"Finding Puck in Hamlet": Chris Wallace-Crabbe’s recent poetry.

The impish Puck from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* has often been described as Wallace-Crabbe’s alter ego. Mischievous, spritely and a practical joker, these characters enjoy life. And Wallace-Crabbe is a ‘character’ in the Australian sense of the word; he is a unique individual who is rascally and appealing. Wallace-Crabbe has acknowledged the importance of Puck in his oeuvre: “I took on Puck because he struck me as an energetic larrikin fairy, liable for transportation.”

And,

“It has been remarked that I’m the first poet since Shakespeare to make good use of Puck; he suits my sensibility pretty well.”

Wallace-Crabbe, like Puck, observes the world from a rare vantage point. Both poets, they comment on human nature; on the foibles of people; on life and death. And both have the last word, an epilogue of sorts. When Puck asserts:

> If we shadows have offended,
> Think but this, and all is mended,
> That you have but slumber’d here
> While these visions did appear,

he invokes a kind of vision in a dream. Similarly, Wallace-Crabbe’s final poem in *Telling a Hawk From a Handsaw* is equally part fairytale, part vision. Entitled, ‘We Are All Grown-ups’, ‘the golden retriever asks the hunter’, ‘What is your music made of?’ but it is a question that is only ever answered with another question, ‘What is the name of a smell?’ Language cannot encapsulate all that is music; it is a sixth sense; a feeling. Like a smell, music has many notes. Finally, ‘silence’ dominates and one final observation is made:

> and the heedless rabbit loped away
> into its blackberry tangle.

Reminiscent of *Alice in Wonderland*, the strange in this poem is also familiar. And yet it all ends in a ‘blackberry tangle’ or a delicious confusion.

But the title of this collection of poetry, Wallace-Crabbe’s most recent, is taken from *Hamlet*, and Puck is noticeably absent. However, this does not mean that the collection is devoid of mischievous moments or light-heartedness. It is just that this collection of poems is characterised by something more serious: time passing. But, it is only through an acknowledgement of the transience of life and the inevitability of death, that the joy of living each moment is possible. Wallace-Crabbe’s poetry celebrates this realisation, like Keats’ ‘Ode on Melancholy’. And recently, Ron Sharp in *Australian Book Review* pointed out the way in which Keats’ ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ is revisited in Wallace-Crabbe’s collection: “Keats, as Wallace-Crabbe has said, is his presiding genius, and echoes of Keats resonate throughout this book, including the appearance of still another bird, "that Hampstead nightingale not to be born for death." Like Keats, for Wallace-Crabbe the "negative
capability" through which he apprehends beauty is even more beautiful and valuable for being so vulnerable and transient.

The title of the book points to the fine line between madness and sanity. Shakespeare’s quotation, uttered by Hamlet, "I am but mad north – north – west; when the wind is southerly. I know a hawk from a handsaw" is appropriate for Wallace-Crabbe’s collection of poetry. There are many different explanations for this odd quotation. One is that handsaw is a misprint for ‘hernshaw’ or a young heron and so being able to tell a hawk from its prey, a heron, suggests sanity, or even just the ability to be discerning. Second, a more recent analysis suggests that handsaw meant saw and ‘hawk’ meant the square board with a handle on the back which a mason hold as he spreads mortar on the wall. Anyone can tell a handsaw from a carpenter’s hawk so again, it is about clarity of vision.

If Hamlet can tell a hawk from a handsaw, then he has some of his wits still about him. If Wallace-Crabbe can do the same, then he is not mad, nor is he suffering a ‘senior moment’; forgetfulness; a lapse. And it is getting old and its association with the memory becoming blunt that is to be feared in Wallace-Crabbe’s poetry; having a mind like a trap appears to ward off death and stupidity. It is also important to note that Hamlet sees the ghost of his father at the beginning of the play. And there are also reverberations of this in Wallace-Crabbe’s poetry. His father, Kenneth Wallace-Crabbe haunts his work.

David McCooy has pointed out how different Chris Wallace-Crabbe’s comments about his parents are to his brother, Robin’s. When McCooy interviewed Chris for Australian Literary Studies he said of his father’s prolonged absence that it, “cancelled out the conflicts inherent in the Oedipus complex. He was merely an ally: nimble, supportive, utterly unthreatening. It was harder for my mother, who took refuge in irony.”

In contrast Robin is “unfailingly hard on his father, the journalist-soldier-handymen-filmmaker-publisher-author Kenneth Wallace-Crabbe, whose return from the War (after having been in the jungles of Burma) sparks off an Antipodean variation of Frank O’Connor’s Oedipus complex. In a subtle way, loss pervades Wallace-Crabbe’s story. Wallace-Crabbe’s most striking claim also centres on the father’s return. ‘I have come to believe that right into her old age my mother doubted the identity of the stranger who returned to our lives after vanishing in the jungles of Burma.’” Kenneth Wallace-Crabbe’s return for Chris’ younger brother is almost like the return of Martin Guerre and questions identity.

Wallace-Crabbe launched this book at a poetry conference at The University of Melbourne and he discussed his father and his ancestry, reading a selection of his poems from Telling a Hawk From a Handsaw.

The poem, “A Triptych for my Father” chronicles his father’s return from the war:

When he came back from the War
He still wore the soft
greyish blue of the British
Air Force, not our darkblue

(he had been too old for ours)

and my little brother whispered,
That man’s still here, in the cold
morning unable to
assimilate this return
from the fabulous, curried East
far to our north, far up
the Eurocentric map
which Dad had fought to maintain
in the fact of the sweat and sprawl
of Japanese marauding.

His joy at this father’s return is obvious and his pride for him is evident in the way he chides his brother’s feelings of alienation and unfamiliarity for a man who gave them life.

He ends the triptych with, “Father, you were able to praise/Whatever I did, or had a shot at”, returning again to life as it whirls by and he tries to record it all, before it disappears. And he finds this exhilarating:

That’s what I love, the take-off,
an exalted thrumming of pressure
as the big turtle races on,
faster and even faster.

The turtle is an important totem for Wallace-Crabbe. He uses the same line in his poem ‘Tributary’. In addition to this, Wallace-Crabbe often states that he feels “as happy as a turtle”. For this reason he is certainly describing himself and his approach to life when he states: “the big turtle races on, faster and even faster”

In, “A Descendant” Wallace-Crabbe begins with, “I fancy I’m descended from the Picts”. In this poem he situates himself in both a familial and intellectual ancestry:

Our patrilineal family came from the crumbled heart
Of traditional Pictish country, close enough
To their curious dark stones marooned in a Christian churchyard,
Not that they’d have known a Pict from a Skraeling,
Most of them.

He discusses his grandfather, Black Geordie, “hurr[ying] off south of the border, / Failing to reinvent the past – until he sailed out here” and juxtaposes this family history with his artistic and intellectual connection to the Picts via Marcellinus and Robbie Burns.

But it is when Wallace-Crabbe imagines himself as a stone, that history and the passing of time is at its most poignant. Originally entitled ‘Brinny’ when it was published in *Southerly* in 2001, “The Stone’s in the Midst of All”, has been described by Wallace-Crabbe as being “about a stone wanting to be a leaf; a very stoic stone with the river flowing over it, but nevertheless a stone wishing it was something else”:

Little by little,

things have been passing over me,

liquid, furry, ephemeral,

slowcoach aeons and banks of cloud.

The personification of the stone in first person becomes a metonym for all of life’s lost opportunities. A brinny, a small stone for throwing, is an image full of possibilities. It may soar elegantly through the air and land gently on the crest of a wave. It may travel a long way but then speed recklessly towards a sandbank. Or it can plummet only a few feet from the person who threw it. However, it is the stone’s stasis, which is of prime significance as it represents the poet’s reflective state.

‘Little by little/things have been passing over me.’ The repetition of ‘little’ and ‘happen’ and the resigned tone undercut the dissatisfaction implicit in the poem. The brinny hopes for a better life but does nothing but ‘shift a bit/...mostly...just l[y]ing around/while happening happens to others/who then go away.’ The stone is restless and resents its solitude and abandonment but it is its passivity and ineffectuality that is the most frustrating as it signals an impediment to the progression of a new self. Though pantheism remains at the heart of most of his oeuvre, his most recent poetry is more sensually aware of the world; these more optimistic poems. In this collection, Wallace-Crabbe plays, not only with words, but, like a brinny, relishes the possibility of soaring into the future.

Though ‘things may ‘have been passing over’ Wallace-Crabbe, they are now passing over him in a ‘liquid, furry, ephemeral way.’ ‘The Stone’s in the Midst of All’ is unique in that it encapsulates his fear of inertia, yet it is only through this contiguous moment of stasis that he can progress to the endless possibilities that resonate in his most recent poetry.
Simon Caterson summed this up in *The Age*, when he stated of Wallace-Crabbe’s book, “Time is a preoccupation in WC poetry”. Wallace-Crabbe, himself, has stressed the importance of time in his poetry, ‘I suppose one of the things I am interested in is the ways in which people have read and do read time in relation to geological time, botanical time and things like that. At worse there is a sense of ourselves as just like a fleck of dust in the face of eternity and yet the world is so full of things that we can bless and enjoy.”

This joy in simple things, is perhaps most contagious in his suite of poems entitled, ‘The Domestic Sublime’. Wallace-Crabbe’s mixture of humour and theatricality capture the joy he has for language, family and life. Again, Sharp has commented that, “This central strain in Wallace-Crabbe’s work is brought to fruition... in the extraordinary sequence of poems called "The Domestic Sublime." The opening movement, aptly called "The Surface of Things," begins with the most mundane of daily activities, applying deodorant, a moment the poet brilliantly transfigures by creating a pair of quatrains with the most ordinary language except for one word, oxter, which means armpit:

Pleasantly rolling deodorant into an oxter

He thought of the shave ahead,

Whether to start in the upper left-hand corner

Or the slant of his jaw instead.

Similarly, Wallace-Crabbe is perhaps one of the only poets to see the potential of a ‘Saucer’ as the subject for a poem and his ‘Indoor Yachting’ is about trying to spread a sheet perfectly on a bed by casting the sheet out over the mattress and letting it “blow out like a spinnaker/so that the far end/will flutter down in place/where a pillow will be”.

‘Coat Hangers Galore’ even manages to celebrate the common coat hanger, in such a way that they seem clever and glamorous:

Clubbable and promiscuous,

they hang around

getting under your feet

while always intending to be helpful

But it is ‘Garlic’ which steals the show:

a naked clove

comes out successfully
shining
virginal as the dawn
yet leaving
its ripe sex on your fingers
for quite some time.

Finally, ‘At the Clothesline’ mixes the sombre with the hopeful:

The many we have loved or used to know
Are dragged already out of sight,
Vanished fast, though stepping slow,
Folded into a remorseless night.

Yet something leaves its mark here like
A rainbow ring around the moon.

Caterson has stated, “I think there is a lot of rejoicing in the things of the world in this book.” And so Puck is there, if you look closely, he is just sometimes hiding in the shadow of Hamlet.