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## Michael Wilding

### *Creative Writing: The CV*

One of Henry's continuing pleasures was working on his bibliography and curriculum vitae, his CV. The bibliography of his publications more than the details of his employment. He could sit for hours at the computer, scrolling through the record of his life and works, as they used to call those studies of literary gents when such things still got published. He could exclaim with Dean Swift, 'What a talent I had then!' The novels. The stories. The essays. The reviews. All separately listed.

His wife found it absurd. But then, Henry felt, she found most of his activities absurd. Let alone his inactivities.

'I thought the idea of early retirement was to give up work.'

'Absolutely.'

'And now you're applying for another job.'

The very thought of it made him sick in the pit of his stomach.

'No, I'm not.'

'So why are you fiddling around with your CV all day?'

'I enjoy it.'

'Enjoy it!' she said.

'I'm keeping it up to date.'

'What's the point?'

What was the point of anything, for that matter, in these twilight years?

'It's a record of what I've done.'

'Done?'

'Written.'

'Why do you need it, you've got the books?'

But having the books and the magazines and the journals and the anthologies wasn't the point. They were part of the point, of course. If he'd had the Master's study with its vast mahogany desk on which the blotting paper is changed every day, its walls lined with indexed bookshelves, one of which is reserved

for calf-bound copies of the Master's own works, the glinting paper knife, the crystal ink bottle, the paperweight, the whole hallowed apparatus, that would have been something. But still, not entirely the point. And anyway, he didn't. Those days were over. As Auden put it, the soft carpets, the big desks will all be reserved by the management for the whopping liars. Henry had a pine wood Ikea table in the corner of the bedroom, or a share of the dining room table.

The point was the list. Though the only lists his wife seemed to believe in were the shopping lists she pressed on him, sending him out to hunt and gather. When he'd kept a list of the books he'd read, she had derided that, too.

'Can't you remember them?'

'Most of them.'

'So why bother?'

Why bother with anything, for that matter. Why let the autonomic nervous system continue? Euthanasia now.

It was something he'd begun to do in adolescence. Lists of bus numbers, lists of aircraft registrations, lists of books read.

'I suppose you keep a list of all your women, too.'

And was that so improper? Probably these days it was. It was not something you could ask. He kept it in his head, anyway. Not the sort of thing to entrust to computer or paper.

But the list of all his works. It was simply too large to keep in his head. True, the ancient bards entrusted to memory immensely long epic poems and heroic declamations. That was how you studied creative writing in the old bardic days. It was possible to train the memory. But if he were to train the memory in such a major way, wouldn't it be preferable to memorize the works themselves, not just the list of them? Then he could astound the audiences at writers' festivals by reciting an entire novel without a text. Not that writers' festivals would welcome such a thing. Not that they any more seemed to welcome him. Publishers' festivals they were more properly called, these days.

So the memory remained untrained. It was a bit late in the day, anyway, to work on that. Like everything else. So he relied on keeping the bibliography up to date on computer, religiously so, so that nothing would be forgotten. In theory it was all in the akashic records, but that was a matter of taking things on trust. He didn't necessarily disbelieve, but he hadn't stuck his fingers in the nail holes.

Sometimes it would be a session of delightful memories, recalling the circumstances in which this piece had been written, that piece published. Recollected images fluttered briefly in some region, not exactly before his eyes, in the imagination somewhere.

In the past there had been students studying for librarianship diplomas who had assembled the bibliography of some poet, some novelist, some literary treasure, which had been subsequently published by some library board. Henry hadn't noticed such items for a while. He had always kept in mind the possibility of suborning some such student, some possible acolyte, offering his assembled bibliography for her to submit and publish. But he suspected that now they were all into information technology rather than the fruits. The days for the publication of a bibliography in progress had passed. Like everything else.

Somewhere in his consciousness he felt that there was a degree of indulgence about this bibliographical activity, if activity it could be called. Reverie, perhaps. It gave Henry pleasure, and that always worried him: was there pleasure without indulgence? Surely there was. But for Henry, there was always the doubt, always the guilt, the fear that something pleasurable was merely indulgence, not work, not morally uplifting.

He tried analysing the source of the pleasure. Was it mere ego? Vanity? Delusion of significance? Or was it more psychologically worrying, evidence of some deep lack of integration and wholeness in his personality? Was it the case that he doubted his very existence unless he could extrapolate and externalize some aspect of it and so reassure himself? Reassure himself he still existed, that he had done good work, and lots of it, lists of it, even if he no longer worked. Was there an anxiety after all those years of institutionalization that, no longer a part of the system, he was no longer of any worth or significance? Was it the case that, without the job that he was so glad to have left, he was now unnecessary? Was he, for all his denials, missing the job? Or missing the structure of justification for his existence? And so these searches through the pages of his bibliography were a search for that justification, a way of reassuring himself. Even more, a way to create a self, not merely reassure it.

Or was it just a way of wasting time? Was it just a matter of occupying himself so that he could forget the fact that he had nothing else to do? Now he had all his time to himself, domestic duties apart, and he was unable to find a use for it. Was it the case that the job had in fact enabled him to write, that stealing time from the job had been his incentive, and now that he no longer had to steal time, he could no longer produce? Had the job been the equivalent of Balzac's huge debts, the engine of his writing, the necessity and the compulsion to produce the fiction, to invent a world in retreat from, or in response to, the pressure of the contingent?

Maybe.

Yes, could be.

And if that put him in the driven and neurotic and obsessive company of Balzac, well that had its satisfactions. Indeed it did.

Scrolling through the publications list, Henry considered the various ways he could group the items. Currently it was framed into separate sections: scholarly, fiction, journalism. These were the priorities of the job. The job he no longer held. Thankfully. But when he had held the job, the bibliography had been shaped for its demands. Scholarly articles were deemed more important than fiction. For a while he had thought it would change with the introduction of creative writing courses. But all too rapidly it became clear that creative writing was going to be part of the education agenda. The interest was not in the writing produced, but in the theory and pedagogy. Careerists in creative writing were not expected to list novels or poems or stories they had written. In an addendum, perhaps. But the career focus was on articles about teaching writing, the theory of writing, writing and the fucking body. Henry's fiction, listed there in all its rich variety, variants, translations and anthologies, remained as irrelevant and marginal as it had been throughout his academic career. Former career.

He spent many hours restructuring the bibliography. In the past he had separated the scholarly from the journalistic. Indeed some of the journalistic he had not even recorded. It had been so frowned upon in the past. Now there was a change! It had been the received wisdom when Henry began his career that academics did not participate in journalism. At the worst they might contribute an occasional book review to the press. As long as it was something specialized, something quasi-academic. But regular reviewing was frowned upon. And feature journalism or opinion pieces were absolutely taboo. Of course some academics did write for the press, even then. A few. But their careers suffered. Chairs were denied them because of their populism.

So Henry, seeing not only no future in it, but also positive harm, had kept his distance from the press. At various times he had done some book reviewing. But it could not be listed in his annual publication report. And so it was not listed in the list of his life's work.

He was not sure when the change occurred. It caught him by surprise, he admitted that. He had not been observant enough of the shifts in acceptability, in the redefinitions of the job. Maybe he had not been reading the papers.

But, whenever it had happened, now it was institutionalized. Now academics in cultural studies and gender studies and education had their regular columns in the press. Now the political scientists and economists held forth regularly in the opinion pages, those with the right views. Now everybody was scratching and scraping to get into the reviews pages. Now academics eagerly sought out newspaper columns and achieved advancement on the basis of them, as far as Henry could make out. There was nothing else they seemed to have to advance on. Maybe just putting in the hours. Time serving as it used to be called.

Henry had been thinking about newspaper work. The pretence of scholarship was no longer necessary. Let alone the practice. Why write earnestly and learnedly for a culture that had died and a system that had been destroyed? Especially when such work was unpaid. Retirement was unregretted, but financially it was a bit tight. He fiddled around with the bibliography and rejigged it.

If he beefed up the journalism and so diluted the academic, recontextualized it was probably the way to put it, he could make it look like the record of a professional writer's life. Essays, reviews, commentaries. A bit of scholarship wouldn't hurt. Mark of a good education. Make it look like think pieces as the media called them. Make his literary production more integrated. The humanist at the desktop.

Not that anyone was going to see the list except Henry. He wasn't applying for work. Though a bit of freelance journalism would be good. If it paid well. Some did. Reviewing didn't.

But something to do when the creative juices didn't flow. When the well ran dry. Or the sap froze. All these sticky liquid metaphors. Why not when the lines were down, when transmissions had ceased? Or were being jammed.

And listing it all resituated it all for himself. Now he could refashion his past. Present himself as someone who had always scribbled for the press, no narrow elitist, no ivory towered scholar, no corduroy and leather elbow patched professor but a man of letters. If he rejigged it with that in mind he would be able to see himself as that and approach the media in confidence. It wasn't a matter of sending them the list. But of the revised self-image the augmented list would give him. He did not need to submit the bibliography to the broadsheet editors. But having restructured it enabled him to reinvent himself. It gave him

many happy hours, the idea of producing journalism hovering there, but not impetuously acted upon. For the time being there was enough pleasure in perfecting the lists of times past.

He set to work to find the unlisted, to supplement what he had with what he had, if not denied, at least what he had, in that superseded past, chosen not to draw attention to. He would represent the œuvre as that of a man of letters rather than a scholar, a contributor to the higher journalism as it used to be called. It was not a futile activity: rather, it enabled him to see himself more commercially. He would focus on the press in future and freelance some pieces to supplement the cash flow. The only requirement he could discern was that whatever was written should be bland and uncontroversial. That did not seem to be a problem anymore. He could write bland. Increasingly he wondered if he would ever write anything else. These days.

So Henry rewrote himself. The appendix of reviews and occasional writing was incorporated into the main body of the bibliography. Half-forgotten pieces in ephemeral weeklies were chased up. Some he dimly remembered he seemed to have no copies of.

He dragged himself into the university library one morning and tracked down some of the reviews he had written in journals he remembered writing for, preserved on browned and brittle paper in substantial bound volumes.

Dr Bee found him there, sitting at a desk by the slit in the ferro-concrete that passed for a window, meticulously leafing through issue after issue of a long defunct journal of opinion, other bound volumes stacked on the desk. Each was as surprised as the other.

'Can't stay away, Henry, is that it?' Dr Bee remarked.

'Makes two of us,' said Henry. 'Like birds released from captivity, we return to roost in our cage.'

'I wasn't planning on roosting,' said Dr Bee. 'Unless some particularly attractive proposition should come by. But I don't see one.'

He looked round at the deserted stacks, the steel shelving, the fluorescent lighting, the brutal concrete walls.

'Not a human form in sight. Much better pickings in the shopping malls. Disaffected housewives, merry widows, all the fun of the fair. But here - .'

He gestured.

'Where have all the flowers gone?' Henry said, half sang.

Dr Bee grimaced in distaste. He leaned over and looked at the date of the magazine Henry was consulting. Thirty-something years ago.

'Lost in time, are we?'

'The good years,' said Henry. He reached out and turned one of the books Dr Bee was clutching so that he could read the spine.

'Simenon. Up to the minute as ever, I see.'

There was no denying it. Both were focussed firmly on the past. And neither could say they were very happy about it. But without a present to occupy them,

where else could they focus? The future? Unimaginable, or all too imaginable.

'Next thing you'll be regretting no one lectures in gowns anymore,' Dr Bee said.

'No,' said Henry.

'No regrets, or no you never did?'

'Both,' said Henry. 'Lecturing in a gown seemed, I don't know --'

'Elitist?'

'Maybe.'

'Medieval?'

'Sort of.'

'Too much of a freak show?'

'That too. Backward looking, I felt.'

'You were a moderniser.'

'Well, up to a point.'

'But now you are full of retrospective regret.'

'Not really. I just wish I'd done more journalism.'

'And made more money.'

'Yes. Except that thirty years ago we were quite well off. Comparatively. So there wasn't the financial pressure. So it wasn't such an issue.'

'But it is now?'

'Yes.'

'Now you want to supplement your pension.'

'Wouldn't mind,' said Henry.

'By writing for this sort of thing.'

He gestured at the bound volumes.

'Trouble is this sort of thing no longer exists. The serious weeklies have died.'

'What about the unserious ones?'

'They died too.'

'So now it's the tabloids.'

Henry bridled a bit.

'I don't know about that.'

'Elitism still survives?'

'It's not a matter of elitism. It's just that I'm not sure I could do it very well.'

'Is it meant to be done well?'

'That's a point,' said Henry.

Neither Dr Bee nor Pawley had much interest in Henry's CV. Who wants to be asked to stand in awe at an old colleague's achievement? It was not something that could be expected of either of them. As a long shot, he tried mentioning it to the Director of the Writers' Centre.

'What are you doing with yourself, Henry?' the Director had asked.

'Working on my bibliography.'

'Send me a copy when you're finished with it.'

'Really?' he said. Somebody cared? He didn't mention that he expected never to be finished, it was an ongoing project, his life. But he could send her the most recent version.

'We'll keep it on file,' she said.

'But you didn't,' said Pawley, when Henry mentioned it over lunch.

'Of course I did.'

'Oh, Henry,' said Pawley. 'I know I appeared insufficiently fascinated in your literary production.'

'No, no,' said Henry politely.

'Yes, yes, yes,' said Pawley.

They sat in the Indian Summer garden restaurant, Pawley with his vegetarian thali special, Henry with his saag paneer, Dr Bee with his beef vindaloo. A bottle of Frascati in plastic netting that Dr Bee said reminded him of fishnet stockings stood on the table.

'Because I am,' Pawley continued. 'Insufficiently fascinated by your publications list. I did not invite you to email it to me and you are hurt.'

'No, I'm not hurt.'

'Yes you are. I can feel it. I can sense these things. Empathy.'

'You're stoned.'

'Heightens the senses,' said Pawley. 'The reason I did not encourage you to email me your list, despite your all too transparent desire to, was to protect you. If you were to email it to me, it would immediately find its way into some secret agency data bank, since without doubt all my emails are intercepted, just as the mail used to be, and still is. I'm sure they would find it very convenient having the complete list of your publications. Saves them having to hire some poor hack to compile it.'



'I don't know - ,' Henry began.

'You have it on a secure computer, do you?' Pawley asked.

'Well - .'

'Not one you go online from.'

'I've only got the one PC.'

'I told you before, it's risky,' said Pawley. 'They could hack into it, do anything. Anyway, not to worry,' he added. 'Now it's on the Writers' Centre files for all to see. Every little detail. Serbian anthologies. Iranian translations. All the details of the Californian alternative. When will you ever learn, Henry?'

'Does the Director have every writer's CV on file?' Dr Bee asked.

'No idea.'

'Perhaps you should find out.'

'I imagine she might for the writers who've run workshops. Or given seminars there.'

'All filed and stored along with fingerprints and biometric data?'

'Seems like the obvious place,' said Henry.

'Indeed it does,' said Dr Bee.

'I don't see any problem,' said Henry. But falteringly. He reached for a napkin to wipe away the pureed spinach that had dribbled down his chin.

'You were always so trusting,' said Pawley. 'And now your trustworthiness is rewarded. Guardian of the National Treasury data bank. With someone of your impeccable credentials, who could fail to trust you? A fine figurehead. Luring in all the unsuspecting to deposit their intimate bibliographical details in the archives over which you preside.'

'I don't think it's like that at all.'

'Well you wouldn't, would you?' said Dr Bee, piling on the hot mango chutney.

'Remember all that crap about the Soviets putting dissident writers in asylums,' said Pawley.

'Wasn't it true?' Henry asked.

'Who knows?'

'Quite a lot of people claim to,' Dr Bee assured them.

'Well, anyway, that's not the point. The point is,' Pawley pointed out, 'that here we have a centre for dissident writers in the grounds of an asylum.'

'What dissident writers?' Dr Bee asked.

'Well, how about Henry?'

'How about you, Henry?' Dr Bee asked.

Pawley pressed on before Henry could reply.

'And now all his dissident data is on file in a so-called writers' centre in a lunatic asylum.'

'It is not a so-called writers' centre, it's a real writers' centre,' Henry objected, chair of it after all.

'For so-called real writers,' Dr Bee.

'I'm just pointing out analogies, homologies, whatever,' said Pawley.

'Whatever, indeed,' Dr Bee agreed.

'Why do you think the Centre was set up?' Pawley demanded.

'Cultural policy,' said Henry. 'Every advanced democracy supports the arts.'

Pawley laughed.

'You don't really believe that, Henry,' said Dr Bee.

'Well, it's true. What is there not to believe?'

'The motive, Henry. And don't say all that guff about cultural heritage and fostering national treasures.'

'They may get the priorities wrong,' Henry conceded.

'Indeed they do,' Dr Bee agreed.

'Fund the wrong people. Support idiotic projects. But the intention --.'

'The intention is to control,' said Pawley, stabbing into his dhal.

'The intention is to buy votes,' said Dr Bee, digging into the lime pickle.

'Votes?' said Henry. 'How many writers are there? You could count the number of votes from real writers on a couple of hands and a foot.'

'Real writers!' said Pawley. 'Who cares about real writers, whatever cultural illusion they might be? Funding shuts them up a bit, buys them off, stops them moaning in the press all the time. Like you said, their numbers are insignificant. The real votes are in the people who think they are writers. Those who would like to be writers. The literary ladies of a certain age. The ones who go to writers' festivals or writers' workshops instead of playing bridge or after playing bridge. Nothing wrong with it. Hobbyists. Like it says on the 'Statement by a Supplier' tax form: 'Reason for not quoting an Australian Business Number (ABN) to an enterprise, the supply is made in the course of an activity that is a private recreational pursuit or hobby.' Old folks with hobbies. An integral part of our demographics.'

'And then there are the inner-city upward-mobile bourgeoisie in marginal seats who feel culture enhances their life style and puts up real estate values. And don't forget the UNESCO statistics, of course. Looks good in the international league tables to spend all this money on education and culture. Diverts attention from the policy on asylum seekers and the degradation of indigenous peoples.'

'That's why they set up Writers' Centres. No real writers belong. One or two desperates. Those losing patronage. Losing publishers. No offence, Henry, nothing personal. The rest are wannabes. But if they feel the government is supporting them, they support it.'

'I have no problem with that,' said Henry. 'As long as some of the cash filters down to real writers.'

'Like yourself.'

'Not necessarily.'

'Like Francesca Templar and Tuscan Bayes.'

'Yes, well, they get it wrong sometimes, I said that.'

'No, they don't,' said Pawley. 'They get it right. Those are the old slags Foreign Affairs and the secret services like to support. The rest of the funds are pissed away on mentorships and equity and writers' festivals and writers' centres. And administration. Never forget administration. That takes most of it. Makes sure the money doesn't get into the hands of subversive artists.'

'I see you've thought about this.'

'Indeed we have,' said Dr Bee. 'We see our old colleague Henry putting himself forward for honours. Should get a gong for this community service even if he'll never get it for his novels. And we worry, Henry.'

'We are concerned for you,' said Pawley, breaking off a fragment of pappadam. 'Particularly when you front for a national data base collection agency monitoring dissidents, deviants, subversives, potential terrorists and other threats to civil order. I'd trash your CV now. While you can. And the copy on the Centre's computer. Get in there and delete it. Who wants to know the details of everything you've ever published, Henry?'

Henry looked at them, silent.

'No one with any good motives, you can be sure of that. The honours committee? If they look at it at all it will only be to find evidence for grounds to exclude you. And there'll be plenty of them. All those revolutionary sentiments you spouted in obscure, forgotten, unremembered publications. Which you so thoughtfully list. You want my advice, Henry. Wipe it.'

'Expunge it,' Dr Bee agreed.

'Trash it. And while you're at it, burn the books and magazines you still keep copies of. So no evidence remains. After all, even though they've got the bibliography, they can't really prove anything without the actual copies of what you wrote. So I'd send those old radical utterances up into flames straight away. And all those translations in pre-entrepreneurial China. Let alone the non-aligned nation stuff. India. The Former Yugoslavia. Libya. North Korea.'

'I never published in Libya or North Korea,' said Henry.

'Not that you know,' said Dr Bee. 'But you wouldn't want them speculating that you might have. Best reduce it all to a little heap of ash you can put in the Writers' Centre Garden of Remembrance.'

'What Garden of Remembrance?'

'Ah,' said Dr Bee, 'you have already forgotten. The Garden of Forgetfulness, then.'

'You people,' said Henry, 'have you no faith in anything?'

'No,' said Dr Bee.

'No trust?'

'Absolutely not,' said Pawley.

'You're worm-eaten by cynicism.'

'It has been remarked,' said Dr Bee.

'Corroded by conspiracy theory.'

'Conspiracies are us,' said Pawley.

'You undermine everything.'

'I think you will find the undermining was already done,' said Dr Bee. 'We merely draw attention to it to save you from falling through the floor boards and breaking a leg.'

'Or neck,' said Pawley.

'Indeed. Or neck,' said Dr Bee.

'Is there nothing you believe in?'

'Cynicism,' said Dr Bee.

'Conspiracy,' said Pawley.

'Words fail me,' said Henry, breaking off a piece of naan.

'Thank heavens,' said Dr Bee.

'At last,' said Pawley.

The rest was silence. Except for the gentle tinkle of wine being poured. And Dr Bee tossing fragments of bone onto his plate after he had sucked out the last of their marrow.

*'Creative Writing: The CV' is an episode from Michael Wilding's Superfluous Men, published by Arcadia, Melbourne, 2009.*

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## TEXT

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## TEXT poetry

### Maggie Butt

#### *Second Life*

No desks and screens for me: but tanned  
a biscuit brown, eyes creased from staring  
out to sea; my dreadlocked hair bleached  
straw by salt and sun; a wet-suit skin tight  
as a seal's; body of muscle and hope.

My second self won't care about the cold shock  
of the sea as long as surf is up: I'll breast  
the breaking waves, buffeted and drenched,  
cough water, coming up for more,  
feet numb, ready for the moment and the rush.

And in the evening, salt-lipped, sand-caked,  
sit by firelight, watch the sparks soar star-wards,  
listen to the songs and poems of the world,  
all searching for the perfect word  
the perfect wave, to carry us ashore.

*Maggie Butt teaches creative writing at Middlesex University, UK, and is the chair of the National Association of Writers in Education. Her first poetry collection, Lipstick, was published in 2007.*

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**TEXT poetry**

**Barbara Edwards**

***Hermeneutics 1.5***

Sitting between those  
Who live and those who search for  
Reasons for actions:  
Explaining whys? and wherefores?  
The creative writers' task.

*Barbara Edwards is undertaking a PhD in the Social Sciences at Swinburne University of Technology. Having developed her family she is now developing her interests in words and ideas, particularly in relation to the way that they may be presented and to the value of those presentations.*

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## TEXT poetry

**Sue King-Smith**

### *Rapunzel*

Ivory tipped  
and bricked with books  
it towers within. I am crowded  
around with ideas, sticky thin  
and ropable that I tumble  
earthward trying to  
find the ground.

Words scurry in and out,  
a hurried, impatient lot,  
furrowed with self-importance.  
I clutch at them,  
these melodious notes of knowing  
but they sift, formless, from my  
febrile, filing mind. And outside  
birds twaddle on in magpie  
verse, and flying things flick  
short lives against the glass,  
and breezes waver through shadows,  
making patterns on the bare soil.

Then he comes.

He battles through thorny  
vernacular, crashes his body against  
an undergrowth of ideology  
and cuts an intrepid  
path of metaphors that wilt  
the hurting reason of theory.  
Then he scales the sacred walls,  
Marx and Dante as his footholds,  
and I wind him in on a thin  
sickly string of poetry that  
survives despite...

He plonks a kiss,  
and a cuppa on my desk,  
tells me the baby needs a feed  
and that the electricity bill is due  
today, not tomorrow, and would  
I like a sandwich, tuna and tomato,  
to feed the body ... the body?

*Sue King-Smith is completing a PhD in Creative Arts at Deakin University. For three years, she was the co-editor of The Animist, an electronic arts ezine. In the past few years, she has had poems published in Famous Reporter, Mascara, The Paradise Anthology, Tarralla, Blue Giraffe, Woorilla, Pendulum, Oban '06 and Tamba, and articles published in JASAL and Linq. Her first collection of poetry, An Accumulation of Small Killings, was published by MPU in 2008.*

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## TEXT poetry

### Jeff Klooger

#### *Taxonomy*

##### *After reading Ross Clark's poem 'Chordata'*

Using his license, the poet writes, 'We had gills once.'  
Yes. Submerged beneath our customary selves  
the shark patrols its killing field  
heaving its sleek shape through the mind,  
the deep sea caverns of our perfectly modern lives.  
But - and this is what *I* am  
- I cannot let it go. *We* had gills?! When?  
When we were not ourselves  
but creatures wholly of the deep  
all unconscious and ready to kill  
at the twitch of a nerve, the bare hint  
of weakness. I have seen men behave like this (philosophers  
they called themselves) maddening  
at the slightest billow of red, engorging themselves  
on the flesh of the wounded and helpless.  
But even so. *We? Had gills?*

Crude and brutal as any philosopher  
I won't let a metaphor be, want every truth  
four square and literal. You see, either what had gills  
was not us, or we are all things  
at all times, the whole history of life  
from protoplasm to the waif-thin,  
hairless, buggle-eyed monster who will one day  
replace us. Oh not everything,  
the poet corrects, a mere phylum - as though  
compared to genocide, mass murder were a trifle.

Is it mere fussiness to worry where we put  
our first persons? But if our '*We's* and '*I's*  
grow too large and encompassing, what will we not consume,  
what hope, what breathing space  
will be left for what we are *not*, the world  
beyond ourselves, our home and neighbours, the alien  
universe we inhabit and the others  
we share it with?

You see, I *am* a shark, I go in for the kill.  
My jaws are cool logic and they clamp shut  
when I bite. But I cannot breathe  
in water - never could, not me.  
I leave such metamorphoses to fairy tales.

I am what I am  
and that brief history compassed  
by what I once was and what I will become.  
Beyond that lies a world of otherness  
- other hunters, other victims, and neither -  
a world there before me and despite me,  
of unending mysteries, unfathomable creatures  
and exquisite nightmares.

*Jeff Klooger has had work published in a number of Australian literary journals, including Meanjin, Overland and Westerly, with more to appear in Famous Reporter, Retort Magazine and dotlit. He has a PhD in social theory and philosophy from La Trobe University.*

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