

Books and 'bright-tabby stripes of happiness'



Martin moved in with my mum, Roseanne, in 1979 when I was in Year 11. With him, came books – lots of books - and not just novels and poetry but also fantastic books on art, Greek mythology, history, chess, not to mention a huge collection of science fiction – such was the diversity of his interests. As well books, Martin was surrounded by the most fascinating group of eloquent interesting friends, fellow writers, critical drinkers, chess players and SBS colleagues.

Mum and Martin were a generous, hospitable couple and 84 Thompson Street Darlinghurst (pictured left) seemed constantly alive with people, conversation, wit and laughter. I loved being an observer of their gatherings or listening in when interesting people dropped over.

But probably my favourite memory from that time is coming downstairs on Saturday mornings to see Mum and Martin sitting in companionable silence at the dining table with toast and coffee, absorbed in the papers, only looking up every now and then to share their outrage at an injustice or cruelty going on in the world or to make a joke about some absurdity of the day or to exchange a cryptic crossword answer.



In the dining room of Thompson Street with its floor to ceiling bookcase built by my dad, Bill, to accommodate some of the books

From my vantage point, Martin's life was packed with purpose, hard work, joy, friendship, love and more knowledge than most of us could hope to fit into two lifetimes, let alone into 42 short years. He was a wonderful kind friend to me, and I was proud of my brilliant, unique stepdad.

The Eastern Suburbs crematorium was full to overflowing for Martin's funeral nearly thirty years ago and it was standing room only at the Tranter's Petersham home afterwards. This website and the forthcoming new selection of his poetry, *Beautiful Objects*, is for those who mourned him that day. But it is equally for the current and emerging generation of poets, writers and artists who never got to meet or learn from him and for Martin's four step-grandchildren, Rosie, Alex, Ben and Anna, who have grown up with 'The Legend of Martin', as told to them by their grandmother.

I would like to acknowledge Nadia Wheatley, who took on the task of commemorating the 30th anniversary of Martin's death without a moment's hesitation or single reservation, despite her own very full workload. This website was her idea and it is her labour of love that has gone into *Beautiful Objects*. Absolutely nothing would have happened without her; I can't thank her enough.

I leave you here with the epithalamium that Martin wrote in 1987 for my wedding. It is full of snippets of shared memories and his hopes for the future. His humanity, charm and tenderness are evident throughout.

Vivienne Latham, 21 June 2020

EPITHALAMIUM: FOR VIVIENNE AND CHRISTOPHER

*Vivienne and Chris, I come in joy
to offer you this verbal toy,
a thing, I hope, that gleams and glitters
a little, though I've had the jitters
trying to pitch the perfect voice
appropriately to rejoice;
settling for what you'll know as normal,
a mix of mandarin and informal,
an idiom fit to do
the honours due to you.*

*This is a sort of sacred place.
I loathed it once, but there's a grace
that marks off with a numinous fence
the enclosure of intelligence
from where the money-movers roar
and media-kings and bigots bore.
I love it now; and love you both
as, as they say, you plight your troth;
a phrase to raise a smile,
yet something that's worthwhile.*

*You're dear to me, as you well know,
which means that I must pack and go
and scabble from the wood of words
some flowers and twigs and leaves towards
a simple wreath that will remain
infrangible by drought or rain,
and, as you change to what you'll be,
will stay with you invisibly,
tickle the sleeping face
with consciousness of grace.*

*We know what we've done to this planet,
to all that's odd and lovely on it;
but you both feel and think and see
and hear the wind around the tree
whose roots go down into the soul,
our minds its branches, hearts its bole,
the tree the Vikings knew, once cut,
would see this human era out.
Each of you understands:
Its growth is in your hands.*

*The blessings I invoke for you
are of what's simple, old and true.
The meerkat's vigilance, the quick
swerve of the cheetah, the slab-thick
shell of the tortoise when the crass
dross of the times spews forth en masse.
The coati's gentle urgency,
the cat's lazy civility:
all things whose heft and span
tend to be lost on man.*

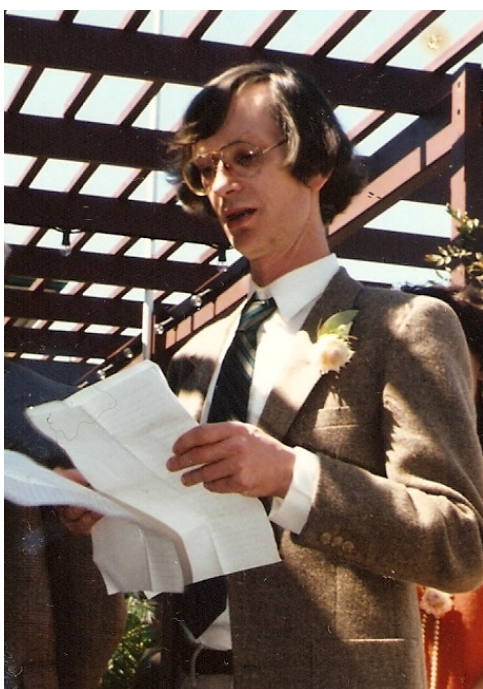
*May all things small and wise and strange
conspiratorially arrange
to flutter down from flickering trees
or seize you shyly by the knees,
wait where you least expect them, or
deliver parcels at the door
containing onyx, chrysoprase,
the unsought thought, the perfect phrase,
the small surprise that might
astonish and delight.*

*For you I don't want ponderous things,
the lumbering goods of gods and kings,
but, shot through life's habitual mess,
bright tabby-stripes of happiness*

*spreading like ripples in a lake
till all the dazzled neighbours wake
and marvel, as they rub their eyes,
to see the sun entigered rise
and bathe in stippled gold
their hearts as they unfold.
Bliss is a rare thing, and I can't
make misery irrelevant,
fend off the early-morning thief
of thought and self, unthinking grief,
or spin a web of words to be
sevenfold shields perpetually,
to guard from basilisks or demons
or bitter unregenerate humans,
but I can pray you move
in courtesy and love.*

*You'll be custodians when we're gone
of all we've been or seen or done.
the Parthenon is yours, the green-
blue light that floats in the ravine
in Crete, black silk of outer space,
the loving hungry carapace
of home and family. As you will.
but hang on to this moment still
when, ritual magic done,
you are both two and one.*

Martin Johnston



Reading the epithalamium on 19 Sept 1987 (the venue was the Holme building at the University of Sydney - see 2nd verse). (Right) Puss, the beloved tabby-striped cat of Thompson Street who lived among the books.