

## Heart Print

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He has published fourteen books of verse, and has been Visiting Fellow at the Australian National University, writer-in-residence at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida, and poet-in-residence at Cambridge University. A selection of his poems appears in the *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*. He compiled and edited (with Philip Mead) the *Bloodaxe Book of Modern Australian Poetry*, and he is the publisher and editor of the widely-read Internet literary magazine *Jacket*, at <http://www.jacket.zip.com.au/>

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*The Tin Wash Dish*

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JOHN TRANTER



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*To John Lucas*



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## Lavender Ink

Look, there she is: Miss Bliss, dozing  
in the shade of a Campari umbrella. Beside her  
a book – something brilliant: Callimachus,  
let's say, printed in an elegant Venetian type –  
half-read, with the most alarming  
metaphors to come,

and a glass of gin, a cool dew  
blooming on the crystal, the air  
kissing her skin  
and the neighbour's hi-fi playing  
'I Can't Get Started' in a distant  
corner of the afternoon.

The yachts on the water.  
The tinkle of ice.

I'm thinking of you, reinventing Sydney  
a thousand years from now, and not  
getting it quite right: missing the  
delicate hangover, the distant murmur  
of the city, the scent of this ink  
drying on the page.

## Black Leather

They had returned to get the acoustic atmosphere for the movie about the French criminals, recording the soul of the place. When the narrative dissolved she felt abandoned: first, as though her friends had walked out on her, then in the other sense, loose, morally bankrupt.

It was an 'optimistic' picture, but dark. The main writer fought with the story doctor, refusing to answer his pained questions. They were intellectuals, she shouted, don't you understand? Working all night she developed strategies,

and gathered a close group of friends around her to fend off the advances of the others, those godless and tireless plotters. And the pages whirling in the metallic light above the sand, the waves and the pages folding and turning.

I could see her problem: the cranial arteries bulging, bad culture gushing across the blood-brain barrier, from the pages of soiled old books and splashy magazines, a dozen new theories every month boiling to the top of the heap of reprints.

Her students thought they had found a new leader, the art pumping, and an innocent job, raking in money and promotion. But the infection was linguistic, and the form malevolent. She panted in the staff room like a fly trapped in a Contents Page, struggling

with some half-dozen new hypotheses, thinking she was checking them out, but they were doing the checking, sorting out the designer theories, the gangs of black-clad youths hunting down the latest clever chat.

Her work was growing stunted and corrupt  
but fluent for all that, and people bought it.  
The skyrocket of fashion, it's not evil, she said,  
it can be useful, even for the working class,  
look, they bask in the light from its burning tail.

That's how culture floats on the lake  
of civilisation, its image wavering in the hazy air.  
She thought of her certain extinction – no –  
you'll always win if you can predict how  
the dog will jump, her script doctor said.

Memo: When I began decoding the images  
unravelling from the screen I thought I was  
reading your heart print, but I'd been fooled.  
Woman does not have a Soul for a reason,  
you argued, it's not the product of evolution,

that fashion for splitting up the dead, they so many,  
into burnt or heavenly pensioners, that is vicious,  
can't you see that? The projector flickering,  
the pages signed with her name curling  
in the heat, blackening and bursting into flame.

## Coffee

The edge of the fields were green, you could see them through the narrow streets like a distant movie, a few tiny people moving about slowly, sowing or reaping. And in the other direction, a glimpse between two high white walls, the glass-green sea.

We brought bad weather with us – bluish clouds blowing across the sky, and a chill darkness covered the fields, flecks of silver mantling the waves, storm wrack on the shore. I had a vision of people descending on this isolated place

at the bottom of the planet, bringing bad manners with them, manners adapted to a different culture, survival in the bear-pit of the city, let's say. We found what was forbidden, isn't that what we're always looking for, then tossing aside?

So we sat on the oars of the self, and time drifted by. Along the shore, life balanced exactly on the knife-edge between the drab and the sublime, 'between the shit and the champagne,' she said, spying on the town, cigarette slanting from her lips, binoculars held steady,

the lenses at the front racking and peeping in and out. 'When I was young I led myself into mischief,' she said. 'High on joy, that's what I want, and I want anyone's arms around me.' She was holding a tiny drawing and showing the customers,

then she pulled back. It's building it up from these tiny pieces, day after day, so that months turn into years, and it gets done, but so slowly. She was painting all night, drinking too much – she put something in it – her boy friend killed himself.

I had gone to the city, the Big Smoke, and  
in that crowded beehive my thin talent for being led  
led me by the nose to the magazines with the bright leader,  
but it's just a job, yet I couldn't tell her that, as if  
it were all just cheap drink, at the magazine's expense.

You forget so much. Later there was a tough time,  
locked away, I guess, endless winter, you wonder  
what he was thinking about year after year –  
the rope around the rolled carpet, maybe, the lumpy  
body in there – he sank back into his seat

at the end of the show, then the lights were fading.  
What I did, she said, I figured I couldn't be nabbed for.  
It was above the ordinary, beyond the pale.  
She threw down the brush, and started crying.  
From the beach hotel to the place of worship, a few

sad steps. 'A glass of water – God help me.'  
She could see it all, like a half-forgotten dream.  
Coffee was brought to her on the beach.  
something like scotch poured into the mug,  
that makes you sweat, that makes you dizzy.

## Country Matters

I gambled with my body, and I lost, Julia said.  
She seemed an angel of the stairs  
poking about up there. Did I believe her?  
I fell into a deep grabby sham.  
The shape of a cross, a faint trowelled reality,

full of sound, and drugs to cure a migraine.  
Tony slid down the blurry slope of his anxiety  
and disappeared into his misery, floundering.  
That was okay by me. I didn't want him  
hanging around the new project, spoiling things.

I'd buy and sell a fat parcel of real estate  
in the time most folks would take to eat a dinner.  
On the stone path that wanders through the copse  
a drop of red, then a rusty smear, the colour of nails  
buried underground in a dark hole, reddish-brown,

which is the colour of dried blood. I saw a dim thing  
struggling into life, unwilling, moving in the currents  
under the rocks. I gulped the thick air, then heard  
an angel singing, and a lot of medicine bottles  
cascading. 'The lamp was dying for lack of oil.'

If you didn't mention writing there was work  
to talk about, from some backwoods cache  
they've invented folk tales that go on for hours.  
First you gather in the back room, then you drink  
the rum. So the folk tale begins.

The young couple met at the first milepost  
outside town, or so the story says.  
The man carefully stole up to the gang, heard  
what they were talking about, every little whisper,  
then a twig cracked, and they swung around, cursing,

then the clack of a rifle bolt in the silence  
of the misty fields, eucalypts dripping, how  
the distant shot echoed back and forth  
along the sides of the valley, then died away –  
Does that make sense? The brief lamp

was my fault, guttering, going out.  
Then they all lay back on the seat  
and talked about the girls at the local dance,  
not hiding their feelings so that anyone  
who wanted to gave a history of his passion,

threw himself together in the manner of a manikin  
making a soul for himself using psychic pressures  
to mould the memories and anger's laser  
to model it, the soul being formed at adolescence,  
rather than at birth, and why not?

That's when the blazing light of the world  
strikes you, and suddenly you're to blame for things.  
That it was done and written out for God's sake  
is inscribed at the front of the book  
thus, in the hope of sanction and forgiveness.

## Gallery

The teachers would hammer us into artists,  
recalcitrant base metal beaten into gold,  
if they could. To me, joy-rides were art,  
and ploughing was a type of inscription –  
I hear behind the droning motor someone's

childhood weathered away and wasted, the boy  
in the threadbare snotty jacket hating us  
for noticing him thus, and his blame becomes  
his chief addiction, a flush of resentment,  
about how others pushed and bullied.

Who's pushing? The theory that pretends to be  
no theory at all, it was busy blocking that other  
theory, disordered, quarrelling, quickly finished with,  
his royal madness noted spotting plots behind the bushes,  
sobbing with rage, a devotee of the sulky air.

I lived in grace, and fell into poisoned maturity –  
seaside cabins packed with wicked kids drinking –  
a world of bush farms turned into a landscape.  
To read it, you just moved forward into it.  
They call those mountains a 'horizon', which is only

a boundary, not a thing. Parents were templates,  
but I could not plot the father. A spanner  
clinked on steel and danced in the ringing shed.  
The tractor did its work like any rusty mechanism  
and his office was the open air, a church of absence.

He wore old blue things. Does history  
have to be past tense? The diary says I'm  
older than he ever got to be, can it be true?  
In a fragment of dream chatter I  
catch my voice from another room and hear

my father's laugh. Is he here? He's been dead –  
'I had the shivers – lock the back door.' Broken  
now – pack away Hope, his poem of the future.  
I photographed myself, I drank the rain  
in deep gulps in flooded February.

Driving to a party, young people, that cheap kiss  
traded for a magazine with torn covers.  
High on killing ethylene, I realised  
wrong could be right. They'd punish the boys  
to save them. I would not join.

You had to take a girl to the dance, or  
you were a creep, the guys opined anxiously.  
And her? She wanted to be a debutante,  
though she knew the routine was a farce.  
Kids growing at their own pace, by the river.

The old men forbade the barbecue, and now  
a thunderstorm begins with pattering drops,  
laughter, girls' dresses bunched under the shelter,  
the grey sky stretching so far, impossibly distant,  
where I glimpse myself longing to go home.

## Globe

In the first chapter a raw wind blew up  
and discovered streams of watery alarm,  
the reader frozen in front of a silent knife  
to escape the due pain, I'm arguing  
stimulus-response, or motor inhibition

in the face of the inhuman demands of this print,  
that reaches out of some corner of the past –  
a grubby back room stinking of tallow –  
and orders you to stop thinking like that, now  
start thinking like this, and do the things

that are inevitable, given this new  
political alignment of wish and fear –  
no, let me think about a road that wandered  
down the flank of a hill, through thick grass  
under the moonlight, snowfields gleaming

on a distant glacier – no, I must read  
these halting words that once leaked and stumbled  
from the nib – I see them begin their journey  
through the post, the type shop, printery,  
warehouse, then trucks grunting through

the city streets and then the silence of a bookshelf –  
high, almost out of reach, at the back  
of the self-help section in the shadows,  
towards a happy auditor, or, lensed  
and winking glints of light onto the kitchen table

the miserable viewer, I mean reader, hypercritical  
at breakfast, and so taunt his target of scribble,  
these doodles intersecting with his fate –  
what did the Professor say? – a hostile  
curl to his lips, nausea – no ballot, no blame.