

# the west

australian poems 1989–2009

Presenting major new work and poems selected from John Mateer's five previous Australian collections, *The West* enables readers, for the first time, to experience the range, development and cumulative power of this important Australian poet.

Grouped by affinity rather than order of publication, the poems reveal a restless subjectivity, visiting and revisiting faultlines and cultural silencings. Accepted as a poet of international significance, John Mateer is also a poet who, in the words of the critic Martin Harrison, 'speaks towards the centre of Australian culture.'

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john mateer

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## THE PREMONITION

I attempt to peel the newspaper, but  
it's soaked through with invisible  
blood. I suppose there are birds to  
knock their airy shells, though  
I only hear crows creaking. Yesterday  
seemed to be something else. I went  
and saw art in an old asylum. The blue  
and iron along West Coast Drive had  
been scoured by thunder and mutely  
glimmered. The people I saw stood up inside  
their shadows, elongated thoughts of people  
stretching to thoughts of bright day.  
The premonition was that I'm asleep,  
sleeping sensibly, believing it takes more  
violence to wake us than daybreak.

## FIRE IMAGINED

Past fire is present in thick grasstrees  
chaotic with naturalism, prehistoric growth.

Someone said it's more intense in mind than  
out there: towns divide the emptiness into distance,  
graveyards beat the glare between shards of  
flowerpot, weed and headstones that are bottled  
heat.

It's like when last year my mother saw  
an angel in the clouds.

Being realistic I told her in this heat it'd  
melt before hitting the ground.

## TWO YEARS AGO

When the locust plague  
was supposed to infiltrate  
the city we found a wing  
on our driveway's black.  
The interior of the land  
had become a skin 'evidenced'  
by the oily crystal of a dead  
insect. It mightn't  
have been that. We  
drove down south, through  
fields bristling with dark  
life. They bopped on the window,  
screeched against wipers. I  
was stopped by two people  
who said, "The creatures'll  
eat anything if it's green."  
There didn't seem to be  
any green, just bleak  
earth-shades breaking  
into other light.

## THE CANADIAN MEMORY

Along the St Lawrence River, through  
dense thickets of hand-like twigs  
in pockets of snow, we played games. The water  
was a speeding sky that left the world behind  
and gargled ice.

My great-uncle drove  
trucks across the ice when the bridge  
into Toronto was a log-jam of  
cars tiptoeing on salt:

*You keep the door open just in case...*

Some boy I never knew was torn away. Found  
miles downstream by slow Mounties  
in rubber boots.

With smog the city warms  
a white sky.

## EPITHALAMIUM

Slowly injected with life, the roses on  
my cousin's wedding dress fill, float.

The inverted city is a reflection. Her  
buoyancy, epithalamium, lightness in the

sky—a tranquilised effect, or nervous  
mirrors looking back?—is silence. Under

water we dance a sleepy tango to French  
music that's soaking through the wall.

I saw the red moon. Tomorrow will come.  
Her husband and I, no longer in goldmines,

will stand on the horizon, on the balls  
of our feet,

and blow cloud from Mauritius.

## THE SIRENS' SONG

— for Noel Sheridan

Nipping the wine glass against his chest with his stump of an arm, he shook my hand. I'd met him before but he didn't believe me. He nodded intensely, the empty arm of his jacket slapping against his side as he spoke to the man who'd introduced me. "It was the sirens' song..." My opinion changed its face. The other man responded, his Irish accent both foreign and clear: "Then the media got a hold of the thing. They trotted out the wife, tears, the drug-death and all that. Yes, it was sad... The women in the bathroom, some anamorphosis beyond belief, and it was awful. Some of it had life: looking out over Lavender Bay, the blue, and the flesh of it all. Inevitable, you could see it..." Moving the wine glass from his side, staring across at me in the silence, tilting his head back, eyes rolling, peeling back from their prescription lenses, their jelly slowly sopping deeply into the sockets, he said, "They were calling him onto the rocks; the sirens' song..."