

H O W T O R E A D

i a n g i b b i n s

Adelaide City Library / Spoken Word SA

Poet-in-Residence

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rev 1.1

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**Government
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Arts SA

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Search the Catalogue

CONDITIONS OF USE

one card
one parent
one legal guardian
one application
one Medicare card
one passport
three years
three months
all debts
all items
twenty cents per item
one item
first day
seven days
twenty-eight days
five dollars processing
two dollars and
fifty cents replacement
five items
one hundred items
ten audio books
five language kits
thirty DVDs

one Fast Flick
two Rapid Reads
four eBooks
seven days
fourteen days
twenty-eight days
seven days
fourteen days
twenty-one days (you choose)
two extensions
three days
thirty holds
ten days
one maximum
two hours
one copy
twenty-four hours

eighty-two million, thirty-seven thousand, nine
hundred and ninety telephones

*Source: Adelaide City Library "One Card / Library Conditions of Use.
434463_01_14"*

MOVING

Of course, I understand why we need to shift again. But there is so much stuff, so much personal material, I simply cannot throw it out, bag it, bin it. After all, you never know when you might need to rejuvenate a bit, branch out in a new direction, get your life into balance, centre yourself, change for the better. And then what would you do? Somewhere in the recesses of your mind, you'd have that vague inkling, that hazy memory: yes, I've got exactly the right thing for this, at least once, at least at some point in the past. But now? Now?

Now, I collect my thoughts and my breath and I front up to the boss and tell her, "Sorry, mate, I have to hold onto the whole lot." She's a good bloke and reassures me not to worry: there is, as they say, "margin for flexibility", especially for people like me, the old faithful, the ones they can trust. Without further ado, I head back to work, sorting, classifying, packing this and that, even though it's tough on my joints and it's hot and it's dusty and I'm dying for a coffee, I reckon I can last out until the end of my shift.

The phone rings and we listen up and it really is time to move. The removalists open their van and we all line up with our boxes of treasures. I'm amazed how few items some of my colleagues have gathered, how many have been accumulated by others. We each have our number, our assigned place in the queue. Nevertheless, it's hard to please everyone, to consider volume, mass, form factor, the specific instructions: the "Fragile – Do Not Drop", the "Flatpack – Do Not Bend", the "Confidential – Do Not Pry."

A few things remain behind, perhaps by deliberate choice, perhaps an oversight, forgotten in a hidden corner, fallen behind a permanent fixture, ignored at the far end of the bottom shelf in the storeroom cupboard. Maybe someone will return for them, when the catalogue is checked for completeness. Or a couple of hundred years hence, a renovator, an urban archaeologist, a vagrant scavenger might find a shred, a scrap, a beguiling trace of what we used to do here. What would they read? How well would they listen?

Source: Contains all the verbs used in the Adelaide City Library: "we're moving" bookmark, quoted in alphabetical order.

994.231

(Sue)

For this book, they fought wars,
struggled for food and water, dug
fragile souls into clay, ground
fingertips into unforgiving sand,
our grandmothers and grandfathers
and theirs and theirs, and here
we are, with time on our hands,
searching the catalogue for clues.

(Craggy)

Our street was strewn with jacarandas
that taunted us with threats of failed
examinations, sun-papered skin, eyes stung
red with salt and tears and sleeplessness.
What did our brothers know? Our parents?
Would anyone tell? Would anyone let on?

(Laurel)

I grew up, down, sideways, around:
we were constantly on the move, sought
arable land, airstrips, lost dogs' homes,
picture theatres, found invisible ghosts,
skeletons that glowed in the dark, bats
aquiver on creaking rafters. Once I awoke,
which way would I face? If I could haul
myself out of bed, where should I turn?

(Jude)

When I was learning to sew, I made covers for novels, bound spines with coloured wool, cross-stitched atlases, dictionaries, darned torn encyclopaedias, collected misplaced buttons (pearl, ebony, tortoiseshell) to mark the ends of my stories, to dispel the uncertainty that followed me whenever I left the house.

(Mick)

I was born in the back of a Holden near Victor Harbor or a shack outside Edithburg or a tractor shed on the Eyre Peninsula or maybe a stranger simply wrote my name in the Register and here I am, eager to go, eager to start another life, all over again.

(Esther)

Poliomyelitis is a, is.

(Davo)

Perhaps it is true,
what they say about me,
my upbringing, my line
of work. Perhaps I can
look straight through
people, as if they were
not there, as if they exist
only in idle fragments
of speech, shadows on a
retaining wall, footprints
set in mud, in the cement
cracking under my next-door
neighbour's driveway.

(Clara)

When a friend fell off her bicycle on the foreshore at Glenelg, we thought it would be the end of her. "Watch out for sharks!" we advised. "They love the smell of blood!" Seagulls swooped for orphaned chips, sandwich scraps, gravel-grazed gumdrops, ignored any snuffle thrown their direction, veered north or south or seaward, to the west.

(Jean)

I remember the cabinets
at my great-aunt's farm.
Fairies lived within and
tigers and dragons sporting
two heads and sixteen legs
and an excess of evil plans.
She baked us special cakes,
green cakes, purple cakes,
and told us to keep our
toenails clean and to tie
our shoes on tight, so
the jindy bugs couldn't
burrow inside our feet and
eat our curdling brains.

(Millie)

I was born already old and grey.
Were there ever singalong games
under the famous weeping willow,
classmates that passed in a fancy,
with Christmas gifts and pantomimes?
Where are the autographed portraits?
Where are the boxes of birthday cards
we would never have thrown out?
I can merely find daisies, pressed
brittle and dry, blameless between
chapters of an unlocked Family Bible.

(Anna)

My earliest memory is of my sister
flying tree-top to whispering tree-top,
carolling with the magpies, arguing
with cockatoos, until she disappeared
into a reflection, framed with royal
gold, and was never more seen to stand,
stilled, anywhere on solid earth.

(Marty)

When I try to write you a letter,
when I try to explain the why,
the how come, the what if, when
I reconsider your silence, your
abandonment, the diary you erased,
unfinished, when I amble along
The Esplanade, the Riverbank,
the Heysen Trail, when I wonder
what I might find either side of
you, if you should ever decide
to stay put, if you should ever
cease your jack-knifing journey,
I rehearse my ancient alphabet,
draw nothing more than numbers.

(Margot)

My memories of childhood in the Hills
are threadbare now, faded and frayed,
bindings thumb-picked apart. We counted
birds flocking by the score and possums
and sharp-clawed creatures that scurried
through the night. We had luscious plums,
black mulberries, ripe nectar-dripping
figs. Frogs ruled the creek with tadpoles,
wrigglers, blind cherry-red worms, while
we played catch in the quarry, before the
rockfall, the fire, before the bulldozers
crawled up from the plains and rumbled
us to tyre-tracks and oil-stains and dust.

(Leah and Sue)

Many of us kept
scrapbooks full of
interrupted dreams,
photo-albums aglow
with vicarious travels
across fence lines,
far-off timezones,
faltering genealogies,
tangled cassette tapes,
the records of fleeting
conversations we always
wished we had heard.

As we pause amongst
reconstructed horizons,
drift past mirages
and pale apparitions,
we have to believe
you must be waiting
somewhere close by.
We have to believe
someone has recorded
exactly where you lie.

*Source: "Growing Up In Adelaide in the 1950s"
editor: Susan Blackburn; Hale & Ironmonger(2012).*

*Each section of the poem begins with the first three words
of each chapter from the book. The names are derived from
the names of the chapter authors, but everything else is
imaginary. The title of the poem quotes the Dewey Number for
this book (General History/Australia/Adelaide).*

[2]

Open Book

Book List

I opened a book
and all I heard were two unaccompanied bass clarinets.
Across the Torrens, cricketers slumped in pairs,
lost between overs; comets threw vapour trails hither,
thither, deep above Mount Lofty skies. “How was that?”
I asked. “Not out,” you replied. “Not in.”

I opened a book,
waited, as damselflies, ichneumon wasps, honey bees,
skimmed the wetland feeding zone. “Right there,”
you whispered, “the evidence we’ve been seeking.”
Next, the shine, hovering amid bullrush and cumulonimbus
break-down, the glisten without attachment.

I opened a book:
trigonometric equations toppled slack around me;
a bridge spanned vacant ideologies to somewhere
near Java or Madagascar or the Galapagos Archipelago.
Diving birds surfaced into gathering nightfall, entangled
luminescent plankton, interchanged seasons.

I opened a book
minutes before everyone's feet lifted off the ground.
Kangaroo Paws, Norfolk Island Pines, Date Palms -
how did they come to reside here? Only the perfume
of apple blossom, roses, freshly mown kikuyu and clover;
an old dog barking with little to say.

I opened a book
and saw nothing but hyphens and exclamation
marks. French champagne was no longer a possibility,
no chance of subterfuge could be entertained.
“Who has the key?” one of us thought aloud. The passage
rang blind with silent egress, slow escape.

I opened a book.
I found my name and yours and, eventually,
the name of the city that used to whelm the plains
and the names of a line of snakes that stretched
five hundred thousand generations to the inalienable
edge of the Great Southern Ocean.

access
air
all hours
and shut
> arms
> **open book**
borders
category
classroom
country
court
cut
> door
drain
entry
file
> fire
for business
garden
hand
> hearted
highway
house
letter
market
marriage
microphone
> mind
> mouthed
neck
> ocean
party
plan
question
> road
> season
> secret
sesame
sewer
sky
slather
slowly
sore
source
stage
studio
trial
university
> wheeler
> wide
> yourself

The Guide

Poetry implies that there is a pre-existing condition invoking love, terror, loss and discovery in equal proportions, at any time of the year, seasonally adjusted or not, at any point in the more or less visible spectrum.

Poetry holds hands, tongues, reservations, court, together, tight, fast, back.

Poetry makes breathing redundant.

Poetry consists of football scores, a broken wrist, Kakadu nectar, Martha's discarded woollen greatcoat, empty space, empty space.

Poetry praises the consolidated revenue from inopportune acquaintances gathering unseen on verdant hillsides beside a river flowing at light speed through the boundaries of the Milky Way.

Poetry rouses dormant semi-autobiographical novellas, hibernating Scandinavian strawberries, inexplicably vexed blue-tongue lizards, feverish basalt embankments: count them, deny paradoxical intervention, save them for later.

Poetry writes nothing.

Poetry tries to bake a perfect lemon sponge cake, to ignore haranguing parts of speech, an onslaught of short-changed hours and over-priced mountain devils. Can you taste the difference on your fingertips, on the frayed collaborations of your eyelashes?

Poetry thinks about calculus, atomic numbers, Latin, Baudelaire, Jackson Pollock, the Melbourne Cup, parasitic invertebrates, collapse, redundancy, the shape of communication breakdown, its mass, its brawn.

Poetry obscures nothing.

Poetry does Luna Park, the Velodrome, Sex Pistols, the Strzelecki Track, when star-struck satellites have ceased observation, only flying foxes and migratory swans are listening in.

Poetry demands a ransom, the time of your life, your attention, should you doubt it for a minute, should the sun fade noiselessly to a clear sapphire sky, another moon-shone afternoon, your glacially warm embrace.

Poetry complicates nothing.

Source: "How to Read a Book: The Classic Guide to Intelligent Reading" by Mortimer J. Adler & Charles van Doren, Touchstone Books, (1940/1967/1972), Chapter 15, Section "How to Read Lyric Poetry" [ANF 028 ADL]. The first verb appearing after each occurrence of the word "poetry" in the original text has been used to create the definitions above. The order of the verbs follows the original.

a good poem

almost anyone can

and as with
and during vacations
and he concludes
and that is

and the rhythm
anything of this
anything you discover
besides many apparently

between such very
but although we
but any good
but a vast

but often the
but the almost
but these words
do several stanzas

finally you will
first lyric poetry
for example a
for once you

he imagines the
if so this
if we tried
in fact the

in most good
in particular
in that sentence
in the reading

is it because
it has been
it is a
it is not

it is perhaps
it is to
many of the
many people believe

nevertheless the title
nevertheless we are
one final piece
or the rhyme

other definitions of
our point is
poetry they hold
reading any great

read the poem
second it is
that seems obvious
that you will

the first rule
the questions you
therefore he adjures
there is no

there is something
there it was
the second rule
the simplest definition

the word time
they do not
they puzzle over
they think that

this is the
thus Macleish asks
to be understood
unless we read

we are certain
we cannot discover
we do not
we do not

we have suggested
we mean that
we put much
we think that

we would say
whatever may be
when faced by
why do certain

you cannot glide
you discover them
you do not
your ear is

you will find

you will never

Source: "How to Read a Book: The Classic Guide to Intelligent Reading" by Mortimer J. Adler & Charles van Doren, Touchstone Books, (1940 / 1967 / 1972), Chapter 15, Section "How to Read Lyric Poetry" [ANF 028 ADL]. The first three words of each sentence of the section are listed in alphabetical order.

[3]

Page Turning

T r u e C r i m e

364 WHI “Undone by Ancestry”

Do you really think I meant it to end like this?

Do you seriously reckon this was my plan?

I had no choice in the matter, it’s in my blood.

They set me up, nailed me, pumped me full of it.

And here I am telling you straight. Listen hard.

364.106 MOR “Tribal Earth”

Mallee roots, fore-quarter chops, sweet honey
toast, still lingering on my tongue. I wish. As if.
What happened to the idea of family tradition,
the lazy to-and-fro of summer and winter,
the calendar shots, our implicit obligation?

364.1066 ROW “The Lord of Sabotage”

Of course, there was someone else. There is always
someone else, pulling levers, flicking switches, issuing
muted instructions in the dead of night, undetected
behind curtains of smoke, walls of mirrors, and me
sliding on track, the rest of us, sliding down his track.

364.1324 LOV “Prayer of Deceit”

The masquerade, impossible to ignore:

his actor’s charm, his bushman’s guile.

And those supplications to higher authority?

Whom was he trying to kid?

What was he trying to prove?

364.1336 LAU “Brute Taboo”

Side-street curs steered clear of him, his moods, his disrepair. Mutts on three legs, scratchy with mange, tomcat claws, Port River mud, followed the allure of Coorong Mullet, dead nicely a week, ready, ripe for the taking, preferred to leave him alone.

364.137 CUR “Ashen Desire”

And yet my heart beat for him, my veins swelled and pulsed and drained me thin whenever he shot through, chasing West Coast snapper or rabbits or buried treasure, an empty spreadsheet, a bill of lading, or simply the punks who owed him.

364.15 BOL “Canary”

Nobody mentioned the whistle, the shout,
spinning, spit-firing between brake squeal
and hinge, plate glass crash and shoulder.
Only my hushed imagination? Church bells
ringing in my ears? Believe me, believe me.

364.1523 JAC “Eliminated”

Suddenly, the absence, unannounced,
the seductive void that draws me inward,
pins shadows to crumbled brickwork,
frames breath with sodden newsprint
and free-to-air blue screens of death.

364.1532 RIV “The Basement Doll”

He never appreciated that I look after myself.
No limelight shone on me, no reporters traced
my movements. But surrounded by silverfish,
inoperable automatic gearboxes, ink-thumbed
Penny Dreadfuls, I preserved my pride, I cared.

364.154 BRE “Bounty on my Heart”

How much was I worth? The negotiations, clandestine transfers, sex, lock-tight codes: probably more than he could afford. Then the telephone call, taxis, a note slipped under the bolted door (no stamp, no address). “All my love.” His broken hand. Did I snigger? Did he?

364.1552 KOE “A Private Heaven”

My fingertips on a string,
my toenails polished pearl,
my hair pure untarnished gold.

364.16 BOW “The Louse”

Even insects show remorse.
Name a single honest person who would want him back.

364.164 PHI “Executive Contract”

Thirteen years: the time I’ve done, the time I’ll do.
One hundred and forty-four, sixty-nine, ninety-six,
two hundred and twenty-five: the squares I pace,
patrol, hold safe under my skin, the combinations
I require to secure my release.

364.168 NAP “Blackguard Traffic”

“Once they check in, they never check out.”

Reminds me of America. South on the four-zero-five:
Mexico? North, Colorado? Does it matter? Not likely.
Better off at Coober Pedy, Innamincka. Keep driving,
Sister. Keep your eyes on the bloody road.

Sources: The titles of each section are derived by thesaurus substitution from the titles of books with the corresponding Dewey number in the “True Crime” section of the Adelaide City Library.

[4]

In Your Own Words

Assist Point

What happened yesterday? she said.

Just thinking, he said. I may have been on a train, he said.

You need to remember, she said. Four numbers, she said.

I know I'm supposed to have ID, he said. But some of us don't, he said, some of us don't.

It should be there all the time, she said, that's exactly what it's for, she said. We never mind checking, just give me five minutes, she said. I'm not sure who...

That's OK, he said. Anything you hear, he said, there are lots of notes around. You can look, he said, yes, while I'm...

What does that mean? he said.

That one's not working, she said. You might need to stand up, do it again, she said. How about I show you? We'll set up here, she said. We'll be about half an hour.

That's good, she said, probably better. You'll get a bit of variation, she said, that's our system.

So this one, he said, is that right? I'll set it up that way? he said.
Exactly the same searches?

Why not? she said. That one can go, she said, next week, when
you come back, she said.

I'm sorry, he said. I can't, he said. My family. The contacts.
History, he said. The children.

We never mind checking, she said. Four numbers, she said,
just give me five minutes.

*Source: Dialogue constructed from snippets of overheard conversations and comments at
Adelaide City Library, 18th and 25th March, 2014.*

Lifelines

K. E., Burnside

At first, they thought my heart was broken. I fell where I stood
under pressure of noon-day atmospheric. They ran ice-water
through my veins, red-gum oil and menthol through my pores.

I heard the swish and sass as you ran for cover, the intensity
building between creak and crack as my limbs failed to hold.
Lost for place, lost for time, I took solace in my lessening load.

J. F., Thebarton

Of course, I was too stubborn to die,
too bloody-minded to stay down for long.

You know what they say: cop it on the chin,
roll with the punches, get up off the ropes.

Well, bad luck, I say. It's your shout, mate.
Another round, and I'm out of here.

Better still, try half a carton, and I'm gone
for good. I'll simply pull the plug, piss off,

write to you from whichever hole in the earth
those crazy bastards have overlooked again.

Y. L., Hindley Street

While lamp-posts regain equilibrium, unbolted security doors cool to resting body temperature, lipstick and mascara fade to classless neutrality, I wish I was an astronaut, a crane driver, a High Court judge's floozy.

Tired of tripsters and intellectuals, bar-boys and engine-girls, tarpit-rousers and sandstone surfers, six-legged alley dogs and fork-tailed cats, I wish I was sterling silver, solid gold, perfect Japanese pearl.

Fire hydrants whistle Summertime, have Georgia on their minds, violent promises and broken lies obscure my field of view, and I wish I was an angel, the Devil himself, an itinerant djinn. Inexplicably, I wish I was you.

R. I., Franklin Street

Why else would anyone come here?
Apart from enshrining the end of the road,
the chance to terminate a line of credit,
release a voyeuristic impulse to observe
both your feet sink into wet concrete,
the raw compulsion to laugh out loud
as tourists converge around your stare,
don kid-skin gloves, peel off your bones,
expose your hopelessly forgiving marrow.

J. B. S., Port Adelaide

Perhaps, I am on board by now, heading east for Bass Strait. My neck might be stiffening, or red from desert switchbacks, or blue and black from the lounge bar where we watched football with rules we did not understand. Was that your final confession? The sweet denial of a life steeped in radioactive decay? The blunt acceptance of treasures accumulated mote by mote in your overcoat cuffs and shoelace bow-ties? But, perhaps, I am too easily swayed by the exhilaration of departure, the thrill I feel when eventually I turn around and see you miles in the distance, taking once more my grimy hand, wiping one more tear from my tarnished eye.

Source: Responses to Poet-in-Residence questionnaire.

Postscript

Counting the levels, the steps I need to take,

I am always open to receiving advice:

I enjoy the pleasure your company brings,

the allegiance I continue to feel for leather,

linen, quality card, the emboss across page-spread

that builds your shifting persona,

that surveys the exhalations I surreptitiously graft

within me, each time I close my eyes.

H O W T O R E A D
i a n g i b b i n s

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