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### [Compulsive Imaginings - Introducing Australian Poets Jill Jones, David Prater and Paul Hardacre.](#)

- Posted by [Literary Minded](#)
- July 20, 2007

Interviewed by Angela Meyer.

<http://literaryminded.blogspot.com>

From the apt imagery of a moment in time, to dark undercurrents, to an overload of mystical beauty, these three Australian poets are enjoyable and intense to read. Australia's physical distance from the rest of the Western world can make its artists informed reflectors. It is a mish-mash of cultures, of opinions, of denials. It is still young. Mostly, modern Australian poetry recognises its roots but rejects becoming entwined with them. It wanders, delves, is frightened and influenced by a global environment.

Originally I was going to construct this as an article, but the poets' answers to my questions were so, well, poetic, that I thought the reader should share the enjoyment of their words.

*Something in the air has changed  
squeak of plastic mutter increase papers as coins in pocket sigh deep lazy  
minds sweat in their shells*

(from '30scapes - A cento' by Jill Jones)

#### **Q: What would you say are the key themes in your poetry and how did these evolve?**

**Jill Jones:** I don't think my poetry, or any poetry, as having themes first and foremost. I'm a bit anti-theme at the moment. I write with the language I find around me. Of course, there is an aboutness in what I write, it is poetry written in the world. Love, death and the weather is one way of looking at it. Or life and its around and aboutness. I know that sounds very general but I am finding it hard to be more specific. There are recurring words (or 'motifs' if you want it to sound literary): streets, dust, clouds, touch, birds, trees, wind, the colour blue, skin, music, walking, night.

**David Prater:** Key themes would have to include death and loneliness, or more accurately, questions of mortality and the essential aloneness of people in the world. I guess these evolved from long periods of aloneness and being an inward-looking, bookish child. However, this isn't to say my work isn't funny - it is, just the kind of funny that makes you feel sad.

**Paul Hardacre:** It's taken me close to ten years to become comfortable with the fact that my poems are, for the most part, paeans to love. There's probably a fair bit of my juvenilia floating around in various old zines and street press that engages with notions of alienation, loss, powerlessness, and despair - all those post-Grunge skeletons in the closet, I suppose - but those fairly rapidly morphed into poems that embodied a more Romantic or idealised notion of escape; of going outside and above the limitations of self and society via drug use or by engaging in other taboos - ways to 'get away from it all' when you were unemployed and seemingly without prospects, and certainly without money. And when you somehow scraped together enough cash to stuff a backpack with clothes and a few books and to hop on a cheap flight, there were ways that you could 'get away from it all' in the more traditional sense - by backpacking around Asia on the cheap. All of these internal and external escape techniques are explored in my first collection, *The Year Nothing*. The book also offers insights into the familial, and two of my great loves: my partner of nine years, Marissa Newell, and the Brisbane inner-city suburb of West End (also known as Kurilpa

or 'the place of rats' in the local Aboriginal tongue). These subjects are put in the spotlight even more in *Love in the place of rats*. In fact, that whole book is one giant love letter to Marissa, West End and my grandparents (on my mother's side) who grew up and lived in Kurilpa during the first half of last century. My West End or Kurilpa is a reality all to itself, existing outside and apart from the real 'place'; a unique poetic microcosm populated by the people I love, and the ghosts of the people I love. But simultaneously, it is an indistinguishable part of the greater whole: a kind of mirror or replication of universal rhythms, patterns and tendencies. My West End or Kurilpa is everywhere, always - just open a copy of *Love in the place of rats* and it will always be there.

In addition to love, there's always been a political undercurrent to my poetry, and this became more pronounced with the increased tempo of vile crimes - committed by all 'sides' - in the disturbing and often absurd, verging on Orwellian, 'War on Terror.' I wrote *The river is far behind us* at the time of the arguably illegal - or, at the very least, fraudulently baseless - invasion of Iraq, back in 2003. As an extended, non-linear suite it wanders and meanders like a river of jump-cut images, fragmented texts and info-biscuits. If you walk along the banks of this river you can enjoy a bird's-eye view of the stomach-churning farce of forced 'democracy.' The bogus 'War on Terror' and the whole complex of political exploitation and media sycophancy that comes with it still makes me sick, and angers me, every day. The cradle of Western civilisation is being systematically smashed to pieces, its people torn apart and brutalised, and the beauty and life-giving force of those wonderful rivers - Tigris and Euphrates - is well and truly behind us. Actually, I'd say that beauty has been vanquished. So you can see that my politics is a politics whose source is invariably love, compassion and a shared sense of humanity; a politics of similarities, instead of differences.

Heading towards the source of human similarities, particularly the shared and equalising mysteries of life and death, has led me to investigate and embrace ancient philosophical systems, most notably Hermetic and alchemical cosmology, and the associated 'occult' fields of cabala or 'Green Language', gematria, and various Western and Eastern mystical and devotional systems. The first major textual result of this investigation is *liber xix: differentia liber*, a Transcendentalesque suite of nineteen nineteen-line poems which, synchronously, took nineteen months to write. For me, it's my most satisfyingly cohesive and important work to date.

**Q: Did you have another life from which your poetic self sprung forth, or have the words to you always come?**

**Jill Jones:** I was always reading, if not writing, and words were, and are, important. I'm not antisocial but I can exist as a solitary, and was solitary often as a kiddy, in that I was shy. I was the fat quiet brainy kid no-one wanted to know, and I was bullied slightly, so I tend to keep out of people's way. That may, or may not, point to the kind of poet that I am. I have many lives and selves, but also only one life, the continuous, until it doesn't some day.

**David Prater:** I didn't start writing poetry till I left school, and even then the first five years I was writing are best forgotten. I stopped writing poetry in the mid-1990s but took it up again in earnest when I moved to Melbourne in 1998. That being said, of course I have an imaginary life, wherein my poetry forms the language I speak, to myself.

**Paul Hardacre:** "He was known as an introspective and imaginative lad totally lacking in ambition and worldly pride, 'with a dreamy face and poetic nature ...'" - this is how somebody once described the German mystic, Jacob Boehme, but it could easily describe me as a child. I was always off in other worlds: in reading books and comics, in writing stories and in drawing. I was massively influenced by fantasy and science fiction and, later, mythology, cyberpunk and horror, and spent much of my early years inventing and populating all manner of other 'places.' It wasn't as though I was some freaky hermit-child though - I mean, I was aware of the regular social expectations and the roles that I was required to play at times: to get good grades at school, to play cricket on Saturday mornings, to do the yard work for my grandparents, and that was fine - it was a kind of camouflage for the me that always was. I enjoyed this dualism, and being able to dip into either world as I wished. As a Gemini, it's perhaps only natural. So although I only wrote one poem before the age of 22, imagination has always been my realm, and by cultivating imagination in this ongoing way, the poet-potential was apparently ready to go, just waiting for the catalyst to initiate the reaction. The catalyst came when I was intimately involved in an incident that allowed me to witness - in fact, experience - both the uncaring, almost violent indifference of 'bystanders,' and the amazing, unconditional love and care of the more marginalised and stigmatised members of society. This traumatic experience permanently altered my perspective, began a lengthy and difficult period of introspection, and resulted in my eventual 'serious' pursuit of a life of poetry.

*took a photograph of sunday night  
then blew it all onto a wall in paint  
something stirs in the brittle light -  
abrupt denouement; studio sounds  
erupt into white (the power's down)*

(from 'Landschaft (mit Gerhard Richter)' by David Prater)

**Q: What do you see as the role of poetry in society (Aus and global), if any?**

**Jill Jones:** Poetry is a social thing, but I don't think of it as having a 'role in society'. Maybe I should. Poetry does things with language, language is important. Perhaps poetry's role is to be resistant. And to refresh language. Lively it up! Stop it corroding. But now that makes it sound like a product, for polishing language. It is language work, something you do, not use.

**David Prater:** Poetry provides a way of talking about things that is at once familiar and strange. Poetry was not invented especially for funerals, I suppose, but it's amazing how well suited it is to these occasions. It also provides words to put on

greeting cards. Sometimes I fail to see what role poetry has, other than to keep poets sane.

**Paul Hardacre:** On a cynical day, I would say that poetry is an almost irrelevant sideshow to the grotesque daily carnival of despair rooted in banal consumerism, media manipulation and perpetual warfare.

On a less cynical day, I would say that poetry acts to remind us all of the true essence of the human condition, and the mysteries of life. It's a kind of conserve which, for the most part, sits overlooked on a dusty shelf, that we can eventually break out and savour when the madness that is this Age of Iron passes. So its role is a preservative one.

**Q: Do you write with your nation in mind as an audience or do you feel more part of the globalised world, speaking of 'universal' experience?**

**Jill Jones:** I've never expected my nation, or any nation, to be an audience for poetry. The poetry audience is very small everywhere. I don't believe in 'universal experience'. My experience is local, and my language comes out of wherever I am and wherever I've been. My experience isn't the same as yours or anyone else's, though there are correspondences and equivalences, and languages go to that and work that. I respond to poetry of many places and I find I get a response from readers all over the world. I don't angst too much about audience but it would be nice. I have no particular attachment to the label 'Australian', if that's what you mean by nation, but neither do I pretend I wasn't born in a place that's labeled Australia, albeit a problematic label, as 'nation' is.

**David Prater:** I reject notions of 'nations', except in an imaginary sense. There's no such thing as universal experiences - sure, you and I can both be sad but that's never the same thing. A person is a universe.

**Paul Hardacre:** I despise all manner of nationalism, so I can't say that I write with Australia in mind. Although my work taps into and to some extent continues the earlier poetries of Australian poets like Michael Dransfield, Charles Buckmaster, John Forbes, Gig Ryan, and Laurie Duggan, it could equally claim heritage in various North American avant-garde and language poetries, and Asiatic texts.

The rise of online journals and magazines means that contemporary Australian poets are just as likely to place their work in publications based in Norway, Japan, Italy, or Brazil, as they are in their own country - one of the benefits of globalisation, apparently. I see this breaking down of national(istic) identities as a mostly positive thing.

More than ever before, my recent work is tapping into the anima mundi, which obviously, given its very nature, transcends all boundaries and artificial divisions, and embodies the universal and the immutably shared.

*& this all happens near a causeway or a bridge  
so romantic it rains at the first sign of reality &  
words return at low tide only five letters  
heart stapled a steady diet of stained thought  
salt feather & bone are present like westerns*

(from 'Boiler' by Paul Hardacre)

**Q: Are there things your poetry can't do, that you wish it could?**

**Jill Jones:** What does poetry do? I'm not sure I have an answer for that. I don't get hung up like a lot of others do with that quote from Auden; poetry does things or else why would people read and write it. But what, exactly? Good question.

**David Prater:** I wish it could bring down a government.

**Paul Hardacre:** One thing that I wish poetry in general - not my poetry specifically - could do would be to sell more books. It would be pleasant indeed if more people read poetry, and bought more poetry books. I'm convinced that it's not because poetry is too difficult or arcane for the average person of reasonable intelligence to understand and enjoy - rather, it's that poetry suffers from poor marketing and branding. Other forms of popular entertainment like cinema, music, tv, computer games - even theatre - all benefit from sophisticated marketing and content delivery mechanisms. Poetry seems boring or irrelevant in comparison, and in many cases, it looks boring. As a publisher I've always said that just because it's poetry doesn't mean that it [a poetry book] has to look like shit. A lot of small presses with poetry on their lists don't seem to share this view, unfortunately. So I think that poetry and poetry publishers need to carefully consider how they will package and market their content, so that, hopefully, it will seem more appealing to people who might not traditionally read poetry. Schools also have to sharpen their game, and need to introduce relevant contemporary poetry into their English curricula. Curricula offering poetry written in an old, archaic style, and addressing subjects that young people would perceive as irrelevant or completely lame, only help to brand poetry as boring and something to avoid at all costs.

**Interviewer note:** It seems ironic to me that poetry, the most portable form of literature, is still deemed inaccessible. A poem can be read from a computer screen, tucked into a jacket pocket, read on a ten minute break. I agree with Paul that it is not due to it being too difficult for the average person, but that it is 'constructed' to be so.

The 'Soi3' poetry series published by Paul's papertiger media are indeed elegant and sophisticated. Perhaps poetry fans together can help to introduce poetry to the wider public and help rid it of its stigma.

**Q: How does an idea or inspiration germinate, and how does it become the full poem?**

**Jill Jones:** There are many ways I can answer that. For instance, poetry begins in a space. Not one I can define. It is often apparent, however, when I'm walking. But even before that, it is in the body's space, and pace, energy.

Often I can begin with the sound of words, a phrase, in the brain. And I am very influenced. How could I not be? No word is mine anyway. There's a list of influences I could go on with but they change over time.

Beginnings are difficult. Poems seemed magical once (still do at times, but I'm talking about the "beginning"). Words were magical. Sometimes I don't know I'm beginning. Stuff happens with words. It's like a tuning in - you hear a dog barking, or someone says something, you see an angle in the street, something on TV and a word associates itself with it for a moment. It's associative, or accretive. It goes or it doesn't.

Sometimes it seems like too much hard work. And writing comes from the body. I think of it as a complex of physical activity that's pretty obvious, like the hand typing or pushing the pen or the eye reading the words being written, as well as what's less easy to document, what someone else I can't remember called "felt sense", a bodily awareness of feelings that come out of words, ideas, images. It all requires energy to generate this activity.

But these days I often write to order, or use other ways to make poems: reading someone else to kick start, making lists, noodling on the net, using constraints. That can work. I am naturally a last minuter so being 'made' to do something is useful. There are, in fact, lots of possibilities.

The full poem can take days, weeks, months or years. The refining part can consist of heavy editing and re-editing, or collaging poems that aren't working individually to see if they gain some energy by being intercut with others. Sometimes I walk away from something for years and come back and find it was OK all along.

**David Prater:** Usually I respond directly to a phrase or a statement made by someone (eg. in a comment on a blog, or in a newspaper, or a lyric, or a quote from a musician) which then usually becomes a title and then it generally writes itself. I never spend that long crafting poems that already seem finished.

**Paul Hardacre:** For me, it's an itch in my head that, if I scratch, eventuates in poems. Like all itches, it can be ignored, if, for example, circumstances aren't conducive to the act of poetic creation. However, I've found that whenever I ignore the itch - if I am occupied with non-creative work of some kind - it's a kind of small death. Seriously, I feel like I'm spitting in the face of the Muses. So, whenever possible, I try to obey the call of impending creative manifestation, and help bring the poem out. It's like being a midwife - my role is almost as an assistant to the birthing of the poem; to draw it from the ether and into this world. With this technique, it requires a sort of 'openness' to channel the words and to lock them in their fixed, poetic form. Consequently, I don't find myself doing extensive editing and re-writes of these works. Where I am at these days is very different to ten years ago. Even my physical writing techniques are very different. Back then it was all felt-covered notebooks and reacting to environmental and situational cues like sunrises, stars and intoxicants. Now my poetry writing process is all laptop-driven; a clear-minded anywhere.

### **Q: Where would you be without poetry? Who would you be if not a 'poet'?**

**Jill Jones:** I don't think I could imagine it. How could one escape poetry? I'd still be a reader of poetry, which I am anyway, as well as a writer of it. Poets must be readers first. Poetry's everywhere. You can never be without it.

**David Prater:** I honestly have no idea. Maybe I'd be a father by now, or a country school teacher.

**Paul Hardacre:** Growing up, I always thought that I would find myself in some respectable profession like architecture or engineering - but that was probably more a result of my latent attempts to fulfill the expectations of my mother and father. Instead, I chose something else ... something more unpredictable and 'real', in the sense of my choices resulting in both really pleasurable and really painful happenings. Poems sprang forth from me at the right time; at what, in retrospect, was arguably the lowest point in my life, and for this, I am grateful. Without poetry as my art, I am uncertain what my life circumstances would be. I don't just think - I know for certain, and am honest enough to share it - that I am equally capable of the most noble, and despicable, acts. Given that, to speculate what I would be doing if my poetic potential hadn't emerged ... well, your guess is as good as mine.

*puts off shoes he must & in a box*

*a room her bells & flames / is black*

*like rain her skull-topped staff her eyes*

*of precious water ink & goats the river*

*makes with matted hair or moon he stole*

*the beast the ghost who followed magic*

(from 'shadow apple south' by Paul Hardacre)

**Interviewer note: I asked a few specific questions as well, due to particular things that interested me in their works.**

*falling stars*

*history cracks the air*

(from 'valley' by Jill Jones)

*On the other hand, I'm curious about a passing cigarette, the other guy's car, a break in the weather, his girlfriend on the veranda, the origin of species, dry shells, green flesh, penetrated fabric, rays, sirens, refrigerated trucks that push fill for the perpetual supermarket at the top end of the street.*

(from 'Staring out' by Jill Jones)

**To Jill Jones, Q: Your poetry is full of binaries and the way that in a micro and macro sphere, these oppositions coexist. This is prevalent in 'Valley' What do you think?**

**Jill Jones:** Yes, my writing moves between the particular and the larger view; if that's a binary, so be it. I suppose I don't see them as oppositions, at least not in an adversarial way nor an exclusionary way. I'm interested in the way the balance works, not to reach stasis but how unbalanced the balance is, how various things are moment to moment. Hence, the title of my last book, Broken/Open. That the particular is by necessity part of the whole, but the whole keeps changing as does the particular, that causes and effects aren't easy to detect or follow but we feel the interactions running across our skins anyway. It was my own slightly warped version of chaos theory before I'd ever heard of the term. And, yes, a deliberate misreading of it as well. Misperception is an important part of poetry.

**To Jill Jones, Q: I see this working as well in 'Staring Out'. The micro & macro, past, present and future, nostalgic memory through to the future as represented by children. I would call it all-encompassing. Do you feel the need to express the complexity of a moment?**

**Jill Jones:** Is it a need? I'm not sure. It's what I do. By the way, I'm not keen on nostalgia as I tend to cut and run from the past but, yes, memory is at the base. Without memory you're caught in a loop, as anyone who has had to deal with someone with dementia would know. My nostalgia is probably for the future. One way of looking at how I work is looking at 'possibilities', some of which are based on choices and history/ memory, and others on randomness and continual change, like weather and climate and luck or lack of it.

**To David Prater: For contemporary poetry to be relevant, do you think cultural references (film, music) and intertextuality are inevitable?**

**David Prater:** I don't know - it's a bit chicken and egg for me - my poetry uses lots of pop culture, so yes it's essential to my poetry. But I don't think it's inevitable.

**To David Prater: Do you think there is a sense in your poems of nostalgia for a time before - eg. a time before technology, a time before reliability and capitalism?**

**David Prater:** Not really - perhaps a nostalgia for childhood, or a reconstruction of a perfect childhood, or something like that. A time before stupidity? Maybe that's impossible too.

**To David Prater: In the urgency of your prose poems (eg. Kunst-Wet) are you trying to capture a moment amongst all the confusion of contemporary life, as you express it, the 'hyphen between breaths'. If not, what is this sense of urgency?**

**David Prater:** It's a sense of impending doom that I've felt for the past few years - a fear of early death, or of not having said what I want to say before it's too late. Maybe this is apocalyptically self-indulgent as well. That poem was really a love poem written across great distances. Trying to conquer impossibilities, or at least alluding to this, making believe that it is possible to be in two places at once, all the while knowing that you're not, and writing a poem that expresses that impossibility.

*bursts of motion this is the station called silence at which i long to get off with you so as to emerge into some blinding shower of certain life-affirming illuminations as blades of wet rubber hack away at the heads of screen actors we shoot our own minimalist movie under the*

(from 'Kunst-Wet' by David Prater)

**To find out more about their works and view some of their poetry online:**

**Jill Jones:**

<http://homepages.ihug.com.au/~jpjones>

Her blog: <http://rubystreet.blogspot.com>

**David Prater:**

<http://www.daveydreamnation.com>

A review of his work 'Abendland': <http://adamfieled.blogspot.com/2007/01/david-prater-abendland.html>

David is also the editor of 'Cordite Poetry Review': <http://www.cordite.org.au>

### **Paul Hardacre:**

<http://www.paulhardacre.com>

papertiger media: <http://www.papertigermedia.com>

hutt poetry ezine: <http://www.papertigermedia.com/hutt>

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