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Launch Speech for Alan Wearne's *These Things Are Real*
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This new collection by Alan Wearne is divided into two parts: the first containing five verse narratives that move across the decades from around the immediate post-World War II years through to the near present, while the second section of the book takes us to the Sarsaparilla Writers Centre. *These Things Are Real*, a title borrowed from Ern Malley, explores varieties of human behaviour and culture with brio, wit, and an ear for the vernacular, its music, inflections and nuances – together with a satiric, parodic, lampooning dimension which overrides the ‘real’. The Hogarth illustration on the cover heralds this cheeky focus. This book is a fiesta of activity, a jampackery of forms: narratives, quotations, various poetic structures and rhymes, and song. In Alan’s writing there is a sense of the larrikin, the ghost of C.J. Dennis, the curiosity of Pip, the child protagonist from Patrick White’s play ‘The Season at Sarsaparilla’, who expands her knowledge by examining the behaviour of the neighbourhood dogs on heat in the mating season.

The verse narratives, in a sense often comedies of manners, are strikingly mobile texts, whether directed by the narrator, the characters, or various moments or fragments of conversation. There are shifts, adjustments, recalibrations re perceptions, revelations and connotations – driven in part by Wearne’s facility with idiom, inference, insinuation. The flexible lineation – with variation in line length, format, use of spacing and enjambment – animates the narrative on the page. Wearne tinkers with his tales.

In ‘Anger Management: a South Coast Tale’ we see the consequences of a single mother’s relationship with a busker musician she meets outside a supermarket. Wearne carefully constructs a frisson in the narrative between the humorous and the more disturbing, concerning elements of the tale. By use of the second person voice he gives the woman some narrative agency, and the narrator some critical perspective, though in the opening lines we get a first person impression of this busker’s charms: ‘I like what I am seeing/even (especially) the stubble and the sweat’. She ignores early warnings: ‘that slow-marching seep of gossip that will out,’ and though he gets cranky re his ex she thinks she can manage him with such techniques as ‘certain’ medications, yoga, massage, ‘and where/all of that might finish’. Still he deteriorates, now cranky with the band he’s playing with: ‘You name it he throws it.’ But the kids jump into his lap, and round midnight he might be ‘reading aloud from Neruda or The Mersey Sound’. Then the bruising starts. Eventually the cops are called, then there’s the AVO, etc. All rationalisations eventually stop. There’s a modulated grimness to this situation, with a cautionary conclusion describing his departure, ‘heading off



now:/sheepish him, his reading matter and guitar/through regional Australia.’ This narrative was originally named a ‘fable’ which indicates a larger dimension to its individual tale-like status.

‘Memoirs of a Ceb’ is the longest verse narrative in the collection, travelling across a few decades. Using a mix of narrative techniques and voices it focuses on the main character Peter from his youth onwards, as he comes to accept his homosexuality. Peter who will become an engineer is a churchy boy. A Ceb. If you don’t know what a Ceb is you will work it out as you move through the narrative. Half way through Viv, one of his friends, actually asks what a Ceb is. CEB is referred to as ‘the world’s beigest acronym’. There are many amusing moments. We first meet Peter having early homosexual experiences during a Holy Trinity Outreach Program during which he meets a bodgie type who calls him ‘Goose’ – ‘a slightly oiled, brush-backed man,/ with just that few more years of life about him’. The young Peter is confused, and disturbed and has some medical/counselling ‘treatments’ but I’ll leave you to enjoy the comical revelations which manifest at the conclusion of the tale. As he grows into adulthood Peter leads an active gay or camp life, has a boyfriend Cameron and plenty of friends. Over the years different aspects, versions of his early sexual experience are revealed in various social situations. For me this retelling of the story is a striking feature of this narrative, with its shifts in emphasis, tones, adjustments and revelations. A kind of poetics or politics of the nature of story, especially in its oral form.

The title of the monologue ‘Mixed Business’ is witty, offering various connotations, including the narrator’s and a reader’s perceptions. Here the speaker is the central protagonist. This unnamed narrator was once a married school teacher, now poor and single, on the Invalid Pension – a downward slide through drug use. He recounts the days when he was a frequenter of a character named Beetle’s drug business/scene in an old shopfront, once a milk bar. Amusingly it’s Beetle who refers to it as a ‘mixed business’. Beetle lords it over the young minions of his drug dealing/using scene. He has charisma and can be harsh. Our narrator has a certain admiration for Beetle. One day Beetle goes too far and a 13-year-old, aptly named Daemon, referred to as ‘user-dobber-thief’ is killed. Both humour and mediated horror inhabit this narrative. For example (“J-j-jeez Beetz,” Stu who thought he was funny/once gagged, “don’t give them ambos t-t-too much work.”) And the black humour of the image of Beetle in prison: ‘someone’s required to wheelchair him, King Beetle-mate with/Aussie flag/ round and around the Z division yard’ is pretty memorable. The narrator wasn’t around the day of the murder but he wants to go to the trial. As it’s school holidays he invites his old school teacher friend Bob Arnold to come with him to see the famous/ infamous Beetle. A prominent feature of this story is the speaker’s admiration of both Bob and Beetle. The 2 Bs. He says of Bob: ‘the kind of man for whom life works/... he loves life’s work; he’s lucky too, since he makes/his luck’. The speaker though also likes to examine what he sees as flaws in Bob Arnold’s ‘unblemished’ glass. This is an interesting monologue full of recollections and interactions of the Beetle days. And interesting also because this somewhat broken-down, down-at-heel narrator has a



kind of crisp eloquence and awareness and a sense of self respect. He concludes: 'and even those memories, our sour/and blighted memories, must surely need to cease.'

The retrospective narrative 'Waitin' for the Viet Cong', a monologue spoken by a retiring femocrat is a political/familial/sexual comedy of sorts. The femocrat reveals stories of her youth-school and university days during the Vietnam War years. Her professional middle class parents are fairly tolerant, and her mother who features as a mini-narrator within the monologue refers to her as 'our elder daughter, the brilliant Marxist-Leninist.' The centre of this narrative is based on her parents' misunderstanding as to why when a student she went missing in Paris and was found, via her parents' connections/network, very ill with pleurisy. It was the Establishment that saved her! This episode is referred to as the mother's 'Great Story'. Our femocrat narrator had taken off to Paris during the Vietnam War years 'When Paris/ seemed like it had been shot out of France into/and beyond the heavens'. But now in this text she explodes her parents' assessment of her illness and reveals its real reason: she had been dumped by the Sapphic/lesbian lover of her teenage years, the French Antoinette, 'that gamin type made for the barricades', whom she had met while at school in England during her father's sabbatical. She describes the Paris drama succinctly: 'She cut me and I caught a chill.' This slice of quasi-leftist baby boomer oral history ends with a song – the rousing 'Waitin' for the Viet Cong'.

'They Came to Moorabbin', narrator directed, with protagonist participation, captures aspects of Australian socio/political life and values during the post-World War II years (with some reference to the War Years). The three main characters are Keith and his wife Iris, and Nance, recently widowed, whose husband Tony had been a diplomat. Nance and Iris have met previously through AWAS – Australian Women's Army Services. The opening of this tale illustrates one of the features of Alan Wearne's sharp social ear via his use of names. He includes both women's names as part of a generational list of 'unadorned names' e.g. 'Jean', 'Gwen', 'Wynne', 'Dot'. Iris and Nance reignite their friendship, with Iris' hubby Keith taking command, so to speak. Keith is a kind of faux chivalrous character full of his own opinions, and finds a role for himself helping the more sophisticated Nance with her affairs, e.g. the taxes, etc. Nance has a welcome flourish of attitude, referring to Moorabbin with wit: 'I'm no Martian', she'd inform, 'but here I live on Mars'. Keith is always dropping round, telling 'Toots', as he calls her, she looks like 'Lauren Bacall'. The narrative is threaded with intimations of sexual interest on his part but Nance is smart and not a malleable little woman. The figure of Menzies permeates the scenario and is filtered through Keith's perspective and values. Nance has her own opinions and has met Menzies in Capetown when her late husband Tony was in diplomatic service. Although she may be a Liberal voter she speaks of Menzies in a comic way: 'to puff and speechify about/the consulate, like some school inspector,/I've thought he couldn't run the Village Glee Club.' Nance also dislikes the way Keith treats his wife. At the end of the narrative we get a kind of epilogue outlining what eventually happened to this trio. Effectively an anti-climax. I found this story a rich snapshot or memory album of a long ago period of Australian suburban history. Alan really evokes the atmosphere or



moves with verve and formal poetic skill through various subjects – literary players and figures, focused on poetry of course; religion, music, politics, sport, celebrities, including the brotherhood of those named Alan, in the name's various spellings. He employs a number of verse forms and some snappy rhymes. The texts proceed swiftly and rhythmically in a kind of progressive barn dance!

The opening text 'Hail! Muse! et cetera.', a compilation of short poems epigrammatic in style opens with INVOCATION: 'Abandon Art all ye who enter /The Sarsaparilla Writer's Centre!' Here are a couple of examples of amusing two liners – in 'On Certain Australian Lady Poets': 'Coral and Lisa, Alison and Ania:/I've half a mind to exile you to Bunyah.'; and in 'Lines (Really) Showing my Age (for Laurie Duggan)': 'What care I for Kylie, Kurt or Bono?/I've a Satanic Majesties...in mono!' Poetry is centremost in the amusing 'The Ballad of 68 or I Was Dransfield's Dealer' which is narrated by the dealer. The title refers to a group of mostly male poets who pushed back against a conservative tradition. Numerous poets appear in this text. There are some snappy rhymes, for example: 'Poems from Melbourne's academe/truly proved a bummer;/no wonder an alternate team/assembled at La Mama' or 'Seeing my future more boutique/than David Jones' or 'Myer's/I serviced decade, year, month, week/our bunch of versifiers.' Ode for 'Johanna Featherstone & Fiona Wright' is a mock ode referencing a time round 2010/11 when two poetry organisations were merged under the new bureaucratic rubric of Peak Industry Body, a rather hilarious concept for the culture of poetry. Alan has fun employing the absurd and awkward refrain 'Peak Industry Body'. Here's an example: 'Industry Body, Peak Industry Body/ Thou mentoring magus like Big Ears to Noddy,'.

'Freely and with the appropriate sense of space' is a fourteen-part series of prose poems/short narratives recounting a series of dreams populated with poets and literary figures. Here's a sampling: 'Shelton Lea is offered the position of Speaker in Federal Parliament; on a plane everyone is reading the same Bryce Courtenay novel; Alan himself is in Lisbon and runs into one of Pessoa's heteronyms, Alvaro de Campos, who insists he is not a heteronym, but that Pessoa is one, and that Robbie Burns is also a heteronym. In fact they are heteronyms invented by de Campos; Ivor Indyk and Alan take Alexander Pope on a tour of the Sydney Writers Festival – Pope hasn't been invited to the Festival, he is their secret guest. Alan is concerned when Pope takes off to explore the activities in the slam poetry tent, but Ivor reassures him that the author of The Dunciad can accommodate anything! Pope returns grinning ear-to-ear!'

Religion is lampooned or satirised with two witty poems in rhyming couplets. In Faith-based Solutions we are presented with a thumbnail perspective on world religions. I particularly like this couplet: 'And whither mankind's Collective Id/should Zeus turn out the Comeback Kid?' The poem Polemical Lines of a Former Sunday School Teacher has some bite as the two opening couplets suggest: 'Houston, Jensen, Pell and Nile/put the Son of God on trial,/.....though Love thy neighbour's fine as such/seems like the Man forgave too much'.



Song being a feature of Alan's work the Blues comes to Sarsaparilla in the form of Sian Gammie's Roman-Illawarra Blues – an unusual linkage. Instead of going down to St James Infirmary the speaker/singer goes down to St. Peter's – and chats with the Pope. Alan can make impressive leaps via rhyme: 'The Empire it had Egypt, it had Syria it had Gaul/it had those Ancient Britons don't forget that wild old Gaul/The Colosseum's mighty, I prefer the Crown Street Mall.'

When it comes to song and music Wearne is not afraid to show his eclectism, as in The Ballade of Easy Listening where he laments its demise in a soft tongue-in-cheek way, referring to such singers/musicans as Andy Williams, Mancini, Roberta Flack.

There are various other poems in the Sarsaparilla section on sport, especially football, but I'll leave them for you to enjoy as I have little knowledge of the football field, having more affinity with the Elysian field. However I couldn't finish off without applauding Wearne's poem Ballade for Alan Gould – with its attached quote 'What's in a name' from the famous bard Alan Shakespeare. This is a tour de force celebrating the brotherhood of Alans, complete with a 23-person guide to the various Alans in the poem. Each verse ends with a statement re the Alans sticking together. Hopefully Alan will read this as only Alan can! And by the way...are there any Alans (or Allanahs here today)?

Joanne Burns is an award-winning poet, winning the Judith Wright ACT Poetry Prize and being shortlisted for the NSW Premier's Poetry Award. Her poems are studied in high schools and have been produced for radio and theatre.