

Tape No. 1166

DE BERG TAPES

MARTIN JOHNSTON

This is Martin Johnston, continuing on Tape 2.

So we went back to Hydra. Oddly enough, my parents' fortunes began to turn up, at least so far as the writing was concerned, as soon as we did get back. An American book club bought, for what seemed to us an enormous sum of money, what my father had really only written as a pot boiler, so we were able to pay off about a two years' grocery bill, and a wonderful document that was too! My mother in the meantime had started writing novels herself. They were no longer, either of them, really obliged to do these even-more-pot-boiling short stories. And my father began to think about writing this book he had wanted to write for years and years and years and had drafted out in short story form, about his own childhood in Australia. He wasn't quite sure how the book was going to work out, what form it was going to take. He was pretty sure of the title, which was going to be *My Brother Jack*.

Meanwhile, Shane and I were both at high school. I had acquired, at age twelve, my first glasses, my parents and my parents' friends and myself having just realised that from the age of about four I had hardly been able to see a damn thing. Which was fine, in that an entirely new world was revealed; also less than fine in that I was the only person at Hydra High School who wore glasses, so the Greek equivalent to 'four-eyes' got bandied about quite a bit, which made me I suppose an even shy and more introverted priggish sort of a young man than I already was. And I became more and more and

more bookish, on the one side — well, mainly bookish; although at the same time I played a lot of soccer, I played water polo, I did underwater swimming, all that; but that side of me which was represented by my parents' library which was large and of which I had completely free run did become more and more important, and I too read the sort of things that my mother for instance had been fed by her parents when she was about my age, classics like Rabelais and the metaphysical poets and the early English novels. I loved books like *Tristram Shandy*, oddities which really no one has a right feeling to, as a child, like Aubrey's *Brief Lives* and *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, and modern poets like T.S. Eliot who it took me a hell of a while to escape from, and I began to be (with not vastly successful results), more serious about my poetry. My earlier dinosaur poems had been wholly facetious, with the facetiousness of an eight-year-old; but they were almost certainly better than the... well, not 'almost certainly', they *were* better, than the earnest stuff full of existential anguish (which I hadn't yet experienced) which I started writing, or rather copying, out of half-digested T.S. Eliot now. Still, at this stage I was pretty sure that I was going to be a writer, indeed that I was probably going to be a poet — if one can be a poet rather than just write poetry.

I had also got hold of some volumes of Greek folk tales, and folk songs in particular, and I was doing quite a lot of translations of those into English, because my Greek was really now very good. My parents never did manage good Greek. My sister and I both did. And her Greek was quite beautiful, slangy gutter Greek; mine was a bit precious, but good also. And I was pretty much equally enraptured by the equal but opposite approaches to poetry suggested by T.S. Eliot and the Greek folk songs full of derring-do and slaughtered Turks and flashing spears and so on.

Life on Hydra was, as I say, better in a material sense, less good in an emotional sense. The foreign community was getting bigger and bigger and beginning to tear itself apart with internecine squabbles and bitchery and all sorts of sexual and alcoholic tangles, and generally beginning to be a pretty unhealthy sort of a place in which to live. My parents more and more felt this. Even so, it might have been hard to leave Hydra except that my father finally finished *My Brother Jack* and sent it off to Australia, where it was published in '64 and was an overnight sensational success, and he was invited as a special guest to the Writers Week at the Adelaide Festival in 1964. And it was decided that he would come back for the Festival in any case, but he would also act as a sort of scouting force for the rest of the family and report on what he saw in Australia; and if it seemed good, well, all the rest of us would come back.

One special circumstance which made this seem desirable was that my young brother Jason, after being originally monolingual in Greek, as soon as we went to England in 1960 lost all his Greek in a matter of months and began to speak excellent English with (for some reason) a strong Welsh accent; he then lost not only the Welsh accent but all the English when we came back to Greece again. And whatever happened to his Greek, it did seem desirable that he should pick up some English from somewhere. So that was the strong inducement to come back to Australia. And, also, my parents were beginning to get a bit worried about Shane's and my schooling. Athens University was one thing, but English-language ones seemed better.

So Dad came back for the Adelaide Festival in '64, and wrote back a series of absolutely enthusiastic letters in... well, it is quite clear in retrospect that he was a bit carried away by Australia. He wrote these absolutely

dithyrambic letters, paeans in praise of such aspects of Australian life as motels. Still, he loved what he found. And the rest of us duly followed him, having first, with some trouble, had ourselves classified as migrants so that we could come back for ten quid apiece, which, on the good Greek ship (well, *goodish* Greek ship 'Ellinis'), after going through very humiliating preliminaries which make me sorry for every other migrant, we did.

Well, so, in response to all these letters, as I say, we came back to Sydney. My father had rented us a very nice rambling old place in Mosman, which was a nice sort of house to come back to. It may perhaps be symbolic, in an alarming sort of a way, that one of the things we brought back was an ancient Greek amphora which a sponge-diving friend had fished up from the bottom of the sea and given to us and we'd crated it up and brought it back to Australia, and it had been here perhaps a week when, at a homecoming party, someone, having got on the outside of rather too many tins of beer, backed his elbow into it and smashed it into a thousand pieces. My father spent a couple a hours a day for about six months putting it back together again. It broke again recently when I was moving from one flat to another, and I'm shortly going to start putting it together again myself (this wasn't quite so bad a break).

But, on the matter of breaks, bad or otherwise, of course Shane and I now had to switch back again to a different set of schools, a different educational system, and being educated once more in a different language, because for instance, apart from that year best forgotten at Winchcombe Secondary Modern (may the heavens blast it!), we had never done such subjects as English. Anyway, we both did these tests to get into selective schools, and duly got into North Sydney Boys and Girls High Schools. Shane decided

fairly early on that she simply wasn't interested any more — very much a reflection of her sensible attitude towards this whole writing culture sort of thing — and dropped out of school and took a business college course. I went on at North Sydney — enjoying it, I must say, tremendously, for that first year or so in Australia; just the novelty of being in what had become by then so strange a country, surrounded by all these appurtenances of advanced Western civilisation, this was quite marvellous. Jason became... well, completely enraptured, by things like television, and rapidly replaced his Welsh accent with an American one due to watching Westerns. And I suppose I very much did all the equivalent things; I certainly sank rather happily into the atmosphere of school, did well, wrote poetry more and more seriously, started university which turned out to be fairly critical for me although... well, not in the normal way.

From about this stage on, my parents' lives in most of their aspects are pretty much a matter of public record, partly because they recorded them so much themselves: on the one hand, my father in the trilogy that began with *My Brother Jack* and continued with *Clean Straw for Nothing* and *A Cartload of Clay* which, although avowedly novels, do contain a strong enough autobiographical element to be regarded as pretty straightforward reflections of what was actually happening; and on the other hand, my mother, shortly after we came back, began a regular weekly column with the *Sydney Morning Herald*, later also a monthly column with *Pol* magazine, and a weekly radio sort of chat-magazine-type programme, a good deal of which reflected her daily concerns, what was going on in the family and so on, as well as things like their increasing political involvements (because for instance shortly after coming back here both of them became strongly caught up in the

anti-Vietnam War movement, right from the beginning both of them would march in the Hiroshima Day marches, both made speeches against the war, and so on and so on. I don't wish to give this too heavy an emphasis, because they were never actively political leaders of any movements. But that's representative of the kind of thing that was going on in their public lives.).

They were also busy rediscovering Australia, picking up old friends, making new ones. So that, for instance, the artist Sir Russell Drysdale (or just 'Russell Drysdale', as he then was) who became I suppose consistently the family's closest friend after we came back, he and my father had met up in '64, and he was around our place, we were around his, pretty consistently since then. All this kind of development went on. But, as I say, this is a matter of public record.

My undistinguished university career isn't, except insofar as it is mouldering away in the archives somewhere in Sydney University. Basically what happened was that the writing more and more took over. At the beginning of my third year at university, where I was mainly studying English (probably always a mistake for a writer, anyway), I decided that I would like to put myself in the market-place, as it were, and I applied for a cadetship with the *Sydney Morning Herald*, which I got. I don't know if it is too much of a reflection on John Pringle, who was then editor of the *Herald* and an old family friend, to suggest that it was a bit nepotistic that I got the cadetship, because certainly I didn't turn out to be one of the world's greatest journalists, or one of Sydney's, or one of the *Sydney Morning Herald's*, or indeed any sort of a journalist at all. John had warned me when I was applying for the job that (and I quote) "journalism isn't all translating Baudelaire, you know, Martin", to which I had politely nodded assent. But I

think I really believed that it was; a belief of which I was quickly disabused during my year as a cadet on police rounds, of all things, from 6 pm to 2 am on the *Sydney Morning Herald*, during which time I sat and monitored the police radio and occasionally wrote a poem. And I began to write the first poems that now still seem to me to be any good. One of these I entered for Sydney University's annual literary competition and, to my quite honest surprise at the time, it won it.* The poem was called 'Spinoza, Winter Swallows'. —

Spinoza scratched a core of light
assimilating all perceived
and thrust its splinters in his eyes
dust where existence interleaved

the trees that filtered down the squares
could only spike the circle's rim
with arclit equidistant points
parameters of seraphim

Spinoza cycles upside-down
around his attic torture-track
scrawling moustaches on God's face
extinguishing the zodiac

and pedals madly till the wheel
must grope for spinning's last extreme
and floats out past the asteroids
nobody's halo no-one's dream

I was writing more and more poetry now. And prose as well, but the prose by and large is best forgotten — as indeed is most, but not all, of the poetry. I was getting published quite a lot in the University magazine, something which invariably I think gives one a tremendous access of swelling to the head, as it did indeed to me (which was somewhat cured by a lot of knockbacks from respectable magazines, or, putting it another way, from

* The poem appears in *The Sea-Cucumber*, p.47. [Ed.]

magazines of which I was not myself the literary editor, which I tended to be of the University ones) and my own acceptance rate of myself was tremendously high! But about a year after this, still working on the *Herald* and still writing my poetry in between compiling the casualty lists of people killed on the roads and so on and talking to friendly burglars on the phone and all the other things that go with being a police roundsman, I started writing poems that got accepted by... well, magazines like *Poetry Magazine* as it then was (now *New Poetry*). I had been reading a lot more modern poetry, and had to some extent escaped from T.S. Eliot and the other writers whom my parents had got me on to, and in consequence was writing what I now realise was terribly crammed clotted deliberately ultra-difficult sort of a style which, while as indecipherable on the whole as my handwriting, had this tremendous sense of surely meaning something very very important indeed if only one could decipher it. An example of this — and this was the first poem I ever sold to *Poetry Magazine*, the first poem I ever sold to something serious, which university papers never are — is this, called ‘Opening’, which I published in *Poetry Magazine* when I was... I think I would have been just twenty. I should add that, apart from the fact that it’s a poem about living in very depressed circumstances in a flat in Kings Cross, having moved away from home for a while because I felt that was the sort of thing that undergraduates and journalists did, apart from that I found it extremely hard to understand what ‘Opening’ was about. However, here it is* —

Lying I felt, between this and that foliate
impotence, neither curious to look
whenever wormlight leaves through the window fishing
fibrils cross and perjuring uncross stars
nor even ever at bare bulbs’ (yellow and) shove

* The poem appears in *The Sea-Cucumber*, p.50. [Ed.]

into the out of streets across the moon.
Which parcelling pared out flagrant night,
dungbeetle, scarab. Bug on a ring.

Brylcreem'd to butane festering, meanders
lurk round what bushes to dayminded look
unwined to winded every midnight growl
never inside. On my lap, lovey. Now,
you smell, tell me whether: not, no, other
places scratched on your eyes' frail glassing.
No, the landlord took them, no, and the
walking stick also.

Feeling it around then standing, corner to carpet
propping on earliest sunfalls, notice
(hear) clicks of a collector's tongs and pence
among howling and hiding; because under this carpet
surely someone's dirt only, other's, is, also morning
cannot be my responsibility.
Turtles grab at the world falling
nor did it, even.

a poem which suggests... I think suggests that I was reading far too many surrealists and not understanding them terribly well. And I was far too keen on sounds for their own sake, and on the intrinsic poeticality of the rather disgusting. It's a phase I stayed in for quite a while. I had, not through any kind of particular row with my parents with whom I still got on very well, as I say moved out of the home for a while. And I was leading sort of a terribly cheapo bohemian life, working most of the night at the *Herald* and then going home to this frightful little flat at the Cross which, frightful though it was, took most of my \$32-90 cadet salary; and, unhappy and underfed and so forth though objectively I was, I think I felt this was the life. I had pretty romantic ideas about poets and garrets and so on, ideas of which I subsequently became disabused by spending just a bit much too much time in garrets or

the equivalent. But at the time I persuaded myself I was enjoying it and wrote poems, pretty bad poems, about it.

Meanwhile, on the paper, I moved from the *Sydney Morning Herald* — well, I didn't move, I was moved, it was supposed to be a step-up — from the *Sydney Morning Herald* to the *Sun Herald*, which meant that I worked normal office hours. And it also meant, because it was a weekly, that my time was a bit more flexible, I could write more or less when I wanted to, rather than when the paper schedules imposed it upon me. And I also had the tremendous thrill of writing such features as 'Dog of the Week', which I did for about a year and a half, and ghost-writing Midget Farrelly's surfing column, this last despite the fact that I had never set foot on a surfboard in anger, or indeed in any other way, in my life. 'Dog of the Week' was fun also; I particularly remember the occasion when... you see, one made up the dog's name oneself, and I called this dog 'Cerberus', and the sub-editor came roaring to my desk and shouted at me "No classical references in 'Dog of the Week'!", which I think gave me my first true understanding of the two cultures.

At the same time I had started writing book reviews, this while I was still on the *Herald* and the *Sun Herald*. At first only because I was supposed to have all this Greek expertise, having lived there for eleven years or so. And so when a book on Greece came out for review, when I was nineteen or twenty, for lack of anyone better it was given to me. I had done a lot of reviewing for university papers, but again I don't think I took that... no, I took that seriously *at the time*; I don't, thinking *back* on it. So I did this review. And it nearly ended my career then and there, because I was imprudent enough to say in it that about half the Greek phrases that the author of this guide-book

about Greece had used were incorrect, and he wrote in to the *Herald* very angrily, and so did this old Greece hand (I'm not going to name names here), so did this old Greece hand who had vetted his spelling, and controversy raged back and forth in the letters column of the *Herald* for a couple of weeks. And finally we hauled in Professor Treweek of the Greek Department at Sydney University who pretty much came down on my side. Had he not done so, I suppose, no more reviews, indeed no more job. So, after that was all settled and because, apart from my imprudence in this review, it was apparently regarded as a fairly good one, I started getting more books of a more general nature. And from then on, and in fact for about the next ten years, I basically lived off book reviews. I came to do one almost weekly for the *Herald* and I was simultaneously reviewing for the *Bulletin* and after a while also for the ABC, as well as for little magazines like *New Poetry* and so on. And I also found after a while that I was reviewing pretty much anything. For some strange reason there was one stage when the *Herald* decided that I was its "drugs and counter-culture and occultism and youth and student revolts expert", so anything on any of those things I got. And I also got a lot of poetry books, and Victorian biographies. There's virtually no kind of book that I haven't reviewed. I think George Orwell is right, ultimately, in saying that that is about the worst possible career for a writer, for a serious writer; partly because it takes up an enormous amount of time and mental effort for really not terribly adequate rewards, particularly on a paper like the *Herald* which alone, so far as I know, among major newspapers, doesn't allow the reviewer the perk of keeping his review copy so he can go off and sell it; partly also because the sheer bouillabaise of assorted ideas and words and concepts and different writers and schools and periods and God knows what that's going around in your head either precludes you from writing serious

poetry of your own or, if you do sit down to do so, then the aforementioned bouillabaise is liable to swamp its way into the lines and end up in the sort of very clotted poem that, as the last one I just read indicates, I was in fact writing at the time. However, it kept me alive. And for many years I thoroughly enjoyed doing it, and finally I think came to do it pretty well, because there is a sort of professional technique that one ultimately gets round to applying to this kind of thing.

But eventually... well, I called an end to it for several reasons. One was that in '73 I got one of the earliest of the Whitlam Grants, which gave me a year to write a novel. About the novel itself the less said the better. It was never published, and never should have been. But I realised how important it was, somehow or other, just to write. On the other hand, I had reviewed myself out.

But I've been running ahead of my story a bit. And it may be — well, it certainly is — that part of the rather confused, and uncertain, and a bit self-consciously bohemian life I was living in the early '70s had to do with the deaths of my parents, which followed rather quickly upon one another, in 1969 and 1970. And... well, my mother's death certainly had an absolutely shattering effect upon all the family, as my father's death, about a year after that, had upon me. At the time my mother died, my father had already started writing the third of his trilogy, *A Cartload of Clay*, and he achieved this strange sort of artistic conjuring trick of continuing the book from where he'd left it off when she died, incorporating the earlier part, in which she appears as an actual person, as a kind of dream or hallucination system that David Meredith (the George Johnston persona in the novels) is having in the course of his own collapse. Now, of course my father didn't live to finish

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A Cartload of Clay. It was published; but what was published was only about a third to a half of what he had intended. Ironically he had intended to conclude it with David Meredith's death, but David Meredith was to be killed during a Vietnam demonstration and quite by accident, instead of dying of the tuberculosis which the real George Johnston had in fact been slowly dying of for some eight or ten years.

[Side 1 of Tape 2 ends at this point.]

SIDE TWO of Tape 2

This is Martin Johnston, continuing.

A critic writing about my poetry recently described me as being much possessed with death — which is not a description I would be altogether happy to go along with myself. But the fact is, I do seem to have been rather given from time to time to writing elegies, and I did write elegies for both of my parents. After my mother died I wrote a poem called... well, it's called 'Letter to Sylvia Plath', because I tend to write elegies by indirection, I tend to write a lot of poetry by indirection. And in a sense, I suppose rather appallingly, although I didn't feel so and I still don't really feel so, I entered this for another of the Sydney University poetry competitions, which it won. And, as I say, it says nothing directly about my mother, and the title suggests nothing of the sort, but it's very much an elegy for her. So here is 'Letter to Sylvia Plath'* (when I later published it in my book, *The Sea-Cucumber*, I subtitled it 'In Memoriam, Charmian Clift'.) —

I

Impacted fans of dawn unfold
aubades of memory. Through the street
cat-eyed last night's now stirring, curled
across the window, round your feet.

Worlds' whirling: cellos in the fur
will scrape the brain across a string
unfurling spiderwebs in air
to suck the discords mornings bring

when evenings twitter and grow stale.
The game's musical cats. The prize,
a peepshow glimpse at what you fail,
or come too late to realise

of nights. You'll notice, though the wine
sheened you in canopies of gold,
the glitter's trickled down to stain
the morning's floor. It's hot (it's cold).

* In *The Sea-Cucumber*, p.14-15. [Ed.]

II

'You're wearing yourself again.'
The fragile occupant recalls
flowering of emblematic veins
to foliate paper on the walls
which are all acting's foliage.
Then consciousness assumes a place
where memory theatre marks the stage;
rooting against the carapace
tendrils gone mandrake writhe and slide
because a nerve refracted there
touches their filigree's outside
and makes a scream out of thin air.
The walls grow rot and funghi pass
from smell to form. The patrons come,
crumble to waterfalls of glass.
Pale eyes from the proscenium.

Now, I think what that poem most conveys, or I suppose what it was most intended to convey, was sheer horror. I was appalled at my mother's death, coming as it did and when it did; whereas when my father died, about a year later, oh, it was tragic and terrible, it was also something that we had all been very much expecting, himself included, for a good many years. And so that's very much the tone of the elegy that I wrote for him, which is the title poem of my book of poems, it's called 'The Sea-Cucumber', and a lot of people think it's the best poem I've ever written. You know, there's a nice difference of opinion on that and, in two quite recent reviews, Geoffrey Dutton said "The title poem, and also the worst and most boring poem in Martin Johnston's new collection, is 'The Sea-Cucumber'." and Christopher Pollnitz in *Southerly* "The title poem of Martin Johnston's *The Sea-Cucumber*, one of the handful of major Australian poems of the decade,..." I think I'll just let the poem speak for itself, as best it can. It's partly an elegy for my father I suppose, partly a celebration of him and of a way and time of life, and it's

intended to be a bit wider than that too. It is dedicated to the painter Ray Crooke who had become a good friend of the family's, and it starts up with a particular day when Ray showed my father and me, a couple of months before my father's death, this new painting of his.* —

The Sea-Cucumber
for Ray Crooke

We'd all had a bit too much that night when you brought out your painting,
the new one, you remember, over Scotch in the panelled kitchen,
and my father talked about waiting. Well, he was doing that, we knew,
or it could have been the dust you'd painted, the way you'd floated
a sfumato background almost in front of the canvas
so your half-dozen squatting dark figures couldn't see it
that moved him in that moment softly, in damp stone, outside time.
He was as garrulous as ever, of course, but somehow,
in a time of his own, it seemed that he was pressing
every word-drop, like the wine of a harvest not quite adequate,
to trickle in brilliant iridules across the stained table:
what sorts of eucalypt to plant – so that they'd grow quickly –
art dealers, metaphysics, three old men he'd seen
at Lerici, playing pipes and a drum under an orange sky.
Memory finds a nexus, there in your image,
people just waiting, not even conscious of it,
or of ochre and sienna pinning them in an interstice of hours.
None of this, you see, will really go into writing,
it takes time to leech things into one's sac of words.
The bloated sea-cucumber, when touched, spews up its entrails
as though that were a defence; my father's old friend
the gentle little poet Wen Yi-tuo, who collected chess sets
and carved ivory seals in his filthy one-room hut,
is gutted one night and flung into the Yangtze.

The dark river runs through your dusty pigments.
Ferns, moss, tiger-coloured sun beat at the window with banners
but the dust ripples between trees, and among the waiting
glints of earth and metal are wiped from the fading hand.
These people of yours, Ray, they are that evening

* The poem appears in *The Sea-Cucumber*, p.1-2. [Ed.]

when we first saw them, or the other one when my father
planted nineteen saplings in our backyard, or when you looked at them
later and said, They're coming on, and his fingers
drummed a long nervous question on the table, though he agreed.
And we were all waiting, though not in your style of art:
more of a pointillism in time, disconnected moments,
a flash of light over an empty glass, a half-finished volume of Borges,
the cabbage palm stooping at dusk into the chimneys,
certain paintings, Corelli, or a morning like the fuzz of a peach,
all bright and disparate. But I think, remembering that painting
of yours, that if one could step away, ten yards, or twenty, or years,
at an angle perhaps, a frame would harden into cedar
and through a haze of dust we would see all the brilliant dots
merge into a few figures, squatting, waiting.

When my father died I was in fact living away from him, I had been
see-sawing back and forth between a series of flats in Glebe and Balmain and
whatnot and home every now and then. My sister had got married, my
brother was growing up, life was changing and I was, I suppose, becoming
more self-sufficient in many ways — not terribly adequately self-sufficient, not
very good at it, but believing that's what I ought to do.

Not very long after my father died,... well, a whole lot of changes came
around. The family house was sold, my sister and her husband who had been
living there went and found a place of their own. I finally quit the *Herald*; I
had been there for about three years, I had realised that I was one of the
great all-time bad journalists, and I think the *Herald* was coming round to
the same realisation. I went on doing book reviews for them, and I was also
doing film reviews for the *Sun Herald* and book reviews for various other
people, so that I could, after a fashion, keep myself. All the same, I was really
very much living the poor bohemian garret sort of life for the next five or six
years or so. I was writing more and more, in '71 I had published my first

book of poetry, *Shadowmass*, which I now look back at and shudder, although it has three or four decent poems in it. In '73 I published my second, *Ithaka*, which is in fact a collection of my translations of Greek poetry and Greek folk songs and so on, and a sequel to which I hope to write over the next couple of years. I got my Australia Council grant and wrote this impossibly bad novel. I had always made a policy of not doing the sort of writing that my parents did, because I always wanted to separate myself very much as a writer from my parents, partly I suppose just to avoid any sort of nepotism or trading on them or whatever, and partly because (at least so far as novels for instance are concerned) they were rather, shall we say, overwhelming presences to have to deal with. But at least neither of them had ever written poetry seriously. Also poetry happened to be what I liked to write and what I seemed to be comparatively good at writing.

I moved from place to place in those years, I think there were something like... after I left home in the first place, something like twenty-four addresses. In '75 it suddenly became possible to go back to Greece again. What money my brother and sister and I had inherited had been frozen during the time it took for my brother to finish high school. Finally the estate came out — or probate was declared, whatever happens with estates — and we had at any rate enough to live on for a year or two. And at about the same time the Colonels fell, in Greece. Also at about the same time my sister died; and I've never been able to write any elegy about that, that was just too much, and too shattering, and to write an elegy about that would have seemed a truly disgusting and automatic response — “right, someone dies, so Martin writes an elegy”. But I don't even want to talk about that.

The Colonels fell. And, even if I had wanted to go back to Greece in the

years between '67 and '74, while they were ruling the place, I wouldn't have been able to, because I had been fairly active in the Greek community here, I'd made speeches and I read poems and so forth to meetings of Greeks and local supporters of the opposition to the Junta. My sister, a year or two before her death, had acted as interpreter to the great Greek radical composer Mikos Theodorakis when he was out here, and had in fact smuggled some documents for Theodorakis between Greece and Australia. As a family we had been pretty much involved with the Australian branch of the Resistance. However, they fell. So I presumably wasn't on a black-list any longer. And with this... well, with the girl I had been living with by then for some four or five years (who is now a very distinguished historian and herself quite a figure in... sort of radical movements), we went to Greece, and spent the next three years mostly in Greece, with a session in England.

And it was fascinating rediscovering the place. It was certainly fascinating to go back to Hydra. It had been eleven years, just about, since I had last been there, and the island had totally totally changed. I made the mistake of going in summer. In the sonnet 'Biography', which I read right towards the beginning of this tape, I have the line —

and these days the Island supports
a 'Jungian sandlot therapist'.

— now, that's a quite literal description of Hydra as it had become, it had become so foreign, so wealthy, so trendified, that indeed it could support a local 'shrink', and a local very trendy 'shrink'. I've no idea what a Jungian sandlot therapist actually does, but I would think two things would be true; (a) he doesn't do any one much good, and (b) he absolutely rakes in the money, whether across his sandlot or not, I don't know. But Hydra had become like that, the kind of society that evolved there was quite frightful.

Although at the same time it was rather marvellous to go back to the old house, the old school, the people of Hydra who still remembered the family Johnston (as they called it) as fondly as ever. Apparently over all the intervening years they had pointed out our house to any and all foreigners as “the Australians’ house”.

Greece in general hadn’t changed as radically as Hydra had, because Hydra, from being one of the most primitive, had become one of the most trendy corners of Greece. And it was still, I found, the place that really I wanted to live in. And I settled, or we settled, for a year in a fishing village on the coast of Arcadia, and for another year in the town of Khania in Crete, both of which were absolutely wonderful in their different ways. And after a long hiatus, in which I hadn’t written all that much poetry and what I had written had been pretty depressed and what hadn’t been depressed had been pretty bad anyway, I wrote the poems which make up the last section of my book *The Sea-Cucumber*. And it suddenly... suddenly things seemed to be going right again. It was going back to Greece that did it. And I think I’ll read a couple of the poems that I wrote while living in Arcadia. This first one is called ‘The house’, and is really just a description of the house Nadia (that’s her name) and I lived in, in Arcadia.* —

The house
for Nadia

There is no need to talk about the light.
The solid mountains blow about the gate,
young cats and yellow frogs in the rosemary
are still, meticulous. (Our tree
promised mulberries, but three weeks late.)
An owl nearby ticks night.

* The poem appears in *The Sea-Cucumber*, p.68. [Ed.]

We've climbed very slowly up the hill
where the asphodel flower like quotations
from a poem we never quite understood.
The beach was crosshatched with driftwood,
stippled with reeds. There are other creations
round us; first drafts of spiders on the sill.

In this bay within a bay times drift through the pines:
the watering-lady in the garden floats
breaststroke out of lumps of marble or walls
frescoed under whitewash. When the owl calls
she vanishes, leaving stout black petticoats
nodding over the roses, pruning vines.

And from the same time and the same place, a poem called 'Notes from the noctarium', which is really about the creatures that were around the place. It was a tiny tiny village and all these hedgehogs and things were pretty much underfoot all the time. * —

Notes from the noctarium

I
Hedgehog,
your coiffure
repels all contumely. When then are you yourself
thus transparent-soft, mousevelvet
quivering on my coat? You rely on trust?
Come now, surely your hairdresser could recommend also
a health studio?

II
When they cut down the plane trees in the square
the owl moved into one of our pines.
But small elegant bodgie birds come and wake him up
and josh him in blank daylight. Ah where now is the old club,
worn armchair and definite cigar
far above the traffic,

* The poem appears in *The Sea-Cucumber*, p. [Ed.]

light pouring down the wet black streets?

III

The frogs still hop, awkward and if they've time,
into weed-patches, building-lots and bathrooms.
Our houses are built on gauzy trceries
of silhouetted frogs. You can scan them, comic strips,
as they sink gradually into what we call asphalt.
The frog prince married a tractor wheel;
their fairy tale is altogether different.

Well, after the Greek experience, which as I say was mostly a marvellous recapturing of time past, despite the strange interlude on Hydra,... let me see,... I came back to Australia in '78. I had written in the meantime yet another unpublished and unpublishable prose book, as well as poetry. I wrote, and continue writing, a good deal more poetry, moved house several more times, and am now settled with this splendid lady, Roseanne, in Darlinghurst. I've got together the bits and pieces for another book of poems, I think. And I'm writing the biography of my parents.

In the meantime Roseanne and I went back to Greece at the end of '79, went to Hydra again, this time in winter, which was very very different. It was almost exactly as it had been, because there were no foreigners there, and all the arty shops and the night clubs and so on were closed — indeed virtually all the bloody restaurants were closed too, it was almost impossible to get a feed, which was indeed very much as it had been! I got stranded in Athens, one of the most unpleasant cities in the world to be stuck without any money, which I did. Came back to Australia again in March of this year, 1980.

Let me see. Here I am in the middle of several new cycles of sonnets being printed in the last and the next *New Poetry*; trying to get this biography underway; having just taken up a job, which I believe I start in a week's time,

a job which I suppose uses my odd background fairly effectively in that it is going to involve translating for ethnic television; and hoping to keep on writing, although not necessarily this recent series of sonnets, of which I would like to read two or three. I would like to read two sonnets from a sequence called *In Transit* which I wrote when I was last in Greece, and two sonnets from a sequence called *The Cyclops Songs* which I've written over the last few weeks since coming back to Australia.

So, first from *In Transit*, a sonnet sequence, for Roseanne; Number Six, 'The café of situations'.*

In this café they have solved the problem of names.
Orders go to the bar: 'Coffee for Calendar,
two cognacs for Backgammon Board and Football Poster.'
You are where you are. They know names must be revealed
most cautiously and that numbers only serve numbers.
In the café of situations they have found the golden mean:
sit there often enough and you'll win a table and name,
Clock, say, or Air Vent, which feeds not on you but you,
drop in occasionally and you're still gifted
while you're here with just that identity-in-place
you've been so long in quest of. Wherever I go
I wear the café walls around me, and the shuffling step
of the invisible waiters brings subtly misconstrued orders
to Broke or Loving or Drunk or wherever I happen to be.

And another from the same sequence; Number Fourteen, 'On Aggression: group self-portrait as greylag goslings'.** —

And home at last between drafts. Back in Athens
air like unwashed dogs, the temples pitted grey, friends passing
leaving me phials of curious pills. Old favourite pin-up

* The poem appears in *The Typewriter Considered as a Bee-Trap*, p.30. [Ed.]

** In *The Typewriter Considered as a Bee-Trap*, p.38. [Ed.]

Emperor Julian Apostate, bless
 these spiralling austerities
as calculated as the filioque. Then flattening air, a flight
more of a waddle, a sling-stretch of the mind
to silicon-chip blackjack and my friends again
in the ruined beer-garden. They've stolen another sky.

*The goslings fight, as do adults, using their wings,
but as these are no more than tiny stumps, their blows
fall short, for they aim them as if their wings
were in the right proportion*

to the size of their bodies

thus Konrad Lorenz. (It's not the heat
but the humidity. Make love not imprintings.)

And finally two sonnets from the group of *Cyclops Songs*, which are inspired I suppose in a perverse way by *The Odyssey*, only in this case, rather than Homer or Odysseus having all the good lines, the Cyclops, after being blinded by Odysseus, has his say. This one is called 'Esprit de l'escalier'.* —

Good manners, sir, are an infernal machine,
and unjuicing your companions a problem in tact
'at the meeting of two value-systems'. If
you complain, so may I. Sir, I am an ogre
not a structural linguist. Even so I understood,
of course, your ridiculous alias, and I knew
perfectly well what 'Noman is hurting me' meant,
but I played by the rules. So now my face feels like pork-crackling,
looks like it too, I imagine. You've ruled yourself out,
made yourself Noman indeed. But how would you have done
on *my* IQ tests? Did you get my jokes?
Next time around we'll understand each other,
next time I'll ask you round the back.
I, for one, am going to make sure I get it right.

* The poem appears in *The Typewriter Considered as a Bee-Trap*, p.8. [Ed.]

And one more from the same sequence, 'The homecoming'.* —

Well, what *was* Odysseus good at? (1) making things (2) lying —
neither a skill I've any use for. Don't talk to me
about subtlety. I've travelled too,
smelt caique-decks' tar and goat and onions in milky dawn winds,
snoozed hunched in my fur on offal wharves, and remember
prayer-flagged cairns, moon-priestesses and pig-myths
on steppes beyond the writ of American Express.
And come back betraying nobody — Argo, Argus,
I'm my own device and my own dog: 'Beware the Savage Cyclops'.
Why should *I* lie?

But for instance I miss
the lobster-scamper down seaweed-stinking alleys,
away from fearful demonstrations yelling
Support Your Local Triple Goddess. — To bed —
I'll give you 'sodden toward sundown'.

[End of tape, and end of interview.]

* In *The Typewriter Considered as a Bee-Trap*, p.11. [Ed.]