

For Martin Johnston 12 November 1947 – 21 June 1990

If it's thirty years since Martin died, then it is just over thirty years since I finished my Arts Degree without a clue about what I wanted to do with my life. In fact, it wasn't even a degree, it was an associate diploma. Degree courses were yet to be introduced to that humble building surrounded by empty paddocks called Milperra College. All these decades down the track it has been absorbed into what is now a multi-campus institution called Western Sydney University.

Writing was one of the subjects I was doing amongst an eclectic array. Patti Miller was my fledgling teacher. We were all starting out in a way. The Lecturers, the University and the students. And during one class Patti told us that we were going to have a visit from a real poet, the son of George Johnston and Charmian Clift no less.

What I remember of that day was meeting a thin, gentle, unassuming man with shoulder length hair. Sadly, I don't remember what he said about writing but what I do remember is being told that he was fluent in Greek and that I wanted to get a hold of his books as soon as I had a chance. I had already decided that I wanted to write poetry and had made a start, but I knew I had a long way to go.

Several years later, during the heyday of The Harold Park Hotel Writer's nights, I met Martin again and struck up a conversation. I was still awed by him and said little even though I felt he was open to talking if I could have just relaxed. And then not long after that I heard he had died. I was sadder than I could express. Sad that I had not made the most of the times that I had met him but also that I felt there was so much that he didn't get to write.

A book of Greek poetry that he translated and that I discovered in a second-hand store is amongst a handful that I treasure. It is called Ithaka: Modern Greek Poetry in Translation. (Island Press, 1973). The poem that I keep coming back to from that anthology is this one. For me it encapsulates something I think can only be captured in poetry and by a poet like Martin. It is restrained, beautiful and deceptively simple.

The Bread

A monstrous loaf,
an enormous warm loaf of bread
fell from the sky into the street.
A child in green shorts with a knife
cut it and shared it amongst the crowd.
But a little girl, a little white angel,
with a knife also,
was carving and dividing up
pieces of genuine sky.
And now everyone was running to her,
hardly anyone to the bread.
Let's face it, we thirst for sky.

By Miltos Sakhtouris

Mark Mahemoff