is like a great many of the individual poems in Porter's novels, and indeed her poetry in general. It presents a narrow, at times meandering column down the page, with line breaks typically based on images associated with noun and adjectival phrases. Significantly, the poem ends with a punchline as a form of poetic if not narrative closure. Justin Clemens once aptly characterised Porter's style as an 'ability to script short, deceptively simple lyrics whose initial apparent fatuousness lets them slip irritatingly into memory, whereupon they extrude iridescent flagella and begin to thrash' (97–98). If he intends the bacterial metaphor as praise, he's nevertheless right about the 'initial apparent fatuousness' of many of the poems. It's the eternal problem in verse novels and epics alike of balancing storytelling with poetic form. After all, as Horace conceded, even Homer nods. Porter therefore adopts a molecular narrative structure comprised of individual imagistic poems each working towards metaphoric closure within their own spaces. This model of restraint within apparent freedom is echoed at the thematic level.

'Trouble' itself offers a case in point. Porter's PI heroine Jill Fitzpatrick tells us that, because she's gutsy, with 'plenty of stomach / for trouble,' she welcomes physical challenges, both professional and erotic. This statement proves proleptic enough as the story unfolds, but 'Trouble' offers a further foreshadowing in its key image of rock climbers. While this sets up a punning punchline to round the poem off, the simile—'rock climbers / like game little spiders'—also hints at the kind of trouble Jill will encounter. She will be dealing with a pair of child molesters/rock spiders. While Mickey Norris their victim is a university student and almost certainly over the age of consent, she nonetheless remains a child in the louche, asphixiophilic hands of Nick and Diana Maitland, and is described throughout as a 'kid': 'Dead kids upset me' says Jill (53). She is initially hired by Mickey's parents, who are hoping that

their daughter's disappearance will be a Missing Person case rather than a murder—or is it manslaughter? Once the game is afoot, Jill soon finds she has 'no head' for the cultural heights that Diana inhabits, a domain specifically linked to poetry and the professions.

In his reading of Sherlock Holmes in *Signs Taken for Wonders*, Franco Moretti draws upon the narratological distinction between what the Russian formalists called *fabula* and *sjuzhet*: broadly speaking, the distinction between the chronological arrangement of the events of a story in the order in which they happened (the basic plot), and the order in which these events are relayed to us by a narrator (the 'narrative' that we read), which is not necessarily the same thing. Detective fiction is based on the *narrative* of detection, which works analeptically to uncover the *story* of the crime, that is, the events as they took place in their original temporal order: 'the criminal produces the *sjuzhet* [*sic*], the detective the *fabula*' (146). The end of the whodunit is always in its beginning with the crime, typically a dead body; the detective has to establish how the body got there in the first place. Finding that out produces the narrative (*sjuzhet*) so that at the end the detective can finally tell the story (*fabula*), because 'detective fiction's object is to *return to the beginning*' (137, Moretti's emphasis). In a classic whodunit an associate of the detective—Dr Watson (Holmes), Captain Hastings (early Hercule Poirot)—or a third person narrator usually relates the *sjuzhet*, while the detective reveals the *fabula* as an embedded or hypodiegetic account.

Moretti argues that the criminal is a kind of poet or artist, in so far as it is he or she who generates the *sjuzhet*; whereas the detective 'normalises' the criminal's narrative by rearranging it into a 'story,' along rational, chronological, 'scientific' lines. The clues left by the criminal are polysemic: they have many potential meanings. To the extent that they open up meaning rather than close it off, the criminal is indeed a poet: 'This is also part of the criminal's guilt: he has created a situation of semantic ambiguity, thus questioning the usual forms of human communication and human interaction. In this way, he has composed an audacious *poetic work*' (146, Moretti's emphasis). The detective becomes the critical 'reader' who imposes a singular 'true' meaning. In seeking to close down meaning detective fiction is literature that ultimately seeks to abolish risk; as Moretti says, it 'empties the proto-bourgeois ideal of experimental culture by subordinating it to a literary structure that is anything but experimental' (149).

In this regard, is it significant that in all of Porter's verse novels a poet figure dies? The radical monotheism of Akhenaten, author of the Hymn to the Sun or Aten, is overthrown after his death; Mickey and Bill McDonald both die violently in *The Monkey's Mask*; deprived of his writing materials in a locked ward, the poet Frank is left to die by the evil psychiatrist Peter Cyren in *What a Piece of Work*; Daniel, a literary academic who teaches romantic poetry, dies of cancer in *Wild Surmise*; and Axel Pine, aka Raymond Putney, aka the eponymous El Dorado, who writes verses about his child victims, immolates himself, nearly taking our hero Bill Buchanan with him.

Only two (or maybe three: see later) of these are crime novels in the strict sense; and Moretti was describing the whodunit, an older form of crime fiction associated with the polite British 'school' that includes Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, and Dorothy L. Sayers. *The Monkey's Mask* and *El Dorado*, on the other hand, are thrillers originating in the 'hardboiled' style of US writers such as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. While Porter retains some whodunit elements, such as revelation of the culprit at the end,¹ her novels also align with Tzvetan Todorov's description of the thriller as 'suppressing' the *fabula* and 'vitalising' the *sjuzhet*. Here the crime narrative and its detection follow parallel lines that frequently cross over and 'fuse,' according to Todorov, and there is correspondingly less complete closure. In

Porter's work this allows for lengthy erotic diversions between her heroines and a *femme fatale*: Jill and Diana in *The Monkey's Mask*, and Cath and the snake-handling Lily in *El Dorado*. (This diversion becomes the main plotline in the dalliance between Australian astrobiologist Alex and American astrophysicist Phoebe in *Wild Surmise*, which is not a thriller.) Todorov writes, 'No thriller is presented in the form of memoirs: there is no point reached where the narrator comprehends all past events, we do not even know if he will reach the end of the story alive' (47). The hardboiled detective is more closely involved with the world of crime and, unlike Sherlock Holmes or Miss Marple, both offers and is subject to violence. As Raymond Chandler's shamus, Philip Marlowe, bitterly reflects at the end of *The Big Sleep*, 'I was part of the nastiness now' (230).

That said, I think Moretti's point about detective fiction being, in his words, '*literature that desires to exorcise literature*' (146) still applies to Porter's verse novels, not only in the way that poets are eradicated from the plot, but also in the association between poetry and criminal pathology. I've mentioned the child-murderer Axel Pine in *El Dorado*. Peter Cyren in *What a Piece of Work* says he 'feel[s] / like a child molester' as he seduces his much younger patient Tamara (168), and later compares himself as an artist to Frank the poet (271). Even Akhenaten sexually abuses his daughters and his little brother. Although the villain Nick in *The Monkey's Mask* neither writes nor reads poetry, his wife Diana teaches it, and he is explicitly linked to it through one of Mickey's poems, '*Your floating hair*' (111):

*Your hair is a storm that breaks over my face
Your hair is lightning and hail stones on my lips
Your hair trickles down my throat like a peacock feather
I want to drown in your beautiful hair
I want to stuff it in my pillow case
I want to die in it and wear it as my shroud
Float Float Float away on your beautiful hair
and go to Heaven.*

'This couldn't be Bill McDonald'
I help myself to Diana's fags
'he's going bald.'

'Infatuation is blind,' Diana says
'and anyway she nicked the floating hair
from Coleridge.'

I watch my smoke floating
over her messy curls.

This poem contrasts what we're meant to see as Mickey's 'bad' erotic poetry with the subtler eroticism of Porter's own. In one of the only negative early commentaries on *The Monkey's Mask*, Finola Moorhead took exception to this representation, and to what she saw as Porter's misogyny more generally.² Note how suspicion is cast on Diana in the last two lines; suspicion, but also doubt: her curls are 'messy' rather than 'floating.' The allusion, as Diana herself points out, is to the figure of the ecstatic bard at the conclusion of Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan.'

Nick's long hair—he wears it in a nineties ponytail—is the metonymy of his androgynous desirability. There's even a hidden clue in the word 'nicked,' meaning to arrest, as well as Old

Nick. Although Nick belongs to a patriarchal institution—he's a left-wing social justice lawyer—the apparent ambiguities of his gender status make him less a male stereotype and more indeterminate. In the poem 'Nick lets out his hair' (238–41), where the penny finally drops for Jill about whodunit, he almost manages mesmerically to seduce her. As she says:

Nick lets out his hair

it fans
blonde, silky

he could be a pin-up
he could be a girl

his sweet smell
is suffocating

Note the feminine 'e' in 'blonde.' Note also the lethal implications of 'suffocating.' The process of her attraction expresses disgust through a transgendered image:

can't get a handle
on this effeminate man

like a transvestite
in a tiger skin mini
making a dark alley pass

Jill keeps telling herself 'he's not a girl / he's not a girl,' but 'my nipple's / not listening.' It's only when she makes contact with Nick's penis as a marker of his gender identity that she finally resists, and it's the revenge of Eve: 'I'm throttling a snake.'

Jill is attracted to Nick's sexual androgyny, but ultimately resists for the very reason of its indeterminacy. Ultimately she affirms a set of values which are traditionally associated with male Australian culture, so that Jill's moral code means that her desires are curiously straight ones. Her dislike of poetry is itself a marker of this normativity, since poetry is an object of overdetermined desire here. Mickey's desire for the boy poets Bill McDonald and Tony Knight also expresses her desire for cultural authority and power over language, which is linked to patriarchy. Jill's spurning of poetry is only partly a rejection of its phallogocentric status. It's also a class/cultural thing. As she says in 'How do you talk to poets?' (90),

I'm not known for my love
of fluffy clouds
fields of daffodils
or brumbies on a moonlit night

give me a good bottle of wine
a woman with spit and spark
and the Trifecta at Randwick

These values aren't so far removed from those of Peter Corris's crumpled hero—Nick even calls her 'a pint-sized Cliff Hardy' (33)—though the 'good' wine is maybe a touch bourgeois.

She has broken away from the suburban ‘snuggly buggly’ heterosexual romance (‘The ex’ 44), with its security, normality and boredom—lesbian desire is the ‘big bad fox’ that gets in—but has resisted gay coupledness with Chris (‘Nostalgia’ 96–97) in favour of her solo PI’s existence in a transposed version of the heroic male loner, tough, yet vulnerable. For what we might call the ‘homonormative’ Jill, then, Nick and Diana are dangerous precisely because they embody poetry as radical queerness, the ‘big sexy risk.’ As she sums up (‘Reckless, careless and sexy’ 245):

reckless, careless
sex killed Mickey

I know
because

reckless, careless sex
nearly killed me

The Monkey’s Mask established the style of Porter’s subsequent novels. Elements were already there in *Akhenaten*, but that work is deliberately more fragmentary, less attentive to linearity, partly to reflect the broken historical record, but also because the pharaoh is made over into an Eighteenth Dynasty version of the romantic-modernist artist, poet of the Aten. Criticism of his incestuous behaviour is tempered by his pharaonic context and by Porter’s elegisation of her hero’s radical nonconformism, as in ‘Epilogue–Eternal Life’ (167–68):

my presence
is as agitating
as a honey-cake in the Sun
to foraging bees

From *The Monkey’s Mask* onwards, though, Porter’s big sexy risks would have more to do with their implied dangers, with thanatos rather than eros.

An Unmistakable Octopus Growl

That desire itself might be monstrous and even alien to the normative self is at the heart of *Wild Surmise* which, while not concerned with crime, actively embraces mystery: mystery at once private and cosmic. A thinly plotted novel about adultery, it poetically balances an arc of *jouissance* in Alex’s resumption of her affair with Phoebe with a progressively elegiac movement in the slow death from cancer of Alex’s husband Daniel, and her guilt at his betrayal. The commanding metaphor for Alex’s desire for the ultimately elusive Phoebe is her longing to discover evidence of life on frozen Europa, one of the moons of Jupiter. In a review of *Wild Surmise*, Rose Lucas has written that, ‘although it is certainly associated with the notion of a riveting, if cataclysmic, vision of newness and difference, like Europa herself,’ Alex’s affair with Phoebe ‘is finally seen as toxic, an impossible, unsustainable object of desire,’ and that it is her unremarkable heterosexual relationship with Daniel ‘which is valued’ in the end (Lucas 2002).

Despite her radiant name, Phoebe is herself cold. ‘I still shiver / in the ice gaze / of her pale clever eyes,’ says Alex in ‘Adultery’ (59), but love is a drug and ‘Alex is an ice / fanatic,’ the narrator later tells us:

her burning hands trembling
compulsively over the computer keys
as they scan Europa
every day for evidence
of ice volcanoes.

Just as she is longing
for evidence
of Phoebe's spectacular eruptions—

what is really under her ice?
what wriggling wonder
would spurt one day
from under Phoebe's ice-hard
eyes
and splash all over Alex? ('Under the ice' 98)

Leaving aside the baroque image of Phoebe's ejaculatory, volcanic tears, the key life form imagined to dwell beneath Alex's oceanic desires is cephalopodan: squids or octopuses, the kind of creatures through which extraterrestrials are often imagined, from H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (1897) to films like *Monsters* (2010), *Arrival* (2016) or the larval 'facehugger' stage of the eponymous creature of the *Alien* franchise (1979–2017). These become a leitmotif with several permutations. In 'The Hawaiian Octopus,' as Alex and Phoebe snorkel off the island of Kaua'i in a flashback sequence, Alex watches her lover's 'strong legs' in a predatory, shark-like manner, only to find her gaze echoed by that of 'a large octopus' she catches staring at her before it quickly camouflages itself:

But Alex can hear
through the lull of the water
in her own brain's
deep stem
an unmistakable octopus
growl (50)

The growl of the octopus permits an anthropomorphic shift further on in '*The Kraken sleepeth*,' where the creature is given voice:

In the abysmal depths of sleep
something quivers and stirs
on Alex's steaming ocean floor

let me be (67)

The allusion to Tennyson's kraken in its 'ancient, dreamless, uninvaded sleep' is clear enough, although later it transforms into 'the oily tentacles' of one of Wells's Martians ('The War of the Worlds,' 123). It returns as a 'white octopus . . . / like a tentacled ghost' at the window of a deep-sea submarine as Alex improbably accompanies her microbiologist friend Rachel Epstein on an exploration of hydrothermal vents along the East Pacific Rise, which offer an earthly

vision of the oceans of Europa. Following Daniel's death, however, cephalopod images are unambiguously linked to the annihilation of the self:

Waking up in icy sheets
 Alex feels an arctic tentacle
 suck hard and cruel
 on her aching leg ('Extinction' 269)

This image echoes a much earlier one when Alex recalls her first encounter with Phoebe in Hawai'i. The experience of 'Phoebe's skin / plastering to hers / deliciously' unites with 'something' oceanic that is 'crawling / through [her] brain,' and appears to link her lover with a dangerous molluskan otherness:

but now the creature's tentacles
 are coldly electric
 taking [Alex] away from the safe earth
 of sex

taking her, dragging her now
 in its mollusk-like beak,
 to her fate of sea,
 a cold alien sea

Europa ('Bali Ha'i' 52–53)

Phoebe describes her fascination with cosmic dark energy in a millenarian kraken-like image, 'a real beast / at the centre of our galaxy' into whose 'black gullet' the stars will ultimately 'disappear forever' ('The Beast' 71–72). Phoebe is herself compared to a predator in 'Oxygen' (78–79), and to a virus in 'Cold (1)' (139) and 'Exquisite cholera' (201–03). Finally, though, sex and death are united in 'Giant squid,' the novel's last poem, narrated by Alex:

I dreamt last night
 that I lay naked
 at the bottom
 of a soft black sea
 in the many loving arms
 of a giant squid (288)

Autumn Royal reads *Wild Surmise* as 'a duet of unfulfilled desire and mourning' and therefore within 'an elegiac framework, [in which] focus may be placed on these unfulfilled desires and the ways in which characters pursue consolations for their mourning' (Royal 1). In this reading, Alex's guilty grief at the death of Daniel does not cancel her mourning for the loss of Phoebe so much as generate a conflicting elegiac movement, 'complicating it further' (Royal 10). Does this final kraken image then imply the triumph of Phoebe, as Alex and the creature 'in perfect unison / . . . [nibble] on / each other's precious / alien faces' (288)?

The titles of *Wild Surmise* and *El Dorado* are connected through the Spanish conquest of America. Excited by the image of a supernova as evidence of dark energy, Phoebe makes an uncharacteristic poetic reference—to Keats's 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer'—announcing that she is gazing 'like . . . stout Cortez staring / for the first time at the Pacific.'

She then turns to Alex ‘*with a wild surmise,*’ as if she might embody that prospect (Porter’s emphases, 85–86), thus giving the book its title. Correspondingly, their affair first began high up in the Keck Observatory perched on dormant Mauna Kea in Hawai’i. The imagery of volcanoes, volcanic vents and Dante’s *Inferno* (the latter from poems in Daniel’s voice) contrasts with icy planets and Antarctic lakes in this novel.

In *El Dorado*, by contrast, it’s all fire, the climax taking place inside a burning house where Axel Pine has drugged detective Bill Buchanan. Pine is the titular murderer, ‘the golden one,’ but his house, where he has lured and smothered his child victims, is also inscribed as the mythic city of gold, after being linked throughout to Neverland. In ‘To the island,’ his last poem, addressed or spoken to Bill, the fire itself has become J. M. Barrie’s enchanted realm:

*you will never see
the island
where the golden fairies
burn in laughter
and wait for me (363)*

In claiming he wants ‘*To cleanse your children / And set them free*’ (‘Pristine’ 161), *El Dorado* becomes a dark parody of Peter Pan, including his androgynous aspects. Though drugged and abducted by him, Cath can’t remember ‘if *El Dorado* is a man / or a woman’ (249). In Barrie’s play, the part is typically played by a young woman in tights.

In *El Dorado* Old World Fairyland replaces the astronomical scope of *Wild Surmise*, and its fantasies of New Worlds reappear in parodic form through Cath’s job as a creator of Hollywood special effects, an ‘Imaginary Worlds Specialist Director’ (35). This is the implausible reason Bill seeks her advice in his investigation, because ‘*Cath has always seen things/no one else can see*’ (30). Yet he also believes she has ‘just never fucking grown up’ (50), and Cath herself feels that she is immature in many ways, comparing herself and *El Dorado* to Peter Pan:

Cath knew there were times
she and *El Dorado*
stared through
the same barred window.

Shut-out Peter Pans
defiant in fairy-childhood exile
shrinking in dreaded adulthood
to wizened pygmies. (‘The barred window’ 154)

It turns out, of course, that she and *El Dorado* are indeed linked through childhood. Axel Pine was once Raymond Putney or, ‘Little Put-Put’ (286: P-P ≈ Peter Pan), and Cath and Bill had bullied him, going so far as to physically eject him from ‘Cath’s cubby’ (333) with almost fatal results after he discovered their treehouse Neverland. This is why his crimes reference the pair: he plants *Peter Pan*, ‘one of Cath’s favourite books / when she was a kiddie’ (121), on little Emma Farmer’s body, and Brett Miller is found wearing a St Kilda AFL jersey, ‘Bill’s team too’ (138). By murdering children Pine thinks he ‘frees’ them from an encroaching sexuality, one imaged in the family romance structure of his dependent childhood relationship with the ‘couple’ Cath and Bill.

As in *Wild Surmise*, *El Dorado* contains both a lesbian and a straight love story. Here, though, the lesbian romance ends happily when Lily, the snake-identifying phallic woman, returns to Cath. 'Bill's blessing' (305) on this affair is crucial to her, even so, because their non-erotic relationship is the true love that dare not speak its name in this thriller:

Cath wanted to love a woman
like she loved Bill

That tranquil and sure-footed
certainty.

Why did sex create
such chaos? ('Tranquillity and anarchy' 142)

Cath's 'big sexy risk' with Lily pays off, but her lifelong closeness to Bill also led to their exclusion and victimisation of Raymond Putney, something each of them has repressed. Now grown up and transfigured into child psychologist Axel Pine, the criminal has been able to hide in plain sight throughout the narrative: the 'child' that they forgot. When, as *El Dorado*, he finally retaliates against Bill he prefers to cauterise the detective rather than kill him, casting him out of the blazing house in a restaging of his own expulsion from the cubby: '*my mercy is my revenge*' (365). The snake, marked as a symbol of desire through its association with Lily, rears up in the denouement as 'The Fire Snake' (364), and leaves Bill with a skin graft on his chest that Cath says 'feels like a snake' as she lovingly traces it in the last poem ('Good coffee' 368).

A Neat Oedipal Bow

I've left *What a Piece of Work* out of sequence until the end because, although it's not exactly a thriller, it works like one in slowly piecing together the motives of a criminal. Peter Cyren may not have committed actual murder, but he has orchestrated the deaths of several patients: by giving the simple-minded Henny-Penny his cigarette lighter, by sexually abusing the emotionally insecure, drug-addled Tamara, and by medically torturing Frank the poet. Like *Akhenaten* and *The Monkey's Mask*, and unlike the other two novels, no third-person narrator intrudes, the whole narrative is spoken as a monodrama. In *Akhenaten* Porter had the freedom to imagine a queer Egyptian pharaoh and his exotic world but, barring when she quotes others, Jill's voice in *The Monkey's Mask* necessitated something of a poetic dumbing down as her metaphorical range could not extend too far from that of an ex-cop without stretching realism (by way of example, see 'Style,' 35). Cyren, in contrast, is a Jungian psychiatrist, the imaginary superintendent of Sydney's Callan Park Hospital in the late 1960s, with a spectrum of mythological references to draw from, and which play out most obviously in the novel's reversal of alchemical transmutation, the chapters moving from gold to the soul's darkness, red (*rubedo*) to black (*nigredo*). Like Faust in Goethe's version of the tale, Cyren's shift to the dark side is initially marked by the arrival of a figurative black dog ('My big black dog,' 110–11) which is both demonic (Mephistophelian) and depressive (Dr Johnson via Churchill).

His slow descent into the abyss begins in earnest when, haunted by a sexual relationship with his mother, who subsequently suicided, he comes to abandon love for money and power. Wrapped up with a neat Oedipal bow—'the blackest secret in the world' ('Death threats' 201)—the novel's erotic transgression is thereby foreclosed as soon as it is revealed in the fifth chapter, 'White,' although there are earlier foreshadowings; for example, in 'The ghost train'

(116–18), in which ‘that skeleton woman / . . . sticking her hand/right down my shirt’ (117–18) signals the return of the repressed. This strange image recalls the old Ghost Train at Sydney’s Luna Park, where a figure in a body suit painted to look like a skeleton would tickle (in my experience), or perhaps fondle riders just before their carriage safely re-emerged into daylight. When accounting for his failed marriage in ‘Why I left Monica,’ Porter makes sure he spells out the psycho-sexual implications:

Real jealousy has only bitten me
once.

And then anything
could torment me.

*A faded photo
of my mother’s lush body*

I left Monica
because she wanted me
to put my childish things
away.

And she was a Freudian. (161–62)

In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) Agatha Christie famously broke the classic rules of the whodunit by making a seemingly trustworthy narrator the murderer and hence, in Moretti’s terms, a poet: a poet with ultimate narrative control over both *sjuzhet* and *fabula*. Like Cyren, Christie’s James Sheppard is a doctor—as is Conan Doyle’s John Watson, for that matter. But Cyren thinks of himself as an artist as well, and takes photographs of his patients for his own less than wholly professional pleasure, ‘my asylum snaps, / where one picture is indeed/worth a thousand daubs’ (‘Lunatic Art’ 8). He also derives a form of literary inspiration from his sessions with them, his ‘notes-poems,’ where ‘Listening like this / is an artist’s work’ (‘Notes’ 76). These figurative claims serve to align him with Frank—based on poet Francis Webb, an inmate of Callan Park—who is the final victim in the novel because, as a real artist, he has become Cyren’s main spiritual antagonist. ‘I’ve scratched your soul,’ Frank whispers as the doctor sedates him for shock treatment (‘Scratchings’ 265). Cyren abandons his alchemical quest to purify his own soul and those of others when he finally leaves public medicine for private practice, ‘leaving my art behind / to rattle and rave / its futile compassion’ with Frank (‘Artists’ 271). The penultimate image in *What a Piece of Work* is oddly misogynistic and recalls my first quotation from *The Monkey’s Mask*:

I’m going to invite him in
for a nocturnal coffee
I’m going to open my legs
as wide as they’ll go

I’ve given the green light
to that tall dark stranger

that most persistent
of seducers

Mister Private Practice.

The humour here, such as it is, involves a pun on ‘private,’ but by now we know that Cyren has heinously destroyed lives under his care. Why does he imagine himself as passive, let alone female, the one being fucked? Why suddenly, flippantly, queer him?

Exorcising the Daemon

That Picador maintained its faith in Porter suggests that her verse novels after *Akhenaten* continued to be popular. The imprint eventually acquired *The Monkey’s Mask* to coincide with the 2000 film version directed by Samantha Lang and starring Susie Porter (no relation) and Kelly McGillis, which had an international release. But that book remains Porter’s biggest hit, with US and UK editions, a German translation, Braille and talking book versions, and a 1999 stage production. *What a Piece of Work* received an Italian translation and, according to *AusStage*, it and *Wild Surmise* have also been adapted for the theatre, in 2000 and 2012 respectively. Critical interest in the novels other than *The Monkey’s Mask* has been more muted. The *AustLit* database lists fifty-nine ‘works about’ it, twenty for *What a Piece of Work*, sixteen for *Wild Surmise*, and twenty-one for *El Dorado*. The bulk of these are reviews and newspaper notices, with academic engagement increasingly fitful and waning. Throughout the period in which her verse novels appeared, Porter’s collections of shorter poems continued to be published by small presses.

Is the falling away of critical interest significant, or merely what happens in the years following an author’s death, before a re-evaluation can begin to take place? Or is it perhaps that Porter’s verse novels, with their ‘graphic sex’ and ‘stenching murder,’ seem not so challenging with the fullness of time? Of *The Monkey’s Mask*, Porter said she wanted to write in the ‘putrid language’ of sensational novels, but ‘still wanted to write the book in poetry’ (Porter 2000). In the end, however, her language was never all that abject, because it retained the politesse of an imagistic style that refused wholly to embrace the dangers—psychological, linguistic—of its own deepest, darkest poetic ambitions. In choosing crime fiction, too, Porter was constrained by the ways in which the form brings its unruly elements to heel, just as it does its villains, who otherwise might seem emblems for the kind of poet she aspired to be. Indeed, her very first collection was titled *Little Hoodlum* (1975). ‘Reckless, careless sex’ implies a ‘big, sexy risk,’ one she was willing to take in *Akhenaten* because the pharaoh, for all his excesses, is ultimately celebrated as an iconoclastic artist. The modern world of the thriller, though, for all its tough talk, lines up against mainstream values, so that radical nonconformity quickly becomes pathological, even monstrous. Nevertheless, Patricia Highsmith, another queer author of popular fiction, managed to shape her hero Tom Ripley wholly out of his moral and sexual ambivalences. That wasn’t Porter’s way.

Discussing *Crete*, which retains *Akhenaten*’s fascination with the outré glamour of ancient civilisations, Lyn McCredden has written: ‘This awareness of the personal and communal injustices and atrocities that define human cultures, then and now, is a mindset far removed from the purely ecstatic and hierophantic impulses. However, as [the volume in question] powerfully suggests, it is a separation of the slenderest kind’ (278). McCredden takes Porter’s ‘awareness’ as a mark of moral insight, ‘the site of ethical suspicion, a place to test the limits of merely daemonic poetics’ (279). I’m not so sure it’s as principled and as considered as that. In her fiction after *Akhenaten*, at least, the complacent if not reactionary ideologies of popular culture, expressed most directly in the crime novels, also work to suppress her daemonic

impulses, demonising them at last and shutting them down—like a bar that’s getting too rowdy and selling drugs and booze to minors. Porter wants her ‘big sexy risk’ to be popular, but is anxiously self-cancelling about the resulting prurient dangers.

In one sense ‘trouble, on the rocks’ means raw, undiluted trouble in the metaphor of a glass of neat spirits, the kind of drink a no-nonsense hardboiled PI might enjoy. But ‘on the rocks’ can also mean to founder, as in shipwrecked, or ‘into or in a state of disaster or ruin’ as the *Macquarie Dictionary* would have it. In other words, trouble that is anything but too deeply troublesome.

NOTES

¹ Even so, culpability is never wholly resolved in *The Monkey’s Mask*: whether Nick or Diana, or both of them, deliberately murdered Mickey, or whether her death was an accident caused by ‘reckless, careless/sex.’

² Mickey’s poems ‘are rendered in a sarcastic light and that is how they stay’ (183–84), Moorhead wrote, going on to argue that ‘*The Monkey’s Mask*, like the work of Kathy Acker, indulges in women-hatred, and because it does this very cleverly it will receive critical acclaim’ (185).

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