

Introduction

‘I like raiding this country for its potential to write about. I do like the idea of being moderately uncompromising, if such a thing exists, in the Australian potential of my poetry’.¹ That comment by Alan Wearne in 2011 is a characteristic one. In his six published books of poetry, he has found a poetic plainsong among the particulars and localities of middle-class Australian suburbia, imaginatively charting a pageant of conversational vernacular from suburban and urban cultures, and sub-cultures. The poems predominantly explore the 1950s to the 1980s, but the broad span is from the early to the late twentieth century, and into the twenty-first. In as much as any imagined character can speak for an author, the following words from Sue Dobson, the freelance journalist from *The Nightmarkets* (1985), could well be Wearne’s: ‘Take any normal street of average length ... / Simply concentrate on / a street of a suburb: *that’s* mindblowing!’²

Wearne’s scrupulous casting of individual characters from Australian social and political life is a delight. His characters are thoroughly assorted – prominent and not-so-prominent types appear and reappear across individual narratives or across bundles of narratives: schoolteachers and adolescent school students, lawyers, politicians, journalists, drug-dealers and other underworld figures, parlour hostesses, white collar criminals, church ministers and land developers. A hallmark of his inventiveness is that they are also genuinely ordinary folk who live ordinary lives – occasionally scandalous or seedy – in the terraces and backyards of Australian society. Another sorting would distinguish them as singles and friends, mums and dads, daughters and sons, and extended family. Here is the full poem ‘On The Road To Gundagai’:

After church the drive, the singsong: Dad in tenor mode
winds the Vauxhall down Mount Dandenong Road;

lulled, Mum’s glad, these patterns still keep:
Janet reading, Carol pulling faces, Margie asleep.

Till, beyond such certainties, each arrives
(stride-, stroll- or stumbling through their lives)

out of those soul-on-sleeve
days, with what was/ is/ might be something to believe.

So Dad dies, Mum re-marries and shifts,
Janet lectures, Carol designs, Margie drifts.

Oh millstone/ loadstar
(that time of faiths/ a Sunday in the car)

behold your future, its, by extension, splendour:
welcome, ladies to The Age of Gender!⁵

This melodic vignette poses a willowy sketch of characters – Dad, Mum and three daughters – about whom we know nothing apart from the narrator’s slice-of-life anecdotes, set to the rhythm of a well-known Australian popular song from the early 1920s (it might be the song the Dad is singing). Those characters keep the narrative afloat, propelling the shifts between an historical note and a lyrical note, which break into each other through the melancholy wit and irony of the narrator. And the narrative itself? It is a yarn about the banality and pure serendipity of time, told within the time experience of memory. If Wearne’s poetry takes a measure of social particularities from the past, as many reviewers have pointed out, it is nearly always with a view to how they sound for a contemporary present. He finds in the past something meaningful that can be imaginatively reconstructed as continuous with a modern equivalence, a dialogue that looks in two directions at people and culture in time.

In Wearne’s monologues and narratives, plot often plays a subsidiary role to his characters. He ruminated in a recent interview:

As for narrative techniques, in writing *The Nightmarkets* I recall adopting the motto ‘Take care of the characters and the plot will take care of itself.’ Well it probably did – if you could call what resulted a plot, for really, I didn’t know the book had one. In *The Lovemakers*, ‘events commenced, to improve’, though I doubt if these could be summarised as an overall ‘plot’. One overall narrative then? No. Overall narratives? Yes.⁴

The Nightmarkets runs to 10,750 lines, its ten monologues cover a year in the lives of its six characters. One distinct narrative thread is politics: two of the characters are running for political office and references to political events and topics filter through the narrative – the Vietnam War and conscription protests of the 1960s, ASIO, Communism, the dismissal of 1975, to name a few. Yet politics, notwithstanding its significance, is largely ancillary to the everyday observations and introspections in each character’s monologue. One reviewer

described *The Nightmarkets* as a contingent narrative:

... the primary involvement is with what each monologue implies of a particular life. We are drawn not so much into the momentum of a story as into a whole existence, a personal web of connections which – inevitably, but almost as if incidentally – involves the progression of events.⁵

This could be said of *The Lovemakers* too. Comprising two long books – *Book One, Saying all the great sexy things* (2001) and *Book Two, Money and nothing* (2004) – *The Lovemakers* has multiple narrative strands and numerous characters, and it experiments profusely with poetic forms.

Wearne leans on plot in his monologues and narratives only in so far as it illuminates how his characters or narrators speak, and especially how their language persistently shifts and circles. Their thoughts turn on things they are involved in, whether on a dilemma or on events that are part of ordinary (even extraordinary) goings-on. We are drawn into layers of their consciousness while they talk to someone: a reader, someone in their group, some outsider, or themselves. Once in a while, the poet himself is one of the created characters. In this selection, a lively interplay is set up between narrator and poet in ‘Operation Hendrickson’, an unconventional twenty-poem narrative sequence. The narrator Robert Hendrickson recalls anecdotes from his school days in the early 1960s, which includes bringing his old school-mate Alan Wearne into the narrative and, ironically, asking the poet to tell his story: ‘Wearney you needn’t believe because / he’s just making it up for *Proper Gander*, / his rag. ‘Hey Wearney, write my memoirs / then put them into your *Proper Gander*.’⁶ The sequence plays subtly with the doubleness of the two authorial roles, masterfully rendering tough stories and school reminiscence with pathos and humour.

Wearne’s specific interest in his characters is in their inner life, their attitudes, biases, beliefs, and in human behaviour: the moment-to-moment intimacies and exchanges of daily suburban and urban experience. In an interview, he acknowledged, ‘It can be said that I have obsessions rather than ideas, these obsessions dominated by particular people or groups, often based on folk I’ve met, known or (like Terry Clark) read about.’⁷ His folk are a broad species of women and men who belong with their particular social group or groups by virtue of birth, economic chance or choice. In the short narrative ‘Neutral Bay’, for example, the speaker is a female courier for the Mr Asia Drug Syndicate. She meditates the ordinary ease of it – ‘I’d get in from the airport after midnight / and wait a day, till someone came around, / unloaded me and

made me *Thanks sweetheart* / \$15,000 richer' – then a restlessness:

What did I think I was,
not old enough to break the law? What law?
By then the only law I had to keep
was getting away with knowing Terry Clark,
so yes I was old enough. I did it,
did it often enough; and whoever I was
I just needed an identity, even if
I didn't need an identity. I was smart and
waiting about on the fringes of Terry Clark's
banal life, hardly knew what I did,
except that I was that damn special.

And finally an unexpected poignancy where the female speaker admits peril,
with a brief semblance of self-compassion and contrition:

Giving myself a week away from spending
I caught a light aircraft back to the folks,
stayed up to near midnight
doing gossip with Mum. Of course
someone's kid was 'into drugs',
always someone's kid and always drugs.

And I thought
*Who knows what The Organisation's doing
right now: cutting, grinding and packing;
delivering, collecting and waiting*
and how I never wanted to feel damn special again.
But *Thanks a lot sweetheart* of course I did.⁸

If there is something to be drawn out of Wearne's word 'obsessions', it is in his turning over of the suppressed itches and compulsions of his characters.

When *Saying all the great sexy things* was published in 2001, Wearne was quoted as saying it 'is about love'.⁹ We might add sex and friendship. *Money and nothing* continues those narratives and also broadens to the entrepreneurial excess of the 1980s, and a tranche of criminal personalities. Kevin Joy, head of the Joy Boys Drug Syndicate and a central character in that second volume, repeatedly mingles criminality and love in his long dramatic monologue 'Nothing but Thunder':

Don't I know what the world needs now, Mister Bacharach!
People want and I'm their kind of Cupid ...
love first and profit only later, I tell you
that makes for real danger. And they're frightened.¹⁰

Love, sex and friendship and the more public catalysts of money and power, are prominent motivators for human behaviour throughout Wearne's work. A question to ask about them is: what distinction is made here between public affairs and private activity? Very likely none at all, in the sense that his public and private squares are equivalently ordinary. This poetry can make the ordinary seem absurd or comical, and it can turn sharply to satire or to amusement, and just as delicately to poignancy. It gives us the interesting ordinariness of people in public life as not very different from the interesting ordinariness of people in their private lives.

Wearne reflected in a 2011 interview on the importance of 'the everyday or my imaginings of an everyday':

... the very concept of writing about such things is a superb challenge. Can one truly make poetry out of such material without banality? Past examples give me confidence that it can be done.¹¹

Foremost amongst his influences are those poets who observe the low dramas (and melodramas) of ordinary social and political mores, re-treading vernacular registers in tying language poetically to the everyday. In an interview, he names a significant predecessor from the fourteenth century: 'What guided me? Since at least my teens I've worked for an outfit called *Narrative Verse in English*, whose founder was a man called Geoff, Geoff Chaucer'. He adds a number of other precursors in long narrative poetry – Pope, Byron, Frost, Kenneth Koch¹² – and especially singles out a trio of mid-Victorian masters of narrative verse, monologues and dramatic monologues: 'Clough, Meredith and Browning more or less challenged me: 'We can do it ... go on ... can you?''¹³

Each monologue and narrative in this selection has its own fidelity to the ordinary, not least in matters of love. 'Roger, or Of Love and its Anger' from *The Lovemakers* is a superb sequence of twenty-six experimental rhymed sonnets. Roger's voice shifts back and forth between extremity and composure as he speaks to his psychiatrist about his wife's infidelity. Here is all of Sonnet 18 'Grit (ii)'; 'Wonderboy' is his diminutive for his wife's lover:

It won't square with ladies, but getting decked
is a compliment; if you can hit and be hit
so can he. When fighting implies a certain respect
why thump your loathed one? (It's better to spit.)
Wonderboy deserved neither. If hardly innocent
his acts were love-fuelled.

As if direct from the shit
of battle I wished I could've signalled this opponent
You and Barb ... d'd'dit dardardar d'd'dit ...
don't send reinforcements just rest my fears
and tell me why.

So exit thoughts of 'Put up y'dooks.'
Today's far more a case of this: combs raised and fighting fit
two more Chanticleers
strut respective barnyards (mine, Wonderchook's)
pecking into their wondergrit.¹⁴

This sonnet is Roger's implicit version of the marriage. Interestingly, his own proclivity as a swinger is not mentioned – it rates just a slant reference in three of the other sonnets. Here, and elsewhere through the sequence, his thought and language feel barely within his rhetorical control, while his speaking manner and his words are tethered to an apparent cool self-possession. The sequence is an homage to Meredith's 'Modern Love', and its epigraph is from Clough's 'Amours de Voyage', but it is thoroughly Browning-esque in its character moves of Roger's condescension, hostility, disdain and ultimately expedient pragmatism. Throughout these twenty-six sonnets, Wearne noticeably creates interruptions to thought by means of punctuation: brackets, italics, ellipses, colons, semicolons. In fact, interruption is a frequent habit, almost a method, in his poetry. A noticeable break or pause in a speaker's utterance, or a syntactic shift to illuminate a quick burst of sudden clarity or perhaps dense confusion, can signal intense emotions in a speaker. The result is a restlessness and suppleness of vocabulary in his work.

In Kevin Joy's long monologue 'Nothing but Thunder', Wearne experiments with the combined tension and liberality of the unmetered line. Set in a bar, Joy talks to Chrissie, an intoxicated would-be drug courier, about Sophie, his young upper middle-class lawyer and girlfriend:

Out on the tan track my head was swampy with ideas,
gelling slowly into schemes. Next time sure.
But Soph 'n' me changed gears: relaxing into parties,

wine, coke, sleep and each other.

One Saturday

she drove me to her old school fair, my tête-a-tête
with class. Class? Couldn't I buy out the lot? And spent
a second, even less, seeing my retirement. One more run say?
Imagine: wiping the frigging slate ... to what?
There must be a next deal and a next. That's all.
Why join those mutts just wanting to exist? I need
to live, to feel myself curl round and into every
part of fate.¹⁵

What makes this dramatic monologue poetic? For this reader, it is the lineations: in particular, the litheness of Wearne's long lines, characterising Kevin Joy as continually poised for the (sometimes clamorous) quickenings that will propel his narrative. Those lines modulate between moods, a change of mood turning on a cadence. This poetry may not be consistently compact in its imagery, but it is tight in its rhythm, echoing and re-shaping from one line to the next, while also surprisingly varying from one to the next.

The groundnote of Wearne's vernacular is the audibility of his words and phrases as a movement of conversational sounds and gestures. A kernel of that narrative voice first appeared in two breakthrough poems in his first book *Public Relations* (1972): 'Saint Bartholomew Remembers Jesus Christ as an Athlete' (written in 1967, when he was eighteen) and 'Warburton 1910' (written in 1972).¹⁶ He went on to develop that voice in 'Out Here' and it has carried forward into all corners of his subsequent work. Wearne has taken up an idiom of conversation in verse, from utmost subtlety to a channelling of wild and unrestrained characters who parade a lack of self-censorship.

His vernacular style can be interchangeably restless and delicate. Take the discerning tones in 'Chatswood: Ruth Nash Speaks', a narrative about the historical, unsolved deaths of Gib Bogle and Margaret Chandler in Sydney on 1 January 1963. In the lines below, the more graceful notes intersperse with roughened-up ballad rhythms. Ruth's observational poise is irreverent and witty:

... and we are, in best sellers or movies, near press-ganged to pretend
how simple, bland beginnings might prologue a ludicrous end,

*So there's Gib on arrival lightfooting it down our hall,
And there's Gib a day later lightfooting bugger all.*

*We think we know the limits? We're merely to follow this text:
Lives unfold lives fold, here's one hour here's the next.*¹⁷

Perhaps taking a cue from the feminist momentum of his own era, Wearne invents a plurality of women characters. Those voices often convey a sense of historical continuity with past generations in Australian social culture, and equally of projecting to the future. As I was writing this, Alan Wearne remarked in conversation that his invention of women characters comes from the fact they are fifty percent of the population.¹⁸ It was a dry remark, with a plain truth. His imagining of the ordinariness of humanity reckons with difference in the lives of women and men, unaffectedly so. In his first verse narrative 'Out Here' (1976), five of nine monologues are from women, younger and older. Three are in the present selection: teenager Tracey Izzard, girlfriend of Brett Viney who harms himself with a knife at school; Marian Viney, Brett's mother; and Lucy Martinson, the deputy principal. In *The Nightmarkets*, three of the six main characters are women: Terri, a parlour hostess; Elise McTaggart, widow of a Liberal politician and mother of John McTaggart, head of a new political party; and Sue Dobson, whose monologue 'Climbing Up the Ladder of Love' is included here. Dobson's take on the feminist condition is a robust piece of self-creation, nicely time-located:

We've entered the Eighties:
it's *our* decade, what your home and schooling
bred you for. Though the Movement may've quit even cooling
years back, simply to freeze,
it's time any educated woman must seize
her inheritance to all that liberation.
And no use bemoaning this occasion
as transient (they all are) he can, ought to be, is your equal.
Life's not a sequel upon sequel
of boyfriends, their hang-ups and triumphs. Realise you're *not* twenty-three
and some mere boy's girl. You can be me me *me*
at last.¹⁹

The Nightmarkets is a classic in its social and historical particularity, and its bounty with language. Those lines are so incisive that it is easy not to notice the complex intricacy of tones. Dobson's monologue, written in rhyming couplets, is played out in a context not simply of her feminism but her profession as a journalist and her relationship with McTaggart, including her role as his biographer.

The scope of Wearne's inventiveness with characters is in finding a

voice that is appropriate to each, and in registering unique experiences. In 'Anger Management: a South Coast Tale' (2017), a young mother reflects on the excitement and desire of a new relationship and how it intensifies and disintegrates, almost imperceptibly:

He won't hit you, yet;
just takes an arm, pushing it up your back
to ask 'And what about what *I'm* feeling?'
You've known him how many months
so what are you feeling? How about
Sorry mate, just don't quite get it
or more likely *Am I to blame?*
*Well I never deserved this!*²⁰

This woman's soliloquy holds sharpness and tremor as she steps through a pathology of behaviours. It is an all-too-familiar complex of reconciliation and calm in a progression of coercions: the silent treatment, accusations, intimidation and violence. The speaker verbalises her thoughts to herself, consciously and sometimes distractedly, to get an anchor on her experience of being blindsided.

In implicit contrast to those tones is a recent monologue 'Near Believing', which reads as a dauntless satire on clerical hypocrisy and child sexual abuse. The speaker, Father John, is a married, former Anglican, now Roman Catholic priest:

At the seaside
whilst she and I paced the length of the strand,
I tried explaining, not in sermon terms,
nor talkback terms, but terms for a teenage girl
with her over-extended crush: 'Let's stop, please.
I'll be wedding someone else one day. Thanks for understanding.
Hardly an hour elapses when I'm not announcing
Sorry if you feel I used you Toni, I understand,
*I used myself and my vocation.*²¹

'Near-believing' has substantial discomforts for a reader, heightened by a disturbing frankness, the language cleaving to Father John's impiety and his trail of rebuttals and delusions as he tells his story. Wearne's more criminal personalities all seem to share a similar distorted perception of their own aberrant behaviour. He unmasks their bearings through a huge variety of

moods, angles and pitch.

But the protagonist in another remarkable recent monologue, ‘Waitin’ for the Viet Cong’ (2017), is a sceptic who is quite at home with truth. The retiree female speaker’s story of a private love and a family predicament is at times agonisedly witty, and at times tender. Her tale settles on two narratives from her youth: her political activism as a university student and her disappearance one Parisian winter in pursuit of Antoinette, a French exchange student whom she met at secondary school. This monologue plays with memory and the nature of family history. The female speaker carries the narrative for what turns out to be a whole family saga – the mosaic of her reminiscence includes anecdotes and words from her late mother, her father, her sister and her sister’s spouse. Her recollection of meeting Antoinette includes a smile at herself, and a memorable tune:

This was Antoinette and I:
some enchanted evening you may see this someone
you’ll wish to see again, again, again, then
fly to my side and guessing I’ll understand ask
*Where exactly are you from and what exactly
do they do there.*²²

As for her politicking with fellow students, ‘The Collective ... my people, people ablaze / with all that kind of courage History supplies’, the hope is that

the greater stories might commence:
all those things we’d live to see happen, happening:
getting rid of Imperialism for starters,
after which anything bourgeois.²⁵

The speaker’s tale of student rebellion and rescue become family-venerated in the words of her late mother, ‘this tale she told / (eyes wide alight in their bewildered pride)’; and her father, ‘*She’s our rebel and nobody else’s*’;²⁴ and her sister and her sister’s spouse, ‘You realise ... it was their networks found you ...’. Or, as the speaker says, ‘History, / unalterable History’. This ageing woman’s own lightly ironic voice recaptures the dogmas and paraphernalia of a spirited younger self with wry joy, but only her revolutionary zeal becomes part of family lore: ‘I put aside telling Mother of ‘Antoinette the Sequel’ / but then she died. Dad remarried so I told them, / humanism all the way.’²⁵ That last assertion might be referable, with a degree of irony, to something like this:

*We knew Struggle, we knew Truth,
Knew Hué and Hai Phong,
Served such causes in our youth,
Waitin' for the Viet Cong.
Whilst Johnson, Nixon strafed the North,
Bellowed each July the Fourth:
"Longin' for the Viet Cong to win girls,
Screamin' for the Viet Cong!"²⁶*

That ballad, in six stanzas, is quoted (invented? remembered?) to conclude the monologue.

On a similar edge, some lines from Sue Dobson (and maybe even the poet), written much earlier:

For this most fascinating thing in the world
addicts me: women and men. All the skirmishes, battles,
truces, treaties, all the incongruous attrition
of civil war and reconstruction, as,
between flare-ups, we resume some spongy armistice.²⁷

There is a strange largesse in that catalogue of part-failures. But largesse in many directions comes naturally to Alan Wearne as a prime mark of all his poetry. We hope that this selection is a surprise and pleasure to read right through, in whatever order a reader's curiosity may take.

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Endnotes

1. Alan Wearne and Michael Brennan, 'Interview with Alan Wearne', *Poetry International*, 1 July 2011, https://www.poetryinternational.org/pi/cou_article/19026/Interview-with-Alan-Wearne
2. Alan Wearne, *The Nightmarkets*. (Ringwood: Penguin Books Australia Ltd, 1985) 64.
3. Alan Wearne, *Near Believing: Selected Monologues and Narratives 1967-2021*. (Waratah: Puncher and Wattmann, 2022) 135.
4. Alan Wearne, 'Interview with Alan Wearne'. *The Verse Novel: Australia & New Zealand*. ed. Linda Weste. (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing Pty Ltd, 2021) 270.
5. John Leonard, 'The Nightmarkets: Nothing Fated or Rarefied,' *Scripsi*. 4.3 (April 1987): 120.
6. Wearne, *Near Believing* 197.
7. Wearne, *The Verse Novel* 263.
8. Wearne, *Near Believing* 158.
9. Angela Bennie, 'Lawson of the suburbs finds poetry in ordinary lives,' *Sydney Morning Herald* 28 May 2002: 3.
10. Wearne, *Near Believing* 119-20.
11. Wearne and Brennan, *Poetry International Rotterdam*.
12. Wearne, *The Verse Novel* 271.
13. Wearne, *The Verse Novel* 273.
14. Wearne, *Near Believing* 94.
15. Wearne, *Near Believing* 121.
16. Alan Wearne and Michelle Borzi, 'Conversation with the author', 13 June, 2019.
17. Wearne, *Near Believing* 149.
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20. Wearne, *Near Believing* 183.
21. Wearne, *Near Believing* 226-227.
22. Wearne, *Near Believing* 188.
23. Wearne, *Near Believing* 187.
24. Wearne, *Near Believing* 186.
25. Wearne, *Near Believing* 192.
26. Wearne, *Near Believing* 193.
27. Wearne, *The Nightmarkets* 55.