

Classic Poetry Series

Adam Aitken

- 33 poems -

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Adam Aitken (1960 -)

Adam Aitken is an Australian poet. Born in London in 1960, to an Anglo-Australian father and a Thai mother, he spent some of his childhood with relatives in Thailand, and was educated at a convent in Malaysia, before coming to Australia in 1968.

Career

He began writing in the mid-1970s and majored in English and Art Film History at the University of Sydney. He has also completed a Master's in Linguistics and a Doctorate in Creative Arts from the Centre for New Writing, University of Technology, Sydney. He was Associate Poetry Editor for HEAT magazine.

He has published three major collections in Australia and numerous poems in Australian literary journals. He is considered to be a poet of no particular school or trend, postmodern and lyrical at the same time. His influences range from the English Romantic to the French, American and British avante-garde, especially the New York school of poets.

In 1996 his second poetry collection *In One House* was considered one of the best poetry collections of that year. In 2001, his third collection *Romeo and Juliet in Subtitles*, was shortlisted for the John Bray South Australian Literary Festival Award, and was runner-up for The Age Book of the Year poetry prize. His fourth collection, *Eighth Habitation*, was published by Giramondo Press in April 2009. His writing shows a deep interest in contemporary cultural issues, especially issues of identity and cultural hybridity. Adam's work has been translated into French, Swedish, German, Polish, Malay and Mandarin, and is published internationally, most notably in *Poetry Magazine*.

Works:

Books

Letter to Marco Polo, Island Press, 1985
In One House, HarperCollins/Paper Bark Press, 1996
Romeo And Juliet in Subtitles, Brandl & Schlesinger, 2000
Eighth Habitation, Giramondo Publishing, 2009
Tonto's Revenge, TinFish Press 2011

Alexandria

At the mouth of the Nile
a Byzantine dome of many colours
defies its modernist renovations.
A sky the colour of a carnal life
kept moist with preservatives,
now too complete, fresh and
a little sour like half dry new acrylic,
authentic as the esplanade breeze.
the smell of Alexandria! Index
of cultural success,
rot, seaweed in withered bays.

that's why we come here – to write:
the tired eyes of bachelors
track their favourite youths.
Fathers look for sons,
whom all the gold of Egypt won't beautify.
Gracious elderly waiters with colonial manners
affect a stance so long held
they wait as long as you do,
wait with you, for your choice
defines the gesture and makes the day.

Watching thunderstorms assemble
for battle out to sea,
from the balcony, a golden light
bathes the shabby roofs.
Is it dangerous? If I open all the doors,
test the hinges on shutters? I want to see
the way lightning travels
down telephone wires, through TVs.
Would my nose glow if hit, would my head
(suddenly blessed) wear a turban of plasma?

No appliances in this room, most basic
but... it's Egyptian enough, or is it
Greek – like you and me
they never could make up their mind,
trapped between Kora standing to attention
and fantastic winged Gods.
Which is why, when I stare
at plaster cherubs in a sagging ceiling
I recall the museum, those rows of heavy-lidded
half bald consuls, the candy spiral of Venetian glass.

Or your childhood memory – Fremantle 1956.
Airy epilogue, dusty essentials
at the end of the line
where the sea and the light
are now compressed
to layers of Pernod green,
and the epic goes to salt on the wind.

Adam Aitken

Aubade 7

Aubade 7

for Paul Prieto

Even before the morning breaks
I wake her up
just to know her dreams

that other flightless thing
she meets in them

that shadow in the shape of me
and maybe that lady
is an owl

in the early morning
in the forest of sleepers

where she meets him
in the shuttered garden

the man she saw
with a box for her lost chick

What will they do
this shadow of a man
and his owl?

What will they say
when they find
the cat has got the child?

But when the sun rises
he will know
exactly what to do

when the lights come up
we'll see
that other flightless thing
is me
and that owl is she

Adam Aitken

Aubade: Thirties Sydney

Some days the future is like a debt
the millennium racked up yesterday
or a kind of heroic sweat
the work camps built, where
the Bondi view commands a path
from one boom to the next
in the intervening years they
harvest, acute & lonely, & life's so tough
even a bull shark's meat is succulent
marinated for a decade
& washed up on a luxury
beach of sprayed on primal art

wildflowers, rock, flint,
history's salted real-estate
the flaneur poets
clamour for a piece of it
reffo gangs stop to smoke
pick & dig the stony propositions
bouquets of roubles
while the flowers
seep dew on a gravel track
haunted by a dawn of rust

collected and set
on raw pine tables, heritage dried
my cheap flora
persists on a dark lapel
when, growing inward, they
forget about the 'twenties
& the crowds still come.

Adam Aitken

Burning the Boats (Hawai'i)

1

Like one true gram of tenderness
he weighs her fire in a boat of gold.
The island tide sweeping the coral
luminous under keels, strangers wave
in the groves. Conch shells blow.
It all seems welcoming.

She needs a big-wave man like Duke.
Each evening, at sunset, she is there
watching the night flood in.
Trained to keep house, constant
as tradewinds she welcomes
the tillerman, brews the booze.
Why he blindfolds passengers
what flora makes him high, she never asks.

For this is Disco-island, Tsunami-shocked,
time-warped in quiet industry.
If she made a union jack bed-quilt or
a better fishing net, would she catch a better fisherman?
Once a thousand birds made one cape.
Now royalty's a museum piece,
calcified embryos, blanched lips of coral
bone transparencies in kerosene dreams.
She hones the hook
on lava's hard horizon.

Here they say
there are no clouds, only fumes, a bootleg distillery
volcanoes pickling the bay.
Her harvest landscape
with fire-gods, limewashed angels,
his dragon painted on her prow.

2 Pearl Harbor

I thought I'd seen the edges of America,
islands of hyphenated races
and it was copyright: miles of surf,
one church, one post office, new outrigger
christened "Chevrolet", hire cars
parked outside the old coffee plant.
Congested as heaven fanned by trades.
Vulcanism in an eagle province.
Red rust earth, like Queensland.
A woman with a Chinese/Sydney ancestor
selling chocolate coffee beans said
go look him up in the library, if I had time
and send her back the missing tree.

I could have bought more bad coffee
or a recipe book for Spam –
compressed pink bricks swimming
in plug-in pans of fat, Spamburger, Spam soup
and Pineapple, the Black Market History of Spam
Spam as the great leveller.

Back in Honolulu, Kentucky peroxide
bombshells cruised by
crunching stilettos on an early night,
murmured "Arigatos" and "Kombanwas".
Beacons blinked in their sleepy heads,
phantom lights of L.A., a future acting job,
neon froth and men with ale and arsenic in their veins.
A corner for a strawberry blond
like "Sugar" who rigged the shanty bar
with long thatched hair
her tattooed man backstage
watching tides on a Budweiser's rim.
Where fish in fish traps used to congregate.

It's fate, they growl, when tides can't wash away
a swamp becalmed, grey poison anchored there.
New fort, fresh god and new seawalls.
On Lei Day Hula girls in neck-to-knee white lace
tuck in their crucifixes, go on dates
in pineapple forests and the Navy parking lot.
On a daytrip to Pearl Harbor
a bus of brats lined up for heritage day.
USS Arizona sunken under glass.
In the legal advice bureau I met
the princess poet.
It's fate she says, we were sleeping when she sank.
She could only love it here, pulling
native boys out of jail. Anyhow
the President had apologised.
That's official, integration and the end of slavery
but if the Asians wanted to stay, OK.
She'd had it up to here with politics.

I thought: now we make our lingo sell.
Mount Kilauea was active again.
Has anyone ever told you
you look Latino? I saw my face
in a cliff of rocks.
She said she'd write me
when the smoke had cleared, when
I had understood.

Adam Aitken

Elegy for John Forbes

Not that you envied them, John,
the rich,
but that they never envied you.
Now a single life
once lost can prove that we
had wished it otherwise.
You were neither blithe simplicity, nor disrepair –
far from it,
more like an old typewriter that still worked
with a kind of emigrant charm
while most had headed for a faster ship.

And now?

Having never left the beach, upturned boats
make luminous, burning things –
and the air after you've gone
is filled with smoke
like a Tom Roberts sketch of the Casbah, not quite
thick enough for incense, not quite
Cronulla, except the same searing light
almost painful
the longer you stare
the closer you get
to that blue sandbar
your poems make of clarity –
the summer light, the abundant ruin
and no one can tell
which came first.

Adam Aitken

Form and Content in Australian Literature

If Content can survive
the Medium
will it survive
the Agent?

Adam Aitken

Ipoh

You feel that way sometimes – peeling
flakes of undercoat on a condemned row of shop houses.
Famed for benchmark limestone
crenellations, mesas and buttes –
better off, some believe, as shopping mall cement.
But under the one-way system
there's gold, precious metals, the aspirations
of old mother China, noodle vendors
built like wrestlers and
Becak drivers on their daily marathon.
They say something in the water
makes their daughters pretty
not the Lancome Christmas make-up pack
though nothing's wrong with that.
Or green and tender vegetables,
or calcium carbonate
in a cup of jasmine tea.

Adam Aitken

It begins

It begins

It begins with letters strewn across the carpet.
It begins with never-to-be-repeated
acts of love, and ends in winter,
and begins again in summer.

With love
there is of course the romance
but also the recall:
it begins with looking backwards
and leaving out the boring parts
of which there are none.

Coming home
the bird will come to this, a bird in the hand,
a bird in the bus queue
the little bird at the bird bath

the bird who's heading home
across a field of unpicked vines.

Adam Aitken

Learning Para-Linguistics

Hoping to articulate my relation to The Other
downmarket I move,
Swiss hotel hierarchies
shadow-play of Samosir bars.
A German pulls up his socks,
the textile boss smooches his Euro-babe
wide-eyed and learning maritime knots
smiles a lot and tastes his special broth
of chicken tainted lake water.
This is how we do it over here.

The Colgate remedy for blisters
heals the wound,
the parasite sits with the hybrid,
the leech on acid,
hermaphrodite of grace
schooled on hippie talk
swotting on Amerika.
Lay one on me, babe – arrow pulled from his quiver.
The one-eyed barfly lands on my interface:
Heh, you: buy me a beer, spluttered
through his nozzle, canines cracked
fragrant and black stubs of cloves.
No school, but educational – Mahabharata
of the loser and the broken-nosed
Icelandic angel, pale as snow, young
steel rimmed Kierkegaard transcends logic
spooning up his magic omelette.
His blood begins to flow, his eyes
explode, then collapse, his blue iceberg face.
Opera island style, the chorus leader
rolls six-paper joints and the policeman
grins in a burning bush of ganga.
The man who laminates fake ID
is a man with a theory on fear.
The shaker of hands and the fingerer
of mandolins, the blower of flutes. Offstage
some gangster cracks the whip,
I feel the blowpipe find the bird.
A hundred bucks fleeced from the son of Moses
a motorbike jack-knives
into the hungry creek of Fate.
A little scratch becomes an amputation,
each stitch decays in the wound.
I write what I can, brush up Dodi's lewd translation
at five percent commission,
He says Pay Up, or you're Tragedy.
Sheena, from Bradford,
contagious Karma, murmurs
just wait till we get to the endless
corridors of silken Heaven
where she'd be waiting,

like an eight armed Swiss army knife
of a goddess on wheels.
The monkeys smear her with a kiss.
Sulphur bubbles up from the gutter of Conscience.
Commandos playing tennis
see me to the witness box
at the trial of an Empire – the crime:
uncontrollable all-inclusiveness
and a weak back-hand.
I wait for the cool attorney of Justice,
for the question I will answer,
the judge wipes sweat from his nervous hammer.
I hear the question that the Lake must ask.

Adam Aitken

Letter to Marguerite Duras

The white trash girl in the second hand Fedora,
hardly fifteen, waits at the convent school gate.
(Once I taught a girl like you, from Hanoi, and rich.)
A Morris Léon Bolléé, black, appears;
at the wheel a white liveried driver.
On the concession it's flat, sad, futureless.
A view of the mountains of Siam,
an oppressive heat of course.
Just like here, where I am writing this
sending your book back to you
across a sluggish canal of memory, writing to you.
White trash on a concession
and two brothers drunk on Cognac and Pastis,
one a killer, the other mostly mute.
A mother who's lost her husband
in a way that's not explained.

What else can I say, I love the way
the Chinese lover could never have you
and how he made love with a kind of grace
you'd call French if you believed it were true.
And there was Hélène Lagonelle
with her arms thrown up in surrender
sleeping with her legs apart
under the dormitory fan, just turning over, lazily.
I love the inversion, you were poor
and he was rich, his fate determined, an Oriental.
The way he sat there, head averted from humility,
in the back seat of the car.

I am him, I am you, and everyone's talking about it.
No, there's no point standing on the steamer's deck
looking back down the river
to Saigon, slowly disappearing under the horizon.
Nothing's explained, which is why
we're slumped in the deckchairs, always reading.
Moral decay, a quagmire
leading to persistent drinking.
The weather's vengeful collaboration.
History ends but love is endless,
dying but undying, always damp
and always just beginning.

Adam Aitken

Lines from The Lover

It was never a question of beauty but something else. Mind for example. For a long time you had no dress of your own, except those your mother had her servant make. Dô could sew with hair-fine needles, pleats and Peter Pan collars. She could make anything look timeless. Writing was sewing. Writing was taking an image—a ferry crossing the Mekong say, and empty it of all significance until it became idea, an image caught between memory and forgetting. We looked about for that place-marker for the time that never existed. The Mekong—that blood in the body, that slow flow between banks that had faded away. The river carries everything along, straw huts, forests, burnt-out fires, dead birds, dead dogs, drowned tigers and buffaloes, drowned men, bait, islands of water hyacinths all stuck together. Everything flows towards the Pacific, no time for anything to sink, all is swept along by the deep and headlong storm of the inner current, suspended on the surface of the river's strength. And like a new-born child, it was blind, or so it seemed to the ungainly, the women from elsewhere, the mothers and the sons, mute and cowed in the presence of the father. And it was blind.

Adam Aitken

Lyric

First there is the picking of a rose,
then the theory on what it means;
or, if there is no rose
there is no symphony,
just empathy, a deeper
arresting of the sense, call it
epiphany, rather than digitised

indolent gesture
an article of clothing so loose
a breeze blew it into a pool of swans...

Light will not do - it must be
cultivated light
inflected through
a mild cloud of darkness...

like the first tentative attempt to say 'I would like'
in French or Italian
brings a faint blush to the neck...
but there is never quite enough time
to see all of the Uffizi
and like Keats there is the threat
of an early consumptive death
but not before
he teaches you everything you need.

There are the interiors,
then the interiors of the interiors

and what comes between us
is precisely the subject of the poem:
be it a sword or hesitation:
more interiors
padded with medieval tapestries,
perhaps the mineralised torso
of a God,
or even a country that can't address us
as is lacks
a studio or eery and so
needs no mention of us,

or, perhaps, no shared lingua,
no roses either
no half buried garden shed
at the back of Regents Park
in which to skimp on our portraits
(nude) in an unfinished poem in October.

A great deal is about to happen
but not yet.

Adam Aitken

On Safari

Such dirty work
turning dreaming tracks

into nature strips
that drunks fall over

on Larapinta Drive
and Heavitree Gap

a tribe oversees
the wrecker's yard

punctuating the MacDonnells
first landmark into town

The traffic lights glow
with spiteful newness

in the crisp desert air of June
warning us to turn for home

Between Mario's
and the Peking Palace

the arid zone cruise
of menu specials no one

claims are fresh
Then the traffic lights turn green

Mormons bike to work
in helmets of charisma

dayglo hamburgers
jammed in their saddles

Adam Aitken

Oracular formulae

'Oracular formulae too speedily deciphered at dawn'
unable to cure this malady of silence
I relied 'on my single breathe to climb'
to the top of the mountain
where you can find
Mother Mary, a more-than-life size effigy,
doubling there as a lightning rod,
a surveyor's plaque, old shotgun cartridges
and views of villages named after saints
and villas sold off to retiring Northerners.

The roadmaps never fail, except in August
when a new roundabout's complete.
All of it beautiful
but not quite out of reach
in September's mist of burning leaves
when chasseurs bring out their blunderbusses.
Rumours of accidental shootings - the drawback
of camouflage is you become
another man's pig.

This little village has no twin - no cafes
or a bookshop like Blackheath.
As far I know only one man has ever
come here to write - Professor Ratz
the archaeologist who collects old ploughs
and Gallic pottery shards, who
on the national heritage day
mounts his friendly lecture in the Mairie

when the town's significance
rises up out of old mine shafts
and the people congregate
at the old clock tower
and we believe 'that a few signs remain' -
the puff of smoke, the fading motor
of a bread van.
We are not quite lonely here and
on the Rue d'Amondier
especially on days like this,
no 'self torn to pieces and suffocating'
to be seen.
Well, not yet.

Adam Aitken

Oracular formulae

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unable to cure this malady of silence
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to the top of the mountain
where you can find
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on the Rue d'Amondier
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no 'self torn to pieces and suffocating'
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Well, not yet.

Adam Aitken

Orchid Weather

I loved that jungle, the one behind the house:
it bore the wild Malayan Emergency
leaf-knitting colonies of chilli-red ants
and scowling ahmas
dicing pork
to a very fine and furious mince
enfolded in dumplings
purple chicken's entrails
sweating in pots of broth.
Fortunes told, widows in black,
clairvoyants in a house of exorcism –
more incense in the shrine, fresher
pyramids of tangerines.

Burst fireworks confettied the air.

Young fauna, my brother and I
dried off in Royal Selangor
Golf Club towels in a house that
reeked of quinine, limes and gin,
almost mixed them myself
for darling spinsters
who never scolded,
with butterfly collections
and how-to-paint books.
We became their undeparted sons
two cheeky gnomes
under cushions
in their too cold conditioned
highland mansions.

Inquisitive and flirtatious
with the servant classes
we prospered in the orchid weather
over-nurtured and beautiful.
Chauffeur, silent behind the wheel
Koran on the radio;
and "our gardener", the greatest
in the business, hands stained with the soil
of an intense wormy blackness
calloused and hot to the touch. Recipient
of our old London blankets, for the family
we never saw.

We mimicked the ahmas
their singsong speech
angry waving of meat cleavers.
We were Master's sons risking sour medicine
to take new territory: alcoves and playgrounds
of camphor and silk, black lacquer
tiffins of pickled cabbage rice

and almost typically
fell in love with the ahma's daughter
in a galvanised tub,
scrubbed with Camay
her ribbons hung to dry on a bamboo stick
for whipping bad boys and dogs.

In games of war and riding the dragon
tadpole hunting and killing the tiger in the tiger's lair
we fell from air to earth, warriors in a two child Opera
where every wound was fatal.
We glazed each other's knees
with Tiger Balm, Gold Cup Brand
and sucked and chewed on salted plum.

We learned another way of saying
no, yes, and how delicious
and yes the lights stayed on
when the rain belted down
all night folding paper
into cranes, the tamed menagerie
bending their wings back
no pain.

Adam Aitken

Pol Pot In Paris

Oh happy child, kindly teacher-were you a fake?
Like you I'm taciturn
but when I give an order who's to hear?
Paris, I found it cold but didn't read very much.
No one knows what you thought of its weather,
the river, the churches or the metro.
You preferred a book on the Soviets to girls in Montmartre.
I too would rather recite Verlaine
than take notes on electronics.
If I had a history and traditions, I don't remember.
Would you understand me?
I too lived on an allowance
of uncomfortable epithets
cobbled from Buddha and Marx:
"Physical beauty is an obstacle to the will to struggle."

Late nights drinking weren't your thing.
Sweet words of girls "mask evil hearts".
A fun holiday on a tractor in Belgrade.
"The wheels of revolution never stop, roll on
to crush all who dare to walk in its path."
We could have been lifetime friends, together
rooting out evil, picking mushrooms,
sipping coffee in the Latin Quarter,
mediocre, polite, soft spoken
migrants meandering in overcoats.

The others marry French girls, you join a work brigade
digging ditches in Zagreb.
In the 15th arrondissement, Rue Latellier
mid-winter, dog shit everywhere.
On the river it's 20 francs
for La Grande Revolution Française.
We could've talked, taken notes for a memoir:
did you join the party before or after the festival
in East Berlin? Did you buy that shirt
before or after the coup d'état?

In Marseille you boarded the Jamaïque.
Your tiny shadow cast a conspiracy
of epic dimensions, and there, in the oily backwash
and the silver wake, a complete solution.
I too went home, dreaming of a family
I would never have, and the one I would.

Adam Aitken

Post-Colonial

They grew up - quicker, and rougher round the edges
than she'd planned, her children
hounding the North Shore's lower end,
losing laundry bags,
rationing snooker money.
They took their losses, spent their gains
with pin-point precision
back spin, double off the side cushion,
chalked up cues
passing back and forth, back and forth.

She was beautiful then, glamorous at a distance
illusion plus and licenced
fork lift driver, Samuel Taylor Aerosols.
Suzy Wong they called her, Suzy Wong
with a Noel Coward accent
lamenting a lost chauffeur, her husband.
She should've been saving
for a new appliance
at Big Bear Shopping Mall.

Remember Louis the Fly
spreading disease with the greatest of ease.
Remember Menzies,
remember the CPA, and all the mates
she cooked a hundred suppers for
when she'd read
a union intercedes. Why invoke
discrimination's house?
Vietnam consumed
truckloads of flagons, teenage poets
and the best efforts
of Dad's advertising
agency.
The phone was tapped for years.

I hope they wiped those tapes
of weeping and recrimination
but mostly
inarticulate
silence between shifts,
quiet lunch breaks,
a word with the manager,
prescriptions through a side window,
scribbled sick notes for the teacher.

They grew up -
quicker, and a little rougher round the edges
than she'd planned.

Adam Aitken

Road To Lovina

descending
from the misted island apex

of a garish golf club
resort

the mountains slope seaward
in second gear

through monkey
territory

past the poorer of the poor
on the arid karst

past rainforest
artist retreats

and down the valley
through the clove hamlets

siesta
on mattresses of drying cloves

we blend our heads
with harvest buds

in a documentary
of the clove

and every smile
to greet our drive

a frivolous after-school
atmosphere

of kids
all arms and flirting

going home
slow as tropical plants

compacted into Dutch
economies of space

picket fence
clove-stained sarongs dry

a breezy
ignorance of history

`behind' us now

dormant volcano

kept sleepy with prayer and
animal sacrifice

the road goes on
to inter-island seas

where the blood and ash
of speechless times

are purged
with cloves

to feed the coral
in its turquoise sea

blooming without bitterness
lurid shallows

and dark up welling
as the shelf drops off

towards such depths
the mountain can't imagine

under its fragrant canopy
medicinal levels

of easy questions
asking why

why the sharks
rise up sometimes

to terrorise the bright
green light

and we know that cloves
can't answer that

nor the shady school
of rural thought we thought

we'd found again
like a promise to return

Adam Aitken

Rock Carvings, Sydney

Some days I pass the handiwork of tribes, that tribe that's gone,
Why make their loss
speak for us or me, the nation's patchwork
constitution?

Why make of their defeat
the lyric lie you call preamble

which says we mean to keep it:
conception's rock, whale and one stone calf,
two intersected outlines,
just-born palimpsest lucid as newborn skin,
large enough for two to lie inside?

They answer no one back
in that text they had to read
of sky, beach, cliff, and ledge,
land's fractured page, countersigned as real-estate.
No man owns it say the men who do.

So each sunny day's pay back time
when I pass their way. I thought
I'd leave brief signature, break
the surface of their mineral breath,

and make it gift or recompense –
my strange error, that code
of vast polluted clouds that murmur
'History is all before, and all before
was this: a scrolling law
of rescored lines, gillflap, flipper, whale's eye,
the Empire coin re-scores.
The first book went soft in water
now it's hard as glass,
final contract when the love is gone
and hardly touches you.'

Adam Aitken

Saigon The Movie

James Bond flies into Phuket, which he pronounces
Fukit and this announces the demise
of the colonial era.

My mother sits on the Left Bank, harvesting rice.
The Baron announces his arrival
with a slice of lemon between his teeth and
Panama with razors embedded in its rim, to wear
to restaurants with a view of crossfire.

The iron butterfly folds back her wings, and rests awhile
on the pillows of this city.
But they are soaked
with the formalin of diplomacy
and the perfumes of an irresistible corruption.

Finally the old merchants
dig up their gold and re-invest in a
coat of arms they wire to a security gate.
Guard dogs with degrees, and lap-dog breeds
that do not bark.
Here a childhood made sensitive to bombs,
a kindergarten closed down with prayer,
American linguists in a helicopter, dropping
ration packs of Chiclets and brand new grammar.

Adam Aitken

Sheryll

Sheryll, I saved you from a knife,
you sailed close to the furies, and saved me too.
Your version of an angel lives in stone and won't sleep well.
Your guard dog sweettalks nightmare stalkers
in the garden's dark. The window's only
glazed light and fetid air, this world's anger staring in.
I forgive your big mouth, for no underworld
cuts your tongue away, the way you shamed that demon.
What's unravelled since is more than blood on a T-shirt.
My shrink prescribed a course of window shopping
to put you back in the family, he said.
More blue pills and Mr Average drives in suburbs
of nothing serious, autism with a high savings rate.
Silence kills everything but the weeds. So

leave me more: easy memories, or perfume sampler
whiff of KL teargas and temples, the bright and their beyond
we could not save, sweat-free optimists in millennial towers,
sambal nation of rough diamonds lurking in a mega-mall.
Your writers fed with publisher's lunches, advances, more books:
yes, it's the living who are loud, don't you think?
The fevered beating of your wings delivered me,
our would-be killer's still at large
and your dreams ride with a knife under your pillow –
each night you close the windows
and curl up, vengeful as a child, and hone your finger
on its mindless edge.
Our sleepless readers will understand.

*

Of the artery & the heart
that side step off a ledge –
I was blessed, like a cat.
How well he writes, the papers say.
I had God lined up
to place a bet & break my bank.
Endless bar-talk: I was
magician, or fool, sacred amulets
round my neck.
No one says they saw it coming, blade held low
in masking tape.
Pride hides in the true coward, my
handsome bête noire
the iron age promotes
to a warrior.
He signs his victims with a flourishing serif,
his cheque honoured no-where.

Was it bravery?
When he carved I did not
feel a thing –

was it just
great technique?

*

The would-be killer you escape
is the killer you could be,
choreography of a brain
tuning anger to the page.
To die in lieu of mourning, your life

a hologram, text of grit and light
lasered to a cheap pirate CD
flogged in Chinatown.
You go to Heaven and they say it's free
where the angels mourn
and don't get paid.

*

If I switch the blade on him
what will I sing?
Dark sensurround of muscle & flesh
holds me down between two cars
drives the bolt across hell's gates,
I push back & his eyes go black with fear
& slow extinction.
Eternity in two breaths of air.
Shiva's chief examiner
fails first time
to hurt the thing he sees, so female you are,
apparition he aimed to please.
Messing with the gods, razor at my ear,
eyes that drill twin black holes of hate.
I stare my failed assassin down as doubt
assails me doubly: my eyes
now, or have they ever been
such polished mirrors
that multiply the mirror of that evening sky?
My god a woman of such eloquence
I waste him for?

Dear Sheryll,
from the gutter you can see the stars,
dry, intact, the final renaissance.
Shiva presses down his night-time puja,
one holy sacrifice.
Now I know no other face.
For it was a desert down there,
myth & message tumbling in a wind
& wailing somewhere deep within.

We found such hate we danced
on the point of a pin.

Adam Aitken

Sonnets for '58

1

'58, the year he'd come a thousand miles.
From post Olympic Melbourne
setting new records for broken homes,
babies began to boom.
The beaut Asian wore pink socks, spoke
great English, knew her brandy-lime-and-soda,
read Das Kapital in secret.
Her mentor the opium professor
got himself fired by the embassy of correctness,
qualified as Best Man and wrote a novel.
The year Dad fell in love at the Victory Monument
the Generals burned the pipes,
the year of the bantamweight champ
of nineteen fifty eight.

2

She dreamt of long journeys, by ship & caravel
to the birthplace of Marco Polo
the chalets of joie de vivre
the mansion of savoir faire.
she woke around sunset, bicycled the black canals
& headed for the fairy lights, Pat Pong.
She became his precious object, a waiting game
when war was cold and recreational.
After the last tête à tête Uncle Ho had said
there was no turning back, when she engaged,
the ship tied up, weighed anchor
in measureless fathoms of mud, from which
the gorgon's knot of water hyacinth
grew such pink & purple flowers.

3 Golfing News

Who were the other men, & and why should we know?
Father's Agfachrome plots a mystery,
the bikini dream sipping champagne
from a silver golf trophy.
A dark haired banker with good quads
by her side, not touching the merchandise.
Neither posed, nor casually exact
as the compose, then tilt, then veer away
from text book convention.
Well, I like the way the bikini's frilled
& Dad's out of the picture
like an inferred God
taking this, as usual, before I was born.
All that 'fifties Adam & Eve stuff.

4

Her sister, my aunt, Head Matron
at the anti-venin unit in Wireless Road
took her by the hand.
Remember me, sister.
They stood by the flared throats
of bronze King Cobras
sunbaking in concrete pits
that stank of piss and reptilian self-loathing.
Older Sis was one for pills:
Here, take these, and remember – hygiene.

Adam Aitken

Spoken

An argument,
a door swinging in the wind.

He would regret
(though could not admit)
how
obscured by varied acts
of his incompetency,
and sometimes
a whole string
of mistakes
no single letter
poem or note
could expunge,
his love for her
- even when
he wasn't there -

was circular
and complete

He always left
the key in the door.

There was an escape, and then
the return,
the broken/unbroken

the whole
there-and-back again.

And between them
the hyphen
that sealed the deal

a piece of string
tied to a loose shutter.

They went away,
the wind died down
and blew back again.

Adam Aitken

Terra Nullius

for Victoria Dawson

1

The Marlboro billboards seem to green
for an abattoir.
Marlboro man looks older this year, but gets about,
wears his dead heart
open-cut upon his sleeve,
greet custodians at the airstrip.
The young writer's poems jangle like camping gear,
wearing hand-me-down boots.
Chirpier than a new four-wheel drive
they go bush, where the inland sea begins.
She sits out the heat with a Salman Rushdie
in a cemetery for dead miners.
she combs her Mohawk, walks and talks.
It was women's business brought here
to the boneyard of men's business.
Somewhere half way to Arltunga
coping with immense distance
and depressed parents he telephotos mountains
macros a spinifex pigeon cooing in a prickly nest.
Out Geln Helen way they lilo algal waterholes
that dampen everything inside
they never knew was dry.
At Ormiston scree run and climb a dinosaur's back
with Bob, snake portraitist and charmer
who'd stuffed his knees this way
one or two marriages back.
In saltpan Terra nullius caravans and Nissan huts,
cask wine transfusions from hole-in-the-wall bars.

2

Wake in pre-dawn purple. 256 colours.
Residual embers sink back
to the land of Namatjira's ghost.
From there go abstract, or swear
a dingo took the leftovers.
Flames brighten and fade, the morning's surplus
clarity turning frost
into dust filled slipstream.
You could drive backwards, in reverse, – forever –
the road ruled straight and narrow
each sand hill urging
the mind towards a moral thought.
All snake and no tail, no head.
Like a roll-your-own open at both ends.

Learn how and why, say please
for every step taken on a pixilated track
across the land. Endless painting.
Enter anywhere. Drivetime talk of
national style. Cowboy, what void was that?
Marlboro man closes the gates.
like an earnest God, when you leave.

Adam Aitken

The Anti-Travel Travel Poem

The anti-travel travel poem suggests the road
romance & regrets
the endless paperwork we left behind
I dreamed of walking boots that wouldn't lace
anti-travellers can never get lost
in a swamp of Choice we must take
the American grid pattern endless
military runways, the borders
of Empire, take-off zone & rabbit fence
keeping peace at the ruined city gate
where crows consider life in a decommissioned bomber
the line I have lain too long on the beach
staring at the awesome winter surf
is prelude to destruction & creation
the anti-travel travel poem does not
ask for directions on a road no one's taken
it is time arrested at six-ways crossroad
where cremation crews put shoulder to the Prince's corpse
malicious hangers-on decide its time to quit
and humans go on burning quietly
find shelf space in a Singapore of metaphysics
in food halls where no one's lost,
no one's found, no one needs directions
each well meant instruction (go straight
through the cemetery, turn left – or was it right)
leads to the wilderness of whole new forests
wholly dedicated to paper (Show us your ID, Mr Death!).
Sure not everyone's perfectly matched.
Even the President preferred golf,
the curve & arrow of ball and club, the flagged
plantation we thought abolished
inter-island piracy forever, & snakes
that hide in elephant grass all know
how dangerous the sedentary life
being cute & poisonous at the same time
exiles mistaken for natives
non-travellers who decide to stay
feral & primitive, go loose, develop the local accent
camp on the edge of what they know best:
abandoned village with Pepsi sign
a dog dozing in a broken down truck
in the mountain's two thousand metre air
the sign on a frog statue:
SORRY, NO ROOM SERVICE
hasn't changed since Eisenhower,
a red stop sign marks disused
industrial estate no one but a film crew stops at
checkpoints for the apprentice guide
and even the ICBM stalls
on a one way track to Krakatoa
with human maps it cannot read.
Rivers stop, flow back, released

from the burden of their own
meanderings, the drunk boatmen, Ophelias overgrown
bloated with silt, good for growing moss
from that moment a bird dropped seed
of grass & trees on no-where-in-particular's
shady undergrowth & the poem's farms & gardens
revert to shaggy Edens where no-one is a stranger
in a Kingdom of minute-by-minute ritual
where we know belonging, we know how.

Adam Aitken

The Bad Women of Bangkok

In communist Laos, where they come from
camouflage is a practical art and the moonlight
a nuisance, but the guards sleep through the blackout
and their dreams swim out across the river

towards Sodom – but who here
minds what they do or where they go –
whose drunken searchlight operators
fall to their knees
and the girls disguised as monks
smuggle into clubland,
where you can
lambada with a snake or smile in a cage
of disillusioned crocodiles,
or edit their lives
and take them back to the hills of their youth
riding whatever tiger you choose,
and call it a safari, under umbrellas
in unbecoming heat; sunburn
and innocence smiles for five minutes,
in a cinema verite where we
can't look away, neither shocked nor relieved
at two-way commerce: your cash relayed to their mothers
via camouflage fish net
they fold your crumpled dollars into.
Makeup and their stripped down
love machine
to play with at breakfast.
What issues from their lips
comes back to them in a cinema, hungover and
condemned to your gaze and a hundred faces
around a curtained screen,
the only face no can see
your own.

Adam Aitken

The Fire Watchers: A Memoir (In The Sydney Style)

Too blind to be a fireman, too flat footed
my brother sought out fires, big ones, coming home
late from school – and became a heavy smoker of imported Virginia.
But me who biked the Harbour Bridge
and saw that shoddy playground burn,
Luna Park, its joyful fretwork temple to fun, the ghost train
razed, parents and children, fairy floss and chewing gum
gone to ash and blackout.

Mum said, I hope you didn't look . . .
In the only city he ever loved Dad slowed down
on passing accident scenes, and I asked
a lot of questions then, a kid stuck on 'Why'?
Obsessive, thirteen, and forensic I memorised
the number injured, type of vehicle, angles
of incidence. Years before crumple
zones crash dummies or digital instruments.
My brother, the surfing shaman, mimicked
sirens and I noted with skilled
Conservatorium training
how they differed – in pitch and rhythm –
from foreign ones on TV.
His every gesture, mum's nerve wracked silence,
Dad's use of the lighter, the way he steered
knees on the wheel as he lit up –
such habits he learned from Americans.

Reaching forty now I ask: Why did Mum
never sew the hems of my jeans, even if Death on the TV
reminded her of her children?
Who buys the albums,
the biscuit tins stacked and smiling, flipped through
so often the narratives refine themselves
with every passing year?
On the day Mum burned Dad's books I thought
how modern she'd become
hard as a fallen city's final hour.
The pyramid of books glowed orange
then the pages curled – biographies, murder mysteries –
winged histories made permanent in print:
'50s crime classics, adulterous romance
well plotted paperbacks Dad would have hoarded
if only to browse, somewhere between accounts,
reading his life away
one balmy Sydney autumn.

Adam Aitken

The Tidal Wave (A Dream)

The report reminds you
how you have to leave town, your boats and dogs

you watch the approach
of a vast swell, more vast

than anything
anyone can remember

you rise to meet the crest
one buoyant hand holding your head

above the waves, the other
erasing the shore

of some distant land – love perhaps
the very idea of presence

estranged whitewater
on an outer reef

singular as a concrete pier
this dream provides –

as if the mind
was observatory
the body a constellation

Then the crest (un –
believably) wipes you away, and

someone riding in it
its crest peeling

and breaking away
as it would, naturally

at that change of medium –
between
sea and land
between
the real you

and the
figured distance
I make of you

though this meeting
is what we want

the way a swimmer
comes to safety

on the shoreline
of your arms

the final heat
which holds me here.

Adam Aitken

The Two Mothers

A Conversation

The one who cares
is the one you abandon
to the slow germination
of village days.

The other one abandons
her few fallow acres

whose most valued possessions
are beauty & optimism
gods & demons

whose bedroom has become
a shrine to a three speed fan
and singers of renown.

One is the backbone of the shop
ironing (everything
has a perfect crease).

The other gives birth
to a confused offspring – part
bird perhaps, oddly plumed
partly you.

Adam Aitken

Tumbleweed Roundup

The posse had gathered
in the emptiest part of town.
Even the dust looked bored.
It was not like there was
enough sentencing to go round
to make a paragraph.
Maybe the Indian Wars
would finally steamroller the pioneers.
All that learnin' foa what?
The Community wanted a lynching
before they knew who did it.
Thankyou for your narrative interest in this position
but we regret to inform you...
Mixed or miffed genres
the Sheriff knew he was up against it -
maybe today he'd name his target, but
no, he wasn't to show his hand
until well after midnight, at which time
the intruder would have left holding nothing
but a kitchen sink -
tho Wild Bill was up on the roof
Bonnie was staking out the front door
and Killjoy Finch had a measure
on Forms. Turnip had planned
a tripartite brochure
to keep the town straighttalking
and Old Quickdraw was gettin' optimised
in a dream of a passive tense.
If the World cometh to our door
if the world were the word? ventured the Preacher.
All eyes turned to him who had once before
and only once proffered sage advice.
Charlie Chan took notes (there was
a suspicious Elsewhere about him - that
he might steal the patents
or spontaneously combust
with song and he wasn't even drunk,
not yet, not ever).

Adam Aitken

What She Told Me Of The War

Were they cruel masters I asked, referring to the Japanese.
By entertaining the invader, she said, then poisoning their rice
they could have been free. For a day perhaps.
But no one had the heart to take a life.
She smiles, beyond the guilt implicit in the thought,
smiling as she often does, like an appeasement
as if to say
why do you ask?
Are you not proud that no one died fighting?

She remembers the planes, supposed 'allies'
vanishing into the thunderclouds of their
own making, falling into history's frieze
in some strange monsoon called war.

I imagine aeroplanes overgrown with vine
leaking kerosene into a khaki forest
somewhere in her rural childhood,
a mission failed, a missing pilot
taking refuge from an angry mob.
But they weren't really, they were innocent enough
and each day's target was a decent meal
(half an egg perhaps) and rice for the next.

If anyone fell out of the sky, they did not
deserve death by fire: who could say
if the cloud was a parachute or the parachute
was a cloud. If they contemplated war, they lacked
its tactics, they lacked technique.

So when the commander sat down, he commended them
on a beautiful meal (fresh chicken, carved fruits)
then fell asleep
with its pleasant memory.

Adam Aitken