

**Poetry and prose contents**

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## Michael Wilding

### From *The Prisoner of Mount Warning*

Plant went out to the Writers' Centre. He liked the lugubrious environment of the downsized mental hospital. The art school was in the original Gothic insane asylum, though you couldn't call it that now. The Writers' Centre was a fine old 1840s mansion, restored in official heritage colours. The croquet lawn had been asphalted into a car park. But the vine alley, the magnolias, the jacarandas, the palm trees, and the fire hydrant remained, giving it a timeless feel, lost in space too, sometime, somewhere beyond the British Raj, out in the British Diaspora.

He could have phoned. It was not that Plant was phobic about phones. That way he would be entirely unemployable. But not to be phobic didn't mean you had to like them. Not as far as he was concerned. You never knew who was recording you. For staff training purposes. You never knew who was listening in, some secretary's office, some switchboard, some other office.

Besides, he needed to get out of the house. That was what they said. Get out of the house. Be a man. Play the game. All authorities and many subversives agreed it was good to get out of the house. Especially if it was a studio apartment. Besides again, he didn't have a lot else to do.

'Charles Dorritt,' Plant said.

'He's not here today,' said the director. Power dressed fit to rival Angela Dark. Black lightweight wool suit, white silk shirt. Black hair, blond streaks.

He hadn't expected Dorritt would be there. He had been going to try and finagle an address or a phone number. But if Dorritt wasn't there today that meant he was here other days. Didn't it?

'He's here sometimes, though?'

'He's one of our volunteers.'

'Volunteers?'

'They help us out. Members, work for the dole, community service, corrective service, work experience.'

'Quite a crew,' said Plant.

'We can't run everything with only two full time staff.'

'No,' agreed Plant. He could hear the signs. It was heading for an all too well-rehearsed harangue on funding and office management.

'What days does he come in?'

She looked at Plant dubiously.

'I can't remember offhand and I'm too busy to look it up but if you want I can pass a message along to him to phone you.'

Plant handed over his card. Research assistance, investigative reporting.

'Here, have one of mine,' she said.

He took it. How could you refuse someone's card?

'You can't give me his number?'

'We respect our members' privacy. We don't give out phone numbers or addresses.'

'I taught a course here,' said Plant.

'So you did. A lot of people do. But you're not a volunteer.'

'I can't afford to be a volunteer. I need to be paid.'

'If you were a volunteer you wouldn't need to ask. You could look him up on the computer.'

'I'll start now,' said Plant.

That was how Plant became a volunteer. And gave his best to the Writers' Centre, for a couple of hours. Putting out chairs for the evening's event. And then setting up the bar. He served himself a beer.

The director handed him a copy of the monthly magazine.

'You can read all about him,' she said. 'While you take your break.'

A bespectacled, bearded, puzzled face gazed from the cover. Charles Dorritt on Writing as Therapy. Turn to page five for story.

Plant turned to page five.

#### SECRET AGENT TELLS ALL by CHARLES DORRITT

This is the story of how I went mad but recovered my sanity through writing as therapy. By writing down what had happened to me I came to terms with my recruitment by the secret service and those years of spying on my fellow citizens.

I had been enjoying university. So when my supervisor called me in to tell me my time had run out, I was shocked. I asked if he couldn't get me more time but he said that was it. He could not recommend a renewal of my funding. I am sure he could have, had he wished. But he had other things in mind.

I didn't.

'What will you do?' he asked me.

'I don't know,' I said.

'Do you have any ideas?' he asked.

'No.'

'I might be able to help,' he said.

That was how I was recruited for the secret service.

It was a library job to begin with. Like research again. Compiling lists. Getting a system going. An entry on each item for the database. But that was only the beginning. That was creating the directory. After that it was going out and surveilling different people. And tracking down groups that were not traceable through the libraries.

Writing down lists in the library I was prepared for. I had been a researcher. But out in the field, as they called it, was very different. I was never properly trained for it. I never imagined it would lead to kidnapping, torture, drug abuse and sex slavery.

I often think of my supervisor who introduced me to the secret world. Did such things happen to him? One day I asked him. That was when they locked me away.

For years I was incapacitated. It was beginning to write that saved me. I took a writing as therapy class and slowly, through the written word, I was able to confront the horrors that had occurred. They are what I have begun to write down. They are the story that at last I can tell.

'He's quite a tease,' said Plant.

'He always seems nervous to me,' said the director. 'He used to be such a sweetie.'

'No contradiction in that,' said Plant. 'This piece' -- he tapped it with his hand -- 'it has all this secret service and sex slave and drugs and torture and kidnapping stuff, but no detail.'

'No,' agreed the director.

'It's not exactly riveting.'

'I'm sure you could find something riveting in the library,' she said. 'We have all sorts of crime fiction in there.'

'No, this will do fine,' said Plant. 'It's just that it seems to go out of its way avoid any specifics.'

'I think that's the point probably,' she said. 'He doesn't want to give too much away. It's intended as a sort of advertisement.'

'An advertisement? For what?'

'For his story. For someone to buy it. A publisher. Or a newspaper. Or an agent.'

'An agent?'

'A literary agent.'

'Oh.'

She gave a Mata Hari smile. 'You're thinking of secret agents, are you?' she said. 'You think they would be interested in buying world rights?'

'I imagine they might,' said Plant.

'I don't know how Charley would feel about that,' she said. She turned back to her desk.

'Before I leave,' he said.

'Yes,' said the director.

'The computers. Dorritt's number.'

'The computers are down,' she said.

Plant gave his best disbelieving smile.

She smiled back. Her best inscrutable one.

'But I gave him a call. He said he'd phone you tomorrow morning.'

'Thank you,' he said.

'You're welcome.'

'I could have spoken to him when you called him,' he said. 'Saved him from having to phone me.'

'I said you were busy doing volunteer work and I didn't want to interrupt you,' she said. 'He understood. He knows we're short staffed.'

'That was very understanding of him,' said Plant.

'Wasn't it!' she said brightly.

'The magazine,' said Plant. 'When did it come out?'

'A couple of weeks ago.'

'And how many do you print?'

'Three thousand.'

'And who sees it?'

'Everybody sees it,' she said.

'But specifically?'

'Our members and the media and libraries. They're mailed out by volunteers. The next mailing will be in a couple of weeks' time. You might like to come along. That way you might get to sneak a look at the mailing list.'

'I'll think about it,' said Plant.

'Before you leave,' she said, 'you might put a few chairs out on the verandah.'

He put out a few chairs, and left.

*The above is an episode from Michael Wilding's The Prisoner of Mount  
Warning, forthcoming from Press On / Arcadia: ISBN  
978-1-921509568*

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**TEXT**

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**Editors: Nigel Krauth & Jen Webb**

**[Text@griffith.edu.au](mailto:Text@griffith.edu.au)**

**TEXT poetry**

**Stuart Barnes**

***Hypothermia***

Cradle of a mountain, coolly cocooned  
In a hollow

Worthless as a church  
In this drift of snow,

Blackening fingers and toes, words  
Deformed, like embryos

Pickled in thalidomide:  
Deathblow. Frostbite, this mind

Glutted with the black, the red,  
The yellow of night,

Never again will these hands write.

*Stuart Barnes writes in a green Melbourne suburb. He's recently completed A Cold Decade, and is currently editing Songs to the Sphinx, his first collection of poetry, and plotting An Octopus's Garden, his first novel. He is content.*

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## **TEXT poetry**

### **C.M. Maling**

#### ***2 poems***

##### **Writer's Block**

I wonder if there is something in the water  
a particle flowing down from the mining boom  
as if the prospect of earning negates the process of creation  
maybe it is the sunlight as it scatters across the page  
how could anything I write be as brilliant  
as that smattering of yellow.

##### **Apple Monkey**

I want to write clever poems  
to put two words next to one another  
that have never met before and  
capture the meaning of everything in their four syllables  
to continue wielding my pen and free Iran  
whilst on a reality television show called  
Australia's Next Nobel Prize Winning Poet  
which naturally I win and the prize  
is a million dollars which I shall use  
to support my campaign for Prime Minister  
where my policy leaflets will be so beautifully written  
that the vote will be a landslide and  
I am elected Supreme Overlord for Life and  
when I die my last words will sum up the human condition  
and I shall be buried on top of Gandhi's grave  
but with a bigger tomb than any pharaoh and  
all the children born after my death will bear my name  
or the name of one of my poems and people  
will no longer need a God  
but most of all I want to be able to put  
those two words next to one another.

*Caitlin Maling has previously published in Australian journals Blue Dog,*

*Voiceworks and Above Water. She completed a BA at the University of Melbourne and a Masters at the University of Cambridge (UK).*

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**TEXT poetry****Cassandra Atherton*****Suburban Sappho****For Gwen Harwood*

Early morning. A Thursday. I hear the garage roller door lift and lower. Lift and lower. The rhythm of people leaving for work. I slide out of bed and in the mirrored wardrobe doors I see my hair is greasy. I should wash it. But instead I pick up my pen and start to write.

Incoming conference call from a university at which I have an interview the following week. "Can we test the link?" Sure. I open my computer. "We'll have to call a technician. Could be a while. Stay with us. Just a little longer. Sorry. Sorry. Sorry." I grip my pen.

Late morning. I shut the computer at last. Ignoring the emails in my inbox. All from students. Can I look at their drafts/plans/poems/stories/lives and fix them, fix them, fix them? They can wait. I search for my pen.

The university spreadsheet stares at me from the coffee table. Semester two results. A long list of names with empty columns. Gaping. The spreadsheet points to the huge pile of essays on my bookshelf. Unmarked. My tower of Babel. From my ivory tower. Towering above me. On the top shelf. I pick up my pen and start to correct.

Afternoon. The phone rings. Have I marked the M.A thesis yet? Could I confer on the mark? Due late November. It's still October, but best do it now. Now. Now. I open the temporarily bound book and start to read. This time I use a pencil to mark the errors.

Late afternoon. I reach for my pen. My blackberry vibrates. Incoming text message. A guest lecture. On Tuesday. "Sorry, it's outside your specialist area. You don't mind. You always come up with such inventive lectures. It can't be too much of a stretch. So, can you, can you, can you?" I lay down my pen and pick up my phone.

Early evening. My cats stir. Their flexed paws kneading the couch's cushion. They run to the kitchen. Looking at me over their shoulders. Am I coming, coming, coming? I surreptitiously slide the pen off the coffee table. Bellamy runs over and nips my leg while Tallulah wails. I tuck the pen behind my ear and go to the kitchen. Friskies tinkle in the bowl. At last I have my moment. I open my book and start to write.

The clock chimes. I have to pick up my husband from work. I take my book and pen to the car and hope he is late. The traffic thwarts me. Gridlock. Red

light. 40 kilometers past the school. I can see my husband walking towards the car before I have even parked. Kiss. "I missed you. What is for dinner?" The pen slides off the car seat and he sits on my book.

Late evening. My husband slides his hand up my thigh. Can I spare fifteen minutes? He takes my pen from me. If I am clever, I can manipulate this situation to my advantage. Eleven minutes later he is snoring. I pick up my pen and start to write: Suburban Sappho.

*Cassandra Atherton lectures in Romanticism and teaches Creative Writing at the University of Melbourne. She is a scholar of Australian poetry and her book, Flashing Eyes and Floating Hair, (Australian Scholarly Press, 2007) focused on readings of Gwen Harwood's poetry. Her book of poetry, After Lolita (Ahadada Press) will be published next month and her novel The Man Jar (Printed Matter Press) is currently in press.*

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