

Rooms and Sequences

MIKE LADD is a poet, radio playwright and broadcaster who lives in Adelaide, South Australia. His first book of poems *The Crack in the Crib* was published in 1984. This was followed by *Picture's Edge* in 1994 and *Close to Home* in 2000. He was born in Berkeley, California in 1959. After studying philosophy and English at Adelaide University he became the singer and lyricist of the Adelaide punk band *The Lounge*. He then travelled in Africa, recording the traditional poet praise-singers known as *les griot*. For the last twenty years since returning to Australia he has been recording, directing and producing radio dramas, documentaries and poetry features for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. He is currently presenter and producer of *PoeticA* on Radio National.

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For Meg and Jeff

Contents

ANAKHRONISMOS	1
<i>from 'NINETY-ONE HOTEL ROOMS'</i>	47
<i>Outside it's (almost) snowing . . .</i>	49
<i>Red patterned walls, uterine . . .</i>	50
<i>The walls have ears, yes, but . . .</i>	51
<i>Manager for Electrolux. Telephone distributor . . .</i>	52
<i>A room like a bony head . . .</i>	53
<i>A pin-up by Egon Schiele . . .</i>	54
Man in Restaurant	55
A Vegetative Life	59
Highways	62
Australia: Holiday Notes	66
3 Studies of a Rotary Hoist	69
AVIARY	71
Dawn of a Scorcher	73
The Daylight Owl	74
St Kilda Intersection	76
Crows	77
Cat	78
Symmetry	79
Murray Bend	80
Parawa Farmer	81

SOLITARY MALE: 3 SHADES OF LONELINESS	83
Funiculi, Funicula	84
The Silvered Mirror	90
The Bird in the Park	102
Gay's Fables	123
CREEL	127
The Immigration Minister's Dream	129
Prayer	132
Kites of Sanur	134
Genitalias Buffo	135
Power Will be Restored in the Next Half Hour	136
Dry Creek Rhapsody	137
Letter Found in a Vacant Lot	138
Spinal Unit	139
READING ROOMS	141
Beautiful Words	143
About Your Poem . . .	144
Audio Couplets	145
Poet's House	146
Mausoleums	147
The Reader	148

Acknowledgments

Some of the fake translations of *Anakhronismos* were first published in *Picador New Writing 4*, *The Adelaide Review*, *Island* and *Hobo*.

'Ninety-One Hotel Rooms' draws its title from a year (1980–81) of working and wandering around the world, staying in a total of ninety-one hotel rooms. Only six are represented here. The poems were first given a public viewing at the Red Door Facing East Studio Gallery in Adelaide, March 2000, in collaboration with Cathy Brooks who also documented those hotel rooms with photographs and small oil paintings one of which features on the cover of this book. Individual rooms have appeared in *Verse* (USA), and *The Weekend Australian*.

'Man In Restaurant' began life as a work for radio, each paragraph accompanied by a rapid cut of sound background, alternating between a restaurant and a tropical swamp. It was first broadcast on *ABC Radio National* in 1993 with John Gaden performing the role of the Man. The text was originally published in *Bringing the Water* 1993.

'Gay's Fables' are based on the original fables of John Gay written in 1726. These new versions formed the basis of my 1992 video poem 'Zoo After Dark,' filmed in collaboration with David Cann.

Other poems in this collection were first published in *The Age*, *Divan*, *Kalimat*, *Vernacular*, *Streetwords*, *New England Review*, *Going Down Swinging*, *Salt*, *Written in Sand*, *The Bunyip*, *Antipodes*, *Muse Apprentice Guild* and *Short Fuse: The Global Anthology of New Fusion Poetry*. My thanks to the editors.

Anakhronismos

in memory of John Bray

Aponius Maso lived in the first century AD, a time when the Roman Empire was at its height and its southern boundary extended as far as South Australia. Maso's family was once prominent in Rome and Maso (though still in his twenties) had risen to a senior position in the civil service. In AD 29 he married Claudia Telchinia, a woman from a patrician family. Then Maso's clan fell from power during the treason trials that became so prevalent in the reign of Tiberius. Though tried on the flimsiest evidence, Maso's father lost his villa and all his other Roman possessions. Maso himself was demoted and sent to the colony of South Australia, the absolute end of the earth as far as Roman society was concerned. Claudia the dutiful wife went with him, though it does not seem very happily.

Being largely desert, sparsely populated and of no strategic importance, South Australia was not an imperial province – that is, not ruled by the army and with no legionary troops stationed there. It was governed by a proconsul who stayed in Rome. Maso was this proconsul's functionary – his “man in Adelaide”. He had a small number of soldiers at his command and was responsible for protecting Roman installations. His other duties included tax collecting, and supervising public works. We know that he returned to Rome in AD 40, but was then sent back to Adelaide. Thereafter Aponius Maso disappears from official records.

In the summer of 1998, Maso's notebook was found inside a protective container hidden in a wall cavity in the ruins of a large domus being excavated at Semaphore, a suburb on the north western edge of the city of Adelaide. The notebook contains various undated poems or fragments of poems. They detail Maso's personal aspirations and difficulties at work and home, his impressions of others, and sometimes his dreams. They also contain snippets of conversation and philosophical marginalia. Maso was no Ovid, but what his verses lack in technical virtuosity they make up for with a certain naive candour. While my translations do not attempt to replicate the tetrameter of Maso's Latin, I hope the result is not entirely unpoetic.

I hear he has a difficult job
and crucifies quite often –
raiders from the desert, Jewish
nationalists, the odd religious zealot.
It serves him right,
PP! I went to school with him!
Clever, yes, but fickle, a little sneak,
and now a governor no less.
He always knew which arse to lick
and then, which head to kick –
the one down on the ground of course!
He bought protection on the oval,
paying the bullies with cigarettes.
And there was the matter of his rival
for prefect of our class
caught with next week's tests
badly hidden in his desk –
and PP, deeply moved, pleading for clemency.
Ah yes. And look how far he's got;
and look at where I sit and rot.

I send another e-mail to Rome:
“Barbarians attacked again today,
this time in the north, in the district of Mun –
the fourth such attack this year.
Two satellite dishes completely destroyed, one
severely damaged but capable of repair.
Send replacement parts by soonest despatch.

“As I have stated often before
(refer memos of fifteenth Quintilis
seventeenth and twenty third Sextilis)
replacement efforts will always be wasted
until I am given enough resources
to properly guard our sites –
I cannot protect this vital equipment
with the handful of regulars I have.
Either send more recruits or give
me money to employ irregulars here.

Your faithful servant, Aponius Maso.”

The reply from Rome comes:

Re: Barbarian Attack.
Three new dishes, repair kits despatched today.

In other words, “Dry up and blow away.”

Today I'm thinking of Busarius,
just nineteen, recruited from Liguria,
his mother a famous singer
and he rising rapidly for his years.
Last month he drove to a quarry in the hills
and shot himself.
There were no hints;
he appeared happy in his work,
though now I think of it
his laughter always seemed
a little too high and loud.
The funeral was wretched –
his mother full of drink and pills,
no-one knowing what to say.
And now, having never paid him
due attention in his life,
I notice Busarius everywhere:
in markets, at the hippodrome,
glimpsing his likeness in public urinals,
hearing that high girlish laugh
in every feasting crowd.

The emoleum men were patching the road,
 out on the Pirian highway
 where the tombs are placed
 in two neat rows.

A day of burning heat –
 the tar fumed behind me,
 the men sweaty and cursing like demons,
 but I took the time to stroll and read:
*“Passing friend, this was my life,
 a good father, an honourable citizen”*
 etcetera, etcetera . . .
 I knelt and graffitied on the base,
“Hope your journey is more interesting now.”

In one place, where poppies grew
 and cicadas dinned in the cypress shade,
 there was a tomb lit by neon tubes,
 its main carving a feast –
*“My life was short and mean.
 Have more fun than I did.”*
 The motto accompanying stone figs
 on stone plates.

“Don’t trust doctors, that’s why I’m here.”
“That slut Celestina poisoned my son!”
“My patron was a robber!”
 These and other bitchings from the great beyond
 taunt no-one living now,
 though perhaps still sting the neighbours.

Near where the line of tombs peters out
 by Publicola’s olive grove,
 I found a new sarcophagus,
 the very latest model from Milan.
 Equipped with intercom, a torch
 and oxygen cylinder inside, it caters for those

with a horror of being buried alive.
I understand them completely –
I too wish death was a clerical error,
that somehow, we might talk our way back.

Hot tonight. Restless.
That wind from the desert
blows in through the peristyle.
Above our bed the ceiling fan squeaks
each time around.
Beside me, my unconscious wife,
her naked hip jutting
into a patch of streetlight.

I get up and wander the house,
look in at our sleeping children
(the two we have kept)
their limbs spread in the same attitudes
as casualties I've seen
in the fields of Aegilia.
Transience! All I can think!

A glass of water from the fridge
brings no relief –
When the bedside clock moves on to six
I'll take a horse from the garrison,
ride by the sea at Semaris
before the day's heat comes on.

Sunday, tenth Quintilis.
Woke in the small hours
from a heavy sleep.
I glanced into the courtyard
and there, dressed in a simple smock,
saw a golden child,
glowing in the dark.

The child called out to me
and I wanted to go –
but not believing my eyes,
checked first the rooms
of our two children.
They were in their beds,
sleeping peacefully,
and when I came back
the child in the courtyard was gone.

Is this the ghost of the one
we exposed some years back
in the central square?
It had a withered arm.
No other couple chose to adopt,
and the infant perished there.
I have often wondered
what kind of life
it might have had.

I've decided to visit Tullius
who passes in these backwoods
for an augurer.
He works in the communications tower
by the Magister gate,
staring at scribbles of lightning
over the desert,
listening to the dry thunder roll,