

Trio

Red Movie (1972)

Crying in Early Infancy: 100 Sonnets (1977)

Dazed in the Ladies Lounge (1979)

JOHN TRANTER is the leading Australian poet of his generation. He spent his youth on a farm on the South-east coast of Australia, attended country schools, and took his BA in English and Psychology. He has worked mainly in publishing, and also in radio production for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, and has travelled widely, reading his work at over fifty venues in the United States, Britain, Europe and Australia. He has received several senior fellowships and other grants from the Literature Board of the Australia Council and has been a visiting scholar at various institutions, from Visiting Fellow in the Faculty of Arts at the Australian National University to writer-in-residence at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida, and at Cambridge University. He has lived at various times in Melbourne, London, Singapore, Brisbane and San Francisco, and now lives in Sydney where he is a company director.

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Poetry

Parallax

Red Movie

The Blast Area

The Alphabet Murders

Crying in Early Infancy: 100 Sonnets

Dazed in the Ladies Lounge

Selected Poems (1982)

Under Berlin

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Different Hands

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The New Australian Poetry

The Tin Wash Dish

The Bloodaxe Book of Modern Australian Poetry (co-editor)

Martin Johnston: Selected Poems and Prose

Trio

JOHN TRANTER



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Red Movie

The Orange Spot

The old drunk breaks into the midnight café
begs a glass of water, reels into the welcome floor.

Later the 'Young Turk'
bearing a blade of malice in his back.

Why not lie together? having in common
a burnt-out bravery, equally sick of pushing out
the glare of life.

Hospital

The pilot reaches for a drug:
like an insect he manipulates his way
through a jungle of bare furniture.
Footsteps approach. Receiving courage
he disperses into the air above Normandy.
A vapour-trail scribbles a quick signal

the key loosens the door
bringing methaqualone hydrochloride
and a wet smile. Drags him back
into the shrill traffic of the ordinary.

Balance

The traveller slouches at the table
handling the glass of pale sour liquid.
In the dim corner someone plays a mandolin
and the heat wavers at the door.

He can see the bus crawling away
into the desert. Having arrived nowhere, he finds
a portion of despair like a gun
settling into a comfortable balance in the hand.

Bestiary

She haunts the bar in a loose, meandering fashion
imprinting glasses with lipstick and not caring.
Her mouth is bright and shoddy, having tasted
a 'little too much'. There are two paths of approach:

the youth hangs about in a grey cloud
of relative eagerness, biting the hand that admonishes.
Middle age flaunts the yellow stripe
of wisdom. The barman sees three animals
coiling in the imaginary grave.

Ward Five

A wrinkled print of myself
stumbles across the grass.
He has lost his grip
and has fallen off the world.

The trees creak with malevolence
as he passes, face averted,
the shadow of a grimace flickering
across his lips.

What is eased forth as a sigh of despair
comes out a strangled grunt;
what is meant a gentle gesture
to the sunlight and the flying air
becomes a nervous claw shaking at his mouth

poor child
'princely nature of our elder brother'
drowning in the polar night

' . . . may you not be long on the way!'

The Road Back

A month ago he dropped out of his technicolor Belsen
with a bleeding head and a dry taste for 'life'.
Soaking out in a haze of suburbia, he keeps a softer drug
tugging at the nerve. Each night the cocaine freeway
blares at the back of his mind.

Now, calling on his old flame, the glow flickers into life
in a kind of mental soft-shoe and a shuffling laugh.
He lights up the kitchen in a vain attempt
to reconnect. 'Just passing through.'

He shoulders the black bag
clammers on the hog bike painted gold
blasts up the alley to the whistles of the factory boys
who know style when they see it and like to let you know
that where they breathe in the greasy gloom
the machinery wears a poisonous skin of rust
and the money's a hard grind.

He knows the money's hard to get.
He handles the hog with a pale strength
headed for the crowded highway and a busy trip.

On the Track of the Attainable

The ambitious minister from the smaller nation
outside the borders of history
through a lack of the will to be
makes up for flesh deficiency with another woman.
He has a bitter smell like a sick uncle that nobody wants
having good reason to drink failure.

Another night plunges into darkness
and symbols of alcohol and flame.
He rushes across the city
from one flesh garret to another
gathering evidence of bones under the face
and articulated structures of pain.
He cries that he is ravished with the threat of death.
'My bones crack and tremble under the dirt!
My teeth mangling the worm!' Nightmare
made incarnate in every foul breath!

The larger nation affords an expansive smile
and wears golden ambassadors like a blessing
fingering out to Rio, Guadalcanal, Korea
fond in the delusion of money and the teeth of life.

Memoirs of a Forty-Year-Old Revolutionary

I should say that I'm a wasted thirty-two
with a dropped womb and a taste for alcoholic failures.
But I am thirty-four, plenty of juice between my thighs,
and I have a young boy not at all alcoholic.

I know seven sophistries of revolution, practise none of them.
I do my best to be a tragic figure, but the boy laughs –
not even a whore in the cause, there are no whores here
in the red twilight. Not so much a worker

as a fellow traveller. I have a taste for leather jackets,
hard drink; my father beat me at the age of twelve.
I tell myself not to forget, but that's an old joke.
My wasted hatred filters to a logic of revenge.

The boy is mad on grass, that's his revolution.
Mine is to stay alive. Well, I've been to Laos,
Istanbul, left a trail of blood through Saragossa
that no one followed. The war is ended:

my damage is to stay alive. Perhaps I'm an amusing failure
perhaps I'm a woman, thirty-eight, a tiresome traveller
with a suitcase full of dumb disguises and a book
and phoney memories of Saragossa.