

2007

Kunapipi 29 (2) 2007, Contents, Editorial

Anne Collett

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Collett, Anne, Kunapipi 29 (2) 2007, Contents, Editorial, *Kunapipi*, 29(2), 2007.
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol29/iss2/2>

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Abstract

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KUNAPIPI

Journal of Postcolonial Writing & Culture



VOLUME XXIX NUMBER 2
2007

Kunapipi is a bi-annual arts magazine with special but not exclusive emphasis on the new literatures written in English. It aims to fulfil the requirements T.S. Eliot believed a journal should have: to introduce the work of new or little known writers of talent, to provide critical evaluation of the work of living authors, both famous and unknown, and to be truly international. It publishes creative material and criticism. Articles and reviews on related historical and sociological topics plus film will also be included as well as graphics and photographs.

The editor invites creative and scholarly contributions. The editorial board does not necessarily endorse any political views expressed by its contributors. Manuscripts should be double-spaced with notes gathered at the end, and should conform to the Harvard (author-date) system. Wherever possible the submission should be on disc (soft-ware preferably Microsoft Word) and should be accompanied by a hard copy. Please include a short biography, address and email contact if available.

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Individual:	1 year	AUD \$60.00
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Kunapipi

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Acknowledgements

Kunapipi is published with assistance from the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies and the European branch of the Association and the Faculty of Arts University of Wollongong.

EACLALS

European Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies

Lou Smith's poem, 'Migration' has been previously published under the title of 'Currawong' in *Scrapbook to Somewhere*, ed. Eve Vincent and Lou Smith, Breakdown Press, Fitzroy, 2004, pp.38–45; and in *StrangeShapes: NewMelbourne Writers*, vol 2, ed. Marion Campbell, Rhonda Dredge, et al, Crooked Styles Press, University of Melbourne, 2004, pp. 137–46.

Jeremy Cronin's poems, 'For Comrades in Solitary Confinement', has previously been published in Jeremy Cronin, *Inside*, Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1983; and 'Penguins', has previously been published in Jeremy Cronin, *More Than A Casual Contact*, Umuzi (an imprint of Random House), Cape Town, 2006.

Libby Robin's 'Lyrebirds' has previously been published in Libby Robin, *The Flight of the Emu: A Hundred Years of Australian Ornithology 1901–2001*, Carlton, Melbourne UP, 2001.

Chris Wallace-Crabbe's poem 'And Gathering Swallows' has previously been published in *Southerly*, 66.2, 2006.

Line drawings of birds: David Collett.

Front Cover: 'Frost Feathers', Photograph, Helen Tiffin.

Kunapipi refers to the Australian Aboriginal myth of the Rainbow Serpent which is the symbol of both creativity and regeneration. The journal's emblem is to be found on an Aboriginal shield from the Roper River area of the Northern Territory of Australia.

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EDITORIAL

I am told that it was the flamingoes to which I constantly desired return on a visit to the zoo as a very young child. Of all the animals that I must have seen for the first time, it strikes me now as a curious preference, but perhaps it was the sheer audacity of the bizarre and the beautiful in colour and shape that attracted me then as now: the blaze of flamboyant pink, the curious beak, the ability to stand effortlessly on one slender leg. I think it is the otherness of Bird — the sheer quality of the fantastic and the alien — combined with aspects of Bird behaviour and mannerism that lends itself so readily to anthropomorphism,¹ which holds me in thrall. Many of my favourite fairytales featured birds — the swallows of ‘The Happy Prince’ and ‘Thumbelina’, ‘The Ugly Duckling’, ‘The Emperor’s Nightingale’; the story of the princes turned into swans by a witch and their sister who must knit them shirts of nettles to release them from enchantment and return them to human form. The princess struggles with bleeding fingers and diminishing time until all but the sleeve of one shirt are completed. The princes recover their human shape except the youngest prince who is returned to earth lamed — a reminder perhaps of the dangers of enchantment.

Fairytales gave way to a love of poetry, and foremost among my favourite poets were those of the Bird — John Keats, John Clare, John Shaw Neilson, Judith Wright and most recently, Olive Senior, whose latest collection of poetry, *over the roofs of the world*, is devoted to stories, images and poets of Bird. In ‘The Secret of Flying Close to the Sun Without Melting Wings’ she gives a distinctive Amerindian voice to the long association of Bird with flight and the human desire for a metamorphosis into feather and air — a transformation that enables escape and transcendence:

For you, flight is given as gift of bird messenger sustained
by rattle, by drum, by song. You soar, sail, glide.
For a brief moment you gain Sun’s nod.

You are Bird itself. But know: such ecstasy is not forever.
You will re-enter your world, but let down lightly
cradled as gently as egg.²

The image of a brief moment of ecstatic intensity and a gentle delivery back to earth is a beautiful one, but for me Bird has little to do with the symbolism of flight. I might rather be a sparrow than a snail,³ but not because I desire release from the burden of the world or my humanness — even temporarily. Like Keats,⁴ and like Camus,⁵ I am one who believes that the desire for immortality is a fancy that cheats us of this life: the symbolic flight of the nightingale is a darkling of our imagination that must be resisted, for such faery lands are forlorn (and yet I yearn for them).

My feeling for Bird is more often a grounded one, and thus to some extent I have more affinity with the pragmatic earthiness of Olive Senior’s Hen than the hubris of Icarus:

Some find you loud mouth and simple,
 for every egg laid a big announcement
 a cackle, some find you
 the broody hen, not knowing all
 is meant to throw spies off the scent
 of our blood's secret: you know
 the sky isn't falling, geese don't lay
 golden eggs, superior knowledge
 resides in the feet.⁶

For me Bird is an everyday pleasure, an ecstasy of this world to which I can return again and again. The wagtails build their nest every spring in my garden, and every year I watch them teach their chicks to fly from the clothesline to



the low branches of the hibiscus tree. Sulphur-crested cockatoos, the noisy acrobatic clowns of the bird world, dangle precariously from the turpentine tree — a tree in which a young kookaburra was given its first ‘laughing lessons’. I didn’t know that kookaburras have to learn to laugh just as children learn to talk until I heard ‘his’ faltering attempts to imitate the cacophony produced so effortlessly by his more mature brethren. This kookaburra has grown rather magnificently fat — quite ‘the merry king of the bush’

(as I used to sing in primary school) — but he still visits my garden regularly and particularly likes the vantage point offered by the Hills hoist. I’m not sure why the urge to photograph birds is so strong, but the Bird issue brought out the amateur photographer in everyone, myself included.

Anne Collett

NOTES

- ¹ The episode of the buzzards and the dead mule in Zora Neale Hurston’s novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), is a wonderful example of this.
- ² Olive Senior, *over the roofs of the world*, Insomniac Press, Toronto, 2005, p. 17.
- ³ From ‘El condor pasa’ *Bridge Over Troubled Water* album, Simon & Garfunkel, 1970.
- ⁴ Reference to John Keats’ ‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 1819.
- ⁵ See Camus’ essay *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* and his novel *L’Étranger* (both 1942).
- ⁶ ‘Hen’, *over the roofs of the world*, stanza 1, p. 23.