WRITING THE POSTCOLONIAL BODY IN LES MURRAY’S FREDY NEPTUNE; DREAMRISER

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Abstract

This thesis is presented in two parts. The first part, *Dreamriser*, is a verse-novel in two books, the second part a critical essay, ‘Writing the Postcolonial Body’ in Les Murray’s 1997 verse-novel *Fredy Neptune*.

*Dreamriser* is split into two books. In ‘The Runner’ Felix Morning wakes on a backstreet of a strange city with no memory of who he is. Flick shows him the way to The Bunker, an underground club where he meets the Dreamriser, a mysterious woman he half remembers. She gives him a parcel he must deliver to the place of the lost things. In ‘Pinky’ Iain and Esther meet on a train and they start a love affair. Damaged by her experience with men, Esther has been sent by the Dreamriser cult to take her revenge. When she falls in love with Iain she must make a choice between destruction and union.

*Dreamriser* was inspired by the idea of the verse-novel, its possibilities and parameters. But where *Fredy Neptune* is an extended narrative through Twentieth Century history, *Dreamriser* messes with time frames and layers of reality and is located within the lost interior ‘history’ of the protagonist. I was interested in finding out how far I could push the lyric under the pressure of narrative, and play with the idea of linear narrative under the pressure of the lyric. I hoped to achieve a sense of the lyric poem across the whole structure of the ‘verse-novel’ as much as within each stanza, section or chapter. In this way *Dreamriser* mimics rather than attempts to emulate the conventional idea of the novel. *Fredy Neptune* moves towards and is constantly seeking that resolution and return to wholeness for its protagonist; *Dreamriser* refuses and actively undermines expectations of resolution and conclusion. Where *Dreamriser* and *Fredy Neptune* meet is in their treatment of the body as subject and material for the poem, in the location of the mind and the myriad layers of identity within the body, and in its consideration of gender and gender relations.

In the following critical essay, ‘Writing the Postcolonial Body in Les Murray’s *Fredy Neptune*’ I look at how Murray addresses postcolonial identity in Australia in his verse novel through the medium of the body. History, gender, national identity and the poem itself are embodied in the very act of writing and in the physical experience of reading the poem. I argue that Murray writes identity through the body in the poem of *Fredy Neptune*. 
Declaration

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_Dreamriser_ is dedicated to the memory of my parents, Sonia and Maurice Corbett.

The Author

Dreamriser

A Verse-Novel

By

Sarah Corbett

*

Maybe in some distant place, everything is already, quietly lost.

Haruki Murakami, Sputnik Sweetheart
Book One

The Runner
1. The Cafe

City lights run underground into the confluence of hours,
before winter sun up, before workers stir,
before birdsong, after night’s work
when time stands still.

On a side street three turns from the thoroughfare
far enough to be forgotten, faded signs for goods
nobody wants hang above shops
whose boarded fronts lean in

as if to check the breathing, as a new mother does,
of the being lying in a puddle that could be blood,
but is an overcoat left like a prop
from the night’s show.

The first bars of Beethoven’s Fifth, a tinny symphony
from folds of cloth, repeat then stop.
The creature stirs, pulls to all fours
like a puppet rewound on a string.

It runs fingers through hair, turns hands like a pair
of new gloves and rubs the roundel of skin
on a finger that is a band of satin, thinks,
what has been taken?

That blind touch to the face, do I recognise this?
Cheekbones, cheeks, stubble, chin –
waits for the dream to reveal itself, waits
and cobbles press knees,

heart pushes at throat, neck aches with holding still.
The man stands, a spider on stilts.
All is dark shapes on dark shapes.
He is one of them.

*
Static fizzes on the air like a coming storm.
He follows the sound, turning his head to a basement
where a sign for Café Open buzzes on.
In the misting window now pinkly neon
he sees a me in there, momentary reversal of the physics of reflection:
spindly giant on trembling pins flapping bat wings,
hair spikes, eyes pits, mouth cave where fear
is an over-coat on his tongue.

To that face he could not put a name. Is this the ghost of who I am?
All meaning falls away and he is crawling naked from the sea
streaming lost from every hole. What have I done
to bring down such punishment?

A man forms from the café’s unlit interior, hero or villain
framed by a camera birthing the embryo of a white face
as lights stutter on. He has the look of an ancient
or one returning from the dead.

Fingers jostle a knuckle of keys as they unbolt the door.
The café rebounds like a punched drunk
and night air meets ground coffee beans
laced with grease and dust.

Coil of smells whip our hero in. He lurches to a red booth
below a plastic chandelier stuck with flies.
Between salt and pepper a menu says Stan’s.
Stan himself stands beside him,
an old hound waiting for the hunt he can only dream,
dropsy eyed, tobacco haired, vest straining at stomach,
lifting the worn pads of his carpet slippers
to his chest’s laboured lift and wheeze.

Smell like a bundle of clothes kept too long at the back of a cupboard.
‘What you like to eat?’ Voice a croak from the sea bottom.
On his forearm a dragon tenses and tightens
around a naked woman.
Our man orders full English with toast and coffee and while Stan jots, 
drops his hands for money into the pockets 
of the overcoat, finds three things: 
a key, a map drawn on a napkin, 
a plastic card. Before he takes in the detail, Stan taps the card, 
‘no worry, this card pays. Mr Felix’ 
The name is an adder striking to the heart of him. 
Felix? Who is Felix? Am I Felix?

‘Do you know me?’ he asks. Stan’s mouth un-zips to pearls of teeth 
like a mannequin’s. ‘We wait for Felix; the Café waits, yes. 
When you wake, we wake. You are the switch’: 
Stan smiles, the pearls clicking.

Nausea rushes Felix. This is some weird shit going on. 
I must be dreaming. Seat and table come up hard against him, 
the chandelier sends out a rainbow prism 
too real for even lucid dreaming.

Eat; he should feed the body he at least has some affinity with. 
He is empty as a well after a long drought, 
an echo doubling back on him 
so that he is echo’s question.
2. Flick

The door knocks to the wall. A woman walks in a dawn chill, 
throws off her hood, tucks white blond hair 
behind pearlescent ears. She is eighteen 
or so, a girl still, changing.

Her eyes are stones of aquamarine Felix knows in gold on almond skin. 
He reaches for them but she puts a gloved hand to his. 
‘Hey Felix. You made it’ she says and calls ‘the usual’ 
to Stan’s carpet slipper shuffle.

The state is dangerous. She knows him when he does not know himself, 
triggers an image he cannot place. She is a stranger with, 
yes, my mother’s eyes (His own are darker blue 
as if ink was spilled in them).

‘I, I made it’, he stammers, I’ll be Felix to make sense of this. 
Stan pushes in with her order of tea and toast 
and a refill of coffee from a swilling pot, 
the brown stuff steaming hot.

She dips her head to butter-pooled bread she soaks in her milky tea, 
finger-scooping the soggy mess into her pink scallop mouth. 
Felix looks away, disturbed by his body’s response 
to this beauty eating, fingers

instead the card in his pocket, pulls it out beneath the table. 
The face above the name Felix Morning matches what he saw 
in the window only clean shaven. Where have I been 
to arrive not knowing myself?

Turning it over he finds The Bunker printed in Stan’s red gothic. 
In a corner a hologram flips between two motifs: 
one letters, the other twisted. 
Before he can decipher it
the girl-woman kisses his cheek. ‘Come back Felix’. Voice like butter
smoothed on bread. He wants to say, who is Felix?

*Who are you? And what does all this mean?*
Where she kissed leaves a hard scale.

How can he ask her name without giving himself away?
She solves it saying ‘Don’t you know your own Felix –
‘Felicity Summers known as Flick?’
A mockney gurning a child might do

as she slips off to the loo. Felix relaxes, sure they’re not lovers.
She has appeal but she’s no more than half girl.
Coffee kicks in to replace the shock of coming to,
heart rapid in his throat.

His body is weary, an ache in his legs and feet and back
as if he has run all night and maybe he has.
Right then he knows he can run. A deer
flits through him as through a wood.

On his feet worn but expensive running shoes fit like skins.
*I’m at the heart of some illusion, or insane.*
A hand pulls him out of his throat,
hangs him on the light above.

He looks down on a long back slumped at a table,
whorl of baldness at the crown of the head,
base of neck creased red and scabbed with eczema,
shine of rubbed in sweat on coat collar.

Flick returns doing her buttons and he slams back to self.
‘I’ve gotta go. See you tonight’,
her face close up, eyes water glinting at stone,
‘Get some sleep. You’ll need it.’

‘Where shall I see you?’ he asks, the mystery deepening.
‘The Bunker, duh, where else?’ half annoyed, half concerned,
taking the steps into the street with a bound.
*She’s the key to this whole thing.*

Stan taps Felix’s wrist where the watch sits under the cuff
like a hospital tag. *That’s it.* Felix fingers the gash
peeling back in his head; but the wound is imaginary.
Stan shucks the keys like a tambourine.
3. The Garden

Felix checks the watch that woke him two hours hence. Six o’clock. A blue light winks behind digital numbers on the watch face.

*It is an ugly watch*, he thinks, *not something I would have chosen.*

Yet the strap is supple and sits with ease behind his wrist.
He shakes off the thought of who has chosen it for him.
*Who am I to choose anything: Felix Morning? a trick, a ghost, a flibbertigibbet?*

As he leaves the cobbled street the light perceptibly shifts, not just the movement from alley to avenue but a distinct moment, like the moving on of time, as if a paler lens has slipped into place.

The sky unfolds blue rinsed linen over white stone houses set back from swept pavements behind iron gates. A guard of London Plane and Silver Birch spangle with frost.

Felix can no longer see the corner of the street where Stan’s Café waits – *does Stan go back on his wheels into the clock?* - and this grand silent one stretches on from one horizon to the next.

One of those locked gardens occurs between two mansions, book-ended in marble strained through rain and ochre of rust, unkempt behind peeled railings two of which have been forced to admit, a dog, *or me.*

Felix pushes his coat through and folds concertina style into the gap. *I know this place,* the hydrangeas and rhododendrons, lilacs, the gone-wild roses. Dead flowers on the path release a perfume where he treads
and he is six years old pelting through tunnels of root, tangle of unburied limbs he hits and hits with a stick as he runs.

A drumming from above answers his music;
when he makes light entry it is raining petals.

On he runs, down the rose walk, past the corner of lilacs now in bloom,
a garden of bruises falling from his baton like the five finger bruises that will that blacken on his thigh.
It is a dream he trips into then forgets.

Ivy bends around a bench tucked under a yew’s black apron.
Felix sits and his foot catches a nylon holdall disguised with leaves. Inside he finds two blankets —
from childhood, my childhood —

and rubs with a heart lurch the milky edge that he used to rub
and say the rhyme that kept away the faces.
Also finds sweatshirt, socks, woollen hat
infused with a russety musk.

He sniffs his hands, the t-shirt crackly with sweat,
this smell, his smell coming at him better than memory.
He pulls on the sweatshirt, the hat. He’s not felt it for a bit
but that cold will bite, he knows.

What else does he know? Bed of blankets, fist for a pillow, breathing into the well of self what warmth breath allows until a mimic of sleep that is a boat hitched to a stump bumping against the bank.

First he takes out the key and the map, the black card in his pocket.
The face, he has to admit, is what he saw, but the name doesn’t fit anything he can dig from his brain’s pockets:
Felix, Felix, Felix Morning?

Nothing comes to him. He has no pen to test the hand that sketched turns to a cross, two lines becoming a wave, and is that a bridge?
The key is plain, and like all other keys made to open a door.

The name of a place: The Bunker, a club of which he is a member,
for which, in the small print beneath his name, he is The Runner,
and the address: Solomon’s Wharf,
of which he has also never heard.
Then to the hologram. Tipped to the sky the image comes clear:
a dragon curling around a woman writhing, dancing?
  Two words made one in a circle:
    Dreamriser.

His hands fall apart; he forgets about his forgetting.
Sleep now, and later he’ll meet Flick,
    perhaps at the cross over the river;
    a river, surely, is not hard to find.
4. The Bridge

The river slides, liver brown, along the backs of tenements.
Felix stands at a slip-way where once there were boats,
now only uncollected rubbish a cat inspects,
parts of bicycles, piss soaked mattress.

He is only an hour from his green sleep in his locked bower
where more than trees watched over him as he dreamt.
Flowers unrolled their names from his tongue on scrolls
as the garden bloomed through all its seasons.

It has rained since; the path shines, dipped with age. A chilled Felix
thinks of Flick, a pastille of warmth, nourishment.
Was it her eyes that forced the guess? He can’t pin it,
but it is there, a fine unbreakable thread.

He filters the maze of back streets, tucks and ginnels, hugging the river
until a tunnel, flickering dark and half light under faulty electrics
tips him into darker night of abandoned warehouses.
On a wall he finds ridged lines like Braille.

The bridge rises, hump backed leviathan, out of the black ocean
that is the night that gathers now around him.
The river staggers by, pissy coat tails, steely breath.
Ahead a green sign is an alien moon.

Before he can reach it, a fist at coat scruff hauls him skyward.
He falls up, world from his foot-soles drops,
laid out in printer’s blocks below the sky’s ink.
His belly summersaults into his heart.

A face in his bigger than human, eyes light bulbs, pupils filaments,
the voice a whittling iron, ‘I’m watching you little brother’
One last shake and he is flung to earth up the far river bank.
The figure is gone but for the print of its wing.
5. The Shower

Felix stumbles over broken ground, night close under packed in clouds.
There is a fine rain that clings, the soaking kind.
He rubs his eyes. Rumble of music under his foot soles.
The moon comes in and out of focus.

A building mushrooms to the glisten of a name: The Bunker.
A luminous seam cracks the doorway. Should he enter?
Has he a choice? Return to the garden? Maybe death is there. Or the winged one.

The door opens two red lungs. He is plucked inside
by two black suited men, one on each arm. Music no longer plays.
Only the fizzle of a light bulb above a booth
where white teeth, black hair, eyebrows

drawn in and beneath the paint a young woman laughing at him.
He digs for the card and drops it in the dish.
She swivels it with a click of metal on glass,
checks it with unnecessary attention.

It’s like entering another country, one on its guard; a tiny hatch
on memory. More hands grab him, ‘here, take this’,
a bundle at his chest shoves him through a swing door,
‘leave the dirty stuff outside’. Flick.

Roll of towel, fresh jeans, t-shirt, razor, soap, a note he unfolds
like a fortune cookie tainted with lilacs: don’t let on you know.
All he knows is nothing. What about what about what Flick knows?

He is in a tiled bathroom under white lights: on one wall urinals,
the other cubicles, at the far end a distressed shower curtain.
They’ve got an order and they’ve slotted me in,
Dreamriser, they’ve made me fit,
Or, and this occurs with a gut churn that sends him to a cubicle,
\[ \text{It’s me that’s made a world around who I’m not} \]
\[ \text{to make up for what I’ve lost.} \]
His shit falls in one emptying lot.

The shower, fixed head rusted at the edge, streams steaming water
the moment he steps in. To shave, there is a foil mirror.
He leaves his coat on a hook, his shoes outside,
strips and chucks the rest.

Enjoy this, body, backed under the gush, head against the tiles,
belly concave – he can suck it in waves – bone of hips.
Feet even and nicely arched, regular toes, nails clipped;
how long has he been at this?

Someone, somewhere, has been looking after him, someone like Flick.
The body of a younger man than he feels blocks
a thought of her pushing hair behind an ear
and someone else appears

as if from the roots of memory: thick black hair in unpicked coils
like a Medusa, falling to the two nubs of bone in the small
of her back, skin petals of a creamy rose
shining like water over stone.

Now he can touch what he is: shoulder to breastbone to rib,
skin creamy but for blond chaff between nipples
and a darker line from navel to cock
fattening and rising from its springy bed.

Warm, alone, a child finding itself unobserved turning, secretive,
to that genital tug that is revelation and memory.
His inside unrolls: openings like dark flowers speeded up.
He is so lost, he might not come back.

*
Flick waits for him with a tray of stew, hot chocolate in mugs, handful of cappuccino biscuits Felix sees a ringed hand unwrapping, tastes cinnamon before he takes in Flick dressed as a waitress, hair in a chignon.

She pulls a face, ‘You took your time’, knowingly, as if she’d seen him, but he cares less and feels refreshed, inside and out. She clatters on heels down metal steps to the cavern below, nakedly raw under electric lighting like a morning after whore, pools of tables, candles not yet lit, empty stage all littered and being swept. Is it before hours or after? He looks at the watch on his wrist: ten to midnight. Flick, nods to the dishes; ‘Eat, you’ll need it’, That same dirty eating, everything relished. She pulls a bar of chocolate from her waitress pocket: ‘Here, I was keeping this’ Felix divides it between them. She re-wraps hers, secreting it.

He notes her quickness, the flickering edge to everything she does. She’s scared, trying not to show it. A hand darts to his face. ‘You shaved. Not bad, considering.’ She keeps her thumb there, stroking.

He sees again in the mirror his hooded eyes, takes her hand and gives it back to her, risks, ‘Flick, do you know me?’ ‘Of course,’ she says, slow smile spreading to a grin, ‘you’re Felix Morning.’

The lights dim to nothing. Waitresses shimmy between tables lighting candles in empty wine bottles. Felix closes his eyes and feels the fur of soft-lit dark reach inside for his mind.
6. The Bunker

The club begins to fill. A few couples look round, find tables, spark cigarettes, chink bottles. Hum of talk over the murmur of bodies, shift of dresses, rustle of silks, tissue, a sleeve.

Music starts, notes dropping like rain in a forest to direct the people in a subtle bee-dance. A brave pair takes the floor until it fills, a midnight garden where roses bloom on wrists and necks and birds are hearts in lover’s throats.

A waitress tips between customers, barely sixteen, Felix trembles. What have I to do with this, a dream of my own making? Flick calls, ‘Hey Stella, bring Felix a drink’. Stella brings the drinks. Felix ignores his.

Flick downs hers in one, nods to Stella to bring more. She frightens Felix; her aqua eyes, her too pale hair. He leans towards her, straining above the noise. ‘Shouldn’t you be working too?’ ‘I am’, she snorts.

‘You mean you’re watching me?’ He is sullen, child himself. She tips her head like a clever dog, ‘More looking after; but yes, my job’s to keep an eye on you’. Is she laughing? It’s hard to tell in the candlelight,

the flicker-light, the red-orange-black of the dance floor strobes that glance over and off like cars passing swiftly in the night. The music has shifted to a higher gear he’s not noticed. ‘Flick, what’s going on?’

Her face collapses. She about to relent, ‘I don’t know the whole of it’, ‘That’s not an answer’. It occurs to Felix not to trust her. She’s a new star, not fixed in the firmament but wandering among coordinates,
one minute puppet the next working strings. What is this world that plays with him? He tries to remember what came before, finds a flicker, a face, a reflection in water and a feeling.

far away, like a memory in a dream, that drifts beyond his hand as he reaches for it and disturbed, fades.

‘Tell me a thing that makes sense’. He’s pleading but instead of pouncing Flick relents,

‘This is the Dreamriser. This is where she makes it’. ‘She? The Dreamriser is a she? What does she make?’ ‘This, the heart’ ‘Why am I here?’ What is my part? ‘You’re The Runner’; ‘And you?’ ‘I’m here to look after you’.

She’s talking in riddles; Felix is furious. The club pulses in his ears, sends a rush of blood through his heart. Music reaches through him long tentacles into every orifice. He has to concentrate hard.

‘Where were you before? How did you get here?’ Her face crumples and she cries, not tears, but a child’s cry, ‘I can’t remember. but you, somehow. I recognise’. She gathers herself, ‘Felix, they must not know I know you’,

‘The note?’ Flick nods. Some other game? Felix presses hard the hand she reaches with, digs cruelly, ‘Flick, who do you know?’ She looks him straight, ‘You, from before. Not a name, or any distinct thing; a feeling’.

The music changes, faster, synthetic, gathers to a pitch the group on the dance floor. Descends to silence. Dancers fall apart as if from cut strings, peel away to drinks and tables. ‘Watch’, says Flick. Felix sips his drink; it burns.
7. The Dance

Musicians collect below a stage now picked out in fairy lights, double bass, guitar, drummers in sleek trousers, huge cymbal players who create a crash, a crescendo of waves as a beam hits and curtains rise

on a creature grown from deep waters, huge headed, many eyed; flail and twist of many limbs ripple out like ribbons. Felix stares at the thing. A sweat breaks out on his back as if the effort of looking is what gives it life.

Bass plucks, drum tugs, the beast moves, octopus to eel to rearing dragon, tongue thrown out as flames. The great body sheds scales, throws phosphorescence across the stage in a circle of waves that break just at the line of lights and separates to six women, gilt painted, glint of sequins, eyes where bellies are, hands feathers, great plumes on their heads cast off laughing with high kicks; you thought us one thing, then another; we’re neither.

They dance patterns across the stage, connecting, spiralling out, gathering in like women folding linen and re-making the monster, like a flipped image in a hologram that comes swimming to the surface then is gone.

Then they are tribal, they are balletic, folksy, then Dervish until they are beyond human: a shifting zoo, an aviary, an ocean. The room lifts to the dance floor as one gathered movement.

Felix is drawn from the chest as if strings have been threaded there, as if he has been chosen to bring down the sun, belly hand-standing, muscle vibrating a deeper rhythm as his hands, feet twitch to join them.
Flick puts her hand on Felix to hold him. His throat pulses but his mind is separate. All else is dancing, the club the cave of the body released to its cells; a dream beating itself out inside the skull on waking.

*

Music slows once more to silence. From chandelier nests above tables electric light grows then dims. The women leave the stage as women. The audience rests and sips from iced glasses. In whispers piped music.

‘It’s weird, but you get used to it’, says Flick, checking her watch Felix sees is like his. ‘Time’s up’, she pulls that grimace as if she’s apologising. Her face twists. The air vibrates.

Felix is looking at Flick looking at something behind him. My dark angel? His back pricks with wings. What would I see now if I was lifted? My shed skin? He’s about to ask Flick when he’s hoisted by his arm pits. Two men return him to his feet but keep their grip. ‘Time to go mate’, one clips. The nightclub becomes a scene and he just a witness and he remembers the habit of dreaming into and out of TV he had as a child: his parents on a hill under lights of alien ships, he a sacrifice to some weird sect, and how he ran away (Did I? Did I run away?) , seventy three bus, dinner money in his pocket, road grey with rain, launderette at the junction. A forest closes over him. The heavies reset their hold to his arms, Felix’s nerves a stew he has to force down. He’s pulled away as his chair clatters to the floor.

What does his body know that his will has forgotten? Felix is no weakling but the men are stone, he hasn’t enough to fight them. He cranes round but Flick has gone; only stars pricking out a dark heaven.
8. The Kiss

Down spirals a staircase, Felix with it. *I am already underground, there must be layers to this labyrinth.*

A cloth wraps his windpipe, no breath, only reeling;
he’s asthmatic and panicking

until he thinks, *I can trick my body with what it doesn’t remember.*

Airways soften, lungs open to piped air in a dimly lit corridor,
black and white tiled floor, walls
a burnt blood colour.

The two men shove Felix. He nearly falls. He must gather in
strength as at the start of a race. He almost runs,
but sees the door at the end and doubts it’s an exit.
He’s free to walk this far, wonders what will come

and if he can take it. He’s in a trap and expects at any moment
a shock given to a rat in an experiment. The shock that comes
is a heat of needles in his hands, wraith at his neck,
a match struck in his chest.

His ready body brings a clear memory of running: night and raining
and the peel of feet off tarmac. *If I run they’ll never catch me.*

*If this is a dream, anything can happen.*
But something tells him, wait and see.

He stops at the door. The brown panelled wood brings a whiff of
childhood, the door to the kitchen where Christmas waits,
the cream of the Aga reflecting a face,
a name rebounding like a ball on a string.

His guards have stepped back. He must choose it, what the door brings.
There is a looking eye that meets his. He leans to it.
The world leans with him. *Is this forgetting meant or accident?* Felix is lost all over again.
Before he can knock there is a click and the door swings in to a room like a study in a grand house: fire in a marble fireplace; 
gilt mirror, Indian rugs; strongly lit from above darkening to library walls. At a leather topped desk 
sits a woman in a high necked blouse, loops of heavy beads, black hair 
straight as glass, mouth and eyes berries, hands slender and white 
laid out on the desk top, nails purple tipped 
over what she’s holding. 

She has a bruised look, painted over with control. Dark clings to her 
as if the light has separated from what it can’t touch. 
Smell of cloves, almond, and ice. She pulls him close 
with a look; he falls forwards. 

A naked figure staked out, hammering of drums, a knife descending. 
Felix staggers against the wall into a picnic on a hillside, 
a train passing in the distance, a child calling. 
He wakes on stones.

The woman shifts as if she’s just noticed him. ‘Oh Felix’, her voice 
surgeon’s wires: very fine, through the organs. ‘You made it.’ 
She has such pull and her smell has a hold on him. 
He wants to keep smelling it. 

What if death is like this: a memory waiting all your life as a scent 
put in place at your birth so when it’s time you’ll come 
without fighting? He sees how fire burns 
without diminishing, how there is light

without a lamp. Yes, death is fixed like this. The door opens 
and the men step in. One locks his arms, the other his jaw. 
Felix bucks but they do not shift. Coming to him 
the woman sings a song he knows

and his chest opens with a rip, tears salt his lips. Her smell 
is crushed lilacs. A passage at night; his feet tapping 
on the wooden floor, pill of smashed scent from the bottle 
stolen from his mother’s room.
I will choke on my own tears; his tongue dams his throat.
This is what an animal feels. His eyes roll as she eyeballs him.
Knuckle against his lip, pill fisted in. No choice
but to swallow: mould, dry husks, bitterness.

Face to face she is beautiful, only a little worn at the temples.
She puts her tongue in his mouth, Tastes of burn, meat;
she is trying the dark behind his teeth.
He wants to be in her.

Their bodies close and open to a shared place.
She puts a knee between his; he takes her lip in his teeth.
There’s no death here, only life. There is more to this:
something, something, I need to remember.

Felix pulls out of the embrace. ‘Lady’, he manages, ‘What is your name?’
She shakes her head. ‘Have you forgotten?’
He sends a thought under his skull, a shape flits there
but will not be caught.

‘What are you – Dreamriser?’ She moves to her desk, ignoring him,
‘You have the key, then you will find the place’.
She pushes a wrapped box towards him.
‘What is it?’ ‘What you have lost’.

There is waiting; the box waits for Felix to take it. He teeters
between two poles: The door, the men; the woman, the box.
Only the box will release him. He grabs it.
It is almost exactly the length of his hand.
9. The Way Out

The two men keep their distance, as if the kiss has made him potent or the pill changed him, show the way with torches.
Felix’s eyes adjust to underground: ore in the stone, earth’s must, a pulse from deep beneath him.

Am I to be released? He’s not sure. He could be heading for dungeons or loosed in the labyrinth. He grasps for an image, receives the woman: scent of mauves and blacks, battered meats, her taste that fits him,

then from below that comes Flick, something of blood there, a connection he still can’t place. And what of the apparition that lifted and shook me on the bridge?
What waits? What could save me?

Where is my will? Could I, even now, find the garden?
Exit is a vertical ladder he cannot refuse. One man taps his back, hands him the long coat. Felix pockets the box.
It has a weight he doesn’t expect. Its insides shift.

Felix climbs the dark and his body moves to a child’s geometric puzzle, his limbs quarter, threaten to split him from groin to sternum.
He must pull in strands: Flick’s hard glisten, body in the shower return the scattering bits.

Through the trap door the moon is a globe on a high ceiling casting its face on a muddy field; high wire fence torn in places, leads him to a path littered with empty beer cans and plastic bags, as if the other world has just left.

The other thing is the watch, an impish eye blinking up at him.
‘Take it off,’ comes a bellow in his ear; the watch unclips from his wrist and falls of it own accord.
‘They’re tracking you Felix. Wake up’.

The voice bends away and Felix looks up at the black giant pointing a spear, contracting its wings with scorn.
10. The Angel

He is tucked under an arm. Skin silk, stone obsidian. A piston between muscle and bone reveals the heart. Felix kicks like an infant, held against one granite nipple. Whorl of scent headlong into roses.

Wings unfold, smell of wax or resin, just as swooning. Wings concertina, muscle contracts, thrusts and power decants through Felix. In two beats they are higher than houses, in five, cold air and cloud,

rainbow of oil meeting water: earth lit with fragments. Higher, and I’ll stop breathing. They surge beyond the city until the tower of a mountain is raised before them, black rock on black night,

and they veer to the black mouth of cave off the sheer cliff of the summit. Felix is set down on a stone bench and his belly resettles against his ribs. What now, he thinks, every bit of him strangely diminished.

The Angel lays its weapon against a wall and busily lights a fire in a stone basin; fire glints against stone, throws shadows to reverberate from the juts and hollows like bolas hunting buffalo.

It mounts a stone plinth and becomes at once a statue camouflaged against the cave wall, but for the white eyes it fixes Felix with, its great head carved with clipped curls, its satyr’s features. Felix looks for horns, finds what might be scales rusting neck and shoulders; but for this organic armour it is naked. Its skin runs now with fires, now a sky of bruises, now stone, flames again; now writing. ‘Speak’ it says, its voice ice melting to liquid.
Words bubble into Felix’s throat to burn and blister at his lips,
‘Why am I here? What is all this?’ The Angel’s skin looks human
again. It cracks two creases in its cheeks in imitation
of smiling, ‘to know your choices.’

‘There’s been no choice so far. I’m no more than a piece
in someone else’s game; either that or – what have I done?
Horror of blood, a neck twisted in his hands.
‘Is this some kind of punishment?’

‘This is of your making, Felix’. ‘Oh no’ groans Felix, his head
dropping into his hands, ‘who did I kill? Madness is always
the punishment for killing. That’s what the novelists
tell us. I am mad, aren’t I;
these are the dreams of a madman, the visions of the insane?’

The Angel considers him. ‘Who is to say?’ Felix groans again,
hugs himself. The Angel says more kindly, ‘You’ve killed
no-one. You’ve lost your memory …

Felix has jumped to his feet, enlightenment on his face, ‘this is the place
of lost memories?’ The Angel hesitates, ‘and I’m not Felix.
Who am I?’ The Angel is irritated; it wants to set the pace,
‘Shut up Felix and let me speak’

The being steps from its plinth and with a steady pacing
back and forth, crosses its wrists, professorially, behind its back.
Felix swears he sees shades of pince nez and mortar board
before the illusion fades.

‘No one being makes the world, but we influence everything.
Each choice from the conscious birth moment spins a connective.
If you could see you as I see you, you would see
one coloured thread within a vast weave,

some holding fast, some working loose, some appearing to vanish.
There are more worlds than you can imagine,
sitting inside each other like Chinese boxes,
or, more accurately, the layers of an onion,
opaque ones you live in, others translucent, like this one.’
   It pauses, adjusts the ghostly spectacles and sweeps a hand
   like a giant duster through the grain of firelight,
   ‘you pass between them continuously

like bees between flowers. But most humans are hardly aware of it,
   artists, maybe, those who would call themselves dreamers,
   magicians, poets, dancers, might catch glimpses
   of those worlds beyond their own.

Humans have always touched the edges and dissolved them.
   Only madness sees more and never the whole. You need
   great strength to contain even a tiny view of it.
   I, of course, see more than human’

It breaks off and produces a stone jug from which it pours water
   into two stone goblets, hands one to Felix who sniffs, sips,
   gulps, drains the pure elixir. The Angel watches him
   then drinks his own. ‘And you – what are you?’

‘A being of this world, and of yours, of your making. Humans
   like their Angels. We would not exist without each other’
   ‘My Guardian Angel?’ ‘Your watcher and your conscience’
   ‘Only that?’ ‘No. I am, like you,

a messenger. We Angels are, as you know. But it’s only a job.
   I have my own life too.’ ‘Oh.’ Felix doesn’t really get it.
   Does it all centre around the human? We make stuff up
   then it becomes real in another world.’

‘The Dreamriser, do I make that?’ ‘No. She does of course.
   You are edges, touching’. It’s time to finish this, thinks Felix.
   ‘What’s your message then?’ The Angel steps back
   onto its plinth as if Felix has commanded it.

‘Return what’s lost and you’ll never get back. You have a chance
   in the garden.’ It holds up a hand, a shield of gold.
   ‘She makes you forget’, rings in Felix’s ears,
   a voice that doubles his own.
This is no troll, but a being with knowledge. Since the pill there’ve been no more memories only the present, intense.
What else does it know? The palm swirls, ‘You forgot what you were when you fell in love’

‘I’m not –’ starts Felix, but his body burns. ‘What was I before all this?’ ‘An artist, Felix, an artist.’ ‘Not a runner?’ Felix ponders his hands: soft pads and grained nails.
sees those holding brushes, touching paint;
scent of linseed enters the night; he rushes with recognition.
‘You ran after you worked to keep the balance, until you lost it’.

Yes, I remember running, but not the other.
Gone now, the vision. ‘How did this happen?’

‘You fell for a powerful woman; the balance was tipped’. ‘Of nature?’

It’s traditional, Felix struggles with this admonishment of the modern, risks argument. ‘In the twenty first century, we are equal …but if nature dictates …’

It laughs, ‘What do you think made me?’ Shifts through woman back to man. ‘Don’t go blaming nature, nature has nothing to do with it. It is your own balance you lost.
You could no longer choose love freely’

Is it right? Is love ever free? ‘You are soft Felix. This doesn’t make you bad; she was just too hard for you to take.’
‘Soft?’ Felix whispers, turns inward and knows:
pictures glimmer through him like charges,
a wheel of memory too quick to grasp; he falls onto the stone ground.
It hauls him back to the seat. ‘What do I smell of?’
‘Roses’, pants Felix, grasping at a cure.
It pours him more water.

‘To her I would smell of excrement; you couldn’t manage that.’

No, I couldn’t, and retches. ‘Felix, attend to me’ the voice booms, sets vibration to his bones; his tongue shakes out as if chains are tightening on his throat.
'Return to the garden and be an artist again; return to your task and you may never escape from the Dreamriser. Now choose.'

It backs off, eyes the distance. Its breath deepens. Felix waits, but it seems to have done with him.

The fire is out, its colours black. *It’s not exactly certain.* The chains relax. Felix breathes. The city is at the cave mouth, a mirror on the pin pricked night. He remembers the kiss and his innards twist; he remembers Flick and his heart flips. There is a kick to the back of his head. He bowls out through his eyes, vomits onto a half buried plastic sack where the watch vibrates. A cat sized black shape scarpers from under him.
11. The Fit

Felix stands, skids, touches earth. Rain chases his neck, flattens the coat at his loins. He buttons it, flips the collar. Fingers clot, feet dampen out the last warmth of the fire. *Time*, he wonders, *what is it?*

Struggling the watch onto his wrist. *Two thirty. Three hours before dawn.* *What gods have stolen me?* The voice in his head like a voice in a dream throwing a line. He laughs, almost; looks around – drum of rain into mud.

Shouts in waves like the suddenly deaf, ‘I’m mad and all this made up, Flick, Dreamriser, fucking angels. This bastard place. Who am I to make this?’ He considers his hands. ‘An artist, did it say? Was I well known, rich, then why can’t I remember?’ He stalls – woman, kiss, bitter pill – empties the last strings of bile into the mud. The pill in his blood tightens the world live in his fist, rain hissing like acid.

*Get a grip Felix* – ‘Who the fuck is Felix? I’m not Felix.’ Sides of the world collapse. Stars rush in. His brain litters the dark. He’s big as the night, a planet in his hand. *How to hold it?* Everything spins;

What he holds is his head. *I have to be Felix to keep the fit.* The world clunks back. He sucks air, wipes snot from his face, salt water in his mouth. Not a time to be weeping. His chest aches. This is what he chooses:

the love of two women. *What choice? Is love a choice? They are hooks they twist me on. And yet I want them.* Each work on a different part of him as if they have owned it, worn it, put it back while he slept.
Sleep; so long since he slept his body calls to a welcome to the earth.
Shadows of the garden run through him but no dream
he remembers. He sleeps like a beast in a field,
standing, swaying, one brief moment.

The only thing is to move. He hits gravel, sets up a jog he knows can go
for miles. Running, this night habit, joy of a body
that responds, swift and clean to movement, speed,
runs and thinks of what else he knows:

the garden, aqua eyed mother, almond skin, the facility of dreams.
Not much. A sense of himself as a child, ordinary things:
Christmas, a holiday. Then, claustrophobia, its link
to fear and breathing, gift of scenting;

nothing more, perhaps, than what kicks in when memory's blind.
Dreamriser. He stumbles; his body remembers her,
rustle of skin, thigh on his, thumb pressed
in mouthed darkness,

a ring. He has seen a ring, or its absence, and rubs that supple band
of uncalloused skin. Is she what this is for?
His skin chills then pricks warm. He walks, careful
not to sweat more.

I love ... have loved her ... what is love's tense? Can it live
without the memory of days out, nights in? Is it its own being
or does it live in the body? Felix examines the spaces
of hips, guts, chest, finds plenty of emptiness.

When she's close can the body remember? Just then, it was like I held her.
Don't think, Felix, feel, is some kind of answer.
There is the box she gave him, a feel of something
almost inside him.
12. The Key

The box knocks at his thigh. He draws it out. It is sealed all round.
He picks at the wax; parts of his body itch. He picks; he itches;
there’s something alive in it. What is it like? He thinks.
A new scar or a healing wound.

He sags against a post back in that wilderness of warehouses
and shut up factories he now doesn’t notice.
What did she call it? ‘What you have lost.’
Is it his past in the box? That doesn’t feel right.

A past isn’t a thing to be wrapped, is it? Felix sees, smells the fustian
white robe he pulls from layers of paper printed with lilacs.
Petals fall from it, flakes of dried skin.
A hand with a gold ring closes on his,
closes his eyes to it. When he opens them and there is a woman,
small moon in her hands, eyes shedding pearls on to her lips.
She steps into air, fair leaps at him. The hood falls
from her head. Moon drops, extinguished.

‘Felix?’ Her voice cracks. He smiles. For all her bravado, there’s this;
he could hug her, but that would, still, be giving too much.
‘Flick, why are you here?’ ‘I had to help you.
They didn’t want me to –
you’ve no idea how hard it was to leave’. She runs a knuckle
under grubby makeup. Felix holds out the box. It jerks; a divining
rod. Flick audibly quivers. Felix reaches a hand,
‘Flick, do you know what’s in it?’

‘I’ve heard – initiations. In the Dreamriser men disappear.’ Felix grunts,
‘What is it to you?’ Flick fades to black, ‘A kind of Dream’
comes her voice from the unlit night, then steps
into her torch’s pool of light.
'Flick, you need to know. I remember nothing: my past life, my real name, how I arrived, apart from little gifts. Can memory be put in a box?’

Flick looks at him a long time.

She cannot answer for she cannot remember a thing before the Dreamriser, only, ‘When I think of you and why you’re familiar I see a black stone in the palm of my hand, hear you saying, a whale’s soul lives here. When it died, way back at the birth of human time, it sank to the sea bed and soul became stone.

My hand is not my hand as it is now it is a child’s, but your voice has kept inside me like the whale’s soul in that stone.’

Felix takes her hands, strokes the backs.

Their thumbs bend around, the same. This love is a shock, more than the other he felt for the Dreamriser, and a pain under it, like fear that levers at the heart and would dislodge it.

‘This Dreamriser – I loved her, and now I say it the loss of that love wrecks me.’ Her power glints in him, crystals smashing in his chest. ‘Is love an object to be trapped in a box?’ ‘I don’t know Felix, until you came I was empty of it’. ‘Oh, Flick, I can’t, I’m not …’

she makes up hastily, ‘No, not that kind.’ She nods to the box. ‘Like that. Like we’ve shared some part forgotten or lost.

His heart breaks for her. She is more of this place than he is; he fears she’ll never leave it.

She waves her torch over their heads. It catches wicks in several windows. ‘We have to … I don’t know … get away. Make it together to some place our own’. But Felix won’t be moved from his purpose. ‘Flick, I’m sorry,

I have to do this. Do you know where it goes, this box? No?

I thought you were to be my guide. But wait, the key finds it’.

The key’s strong light shines through his fingers as he takes it from his pocket.

‘Felix? I’ll come with you’ ‘That’s the spirit’ He’s cheered by this. Her company will take the edge off whatever comes next.
13. Place of the Lost Things

A low door with an opaque eye above it Felix considers, Flick smashes. Pieces spill as dust. The key fits its slot, turns like a spoon in custard and opens with a touch from both of their hands.

They step in and the space unfolds, one box opening out into others. A low current filters the humming silence. Multitudes of emissions from miniature light sources hatch rainbows across their path.

Flick tucks her hand into Felix’s. He cups it, soft pulse; drops it. He can’t take, after all, her need of him. There it is, he thinks, my heart, tripped out then back and now I’m hearing it for the first time in ululations.

Hairs on his arms prickle, crackle of his scalp, crawl in his mouth. ‘Can you feel it?’ ‘It’s living’, she says, pupils inking her eyes, hair white antennae. She plucks at brightness, a glass jar from rows of stacked shelves.

A honey pot, inside a small thing folded in tissue. The lid eases off. They twist and rock as if they have taken knives to each other. ‘Such a small thing …’ gasps Flick, ‘can destroy you’ clinches Felix, catching the jar as it drops, returning it. Now they see: a warehouse of common spirits in packets and jars and boxes, only what fits the human hand. They wander, inspecting but not daring to open shards of a cup stacked in a vial, tupperware of ribbons, piano key in a shoe box. These are what they can reach, everything piled triple, back to back, and each thing pristine in a vacuum. Lights dim then relight.
as they pass, a wave moving after them. Higher up are sealed containers, crowd of stoppered bottles; a preponderance of the wax
Felix perceives as human. ‘There’s something of each of us here’, his throat a snake

that has eaten its fill. Flick is shimmering. How young she is,
I’d barely noticed and even thought – She is narrow as a boy.
That he has lived long enough to be her protector
breaks over him, his eyes burning.

Her outline ripples to a bow of lit colours. ‘I see’, her voice clear,
her voice the quench of water. ‘What can you see?’
‘White curls of breakers shattering the sun’s
mirror, a wet stone in the sand

sleek as a seal, my face child’s looking up from the surface,
you, calling my name, my name a skimmed pebble skipping
once then sinking into a wave;
Dreamriser taking my hand’.

Flick looks up, her eyes marsupial, her face a heart, her hands buds.
How did she get so small? Silt of evenings, of milk.
Hiss of the sea, grain of his skin,
the inner silk of memory.

*

They take a boat off the far north of the land, cradle of the sea rocking
them to an island, and a cottage looking to the Arctic
all summer across marram spikes and slide-down dunes,
starred yellow gorse, samphire in spumes

all along to the white clipping of the shell-made beach, Oyster Catchers
scything the blue cuticle of a bay; a wind that stops for a day
when they sun-bathe and swim in the fleece of waves
touching each other home.
She is there, black hair blown to her waist, rounder, more of her, skin browning, gray in her fringe and a girl-child who runs back and forth between them with gifts of pebble and seaweed, puzzle of broken shell from the shore.

At night they leave the child sleeping in the bed they share to watch a moon red as the land rise over them, oil on his fingers as he unknots her hair, Salt taste of her skin, salt of his mouth returned, her encompassing him. After, he lifts his little white haired girl from where she has drifted and lays her between them under the open window. The sea’s voice shifts in with the moon, a vision scented with almonds that breaks to a spackle of white horses. Knowledge of them is an ache he carries over sea, over land, down to the lights under the earth to the place of lost things where a stone in his hand crumbles to sand.
14. Running

He has placed his box on a shelf, walked away, come back.
Put it high between two bottles; walked away, come back.
Stood a long time looking; held it; put it back.
He does not know what to do;

what to do with his hands falling empty each time.
He has searched for them, called their names, waited
as his voice resounds, lights minnowing around the words.
He has turned cloth, stripped, rubbed each part

for a sign, found his flesh answering: once they were mine.
He has seen that he is alone, that he cannot leave the box,
that he has come so far. That he is lost.
He has left that place; put the key under the door.

Regretted it, found Flick’s torch and imagined her handprint
   to carry as a code for what he might one day retrieve
   or simply a memory his palms can harness
   to call her back from that shore.

He has noted the night’s turn in the East, the morning’s pewter breaking
   between the high buildings and run as he knows how,
   to knock the present into his bones. He runs
   to the bridge and further,

West along the river, beyond the city until there are fields of sheep
   like nubs of cloud lifting from the ground and two horses
   coaxing morning from the earth. All is tangible,
   as if he has crossed a barrier;

all is now visible, air caught in whole droplets. Grass comes up at him,
   a vision in green dimensions. Soaked with sweat,
   the dew-wet grass, he stops by the river,
   crouches to his shining face,
strips and sinks into its white bowl. Is he less now, or three in one?
He looks for double, triple, perceives the clear edge
of what is to come. *What if she is not yet born?*
He feels the pull of north,

that glittering shore, knows he must run to meet them there.
Can he be both artist and lover? Is there time for father?
He will drag the Angel with him, he thinks,
hears one link of that chain re-fasten

and the subtle adding of weight between his shoulders.
Is he fixed in this universe? He knows now he had a wife
and lost her, that somewhere between past and future
is his daughter; that this night was a forgetting

to remember.
Book Two

PINKY
1. Train

Esther

Bands of night
On the window

Collapse to black
In the tunnel.

A young man
On the platform;

The fire of him.

Iain

Heathrow Express; my entry to the city
compressed to the stutter of a tunnel,
London the darkest November yet.
Stepping from the plane wind clapped
my thin jacket and rain found my neck,
night smoking like a bar after-hours
as passengers drifted to cabs and relatives.
A train draws in, re-lights at the platform,
an empty carriage exhales its breath.
Strip lights falter as I fold to a seat,
my eyes double in the window’s mirror,
my hair as blond as when I was twelve.
Esther

I carry the time
I’ve not yet done with:

A year lost
To the passes and bridges

Where a lord sits
On the throne of your wrongs.

The child in me -
A girl with Eskimo hair,

Marsupial eyes, wrists
Like chicken bones –

Showed me where
The eel-children

Split to the yellow fat,
Heal, split, heal.

Iain

The island was a sun ship in the Aegean.
I stood on the ferry deck as the dock
backed off like an affronted friend
and the water unrolled its great blue tongue.
Cypress hill, orange grove, white house
above the bay, pearly tops of the town,
dipped below the waves. I wrote nothing
those three months, slept, swam, ate, sunbathed.
But a story kept begging round and round:
I had to face it each morning, souring
coffee and rolls as the sun streamed by,
a dog with one yellow eye, one turned in.
**Esther**

I am in need of love,
Its cry the genesis of cells,

Electricity in darkness,
Forks of pain.

I return through shadows
To this presence,

The warmth of him
A wave on a screen.

**Iain**

A click from the back of the carriage
like the unclipping of a gun.
My right shoulder cools. I clear my throat,
pitch a confidence I do not feel.
My left knee shakes involuntarily
at a glint, a rebound off neon,
the distinct sound of a knife unsheathing.
Slung on the rack, my bags hunch down,
wallet and phone press in my pocket.
I could turn, make clear my surrender.
The tunnel goes on and on
amid lucid flashes of strong colour.
Esther

Leaning in,
His face
In the window –

Calf lashes,
Milk of his eye.
A tail uncurls

On my tongue.
A shivered
Dreaming,

All the wants
Come home,
He is like

Looking at a lamp
Through skin.

Iain

Behind me, a black shape takes up the aisle.
Whiff of lilacs, earth scent, ashes;
the furthest corners of my mother’s garden.
I turn; a cat stalks upright like a human.
I blink; see again what I have seen:
a young woman, something of the bed
and the other bower about her,
a falling, as if her eyes are too heavy
for her head, as if her bones are a burden.
She tips towards me, pitiful and beautiful,
a starved pet that has finally decided
the life in her is stronger than the death.
Kiss

Her spider’s knees at mine, legs a gleam
in black up to the thin black shucked-up dress
ruched at the hips. An opal is an eye
on a chain between her small high breasts
as she straddles my lap, arching her back
and flicking away her long black hair.
Her hands are icy and smooth, nails purple
as if just pulled from a river; they nip,
they feast, a cage of mice, ten hungry fish.
Her iris is black, her lids are purple,
her tongue is a minnow between my teeth
and released, darts for my throat with its tip.
2. Tryptich

Esther’s Bones

I am back
With the wrong bones,
A crash victim’s.

They pieced me together
Posted me in an envelope
They should have marked: fragile.
But didn’t.

A special kind of bad treatment
That needs a special kind of cunning.

My skin’s almost used up,
Barely enough for this frame.
Still, it has a kind of beauty:
Inkpot eyes, jewel bruises.

You could read me, I make shadows:
Bird head, dog jaw, split hoof.

Maybe I’m a puppet made of hands.
I can be there and gone,
It’s a way of looking.

I’m down to zero,
Just the ghost ring.
When I was small
I had the cat’s green eyes,
Hunting the glimmers
Of little creatures.

Grubs lit glow nests
Where I picked at them,
A beetle left its ghost self
After I’d crushed it.

I’d stay whole nights
In the woods
Where spiders made webs
On my face like rain,

Woke once to find
A mouse in my armpit.
It spoke a word
And there was a view
Of tiny tables with tiny cups.

I caught the sideways shift
Of what was not there,
An on-off flicker,
The crackle of a bulb.

It has never left me, this gift
Even when they strung up
Our puss and put out
My eyes to the black.
Esther’s Scar

They patched up my hymen,
Made a mouse ear
Of my stomach: it’s an affliction,

That and the way
My hips bow
(too much falling),

My pelvis is not wings but anvil,
(any birth would retreat from flight
and be hammered),

My spine’s the wall of China,
Or a rope of pearls
About to burst their oysters

And my skull’s a toppling point
(but I’ve never had my poor
neck broken)

The cauldron of blue
And my darkness flashes:
I have the night sight,

Take me out when the sun
And the moon aren’t looking,
In a moor mist

I’ll get you lost on purpose.
There’s a rusty tarn
Shrunk in summer

To a wriggle of frogs
In their morphing.
The scar I’ve not mentioned.
3. Bunker

Touch base at six, strip to my skin’s layer of sweat. Sleep best part of the day, wake at dusk with her taste, a hard on. Shower; fresh clothes from the closet, pile the washer from my rucksack, stop, remember. In my top pocket an address and date: half eight Solomon’s Wharf, The Bunker. Her name: Esther.

Grits, iceberg’s leavings, dirty rivers; mud and earth, clay pits, claw marks, a buried head; reed beds, nests; moss and rained on stone, and, and dead-heads,

my mother’s shears rusting in the rain bucket; no. Roses browning in the vase, their death scent. No. Her hair her face her mouth her teeth her throat.

*

I take a cab. The driver says it won’t be cheap. Lights leave us, hamlets and parks. A shortcut to an alley and we pull up, reverse. Two Rasta’s in the rear beam eye us in the mirror; both our hearts beat. They turn, their trainer whites fold away and the night re-forms without them. The driver, I can tell, has lost his nerve.

Two tenners lighter and a pointer towards a bridge, glad I shopped for winter: Puffa jacket, cashmere scarf, my toes in a sweat of wool. Still, a metallic chill hits my chin. The alley walls rise like tenements, totter and leer; the sky is cut to a landing strip lit with stars. I lean into a corner. The ground opens: The Bunker

*
lit in neon above an iron door.  
I grab the clammy brick and trip the last steps.  
Two black men in suits and tied back dreaded hair

halt my fall. One holds my shoulders like a kind uncle  
with bad news, one opens a cream palm  
and points to the sign above us on the wall:  

*Members Only.* My mouth closes on trodden leaves.  
I think I might find her there, when a curtain  
twitches and stirs. A slim hand picks between,  
an opal ring; her face, high boned, painted in pools  
of purples and blues; a spasm of irritation.  
Her eyes flash to the suits, ‘Join him up, you fools.’

*  

Music is sinuous with a deep bass growl.  
The place is hot but hardly packed: clutches  
of faces lean in corners, chairs and round  
tables with candles skirt the floor and part way  
up the wall there is a walkway with half moon places  
fronting shadowed doors. Dancers adorn a stage.  

Esther sits at a table: silver candlesticks,  
goblets and uncorked Bordeaux. I think: gothic,  
her black hair twisted to a chignon, spiked  
through with a pin tipped with a black stone,  
one corkscrew curl at the side of her face,  
shadows of lashes stippling her heek bones.

*
What I know of women you can put on a postcard:
one nighters, student flings dry mouthed and awkward,miss-steps and misunderstandings; the fuzzy dark,

half-shapes pressed firmly under the duvet,
some things when I was a kid I’ve pushed
far in. But the stirrings of leaves, trees and rain,

the must of damp, un-earthings – why Esther
resonates, why this makes sense in its nonsensical way.
I’d say I’ve come to find what got left behind,

what I can’t catch when I turn, what hangs, felt
but unseen, like ghosts showing up at last
in the photograph I took of my parents.

*

Midnight ticks by. We drink until our lips darken.
She talks and I listen, catch half her words,
the other half lost in her fine fidgety hands,

her fragile wrists, one kinked in the bone.
She fingers the glass and turns the wine
so that it plays with the candle’s flame.

I wonder if I should lean across, pause
the fall of her words with my tongue
but lights go up and we are shown the door.

We walk the miles to my place like fawns
entranced, kiss on the city threshold.
The music is long gone and it is dawn.
Conversation (1)

‘Red fruits for breakfast,
I eat nothing else.’
Israeli grapes, Italian strawberries,
Apples called Washington.
‘Until now I have never travelled’.
But I lie,
I have been there and back again.

I tell her about my book
over coffee in the kitchen.
She likes the little red cups,
the plates with poppies
where she slices her apple
into crisp corners.
‘It is not about my parents
or growing up, but a fantasy
of comic book gangsters
where the good get lost.’
The critics loved it, and the prize judge.
It thrills me with shame and disgust.

He talks with passion,
and there is a little curve
of distaste at the corner
of his mouth on certain words:
parent, book, critic.
I am careful not to listen,
only give the impression
while I suck pips from grapes.

There is her whole attention:
her body held by a current.
She frowns, shrugs:
‘I never read books’
falling from her tongue.
She has a black halo,
a sooty Madonna;
I disturb a filament of hair.
4. Nights

He pricks his way into my shell,  
Small movements, softness’s;  
My whole skin shines.

He turns me over, my body  
To his. I slide between palms  
As he slides in me.

She takes my hands and parts  
her folds with my fingers,  
her raised clit a pearl.

She is a continent, its rift,  
and from here, its heat:  
her mouth, her cunt.

Deep kisses, tongue’s roots, teeth  
In them, on lips and,  
Soft tugs.

We bend,  
Snail-twist from branches  
In our mouth’s dew-drip.

Dogs, locked in, my cock swells,  
we are moving,  
one shaped word.

She gloves me, hands,  
and, looped tails  
we lash and bind.
Surge of a horse in my back,
The animal’s earth and tendon
   Stretch, gather, lift.

   Flashes of cord and vine, grape
   And the blood.
Thud in the womb; galloping.

She wraps around me, eel-slippery.
   I arch in, her mouth open,
   she wants two of me,
   swing to my final
   phase,
   thumb on her lip. Fist her
   hair, tip her over. Come shouting.

Slow now, mount, as the blood keeps
   And hold the cum-slippery
   Hard, and hold

   Fingers to me
   Hard and whole
While the world-flower empties its stars.

Firm at the neck,
   spines from fishes,
   bodies slither and
   wriggle.

   It is a relief to gasp
   and die,
   a trail of plasma, the glitter
   of cells on my hands.
5. The Bath

Gutter as the cistern empties,
    parachute of steam un-rolling,
    Esther in the half-light,

    candle flickers of hands,
    her shape cut on the wall.
She sings an unfamiliar song,

voice cracking for the reach
    of a word, then steep descent
    of the melody. I dip in behind,

    kiss her back, find the curve
    of her under the water in the slip
and ease of essence of roses

as she turns her mouth on mine,
    ash and acid of wine and cigarettes,
    finish this, she says,

    our bodies move as one joined
    snake enters and devours
to return whole from the throat,

the room given over,
    a smear on the wall the oil of her hair
scenting the room like a burn.


I remember my birth as a dream,
Voices beyond the give and wrench
Of my mother’s bone tunnel,
Pulled, pulled into the world,

The reddening, vein-thin last look,
Drench of fluid and air the length
Of my body as it fell feet first
To hang by the umbilical.

*

When I was two I found the company
Of cupboards, made friends
With dust in corners, a hidey hole
Between two rooms

Where I learned to sing
In the first language: mammal clicks
And growls, mouth pictures,
Before there was writing.

*

On my fifth birthday I made a peg doll,
Crayon eyes and nipples, pink tissue skirt, a veil,
Married her to another peg,
Jammed their legs until they split.

I’d seen my father to my mother do it,
And after, her thigh’s black marble.
By forty she was papering folds
Of her face where the powder gathered.

*
When I was seven I changed: thing
To girl back to thing; then a doubling,
One skin inside another;
At fourteen, my baby girl

By my father still-born in the wood,
Her eyes one long stitch in linen,
White as milk, white as the cut
That opened then sealed.

*

I grew into stone that could stand
The rain, the cold, the driven wind,
That would be an age in the weathering,
Speck of me a fossil eye watching

At the heart for the time to waken.
The train made the first crack, but deep,
Inaudible, then a fissure from that kiss
It’s taken three weeks to notice.

*

I grew out from there with every touch,
Eyelash reaching into leg then pubis,
The spine’s knuckling a whip
All the way to the pads of my fingers.

*

Now there is Iain I bend him to me.
We are tightening, we are softening,
Our bodies muscle of the other
Until we are more alike than different.
I stand in the wardrobe mirror,
My silvered scar, my silvered belly.
I look for where he has entered me,
And a slit opens an eye in my rib.
Leaving you for an hour is a wound from shoulder to hip. I stagger like a soldier from the fray, like a bull from the priest’s felling axe, but we have to eat. I buy fruit at the market, home-grown russets, pitted cox, the asked for berries, and walking home take a strawberry from a punnet.

Its fellows lie like toy bricks in a tray or roll and separate, some crisp, some green-tinged, some white at the freckled end as if surprised by the out-of-season trick into ripening.

This eating is love’s union, the twin lost when cells folded and hardened to a ridge, the fruit a globe of flesh that has left the body, a painted heart that yields when bitten.
8. **Sex Scene**

*Esther*

Let me introduce you to some tricks:  
The belt of my skirt fits, like this,  
Around my wrists,

Tie it tight so my hands are balled  
And there is just enough  
Pull to hurt. Buckle

It over my head. You might leave  
Me now to cool down.  
Open a window: the chill’s

A sort of fix, get yourself a drink –  
A hard one –  
And watch.

You look at me and it’s an inside  
Sort of thing, as if  
You’re tugging tiny strings

Under the length of my skin.  
Take another swig,  
Swill it round and spit.

Let the spray catch like a slap.  
Take my foot  
And squeeze, put

Your hands between my knees,  
Your fingers, there,  
Harder, to make a bruise.

Put the bottle to my lips.
Iain

It’s like you’re showing me a scene
    from your past, a darkness I can’t
    enter yet. There’s something for me
to understand in this, and the carnal

rises to a pitch, uncoils from its pit
    and stands up like a kick in the guts.
I hardly dare admit how much
I enjoy this, fucking you tied up,

I’ve never known a woman step
    both outside and inside herself.
    A hand grabs my neck at the nape,
hauls me inside out like a pelt.
What has cut her throat to sternum?
She has a hinge.
The scar is smooth as water tension,
the edges pulled like guy ropes.
Her nipples stiffen,
‘it is a thing of beauty lost to me forever.’
I ponder this little drama,
put my ear below her breast

There are surfaces
And there are organs.
What scares me is what lives
On the inside getting out,

and hear the slow grind of a glacier on its way
down a mountain.
The sheets are damp with sweat, her sweat
drying in my groin.
I can barely recall
when I last saw the sun,
I’ve paled, lost pounds,
my own scar
three inches of whiter flesh
from a burst appendix
when I was twelve.
Those two weeks
Yet still I sneak in,
Un-snipping the tiny seams
Of fear’s little cuts,
It’s like this when you’ve been opened,

a change from which
I never quite returned.
I held my mother’s
hand as the anaesthetic
snuffed out the panic,
woke to a nurse with
crisp, dark curls
who brought
my first wet dream.
The next day,
as if she knew,
as if she had dreamed it,
my mother took me home.

It sets its claws in the gut.
My jaw pivots for the head, the long
Glisten of scales opens my throat.
It comes, as if love has worked it.
10. Under the Lamp

The window bangs. I must have dozed; Esther is gone, her clothes spill about the room. There are bloody prints on the sill. I dress, run into the street. Houses fold to facades, parked cars their black selves. A charge runs the length of my legs as at the onset of a bad dream. The street is a cartoon, shadows drawn on. I finger the road for blood, find grit, mud from a shoe; set off, calling her name.

*

The square of park I’ve sat in Sunday’s hangs in space like the foundations of a house; the road to the tube lists, then runs out at locked gates, the station’s leering mouth. There is a track along a wire fence where kids hang out, beer cans, fast food cartons, plastic bags, drowned rat of a sweatshirt. Beyond the wire it is pitch black, like looking out from a ferry at night, knowing the sea is there because you can smell it.

*

I push to the last V of scrub, sweep with the light of my phone: nothing, not even the slough of what’s just left. If Esther came this way she’d have turned back. Fear gnaws a bone at my shoulder. Between my eyes like a bolt, flash on flash of a scene I’ve seen before from some old horror film: spine sliced to a hackle, peel of lips, headlamp eyes. I turn, trip on clumps of tangled grass, grab the wire.
An underground pass to the city is empty
but for the watery radiance of ultra violet
and puddles of rained in piss. I sprint,
shoes slapping concrete, raising echoes
to rebound all along its length.
Midnight, the streets bright with shoppers,
clutch of half-naked women, musk of them.
This is when I see her, or a likeness,
nymph-girl, a fall of hair black water,
cataract of her spilling a corner.

*

One street back and the lairy whore
of the city has shrunk to its wrapper,
a street like a street in the scrag end
of my home town, houses in tight, upright rows
scrubbing their noses on the road.
The black haired woman enters
a black door. I am answered by a skinny
Caucasian, his cheeks stippled cheese.
In the back pocket of my jeans the card
Esther put there three weeks ago.

*

He looks from it to me, calls, ‘Geezer’
over his shoulder in a voice that would
split stone, coughs up a pebble of spit,
waves me in. A bulb swings on wire
with the rhythmic thumps from above.
I am frisked, my wallet lifted before
I can take in the room: leather sofa
sunken under purple lamps, mess of a bed.
Music pulses and an unseen hand
notches up the light until comes visible

*
feet pinched into heels, a love heart ankle chain against a wrist thin ankle, skirt hitched with a wriggle, a cocked grin, scores on the finely lathed arms, a girl, maybe not more than twelve. I back out, retching, just have the nous to grab my filched purse before I’m strong-armed down a back passage. I heave up against wet brick, deeper in to unknown territory.

*

Hands come up to my face: tannin, iron of blood. There is a pattering like the upward raining of a spring. A buried river is rising through me. A wave gathers and breaks. I finger my cheeks and the salty drops there, see prisms glitter and disperse. I gather in the parts of this body I’ve worked like a paid for body, the throne of my brain in its castle of bone.

*

The way out is a flicker of yellow I lose twice, three times, until I turn on an embankment that’s familiar, concrete banks and industrial buildings flank the brown slug of a river. Dawn is approaching, a pink line pushing through above the roofs. The light empties me out; the dream is over. I think of going home, but how would I begin to get there from here?

*
A dock where barges rust in the wash, bench littered with papers and wrappers. I clear a space and lie down, my hood around my ears against the frost. Clouds shift and the morning star appears. For the first time since I met Esther, a balloon of joy in my chest. Have I mistaken love and forgotten it, or taken love for something else? A bridge is composing from the mist.

*

It takes me within a mile of my flat along a cindered path. A woman cycles to work, wool skirt and ear muffs, briefcase across her back. Ducks wake and flap at her as she passes. I’ve been given a hip flask of pep to see me to my door. As I pass the corner, the café lights are coming up and two hidden blackbirds are singing to each other in the park.

Iain Sleeps

In the rhododendron forest
branches are snakes, leaves are eyes.

Beneath my plimsoll soles the earth
is a dark stain I crumble with my toes.

A finger hooks my skull, space moves out.
I am the nuclei, speck of gene in the egg.

My small self is close-up then distant:
the thin neck, shoulder’s folded planes.

Coming back is the opening
of a yellow flower behind my navel.

*

Esther in the city’s forest between the bark
of bodies and towers, hair grown to a black
gown, furred heels, toes clawed with horn.
Her head-lamp eyes haul me in.

Trees tap at the window, stones
in my pocket rolling in my hands.

My child self calls to an un-answering voice,
shouts off horizons like a meeting of wolves

*

A distant knocking falls away to voices;
a silence broken into by cars.

Planes glide by, crisping
the white sky above the city towers.
The quilt makes a radius of soft hands.
The day darkens. Heating

clicks on and emits a low hum.
I get up to drink and find I am walking

on supple pads, my limbs loosened.
I want only the crawl space of the bed.

The temperature drops near to snow.
Tick of curtain against the sill.
11. Where Esther Went

Beast

I crawl out that gap and I am
Four legged, I am beast
Headed, bristle-
Backed, yellow-nailed.
Long years it has waited,
Grub in the stone dark,
Worm of self the fear buried
Until love turned it out
Like a bean from its skin
To cultivate in that moisture;
It farmed tissue and bone,
Matched a transfusion of blood
To make a blood self
To shift between worlds.
Here it is, married skin
And hair, a steal
Of teeth grown beyond
Code; footpad, thief
Of me that heaves a belly
Lust-heavy, in love,
But silenced, its voice
Stitched into its mouth.

It walks the night,
The city empty
But for the human ghosts,
Their feeling-trails ice cauls
Lifted from cracks in the ground
To show the nothing
That is there.
Fire

I survived the fire I started.
Maybe I was born of fire
And could stand it -
They all died in their beds.

The cock gave the alarum call,
Blood on the tiles, the dead recalled.
In the night the dead came over a sea
Oiled with the beating of hands.

They had one face, my family,
They were power, they meant *suffer*;
Fear was a man with chicken feet
Who flapped his fear-wings.

My mother had an apron I pulled,
Hands like burlap smelling of crusts
In the cracks of her knuckles,
A gold ring that slipped.

At dawn the cockerel croaked.
I fled, the house burnt out, killing him
With one flat stone that skimmed
And hit like a spinning blade.

Years then, in the badlands,
Anything you could get
Meaning what they’d give you
On the back seats of cars

That took their children to school
And their wives to church.
It wasn’t the first for a girl raped
Before the cock woke his wives.

Fire comes from that breakage.
Dreamriser

Then came the women of the Dreamriser
Who’ve made another world alongside this,
Where men serve women who rule
Through the dance with a by-line in lost things.

When they picked me up I was lost alright,
Beaten, naked, bitten, cigarette burns
The length of my back, hair torn in chunks
From the scalp, face a bloody mess.

They found me, they said, by the smell
Of my blood and shit and the Gretel
Trail of it along the disused underpass,
I was almost gone, fucked, left for dead.

They washed me, put me under ether,
Where you don’t dream. I woke re-stitched,
Clean, the pain a distant ship I could wave to
But not reach, sailing its quiet ellipsis.

The kiss on the train was a trap.
I’d been sent to catch a man to pay man back.
Cocks could crow all they liked,
We’d cut those cocks out.

I hadn’t reckoned on love like the devil
In an alley sticking his hand into my belly.
I had to leave to work out what love was,
Like a wolf that runs when shot.

Once more in their underground house
They dance until I am flesh-bound,
Bone-tired, two-legged again,
Sweating a pint of myself.

To the Dreamriser I owe a debt.
I am still not initiate. Can I do it –
Kill what love has touched?
Those girls give me the knife.
12. A Thing Lost Returns

Esther moves under glass,
her face presses the surface
fingers kneed, eyes bulge,
lips break through.

Mid night. A rush,
cold anaesthetic.
Iain waits, his love intact,
its hope, its dead fall.

I reach for her. My arm snags.
I have been tied
cross ways on the bed.

Cigarettes, ash, under-taste
of fruit and blood.
Window thrown off the latch

Bile and lint,
the aftershock
of surgery
coming back
She holds a knife
above my heart.

She could lift the bloody pulp
pumping in her hands.

There might as well be fires, drums.

Blood in my ears;
the foetus
in the stethoscope.

Can I kill what love
has made in me?

My tongue un-sticks,
it’s speak now or else.

‘ I’m glad you’re back,
we had fun, more than that’.

Her cheeks flicker with keeping quiet.

I see him, as if he has broken
a morning dream that bound
us, conscious, to the bed,
and wakes me with love,

I lower the knife.
13. The Bond

*Breakfast*

Rainbows in the kitchen
window splitting prisms
of buttery sun; snow
crusts on the sill.

Esther wears an old shirt of mine,
where the collar gapes
berry kiss on her throat.

Coffee hissing on the hob,
belly warm from Iain’s touch.

She’s softened, replete;
are they apples
in her cheeks?

brioche from the oven,
his womanly hands cup my feet.

Her taste, sweet as the nut and honey pastry
cakes I had in Greece

His cum in my mouth, love into honey,
every orifice we kissed

sugar grain when meadow-honey
is left in the fridge

hedge-berry jam set on the tongue with a spoon

salt roots of her hair at the base of
her neck when she comes, caviar

almond crush inside his ear
A Conversation

‘Now you’re back,
no more knives, no more
running away’

‘I’ve been running still, each waking
a returning dream,
my fear a hare’s underground.

‘Half my life has been in ether;
each waking
a going under.’

‘What weight you have, what metal
holding you to the earth.’

‘I will write again,
with you, my garden.’

‘You are the one
to hold me to the day.
I could grow again
out of this scar’

‘What made that scar?’

‘My father’s baby, dead in my womb
when I was fourteen.
My family dead by my hand.

Silence at that,
snow gifting the window.’
'The Vow'

‘We are strangers who have entered each other without so much as a vow.’

‘A covenant then, a bond. a piece of you would make me whole.’

She friendship hooks me across the table, spots of colour, her lips plumping.

‘Have you heard of lovers who eat? It’s the ultimate –‘

‘I know you’ve been to places I’ve not, but –‘

‘It will be a fitting alchemy. Just the tip you understand?’

She puts the digit between her teeth. Broadcasts desire where she bites.
14. Pinky

Idea

Blush
of blood in a bowl,
ungraspable
as sea, waves,
lust in the belly.
It moves between us,
a foetus forming
in a dream,
eyeless head,
un-bodied.

We want it, fear it,
draw it near.

We are moving
beyond ourselves
into the idea.
Knife

We hold hands
across the table,
the knife between us

a steel smile, all flashing
teeth and come hither
from its sweaty handle.

The bulb overhead lights
the grain in the wood,
the whiskey’s urine,

a finger left in each
of our glasses. We bang
down the burners,

the knife hovers just above
us. Fire in the ends
of our fingers.

We fall about, puppets
held by the strings of our hands;
come back to the job,

staring at the minuteness
of our finger-tips
against the huge table.

The knife is laughing at us.
Appointment

We explain our plan
to the middle-aged doctor
whose glasses whiten
in the heat of suggestion

and his bald head ripens
to a round of cheese;
sweat winks, slides
from his nose to the lapel

of his off-the-peg suit.
His gold watch points
an admonishing
finger at us.

He writes a figure on headed
paper, flips it across
the paddock of his desk.
We look enquiringly at each other

and smell the anaesthetic,
the come-around nausea
and the crushing interest
the loan will gather.
River

We take a taxi to the river, 
touch each other in the back seat.

Fingers under clothes, 
tongues between mouths.

New Year about to turn, air 
slaps, slush in the gutter.

The river black under the fall of dusk, 
swollen muscle of water.

We quicken to where the bank 
opens on a bed of frost

sequined with passing head lights, 
high on caffeine, drunk on schnapps,

our misty gasps breathy captions 
as we unbutton to belly and groin,

heat and skin answering 
our questioning hands.
Locket

here is a gift. I

A chain on my neck,

found it by chance

on Broadway Market, between an illustrated Paradise Lost and a pile

A heart-shaped locket, penny-sized with a tiny, impossible key; cute of you;
of starched lace bonnets. It is Victorian, yellow gold, unfashionable; it was a

I like the serendipity of your guess; did I tell you it’s my birthday? Well, it is.

child’s. Here, inscribed with an E on the back, where it touched untouched skin

Clip shut the clasp at the nape of my neck, thumbs on my collarbone, hands

a hundred years ago; my first grown up gift for my first grown-up woman.

A shadow bird lifting and spreading my hair, black wings on the wall.

Look at your hair in my hands, opened wing of a blackbird, a fan,

Kiss me like a child going to bed, then my lips, your tongue

its darker imprint on the frosted bed of the lawn

A bird in the caged space of my mouth

where I found it; like now, look:

As my hands undo your shirt

your hair on the wall a

Where waits your

blackbird

Heart
On Dreamriser, Fredy Neptune and the Verse-Novel

Probably the first ‘verse-novel’ I ever read was Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (1856). Even though Barrett Browning styled the work as a ‘novel in verse’ and drew on the novels of George Sands, *Aurora Leigh* was taught along the same canonical line as *The Fairie Queene* (1590/1596) and *Paradise Lost* (1667), and it felt that what we were learning about as English undergraduates in the 1980s was the long poem or English Epic. Poetry and prose fiction occupied different arenas, and there was little or no critical suggestion at the time (at least to English students at Leeds University) that the two might meet in one text in this acknowledged way. Poetry had come first in dealing with extended narrative, but it was always poetry, and stood above fiction on its own hallowed ground.


Part of me suspects that one aspect of this willingness to add the epithet ‘novel’ to ‘verse’ had something to do with the decline in the poetry audience and the obvious success of the novel as a preferred form for mass readership. Verse-novels could
capitalise on the wider readership for the novel and authors were not confined to the small print runs and limited marketing budgets of poetry publishers. To give one recent example, Ros Barber’s *The Marlowe Papers* (2012) was published by Sceptre, attracted a notoriously high advance and has been widely marketed. The roots of the modern ‘verse-novel’ are to be found in such texts as *Aurora Leigh, The Ring and the Book* (1868), and *Eugene Onegin* (1833). This was the era of the rise of the novel in the popular imagination, and these poets were certainly responding to this challenge. *Eugene Onegin* has had a lasting influence on the verse-novel, most notably in the use of the ‘Onegin Stanza’ or ‘Pushkin Sonnet’, used by Seth in *The Golden Gate*, Anthony Burgess in his posthumously published verse-novel, *Byrne* (1996), and nodded to by Murray in the use of sonnets in *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral*.

Experimentation, the need to test one’s reach, to explore new ground or broader ideas, to break out from the strictures of conventional formal demands or simply the narrative urge and the desire to tell a story in the poet’s language. These are some of the reasons why a poet might embark on a verse-novel. The aspect of undertaking such a project that most appealed to me was that there was no one fixed way of doing things. This is a, relatively, new genre. From sonnet sequences (*The Boys, The Golden Gate*), to long, free-form narrative lines (*Autobiography of Red*) and ‘assemblages’ of poems in varying free and fixed forms (*Quiver, The Marlow Papers*), no-one has established the rules yet, or attempted to claim the generic ground.

What these works share, however, is the novel’s interest in plot and character combined with the poem’s insistence on the primacy of language and the density of
imagery and meaning. Many of these works retain a connection with the tradition of the long poem in their use of myth as a baseline for their ‘modern’ stories, such as Hercules and Geryon in *The Autobiography of Red*, the Diana myth in *Quiver or The Odyssey* in *Fredy Neptune*, whilst remaining firmly placed within the modern. This points to theplayfulness and flexibility of a form that can touch both the kinds of myth-making associated with epic poetry and such contemporary issues and generic concerns as homosexuality (*Autobiography of Red*), murder-mystery (*Quiver, The Monkey’s Mask* and *The Golden Gate*) and the wars of the Twentieth Century (*Fredy Neptune*).

I first encountered Anne Carson’s *The Autobiography of Red* after I had completed my first book of lyric poems. Just as reading the women poets who came into prominence in the 1980s, such as Carol Ann Duffy and Eavan Boland, had made me realise that there was a way of writing and finding a voice and a place within poetry that was not male, canonical and ‘highbrow’, reading Carson made me realise that there was a way I could marry my instinct towards story with what I was learning about the lyric. It was to take me almost another ten years to finally embark on such a project, but I doubt I would have had the knowledge or stamina to do so earlier. The framework of the PhD has certainly helped me to realise that goal.

Although I admire Carson’s verse-novel immensely, it was Murray’s second verse-novel, *Fredy Neptune* that seemed a more likely candidate for critical study at PhD. I was too close to the Carson, it was too much part of my own internal mythology, and I knew there was much I was less sure of in Murray. In terms of
weighty-ness, meaty-ness, and complexity, I felt that Fredy Neptune would provide suitable food for critical study. I also knew that I was not going to be overly influenced by Murray’s style, and that I would not be tempted to try to write or sound like Murray. I might have found it harder to tease out my own voice from that of Carson’s.

What I took from Murray, more than anything, was the determination to keep going, to be ambitious and see it through to the end, and to trust in the forward momentum my formal choices allowed. The un-rhymed, stepped, four line stanzas of The Runner began briefly as Murrey-esque octets before finding their own shape and rhythm. I drew on both Murray and Carson when formulating the long, running lines of The Runner that can also be pulled up short when necessary, such as here, where ‘The Angel’ figure has taken Felix to his cave:

    The angel lays its weapon against the wall and busily lights a fire
    in a stone basin; fire glints against stone, throws shadows
    to reverberate from the juts and hollows
    like bolas hunting buffalo.¹

I learnt how to plant direct speech into the lyric from Murray’s extensive use of dialogue in Fredy Neptune, although decided on a different typology. Where Murray uses italics to indicate speech, I decided to use conventional punctuation for dialogue, reserving italics to indicate a character’s thoughts.

    I took strength from Murray’s insistence on the poetic density of his lines in order to keep faith with my own poetic practice. Whilst Murray maintains a powerful narrative drive, he also steeps his language in both meaning and image, such this striking early image: “So the ship rode the bosphorus like an iron on shined blue

¹ ‘The Runner’, Dreamriser, 29.
This is never thin prose dressed up as poetry simply by the fact of being broken into lines; it always demands the continued and active presence of the reader’s imagination.

I knew that voicing gender was going to be central to my own writing, inhabiting a male voice from an embodied perspective. The ‘shower scene’ in Chapter Five of *The Runner* gave me the opportunity to detail the physical experience from a male point of view, and to enter the interior, bodied world of my male character:

Now he can touch what he is: shoulder to breastbone to rib, skin creamy but for blond chaff between nipples and a darker line from navel to cock fattening and rising from its springy bed.3

I knew that my own gender politics were at odds with Murray’s, but I was also surprised to find such a genuine attempt at sympathy with women in *Fredy Neptune*. I knew that what I already shared with Murray was the idea of the act of making poetry as a partly shamanic/magical act, and with the idea of poetry as embodiment, which I had mostly encountered until this point through his animal poems. Esther’s transformation in Chapter Nine of *Pinky* could be argued to point to this: “my jaw pivots for the head, the long/Glisten of scales opens my throat.”,4 although this also reflects a motif that runs through much of my own work.

Book Two of *Dreamriser*, *Pinky*, is where formal comparisons with *Fredy Neptune* begin to depart. Written as first person ‘dialogue’, *Pinky* consciously uses a variety of formal motifs to establish and delineate character. Esther’s lines are shorter, capitalised and always free verse. Esther, as her biblical name suggests, is

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4 ‘Pinky’, *Dreamriser*, 66
closer to an archetypal figure than a true character; she carries both the mythic strains of one returned from the dead (Persephone/Eurydice), and a tone that is drawn from both the furies of *The Oresteia*, and of Seamus Heaney’s ‘Bog Poems’; in both senses, Esther is decidedly pre-modern. Iain’s poems, although often more obviously formal, sonnet-like in Chapter One, making use of terza rima in Chapter Two or blank verse in Chapter Ten, are contemporary in tone. This is because Iain is a writer. He is consciously making use of and trying out the ‘craft’ of writing, whereas this would be irrelevant to Esther; hers is the pure and furious cry of the damaged.

The final chapters of *Pinky* break down this difference, becoming interlinked and mimicking each other as the two characters reach towards greater harmony and acceptance.

Other influences in *Dreamriser* are the novels of Haruki Murakami, in particular *Sputnik Sweetheart* (1999), which provides the epithet, and the films of Atom Egoyan, especially *Exotica* (1994). I had the unnerving experience of reading Murakami’s *1Q84* (2010) after completing *Dreamriser*, and the sense that I had anticipated the whole feeling and internal narrative of Murakami’s trilogy in my verse-novel. Fortunately that feeling has passed, but I do think it points to sympathy with Murakami of an imaginative/fictional response to the world. This is one in which magical occurrences fit within the narrative, such as the appearance of the Angel in *The Runner*, and Esther’s beastly transformation in *Pinky*, and one in which a multiplicity of narrative threads feed into a whole that can often only be seen at a distance. Murray too, premises *Fredy Neptune* on a semi-magical, uncanny motif, Fredy’s superhuman strength, although the narrative is conventionally
historical and linear. Agoyem’s Exotica provides a tone for Dreamriser, such as in the use of the exotic club, but again, I’m talking about imaginative sympathy here. I never set out to base Dreamriser on Exotica, but I can’t evoke one in my imagination without the other surfacing as image and feeling.

More specifically, it is Egoyan’s non-linear story-telling, leaving the central mystery unresolved, that bears comparison with Dreamriser. This is also where Dreamriser and Fredy Neptune part company, and where, finally, my formal and narrative aims are very different to Murray’s. In the end, I’m less interested in the kind of resolution pointed at by Fredy’s return to a spiritual and bodied wholeness at the end of Fredy Neptune. Pinky takes the reader back to a time before The Runner, and although Pinky closes with a kind of resolution, the reader always knows that what has been gained at this point, will, in the future, be lost.
Writing the Postcolonial Body in Les Murray’s *Fredy Neptune*

**Introduction**

In this thesis I will show, through a reading of *Fredy Neptune* (1998), how in this later work Les Murray answers his critics on the treatment of women in his work and his equally controversial use of Aboriginal cultural modes and motifs, in his quest for a creolised republic for modern Australia. I will argue that *Fredy Neptune* is an exploration of multiplicity and slipperiness of identity, as opposed to dualism in configuring the postcolonial identity for white settlers. This idea of multiplicity is extended to encompass gender as Murray attempts a personal reckoning with his conservative and religious views on women. As a work written on and through the body, *Fredy Neptune* is representative of Murray’s poetic practice of wholeness. It is this insistence on the primacy of writing, and the immediacy of the force of poetry as the route to identity, that saves the work from its inherent contradictions. However, I argue that *Fredy Neptune* does not resolve Murray’s difficult position on the primacy of the bush settler culture and his attempts to align this with Aboriginal culture, nor does it find the parity between the sexes it hopes for.

Les Murray is amongst modern Australia’s foremost white poets to have not only addressed the question of postcolonial settler identity in both his essays and poetry but to have pursued the formation of a postcolonial identity in his work. What does it mean to be a modern Australian in a postcolonial, but not post commonwealth state? How can a ‘postcolonial identity’ in Australia take account of the very different experience of being a white settler or of being Aborigine? What about class and
gender, or the rural and the urban? Murray has his answers to these question and they are, despite his best efforts to speak from as wide a populist base as possible, deeply coloured and bounded by both his own subjective position and his own prejudices, especially when it comes to women.

Murray’s insistence on the primacy of his white settler bush culture as a foundation for writing an Australian postcolonial identity, tends to eclipse other possibilities, such as those of Aboriginal writers and of women writers. As a figure in contemporary world poetry, Murray looms large and he has been forceful in promoting his view. Murray’s career to date has been characterised by his insistence on the cultural primacy of his settler Bush culture, as defined against both the urban intellectual culture of modern Australia and the colonial inheritance.

Fredy Neptune is a defiantly proletarian book, the story of, “a blokish man and his oick language.” Murray’s, “drive towards founding a separate Australian poetics upon the spoken idioms of the country” has found expression in his ‘vernacular republic’, arguably the defining achievement of Murray’s poetry and his career. Fredy narrates his story in this vernacular whilst shifting between the German and English of his own dual cultural heritage. Therefore, Fredy achieves a higher level of linguistic sophistication than Murray is allowing for. His ‘blokish man’ is as much the cosmopolitan poet as his author.

Murray could not simply adopt the colonial idiom for his work but had to ‘re-centre’ his poetic language in the place of his birth. As Martin Leer states, this re-

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centring is, “an act of relocation, of decentring the centre.” However partial and partisan these idioms might be, the very process of harnessing them for his poetic project stands out as a key postcolonial strategy in Murray’s writing. Ultimately though, however far a poet attempts to speak for her nation, she can only speak for herself. Murray has been wise to continually return to the act of writing and the primacy of the poem and the poetic process as the true site of (his, at least) identity formation.

However, it is fair to argue that Fredy Neptune encapsulates many of Les Murray’s postcolonial strategies and can be considered a representative work of postcolonial settler literature. In one of the founding studies of postcolonial writing *The Empire Writes Back*, the literature of the settler colonies came to be defined by, “three major issues […] the relationship between social and literary practices in the old world and the new; the relationship between the indigenous population in settled areas and the invading settlers; and the relationship between the imported language and the new place.”

Fredy is the eponymous bloke ‘from the bush’ who nevertheless encounters the true poetry of Europe. Fredy has a dual nationality as German/Australian. He is bi-lingual and this gives him a complex relationship to language that allows Murray to express the full range of his linguistic interests. Fredy speaks firmly of and from the vernacular republic but has access to the German of old Europe where one version of lyric poetry originates.

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Fredy speaks the rural bush idiom that is already distinct from the English he encounters abroad. Whenever Fredy encounters that Australian idiom he is immediately transported ‘home’. The, “problem of finding and defining ‘home’”\(^9\) becomes central to settler postcolonial writings, in Elleke Boehmer’s words, “an over-arching metanarrative of *journeying* and *return*.”\(^10\) As Laurence Bourke states in his early study of Murray’s poetry, “The drama which his poetry rehearses is one of loss and recovery: if there is a homecoming it is because there is first an exile.”\(^11\) Fredy enacts this drama, embarking on a journey from: “our farm outside Dungog”\(^12\) that takes him around the world in half a stanza: “Why this is Valparaiso!/Or: I’m in Singapore and know my way about/ […]out of New York on a Hansa Freighter […] /cooking alive that august,/in Messina”,\(^13\) and through the history of the first half of the Twentieth Century. This is a journey back and forth across the globe punctuated by returns to Australia, the centre which is home. As Steven Matthews points out, “As spatial and geographical historians suggest - journeying was crucial to the establishment of a sense of what Australia is.”\(^14\) In *Fredy Neptune*, as elsewhere in his work,\(^15\) Murray acts out this journeying on a grand scale, encompassing the globe.

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\(^12\) *Fredy Neptune*, 3.
\(^13\) Ibid, 3.
\(^14\) Matthews, 17.
Where He’s Placed

Murray is the literary descendent of not only the Jindyworobak Movement, but of Australian poets Kenneth Slessor and Judith Wright. He is also the contemporary of those world poets who have actively sought to address the postcolonial in their work, most significantly the Caribbean poet Derek Walcott. Therefore, Murray has gained a prominent position in both world poetry and Australian literature. By 1990 Murray was, “an established presence on the poetic landscape of Europe, the only Australian poet of his generation to achieve this distinction.” Of the influence of Kenneth Slessor on Murray’s work, Christopher Koch has said that Murray descends, “in a perfect line from Ken: themes of Australia and themes of Europe co-existing, double-faced, contradictory and yet in harmony, because the mix is in perfect harmony with our history, with what we are.”

Murray was spurred on to write Fredy Neptune after reading Walcott’s epic poem of postcolonial historical recovery, Omeros, stating in his essay ‘How Fred and I Wrote Fredy Neptune’ how Omeros was, “The cocking hammer which made that trigger fire.” Walcott is a poet who has wrestled with the complex identity of, “his irreconcilable and pluralistic situation as a transplanted African in a colonial English society” and sought, “in his double culture and his divided self […] the basis of metaphor and the moral meaning of poetry.” Walcott has written a body of major


18 Christopher Koch, quoted in Alexander, 123.
21 Ibid.
poetry that has transposed the personal into both the mythic and the historical, and often, “unites a vernacular tradition with his high eloquence”, just as Murray does. Both poets draw on the tradition of English lyric poetry and yet speak from and for a decentred identity. Both poets choose epic forms for their great narrative poems that speak back to the lyric tradition, the terza rima of Omeros and Fredy Neptune’s unrhymed Octet. However, whilst Walcott tends to stay within more traditional poetic forms, the work of Murray’s middle career was characterised by ‘sprawl’, a technique in his poetry that attempts to embody a sense of Australian identity that is aligned to a land renowned for its expansiveness. Fredy Neptune maintains, “the fine balance between formality, intricacy and sprawl which gives Murray’s work its distinction.”

Murray continues and extends the Jindyworobak movement’s attempts to, “indigenize their work” through his project of assimilating into his poetry certain Aboriginal cultural ideas such as the Dreaming. Symbols of myth and initiation are to be found in his first verse novel The Boys Who Stole the Funeral (1980). The central theme of this book is, “an echo of the importance many aboriginal people attach to returning the remains of a dead person to his or her spirit country.” But Murray typically situates this theme within the white settler culture of the Australian bush. The journey of the story’s central character, Kevin Forbutt, culminates in a masculine initiation rite that would have in reality remained sacred and hidden:

They take out the fatty knife and the ghastly small knife

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22 Balakian, 166 – 177.
24 Ashcroft et al, 218.
25 Alexander, 206.
and begin to cut to cut. The pain is unspeakable, exorbitant —

Murray came under attack from critics, not only for his appropriation of Aboriginal culture in *The Boys*, but for his representation of women and feminism. A key character in the verse-novel, Noeline Kampff, stands in two dimensionally for what Murray perceives as ‘feminism’ and, “speaks entirely in clichés and curses, expresses confused hatred and despair, and pours a bucket of blood over Reeby in a symbolic abortion or human-sacrifice scene.” It would only be fair to point out that Murray has revised some of these undisguised feelings towards women in later work.

Like Kenneth Slessor, Murray has concentrated a large part of his poetic energies to, “root an alien language in a new land”, with the act of focusing on Antipodean flora and fauna going beyond mere noting to the embodied act of naming. As Peter Alexander points out, “Murray’s recognition of the importance of the Australian landscape was an imaginative leap of the utmost importance to him and to Australian literature.” Just as his precursor Judith Wright sought to represent the land of Australia as, “humanly viable, its geography made complex by historical and spiritual associations”, Murray has peopled his poetry with figures from settler history and incorporated his family history, contemporary milieu and personal presence throughout his body of work.

27 Alexander, 207.
29 *Ibid* 78.
Judith Wright’s notion of the, “double-aspect” is to be found deeply embedded in Murray’s work. Both poets, “have tried to negotiate between the more recent white native culture and that of the older native other. Both are poets of pluralism and cultural twinning”. These various strategies are all part and parcel of Murray’s most often stated project of establishing through his poetry the ‘vernacular republic’, and it is this aspect of Murray’s work which stands out as his major contribution the development of a postcolonial settler identity in Australian literature.

Essay Outline

In Chapter One I suggest that Murray writes an historical body in place of the physical sensation of body that Fredy loses. Fredy Neptune begins with the loss of the body and ends with its retrieval, back home in a post World War Two Australia. Fredy witnesses the burning of a group of Armenian women during the early years of the First World War and his response to this atrocity is the loss of sensation in his physical body. Fredy, “is rendered into a body with no presence” and this, “makes Fred into a representation of one of his creator’s key preoccupations […] with bodies and the mystery of embodiment.”

The story of the verse novel traverses the two world wars of the Twentieth Century and moves between the major political and historical upheavals of that period. This journey takes Fredy from damage to repair through a series of awakenings towards church, family and home. In many ways Fredy becomes a

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31 Judith Wright’s notion of the ‘Double Aspect’ of Australian identity posits a “sense of the New world as old […] the doubleness of the New world comes from its European discovery. It was split-new to us and older than us” quoted in Robert Crawford, Identifying Poets, 1993, 75.
32 Crawford, Identifying Poets, 1993, 75.
33 Matthews, 134.
cipher, is even deliberately created as a tabula rasa, for those historical processes that have shaped the human self in the Twentieth Century. The verse novel encompasses the First and Second World Wars and closes at the brink of a third, Cold War. It is impossible, reading the verse-novel in the Twenty First Century, not to read there the echo of our new and present wars. Murray was writing *Fredy Neptune* in the years after the first Gulf War in 1991, harbinger of the next bloody cycle of history that has so far, taken us through 9/11 to the ‘war on terror’, Iraq and Afghanistan. This is a new cycle of colonial dominance, this time by a postcolonial state.

Peter Alexander argues in his biography of the poet that Murray’s is, “a republic of the mind, particularly of the imagination”\(^{34}\) and that, “if Australians could take imaginative possession of their country, the republic would have arrived”\(^{35}\). *Fredy Neptune* is just one such imagining, where Fredy embodies the Australia of the mind as well as the body. This is an Australia come into being in the Twentieth Century at the moment of Gallipoli, at the point which Fredy is able to say: “When Gallipoli came, I thought: I will desert/ if I have to fight Australians”\(^{36}\). This is a new world that is continuous with rather than split from an old world that is Aboriginal, not European. Here lies the complexity of where Murray is writing from: white settler, male, rural, proletarian, in the colonial language and poetic tropes of the ‘mother country’. History is lived through the poem, the poem striving for ‘wholespeak’ to embody the experience of a postcolonial identity in all its paradoxical multifariousness. *Fredy Neptune* writes an historical body in place of the lost body of the central character, a history told and experienced at the level of the

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\(^{34}\) Alexander, 159.

\(^{35}\) Ibid, 159.

\(^{36}\) *Fredy Neptune*, 4.
individual as opposed to the level of the state or its ideologies; an interiorised, embodied personal/historical.

Chapter Two outlines Murray’s ideas of poetry and embodiment, and his terms ‘wholespeak’ and the ‘poeme’ in the context of *Fredy Neptune*. The concept of ‘body’ in the poem is not merely that of the physical body. Both poetry and narrative are engaged throughout with bringing into consciousness the bodied existence at, as Murray perceives it, the various levels of reality that humans inhabit. This is conscious and unconscious life, the physical body and the dreaming or spiritual body brought together in a pre-Cartesian whole. Fredy’s separation of body and self is an abomination brought about by the schism of war and genocide. Fredy’s divided self mirrors the divided world. It is only when he is able to: “pray/with a single heart” 37 at the end of the novel that he is able to regain wholeness and be healed. Murray’s poetry and Fred’s journey is a fully embodied realisation of such postcolonial strategies written on and through the medium of the body. *Fredy Neptune* is, “A fully dialogical novel and a real poem (in the Murrayian sense) centred around a many sided figure of embodiment and disembodiment, of uncommon and common ways of being in the world of poemes”. 38 *Fredy Neptune* strives, in the words of Franz Fanon to create, “a real dialectic between my body and the world.” 39

Chapter Three considers *Fredy Neptune* as a postcolonial text that writes a postcolonial identity through the medium of the body. At the core of the novel is an expression of the multiple nature of postcolonial identity in the figure of Fredy. Fredy in his *unbodying* can be viewed as the characteristic ‘other’ as identified by

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37 *Fredy Neptune*, 14.
Fanon, the undefined or erased subject of postcolonial discourse. This absence can be read as identification with the suffering of those bodily erased by colonial power and something more subversive and potentially liberating, Fanon’s, “utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born.”\textsuperscript{40} This is a body that suffers not just a sensorial annihilation but a splitting into multiplicities; a corporality plagued by the paradox of being and not being.

Elleke Boehmer has suggested how in settler societies, “the absence of an alternative, pre-colonial metaphysic makes the assertion of ‘otherness’ more difficult”\textsuperscript{41}. Murray has been widely criticised for incorporating Aboriginal cultural ideas in his poetry. He has argued for the creolisation of Australian culture in an attempt to align the white settler rural working class with the Aborigines, and the locus of his poetry with aboriginal song. As such, he might be seen as making use of the ‘otherness’ of Aborigines to locate otherness for the white settler. This identification extends to the Australian landscape, and offers another layer of identification with the forty thousand years of Aboriginal habitation. The transmutation of the body into fire, evoked on the one hand by the burning of the Armenian women as the central image of the poem, has complex symbolic resonances for the Australian poet where fire is part of the very physical history of the homeland. For Murray, Australia, and specifically his ‘forty acres’ in Bunyah, New South Wales, is his ‘spirit country’, a place where he, like the Aborigines, finds his ‘Dreaming’.

\textsuperscript{40} Fanon, 8.
\textsuperscript{41} Boehmer, 136.
The making of a postcolonial identity under such circumstances requires high levels of double think. One of Murray’s solutions in *Fredy Neptune* to the complexity of writing from such a position is to play with multiplicities of identity. This allows for a textual slipperiness that not only attempts to outwit his critics, but underlines the very slipperiness of identity itself, both national and individual. *Fredy Neptune* is layered with paradoxes that are representative of but are not always easily resolved in Murray’s textual universe. Fredy embodies and is subject to these paradoxes throughout his story. He leaves home only to yearn for return. The cycles of exile and homecoming are key to the re-writing of the postcolonial experience and in *Fredy Neptune*, an essential part of Murray’s strategy of re-centring the centre as home.

Throughout *Fredy Neptune* there is the omnipresence of death in life, of being here/not here. This is Fredy’s central paradox. Fredy’s sojourn in America is littered with images of the undead, of ghosts and of meta-journeys to the underworld. Part of Fredy’s response is to consciously inhabit the position of performance, acting in Hollywood films, joining the circus and taking on a non-de-plume. There are slippages between race and class Fredy not only perceives but exploits, and Fredy often plays the role of outsider. These are instances of inhabiting both the otherness and duality of the postcolonial position in ways that are essentially resistant to definition, and by definition, resistant to the centrifugal forces of colonialism.

Chapter Four focuses on women, sex and gender in *Fredy Neptune*, in which I see an attempt by Murray to address and redress some of the unbalanced statements around women that have characterised his earlier work, in particular *The Boys Who
Stole the Funeral. There are uncertainties and slippages around gender present in the verse-novel. Such figures as mixed gendered Leila Golightly and bi-sexual Marlene Dietrich flag up this interest. Some of this relates to the difficult personal history of the poet around issues of women and sex. To some extent, the writing of Fredy Neptune has been part of Murray’s recovery from this damage, as has the realisation that, “Maybe I had to bear the androgynous name Leslie in order to be a poet” 42.

The story of Hans, the German boy Fredy rescues from castration at the hands of the Nazis, provides a sub-plot or illumination on the grand themes, weaving the effects of state sanctioned ‘narrowsspeak’ on the body, how the force of history can change the very physical makeup of an individual. Hans’s is a whole body about to be, literally, dismembered. The saving of Hans is as essential to Fredy’s psychological survival as it is to Hans’s physical survival. When Fredy loses sensation in his body he becomes in a moment superhuman, as indestructible as a comic book hero, but along with this, as with those superheroes, comes a moral responsibility. Like such a hero, Fred’s moral position is clear from the outset: “I’d had to find out, without killing, among the killing,/what my human worth would be” 43. Fred’s core sense of his existence, and his moral purpose, doesn’t change, and perhaps without the difficult layer of the body he would remain something of a two dimensional character. Hans affords Fredy the chance to act out this moral position and to enforce a natural, human justice; it such a consideration of justice that will finally redeem Fredy.

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42 Murray, ‘How Fred and I wrote Fredy Neptune’, 77.
43 Fredy Neptune, 17.
Fredy’s rescue of Hans is an act of empathy, and empathy takes a central place in Fredy’s moral universe. Empathy is a remedy for historical erasure and the remedy for his affliction. Poetry is itself an act of empathy, the poet must inhabit, or in Murray’s terms, embody, its subject, experiencing the world from his/her/its point of view in order to truthfully represent it. Therein lies poetry’s redemptive potential: if we can fully know the other, how can we destroy it? Fredy’s loss of physical sensation is itself a profound act of empathy that seeks to redeem the human from the grand, dehumanising, historical narrative. This is a further role that poetry might choose to take on, just as, for example Anna Akhmatova’s Requiem was both an act of witnessing and an act of empathy, poetry as a salve for the pains of Stalinist Russia that found universal resonance.

The reader is kept in a close constant relationship to the presence of the body through the materiality of the poem. The intense, visceral nature of the poetry brings the reader into the continued presence of the body as a counterpoint and reminder to what Fredy has lost. It is a method that recalls the dramatic change in the writing of war and war experience brought about in the poetry of the First World War poets. The poetry of the First World War is an instance, perhaps the last in Western history, when poetry emerged from a historical moment and was changed irrevocably by it. It is a poetry that is fully embodied and speaks of the historical moment from the point of view of immediate individual experience, and in so doing was able to take an active historical role in helping to change attitudes to war. This paralleled a break in culture and society at the beginning of the modern age. The conflicted hero in Murray’s poem is as much a metaphor for this moment, as his journey through
history and towards recovery is a metaphor for Murray’s search for a new world identity in poetry.
Chapter 1: Historical Bodies

Introduction

In this chapter I argue that Murray writes a historical body in *Fredy Neptune* in place of the erased body of his hero. As Steven Matthews asserts, Murray’s poetry displays how, “History can only operate through a form of embodiment.” Fredy Neptune is an historical text, “the story of the twentieth century, it is the big story, the fate of the Germans and the fate they then visited on others.” The story of the novel, a journey through the violence and progress of the first half of the Twentieth Century, is at once a journey of the body and a journey into history.

Fred Boettcher, the hero and narrator of Les Murray’s verse-novel, leaves his home farm in Dungog, Australia to be a sailor just as the Twentieth Century ignites into the First World War. A second generation German/Australian, Fred is seconded onto first a German then a Turkish battle cruiser. Setting foot ashore in Turkey he witnesses the burning of a group of Armenian women. The image Murray sets up as the inciting incident for his verse novel, is an image of being set alight that calls into the presence of the story the myriad spectres of the history that is about to unfold:

> They were huddling, terrified, crying.  
> Crossing themselves, in the middle of men all yelling.  
> Their big loose dresses were sopping. Kerosene, you could smell it.  
> The men were prancing, feeling them, poking at them to dance – then pouf! they were alight, the women, dark wicks to great orange flames,  
> whopping and shrieking.  

Matthews, 105.  
Murray quoted in Alexander, 290.  
Fredy Neptune, 5.
Fred lives the historical moment of the burning of the Armenian women, the event he encounters moving through him and changing his very physical make-up. This event and Fred’s powerlessness to stop it results in leprosy: “I opened my clothes and showed my islands and countries, white, with red crust borders.” He is soon trapped inside a corporeality unable to experience physical sensation but capable of self healing and incredible feats of strength. This: “null, numb, nothing” lasts, apart from brief moments of reprieve, the length of the story. Just as Fred’s bodily experience cannot be extracted from the magnified events of history, so history is made out of the physical bodies of humans and human action. Fred is, in Murray’s words, “the thought of the body” and, “the whole rage and horror turned into art.”

Divided into five books, Fredy Neptune charts the history of the early part of the Twentieth Century. Book One covers the period of the First World War, from the moment Fredy and Australia enters it, to the point at which Turkey is forming into a modern state. This historical event is compressed in the final pages of Book One with the beginning of cultural modernity, epitomised here by ‘Hollywood’:

The town was flapping with Greek and Turkish flags.  
Two into one wasn’t going well that year.  
People I couldn’t tell apart spat at one another  
in the streets. The colonial offered me hospitality,  
but I was headlong hell-for-leather after a ship.  
I knocked about the harbour, just starting to be very sorry  
I’d turned the colonial down, and watching a packed Greek ferry  
tie up. A bloke on board was yelling Charlie Chaplin!  

*Charlie Chaplin!* and holding up big flat tins.  
I thought at first – horrible notion! – that those flat tins  
were magazines for Lewis guns.

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47 *Fredy Neptune*, 7.  
49 Murray quoted in Alexander, 290.  
50 *Ibid*, 293.
They were moving picture film cans, of course.\textsuperscript{51}

Book Two begins with Fredy’s return to an Australia reeling from the war and suffering the Spanish flu epidemic:

Then we’re at Dungog, a white-whiskered women, muzzled kids and handkerchief desperados. Scared the Black flue might strike them.\textsuperscript{52}

This second part of the verse-novel is concerned largely with Fredy’s second experience of displacement as a German/Australian, his search for his mother, his relationship with Laura and his attempts to make a life at home. This period is also significant for Fredy’s first foray into the circus and his transformation from Fredy Boetcher to Fredy Neptune.

In Book Three, Fredy is sent to bring back Basil Thoroblood, an Australian gangster in exile in America. Wall Street crashes and this adventure spans the period of the depression in America, until the revival of American fortunes through the cinema and ends at the brink of World War Two. Book Four is set mostly in Germany during the rise of Nazism with a brief foray into Stalinist Russia, and contains the stories of Hans and of Countess zu Knull with her ‘Midnight Cabaret’.

Book Five brings Fredy back to Australia where he and his family live out the depression in the bush.

Fredy cannot avoid the Second World War entirely and ends up first in China then Manila, the focus now on Australia’s involvement in the war rather than Europe’s. The verse novel closes with the full realisation of what the Holocaust has meant and the root of Fredy’s redemption. On the other side of the world, two new powers are sizing up for the next, Cold War: “the white atrocity […] the sun disk of

\textsuperscript{51} Fredy Neptune, 44. 
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid, 49.
the bomb.” The historical setting of *Fredy Neptune*, “links genocide in the World Wars One and Two, as a connective to those who only associate the […] Holocaust with the latter.”

**When Gallipoli Came**

Fred’s journey starts at the moment modern Australia enters history: “When Gallipoli came”, and his state of complex identity at this early point in the verse-novel illustrates the novel’s concerns with the shifting nature of postcolonial identity for white Australians. According to Boehmer, for the white postcolonial settler, “a double act was required: to remain vigilantly critical of the legacy of colonialism, but also, because it could not be entirely eliminated, to discover how to accommodate that legacy even while re-interpreting it.” For postcolonial identity to be established it is important that postcolonial subjects re-write themselves into history. “Post coloniality is defined as that condition in which colonised peoples seek to take their place […] as historical subjects”, writes Boehmer, and that it is in, “histories and historical narrative they gained access to temporality.”

Murray’s position within the postcolonial is deeply compromised. Much of postcolonial theory takes as its subject the work of indigenous peoples who have been disenfranchised by colonialism. It is their pre-colonial history that must be re-
written and reclaimed. Achebe writes an aural history of the Umuofia into literature in order to maintain a convergence of the history of the West African people with colonialism. On the one hand, Fredy Neptune argues for a self-defined Australian Republic free from the moral and political decay of the European world wars, and on the other hand Twentieth Century Western history is the basis for its re-imagining. Just as drawing any parallels between, say the work of Achebe and the work of Murray is inevitably uncomfortable, attempting to base an idea about such an identity on the work of a white male writer is equally one sided. However, according to Steven Matthews, Murray conceives of, “Folk Australia” as, “part imaginary, part historical.” Matthews argues that Murray is, “writing a self image to resist the history of colonisation in his country”, and I would agree that despite the inherent difficulties and discontinuities Fredy of Fredy Neptune is one such self image.

Fredy is: “A colonial, from the South Sea – The empires/could be pretty approximate.” Within several stanzas he has the status of German and has Turkish imposed upon him:

Soon after, the Kaiser came on board with crowds of heel clickers. We’d to change our caps, he said, and put on fezes. We were now the Turkish Navy.

But his core sense of self becomes clear when his sense of what is home is involved:

“When Gallipoli came, I thought: I will desert/if I have to fight Australians.”

Whatever identity colonialism places on its subjects it is ultimately unfixed, merely a

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60 Matthews, ‘Murray and a Music of Indirection’, 31.
61 Ibid, 25.
62 Fredy Neptune, 4.
63 Ibid, 4.
64 Ibid, 4.
different kind of dress. Despite the unravelling of the weave of identity as the novel progresses, at this point in history, at the historical moment that is Gallipoli, Fredy’s identity crystallises as Australian.

For Australia and New Zealand alike, the Gallipoli Campaign begun on April 24th 1915 is widely recognised as the moment of the birth of a national consciousness. Heavy losses in an initial naval assault led to an allied retreat and by the time the decision had been taken to send in ground forces the Turks had rallied. In the hours before dawn of the 25th April, the Australian First Division waited in boats off the coast for a dawn attack. The boats drifted off course, the ensuing landings were chaotic and in the confusion casualties were high. The few square meters that were captured that morning were never extended. The Anzacs dug in and a stalemate began that was to last eight months until a final retreat in December.

Such an event provides monuments and heroes and occasions a day of worship. Anzacs Day was used as an instance for patriotic rallies and recruiting campaigns in the remaining years of the war and in 1927, for the first time, every state in Australia observed a public holiday on Anzacs Day. Today, it is a day of national mourning and remembrance that has a powerful hold over the consciousness of white Australia. Manning Clark has said that, “the tragic action in Turkey paradoxically acquired for Australians a sacred site.”65 Fredy Neptune is a work intent on a kind of slow motion explosion to expose the dual threads of white Australian postcolonial identity, and begins by signifying this most nation defining of events. The mention Gallipoli gets in the opening pages of the verse-novel is so condensed because the name has such power; to name it is enough. For modern

65 Quoted in Matthews, 90.
Australia Gallipoli is a birth, not the romantic myth of birth its pain airbrushed out, but the blood and filth and horror-soaked poetic birth that tears a new nation from the womb of the old. With the mass slaughter of its countrymen, Australia is born from the mother country.

This is not to say that war does not change those who fight it, but perhaps it makes them more conscious of who they are and where they belong. To be re-made in the image of the new land the postcolonial identity must set itself within history. As Steven Matthews writes:

Murray’s self appointed role becomes that of national remembrancer […] not altogether removed from that ‘painful’ task which the theorist Homi K Bhabha has seen as essential to forming a bridge between a colonial past and a new cultural identity, a putting together of the disremembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present.66

Fredy’s affliction takes away a part of himself, the part that experiences pain, but not his essential feeling self. He is at pains to stress this difference early in the verse novel when he is taken into hospital as the result of a burn: “I haven’t lost feeling, I snapped. I’ve lost sensation.”67 No matter what happens to him, he remains sure of this marker for the continuance of his core humanity.

Just as Fred is a figure in solidarity with those ordinary soldiers, his affliction is a representation of that condition of stalemate particular to Gallipoli and the wider theatre of the First World War, rippling out to the Cold War that was to define the second half of the Twentieth Century. The entire narrative arc of Fredy Neptune could be seen in terms of this stalemate. His travels don’t necessarily resolve anything; they are too episodic in nature and his various exploits are only diversions

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66 Matthews, 35.
67 Fredy Neptune, 24.
from main objective, which is to return home. *Fredy Neptune* is a quest narrative that, in the words of Elleke Boehmer, “seeks mastery […] of history and self.”

**History as Narrative in Verse**

The narrative journey of *Fredy Neptune* parallels the story of coming into being of modern Australia with the journey of an individual. As Steven Matthews argues, “Australia’s history seems […] unavoidably interwoven with that of the Twentieth Century.” The structure of the book weaves key events in world history with the intimate personal history of our hero. Each book is characterised by the coming into being of a nation state: modern Turkey in Book One, Australia’s early moves into nationhood in Book Two, modern America in Book Three, Nazi Germany in Book Four, and modern Australia in Book Five. Charles Lock writes of the importance of the place of the birth of modern Turkey in the book as follows:

[…] the new Turkish nation, emerging in the last years of the Ottoman Empire. Had the support of the West in its ideological balance […] Kemal (Ataturk) won the approval of the West, and in this he may be regarded as the forerunner of those ‘Independence leaders whose barbaric practices would be condoned by the West under the cover of an emerging post-colonial discourse.’

History, as told through these five books, is understood as a cyclical process of rise and fall through human conflict that is paralleled by the development of culture and the growth of ideas. So in Book One we see the first aeroplanes and the effects of the mechanisation of war, in Book Two the rise of working class consciousness and the spread of the use of the motor car (Fred and Laura have a travelling van; it is a car

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69 Matthews, 45.
that affords Murray the narrative turn at the close of the book). In Book Three there is the between-the-wars explosion in cinema in America, and the Zeppelin, here a metaphor for the rise of Nazi Germany and for Fredy’s lack of physical sensation: “The Zep sat like me in the air”\textsuperscript{71} says Fredy at the close of Book Three.

Book Four focuses on the consequences of extreme ideology and mob persecution. The burning of the Armenian women is a symbol at the core of the book, “of the mob persecution which Murray termed ‘the police’, and which for him summed up much that was worst about human nature in the Twentieth Century.”\textsuperscript{72}

Book Five is concerned largely with bringing Fredy towards his personal and familial peace, the end of his story. The force of industrial development in the shape of ‘Manpower’ has its presence – Fredy and his son Joe get jobs there – as does the inexorable movement of modernity and mechanisation towards the zenith of its destructive possibility: “the sun disk of the Bomb/like belt taking up on a wheel, or chain flowing off it.”\textsuperscript{73}

                                    
Each book contains a period of transformation for its protagonist from farmer to sailor and from leper to this unique individual who loses bodily sensation; from German/Australian to postcolonial Australian and from Fredy Boetcher to Fredy Neptune, the circus act; from a ‘superman’ in Baz Thoroblood’s stable to tramp across Depression era America, to an extras actor in Hollywood and finally to settled family man at home who regains the sensation in his body, mislaid for thirty five years. This is evident in the internal structural connectives of the verse-novel as Fredy’s personal metamorphoses parallel those of key nation states in modern

\textsuperscript{71} Fredy Neptune, 170. 
\textsuperscript{72} Alexander, 289. 
\textsuperscript{73} Fredy Neptune, 247.
history. Two of these are postcolonial states, America and Fred’s homeland, Australia. Modern Turkey emerges out of an ancient, sprawling empire and sits traditionally as a bridge between east and west. This is a metaphorical bridge for Australia between its own, western colonial past and postcolonial future far to the east.

Germany is a country come into being from the wider and colonial Prussian Empire after the First World War, and the novel pays attention to the effect of Germany’s history in the restructuring of the Twentieth Century. Fred, in his affliction and in his multiple nature, is the embodiment of the processes of that history. The two are intertwined and inseparable and it is not possible to see where one begins or another ends. Much of written history would make it seem as if the great destroying ideologies of the Twentieth Century rose of their own accord and not from the actions of small groups of men conducting energies that would eventually radiate out to encompass whole countries, whole continents of peoples. It might be seen that, “All forms of discourse – from the smallest units to the national language and beyond – are shot through with social and historical conflict.”

The very belief that systems of power, ideology and government are beyond the individual allows individuals to deny responsibility. In Fredy Neptune we follow one man’s story, one man prepared to carry that responsibility:

Was it something I’d made? If I had, I’d be the shirker of the century. But it wasn’t about my two countries thing; it was about something stronger. A way I couldn’t let the world be.

74 Tony Crowley quoted in Crawford, 8.
75 Fredy Neptune, 251.
This possibility of history or events being ‘set in motion’ ties in with a familiar Murray theme and poetic technique of the ‘cycle’, and it is only possible to view history this way from a distance:

It is the outward looking, expansive gaze which makes possible the interaction with a ‘significant other’, a foreign culture in which gifts for the future of one’s own culture may be located, and in which an illuminating reflection of one’s own identity may be glimpsed.\(^ {76}\)

The cycle here is a German cycle and it is not coincidental that Fred’s dual nationhood is German /Australian. His movement is away from a prior European identity that split and unfixed and towards a wholly present Australian identity. Hitler’s Germany bases its nation identity on the past, the folk tradition and the Roman Empire. It steps back into the semi-mythical, and into the strictures of Empirical rule; it is too narrow, hence it fails. Fredy comes to the reckoning that:

Germany was my people but not my country, was the short of it.
Germany was my people who had lost the war
and I hadn’t, so I couldn’t cotton their Adolf.
My struggle was a body that couldn’t face atrocity, and vanished:
his dead body was his Kampff-book, that he’d closed my people in.\(^ {77}\)

Outside the time frame of the verse-novel the reader knows that Germany goes on to become a split nation, itself subject to colonial forces from East and West. America, on the other hand, is boundless, embracing and multiple. Its sense of itself at this point in its history holds the possibility of the kind of multiple identities for its citizens that could be hoped for Australia’s. Those new nations that succeed do so because they not merely throw off, but they transform the past, making something new, perhaps hybrid, but always plural, for the future.

\(^{76}\) Crawford, 12.
\(^{77}\) Fredy Neptune, 197.
The Medicalisation of the Body

That this is a bodied transformation, and that in *Fredy Neptune* Murray is insisting we view Twentieth Century history at the most visceral human level, is underlined in each book by at least one serious physical accident requiring a stay for Fredy in hospital. This leads to the consideration of the question of the medicalisation of the body in modern times. This process is aligned with the idea of the state and the colonial state, both of which need to be avoided if the integrated postcolonial self is to be actualised. For Fredy these stays largely afford the need for escape and help fuel Fredy’s narrative, but are also described in ways that mirror not only the body itself but the tightening of control over the self and the body by the emerging modern state:

> At Berlin, I was carried on a stretcher from the train through this terrible hall full of cripples and crying and racked up in a green motor until I was stowed in another huge hall of a hospital iced with mirrors tingling under the lights. The doctors were buttoned and straight as bayonets, with their guard moustaches, the nurses tight and pink and all of us Wounded tucked up so trim and square we couldn’t see what shapes each other were.  

This passage shows the reader the well known effects of modern mechanised warfare on the human body and gives an image of the hospital that is at once clinical and mysterious.

Murray brings together the elements of history, war, the emergence of the hospital and the presence of sexuality in an evocation of state bodily control that is reminiscent of what Foucault calls bio-power, “the administration of bodies and the

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78 *Fredy Neptune*, 6.
calculated management of life.” Fredy is continuously avoiding those mechanisms of state – the army, the hospital, even, to the extent in which he continually leaves it, the family – and choosing the very states of existence that set him outside of those state maintained social norms (being a traveller, a vagabond, going bush, joining the circus, and of course, his essential status as ‘different’). He does this as a way of re-establishing an a-priori state of human freedom, a tabula rasa upon which may be formulated of a new kind of self and identity in a post-imperial, postcolonial world.

It is well known that many modern medical techniques were developed in the field hospitals of the wars of the early Twentieth Century. The state utilises the breakdown of the human body only in order to rebuild it to fight its wars again. But the state also orders human beings through the medium of the body. Such as the hospital and the asylum, as in the story of Hans, are powerful sites of such ordering and control. The army is a parallel institution where the bodies of men in particular are shaped and ordered to do the dirty work of the state. Increasingly in the Twentieth Century, war becomes the arena in which these elements of bodily control are synthesised. The state, or those who operate in its service, is not to be trusted. It is essential that individuals maintain a distrust of those in power in order to ensure the future moral and physical survival of the human species.

Those doctors and nurses who tend Fredy’s war damaged body in Fredy Neptune are represented as gendered body parts: “straight as bayonets/tight and pink” and as agents of the state: “their guard moustaches” reminding us of Murray’s well known response to sex as a ‘Nazi’, a phrase that will be echoed later in the poem. The wounded have had their bodies neutralised, they are: “trim and square” in a

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79 Rabinow, David (Ed) A Foucault Reader, 1984, 262.
foreshadowing of the story of Hans. Hans’s body would have been neutered by the Nazi state if Fredy had not rescued him.

Fredy’s affliction is first construed as leprosy and he is soon incarcerated:

I was shipped/to a walled in hole on the flats of the Weser River, the Kaiserley Leprosarium. It was yellow indoor cemetery: we were there to stay, and things went on there, very slow, that happen in the grave. From just like a scratchy photo to bandaged stubs, and earholes, and half faces – and not stopped, like on cripples in the world, but continuing.\(^80\)

Both the clinic, the asylum and work have their place in the ordering of subjectivity in Foucault’s terms, and both have their place in *Fredy Neptune* as negative expressions of this. That medicalization is something to be avoided by Fredy is clear in his second hospital experience in Book One. Admitted with a burnt hand Fredy decides to take a risk and find out if medicine can cure him:

Cox was the most barefaced curly-headed rogue medico unhung, blokes that much still mattered to in the hospital told me, but that was later. I asked him *Can you fix my hand*?

*I can: no one else can*, he answered with a grin, so I took the plunge: *Can you cure me?* I asked him.\(^81\)

Cox begins to medicalise Fredy in a language that separates the ‘condition’ from the individual’s bodied experience of that illness:

Meantime I was tapped and prodded and written up: Profound neuropathy: proprioception intact (see? Read it) no gross motor deficit: agnosia frequent in darkness: slight allaesthesia: grossly flattened cutaneous percept ubiquitous.\(^82\)

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\(^{80}\) *Fredy Neptune*, 24.


This is the language of the Twentieth Century occasioned by the birth of psychoanalysis and developing ideas about the relationship between mind and body that was to find its role and application in the treatment of shell shock.

But this reads, certainly in terms of Fredy’s linguistic universe, as nonsense, a language invented by those in power to mystify and hold sway over its subjects. It is the state that owns the language that separates self from body and therefore it is the state that can gain ownership of the body. “You’re my subject” claims Cox, punning on the duality of that word to turn this encounter not only into a question of medical or even state authority, but one of colonial authority. This is a colonial authority adept at drawing ever new lines in the sand to define the other: ‘You even pronounce your surname correctly. So you’re rights are as wind. You’re a British suspect!’

Closely connected to the necessity of escape from hospital for Fredy is that he is not to be found out as different. As history is about to teach us, the state does terrible things to those who are different. Therefore, this process of medicalisation shown throughout the novel, both literally and through language poses a risk of incarceration for both his physical self and his identity. Fredy needs to continually side-step to avoid it. Such escape is essential to retain a unified sense of self free from the impositions and orderings of the state. Fredy Neptune, “participates in the narratives of the imperial centre, but obliquely, cunningly.” The state names and divides those bodies that come under its rule in order to own them. Such multiple divisions, facilitated by both language and ideology, are reflected in paradoxical

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83 Fredy Neptune, 24.
84 Ibid, 24.
85 Ashcroft et al, 121.
concerns about the body, gender, class, ethnicity and nationality and the location of self in *Fredy Neptune*.

**Conclusion**

Murray embeds his hero in the history of the first half of the Twentieth Century. This is a history dominated by the cycles of war and destruction. Fredy, in his affliction, becomes a symbol for the suffering and destruction of those millions of ordinary people. He literally carries history on his body. As such, Fredy is a metaphor for both the necessity for empathy and an elegy for the lost. It is only a great, whole prayer that will save him. The body in the Twentieth Century has been subject to its greatest scrutiny and its greatest erasure. The increase of technology and the use of machines in war, and the medicalisation of the body, have gone hand in hand in a paradoxical dance of state control over what was once a private realm for the individual. Fredy must continually escape from situations that threaten his bodily self in order to maintain any sense of personal identity. Furthermore, Murray writes a long poem that mimics in its structures and composition the course and processes of that history. The poem is the body of that history, both of Fredy and of the Twentieth Century. In *Fredy Neptune*, Murray attempts to write Modern Australia back into world history by giving his protagonist a central place in this. However, Fredy for the most part, is an observer rather than a player. Keeping out of the history that shapes the rest of us, Australia will always remain distant. Perhaps this is the necessary price to pay for independence from European colonial dominance and for the re-centring of home that is so central to Murray’s project of re-defining postcolonial Australian identity.
Chapter 2: Embodiment, Wholespeak and the Poem

Introduction

In three essays published in the 1980s, ‘Embodiment and Incarnation’, ‘Poems and Poesies’ and ‘Poems and the Mystery of Embodiment’ Les Murray sets out the ideas of embodiment, wholespeak, his notion of ‘the poeme’ and their relationship to his poetry. It is important to understand the basis of these three concepts when approaching Murray’s poetry and these ideas are inextricable from any exploration of his attempt to establish a postcolonial identity in his work. Murray sees the embodied experience of poetry as central to understanding poetry’s place and role in the world, and therefore the place and role of his poetry in the postcolonial Australian context. This is wholespeak, a poetic experience, as Murray defines it in these essays, which links the reader to spiritual experience and allows access to the wholeness of religious embodiment in the secular universe. Murray draws parallels with the Aboriginal religious and artistic culture here as just one of his postcolonial strategies.

The verse-novel Fredy Neptune works through the body thematically, structurally and texturally to capture this embodied wholeness, a wholeness that expresses the embodiment and wholespeak of the poetic experience. I would argue, further to Bruce Clunies-Ross’s assertion in his essay on Fredy Neptune, where he states that, “Fredy is a figure for the ideas about poetry and embodiment

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developed in Murray’s poem ‘Poetry and Religion’, that *Fredy Neptune* is Murray’s most developed application and exploration of these ideas in his work.

**Embodiment and Wholespeak**

Embodiment in poetry is not a new idea, the rhythms of poetry have long been associated with the rhythms of the living body, from the five beat iamb of English poetry that, “fits nicely with the living-breathing-speaking voice”, to poetic rhythm that, like the rhythmic variations of the human heart, syncopates around an, “ideal or underlying regular pattern.” Murray writes that, “the music of most of the poetry written in the last few centuries is verbal and gestural, bound up with the sounds of words and the ordering of breath which the structures of written verse are designed to bring about.” In the essays ‘Embodiment and Incarnation’ and ‘Poems and the Mystery of Embodiment’, Murray gives us keys to a method and idea of poetic embodiment that finds expression in subsequent collections such as *Translations from the Natural World* (1992) and *Subhuman Redneck Poems* (1996). Of the term ‘embodiment’ he writes:

> It refers at once to the materials in which a work is realised and to its somatic effect upon the beholder […] felt in the ghostly sympathy of breath and pulse and muscle […] we speak of having our breath taken away, of being made to shiver, of being knocked sideways, being rocked on our heels.

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87 Clunies-Ross, 95.
89 *Ibid*, 79.
90 Ibid, 225.
91 Ibid, 264.
For Murray, the poetic experience is, “an experience of wholeness”, a universal experience available to all in a world that has lost the certainties of organised religion. Those two words, ‘experience’ and ‘wholeness’ describe what a poem should feel like to read and how our physical body responds to and is bound up with reading the poem. He writes:

We only half-notice, consciously, that our breathing has tightened and altered, submitting to commands from beyond ourselves. It shifts in and out of this sympathetic obedience as the experience oscillates within us, coming and going in its successive small peaks of intensity. We may say that the poem is dancing us to its rhythm […] it is, discretely, borrowing our body to embody itself.

By this Murray is not simply referring to the techniques of metre and rhyme which help to order and carry the poem along, but how the poem is read, as a, “standing event” that can be lived and relived inexhaustibly. This ‘event’ of the poem is maintained through the poem’s essential mystery, a ‘wholespeak’ that keeps it just beyond the reach of reasoning and fixed meanings and out of the clutches of ‘narrowspeak’.

Murray calls, “properly integrated poetic discourse Wholespeak”, against which he sets up ‘narrowspeak’, “the administrative discourse by which the world is ruled”.

The language that originates from the primitive or, “hindbrain” as Murray terms it, wholespeak is the language of an embodied poetry, one emanating from the dream and dance of an embodied poetic practice. In ‘Poemes
and the Mystery of Embodiment’ Murray states that, “Wholespeak is the soul’s language”\(^98\), but he also acknowledges the necessity of narrowspeak as, “part of its function is to protect us against the strain and fallout of Wholespeak”\(^99\). *Fredy Neptune* works out its themes through the wholespeak of an embodied poetic, one which moves between languages and idioms (the poetic language of heightened syntax, simile and metaphor, and the speaking voice of working class Australia) a vernacular wholespeak that can stand against the narrowspeak of the great destroying ideologies of the Twentieth Century. *Fredy Neptune* acts out its narrative on and through the body, both of the poem and of its hero Fredy, whom Bruce Clunies-Ross calls, “a many-sided figure of embodiment and disembodiment”\(^100\).

For Murray, the poem both embodies physicality in its very make up and is a moment of embodiment for the reader through the act of reading. These ideas are present in Murray’s poetry from the earliest poems of *The Ilex Tree* (1965) and find full expression in Murray’s immersion in the embodied poem in *Translations from the Natural World*. Peter Alexander points out in his biography of Murray that, “he would illuminate the interaction between the physical and spiritual worlds in poems from ‘The Burning Truck’ and ‘An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow’ through to *Fredy Neptune* and beyond.”\(^101\) In ‘The Burning Truck’, the vehicle is brought to life as living monster: “growing enormous, shambling by our

\(^{100}\) Clunies-Ross, 101.
\(^{101}\) Alexander, 91.
street doors’, an embodied metaphor that is body, wholeness and substance: “its whole body and substance were consumed with heat/but it would not stop”.

‘Me Me Me’, from Translations, is worth quoting in full for its evocation and embodiment of the firetail finch. The very metre of the poem: “oscillates at dew-flash speed”, marking out the finch’s rapidity and emphasis of movement: “a heart-rate of instants”, like the heart beat of the bird:

Present and still present don’t yet add up to time
but oscillate at dew-flash speed, at distance speed. Me me me
a shower of firetail (me me) finches into seed grass
flickers feeding (me me) in drabs and red pinches of rhyme.
All present is perfect: an eye on either side
of hard scarlet nipping the sexual biscuits of plants,
their rind and luscious flour. It is a heart-rate of instants,
life with no death, only terror, no results, just prudence –
all vacuumed back up, onto low boughs, by a shift in shimmer,
present and still-present bringing steps that mute crickets’ simmer.

Fredy Neptune as a ‘poem’ in the very largest sense – a poem stretched over
two hundred and fifty pages – is an embodied poem realised on and through the
medium of the body of its hero. In the opening stanza, where we first meet Fredy
and view him briefly in his home environment before he sets off on his journey,
we are given meat and its relationship to the body both as food and metaphor.
This sets up the emphasis on corporeality that is returned to throughout the verse
novel:

That was sausage day
on our farm outside Dungog.
There’s my father Reinhard Boettcher,
my mother Agnes. There is brother Frank
who died of the brain-burn, meningitis.
There I am having my turn
at the mincer. Cooked meat with parsley and salt
winding out, smooth as gruel, for the Weisswurt.\textsuperscript{107}

The central premise of \textit{Fredy Neptune} is the loss of the hero’s bodily sensation at
the witnessing of an atrocity, the burning of a group of Armenian women during
the Armenian Genocide of 1915. Fredy’s response to the horror of this is an
embodied one, it happens to his body and is enacted through it even as it causes
the body’s sensorial loss: “within days I found out I had leprosy./I just curled up
in my hammock like a burnt thing myself.”\textsuperscript{108} When full sensation returns to
Fredy’s body on the closing page of the verse novel we are given full rendition of
what it means to be weighed by the body:

I learned that week, in love and swears, that the earlier
times I’d been back had not been full returns,
just ghostly half-measures, memory dreaming flesh at half gravity.
Now I was sore and heavy and bogged in chairs. I lifted
nothing but my long frame, with my wrists; I walked hard stomps,
I extended all the way in itch and muscle-twist and cloth-rub
from the head I’d lived in to the feet that had been my far limits.\textsuperscript{109}

The weight and heft of the body, with all its peculiar demands, are ever present
within the very texture of the poetry of \textit{Fredy Neptune}, and this strategy keeps the
reader in the closest proximity to the continued consideration and evocation of
\textit{body} that the words on the page can allow. Fredy loses physical sensation but
becomes miraculously strong. In its absence the very idea of the body’s weight
finds its presence. Fredy’s tricks as part of Lula Golightly’s circus troupe work as

\textsuperscript{107} \textit{Fredy Neptune}, 3.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid, 5.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid, 255.
a visual joke on this very idea: “I’d hang by one hand from the swing/and draw
my knees up and sit like on a chair.”\textsuperscript{110}

Alongside the role of the body, Murray identifies two states of
consciousness: the daily waking consciousness that creates and carries reason and
the unconscious that is both our dreaming life and our day-dreaming life. Our
dreaming consciousness is coming in to play in our waking lives, “seeping
through it here and there.”\textsuperscript{111} According to Murray, “To be real, a poem has to be
at once truly thought and truly dreamed, and the fusion between the two
represents incipient wholeness of thinking and of life.”\textsuperscript{112} The body is a, “third
partner”\textsuperscript{113} in the poem, “the ghostly sympathy of breath and pulse and muscle”\textsuperscript{114}
that acts and reacts to the words and the events the words recreate on the page.
The words themselves mimic the physical sensation or action, what Murray terms,
“the bodily echo of art”\textsuperscript{115} and in turn the reader mimics the poem: “It is a mirror
state, or an echoic state, in which we half consciously imitate the dance that is
danced before us.”\textsuperscript{116} It is the conjunction of these three parts in balance that
create the whole poem. This is not a poetry divorced from everyday reality but
steeped in, emerging from and attempting to bring into being a complex reality as
perceived by the poet, a reality that operates on many levels to create and sustain
the human world. This is a bodied reality that does not accept the split between
the body and the soul but believes in and seeks out a core self that is both at once.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{110} Fredy Neptune, 99. \\
\textsuperscript{111} Murray, ‘Embodiment and Incarnation’, The Paperbark Tree, 260. \\
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid, 260. \\
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid, 263. \\
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid, 264. \\
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid, 264. \\
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid, 365. 
\end{flushright}
The states of trance and reverie have long been associated for Murray with the act of making poems, both a reality of experience for the poet and an often re-stated position that consciously links his compositional process with a Bardic stance he has taken throughout his career. This is a stance in which Murray, as Laurence Bourke points out in his study of the poet, “Freely addresses the topics with a poetic voice that announces itself as public and central to national identity”\(^{117}\) and enables Murray to, “resolve his personal preoccupations with recovery and repair.”\(^{118}\) Writing of his experience of composing *Fredy Neptune*, Murray has said, “the book remained a kind of standing trance which I could leave and re-enter”\(^{119}\) and talks further of how the writing of Fredy Neptune aided his recovery from depression. The wholespeak of poetry, both in the writing and the reading of it, is strongly linked for Murray with the state of mental and physical health. Poetry allows expression for the layer of dreaming in our lives that surfaces through and lives behind everyday reality; he writes, “For ordinary mental health, let alone any sort of fullness of life, we need a measure of harmony between them [conscious and unconscious life].”\(^{120}\)

Murray makes the connection between the poet and the shaman which at one and the same time connects his own European Celtic heritage with the Aboriginal poetic. The Murray’s originate from, “Jedburgh, co. Roxburgh, Scotland”\(^{121}\) and Les Murray spent an extended stay in Scotland, “in Herdsmuir Cottage, not far from the site of the bloody eighteenth century Battle of

\(^{117}\) Bourke, 31.
\(^{118}\) *Ibid*, 30.
\(^{120}\) Murray, ‘Poemes and the Mystery of Embodiment’, *The Paperbark Tree*, 344.
\(^{121}\) Alexander, 132.
Culloden”. As Robert Crawford points out in *Identifying Poets*, “coming from a ‘tribal’ culture and feeling closely bonded to his own Scottish and Australian extended ancestral family, Murray [...] sees his background as connecting him closely with the Aborigines whom he links his own family background.”122 Although Crawford is making a political point about Murray’s attempt to align all three with, “the oppressed rural poor”,123 his statement underlines Murray’s sense of connectedness to an a priori level of human spiritual consciousness. This is a sense of human consciousness that reaches across old world European, new world white settler Australian and Aboriginal Australian religious culture. The poet’s trance is, “an integration of the body -mind and the dreaming-mind and the daylight-conscious- mind. All three firing at once, they’re all in concert.”124

When this integration breaks down, the self cannot remain whole. Murray sites the moment of this breakdown in the European Enlightenment. For Murray the Enlightenment, “had been a disastrous over-emphasis of human intellect and a turning away from the spiritual.”125 Because of this dualism, Fredy suffers a kind of annihilation of the body that is only rehabilitated through a realisation of a spiritual reality where such duality is revealed as fallacy; in Murray’s terms, “Christ-nature made real and effective in the world.”126 In a key passage in the poem, Fred visits the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, sacred to

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122 Crawford, 79.
123 Ibid, 79.
124 Les Murray quoted in Alexander, 135.
125 Alexander, 126.
126 Ibid, 155.
Christians as the site of the annunciation. Here he meets: “one in a hood”\textsuperscript{127} who gives him the answer to his affliction: “\textit{if you can ever pray/with a single heart to be free of it, it will leave you that day.}”\textsuperscript{128} The moment acts only as a brief reprieve but it is a message of wholeness that will take Fred the rest of the novel to fully realise and embody. This is a mysterious moment in the poem when Christ is made present in the sense of, “the third who walks always beside you.”\textsuperscript{129} Elsewhere, we are led to read the blurring of boundaries between Fred and the notion of a Christ-like figure – Fred’s affliction as taking on the suffering of others, the ensuing wounds as a kind of stigmata – as Fred’s separation from, rather than connection to, his spirit self.

\textbf{Dreaming}

This idea of spirit in body is not confined to Catholicism or Christianity but has a corresponding source in Aboriginal belief systems. Each newborn is connected back to an ancestral spirit-place through the Dreaming and carries the living embodiment of that ancestor throughout their life. The words ‘Dreamtime’ and ‘Dreaming’ were first used in the late Nineteenth Century by early anthropologists attempting to translate complex Aboriginal cultural and religious ideas into English. The Dreamtime, “involves an exploration of Aboriginal ideas about the

\textsuperscript{127} Fredy Neptune, 14.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid, 14.
nature of the world”, and refers to a, “unique and complex religious concept”.

The Dreaming is located within the body of the individual and within the body of the land, the features of the land itself having been created in the dreamtime by the activities of the spirit ancestors. At ceremonial or significant points in an individual’s life, such as the ritual journey of ‘Walkabout’, that person may re-enter their Dreaming and thus invoke and enact the continual creation of the land. These ideas became widely known in the popular imagination in the nineteen eighties through Bruce Chatwin’s Songlines (1987), a novel which focuses on the narrator’s attempt to learn something of the sacred re-envisioning aspect of Aboriginal religious life through what he terms ‘songlines’. Chatwin makes the connection between dreaming and poetry explicit. The narrator tells us that, “By singing the world into existence [...] the Ancestors had been poets in the original sense of poesis, meaning ‘creation.’”

Murray’s idea of embodiment in poetry is a spiritual one, religious but not confined to Murray’s own Catholicism. The essay ‘Embodiment and Incarnation’ is subtitled ‘Notes on preparing an Australian anthology of religious verse’, and was written in response to his editorship of the Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry. Murray is alert to an idea of poetry where, “authentic spiritual experience is present everywhere, from moments of illumination to whole passages of

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130 Howard Morphy, Aboriginal Art, 67 – 68.
131 Ibid, 67 – 68.
positive and negative mystical encounter.” The idea of a poem being ever present, “complete, finite, yet inexhaustible”, draws a parallel with the concept of the Dreamtime and Dreaming, however far these concepts are used as the best way of understanding Aboriginal religious culture from a white perspective:

The Dreaming exists independently of the linear time and the temporal sequence of historical events. Indeed, the Dreaming is as much a dimension of reality as a period of time. It gains its sense of time because it was there in the beginning, underlies the present and is determinant of the future; it is time in the sense that once there was only Dreamtime. But the Dreamtime has never ceased to exist, and from the viewpoint of the present it is as much a feature of the future as it is of the past.

Murray draws much of his information on Aboriginal culture from TGH Strehlow’s seminal text, Songs of Central Australia (1971), which focused on the Aranda, for whom, as Murray states, “The earth and the sky have existed altjiranga, that is from all eternity.” Murray has his own sense of Dreaming, what he names as a, “sponsor” of his writing, expressed in the poem ‘The Flying Fox Dreaming’. He places himself within his own spirit country and where: “All down the valley of fig/and flying-fox men, the lights now of towns are beginning to gleam.”

Murray sees his attempts to incorporate the influence of Aboriginal culture in his poetry as part of a postcolonial strategy of creolization, or what he also terms, “a convergence between black and white”, and, “to promote, and revive,

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135 Ibid, 260.
136 Morphy, 68.
138 Ibid, 84.
the use of Aboriginal themes and imagery in Australian poetry”141 initiated by the
Jindyworobak movement of the late 1930s to 1950s. The Jindyworobak
movement was, in the words of Steven Matthews in his 2001 study of Les
Murray’s poetry:

A response, by a group of Adelaide-based poets including Rex Ingamells,
Flexmore Hudson, Ian Mudie and Roland Robinson amongst others to a
perceived lack of cultural maturity in the country, a sense that Australia was,
as Ben Elliot has written, “still emotionally and intellectually a colony in
adolescence.”142

As Matthews puts it, “Murray is quoted as having claimed half-seriously in a
letter to be ‘the last of the Jindyworobaks’, 143 and to continue to, “capture a sense
[…] in verse”144 of what he saw as the Jindyworobak’s concept of, “slow
moulding of all people within a continent or region towards s the natural human
form which that continent or region demands.”145

Two of Murray’s well known poems attempt to marry the influence of
Aboriginal religious and artistic culture. In ‘Walking to the Cattle-Place’ black
men chant, “the sort of non-sacred-nonce-verses which Aborigines compose on
the spur of the moment to celebrate the casual events of the world around
them.”146 ‘The Buledelah Taree Holiday Song Cycle’ is written in the style and
metre of Berndt’s translation of the Moon Bone Cycle. Murray explains how the
poem was an attempt at this creolized fusion of the three cultures he sees as
present in modern Australia, the Aboriginal, the (white settler) rural and the urban,

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141 Murray, ‘The Human Hair Thread’, The Paperbark Tree, 98.
142 Steven Matthews, Les Murray, 11.
143 Ibid, 11.
145 Ibid, 96.
146 Ibid, 82.
“what I was after was an enactment of a longer-for fusion of all three cultures.”¹⁴⁷ The poem recounts the common habit amongst white Australians of returning to the countryside for their holidays, and raises this activity to the level of ritual that aligns it with the Aboriginal spiritual practice of return, “going back to their ancestral places in a kind of unacknowledged spiritual walkabout”¹⁴⁸.

For this is the season when children return with their children to the place of Bingham’s Ghost, of the Old timber Wharf, of the Big Flood That Time, the country of the rationalised farms, of the day-and-night farms, and of the Pitt Street farms, of the Shire Engineer and many other rumours, of the tractor crankcase furred with chaff, the places of sitting down near ferns, the snake-fear places, the cattle-crossing-long-ago places.¹⁴⁹

These poems are attempts at recreating a pre-enlightenment wholeness in place of a postcolonial state of dualism. This is an attempt to bridge the divide between the aboriginal cultures that existed forty thousand years in continuity before the advent of colonialism, and the white settler population in the Twentieth Century and beyond. “It is my belief”, writes Murray, “that when the strong web of future Australian verse comes to be woven, some of its strands will be found to be poetic threads spun on the Stone Age hair spindles of Central Australia.”¹⁵⁰

These have been, and continue to be, controversial ideas in the arena of postcolonial thinking in Australia. Murray has been strongly criticized for his approach to the use of Aboriginal culture in his poetry and is, at the very least, in danger of invoking nostalgia in the service of a postcolonial and nationalist theory. Such attempts can be seen as further appropriation of a culture and a

¹⁴⁷ Murray, ’The Human Hair Thread’, The Paperbark Tree, 92.
¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 92.
people that has already suffered violation and disturbance a massive scale. Despite Murray’s project of establishing a postcolonial self in his work, Robert Crawford argues that, “the fullest, most vulnerable Australian literary identities are not really ‘literary’ at all, but oral, sung aboriginal poetries in their original languages.” Murray’s poetry has at times been criticised for employing the very narrowsspeak of rhetoric and didacticism he guards against, and Paul Kane argues that, “Murray’s poetry displays a late-romantic inability to embody full presence despite his best efforts.”

However, Murray as an individual and a poet of unusual abilities has perhaps come as close, through near shamanic poetic techniques such as the embodied displacement of self evident in the animal poems in *Translations from the Natural World*, as any modern, postcolonial writer, and to realising in his work the influence of an older spiritual tradition in his search for an embodied poetic of wholeness.

**The Poem**

A third idea that emerges from these essays is that of the poem made incarnate in the world. This is how Murray explains his idea in ‘Embodiment and Incarnation’:

> What of those poetic moments that do not issue in art? They seek embodiment, too. Ferdinand Porsche’s poems came out as cars, Henri Dunant as the Red Cross – Hitler’s poems took concrete, steel and possibly forty million human lives to find expression.

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152 Paul Kane, Quoted in Steven Matthews, ‘Murray and a Music of Indirection’, 28.
We all carry the impetus to create and to make our ideas real in the world. True poetry is at best benign – it can do no actual physical harm and may do much physical good – but not all our poems will be good for the world:

What is very clear is that poem fusions which do not find embodiment in art, and rejoice our bodies through that, may find more terrible embodiments from us altogether into the bargain. A poem-fusion seeking embodiment its outside art may well be the most dangerous thing on earth.\textsuperscript{154}

\textit{Fredy Neptune} is Fred’s poem in the sense that we all have a poem that is our lives, whether we actualise this in verse or not. It is of course a big poem, Murray’s long poem, a narrative and hero he freely associates with his own personal and psychic poeme. \textit{Fredy Neptune} is as Murray admits in Peter Alexander’s biography, “My secret autobiography.”\textsuperscript{155}

The concept of the poem incarnate in the world is expressed throughout \textit{Fredy Neptune}. The period of the novel is the grand poem of the first half of the twentieth century and its many big poems of destruction. “Do all these big poems burn women?”\textsuperscript{156} Fredy wonders when he is introduced to the idea of the poeme by a Turkish Colonel. The Colonel takes him to Izmir and on the way they stop at a village to listen to some folk poets:

we bowled along, he said we are between two poems: the old one in which we are the head of Islam and take Byzantium and butt at the gates of Vienna, that one is finished. The new poem is steel and dynamo Ottoman, Gagauz, Turkmen, Kazakh, all of the Turkish peoples one great secular Turkey from Thrace to the Chinese wall.\textsuperscript{157}

\textsuperscript{154} Murray, ’Embodiment and Incarnation’, \textit{The Paperbark Tree}, 265.
\textsuperscript{155} Alexander, 286.
\textsuperscript{156} \textit{Fredy Neptune}, 44.
\textsuperscript{157} \textit{Ibid}, 44.
The idea is taken up again in the house of Basil Thoroblood. Thoroblood is an Australian criminal escaped to pre-crash America and Fredy has been sent to bring him back to Australia to face justice. To feed his fascination for human miracles, Thoroblood keeps a group of strongmen behind the façade of an ‘asylum’. Fredy becomes a ‘guest’ and Thoroblood is intrigued by his uncanny otherness and his obvious superiority of strength among the strong: “Well, you widen the definition, he said./You’re a different species of strongman, if you’re genuine./And I think you are.”

Thoroblood has a great library: “Walled and lagged with books”:

He would talk, to me or any of us, about
bodies and corporals, embodiment and incarnation;
about never being the body that an evil poem
uses for its vehicle; about how a true poem could arise
from the body, as well as from consciousness or dream,
and might well be the wisest of them.

Murray puts his own ideas about embodiment, incarnation and the poem into
Thoroblood’s mouth and has him deliver these ideas to Fredy as if Thoroblood is
the incarnation of the author (the rational, editorial other authorial part within
each writer, as opposed to the dreaming part).

The novel is witness to the great destroying poems of the Armenian
Genocide, the First World War, the Second World War, Nazism and the
Holocaust through to Communism, the Cold War and the nuclear age. Steven
Matthews argues that, “Nazism represented the most extreme version in the
twentieth century of a ‘poeme’, as [Murray] would call it, an attempt to graft a

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158 Fredy Neptune, 199.
159 Ibid, 121.
160 Ibid, 121.
whole, ordered, rationalised system on to events.” Set against this is the embodiment of poetry itself. Fredy realises this when he is read Rilke’s poem ‘The Panther in the Zoo’, by Marlene Dietrich. The experience is a powerful one for Fredy and the reader is brought back to remembering the medium through which the story is being told: “It sat me up. This wasn’t the Turk’s or Thoroblood’s ‘poems’, big, dangerous, baggy. This was the grain distilled. This was the sort that might not get men killed.” This is the medium and the ‘poem’ of wholespeak as opposed to the narrowspeak that is ideology and power.

Conclusion

The verse-novel Fredy Neptune is an exploration of Murray’s ideas of poetic embodiment, incarnation of the poeme and the idea of wholespeak as an expression of the wholeness of the poetic experience. These ideas are to be discovered throughout Murray’s oeuvre, and they find one of their fullest expressions in Fredy Neptune as a work about the body made manifest on the page. Embedded within Murray’s ideas is an approach to spirituality mediated through poetry that attempts to be both Catholic and Aboriginal. This is also an attempt to marry poetic practice to his search for a postcolonial identity and align if not merge the white proletarian settler identity with that of the Australian Aboriginal. Murray is not without his critics and his work can be as digressive and rhetorical, falling into his own category of narrowspeak, as it can be dreamed and

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Matthews, 122.

Fredy Neptune, 160.
whole. His attempts to draw Aboriginal religious and artistic motifs into his work are as controversial as his statements on national identity.

Any view of Murray’s work, and of *Fredy Neptune* in particular, must take into account the essential multiplicities present in the poetry. This is a strategy that emerges from Murray’s concept of poetic embodiment and wholeness in that the poem must stay essentially ungraspable, beyond finite meaning and expressive of the hidden and the numinous. The poem makes use of these multiplicities to remain unfixed in meaning and therefore eternal in presence. This is a strategy central, not only to Murray’s poetic practice, but to his attempt to re-vision in his works a postcolonial identity for Australia. It is a strategy envisioned through the body.
Chapter 3: Writing the Postcolonial Body

Introduction

Fredy is German/Australian, split between two cultures that represent the old world of Europe and the new emergent Australia, speaking both English and German. His story begins at the point when the old world itself is splitting at the beginning of World War One, just as Australia is emerging as a nation state in its own right. Fredy is divided from his own essential nature, his body splitting away from his psyche when he witnesses an atrocity. This is a harbinger of the Holocaust, and a dark mirror to a human world that divides itself along ethnic lines. Fredy is separated from his true mother country whilst trapped within the paradox of the colonial ‘mother country’. As such he is the perennial outsider forever trying to return home. *Fredy Neptune* is a story of exile and return, of the journey out from the centre in the quest to re-define that centre as home.

Fredy’s story unfolds through a series of adventures, characterised by a play with dualities such as gender and class, exposing them as much as a performance as those acted on film or in the circus. Australia itself is characterised by a dual nature that holds both the pre-colonial and the emergent postcolonial world in tandem. The two are interchangeable, the ancient aboriginal world as shockingly ‘new’ to the settler as the old world of Europe is empty and redundant. Fredy’s quest to return home is as much a return to the pre-colonial bush as it is to any notion of a modern industrialised postcolonial nation.

The notion of hybridity runs throughout *Fredy Neptune*, whether racial, cultural, sexual or linguistic, where, “hybridity […] is the primary characteristic of
all post colonial texts.” The figure of Sam Mundine, Jewish Aboriginal, goes someway to express the role of creolisation, as Murray sees it, of both of culture and ethnicity in the formation of a modern Australian identity. Murray has attempted to incorporate Aboriginal cultural and spiritual practices into his work in an, “attempt to articulate and construct a poetic identity which will make for full identification with the territory of Australia.”

Just as, “Paradoxes and ambiguities abound in Murray’s poetry”, Murray’s dualities are multiple and often paradoxical. They aim to show, on the one hand, the ‘divide and rule’ strategies of the colonial world, the consequence of which is mass human destruction and a loss of identity, but on the other hand, the powerful play with duality that can free the individual and expose the true nature of self and identity. This is a spiritualised whole that is realised on and through the body.

Fredy’s Voices in the Vernacular Republic

To give utterance, to speak, to work in the breath and rhythms of poetic language is the first instance of poetic embodiment. Fredy, in his bilingualism, speaks through the body, his use of language actually changing his physical makeup as he speaks. Phyllis Gates notices:

That I looked different in the face
when I’d been speaking English or speaking German:
You’ve been with your German friends today. And she’d be right.
That language moves the muscles in your face differently
it makes you purse-lipped. You’ll look English-speaking again after supper.

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163 Ashcroft et al, 182.
164 Crawford, 74.
166 Fredy Neptune, 155.
Just as, “language and ‘space’ in conjunction indicate one creative site of conflict in the writing of settler colonies”, Fredy Neptune is engaged in the production of a poetic wholespeak that is at the service of a social and cultural hybridity that is, in the terms of the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin a, “dialogised heteroglossia.” Fredy speaks his own narrative history in the language of Murray’s ‘vernacular republic’, re-centred in the idioms of his native rural community and the German of his inherited cultural ancestry. This vernacular republic is opposed to language of the colonial ‘centre’ and is, as Bakhtin states of his term heteroglossia, “Consciously opposed to literary language.” Fredy Neptune is a dialogic novel filled with multiple selves and voices. It is, “double-voiced”, not only in its bilingualism but because Fredy is continually involved in an, “underlying dialogue with himself.”

Bilingualism is a, “form of internalised dialogue” that, “highlights rather than smoothes over conflicts and contradictory feelings of both belonging and dislocation.” Fredy’s narration is, “enriched” by, “its linguistic variety” and, “Fredy’s bilingualism” is, “enhanced through loan-words such as ‘wurst’, transliterations such as ‘soil seal’, ‘race- comrade’ and ‘wander-years’, snatches of German slang literally translated and traces of German syntax and word order.”

The re-envisioning of how language can operate as a medium for a cultural and

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167 Ashcroft et al, 136.
170 Crawford, 7.
173 Clunies-Ross, 93.
174 Ibid, 94.
historical embodiment that is both subversive and liberating is very much at the core of Murray’s verse-novel.

Les Murray, “Centres the art of poetry in the ‘Vernacular Republic’, the realm of common speech and ordinary life, without constraints on the range of poetic language or narrative which would imply an elitist or hierarchical concept of the art.” Murray’s vernacular is the Bunyah dialect of his own, “spirit country”, the rural farming community he was born into with its, “Peculiarities of grammar and delivery” that, “reflected and reinforced the peculiarity and closeness of the valley community and were part of the birthright of everyone born into it.” There is a general critical agreement about the power and effectiveness of Murray’s linguistic strategy in his poetry, “the production of a beautiful, flexible, Australian poetic language […] akin to what Eliot in ‘Little Gidding’ called “the purification of the dialect of the tribe.” As Steven Matthews points out, “Murray’s sense of locale is continuous with the vernacular which he proclaims as distinctive for his emergent Australian Republic” and according to Laurence Bourke, “the convincing and respectful use of the vernacular supports his claim to ‘see’ and represent the authentic Australia.”

However, Murray’s claim to speak for all Australia has also been the basis of one of the major criticisms of his work. Laurence Bourke points out that, “the notion that one person – particularly when speaking from a quite selective and restrictive

177 Alexander, 15.
178 Ibid, 159.
179 Matthews, 25.
180 Bourke, 124.
tradition – can speak for a people as diverse as contemporary Australia is decidedly problematical”¹⁸¹ and Robert Crawford insists that, “English-language Australian poetry still lags behind Aboriginal culture.”¹⁸²

Despite the obvious problematical nature of Murray’s enterprise, to read Murray’s vernacular in the context of postcolonial theorising is highly instructive. Language is important as a postcolonial strategy in settler societies, “where the absence of an alternative pre-colonial metaphysic makes the assertion of ‘otherness’ more difficult.”¹⁸³ Murray must speak in the colonial language English being his mother tongue, but it is this colonial language which carries both, “the weight of antiquity” and the , “hierarchical structure of power”, through which, “concepts of ‘truth’, ‘order’ and ‘reality’ become established.”¹⁸⁴ As Franz Fanon pointed out in his seminal study Black Skin White Masks, “To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture.”¹⁸⁵ Fredy carries with him on his travels the dual cultural heritage of English and German, both of which are in the process of being transformed under the pressure of an emergent modern Australia.

Fredy’s German, an ‘old world’ language of a Europe about to be dismantled through the upheaval of half a century of war, is one which he will eventually outgrow towards the end of the novel. Of his use of German in Fredy Neptune, Murray says, “My aim was to bring off an illusion, as far as possible without dropping actual German sentences into the text.”¹⁸⁶ . “Versteh’ dich nicht, mate: I

¹⁸¹ Bourke, 33.
¹⁸² Crawford, 74.
¹⁸³ Ashcroft et al, 136.
¹⁸⁴ Ibid, 7.
¹⁸⁵ Fanon, 38.
don’t savvy”\textsuperscript{187} says Fredy as he’s about to be taught a few basic words of Turkish. But for the main part it is very useful allowing Fredy to shift between roles and get out of scrapes. Fredy’s linguistic dexterity tends to serve rather than hamper or confuse him and he continually slips between such identities in order to escape or survive.

At times Fredy seems able to communicate beyond language. He talks with the Muslim girl Shahira who takes a fancy to him despite: “Not a word of English, a bit of French, no German -[and not a sign of us misunderstanding each other]”\textsuperscript{188} and with a Turkish woman who has a message to impart:

\begin{quote}
You are real. I have hated shadows.

God has sent you, ordinary man, to burn the hate from me –

God must also have sent me the brains to grasp that much Turkish

But it’s what she said.\textsuperscript{189}
\end{quote}

Slipping between languages, and at times operating seemingly beyond the normal rules of language barriers, enables Fredy to maintain a position of ambivalence towards the powers that rule and destroy. These are powers still engaged in imperial cultural expansion. Fredy’s English, which is Murray’s vernacular, is already outgrowing the burden of colonial culture and expressing that of the new world.

In his essay on the writing of Fredy Neptune, Murray explains his use of the vernacular as his primary mode of storytelling:

\begin{quote}
There was no way to embed Fredy’s speech and sensibility in conventional literary diction without unbearable condescension, and frankly I revelled in the prospect of a vast holiday from the strain of always building bridges between my inherited culture and the suave snob-talk of culture.\textsuperscript{190}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{187} Fredy Neptune, 5.
\textsuperscript{188} Ibid, 32.
\textsuperscript{189} Ibid, 42.
\textsuperscript{190} Murray, ‘How Fred and I Wrote Fredy Neptune’, Les Murray and Australian Poetry, 67.
This ‘inherited culture’ is rooted in the idiom and dialect of Bunjah, the ‘suave snob-talk’ in the cities and universities. Bruce Clunies-Ross points out how, “The tone of Fredy’s narrating voice is set by the Australian Vernacular”\(^{191}\) such as in the opening stanza of Book Five, ‘Lazarus Unstuck’, Murray’s vernacular in its, “pure form”\(^{192}\).

In the middle of ’39 we signed up with the Manpower, Joe and I both. I’d managed to teach Hans not to talk German around Laura or around strangers which struck him half dumb but that was cover too. As it turned out, the Manpower didn’t check on him. they gave us a number each, and said we’d hear from them if and when war came. By then we knew it would.\(^{193}\)

When Fredy speaks English he does so in, “essentially the sociolect” of, “rural men’s talk of my father’s youth.”\(^{194}\) Murray employs, “precise modulations in idiom or slang”, \(^{195}\) the work peppered with universally recognisable Aussie slang such as: ‘squibbed’\(^{196}\) and ‘fair dinkum’\(^{197}\).

Poetry is written (in nearly all cases) in the mother tongue and in the absence of a pre-colonial mother tongue Murray was essentially stuck with English. This is the very language of the colonials against which it is necessary for settler societies to re-define themselves in opposition to in order to found an independent sense of self and identity. The cultural vision carried by the English of the early settlers was just not up to the job of embodying the experience and reality of the ‘New World’. The

\(^{192}\) Ibid, 71.
\(^{193}\) Fredy Neptune, 215.
\(^{195}\) Clunies-Ross, 92.
\(^{196}\) Fredy Neptune, 4.
\(^{197}\) Ibid, 18.
standard must give way to the vernacular in order, in the words of the African
novelist Chinua Achebe to, “bear the burden”\textsuperscript{198} of the new cultural experience. As
Steven Matthews points out, “the work of naming is still going on in Australia”\textsuperscript{199}
and that this work of naming, “underpins Murray’s own fascination with words and
names.”\textsuperscript{200}

In \textit{Fredy Neptune} this can be seen in the way Fredy’s given name of
‘Boettcher’ undergoes a constant redefinition and Fredy is called variously: ‘Butcher’
‘Brisbane’, ‘Buttocker’ and ‘Baer’\textsuperscript{201}. Murray is having fun in the language here but
this word play also underlines the shifting and unfixed nature of Fredy’s cultural
identity and how he is in a process of outgrowing and outwitting his ancestral
heritage. The name Fredy is the name Murray was nearly given and one he would
have preferred over the somewhat androgynous Leslie; a suitable disguise then for
the poet engaged in his ‘secret autobiography’. The nature of Fredy’s unfixed
identity allows him to operate as an outsider to the historical narrative that unfolds
and to the various national contexts he temporarily inhabits. Just like the poet or the
shaman, this is a powerful position to occupy.

Because language is a medium of power it is necessary that, “Post colonial
writing defines itself by seizing the language of the centre and re-placing it in a

\textsuperscript{198} Achebe, 62.
\textsuperscript{199} Matthews, 33.
\textsuperscript{200} \textit{Ibid}, 33.
discourse fully adapted to the colonised place.” 202 The use of the vernacular, “appropriates the language for the task of constituting new experience and new place” 203 becoming a, “counter-discourse” that is an “opposition to the centre” 204 that is English. In his ‘Vernacular Republic’ Murray underlines the continuum of Australian English, becoming the centre rather than occupying a colonial hinterland. As Martin Leer puts it, “the continuum of Australian English is brought home – local meaning is standard, not a colonial variation.” 205 In doing so, Murray’s Vernacular Republic achieves and remains an, “important mode of resistance.” 206

It was in the period of Murray’s university years that he distinguished himself as a linguist, albeit a renegade one, “poring over a Sanskrit dictionary or a Finnish grammar, and emerging to tell wondering and amused groups over coffee on the Manning of his latest discoveries.” 207 Murray’s first settled job was with the Translation Unit with the Institute of Advanced Studies at the Australian National University where his facility for languages allowed him to translate, “at sight German, Swiss-German, Dutch, Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, French, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese”, 208 amongst many others. Murray was to use this ability with languages to great affect in Fredy Neptune and Fredy’s bilingualism, rooted at further level as it is in Murray’s Bunjah vernacular, is one of the central motifs of the work.

202 Ashcroft et al, 37.
203 Ibid, 56.
204 Ibid, 56.
207 Alexander, 67.
208 Ibid, 114.
The Multiple Body

Fredy Neptune is a work of postcolonial writing concerned with establishing a subject identity outside of the manipulation and control of any overarching ideology. Fredy’s multiplicities, his constant layering of self and identity, enable him to refuse, “the categories of imperial culture.”\textsuperscript{209} Hence Fredy’s essential ‘unbodying’ at the opening of the novel, an ‘unbodying’ that lasts the two great wars of the Twentieth Century and the length of the novel. How else can Fredy avoid these powerful political and historical forces if those forces are working through his bodied self, other than to separate that self from its body? Fredy becomes: “just a self in mid-dark”,\textsuperscript{210} and it is Fredy’s very otherness as characterised by this absence that makes his predicament so powerful, “it is the recognition of what’s missing that transforms and inverts the reader’s view of Fredy: not a freak, but one of us.”\textsuperscript{211}

Fredy’s bodied transformations or metamorphoses can be seen as metaphors for becoming in the process of developing a new world identity and the need to shed imposed colonial patterns. Murray takes, “the silenced and wounded body of the colonised”\textsuperscript{212} and transforms it into a symbol of resistance. Fredy becomes strong, impervious to disease and injury, his body healing quickly without medical help:

\begin{quote}
When are you going to fix my hand? I asked him.
Soon, he lied, soon. So I spread it wide open, not a mark on it. \textsuperscript{213}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{209} Murray quoted in Matthews, 22.
\textsuperscript{210} Fredy Neptune, 9.
\textsuperscript{212} Boehmer, Stories Of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Post colonial Nation, 2009, 127.
\textsuperscript{213} Fredy Neptune, 25.
As strongman extraordinaire amongst Basil Thoroblood’s collection of strongmen, Fredy is: “the body’s word.”\textsuperscript{214} Marlene Dietrich intuits his condition, naming it in a German that Fredy translates as: “You are but once. You’re unique.”\textsuperscript{215} Fredy can and does use this strength, in the trope of a superhero, to save others. He lifts a ship’s engine off a man: “I got two good holts on big Otto/and heaves at him, against all his inclinations”\textsuperscript{216} and saves a child from electrocution:

\begin{quote}
 I’m straight down the stairs 
 and run and grab the wire. Well it feels like nothing 
 of course, but ten times my nothing: I freeze 
 and it won’t let go my hand: my head is full of like 
 newspaper print all the way back across the country 
 and I topple sideways bang! Over orange boxes that splinter 
 but it stretches the wire away from the kiddie and he is rescued.\textsuperscript{217}
\end{quote}

However, Charles Lock points out that, “He has never allowed his freedom from bodily limits to be a source of pride, rather of shame, an enduring occasion for concealment and deception.”\textsuperscript{218} In the end this symbol of resistance becomes one of recognition with universal suffering. The central statement of Fredy Neptune is to show allegiance through the very body of the poem’s hero with those murdered by the state in the twentieth century:

\begin{quote}
 In this century well over a hundred million people have been murdered by the police […] another hundred million have died in Uniform wars, but the ones that I particularly have been haunted by all my life […] are those unarmed victims of ideologies, tribalisms, that sort of thing.\textsuperscript{219}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{214} Fredy Neptune, 147.  
\textsuperscript{215} Ibid, 161.  
\textsuperscript{216} Ibid, 138.  
\textsuperscript{217} Ibid, 156.  
\textsuperscript{219} Murray quoted in Alexander, 289.
This symbol is not fixed but must be further transmuted into one of forgiveness if Fredy is to regain wholeness at the end of the book. This forgiveness is itself a reversal: “Forgive the Aborigines. What have I got to forgive? /They never hurt me! For being on our conscience.”

Then:

Forgive the Jews, my self said.

That one felt miles deep, stone-blocked and black as iron.

That’s really not mine, the Hitler madness – no it’s not, said my self.

It isn’t on your head. But it’s in your languages.

Robert Crawford points to, “the transforming open-ness to the other” in Murray’s poetry and Peter Steele writes:

Murray is a great reader of things ‘as’ other things – of their guising themselves evocatively, of their melting into or arising out of one another, of their being just-broken codes for each other.

Such doublings, dualities and ambiguities, where any one thing can becomes another are at the service of what Homi Bhaba has called a, “performative doubleness.” Steven Matthews highlights a performativity at the core of Murray’s poetry, “that constantly and cunningly unsettles both its own attitudes and our responses to it.” Fredy’s divided position, “allows him to acknowledge the power of fantasy, and of the ways in which the modern world […] has embraced it.” This ‘constant performativity’ is to be found throughout Fredy Neptune.

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220 Fredy Neptune, 254.
221 Ibid, 254.
222 Crawford, 13.
224 Bhaba, quoted in Boehmer, Stories of Women, 10.
225 Matthews, 40.
226 Matthews, 143.
Bruce Clunies-Ross points out that, “Fredy’s narrative is a performance and it is also the story of a performance.”\(^{227}\) Fredy becomes, “A kind of Picaresque superman”\(^{228}\) on a journey of colliding events that take him from joining Lula Golightly’s circus as a strongman where he recognises immediately the necessary layers of self required in such a performance: “She left me among the signed acts/and the faces that were acts too.”\(^{229}\) In America he finds work as an extra on film in the burgeoning days of Hollywood. This is where he meets Marlene Dietrich. Marlene reads Fredy as a performer, someone who is acting out his role in life as a way of hiding something. She is able to do this because this is what her place in the poem represents. She is the consummate performer: “How do you read all this? I strangled out/Theatre, she said. *Even Hollywood is theatre. Everything in theatre is understood to be a performance.*”\(^{230}\) *Fredy Neptune* is a work of performance that operates on a variety of levels to read the lie of the notion of an integrated identity, and to open the ground for a new formulation of self and identity that is based on plurality. Fredy’s performances, “are cover because he is at risk of exposure as a ‘no-body’, a danger compounded by the fact that he is trapped in his double German-Australian heritage during the critical years of the Century.”\(^{231}\)

**Belonging to the Fellowship**

Throughout *Fredy Neptune*, Murray is working with ideas of belonging which can be seen in light of the performative nature of the text. The homogeneity of the

\(^{228}\) Matthews, 134.
\(^{229}\) *Fredy Neptune*, 98.
\(^{231}\) Clunies-Ross, 95.
proletarian male is expressed in the figure of Fredy as the culturally specific Australian ‘bloke’ who belongs to those: “islands and countries” now inscribed on his body. But it is this very position that isolates him, “his simplicity, his lack of education, his being a foreigner wherever he goes, and the fact that he feels compelled to hide what has happened to him.” This position of outsider becomes one of power however, a creative power, “in which an illuminating reflection of one’s own identity may be glimpsed.” Fredy is also the outsider-observer who is steeped in vision and dream and who is able to interpret and relate the human story.

According to Bakhtin, “In the realm of culture, outsiderness is a powerful factor in understanding one’s own culture. Steven Matthews suggests that Fredy, “could in a sense be seen as the embodiment of that migrancy which Salman Rushdie and Homi K Bhaba have seen, in relation to other cultures, as inevitable in a move towards a post colonial condition.” It is only at this distance and occupying the position of exile can the postcolonial subject ‘see’ the whole entity of home. Murray chooses for Fredy the position of outsider pressed upon him through a bodily affliction to explore the paradoxical experience of belonging and difference through the lens of bodied experience.

Fredy shifts very quickly from belonging to one homogenous proletarian group with a distinct identity (the sailor), to that of the tramp or pariah whom only another pariah would befriend. When he first finds himself cast onto the streets: “The
only one who’d sit with me was a girl faced man” 237 who:”taught me the begging words/ I’m a leper, don’t touch.”238 This is a brief preliminary step on the way to outright outsider, whose absence of bodily perception would set him apart from even his fellow working men: “No one on earth to tell then./a working man with other men, ashamed of the difference/happening me.”239 This final defining ‘difference’ is set in motion at that second key encounter, after the burning of the Armenian women:

I was in Osnabruck outside the Peace Hall this Spring morning
eyeing a couple of other land-rakers like me
and a pretty girl going by with an attaché case,
filling in, I dare say, for some pen-push off at the war.
One of the drifters suddenly jumped and tore
the briefcase off her. Really. Because her arm came off too.
I blinked. It was real. She screamed. The veins and muscles attaching the arm were leather straps.240

This event forms an oasis in the otherwise bloody carnage of part one of the verse-novel. The Peace Hall and the ‘pretty girl’ contain a possibility of redemption for Fred he is unable at this point to act on; he says: “if I had got that right, everything would have been different.”241

Fredy’s failure to act in terms of natural behaviour causes his final fall to the non-existence of his body. Instead of helping the girl up when she offers him her: “real, live hand”,242 he gives her the wooden arm, giving her back not her healthy, normal, living self but her artificial disembodied part. This is the part that must represent her personal trauma whether through illness, violence or war. Before

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237 Fredy Neptune, 6.
238 Ibid, 6.
239 Ibid, 9.
240 Ibid, 8.
241 Ibid, 8.
242 Ibid, 8.
meeting her, Fredy has already identified with this damaged part of the self. He employs the disguise of a one armed local: “no touching people,/but I’d look as if I could. And I’d keep one arm inside/my clothes” and it is in this identification that she seems conjured up. The event is rather like an event in a dream that represents our hero’s unconscious fears. Fredy goes through a momentary catharsis that is both a shedding of the layer of the body and an experience of horror akin to a dream state:

Then I stuck a chair under my doorknob – this was before showers – and had a good body-wash. My numb bits were changing, stinging like burns, and coming off at the rims.

I was terrified. I was coming apart.

The girl is an echo of Fredy in that moment; even though he fails he is attempting to make contact in that: “fellowship of suffering.” The girl in the Peace Hall underlines Fredy’s status as other in that very same fellowship.

Fredy is: “keeping out of the human race to stay in it”, and whilst Murray places him where he would be, “most at risk, among the classes most vulnerable to officialdom and mass slaughter”, he also gives him a gift which will protect him from the worst excesses of it. This: “flesh dead, alive in no-life” is paradoxically the very thing that prevents his death in the wars he traverses, and sets him beyond physical suffering and beyond the company of his fellow humans. When Fredy arrives at Baz Thoroblood’s he survives a stabbing that should have killed him:

There was a blood spot

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243 Fredy Neptune, 7.
244 Ibid, 8.
245 Ibid, 11.
246 Ibid, 17.
248 Fredy Neptune, 17.
the size of a crown piece on the back of my shirt. I looked at it, and wondered where I got it. I looked at my back in the mirror, but there wasn’t any wound.\textsuperscript{249}

He is seen thereafter by the other guests at the house as a voodoo figure, one of the undead: “\textit{Are you a boojum?} She asked.\textit{A what?} I stuttered. \textit{A spirit living in a dead body.}”\textsuperscript{250}

The ground between living and death in \textit{Fredy Neptune} remains porous. At Thoroblood’s there is Sibling who survives a hanging and has a vision of that otherworld:

\begin{quote}
He looked back, but the land had disappeared in haze. But it was okay. The pier had started floating. It was a big raft going on no longer out on piles but sitting sweet on the water. Then he and all on board came to the steep of the sea where it went down over the world, and there was country just over beyond, break of daylight country, and crowds with people he’d known but were dead now standing over there showing no sign of death.\textsuperscript{251}
\end{quote}

After the shock of splitting with Laura for the first time, Fredy enters the river and almost drowns. He too has a vision of the otherworld from where he is gifted to return:

\begin{quote}
So I went up to that country and sat there. It looked a bit rougher, close to, with tussocks and logs. No houses, though, nor fences. I still wore my earth clothes, salty and cardboard brown and cracking where they bent. I hadn’t seen mangrove trees nor sandhills in that woman-window but why wouldn’t they be there? Queer to be done with meals
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{249} \textit{Fredy Neptune}, 119.  
\textsuperscript{250} \textit{Ibid}, 122.  
\textsuperscript{251} \textit{Ibid}, 125.
and be so hungry. And it seemed there were to be cattle there, away off, for company. And then I woke up to myself. I’d floated in my dumb body twelve miles, maybe more, right up to Fullerton Cove and half a mile into the paddocks. I may be the only man who ever slept through his own drowning.\textsuperscript{252}

Metanarratives of the journey to the underworld are present in \textit{Fredy Neptune} in a way that links the poem to the great Epic narratives of poetry and to thematic threads in Murray’s oeuvre as a whole.

\textbf{The Creolised Republic}

Murray argues for, “A slow moulding of all people within a continent or region towards the natural human form which that continent or region demands”.\textsuperscript{253} However, “the ease of translation he marks between the white tradition and the black has itself been cause for concern for some critics.”\textsuperscript{254} “Fredy literally embodies that sense of necessary creolisation which Murray has consistently argued for.”\textsuperscript{255} The figure of Sam Mundine, who comes along as a true friend to Fredy, is both Jewish and Aboriginal. Sam represents on one level the shared fate of genocide and erasure of those peoples, and on another level the complexity of a new kind of mixed racial identity. This is not confined to the postcolonial situation but emerges as a possibility for all future human identity. Sam reflects Fredy’s essential dual nature, although for Fredy, Sam occupies a place of uncomfortable duality he refuses to recognise:

\begin{flushright}
\textit{How do you know so much, Sam – We are studious people. – We Jews, or we blackfellows? – Both. – First you’re one, then the other. –}
\end{flushright}

\textsuperscript{252} Fredy Neptune, 64.
\textsuperscript{253} Murray, ‘The Human Hair Thread’, \textit{The Paperbark Tree}, 67
\textsuperscript{254} Matthews, 9.
\textsuperscript{255} \textit{Ibid}, 144.
And I always will be. Surely you would know about division? –
No. The world’s divided. Not me. I won’t shoot my left hand nor my right.
True: both are white. Is a Jew white? Tell me, Fred.  

Perhaps this is because Sam identifies with and therefore displaces his sense of self on to two different but clearly defined racial and cultural groups. Fredy is submerging his own bewildering duality into his sense of an ‘Australian’ identity that is, at his point in history, barely come into being. Fredy is left with his body, his left hand and his right representing division held together in one self. But perhaps Sam is a reach too far. Who can really believe in a character that must undermine every possible stereotype to the extent that he lives in France and becomes a chef?

The irony for Fredy is that the wholeness he claims at this point is the very thing he lacks. Murray is especially concerned with imaging into a bodied reality that especially difficult identity of the modern white Australian. As Sam points out, both Fredy’s hands are white suggesting that whatever troubles, whatever inner turmoil Fredy might suffer, he will never know what it means not to be white. Recalling the biblical aphorism, Fredy intuits the evident truth of Sam’s wisdom: “Most of Sam’s advice was too clever. I spose his colour/was the camel’s eye.”  

It is the very visibility of Sam’s difference as opposed to the hidden nature of Fredy’s that makes the one exterior and therefore more easily dealt with and the other interior, embodied, and in the end more difficult for the reader to tease out.

**Being at Home**

“The theme of home”, according to Robert Crawford, “is one of the great themes, perhaps the major theme of late twentieth century poetry in the English speaking...”

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256 Fredy Neptune, 27.
257 Ibid, 28.
Home as the site of healing in *Fredy Neptune*, connects both Murray’s conservative ideas of home and his more controversial attempts to tap into the chthonic roots of ‘home’:

I thought: while I’ve got feet
if I can get away, keep my patches covered over
and get a ship, and get to the Pacific,

somehow I’ll be right. And home, if I could get right home, would cure me.  

In Book Two, Fredy suffers his first accident at work and although: “the stitches felt like bootlaces pulled tight, knee to bum” as soon as the doctor suspects something odd about Fred’s ability to heal, he makes his escape: “I skun out of that hospital that night, still leaking in my bandages,/and went to earth with Cos.” That ‘going to earth’ is picked up through many strands in the verse-novel and equates both with ‘going bush’, and a deeper return that Murray would like blended with both native strands of spirituality and Christian religiosity. Somewhere located within ‘home’ is the place where Fredy’s body will be recovered, just as Murray as a poet, “drew strength, Anteus-like, from the soil of his own continent”  

When Fredy returns to Australia at the beginning of Book Two, he faces an unexpected layer of social ostracism. He is defined now as German, not Australian, alien and enemy in what he considers to be his own land. It is such prejudice that has

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258 Crawford, 14.
259 *Fredy Neptune*, 6.
262 Alexander, 140.
killed his father, lost him mother and home. When he returns to his home farm: “I got no more warnings or welcomes, walking up Dowling Street/and out to the farm”263:

Then out comes a man. Not my Dad, but acting the boss.
Good day, he says, not smiling. Good day. – What can I do for you? –
Well I live here. Or my family do. Where are they?
Gone, he spits out. Where all you Hun bastards belong.264

His response to this trauma is to go bush: “Every night I’d pay twopence to cross the Stockton ferry,/ then walk up in the bush, take off my clothes and sleep raw.”265 The practice of ‘going bush’, or ‘walkabout’, for the emerging Australian proletariat, was as much an expression of their difference from the emerging new world upper classes and a re-enactment of the pioneer settler disobedience, as it is an unconscious identification with Australia’s existing indigenous peoples.

Fredy is more often than not on the run or tramping, such as in the aftermath of the ‘Baz Thoroblood’ sequence in Book Three. He is rides the freight: “on north into their iced high city”,266 following in the American tradition of the hobo. Fredy’s default setting is on the road, alone. Dramatic events in the novel, or events where Fredy becomes embroiled with his fellow humans, are often followed by these periods of solitary travel. “Right then I badly needed my Pat Malone/and I’d rather tramp with him than ride with any soldiers”267 states Fredy towards the end of Book One. Fredy comes well equipped for such a lifestyle and this in itself locates him right back at home among the wandering tribes of the Aboriginal Australian. This, in Murray’s terms, forms the basis of a new world identity for the common peoples of

263 Fredy Neptune, 193.
264 Ibid, 49.
265 Ibid, 52.
266 Ibid, 140.
267 Ibid, 42.
Australia; it is where the white settler Australian begins to form a postcolonial identity. As Laurence Bourke points out, “the bush ethos remains at the heart of Australian identity.”

Despite his own spiritual choices, Murray has strong sympathies with such beliefs that go beyond any conscious agenda to establish parity between Bush culture and Aboriginal culture, in his wider attempt to create a postcolonial national sense of self. What he calls: “my own spirit country”, is embodied in poem after poem throughout his oeuvre, from: “a pony that could fly” of ‘Spring Hail’ where:

I sat on a log then, listening with my skin
to the secret feast of the sun, to the long wet worms
at work in the earth, and, deeper down, the stones
beneath the earth, uneasy that their sleep
should be troubled by dreams of water soaking down,
and I heard with my ears the creek on its bed of mould
moving and passing with a mothering sound.

To: “even the dead one becoming a clenched oval stone[…]going out continually over horizons” of ‘The Flying Fox Dreaming’. These are poems of heightened awareness that verge on other states on consciousness and evoke the waking dream state of trance that is the shaman’s. This is a poetry located within the body of the land itself where, contemplating his own place in relation to the first people of Australia the poet can: “go into the earth near the feed shed for thousands of years.”

The place that Fredy has made for himself in the bush is where he first takes Laura to make love to her: “we went to my landlady with the useless roof/and the

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268 Bourke, 21.
269 Murray, ‘The Human Hair Thread’, The Paperbark Tree, 69
271 Ibid, 118.
272 Ibid, 94.
little twigs under you”, sanctifying the act through this connection to land and place in a strangely pre-Christian way, a tender enactment of an ancient human rite:

And there were laughing and tears
and things felt, and sensations had and given –
and things not told, too. It’s not just the privacy of one.  

This underlines the true and complex nature of Murray’s characters, and through them Murray’s perception of the human as occupying a continual line of existence, where the unconscious nature of our collective humanity is continually played out. This is where Murray locates his Boetia in, “the fertile hinterlands of the ancestors, the place of ritual and loyalties.”

Fred’s body becomes a burning body in deep empathy with the burning bodies of the Armenian women. The burning that runs through the whole work on a symbolic level has its Catholic as well as cultural overtones: hell fire and damnation or the very real burning of Christian martyrs; the ‘burning’ of sexual desire. But the act of burning is deeply symbolic of place, Australia, and fire holds special reverence in Murray’s poetry as both an act of worship to the land and an act of regeneration. As Martin Leer points out, “the use of fire […] becomes an essential part of coming to terms with Australia, both physically and psychically.” Again Murray’s duality is at work: each thing contains its opposing force and fire is both destruction and renewal. Fred burns when the leprosy first comes on and he burns when it leaves

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273 Fredy Neptune, 59.
274 Ibid, 59.
275 For a discussion of Boetia versus Portia debate, see Laurence Bourke’s study of Les Murray, A Vivid Steady State. Bourke, 28.
him: “I was burning in my clothes, sticking to them and ripping free again/shedding like a gum tree”.\textsuperscript{278} Apart from brief spells of remission, this is the last thing he feels although he will burn time and time again. The simile ties Fred to his native land and to the native practice of burning the land, as it ties him to the wider historical and religious themes.

**Conclusion**

Fredy carries the weight of Murray’s complex and controversial ideas about how to re-imagine the postcolonial self for the white settler in modern Australia. Fredy not only speaks from the ‘Vernacular Republic’, but from a hybridised place as German/Australian. He is at once outsider and observer, as the poet might necessarily be, in order to speak for the wholeness of his nation, and reaching continually to belong, to return ‘home’. Furthermore, he is set up as a figure that might encompass the identity of home and nation. The weight of these paradoxes is enough in itself to create the splitting of self and body. But Fredy has to stand in for much more. He is both the multiple self that refuses easy categorisation and therefore control from the colonial centre, and the one who seeks only to be whole. Ultimately, Fredy embodies the contradictions and pressures of re-defining identity that face all those in the state of being ‘postcolonial’.

\textsuperscript{278} Fredy Neptune, 8.
Chapter 4: Gendered Bodies

Introduction

In *Fredy Neptune* gender and the gendered body are both singular and doubled. I would argue that this is an attempt by Murray to address, however paradoxically, the place of women in his poetry and, “move towards a new definition of what it means to be a man in the late twentieth century and beyond.” Murray was critically attacked in the nineteen eighties for his negative view of what he understood as ‘feminism’ in his first verse novel, *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral*, represented by the figure of Noeline Kampff. Writers on Murray generally acknowledge the invisibility of women in his poetry or point to the way in which female figures are, “satellites which variously reflect and confirm while always revolving around the supposedly normative masculine model.”

However, in *Fredy Neptune* gender is being acknowledged as a vital layer to an understanding of both the formation of selfhood through the body and the individual’s role in history. *Fredy Neptune* is alert to the idea that:

As in the cross-section of a tree trunk that is nowhere unmarked by its grain – so, too, is the nation informed throughout by its gendered history, by the normative masculinities and femininities’ that have shaped it.

Murray’s destabilising of gender in *Fredy Neptune* is part of a wider strategy to re-envision the postcolonial self in modern Australia. It is through considering the

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279 Alexander, 142.
280 Bourke, 102.
verse-novel’s treatment of gender that the internal paradox of Murray’s thought and ambition comes most easily to light.

**From The Boys who Stole the Funeral to Fredy Neptune**

Between the two verse-novels, *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral*, published in 1980 and *Fredy Neptune* in 1997, there has been a shift in Murray’s treatment of women and gender. Grossly stereotyped and vilified, Noeline Kampff, a central, symbolic figure in Murray’s earlier verse-novel is presented as barely human: “contorting/ her face and growling.” Noeline’s crime is two fold: feminist activism and abortion. As such she, “becomes a major part of the working out of *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral’s* plot and morality.” She receives her ‘punishment’ at the hands of another woman, her narrative opposite Jennie Dunn who is: “*The Girl Who Scalded the Other One*.”

Women are split very clearly into two camps: those who propagate the: “sex war” in Murray’s terms, through feminism, and those who seek to appease it. These women, like Beryl Murchison, are representative of a group of women who underpin the very order that divides the sexes in the first place. It is Beryl who declares: “*There’s only one sex in Australia, always has been.*” It’s clear that this one sex is male, not female. As Laurence Bourke asserts, “Murray is declaring the centrality to Australia of the masculinity tradition through a supposedly female

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282 Murray, *The Boys who Stole the Funeral*, 55.
283 Bourke, 204.
perspective.” It is clear from the verse-novel’s representation of types of women as opposites, that there are those that are desirable within society and those that are not, and it is women who police those distinctions. Men, on the other hand create, drive and protect the social and cultural mores that Murray wishes to promote; they are the unquestioned, integrated and whole sex. They are ‘the boys’ who must be especially wary of any attempts to dismantle or undermine this clear marker of gendered selfhood. The only conclusion is that women are not equals in this ‘one sex’ but are subsumed by it.

In this earlier verse-novel women exist in that romanticised, passive domestic state, like Gladys Dunn: “the remote and /country mother” who: “sits up on her folded knees in her floral/skirt amongst the paisley of vegetable leaves and tendrils”. As Laurence Bourke points out, “The Dunn female characters happily occupy the feminine role assigned them they […] know their “place”, and they keep within the confines of the house”. Murray’s concept of the ‘common dish’ is seen as the ‘solution’ to the threat of social cohesion in the novel, and is the point at which the verse novel finds its resolution and draws to a close. In Fredy Neptune the concept of the common dish is imbedded in Fredy’s repeated attempts to return home. Home is the place of self and healing, the site of ultimate happiness and redemption for the character. Murray never really moves away from the idea of home and its importance in his world view for human wellbeing, although in the later verse novel it is possible to argue that home is now a more shared, if not entirely equal place than it was before.

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287 Bourke, 109.
288 Murray, Boys, 69.
289 Bourke, 204.
In many ways, *The Boys* is a cruder work than *Fredy Neptune*, one far more at the service of an imposed ideology based on outmoded ideas of gender roles. Laurence Bourke argues that, “the poetry’s women are more properly seen as enacting the narrational preoccupations than being credible as characters.”290 Robert Crawford points to Murray’s misunderstanding of the place of abortion in modern feminism, placing it in within his thematic framework of the, “blood sacrifice which runs through the history of civilisation”.291 Steven Matthews argues that, “Murray’s deeply Catholic belief in the right to life […] troublingly interconnected with Reedy’s hatred for the feminist argument.”292

The place of responsibility for human failings has shifted between the two verse-novels from that of women to that of the state. In *The Boys* there is a “sex war” largely propagated by wrong thinking women. In *Fredy Neptune* war has become vaster and all encompassing, impersonal and removed from the individual. It has embraced both men and women equally, the only conclusion being that they must fight it on an equal basis united against the larger forces. Peter Alexander points out that, “One of the themes of the poem is the reflection that World War Two had produced an equality of suffering, women as well as men, soldiers at the front and civilians in the war”.293 On witnessing the birth of the nuclear age in the final pages of the book, Fred exclaims:

I heard myself say The Hermaphrodite! The Hermaphrodite, almost out loud. I spose I meant war was now equal for men and women.294

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290 Bourke, 206.
291 Crawford, 87.
292 Matthews, 87.
293 Alexander, 292.
294 *Fredy Neptune*, 246.
The idea of the hermaphrodite will find expression in characters such as Leila/Leland as well as in many minor character sketches; the concept of being de-sexed can be seen in the story of Hans, and the continual shifting boundaries of identity in the work encompass both sex and gender. I would argue that in some ways but not all *Fredy Neptune* is a positive development of Murray’s treatment of women in his work, and a far more complex and sophisticated, although by no means complete or integrated development of this notion of ‘one sex’.

Laura

The most prominent and perhaps important female figure is Fredy’s life long partner/wife Laura. Fredy meets Laura as they both take in a war memorial: “I heard a woman next to me swear/half to herself, half to me: few womenfolk swore much back then.” Laura has lost her first husband to the war, and this is what occasions her swearing: “*My poor bugger went because his mates called him a slacker.*” Laura is immediately configured as like Fredy, she uses the same direct, colloquial language, she both despises the war and recognises the trick the state plays on individuals to gain a complicity that can lead to their death. Laura has a: “good face”, she is: “honest, blushing around freckles like pale raindrops.” She is a homely girl next door figure who shares Fredy’s sense of humour: “she was grinning/because I’d called the big spruiker a whited elephant.” Murray sets Laura up as a suitable partner for his hero. Both are of the new world that will be formed and that will

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295 *Fredy Neptune*, 54.
require a new kind of human being. They are more alike than they are different. Laura is transgressive of the old and therefore indicative of the new. She backs off from marriage to Fredy as either expedient or even necessary and suggests they live together as an alternative. Their child Joe is born outside of marriage and although he is then the spur for wedlock, not much is made of either the situation of Joe’s birth or the wedding. The emphasis is placed on a sense of shared responsibility to the child rather than the pressure of duty and social convention that would have been more common at the time their story is set. One gets the feeling that Laura takes the liberty to swear in public because she is a new kind of woman, hardly ‘womenfolk’ at all. This does not, however, condemn her in the hands of the author, as it might have done twenty years earlier in his career.

However, it is fair to say that women both have and keep their place in Fredy Neptune. Laura is not equal to Fredy and her role is to, “point up the “heroic central male quest.””\(^{299}\) There are many ways in which Laura and the other women in the novel do not stray from their set traditional roles. Laura stands by her man, often waiting years for his return. She has an unerring faith in the continuity of his humanity and is, as all good wives should be, an observer and reporter of his moral rightness, as she states unequivocally towards the end of the story:

> Laura’s mind circled round Hans. *Most people*, she said, *if they do any at all, do ordinary-sized kindness.*
> *Not my Fred. He smuggles a whole adult around the world to – what? To draw a line between animals and people?* \(^{300}\)

These are rare moments of insight into Laura’s point of view. This is, after all, a first person narrative, the very choice of which privileges a male protagonist’s view of

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\(^{299}\) Bourke, 102.

\(^{300}\) *Fredy Neptune*, 208.
world history. Laurence Bourke has argued that the, “building blocks (of Murray’s poetry) are masculinist dramas – Christian, Aboriginal and Boetian heroic […] for each of them a male is central and women have subsidiary roles restricted to nurturance and support.” Bourke is writing before the publication of _Fredy Neptune_, but his words continue, on the whole, to be an apt description of the role of women in Fredy’s narrative.

Yet Laura as a character is not without autonomy and she is configured as both clever and canny. She is able to use her ‘feminine wiles’ to manipulate authority pointing to a fascination with female ‘glamour’ in the novel, as will be seen in Murray’s treatment of the other significant female character, Marlene Dietrich. Just like, Fredy Laura is more than willing to usurp that authority in the name of moral justice. It is Laura who takes up Fredy’s failed attempts to claim his father’s farm insurance: “They didn’t have a chance. I saw later she could purr/or chime like a bell, or draw up like a duchess”, and it is Laura who comes up with the idea of changing Hans identity to that of Fredy’s dead brother, and hatching his plan of escape. Once in action, she’s pretty impressive:

> The keepers never had a chance. Laura went to the asylum in an Army Buick with Ken Boyce as MP driver-escort to the German patient. In her cream costume, silk stockings, hat she’d have bluffed a Field Marshal. She signed Hans out and swept him away to the specialist head-doctors. Who were us. And the weeks and months piled up over the adventure, with never a copper to our door. It had worked.

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301 Bourke, 102.
302 _Fredy Neptune_, 241.
303 _Ibid_, 241.
But Laura most often works to temper Fredy’s behaviour. She is the voice of feminine reason and caution and she has no adventures of her own. She does not drive the narrative but rather echoes the central, male, narrative; she is, in all respects, Fredy’s companion. Furthermore she stays at home. She is the sign and symbol of home, the site of emotional return. She keeps alight of the flame of home. It doesn’t get more conservative than that.

Laura is configured as like Fredy; she is not only his companion, but she is also his reflection. There are many ways of seeing this. One is that the idea of the ‘one sex’ that shows itself in Murray’s earlier verse-novel, one that subsumes the female gender into that of the male, has developed only so far in Fredy Neptune. Laura has on the whole no autonomy, no agency, but as the presence of women in history cannot be ignored entirely women are given their place in the verse-novel. They are the reflective surface, the mirror image thrown back.

Many of the minor female characters in the verse-novel, those whom Fredy encounters and some of whom he has brief liaisons with, are a reflection of Laura. One such is Emily Monroe, for whom Fredy tells us:

There was this woman: my eyes ran over her like tongues.
Men do that. Our brains are set to do it even if it mostly stops there.\textsuperscript{304}

Fredy’s first ‘lover’ Shahira is Muslim and therefore cloaked and hidden. She views Fredy from a window secretively: “\textit{She has looked at you from her window when you don’t see.}” \textsuperscript{305} She cannot even speak his language, so we never hear hers but to Fredy she is hope and healing: “If I told her how I was, fully, the moment I told her, I’d be

\textsuperscript{304} Fredy Neptune, 129.
\textsuperscript{305} Ibid, 31.
This echoes the incident with the girl in Osnabruck, where: “If I had got that right, everything would have been different.” The women are represented as partial or barely seen, as with Shahira or the Osnabruck girl, or seen as objects or mediators of male sexual needs, such as Emily or Phyllis. These women’s stories are either minor echoes of Fredy’s far larger story or bleed into the overall ‘story’ of women in the poem. Their stories rarely develop beyond the containable episodes; once they have fulfilled their role Fredy moves on and we don’t hear of them again. As Laurence Bourke says of The Boys, “all women are peripheral in this poetry because it is dominated by men”, and in this sense Fredy Neptune does not appear to have advanced very far in its view and representation of women.

The figure of the mother in Fredy Neptune is ironically a figure of diminishing power. Ultimately Fredy’s mother comes to betray him just as Laura’s mother betrays Hans to the authorities. She aligns herself with old Europe in the guise of: “New Germany” through the figure of Herr Volkmar Seitz. Fredy’s mother returns to Germany with her Nazi sympathiser husband to perish there near the end of the novel in the fire bombing of Dresden. Both Fredy’s and Laura’s mother are figures of the old world; they betray their children as all good fairy-tale mothers do and with their deaths fade from the story, not only the story on the page but the story of the future.

306 Fredy Neptune, 33.
307 Ibid, 8.
308 Bourke, 101.
309 Fredy Neptune, 83.
These mothers recall the figure of the Countess zu Knull: “On a high seat, and wearing a laced green gown/of heavy stuff, and her hair in a silver string bag.”

She is a matriarch of the old religion and a fairy figure whose power must be vanquished in order for the new world to emerge. She is the figure of the mother or the ‘motherland’ who, at a psychological level, must be defeated in order for our hero to grow up and realise true autonomy of self and identity. Countess zu Knull wields an absolute feudal power over her subjects to the extent that she offers a servant to Fredy for hanging: “if you wish it/I’ll have the coachman flogged again. Or you may hang him.”

Hence the mother is symbolically aligned with the authoritarian power of the old world that must be overcome by both Laura and Fredy. This is a long way from the configurations of matriarchal women in *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral*, women who are the holders of power that binds society, not the wielders of outdated powers that prevent its development.

The figure of the mother was conspicuously absent in Murray’s earlier poetry, until 1981 when he first published ‘Three Poems in Memory of my Mother’. Murray’s mother died of a haemorrhage brought about by a miscarriage when Murray was twelve years old. As children commonly do, Murray buried the trauma in guilt and a belief carried into adulthood that he was in some way to blame for his mother’s death. “I didn’t mean to harm you/I was a baby” Murray writes, ambivalently, in the poem. Laurence Bourke writes that, “in interviews Murray has referred to his difficulty in confronting his mother’s death, both at the time when he

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310 Fredy Neptune, 200.
311 Ibid, 200.
312 Murray, Collected Poems, 185.
was a twelve year old child and later as a young man“,\textsuperscript{313} but goes on to guard against paying too much attention to, “some psychological origin which by its own terms cannot be brought into clear focus, and it does so at the expense of what has been created.”\textsuperscript{314} The mother figure in *Fredy Neptune* may have its psychological roots in Murray’s autobiography, but it transcends these to create a symbol of redundant power that must be transcended in order for selfhood to be realised.

On the whole, Murray’s conservatism and his Catholicism his commitment to the ‘common dish’ of a poetry of hearth and home, “which is grail, chalice, camp-meal, and the sum of common experience and human suffering”,\textsuperscript{315} get in the way of a fully fledged, conscious development of the ideas of gender in the novel. But such a view is potentially reductive and I think the real ‘story’ of the unconscious working of gender in the novel is not about an either/or, male or female, but about the possible ground between them.

Laura is present as Fredy’s mirror-image, the other side of the looking glass; she is, almost literally, Fredy’s other. This could be seen as an attempt, rather than to reduce the category of female to merely the reflection of the male, to expand the category of male to incorporate that of female in a way that questions the categories themselves. The figure of Leila/Leland: “strange Leila, that I once saw pee standing like a man”,\textsuperscript{316} threads this theme throughout the novel. Fredy is tricked or tricks himself into believing that she is a hermaphrodite. Leila/Leland is instrumental in helping Fredy to finally escape war and return home, as he, ironically perhaps,
borrows her male passport. It is not until much later, near the end of the novel that Leila is revealed to have been a woman all along:

I spoke about Leila being Leland and she froze. Leila was a woman. If I was taken in by drag over there in Germany, all the more fool me. ³¹⁷

Fredy wants there to be more to Leila/Leland than there first appears. He wants her to be hermaphrodite because this will confirm his experience of an identity that is at once unsettling but also contains the potential for liberation from social norms. Fredy goes on to declare:

I realised how much I’d wanted there to be someone somewhere not trapped in just one half of life. shave every day, keep your clothes on, you’re still trapped. ³¹⁸

This idea of being trapped within one gender or one definition of gender is clearly as much a trap for men as it is for women, and both men and women seek ways out of this trap. Leila on becoming Leland gains a sort of historical autonomy that also allows her to become an active player in the narrative. “I miss those parts of me” writes Leila, in a letter thanking Fredy for the return of her ‘male side’ adding: “I dare you to borrow Leila next time, Fred, you tarzy man”. ³¹⁹ Fred never does borrow ‘Leila’ but the verse novel is textured with hints of homo-sexuality and gender obliquities from the men who: “goose each other”³²⁰ in Constantinople to the: “girl-faced man /who’d never shaved”, ³²¹ “the wrestlers in oiled leather shorts”, ³²² and the curiously consistent use of the word ‘queer’.

³¹⁷ Fredy Neptune, 238.
³¹⁸ Ibid, 239.
³²⁰ Ibid, 4.
³²¹ Ibid, 5.
‘Queer’ is one those terms that has sat around in the English language for centuries to mean little more than strange, or odd, eccentric, or feeling slightly unwell, and was used relatively recently as derogatory slang for homosexual, to be adopted in the latter part of that century by homosexuals themselves. It is used throughout Fredy Neptune in its colloquial sense to mean odd or strange. This is obviously slang located in Fredy’s time before it took on its other meaning, but it is difficult not hear that other meaning being implied as the book was written and can now only ever be read in the context of the contemporary use of that word. It’s a small point, but one that seems to add to the ‘queer’ fabric of the novel.

Of course, in the original meaning of the word Fredy is quite clearly ‘queer’ and in the contemporary meaning of the word we may also read through him his reading of the world as Queer: ‘After five queer years’ Fredy sums up the first part of his story. To be queer is to be double, multiple, unfixed, shifting; it is to subvert the boundaries imposed by authorities, boundaries established and policed to control individuals as a mass in the production, reproduction and movement of wealth and power. There’s no suggestion that Fredy is homosexual in that literal sense, but that he seeks a companionship of self and identity with those and through those whose identity is unfixed, whether that be through a complexity of race, as in the figure of Sam Mundine, or a complexity of gender.

Not only is Fredy’s world read as queer, but it is also read as other. The moment of the burning of the Armenian women changes everything for Fredy and establishes the starting point for all that will follow in Fredy’s reading of twentieth

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322 Fredy Neptune, 6.
323 Ibid, 11.
century history. On witnessing this erasure of an other that carries the dual nature of
gendered other, “the female body form [...] that most fetishised and silent of body
symbols” and ethnic other (Armenian), Fredy himself is erased. This is a physical
experience that embodies a physical erasure, one that represents and identifies with
the dual body (female and ethnic) that has suffered. As Elleke Boehmer states, “The
colonial representation, exclusion, suppression and relegation can often be seen as
literally embodied”. Fredy, as male and white, that representative of the
perpetrators of war and genocide throughout recorded history must, in order to rejoin
humanity, cast off this outer skin and identify with the oppressed other. Through the
symbolic loss of sensation in his body, Fredy becomes other in the verse novel.

Murray appears to be attempting in Fredy Neptune to set up a model of sexual
behaviour for both modern men and women and for the relations between them. But
this is by no means straightforward. Laura is, like Fredy, sexually cautious, and
conscious of behavioural mores:

One week she produced a tan Borsalino hat,
and a paper bag for my sailor’s cap. I know you’re a sailor,
but the world doesn’t have to. She made a joke of it
but I could fill the rest in: seen with sailors, a war widow.

This is set up in the novel, not necessarily as indicative of compliance with
conservative modes of behaviour for women, but as Laura refusing the
demoralisation of sexual love that is perceived as coming from sexual promiscuity.
She takes on certain freedoms and refuses others. Fredy too is clear about his
discomfort with such behaviour as he states early on:

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324 Boehmer, Stories of Women, 132.
325 Ibid, 129.
326 Fredy Neptune, 55.
All the women we Turk matlows met we led to by to.
I was ashamed and shy. I was always, round all that:
the tired anger it, behind the sticky smiles, the contempt
as they stooped over to give you eyefuls.
All I wanted was a girlfriend.\(^{327}\)

It’s easy to read in this Murray’s own discomfort with sexuality detached from home
and marriage and a sense of shame and reticence that is deeply bedded within his
personal psyche and history. Murray has come to talk openly about this, most notably
in Peter Alexander’s biography and the autobiographical essay ‘Killing the Black
Dog’ (1996). Both texts corroborate a narrative of Murray’s damaged sexual
development as a teenager as a result of severe sexual bullying, the taunting and
name calling he suffered remaining the catalyst some forty years later for a mental
breakdown. Murray cites the writing of Fredy Neptune as his route out of the illness,
a healing that clearly has complex and compound threads. I suggest at this point, in
the context of Murray’s relationship to women as a subject, that his treatment of
women in *Fredy Neptune* is an attempt to redress his own imbalances and to put
forward a framework for a different kind of relationship between men and women.

The concept of friendship is crucial to this. “I’d always seen women in the
unwounded parts of my mind as simply fellow humans; now I may be able to see
them that way altogether”,\(^{328}\) Murray writes in ‘Killing the Black Dog’. When Fredy
first meets Laura, she is: “my first real woman friend”;\(^{329}\) and when he meets Emily
Monroe, she too is a friend:

> peaceful to be with
> no challenging or managing a man
> just for the power of it, non of that big mauve Mystery

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\(^{327}\) *Fredy Neptune*, 4.
\(^{328}\) Murray, *‘Killing the Black Dog’*, 1996, 23.
\(^{329}\) *Fredy Neptune*, 130.
some women go in for, to keep us off balance and belt high.330

It is such friendship between men and women that might lead to a new kind of relationship not predicated on the power of sex and the imbalances it causes. There is the hope expressed here, however futile, of eliminating such power from individual relationships between men and women through friendship, mutuality based not on gender differences but on the sameness that exists between human beings regardless of gender (and regardless of race, as in Fredy’s friendship with Sam Mundine ).

According to Fredy who is, he admits: “shy around all that”, 331 it is sex that gets between men and women. Sex prevents them from seeing each other as simply fellow human beings, and of relating to each other in ways that recognise and privilege their sameness, rather than their difference. It is hinted that it is Fredy’s lack of sexual assumption that allows him into Marlene’s world, that he sees her first as a human being, not a sex icon: “So why did you call me over? I asked her at last. She said/Most men would assume they knew! Why are you different?”. 332 It is Fredy’s willingness and ability to see beyond those structures imposed on individuals that makes him special, a unique figure, a symbol or icon for a possible new kind of human being, one who can carry a model of self and identity for the future.

**Sex**

The sexed and sexual body has come under the auspices of state control. Foucault states that we:

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330 *Fredy Neptune*, 130.
331 *Ibid*, 130.
Are in a society of ‘sex’ or rather, a society “with a sexuality”: the mechanisms of power are addressed to the body, to life, to what causes it to proliferate, to what reinforces the species, its stamina, its ability to dominate, or its capacity for being used.\textsuperscript{333}

Foucault talks of the constant \textit{arousal} of sex in society, rather than is suppression, as a marker for modernity, an, “index of a society’s strength, revealing both its political energy and its biological vigour.”\textsuperscript{334} The fabric of \textit{Fredy Neptune} is imbued with the embodying of sex and sexuality. This is crudely and cruelly woven with the plasticity of the human body in the services of war, but also seeks to redeem the normalising and intimate state of sexual relations between people, as shown through Fredy’s relationship with Laura.

The sex act is treated in several ways in the verse-novel. There is the tender, unrevealed couplings between Fredy and Laura, too private to allow the reader access to and often aligned with the ‘deeper mystery’ of land and the sacred. This is in sharp contrast to how, outside of this private relationship, sex is treated with vulgarity. It is reduced to a base animal level that draws parallels with the expressions of cruelty in the work: “Your face looks like the wet parts of a dog”\textsuperscript{335} says Fredy to the Black Watch sergeant who beats him up in Jerusalem.

Where sex is reduced to base bodily instincts in the verse-novel, it is aligned the drive towards violence and war. This reminds us of rape, an act that is an expression of power enacted through the body that is the opposite of love. Sex, under these ‘police’ conditions, is sex ‘wounded’ because it has become a medium of control by the state through the body.

\textsuperscript{333} \textit{A Foucault Reader}, 269.  
\textsuperscript{334} \textit{Ibid}, 268.  
\textsuperscript{335} \textit{Fredy Neptune}, 15.
The Story of Hans

The story of Hans affords us a peek into the home of the everyday German in the 1930s, those very people who brought Hitler to power:

Herr Lenzing, who was a red-faced big blond fellow unbuttoned his shirt and faced the barred cloth maw of the wireless as the Corporal went on about Volkwerdung, becoming a people. That the words of our dear Fuhrer should beat more immediately into my heart.336

The Fuhrer literally enters and occupies the father’s body, just as it will occupy the son’s. Even in the smaller details of the verse-novel, the modern state has gained access to the most private, inner part of the human body. Because of this, history is present in the body and acts through it; all are intertwined.

Hans is a young German man, with what we might call in contemporary terminology, learning disabilities. Fredy rescues Hans from sterilisation in 1930s Germany. He escapes with Hans by boat, but they are waylaid and must encounter the Countess Zu Knull and her ‘Midnight Cabaret’, before they can continue. This is a semi-magical experience such as might be encountered by travellers in a fairy tale. But it also reinforces the end-game of the Nazi project. Once in Australia, Hans becomes part of Fredy’s family, integrating well with his son Joe who learnt German as a young child from Fredy’s mother. But Hans is interned in a mental institution during the Second World War and both Laura and Fredy must enact a second, final escape, before the story can come to its close. The necessity of getting Hans out of Germany is the narrative catalyst for Fredy’s return home in the Book Five, and

336 Fredy Neptune, 194.
provides the final metaphors for Fredy’s bodily return. Hans is not only a way for Fredy to return home, but a way to come to terms with home and history.

It is significant then that Fredy first encounters Hans when Hans asks him the way:

How Hans came to me, I was near the Stettiner Bahnhof and he came to me to ask his way. *Pardon please Sir*, he started, like something learned by heart and still shaky on it, and looked hopeful, ran out of words and handed me a letter. He had a shock of hair and a faint look of someone buttoned into his clothes by others. The letter gave the address of a medical clinic where he was to report that midday to be sterilized by removal of both testicles in accordance with the Law for the Safeguarding of Hereditary Health of the 14th July that year.337

The weak leads the strong to redemption in a biblical echo of a Christ who is revealed through his healing of the weak. This sets up a moral, spiritual law in opposition to a state law, that will lead Fredy to the act of forgiveness at the end of the novel that brings back his body. Hans is a sort of moral magnet pulling our hero full circle. Hans is reconfigured at the end of the novel, and therefore saved from incarceration in a mental hospital or worse, as the brother Fredy lost to meningitis at the very start of the verse-novel. Furthermore, Hans is the route to and symbol of Fredy’s final redemption. As Fredy waits for his daughter Louise to return from her music lesson, Hans plays with a racket and ball. In a final, clarified moment of evocation or even resurrection of the image of Christ, Fredy is led to the moment that releases him:

There was a crucifix on the wall near me, and Jesus had his head turned hard to one side, as if he was watching just one player.

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337 Fredy Neptune, 193.
in Hans’s tennis game; not Hans but the dark space that kept returning his shots, mostly skew, so Hans had to chase them.\textsuperscript{338}

The story of Hans encapsulates both the ideas of the state manipulated body and self, and the control of sex and gender by the state. This ‘Law’ which Hans is to be subject to, signifies at an historical level the point at which Nazi law begins to take public control of the private body, and signifies the beginning of the descent to the Holocaust.

\textbf{Marlene}

Women’s sexual ‘glamour’ is one aspect of how the verse novel fully acknowledges how it is social systems, operating through a cultural medium, that help to form and maintain these distinctions and barriers between the genders, and how the sex act itself is part of that manipulation. Phyllis Gates: “a trying to be actress”,\textsuperscript{339} whom Fred meets in America during his ‘Hollywood’ saga, describes this very well: \textit{“I’m not beautiful as a presence} so I have to work by entrainment. The second rate way. ”\textsuperscript{340} Both men and women are subject to this. Women must deploy glamour to get what they want from a hierarchical structure of state and society that will only notice them because of it; the better women are at it, the more successful they can be, the more power they can wield over men. Men are denied either an intimate knowledge of another human being as a friend, not merely a sexual partner, and are confounded by this: \textit{“big mauve mystery”}\textsuperscript{341} that only serves in the end to keep the

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\textsuperscript{338} Fredy Neptune, 254.
\textsuperscript{339} Ibid, 155.
\textsuperscript{340} Ibid, 156.
\textsuperscript{341} Fredy Neptune, 156.
\end{flushright}
genders in their places. Glamour is one of the ways in which sex is manipulated by authority, and by extension the bodies and relationships of men and women. However, if you buy into it, glamour is a sexual power that translates into political or economic power, and Marlene Dietrich has buckets of it.

It is Marlene Dietrich, arguably the other significant female figure in the verse-novel besides Laura, who is powerful enough to embody this idea of glamour and move beyond it. On one level, Dietrich is something of a fantasy figure in Fredy Neptune, and one gets the feeling Murray is taking certain liberties here; why not have perhaps the most glamorous and sexually stunning film star of the Twentieth Century meet your character, single him out as unique and therefore worthy of the intimacy of friendship? Marlene might as well have invented the word glamour, or had it invented for her, for she embodies the epitome of glamour/power:

The most beautiful woman

we had ever seen stood in a white sharkskin man’s suit
talking to Freund the boss cameraman. She’d dim to normal and laugh,
making Berlin wisecracks, then she’s look. And a man’s heart would turn end on. Hot coffee would run from his cup.
He’d see every blemish in his hands, every fault in him would cure, he’d feel blue sea under flying fish – then she would be just a very good looking woman again. It was a gleam that came and went.
Marlene Dietrich, new to the studio, checking out our movie. 342

Marlene comes to America from Berlin in the 1920s to work for Paramount Pictures and makes a series of six films with the director Von Steinberg, the first of which to make her name is The Blue Angel. Her mystique, her incredible glamour which is to prove a lasting power, is partly attributed to Von Steinberg’s innovative use of lighting techniques, the play of light and shadow to create both beauty and mystery

342 Ibid, 152.
and the ‘high production values’ of those films in the use of costume and set design. In many ways, Marlene is the first ‘manufactured’ screen goddess. She is to become an iconic figure throughout the twentieth century, not least for her ability to continually re-invent herself. Her very name is an invention of her own making, a contraction of her birth names Mary Magdalene, just as Fredy’s surname is changeable and interchangeable throughout the work.

Furthermore, Marlene just like Fredy is a character of complexities and dualities. She is bi-sexual and therefore representative of what symbolises a shifting, liberating force in modern identities for men and women. Throughout her life she has a series of lovers that encompass world leaders. She is politically outspoken and fiercely anti-Nazi; she becomes an American citizen in 1939 and a ‘forces sweetheart’ on a par with Britain’s Vera Lynn, risking vilification in her birth country. She continues however, throughout her career, to record songs in German, and it is her bi-lingual, dual nation status that gives her an obvious parallel with Fredy.

But unlike the other women figures in Fredy Neptune, it is the very historical fact of her presence and power to enter and translate culture, one that translates into an icon-making career spanning seventy years of the Twentieth Century, that rescues her from the mirror. Marlene is her own mirror; she turns it on herself and manipulates it, a technique all women famous for their beauty or not have used as a way to survive. Significant here is her bi-sexuality, her cross-dressing, her willingness and ability to create an image that is sexually ambiguous, masculine as
well as feminine. She is able and willing to sit across gender boundaries and trapped neither by the mirror of gender reflection nor the mirror of glamour.

Marlene introduces Fredy the lyric poetry of Rilke:

> It sat me up. This wasn’t the Turk’s or the Thoroblood’s ‘poems’, Big, dangerous, baggy. This was the grain distilled. This was the sort that might not get men killed.  

This is a curious incident in the verse-novel, and seems to be about the transference of poetic knowledge through translation from the old European world to the new. The poem distils the metaphysical heart of the verse-novel. The panther mirrors Fredy’s powerful body, ‘hypnotised’ by the effects of the mind into its own erasure. The panther might have to erase itself in order to free itself from the cage and: “fade from having been”:

> His gentle tread, each muscular strong joint circling in the very narrowest space is like a dance of force around a point where a mighty will stands hypnotised in place.

This very poem links us back to Murray’s expressed idea of the embodied poem as a ‘dance of force’. Bruce Clunies-Ross argues out that, “through Rilke’s poem […] Marlene Dietrich demonstrates that humans are poetic.”

This small, but true poem, mediated through the voice of a woman who carries the symbolism of multiplicity of both gendered and national identity, is in direct opposition to the ‘big poems’ of war. “This was the sort that might not get men killed” says Fredy, then, “I shook myself and we talked of childhoods and homes.”

This is an identification with the female that suggests that not only is it women who

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343 Fredy Neptune, 160.
344 Ibid 160.
345 Clunies-Ross, 9.
346 Fredy Neptune, 160.
carry the genesis of human peace and freedom and who return men to a consideration of childhood and homes that re-humanises them, but that men need to become more like them in order to stop remaking the big killing poems.

**Conclusion**

In *Fredy Neptune* Murray’s women still play the roles they are assigned, either as helpmeet or mirror image of the central, heroic character. Marlene is a symbolic fantasy image just as Noeline Kampff was. But there is a crucial difference between them: Kampff was created in part to serve a distorted and outdated ideological view of feminism that reinforced the differences and separation between the sexes. Marlene represents the very opposite: the possibility of both friendship between the sexes based on equanimity and the shifting dynamic of unfixed gender identity that yet allows for a wholeness of self. If there is a presiding muse in the book, it is Marlene, the bringer of the gift of the ‘true poem’. It is no longer the mother who demands the blood sacrifice; the mother has been transcended. It is the crushing ideological *poemes* of the Twentieth Century that dominate and destroy men and women equally. Murray’s hero identifies bodily with the damaged and erased women of history when he witnesses the burning of the Armenian women. Just as women became and become other under the forces of power, both colonial and historical, so does Fredy. In this otherness, he identifies with the complexity and duality of the gendered body and this transforms the very idea of gendered identity in Murray’s work from one that traditional and fixed to one that this mutable.
Conclusion

Murray’s contribution to establishing a postcolonial national identity is one which highlights and plays with the paradoxical nature of postcolonial identity as much as it tries to resolve it. This essentially, multiple, nature is caught up with what the poet Judith Wright called, “the double aspect of inner Australia”,347 the presence of, “the reality of exile” within, “the reality of newness and freedom.”348 Murray’s work attempts to address this paradox which sits at the core of white settler identity in modern Australia (as opposed to an urban identity which Murray refuses; he has ‘returned to Bunjah’ after all). But in doing so he exposes the weakness of his assumed position and creates further contradictions for his readers. His ‘vernacular republic’ is based on a bush ethos many rightly now view as not only conservative but defunct, as modern Australia is highly urbanised.

Murray’s attempts to align his poetic practice with Aboriginal culture have only served to bring him heavy public criticism. Murray’s idea of the creolised republic ignores the project of indigenous peoples to preserve their culture and history from further erasure and appropriation. Murray confuses the necessity for indigenous peoples to reclaim something that was once whole (such as Aboriginal culture) with the anxiety to avoid any purification of the race that might echo Nazism. He fails to see the contradiction with his own insistence on the ‘nativeness’ of white settler bush culture, whilst at the same time claiming poetic rights over indigenous material.

348 Ibid.
Fredy Neptune is a slippery text. On the one hand, Fredy’s ability to be an outsider, and therefore a witness rather than a perpetrator to the century’s crimes, and his insistence on continual escape from any state power or institution, preferring to ‘go bush’, sets him up as a symbol for resistance, the eponymous ‘free spirit’ avoiding definition just as his mysterious affliction avoids being named. On the other hand, the complexities of the text belie its unwillingness to go too far from a position the author has long established for his work, personally in his Catholicism and politically in his conservative nationalism. The limiting affects of Murray’s Catholicism and national conservatism are seen most clearly in his treatment of women, gender and sex, even as he strives to move beyond the stereotypes of his own making.

However despite this, I argue that Fredy Neptune is Murray’s attempt to reckon with both his personal ambivalence towards women and his own sexuality, even if that very ambivalence prevents him from becoming fully liberated from his embattled position.\footnote{For a discussion of this in relation to Fredy Neptune see Robert Savage’s fascinating essay, ‘Erocide is Painless. Insensation in Les Murray’s Fredy Neptune’, Australian Literary Studies,20.2, Oct 2001, 122.} Fredy Neptune displays a considerable shift in Murray’s treatment of women from the blinkered vitriol of The Boys Who Stole the Funeral where women are either murderers (i.e. feminists) or keepers of hearth and home. In Fredy Neptune women are characters who, on the whole (apart from Fredy’s mother) are sympathetically represented, even if they remain as largely either mirrors for, or helpmeets to, the central character. But what is most interesting about Murray’s treatment of gender and sexuality in Fredy Neptune can be seen in the figure of Marlene Dietrich. Marlene is as multiple as Fredy (or Fredy/Murray).
Her bi-sexuality, her ‘queerness’, ‘hermaphroditism’, her hybridity is echoed throughout the verse-novel in its content and texture. Marlene stands in for the verse-novel, a hybrid form, and therefore for poetry. She is the written, embodied, poetic self, who sees Fredy for his uniqueness; who speaks his language.

The split or multiple self is a concept central to *Fredy Neptune*. This emerges from Fredy’s national duality as German /Australian, leads us into the central motif of Fredy’s insensation, and on to the exploration of the complexities of racial identity in figures such as Sam Mundine. These elements are reflected further in the constant play of notions of self and identity throughout Fredy’s journey. It is important to make the distinction, as I believe the poem does, between constructed identities – whether this is nation, race or gender – and an a priori identity of the self which is connected to the spirit and the unconscious. Only by exposing the former as constructs and as roles we play or have imposed upon us can we reach the reality of the latter, one that is a reality of wholeness.

Finally, my reading of *Fredy Neptune* is of a text written on the body. The trick of exposing the central character and narrator to the loss of his body only serves to insist upon the essential presence of the body throughout. As Robert Savage points out, “Fredy spends little time thinking of anything else.”\(^\text{350}\) History is lived through the body and Fredy’s body in its very loss stands as metaphor for the erasure of millions of corporeal existences in the Twentieth Century. A self without a body engenders horror: “just a self in mid dark”\(^\text{351}\) as Fredy says; for identity to be whole it must be located within the lived, bodied experience.

\(^{350}\) Savage, 425.
\(^{351}\) *Fredy Neptune*, 9.
Ultimately, such an identity can never be truly fixed. Whatever might constitute a postcolonial, gendered or ethnic identity must remain multiple, fluid and beyond finite reach if it is to outwit the forces of history, power and ideology (what Murray would call ‘The Mob’). It has always been poetry’s special place to preserve the primacy of such freedom. In creating *Fredy Neptune*, Murray has written a poem that mimics and mirrors these shifting paradoxes of self and identity and finally, located the site of self realisation, whether personal or national, within the body.
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