MARION CAMPBELL

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Fiction titles:

ANNA COUANI

Anna Couani is a Sydney writer who teaches visual arts to newly-arrived students from other countries. She writes experimental fiction and poetry and is the publisher of the small press, Sea Cruise Books.

Fiction titles:
Italy, Rigmarole, 1977.
Were All Women Sex-Mad?, Rigmarole, 1982.
The Train (with Leaving Queensland by Barbara Brooks), Sea Cruise Books, 1983.
Italy and The Train (reprint), Rigmarole, 1985.
The Harbour Breathes (with photo-monteur Peter Lyssiotis), Sea Cruise Books, 1989.
Notes by Marion Campbell

Each time I return to ‘She Left You Came’ the writing recomposes its mystery while maintaining an ambient clarity and I get seduced again by the intensity of its paradoxical turns. Before I thought I understood and now I take pleasure in the understanding that withdraws from the horizon of each sentence.

While I can see the structure which has each sentence turning on the pivot, reversing and advancing at once, of the adverb or the adverbial phrase of time, the kind of temporality which emerges exerts a thralldom resistant to my analysis.

Each time I find activated the site of loss, ‘she left’, through the elation of arrival, ‘you came’, and yet it is the triumph of difference in the new encounter which makes for the reconfiguration of back-lit memories and so for their illumination.

The novel I am attempting to write is about misrecognition of a blinding kind. While I work out for myself the web of relations, or what are called ‘draglines’, leading one of the characters, Tom-Tom, to invest in the Spider and in the Laporian Liberation cause, I will be engaged in some loopy detours.

Since the novel will deal in passionate and obsessional investments and their denial and repetition across a range of social processes, I cannot rely on the simply cumulative effect of short passages set end-to-end. It will have to work partly through disjunction and partly through integration across a range of registers and of ‘voices’. It will take narrative time to reshape the questions the narrators ask about Tom-Tom, for instance.

Reflecting on what I find so powerful in Anna Couani’s piece I hope that in part at least my book will explore agape, which is more than love, I think, and which pulses in the impossibility and necessity of repetition. It is about the face of the new as ‘coincidence’ and ‘unrecognisable silhouette’ at once. ‘She Left You Came’ reminds me, as it should remind Tom-Tom, that death is in definition and that claustrophobia comes from the failure of suggestion.

In the undertow of this prose poem I find agape rewriting space: ‘When you laughed everything opened up. (. . .) After
she died ramshackle became inferior.’

While the extracts from my draft explore Tom-Tom’s investments in the Laporean cause as embodied in Asif and in the Spider, what I really want to write about is the charged field through which these are experienced as *agape*. Before the character can take on the lesson of ‘She Left You Came’ she must give herself to ‘black stasis’ if not the ‘long dark tunnel’. In the last extract she submits to the sealed room syndrome, the arrest of desire through a claustrophobic loss of reference. The fact that she knows this gives me hope that she might be restored to her own narrative dynamic.
POINT BLANK I ASK THEM
(from a Work in Progress)

Marion Campbell

I show them point blank, ask them if they recall this Tom-Tom at all.

Wipe out. Zero characters it reads on my menu. Do you read me? There's nothing on my file. I become the curser shouting: give me blanks any time before white lies. And I am the mangy, rangy bitch, running, sniffing outside lexis. I've left behind the security blanket. I rattle my bones in the blanks of your visions and revisions. I parade my blank-mange: lick this Sir. Itching scabs stitch my skin. And you talk of syntax in the poem parlours of your memory. You pamper your sleek bodytexts. Try, as I consider razor wire, the curser growls, just try to get me with your blank bullets. See how the sores run. Payment? RESTITUTION for infecting you in my viral returns? Here's my blank cheque. It makes you blanche. You with your lethal chic and aerobic tongues, have your checkout chicks check this one out: my signature is full of blanks. A Bidon dragline, a Laporian scrawl you say. You give me that blank smile you reserve for us. Your memory bank's gone blank. Maybe there are no words for such as me. Your looks say it loud and clear: you blanking blank, you've blanked our blank, you blanker. Come on: who's tossing the blanket now?

BASILIO:
Could be, but that would've been way back when she phantasised arrest. After the demise of the femocrats, after she dismantled her act.

For her it might have begun in the quarry but I'd wager it began seriously at the pool table, when Asif saw her operating with that other woman in their famous Tandem Tango combination. In the quarry, well, she was having her little zen picnic at the mouth of our arsenal. Can you imagine? We had to divert her
somehow. So we chatted her up a bit. Seemed she was staying with Ecumian professionals, connections she’d made before she came to Farsillon. They must have got some sort of exotic charge out of the Nullusian adventuress. She wanted to break out of that, it was clear. She said she’d left her land to some fringe dwellers back in her own country. She presented this as some sort of cachet. We tripped her up on that one. The blush! My land.

So much for their rights if you call it my land.

It was shorthand, for Christ’s sake.

It was good to see the veneer crack.

I’m listed back there as dangerous.

Congratulations, sister, you think that’ll make us trust you? Show us the documents, photos. Album, got a family album of your land? Then she showed us, but really secretive, as if the cryptolingos’s available to anyone, a postcard of this weird flower she told us was a banksia and which she used later as the femocratic emblem. The banksia knows how to live with its own death, wears its skeleton on its sleeve. It’s a good male-mime when necessary; it’s presented as a hairy menace, a compulsive rapist, she said. Kidnaps the pale-skinned gumnut babies, so run the rumours of its evil. It’s suspect because it operates collectively, and speaks in many tongues. It’s the revenge of the bush on the Colons. And then she rolled up her sleeve. There was a banksia on her bicep. The polylabial rules, she said. It wasn’t discreet, you know.

She hadn’t been to the quarry by chance, it turned out. She’d already made her dragline to the Spider, if you get me. She’d been in a short-term visa queue, and she’d watched a routine of the Migro Buros or what we call the Migraines. Each time the Laporean guys make it to the top of the queue they’re told their numbers have expired. Each time they’re issued with new numbers sending them to the back of the queue again, right? She found later, when she followed that queue from the back alley of Farsillon into the main drag, that some had done six days’ waiting. So she barged to the front and harangued the Migro Buros. They’d never had anything like it happen before and for a while they listened in bemused tolerance. They told her she could have her own papers revoked if she wanted more equality. Asif and the Spider eyed her. She looked energetic enough, for sure. She acted like a mainstream Ecumian, spoke the language from burolingo to gutterslang with the coolest modulation. Lovely control, they thought. Could be a good weapon. Fearless. Sure, there was a bit of fanatical zealot in her they’d have to watch. When the Buros told the Laporean losers they’d have to collect new numbers once again, Tom-Tom comes in this poshest accent: Up my bum they will.
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The Spider took her aside: *They know and you know that that's what Ecumia needs, black labour. If these guys get visa security they'll have to give them regular wages which, of course, the current policy is geared to prevent. Now for the moment we're just documenting. If you want to look into El El and do your bit, come to a Webworkers' prelim my place. One on tonight. Basilio will call for you.*

When we arrive, Tom-Tom sees something else, of course. There's the Spider all right, beckoning her to an alcove: the baldaquin piled with cushions and hung with tapestries. She's got her coral pants on. She is smoking a hooka, something we haven't seen before. She offers Tom-Tom wine and pastries. Tom-Tom falls head over heels for the first course, the cause, but especially for the Spider, I'd say. When the little Bidons materialise from everywhere, lifts, bedrooms, hidden studies, walk-in-robies, it's some sort of amorous relation Tom-Tom imagines, as if this army of men were engaged in the sexual services of the Spider . . . I'll give her that, she's always had a kind of cradlesnatching charisma, you know, with the young recruits. She can set one before the others and come out with some pretty withering formulas: *this is a pretty knotty bit of plantation pine, but we can make a temporary ladder out of him, what'dya think fellas?* she'd say and feast on the brief round of automatic laughter. *Now I always say you need a bit of stodge in any revolutionary diet, and this one is a raisin bread if ever.*

The Spider used the struggle as self-extension. I can see that now. But I'm not sure that it matters. It's academic, as you guys say, whether she was fake or not. We did our stuff for her. And does it matter whether we were fake or not? She had us doing ammunition breaks, framing the United Front in the Press, infiltrating their meetings. We all offered it as a kind of gift. Her appetite was monstrous. We were addicted to feeding her.

I show Basilio the entry:
*Yeah she has us all doing the spiral scaffolding which she removes once the structure's there so you've got to say the web is hers. We're just the agents of her eccentricity; we provide her epicenters, dance attendance upon her phantom pregnancies. We manufacture Spider clones for her. Sure we work. With our pedipalps we service her all right: we puncture, probe, crochet. We tick-tack dance on live-wire legs but we're choreographed by her. We digest her food for her: so she eats outside herself. We are her kitchen and her stomach. We dangle from our draglines and perform a relay of decoys. Need be*
she'll expend us all. We know the risk and love her for it: at any time any one of us can become her food. Caught plucking out our amorous code, when she's in that mood, we've lover-tucker: we're running webstruck, all of us.

BASILIO:
Yeah, Well I got caught too. Webstruck as she called it. If you'd been trapped in her gaze, you'd understand. She seemed to be covered in eyes. Those black eyes, they wrote us into their ink. We were the cursive script she improvised. She made her cryptolingo out of us. And you know, it worked. She had me running. She had us all running. Tom-Tom was caught up with running for the Spider. Curser, cursive, so what's the difference? Some of us gun-runners, some of us writers. The Spider could make a table of twelve disappear into her anecdote. One time it's about her getaway from her German doctor-lover. She tells us how she broke into her Marberg surgery and putting on her best Turkish-German imitation told him where to go. She pointed to his crotch: you call that a toolkit, she jeered. Take away your prescription pad, you're nothing! She served it to him in front of all the patients. The next it's about her diversion of funds for the El El cause when she was working as Minority Cultural Affairs Buro. The rorts, the junkets, the magouilles. We can't pass judgement. We're intoxicated with the heady drug, her arbitrary power. Well, before her, we were nothing, man. Nothing.

LOU BARB:
Oh look I know there are prowlers and prowlers. And I'd be the first to recognise that I've had it comfortable and this is a kind of armchair excursion to the other side. Trying to piece her life together, I still let it prowl outside my own. I was one of the Nulliusian window-shoppers coming to check out the Laporan. But at that stage, she got a charge out of it. She staged him for our delectation: his long thighs lounging out from the beanbag, their baby with the terrifying eyes, that seemed to be able to read us all. He was sexy, that bastard, Asif. He could turn on elaborate courtesy you know, like a few other Laporeans who came to visit him. Talk about radchic: the electric danger of the terrorist, you know the spiel. But we all felt that attraction to the prowler forever spying on our soft bourgeois centres, to use one of Tom-Tom's terms. We sidled up to our own interiors, swearing we'd never repeat our parents. The way we could all perform our solitude with a Laporean at the window! Alone I imagined myself in his sightlines. And later when I wanted to recruit Tom-Tom back, to save her from herself, I tried for that seductive principle: how'd I look to the prowler in her which had swallowed the prowler in him? I wasn't the only one to get
dazzled by the glamour of danger she carried from him. I suppose we loved her for taking the risks for us. I would never have dreamed that there was something else all along.

In love with the institutions she moved in and out of, a peeping tom-tom, no danger-prowler that one, a petty peeper finally, who borrowed the roiled lens of the establishment to see herself as radically outside. Her code name, yes, sure. I mean, how else? The double-beat sounds trendy enough. Still, I'd be surprised if it weren't just the old tattoo. Of the heart, lesioned, prosthetic in part, but heartbeat just the same. Behind all her investments I'd say was a fairly clichéd romance.

BASILIO:
They were a bit of a joke those femocrats, but to start with they saw themselves as a joke. They spoke with a glad lurch in their voice and always this rising intonation? As if they were prepared to be wrong? Like they'd even got our name's wrong? We've fallen through the hole right? Neo-aling, they called it, although I think by then it was already at the stage of post-neo-aling. They dressed with systematic asymmetry: odd leggings, diamonds one side, spots on the other. No coupling is ever stable, Tom-Tom laughed, so, okay, I'm out of sync with myself. So she begins: we hazard you've accepted us as Webworkers? Hazarding was because you could never be sure of what you knew? Under all the imagery, it was hard to see what she was. There were the hennaed dreadlocks, the patchwork panchos and the constant mobility of face and hands. She had good eyes, though: black almonds. Onyx almost. Maybe there was a certain narcissistic connection with the Spider. Their eyes, come to think of it...
So, okay. We measured up, we fitted. All the same, it was hard to see how some of these guys fitted. The Migraines had measured biceps, heights, weights, cocks; they'd dipped tapes into urine samples, peered down our holes, up our holes, pinched scrotum, cupped balls. Just testing, they laughed. We all felt pink and glistening then. No secrets. But the cement of that inspection set inside, made us hard and grim. I told myself I had other certificates. I was certified as not one of them. I was written into Ecumian law, its codes and local rules with the right style through those certificates. I had connections. I knew the tricksters to avoid. I wouldn't end up paying my first wages to an agent. I had practice on the machines. Licences. Wouldn't be fazed like some I can tell you who had missing fingers to show for it. I could read their language. I could do a ratio sum. I wanted to puke at their inwardness. That cowering inwardness, I could read defeat all over it: it had them barracks-bound, sucked into the tunnels, the work without earmuffs, the pain in phantom limbs, the no-compensation-because-no-papers. That pathetic inwardness was what stopped them from coalescing. Coalescing, massing: we had to amass all our labour in reserve. We would withdraw, be reserved, and watch their cities choke on their shit without us.

I could've made my way blindfolded anywhere in that city like I'd swallowed and metabolised the map. I knew how to feed the ringroads and the freeways from the cul-de-sacs and one-way Bidon streets. It was for the taking. My confidence aroused me. My blood didn't flow; it drilled through my veins. I was pumping for the Bidons. Of course the Bidonvilles caught in their ratty-treed terrain between the freeways and the Supertrain lines, they were my material. I had to start with the cement highrises twenty k's and three hours in traffic jams from Farsillon. There were chunks of countryside still caught in their fire-escapes like old food between the teeth. I had it all on the tip of my tongue — it was my stuff. Like one of their sociologists, you could say I was something of a student of graffiti. The stairwells were my memo pads. The messages were grafted into me. I'd connect with all our people who whispered and swallowed and make Bidonlingo with the thick spit of their angry children. I'd line them up and give them superjoecool cocksureness: back erect, head still with the slight reverse tilt, expression impassive, pelvis easy, all movement from below, fluid, fluid, flexing only in the legs. All we needed was a bit of ruse and a few guts. We'd turn the Colons' language inside out so that their own tongue would terrify them. That was what aroused me, if you want to know. Of course you want to know about her. Why in the hell, I asked, was this woman looking for a cause in Ecumia when she had one stinking cause back in her own country? I
was amused at the thought of leading her on, feeding that infuriating glossy humility those middle-class women try out when they look at losers. They watch us with smiling indulgence: fascinating culture, they say, inventive bricolage of the oppressed, they say, like they’re looking through their little glasses at the Opera, when we trick them with shit we’ve made up that moment. I massaged something in her head into a hot readymix, which she took for my lust, I guess. Then I saw how I could use her misery, her need for a theme and a sequence that would make her a champion, a minor one maybe, but a champion all the same, of the El El cause. I could see how to get her into our imagery and then to have her feed it. We needed Webworkers, whatever their motivation. In a way, the more deluded they were, the better.

BASILIO:
Sure I remember Tom-Tom the femocrat, in her act she called the Double-bitch, or Tandem tango. They called their code subversion neo-aling, burrowing under the surfaces of law and language. Okay, you say, so what’s new? In company with the other woman whose name, come to think of it I never knew, she was totally different. None of that self-seriousness; no, she was outside herself, in those days. There was none of that black static that kept her estivating as you say all those years later. We had the femocrats perform for us on the worksites, sending up servility. The Ecumian cops ignored them, dismissed them as innocuous clowns. Hey Bidons, they’d sing, look at me getting it off on a jackhammer, just like the bosses want me to. See, me, I am so macho man, don’t need earmuffs. Deaf is bigger balls. They talked in one breath, well, rather than one smothering the other, they syncopated like an echoing drumbeat. So the name Tom-Tom, I guess, the beat just off, which appears to be with you while taking the sound into an undertow, another level altogether.

You can get the sense of how their femraps went from this tape. It sounds pretty crude now and you can hear the jeers and the traffic noise, and the workers continuing oblivious. They performed it in outrageous banksia suits, covered in horny lips.

we’re the Banksia
Bidons
hairy big fat violent
we’re polylabial through
and through
our horny lips

22
but songs come honeyed too
or oyster-luscious
ding-dong uvular moist
we ring for you
we're softies hard in the middle
we're what you need
to make of us
soft-heads with hard-ons
we're peeled almonds
at the centre should you care to lick
we've got our biceps up
on your machines
with our single battery cerebral lights
we redden the workplace
we bloody it up
we're the catch
in your safety regulations
we're the spanner in the works
we're working it up
working it off
we dance with the chainsaw
the sledge the jackhammer the bobcat
we're all ditchwitches
we cream and we spout both
asbestos fibre, battery acid, you name
the poison we give it back
recycling your batteries and brakes
we make you go and not go
materially we're the basest but
we're building little shrines
to what you admire in us
to microcephelia and hirsuitism
singing polylabially, we make
our polyglossaries erupt
in your monolingual
we're the banksia cobs
come back to haunt you
we wear our skeletons on our sleeve
we're capable of glistening styles
we dance with the bones
your machines have crunched
send up the stench your hygiene
bestows upon us
toss our foetal and fecal detritus
down to your restaurant courtyards
we splatter your demographic tables
with our discreetly dead babies

LOU BARB:
Back then I could’ve sworn she was the one who would break away from the death culture. Well, she always stole the show and I suppose her stand at Banksia Fold was part of her theatre. There was no need for that kind of exit, no need at all. I can imagine Asif’s rebuke, of course. He’d say: *but those Nulliusians are dying all the time. Life is just a drizzle to them: they’ve got death right through their culture; they’ve got death in their clackety-clack keyboards. Each word is a mortuary deposit. They call this a style. They send their thought bubbles up like toy puffs alongside the advertising blimps in the enamel skies: elaborate, highlight, delete, and call this a happy philosophy. Their free-play which they import from Ecumia has always been one complicated, drawn-out, death-wish. But I’d never have thought Tom-Tom would get contaminated by that lethal static herself. But I suppose it happened. See what you think:*

ASIF (YOU RETURN . . .)
Your return was prepared in a sealed room. I’d close my eyes, stab the map, and take myself to the town nearest the mark to wait. It was as probable as a reunion in my suburb. I would book into the hotel nearest the railway to begin the vigil: holed in for you.

*The mildewed poverty of that room struck home. Of course this is what I wanted. The mildew gave some sort of presence to the waste of desire. The unnameable was there in the bubbling rust around the tap base, in the fungal culture of the trim, in the tile grout, in the oval of the coir mat – need I go on? – in the wall-to-wall heartlessness. I dimly located the poison in the return to descriptive clutter, to this fatigued contingency, this old existential nausea. What self-indulgence it all seemed now. Trying the window, I drew the line. This had to be the last experiment. Let the paint be wrinkled like archaic milk, but let me resist the pressure of the swollen breast to occupy me: oh my children. I see now that in memory, this is*
what you have become, Asif, one of my children. It is I who must endure your orphanage.

So, the sash window was opaque with dust. It had long since been painted into its frame and on the sill there were puddles of paint wrinkled like archaic milk. Outside I tried for the sense of glaringly lit provincial street. Provincial is a word resisting Nullusian applications. Why did I try for your world outside then? It was usually a depressed fringe wheatbelt town. Beyond this set I wanted acres of albino stubble, and I am afraid, beyond those, the simplicity of ruined land, the frozen dance of whitened trees, the craze of saltpan fissures.

For a change, the last time, I made the town coastal, uneasily spreading towards city status, but retaining the slow time of country town in the main-street, a yawn at the centre.

Behind the flyblown and insecticidally greased windows I planted a milk bar, a run-down co-op grocery, an uncertain delicatessen, as you might have said, ventriloquising the colon’s language. I put permanence into the cupcakes with their china-hard caps of icing. I set time in the terrazzo cross-section of brawn, in the jars of lollies, filling them all with Poached Eggs, powdered like my grandmother’s cheeks.

There was a street-long queue for Ghostbusters 3, and further on, a caryard full of seventies Fords and Chryslers was still open. The salesman leaned against a white tail fin, depressed despite the claims of his shiny suit and the comfort of the coffee mug which he hugged to his chest. He would want to ask me out. I knew this. It was not vanity, nor fancy, nor the desire for anything to happen; it was as inevitable as breathing. He would sniff out my old habit of despair, as the Spider had, as you had, and convert it to his purpose. Despair is not a mood. In my case it is a passivity so accomplished it is indistinguishable from dynamic potential. You see, nothing is a risk any more. This is what might have made a terrorist of me, Asif.

Beyond all this I could feel the amazing sea. I imagined in my blood its rhythmic scope but would do nothing about getting there. I was still at the window sealed in its frame by the paint. To be truthful, I would have been tricked by the deflected sea-breeze and would have walked in the wrong direction, with the same results.
I can't get out of the sealed room in memory either. In taking a photograph of this room, you'd make sure it was windowless by angling the camera at the skirting boards. You'd be glad of the camera's tilt, cocky or drunk, to restore retrospectively a sense of a mind still there, if awry. Claustrophobia, the photograph might say, is about being forever without a larger frame of reference. And yet, the camera's tilt, cocky, or drunk, also might imply potential to break out. Later in another town, this image would come to me on a postcard and I'd be crouching in a sealed room eyeing a puddle of paint set like archaic milk on the sill. I'd remember that then I'd been relatively jaunty in my attempts to recapture you. Greetings from Exville, the postmark might have said. What a poverty-stricken adventurer I was. But the script would be yours and I'd see that the miracle had worked. Join me, for old times' sake, for pool?

The Ghostbusters queue shuffles its feet - less of them now. The pool players are as quiet and suspenseful as statues: they are fibreglass, pop art statues. They lack the solemnity of, say, granite statues. Their gestures hang in such a way that I'm not sure any more from where the cue for them to move will come, in whose gaze they are immobilised.

Join me for pool, you write, or is that your writing? Why not this last gamble? I have kept on my long gloves but have them unbuttoned at the wrists, like a woman smoker from the fifties, so that these empty cloth hands dangle their separate wills beside my own, which by contrast become more or less determined. Is there any sense in unpacking my cardboard suitcase? It contains a spirex notebook, a packet of tampons, a spare pair of jeans, and underpants. I could go into the haberdashery opposite for clothes. From the window I can make out a dummy dressed in a tartan nightie. Each woman in the town will have seen herself inside or out of that nightie, to the point where I would take on the weight of considerable phantasy in slipping it on.

I still resist resolution. I suppose it is what keeps me alive, resisting resolution. While I want this time to believe absolutely in the possibility of our reunion, I must still leave all the options open. I will refuse the brief thrill of the slick twist even as a development, let alone an ending. I will not get caught in any final gesture. I will leave no trail, no hieroglyph dying in the mirror. I will leave the slate clean, an empty register. I will wipe the memory of all that time waiting for you and hiding from them. The aeroplane which took you will be just a silver hyphen. There will be a few dispersed markings in the sky, powdery
like the skies of failing memory. As far as they are concerned, neither of us will have been.

Then I am tempted not to try the pool tables. Anyhow, the time, the day, when? I must learn to inhabit this room at zero degree desire and to fade to grainy grey along with my sense of its furnishings. The clunking commerce of the streets, the riffs of traffic, the kebabs on roadside braziers, the cool darkness of winebars will not draw me out. That I might have been something, even an effective Webspinner will no longer taunt me. I will become one with my own perduring motif: no development in space or time unless I can count the fading of intensity and the fraying of edges. I will be a motif discharged of any emblematic value.

Like a simile left yawning for its second term I will be . . .