



Story Frances Whiting

thrill of the quill

Photography Russell Shakespeare

Poetry is not dead. It's simply found a life beyond the bookshelf – in pubs, clubs, living rooms and online magazines.

The poet lies dreaming, hands curled beneath his chin, mouth twitching in laughter and memory. It seems rude to wake him, so I sit by the window and pass the time reading his poems, the words leaping off the pages like black arrows in the still room. "Nuns go by as quiet as lust," one begins. "Born in 1824, by rape ... " goes the one titled *Brisbane*. And somehow morning turns into midday as the staff in the southside Brisbane nursing home start rattling the lunch trolleys.

David Rowbotham stirs and wakes, holding out his hand to Ethel, his wife of 58 years, and smiling as he feels her familiar skin. The 86-year-old is blind, and a series of heart attacks have felled him. But the writer of 15 volumes of poetry, winner of prizes including the 2007 Patrick White literary award, journalist and former *Courier-Mail* arts editor remains upbeat, optimistic, *interested*. Just this May, his new poem *Phantoms* was published in *The Australian*.

Now he is wide awake, telling stories from his life in a voice like rolling thunder. Meandering through a childhood spent in Toowoomba, line-fishing with his bootmaker father in Breakfast Creek and the Brisbane River, and surviving World War II, he arrives at the present and draws his mind to attention. "So," he asks, "you want to write about poetry?"

"Yes," I answer, and then it comes: a long, low rumble of a chuckle from the bed.

"Good luck," he says.

When the black car came
 and took you away
 the traffic lights turned red

suddenly the sound of a siren
 a prolonged sound, the painful howl
 of police or fire's red engine
 like the bellow of a mule in the night

Under a half-moon of light on a tiny stage, Graham Nunn is reading a poem to a crowd of about 80 scattered on couches at InSpire Gallery Bar in Brisbane's inner-city West End. The poem is about his good friend Grant McLennan, former member of the band the

Go-Betweens, who died in May 2006. Titled *The Stillest Hour*, it recalls the day of McLennan's funeral. With guitarist/cellist Sheish Money beside him, Nunn continues:

this is the stillest hour
 the quietest room
 standing on the side of the road
 with the cathedral looming

I don't know whether to breathe
 or sink ...
 now it's you up there
 lighting fires.

Nunn, 39, runs the bar's popular monthly "Speed Poets" afternoons, events in which poets are given two minutes and an open mic to, as one cheerily put it, "open an artery". This is how poetry reaches the masses in 2010. It lives on in the new breed of performance poets who don't so much recite as take their skin off live on stage at readings and festivals around Australia. To watch Brisbane-based David Stavenger prowling around a room as his alter ►





ego, the white-faced “Ghostboy”, reciting “*night is a Mexican moon, blood orange, tequila red, a time for teenage ghouls to run the midnight sun ragged*” is to realise just how far we’ve come from “I wandered lonely as a cloud”. Then there are the “slam poets”, men and women who slug it out with words, competing for points and poetic glory in pubs and cafes scattered across town.

Nunn, who by day is a behaviour support teacher at an inner-city Brisbane school, says there’s nothing rarefied about the modern poet. “I think there might be this idea that we’re all smoking those really long cigarettes and wearing berets – it’s too bloody hot in Brisbane for berets. I would like people to know that if they come to a poetry reading they will be welcome, there will be all sorts of people there and they will hear some beautiful works.”

Poems “tell the stories of their time, huge moments and emotions distilled down in a few lines”, he says. They are the stuff of life. “I remember sitting on the couch with my dad as a kid watching the cricket and Dennis Lillee was coming in off the long run. My dad looked at the screen and said, ‘now *that’s* poetry’ – and he was right. It has grace, rhythm, beauty, surprise, it’s in the everyday, coming home to give your wife a kiss, the turn of her head towards you, the kids tumbling at your feet.”

AT THE GIDDY HEIGHTS OF ITS POPULARITY IN the West, poetry made heroes of its creators. It wasn’t just his scandalous personal life that made Lord George Gordon Byron so famous in 19th century England; at the height of “Byronmania”, a good portion of the English population would have been familiar with poems such as *She Walks In Beauty*. In the mid-to-late 1800s, a poet such as American Henry Longfellow could sell 10,000 copies of a new work in a day. But the years have not been kind to poetry. In 2010, the average sale of a new book of poetry in Australia is 300 copies. Most of the major publishing houses have dropped their new poetry lists – between 1993 and 1996, 250 books of poems were published

in Australia each year; by 2006, that number was down to about 100; today one publisher estimates it at “about 60”. In mainstream bookstores, poetry is allotted a shelf or two. “No-one ever asks for it,” says one proprietor. If poetry is not dead, might it be on its last legs, penning elegies to itself?

Hasn’t the charisma leaked away from the café crowd, and that other Authority, the *Salon des Refusés*?
 I have forgotten much of

That old sack of enthusiasms and snake-oil recipes,
 the way
 You have forgotten your childhood, since
 You woke up just in time to watch the adults disappear
 From the world they had bequeathed us

That’s from *The Anaglyph*, from John Tranter’s new collection *Starlight: 150 Poems*, to be published later this month. Sydney-based Tranter, 67, is one of Australia’s most successful poets – he has written 21 volumes and his 2006 collection *Urban Myths* is one of our most awarded poetry books.

Tranter coined the term “the Generation of ’68” to describe the poets of the ’60s and ’70s, postwar poetry’s most productive and popular era. He knew and worked with them all – Michael Dransfield, John Forbes, Vicki Viidikas. And he knew the wonderfully irreverent Gwen Harwood, the Brisbane-born poet who, frustrated at the reluctance of some editors to publish work by a woman, wrote under several pseudonyms including Walter Lehmann and Francis Geyer. It was under Lehmann’s name that Harwood published a poem in *The Bulletin* in 1961, its acrostic (a literary device where the first letter of each line reveals, vertically, a hidden message) spelling out: “So long Bulletin. F.k all editors.”

The world has changed, and publishing with it. But Tranter, a former editor of *The Penguin Book of Modern Australian Poetry*, insists poetry is not dead. “It’s just that its heart is beating in different places.”



I'm a poet
 with a day
 job ... not a
 legal typist
 who writes
 poems.

Undying art ...
 Young poet Zenobia
 Frost (left) and
 elder statesman
 Bruce Dawe, who's
 had 15 collections
 published.

Later,
 I sit on the back steps in yesterday's
 Dress and watch the sun take slow,
 blue gulps of time to make its light.

Zenobia Frost – was there ever a better name for a young poet? – is swinging her legs from a garden seat in Toowong cemetery and writing in a bulging notepad. She comes here often, in her vintage clothes and cat's-eye glasses, to write her modern-day sonnets and villanelles about love and yearning and the mating habits of cicadas (... *how does she undress herself? Dried upon my hand her castoffs seem an armoured corset, and that zip down the back doesn't*

really give). She likes to write here, she says, because it's peaceful and "there's nothing creepy about this place. I've learned it's not the dead people you should be afraid of."

Frost, 21, has been writing poems since she was five years old. Now studying for a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature at the University of Queensland, she describes herself as "a poet with a day job. It's a far more accurate description of me than a legal typist who writes poems." Today she's working on a collection of poems based on the stories behind the names on the tombstones.

"This is where Colonel Samuel Blackall is buried," she says as we reach the highest point of the cemetery, where Blackall's tombstone spire spikes the sky. "He was the second governor of Queensland and he wanted the cemetery to be here, but there was a lot of opposition to this site. So when he died, he made his point by being buried here."



... you made this site
 a cemetery, colonel,
 and had your body
 planted here like a flag

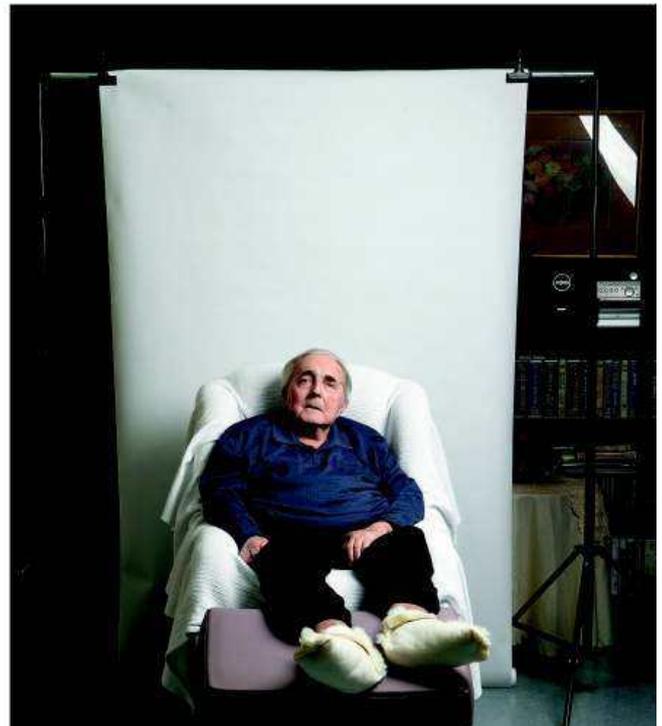
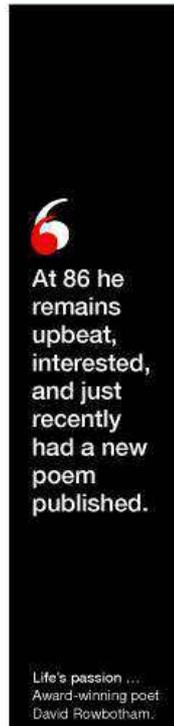
Frost's cemetery poems will likely be published by one of the small independent presses that have sprung up as the larger publishing houses scale back their poetry releases – companies such as Brandl & Schlesinger, Giramondo Publishing, Black Pepper and Brisbane's Small Packages. A little like the underground magazines that flourished in the '60s and '70s, new outlets are being found for poets' voices everywhere – and nowhere do they ring louder than on the internet.

The web is home to thousands of poetry sites, some terrible, some excellent, like Cordite, Divan and foam: e. Tranter's quarterly online magazine, Jacket, is considered *the* place to publish; with 800,000 hits since it began in 1997, *The Guardian* newspaper calls it "the Prince of Online Poetry Magazines". It has 7000 printed pages online, and entry to it is by editor Tranter's invitation only. It's also free. No-one, least of all Tranter, makes any money from the site, but no-one expects to. Few, if any, poets make a living in Australia today purely from writing verse. They teach, edit, write novels or hit the festival circuit. Or they wait tables, still the preferred profession of the starving artist.

Tranter, whose books sell better than most (*Urban Myths* sold more than a thousand copies), cheerfully estimates being a poet has cost him "about one-and-a-half million dollars" in lost wages and superannuation. "Poetry is a very stupid thing to do," he says. "I often think that's why there are fewer long-term female poets than men. Men will keep at something for 30 years for no rewards at all whereas women are far more sensible, and at some point will say, 'Well, enough of that'."

All day, day after day, they're bringing them home,
 they're picking them up, those they can find, and
 bringing them home,
 they're bringing them in, piled on the hulls of tanks, in
 medevacs, in convoys,
 they're zipping them up in green plastic bags,
 they're tagging them now in Saigon, in the mortuary
 coolness
 they're giving them names, they're rolling them out of
 the deep-freeze lockers – on the tarmac at Tan Son Nhut
 the noble jets are whining like hounds,
 they are bringing them home

– *Homecoming* by Bruce Dawe, 1968



The poet stands in the loungeroom of his Caloundra home before a semicircle of seven people, who sit drinking his words in. His wife Liz has provided cups of tea. In a flannelette shirt and khaki shorts, Bruce Dawe is reciting his own work as part of the Modern Poetry course he teaches. "I didn't want to do myself," he laughs, pointing at the students. "They made me."

The 80-year-old sets a cracking pace for the class from the Sunshine Coast's University of the Third Age, catering to the over-fifties and delivering its classes in all sorts of places.



I watch him – elegant, balding, hawk-nosed, bright-eyed – and wonder at the sight of one of Australia’s most commercially successful poets (to date his 15 books have sold 180,000 copies) plying his craft to a small group in his home.

But Dawe has never been bothered by numbers. “I don’t think it matters who’s there or how many,” he says after his students have packed up their notes and politely brought their teacups into the kitchen. “The important thing for the poet is that somebody, somewhere *gets it*. For me the continuing, eternal thrill of poetry is the power of words.”

Melbourne-raised Dawe has lived in Queensland since 1968, when he moved to Toowoomba with his first wife, Gloria (who died in 1997). They raised four children and he lectured at the University of Southern Queensland, all the while writing his poems. His trademark has always been his simplicity: his words are unfussy and unhurried as he writes about ordinary men and women, suburbia, politicians, developers, love and war. His next collection, *Slo-mo Tsunami*, is due to be published in October by Puncher & Wattmann.

“Poetry will always matter to the people it matters to, and I’m one of them,” he smiles. “I find the world a very puzzling place and one way I deal with that is to put down how I feel about that. Some people deal with the world by going to the pub, singing in the shower, kicking the cat ... poets write it all down, for us it’s like breathing on paper.”

For Dawe, poetry has never been an attention-getting exercise. He has, however, been lured to Brisbane from his quiet life on the Sunshine Coast to attend this weekend’s Queensland Poetry Festival, regarded as one of the best on the national festival circuit. Unlike many of his contemporaries he has never left Queensland, finding plenty here to write about – particularly, he says, “during the Joh years, which provided us all with a natural circus”.

Indeed, this state is considered fertile ground for poetry, partly thanks to the University of Queensland Press. “We’re one of the last bastions,” says poetry editor Felicity Plunkett.

“We’re certainly the last biggish house still maintaining five or six poetry titles a year.”

UQP publishes Tranter and also David Malouf, the Brisbane-born writer who is better known as a novelist. Malouf’s first collection of new poetry in 27 years, *Typewriter Music* (2007), sold out of its print run of 3000 within three days. The university press also supports Arts Queensland’s annual Thomas Shapcott prize, whose winner receives \$3000 and the opportunity to publish his or her first book. Last year’s winner, Rosanna Licari, launches her book *An Absence of Saints* at the poetry festival today.

Queensland has produced many of Australia’s best-known poets, including Malouf, Harwood, Rowbotham, Shapcott, Val Vallis and Peter Porter. But while we revere our sports stars, we don’t celebrate our brightest poets. In some cases, we barely know them. Porter’s death at 81 this year in his adopted home of England was big news there. Here, it barely rated a mention.

“I wish more people knew about our poets, the established ones and those we’re seeing coming out there,” Plunkett says. “I think there might still be this idea that poetry is not accessible, but really it’s never been more accessible.”

In times that matter, says Tranter, people turn to their poets. “Birthdays, weddings, funerals, when people need a way to express feelings, it’s often poetry they will find it in.”

I think of W.H. Auden’s *Funeral Blues*, the oft-recited poem at last goodbyes – *stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone*. I think of Nunn’s farewell to his friend McLennan. And I think of how Rowbotham, lying in his nursing home bed, is still painting word pictures behind his blind eyes.

The poet lies dreaming and later, when he wakes, he will say in a voice full of wonder: “You know, when I was a young boy I didn’t know what to call what was inside of me ... now I know it was poetry.” ■

Poets including Dawe, Frost, Nunn and Stavenger will appear this weekend at the Queensland Poetry Festival at the Judith Wright Centre, Fortitude Valley; www.queenslandpoetryfestival.com