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Alan Wearne, *Prepare the Cabin for Landing*

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Alan Wearne has always been a consummate storyteller, conjuring experiences and assembling mini-epic sagas (and several that are monumental) from everyday life. In *Prepare the Cabin for Landing* he explores behaviours of multiple selves; his interest is with the way life falls. This brings great flexibility to his use of satire, from good-humoured raillery to sharp parody to ridicule to invective to narratives of dark irony. He keeps the rigours of censure constantly in play. Some of Wearne's imaginings are very likely prompted by his own real-life encounters with suburban and inner urban cultures in Melbourne between the 1950s and 1980s. This era is his milieu and an enduring subject in all of his verse collections.

The poet is himself a minor character in "Operation Hendrickson", an unconventional, twenty-poem narrative sequence. Robert Hendrickson ("Henn") is the narrator, recalling anecdotes from his school days, but Henn brings his old school-mate Wearne into his narrative, asking the poet to tell his story – "So Wearney's told: / 'Until we meet once more, go on, like I told you, / write my memoirs.'" – leading to a lively interplay between Wearne as poet and Henn as narrator.

Set roughly in the late 1970s, the poem memorialises time, encapsulating it in that period, while being written many decades later. Henn is continually presented as taking on an authorial role. This includes trying out his concept of how people experience phenomena such as "God". "Caveman", for example, is about a minister's son who was a victim of bullying at school, but the opening lines could be the start of an epistemological-theological discussion:

> I know enough of God to know God knows when he's been had;
> or when God's bored, so bored with certain pious stunts
> he just gives in. There's even times when all God sees
> is full collapse and walks away.

The rawness here seems to be picking up a notion of people needing to look out for each other. Wearne's poem is catching something of the zeitgeist of Australia in the immediate post-war decades. Henn alludes to indifference as an accepted part of school culture, implicating himself: "You sure could get an easy rise from Caveman, / and watch him turn, turn into Caveman Plus". As Henn recollects, lack of empathy is widespread, even the teachers are complicit. They too replace the child's name with his pejorative nickname:

And wasn't it all like
some smug, very new teacher who announces
"So, you're our famous Caveman…" someone
(let's try calling him God) making you his special joke,
making sure you have to live and wear that joke forever.

"Caveman 2" is set some years after their school days. Henn finds the minister's son "stacking trolleys as they come wheeling / off the escalators". His language breaks into linguistic fragments:

And here's what I won't be asking,
what he's not going to reply.
Do you know
we used to walk past your classroom just to see you in action …
wasn't there that time you threw chairs at a girl! ...
didn't you ever know how everyone went bug-eyed at you …
did you ever mind … Is God still trying to break you …
and how many times have you been broken anyway …
Maybe maybe
sort of sort of not my God not many hardly any none.

The breakdown of language in those last two lines sounds like the unspoken answer to Henn's unspoken questions, but the incoherent stuttering is also a disappearing of the answer into Henn. The implied realism fits with the gestalt of doubleness that Wearne is working through this poem. The speaker acknowledges an impoverishment and solidarity of plight, with knowledge of the other's helplessness, as he judges it.

If there is a way to sum up the tough, witty, poignant terrain of this sequence, it might be that it shows the impact of the past – experiences, behaviours, actions – in shaping the now-ageing Henn in the present: "Foster care was moving out of 'homes' / and into houses, houses with folks"; and:

I could be many people's boy,
which still is now both advantage/disadvantage;
for it can remain such a bewildering comfort,
guessing how much you'll never know (especially about yourself).

Through Henn's memoirs, we are privy to several unguarded moments of this kind. We also hear of criminality: "Pancakes my friend, we were / making pancakes. Our very own 1963 / drug of choice"; and of Henn's reaction to being charged for "carnival knowledge": "Okay, she was fifteen … 'Sure I did it but y'know I'm innocent, right?' / Whilst Wes just stares some *Really?* squarehead stare".

Other troubled figures are randomly woven in and out. We hear of the fates of friends and acquaintances through drugs, car accidents, war and "*victim centred fun*". But amidst the clamour of the various stories, pathos emerges in Henn's search for belonging: "And when I found love, or thought I did, / I liked it". Henn refers to love unaffectedly and often, it even appears to sit behind his pent-up acrimony over his conviction: "*Well I've learnt this from carnival knowledge / Love's rated at sweet bugger-all*". And later in the poem: "Done once, I wish I could remind them / though I don't, *done once for love*". A plaintive moment in his thinking about love emerges in this passing insight:

> "What do you think it is it is, this life, this life?
> Some bright elusive butterfly of love?"

The stuttering and sentiment here arise unexpectedly and disappear just as quickly. What is interesting is the incongruity of where those two questions are coming from and to whom they are directed. Is the reader being formally addressed? The voice in "Operation Hendrickson" is constantly in flux, compounded by the poet's own presence as a character. Wearne is shaping the emotional power of Henn's story. Yet the mark of this poem is the conviction a reader is likely to have that Henn is in charge of its quirky imaginative power. As readers we see this intricacy being played over and again through the sequence, right down to the last lines, when "Wearney" prompts Henn for an "ever-essential / Henn motto". The two characters seem spiritedly indistinguishable. Henn says, "'*Don't like it? Don't do it.* / For Wearney, that's what it's all about'". Yet every so often through the poem, the Huckleberry Finn epigraph resounds: "… and he told the truth, mainly". Arbitrarily, "he" could very well be the poet: as Henn counsels, "Wearney you needn't believe because / he's just making it up for *Proper Gander*, / his rag".

Prepare the Cabin for Landing gives us stories and experiences that have a heady mix of different registers and pacing. This is particularly evident in the four single poems in the first section. The implicit promise of friendship between the three teachers in "A Portrait of Three Young High School Teachers", for instance, is a very fine counterpoise to the bleakly funny "Dysfunction, North Carlton Style or, The Widow of Noosa", a burlesque caricature of the marriage and family life of an inner city couple. The three young high school teachers poem has the sanity and clarity of a Jane Austen with a modern bent. Its concern is tacit kindness as a firm buttress for living. The first two stanzas play into a subtle irony:

> In full, pleated, white or floral-patterned skirts,
> you're twenty-six or twenty-four or twenty:
> the focused one, the one who's sharp-tongue wise
> and the newly-wed from interstate
> whom the other two can't help but protect and advise.
>
> And if like the nation this school seems
> on better days almost miraculously do-it-yourself,
> doubtless that's because who else is there to do it?
> (Then, if you wish to appear old-fashioned
> it's all like a "courtship", or what you're discovering re marriage.)

Whether done consciously or not, those small conditionals in the second stanza seem to be echoing the great opening lines of Auden's "In Praise of Limestone". The narration in the lines above is directly authorial, though toward the end of the poem the "voice" is deftly transposed to one of the teachers.

In the other two poems in the first section, Wearne shifts the tone and pace. He is in spurring satirical mode in "'All these young Australianists…'", lampooning academia through his speakers, "Janice Y. Wilde, critic and poet" and her partner, "critic, essayist, novelist and naturally / poet Ted Tucker". Janice sets the scene in these lines:

> Euro-conferencing doubtless gives one, though I'm sure you know it,
> mind-enhancement, network-enlargement and dollops of let's-just-

call-it succour.

And further on:

> all these young Australianists out on their learning curve
> returning home for what? Frequent Flyer points and tears
> tears tears,
>
> back-stabbed, bitten and burnt.

Wearne is one of the most adept modern Australian poets writing in strict rhyme (another is Alan Gould). This poem uses a mix of rhymed free verse shaped into long, four-line stanzas, and rhymed loose tetrameter in eight-line stanzas. The insistent tension of its rhyme scheme sharpens and forgives the poem's theatrical leaning to melodrama. But the poet also allows a naturalistic wistfulness for bygone days (Janice again):

> And yes sometimes I fear it's shuddering beyond control: this
> Creative Industries/that Arts Practice,
> and I do yearn to return to those days when all it required was
> just loving the stuff.

Wearne is an ebullient satirist, turning nimbly from one tonal ambience to another within the same poem. A lampooning satire does not necessarily need to be unsympathetic. In fact, in an interview with Michael Brennan in 2011, Wearne points out that his poetry plays across diverse literary forms:

> I court a satiric muse, I court a narrative muse and at times the tragic muse comes a-calling. I have Browning as a strong exemplar, other fine Victorians in strong support, whilst the man who brought us *Don Juan* refuses to leave.

"The God of Nope", also in the first section, is equally satirical, but the tenor is unremitting in its cool fury toward the key figures responsible for the real-life collapse of the Nugan Hand Bank in the 1980s: lawyer Frank Nugan and ex-Green Beret Michael Hand, with alleged involvement by the CIA and organised crime. As so often with Wearne's poetry, formal technique provides the scaffold. In his 2011 interview, he talks about the music and rhythm of metrical verse:

> I love the way form, structure, metre etc. frees you, just as his cell allowed the Birdman to study the flocks of Alcatraz. When it comes to composition though there's little better for me than a good balladic beat, or to quote Nat "King" Cole: "I'm an errand boy for rhythm . . . send me".

Readers of Wearne's poetry will know that he shapes the cadences of his free verse as vigorously as those of his formal verse. In the following stanzas from "The God of Nope", rage is played into mordant irony, armour-plated by meticulous rhymes. The speaker is "a onetime junior partner":

> "Some place, we're told, there has to be a law
> which may apply to us and may not, for
> this now's our world at play/at prayer/at war.
>
> Eyeballing Tyranny? Rinsing out the dope?

Why be a martyr to the God of Nope
when yeah! blooms forth from every boomboom! hope?

We just suggest, the world falls into line…".

Tightly rhymed tercets of this calibre extend over seven pages. The beat pattern is restless and not always what you expect it to be within its pentameter mould. It reads like a performance-driven poem. Its inflexions are straight-out confrontational.

The last poem in the book, "The Vanity of Australian Wishes", is a sprawling personal treatise modelled on the civic-minded satirical tradition of Juvenal's "Satire X" and Samuel Johnson's "The Vanity of Human Wishes". In Wearne's poem, one of two epigraphs is a quote from a letter that Alexander Pope wrote to Dr John Arbuthnot on the 2 August 1734. Here is an excerpt from that epigraph:

> "I thank you dear Sir for making That your Request to me which I make my Pride, nay my Duty; 'that I should continue my Disdain & abhorrence of Vice, & manifest it still in my writings.'" … But General Satire in Times of General Vice has no force, & is no Punishment: People have ceased to be ashamed of it when so many are join'd with them; and tis only by hunting One or two from the Herd that any Examples can be made.

This nicely sums up the texture of Pope's satire, and indeed Juvenal's and Johnson's. Their poetry seems deeply ambivalent about any presumption that those who are castigated through satire will be ashamed and will reform. In the moralising tradition of holding up a mirror of satirical art, shamelessness too often stares right back, impudently.

Wearne's poem starts by making a coincidental link between the funeral of Alphonse Gangitano, a key figure in the Melbourne gangland wars in the late 1990s, and the death of his fellow poet and close friend, John Forbes, which happened on the same day. At this personal loss, Wearne confesses to an enduring grief. The connection between Gangitano and Forbes may seem tenuous, yet if we consider Wearne's imaginative apprehension about Australian social and political culture, and his capacious reach within that scope, we can nearly always expect his poetry to be disarming, sometimes turbulent, and often waggish. Indeed, he assumes a facetious tone in his 2011 interview when talking about the impetus to write about gangland criminality: "The recent Melbourne gangland wars for god's sake were too iconically over the top to be left to a mere junior art form like television, and I've a good mind to render them in ottava rima (better than *Underbelly*!)". (He settled for free verse rather than metre.) But the poem's main intent is to survey aspects of Australian life and make sense of them, with particular emphasis on a critique of vanity in all of its guises. It opens with an address to a generalised Australian consciousness:

Why should any "world" styling itself "new",
let alone such hyper-"new" antipodes as ours,
reckon it owns a mortgage on tolerance and reason,
that special unto-itself belief that *we're*
the ones never stuffing it?

Here, casual, colloquial language is lifted to rhetorical grandeur. But the voice in this poem shifts continually through nearly thirty pages, streaming imaginary voices and dialogues.

Wearne is a terrific experimenter with first-person narration. In this too he draws on literary predecessors. In his interview from 2011 he says, "I am still drawn to those Victorians unafraid of using a "speaking" voice: Clough, Meredith, Browning and Hardy". Yet the tradition that Wearne calls upon is vast. In the same interview, he acknowledges debt to a richly textured literary inheritance, it is a broad slate: Augustan poetry, the seventeenth-century Metaphysicals, Pope, Dickens, Fielding, and a range of twentieth-century poets – among them, Philip Larkin, Patrick Kavanagh, James Wright, Paul Blackburn and the New York School. Interestingly he says, "although I barrack for the New York School (they're my team) I don't let that get in the way of appreciating other players". But Wearne's gaze is always on Australia.

In an interview with Bonny Cassidy in 2005, he is unapologetic about his habitual focus on an Australian sensibility:

> 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. Not dogmatically so, but if someone requires footnotes to understand my piece, because they're not from this country, well, tough.

Six years later in his interview with Brennan, he is just as categorical:

> For my own part, I am so poetically grounded in the country called Australia, I've never left its literary shores; and even after 11 years of "exile" I've hardly left Melbourne!

Wearne mockingly chimes that he would "still be an Australian poet" even if he takes up his own idea from 1976 of writing a dramatic monologue about China's Zhou Enlai.

Setting "The Vanity of Australian Wishes" on board a plane, Wearne as narrator addresses his readers a.k.a. the captain addressing his passengers. Most clearly, the two cannot be disentangled:

> "This is your captain speaking…"
> and name us a better way to start
> a vanity of wishes.

This is authority we might normally respect, but the interloping voice of the narrator-poet makes the announcement ludic. Near the end of the poem, Wearne's captain goes further, resorting to a farcical broadcast in preparation for landing:

> Your captain again.
> We're not meant to surprise: my bland self,
> my taciturn two i.c., all my calm, courteous personnel
> padding through the cabin just for you,
> you who got it the first time *Bland!*,
> even if before we land I'd love to grab five minutes
> of makeover time, just to re-emerge as a Year Ten smart-arse
> at his intercom announcing:
> "Attention Earthlings! Attention Earthlings!
> We come in peace, we come in peace, in temperate, rational

goodwill, which is more than you are doing now…"

A poet's authority is assumed here in order to parody the authority figure who might have delusions of power. Such a voice is rarely impressive for long.

Wearne also introduces a select cast of passenger-characters, who are energetically threaded through his own dialogue with "Australia":

For all your time and all your space
Australia, you are there and always there,
and Snowy, V'roomy, Digger, A-K, Chad, that wonderboy,
his dad, Gangitano, our friend Forbes, you and I
yes you and I, never arrived from "no place".

Usually, a satirical poem is directed initially to an inner circle, an in-group who understand its subtleties and idiosyncrasies. Yet satire also has a larger design, intended for scrutiny by a wider audience. "You and I" is salutary: it accepts complicity. Wearne's poem is as rough and diverse in its focus as the country itself is. There are satirical broad-strokes at politicians, corporate greed, and drugs in sport. It also brings up the punitive acculturation of school life, the hanging of Jean Lee, and the Bali Nine. In effect, the past behaviours and ambitions of its cabin of travellers might be seen as a microcosm of a wide range of human desires, and expectations, of inordinate satisfaction. Wearne's sweeping survey has an uncompromising power. I think it is a measure of how poetry gets under one's skin when its language has a force that leaves this reader, at least, unsettled and tense. This is not alleviated by the strong conviction that it is art that produces this effect.

With all of the poem's wildly heuristic aspect, however, if we wish to determine a still point – or, in the tradition of satire, a moral place – we might have to acknowledge there is no such dwelling. For one thing, the poem comes to us oddly from within a cabin above the earth. Wearne's memories of his friendship with Forbes are an obvious steadying point, but those reflections are personal, singular, and from the past. (John Forbes was himself an outstanding satirist and not far from Wearne in sensibility.)

The satirist's moral place is traditionally one of common sense. In the best satirical verse, as I understand it, the poems themselves are set away, undistressed, from the rage and turmoil that are their subject. We need only think of Johnson: "Let observation with extensive view, / Survey mankind from China to Peru". Or Juvenal's "Satire X" with its own epic evocation, addressing a Roman audience with a glimpse at ambitious imperium: "In all the lands that stretch far eastward from Cadiz / to Ganges and the dawn". Pope's satire too (in so many ways, the antithesis of Johnson's) is generated from a distance – "An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot", for instance: "Shut, shut the door, good *John!* fatigu'd I said, / Tye up the knocker, say I'm sick, I'm dead". Pope, Johnson and Juvenal take up a semi-dramatic posture in their satire, raging against decay and dullness, yet the tone of moral revelation in their poetry is often so quiet that readers might almost not notice its importance.

Interestingly, in Wearne's case, we get a breath of what a moral stance might look like in "A Portrait of Three Young High School Teachers", the poem he placed at the opening of his book. Its tone is of a light, ironic intelligence, the narrative circling upon the social contract of civility. Readers will find a similar note in other poems in this book. We find these qualities again in the penultimate stanza of "The Vanity of Australian Wishes" when

we get a sense of where the poem alights, or where the plane lands – in a moment of poise:

> For, as you step from the aircraft
> there'll be something quiet, simple (yet thanks not "Aussie",
> Australian) to please us all:
> another set of our smart-suited women and men
> heading in easy phalanx towards the departure lounge,
> that kind of quietly anonymous professionalism
> plenty still retain, set to neither con nor big-note
> nor indulge.

If there is a moral position, it is a modest one. But of course we do not know those "smart-suited women and men", there may be fiends among them, perhaps.

Here are two paragraphs from Wearne's own tribute to his predecessors, taken from a press release that came with the review copy. This is Alan Wearne's own voice, nicely balancing epistle and tribute:

> Juvenal must have known that combination of bemusement, annoyance anger and despair to which your country (let alone the country of mankind) can drive you, though always with an eye and ear to its entertainment value and dramatic potential.
>
> So with him looking over one shoulder and his grand successor, imitator and author of "The Vanity of Human Wishes" Samuel Johnson checking me out over the other, I turned to them saying "These are some of the things we have to suffer and celebrate in a land you would barely imagine, with an array of sinners and saints, attitudes and actions, you most surely would. For without your example Messrs Juvenal and Johnson, much of this would never have been written. And no, it's not even a version or an imitation, though will you accept homage?"

Wearne's confidence in offering homage is strangely moving. "The Vanity of Australian Wishes" ruminates on what constitutes the common good, with an eye and ear for the raw drama in thoughtless refusals of it.

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