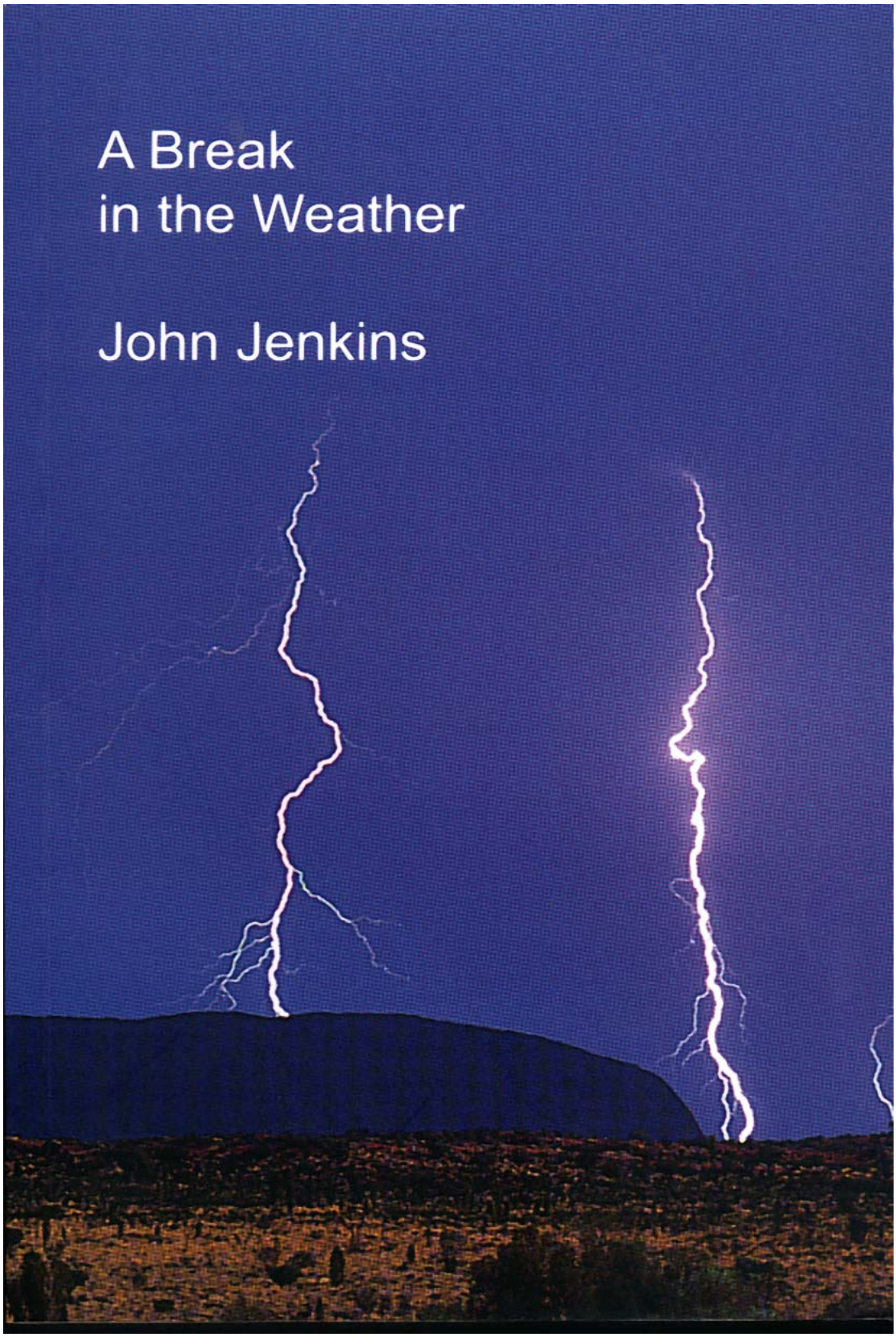
A Break in the Weather

John Jenkins



A BREAK IN THE WEATHER

John Jenkins was born in 1949 and lives on the rural outskirts of Melbourne, where he works as a writer, journalist, editor and teacher. This is his seventh book of poetry.

Also by John Jenkins

Poems:

Days Like Air, Melbourne, Modern Writing Press, 1992.

The Wild White Sea, Adelaide, Little Esther, 1990.

Chromatic Cargoes, Melbourne, Post Neo, 1986.

The Inland Sea, Melbourne, Brunswick Hills, 1984.

Blind Spot, St. Lucia, Q., Makar, 1977.

The White Wolf, Melbourne, Contempa, 1974.

Co-written poems (all with Ken Bolton):

Nutters Without Fetters, Berri, NSW, PressPress, 2002, and on the web at www.presspress.com.au

The Wallah Group, Adelaide, Little Esther, 2001.

Gwendolyn Windswept (a verse novel), Adelaide, serialised in Otis Rush magazine Nos 9 to 13.

The Gutman Variation, Adelaide, Little Esther, 1993.

The Ferrara Poems (a verse novel), Adelaide, Experimental Art Foundation (S.A.), 1989.

Airborne Dogs and Other Collaborations, Melbourne, Brunswick Hills, 1988.

Anthologies (as editor):

Soft Lounges (with Antonia Bruns), Melbourne Fringe Festival, 1984.

The Outback Reader (with Michael Dugan), Melbourne, Outback Press, 1974.

Non-fiction:

Arias: Recent Australian Music Theatre, Melbourne, Red House Editions, 1997.

22 Australian Contemporary Composers, Melbourne, New Music Articles, 1988.

Travelers' Tales of Old Cuba: from Treasure Island to Mafia Den (*ed.*), Melbourne, Ocean Press, 2002.

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MODERN WRITING PRESS

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CONTENTS:

Part One.

1.

A CLOCK ticks out of sight, transporting
day towards sunset. Long rays of light incline
to stain a desk, music softly interposing
notes between one thought and the next,
where someone sits, thinking. His name is Bruce,
a prodigy at five, genius at twenty,
and he has plenty to occupy his mind,
for the Earth is quickly running out of time.

2.

The clock ticks, but he just picks his teeth
with a paper clip. Then sets an idea in orbit:
Like a dark star in a galaxy of one,
it’s soon eclipsed by doubt, and he quits his puzzling
equations, squeezed out from abstract symbols on
a pad, and looks at the window, blinking at the
fading light; still in reverie, still tantalised
by the bare outline of what he’s just surmised.

3.

Before we learn what Bruce has spun from clouds
of thought all day, what teases out his mind, we must
tell how, as a boy, he was found — and in a way
to provoke imagination of even those
most soberly inclined to statements of hard fact.
At a tender age, before he’d been one year,
Bruce was found naked in a summer bower
surrounded by sweet buds and nodding flowers

4.

Beneath a tree in the Botannical Gardens
of that city on the Yarra, at the bottom
of your map. Found, in nappies, thirty years before
we find him here. So let’s go back — on wings of light,
if back we ever can return — to set the scene,
where we find reality assumes the contours
of a dream — all bright air and shifting summer leaves.
(And, as dawn breaks, let’s hope our story is believed.)

5.

On a bed of moss this naked boy awakes,
appearing out of nothing, with a little sigh.
Where, just before, the warming air had stirred,
he crawls towards fresh grass and flower stalks
as the talk of distant picnickers, bright bird calls
and a floating voice across a lake, all blow
faintly by. Why should the tender infant cry?
A slumbrous spray of blossom shades his eyes

6.

As he reaches up to touch some bright and bobbing
buds, his sparse hair a golden brown all made
brighter still by stars of pollen. And we see
the fingers on his lifted hand are linked
by bands of skin — translucent petals where the sun
shines through! The babe’s eyes widen as he looks about,
unclouded still by scenes of ugliness and toil
seen by so many eyes upon this mortal coil.

7.

“Why! For goodness sake!” A certain Irene Quinn
stumbles over the baby boy as she takes
her morning walk. She’s afraid of fevers
(those chills in ambush!) and wears an old fox stole,
though it’s high summer. An eccentric lady who
lives alone, she straight away decides to take this
garden pixie home, and wraps him in soft fur.
She’d always wanted a son to live with her

8.

Ever since she lost her own child, years before,
after a sorry affair with her accountant.
When her child died, she was sadly, doubly sure
her decision not to marry had been prudent.
But secretly, she couldn’t want a child more,
could cuddle every little tot in sheer delight,
so a tender part of her would grieve at last
to return each warm bundle of boy or lass

9.

To a pram or cot. She lived alone, paid her
taxes, and her agile mind proved a match for
any prying neighbour or teacher who’d ask too
many awkward questions. Anything that stood
between her and ‘sonny’ had to go — and it went!
Her bower child was heaven sent. She changed planes
and jobs and home, judiciously, so many times
the curious forgot, and this covered up her ‘crime’

10.
Of omission. But can love ever be a crime?
You decide. Did she really sin? Certainly,
she cared for him. Now, Bruce sits. Distant music
is thrown into soft discordant notes inside
his mind as he looks outside the window
to wonders at the stars, and night fast falls.
Not entirely naked, no, a slender strand
was tied, those years ago, about his infant hand

11.
And on it was a stone, of meteorite
from parts more distant than unknown. For he'd
had the stone analysed and carbon-dated,
though curiosity was more inflamed
than sated when the lab report gave its
bald verdict: the rock or gem was from Cygnus
Alpha, a scrap of sky so 'gone' from where we are
that, even at light speed, you'd have to travel far

12.
(Now, that's an understatement!) but still use up
a lifetime to reach that place in outer space.
No, his origins were not in doubt. The author
of his story had simply left things out. For
one, an odd poem he'd found in mother's shelves:
The High Tides — a ludicrous conceit that must
have worked balefully upon her mind.
This mad poem inferred that a woman would find

13.

Or meet a star-born child in some garden,
a boy called Bruce (as she'd named *him)* "graceful
as the slender Spruce" the poem had rhymed.
Well, as far as mother was concerned, he *had*
dropped from the sky. It was a figure of speech
apt enough. And she collected gemstones, too.
A more likely explanation was within reach:
he was left, storm-tossed flotsam on life's beach

14.

By some frightened girl who couldn't afford or
cope with the stress of her bastard boy. And mother,
well, mother did *invent!* Besides, it sounded
all too much like *Superman.* Bruce even saw
that film with her, and she had said: "Those farmers
were so good to take in the 'found' lad." Q.e.d.!
He'd also read Byron, Homer and *Njal's Saga*,
found 'Jungian' heroes in the *Ramayana*.

15.

Mum had read them too. Archetypes pop up
everywhere, in *Gilgamesh* or *Orlando*
Furioso. And it's quite in order that they
do so. One had popped into Mum's head that fatal
day in the garden. Imagination, every
bit of it! He shivered at an image — some
odd intimation — watching his shadow fall,
a shift of tonal values, across his study wall.

16.

He moved, and it slid into a multiple dance
of shadows — *what was it now?* — but couldn't say.
Perhaps, just a passing doubt, or inkling
of the commonplace that all our days are 'written',
and we share with fiction links deeper than
the arcane codes deciphered by our genes
(like missing notes he heard once in a dream
when everything was really as it seemed

17.

When it seemed insubstantial) and put down his pen.
He turned the light off, and night deepened once again.
Origin was not the thing that niggled at his brain.
He did not make of childhood some deep mystery —
Mrs Quinn, clearly, had protected him from pain.
Rather, a sort of stain was seeping from the clock:
namely, *time*. It's sticky slide of moments a tether,
a cosmic Super Glue, holding things together.

Part Two.

18.

OR DID it? *Time...?* he thought, toying with his pen,
as we cut to 'years later', and to Hobart town,
to dark days of rain and wind upon the Derwent,
as Bruce plies the troubled flow in a little boat,
heading to the wharf, then hotel and to bed.
Time *is* the problem, and he can't seem to quit it.
His head swims with a calculus he can't quite shun,
for Bruce is a leading mathematician

19.

Lately employed by the fishing industy
to estimate the likely catch for Hobart.
Where to fish? How fine the mesh of bobbing nets?
How long to trawl the waves, how vast will be
the schools? And at what depth? Importantly,
how many fish will be left to breed again next
year? Silver sparks beneath the waves, flickering
shoals of quick and nervous life, in shimmering

20.

Forays meander and swerve like one vast mass —
and who can guess what tremor, what single
fish, will trigger the entire wheeling school?
This perplexed him. For here was ordered chaos
all in motion, a constellation of living
numbers on his charts, requiring all his art
to understand… Besides, it was good to help feed
the world, distracting him from greedier

21.

Speculation: *What was time? How did it work?*
Questions baited to hook his mind, strung out
on impossible equations. Thrashing about
on deck that morning, with a pad, beneath an
awning, out of the wind, Bruce jots new ciphers
as the boat kicks shoreward. Meanwhile, fishing boats
linked by satellite, Antarctic base camps on far,
wind-swept ice, probes beneath the waves and sonar

22.

Scanners all send data streaming into Hobart.
The schools are running, a bright galaxy
of fish beneath the ocean’s chill, all down the
rugged eastern coast, from Cape Naturaliste
to South East Cape, where the waters of Bass Strait
are rich with silver bullion and clouds of minute krill —
from the Tasman Sea to the Pacific
Antarctic Ridge — so a catch truly prolific

23.

Should be expected by the Tasman fleet.
Later, in his office, Bruce directs the boats.
Here! And there! In this sector, should they be
disposed best. He looks up to a blipping screen —
where the ocean’s contours are displayed in lines
and waves — and charts the larders of the sea by
walking steel dividers, leg by leg, across a map.
Then Bruce takes five and lunch, followed by a nap

24.

That objectively takes but ‘forty winks’, yet
teases him with dreams — of a huge sea cod
swimming in slow motion up an endless tank
marked off, on one side, with a scale in millimetres,
and further synchronised to a simple counter
that totals every one of his, the dreaming body’s,
heart beats — almost convincing him, when he pokes
up from sleep again, that time is a cosmic joke

25.

With this punch-line: that ‘take five’ here can
never hope to tally with the clock above his desk,
which says only minutes have elapsed; whereas
five years were measured by that slow old cod,
which still floated in the haze beneath his eyes.
Bruce looked about him: his map, dividers, charts,
fresh cut flowers in a vase, all were the same.
Unless the universe was complicit in this game

26.

Of inner eons gratuitously shrinking
into minutes of objective time, there was no
fear of a tangled temporal warp and woof.
He’d not been ticked off for subscribing to the
facts, and told time was more intuitive, more a
metaphysical conundrum, but was simply
exhausted, and should spend (mint?) more time in bed,
or maybe in a hammock, than stretch his head

27.

And the midnight oil on crazy speculation.
It had been years since a holiday he’d taken.
“Yes,” he thought. “Quick trip soon, to Uluru.
Always wanted to see it — and really need
a break.” (Even though the tourist ads on TV put
him off). “Always been curious. So, *why not?’*
He decided it would do him good to clock
off for a week — and bought a ticket to The Rock.

Part Three

28.

A FEW DAYS later, Bruce was walking hand
in hand at Uluru with a girl called Miko
Tanaka. She had stumbled on his luggage
in the hotel foyer. Lucky fall for Bruce,
as it's unsure he would have been introduced
to a woman as interesting and bold as her.
Later, in the Desert Bar, their tongues unzipped
by cocktails, they began a conversation that flipped

29.

Over the following five days, from science to sex —
drifting in a haze of sweet infatuation,
and only broken by bouts of lust, rambles
in the dust around the Rock, and dinner. She told
him: "I am very rare — to be Japanese, yet go
alone. We always travel in a group. But I'm
like 'Adventure Girl', a cartoon. (Do you have it?)
— as seen on Tokyo TV! I am very fit

30.

"And have designer pack and walking shoes. Yes.
Miko. Adventure Girl. Same as on the screen."
('Adventure Girl' said the pin on Miko's shirt.)
She was thin, with a small, neat face, short hair,
and an impish smile. Miko invited him to see
her room, and that was that. He stayed all week.
It was a sort of zen on both their parts: love saw,
prompted, and got just what it wanted. Both ignored

31.
Convention — their second date would have to wait.
And explored a repertoire of erotic tricks,
enough to coax them both to come then go into
an ever deeper afterglow. Or, they discussed
the spin and charm of photons (Miko studied
physics, something of a prodigy, at Ueno
Uni.) or they swapped bits of chaos theory
as it applied to swarming bees in hives, and re

32.
‘Problems’ that required quirky maths. (Miko
was no slouch in that department, twisting
in the cool white sheets.) Conditioned air hummed along
to their equations as, cocooned in their dark room,
they half pulled the thin Venetians open
and wondered at the cloudless sky outside —
the blue so deep and bright — until their itch revived,
and, finding it excruciating, fucked each other blind.

33.
Below, on top, inverted and from behind —
each fraction, square root and permutation tested —
theirs was a union both of bodies and of minds.
Satisfied, the new day found them on the trail,
in the cool of morning, still shaking off their sleep,
and yawning now in well-being’s happy fuzz
that lovers know is nature’s keen delight.
Miko wants her Bruce beside her day and night.

Part Four.

34.

FOR THE third time in as many days they circum-
ambulate that mighty monolith — the worn peak
of some vast and ancient mountain buried miles
beneath their feet — that Giles first came upon,
it's said, though it was ancestor to the desert tribes
for lifetimes-plus before Stonehenge; those British
dolarites just babes, we understand, beside this
buried range of arkosic sandstone stamping its

35.

Dreaming silhouettes against the desert sky —
breaking through the earth at Kata-Tjuta, then
Mt Conner and the Rock — where our pair now set out,
walking clockwise round the base, careful to eschew
the ant-trail of the summit climb, not seeking to
offend the custodial Anangu, whose land
they tread, or dream-time spirit of the monolith,
self-created from the sacred world that's kith

36.

And kin to Country, owning all people here,
and renews the timeless journey with its songs.
They walk round the base, pause at the Gorge,
the Pebble, Rockhole, Maggie Springs, remarking
on the 'red matter' and water-catching basins
in the pock-marked, time-eroded contours
of a striking local feature dubbed 'The Brain'.
Here, water has mottled pigment with its stain.

37.
And within a cave at noontime they repair
and share a flask of melon juice, tofu rolls,
a ham sandwich, in the cave’s delicious cool,
while relentless heat beats down outside,
cracking rocks that cooled and shrank all night
and now must rapidly expand. Thus sand is
born of solid rock, and borne on winds, the sands
of time, swirling in the heat outside, and

38.
Burying further, by imperceptible degrees,
the timeless rock in its desert hourglass.
It’s true, our two are of a scientific mind,
though not unfriendly to the sense of timeless
grandeur, the mythic sweep and deep culture,
of their hosts. That culture so enduring it
must occasion awe, and certainly respect.
Let’s return to our lovers now, and deflect

39.
Our nomad attention from such vast reflection.
Time, you see, was on my hero’s mind — again!
Miko, in contrast, seemed content with every
passing second; her senses thrilled, she was
Adventure Girl of the Outback, entirely
taken with her smart holiday romance
and the vastness of the Inland space and light —
such sheer views to blue horizons hit her right

40.

In the solar plexus. This was not Tokyo
where space was tight, and your body had no
right to more than a few square metres, like
a ricocheting pachinko ball, amidst
the streaming Shinjuku crowds at rush hour,
when she'd neatly navigate crowds a million
strong pouring up from subways to the neon.
She was ecstatic here, drunk on space and light,
even in the cave, and hugged her lover tightly.

41.

Distracted, Bruce pondered matters more abstruse.
What teased his mind were Aranda couplets
collected by the scholar T.G. Strehlow
in the latter's luminous, ground-breaking
Songs of Central Australia, an important
and central text, but so rare, and expensive,
in its original edition of but eight
hundred, now sadly out of print, and still await

42.

Ing some benefactor of true worth to transcribe
Strehlow's 'songs in English' to the Internet,
for unfettered public access; and to set
the record straight, that five thousand verses
of Aranda and Loritja song, might reveal
a truly dazzling, epic scope, comparable
to any ancient poetry, whether Hebrew or
the noble Greek, Old English or Old Norse.

43.

Enough of my pleadings for the obvious!
Bruce had been reading these Aranda songs
and puzzled over something that obsessed him.
In one song-line, you see, a tribe sets out upon
a journey in the footprints of a dream-time
giant, who left behind something of its spirit
in each place it went. And, curiously, in one
verse the group arrive, but in the next set out, on

44.

The *same* journey, once again; or are about
to go, having already left! — as if time were
a charmed circle and one can start anywhere,
to arrive at any point on the circumference
of now, of past, of future, or of futures past.
It was intriguing, and breeding quite odd
associations — a resonance or ‘flavour’ —
in his mind, one he couldn’t help but savour

45.

Especially when he saw, swimming above him
in the cave, what seemed the painting of a fish —
it floated out of the shadows like a gestalt
or rather, giant cod, the same as he imagined
in experimental dream that ‘proved’ all time
could loop the loop of common sense, defy
both clocks and logic — the same way photons
‘jump’…, as Miko explained upon their futon

46.
After love’s arithmetic (add six to nine) was done,
and they reclined in conversation a day before…
‘jump’, according to their quantum numbers,
to new levels of ‘arousal’, without passing ,
as it seemed, the spaces in between, as time
and space and energy were just expressions of
the one united field, perhaps, that Einstein pored
over, and once parsed with symbols on a board

47.
Although the final terms, finally, eluded him.
Bruce stared at it again, but was mistaken —
the phantom fish was just a trick of light, arisen
in his imagination, not limned in pigment
on the actual rock. And our lovers leave
the interior’s cool retreat, into blinding day.
That night, they become a liquid constellation
of stars, mirrored in two pools of bright sensation.

Part Five.
48.
SLOW BUBBLES seem to circulate about him
and, from his lips, thread bright chains in spirals.
They twinkle and wander, slowly rising to
the warm sea surface as, two months later,
Bruce glides above a bed of coral, on the leeward
side of a jewel-like cay, one of hundreds
that might evolve or fade on that superb reef
which, for three thousand kilometres, leaps

49.

From Thursday Island to Barrow Point in one
green and turquoise arc — though broken into thousands
of more smaller reefs. This Reef (called, quite rightly,
Great) is a Marine Park. Patterns of waves projected
onto the sea floor make it all seem to move and
shimmer, the liquid rhythms taken up by clown
and parrot fish; skeins of marine life in fathoms
far above him, or they dart to deeper chasms

50.

That plunge, stepwise, to twice a thousand metres
just three miles from the continental shelf…
Here, Bruce drifts over fields of antlered pink,
in the underwater heavens of the sea.
On his wrist is a pager, embedded with a
chip of tricky sand — it's waterproof of course!
It signals with blips and flashing lights — he'd
best check his mail. He lifts it to his mask, to read

51.

The text just sent by Miko from her lap-top (or
computer on it!) as she rides the Yamanote line
to Shinjuku: "Dear Bruce, I'll see you in six
months' time, at the Twelfth Annual World Climate
Convention, next in Sydney. I have booked us both
a room in the Blue Mountains. What eternity
to wait, but wait we must! My studies are a joy.
Hope your work undersea finds good. Oh-boy!

52.
“It’s sure exciting! — M.” The word ‘eternity’
sank like a stone, ballast to his thoughts, carrying
Bruce deeper, and mixed with a sharp and leaping
pleasure, part anticipation (his lover’s words),
part delicious disconnection from the ocean’s
surface, as the gentle motion of his flippers,
left then right, stirred the cool caress of water
over skin. He sucked air from the regulator

53.
Joining pliant pipes to the tanks on his back,
its hiss inflating worlds, his lungs, his being,
all commingled with a breathless joy of life.
The weighted belt around his waist provided
perfect buoyancy. He glided, weightless then,
suspended in the ancient amnion. Eternity,
he thought, was all about him now, and mused
at Freud’s ‘oceanic feeling’, which fused

54.
With many other thoughts, too. It seemed that bliss
came with the restoration of the human
body’s links with the cosmos — more than memoir
of a fetus once deep inside the womb.
Actually, he thought, we *are* all connected,
intimately, with nature — by ties of gravity,
of pressure, of oxygen flooding our lungs,
then blood and brain. The sun probed at tiny fish
as he idly revolved more ideas such as this

55.

And drifted over an expanse of digitate
and branching calcite, where clownfish sidled into
folds and contours of a bright red coral brain,
and cleaner-wrasse picked the teeth of angelfish
just out of school, and removed the parasites
from scales of a huge and sullen reef perch.
This radiant reef was an arabesque of life
that knew nothing of separation, and was rife

56.

With extreme sharing, to the point of symbiosis:
Here, each must feed, because each is fed upon,
by others in their time. “And their time’s always
now,” he thought, and bubbled out more breath above
the coloured lawns, where a crown of thorns slowly
slid towards its lunch — a spiky star eclipsing
cobalt moons and pink lace, deep below his mask.
He turned his head over to one side, and gasped

57.

Expelling water that had seeped beneath its glass,
the living map of coral sharpening to view
once more below. “Twenty thousand years ago,”
he thought, “in the past ice age, this place was just
dry land. Then, much of the sea’s free water was
locked up and frozen solid in a vast polar
cap of northern ice, and the water level declined
a hundred metres, way below what we find

58.

“Today… *Imagine walking here!”* Then, in a sort
of time-dilating trance, image after image
floated through his mind. He remembered seeing
micro-sections of the living polyps; knew how
each animal — a feathered worm secreted
from a tube — sifted nightly tides for plankton.
A benign host, with algae living inside
its body structure — tiny plants hitching a ride!

59.

This relationship, between symbiotic
life-forms, makes a perfect sense: energy is
traded for oxygen. It also explains the
sensitivity of coral growth to the depth
of water, as plants can’t photosynthesise
in plummeting gloomy realms the light can’t reach.
But in these sunny ones, where the lively trance
of mirrored rays so blinding shot and danced

60.

Below the surface, they can and do. But more
than this, all organisms that are marine
and coastal are absolutely governed by
the tides, in a serene and secret balance
we can only dream, one day, of sharing.
Our diver thought, and in his mind invented
a ‘little clock’ of widgets, wheels and dials
and fancifully ‘installed’ it, with a smile

61.
Inside each punctual polyp. How could they ‘guess’
the exact time to spawn? As they surely do.
Coral release a milky firmament of new
and microscopic life, precisely at a
certain time of day and year — at the most apt
phase of nocturnal tide. Above his head, a
continuous muffled roar mixed its white
noise with the welcome hiss of air, and his tight

62.
Chest inflated to receive it with a rush
of pleasure, as he swam in a steady rhythm
along a channel in the reef where zebra-
darting shimmers wheeled up steep banks and
tube worms extended feeding fans, groping for
the watery Braille of dinner, as he drifted on.
What a sparkling place for stale minds, for deep
refreshment! He made a mental note, to keep

63.
Should (forbid!) he ever tire of his earthly lot.
Was eternity, he thought, really “all about”,
or merely time? Dynasties of coral lives
untold, building on the bleached hulls of ones before,
had made this reef in layers of time on layers
more; reaching back to when that pole-locked
ice had melted and seas had flooded land,
some ten thousand years before. And the sand

64.

Ground from the coral raft by storms, gave birth to
beach, then cay and island, all slowly emerging
from the sea. The largest structure ever built by
living creatures. But how to map its growth?
Bruce juggled with some models. It could be done,
if variables were factored with precision.
Dry stuff and technical, all this, no doubt!
That's what computer mapping's all about.

65.

Liquid rhythms overtake his jagged thoughts
and bring him back to, er, water, as Bruce recalls
what this diverting dip is really for. And sets
himself a faster pace, gliding to the mouth
of a gloomy submarine channel. This was work,
not recreation! His present occupation
was consultant; mapping his priority —
his employer the Marine Park Authority.

66.

But he can't shake Miko from his inner world,
deep in reverie — *love's calisthenics, in that room
beside the rock! Ah, what's the use!* — Bruce glides on,
a floating dream, even though the scene below is
chilling. (No, not a shark — and the only ray
is of downward-filtering light.) The view hardens
into one of stark monotony, of coral bleached
and uniformly white; bright meadows leached

67.
Of life and pigment. Indeed, ‘coral bleaching’
is the term for this distress. Sun almost aches:
its glare reflected from more calcite bone-yards
that widen and extend all about him now. Bruce
makes observations, maps the bleak perimeter,
taking crucial readings of the water’s heat.
He punches data on a keypad in his hand —
then, towing bubbles, swims back to dry land.

Part Six.
68.
FOUR weeks later, Bruce stands looking out to sea
from the rocky ramparts of Cape Grim, where sheer
cliffs plunge down into ice-blue waters of Bass Strait.
Rocks on a tidal ledge below are fringed with white
of breaking waves, then waves in slow striations
until the far horizon dissolves in misty blue.
He scans sea lanes where no ship this morning glides.
Invisible behind that perfect rule that divides

69.
The sea from sky, lies fair King Island, then
the main island of Australia. He stands,
of course, upon the minor one, Tasmania,
that love-shaped southern fastness on your map.
Cape Grim hosts the main Antipodean station
of our top body meteorological’s
global atmosphere watch. And this is true,
no glib invention of a loony poet who’s

70.

Taking you for some cavalier ride, though he
might do that too — but not here, and not today.
‘Cloud physics’: two lovely words, particularly
when put together. Less euphonious are
‘atmospheric chemistry’, yet they are apt
to what transpires here, where air is sweet with
brine, and sea meets sky, and clouds are born
of both, moist go-betweens that take their form

71.

From the elements they mix together and
make sweet commerce. Behind Bruce is a tower
made of metal struts, its peak crowned with a dish;
at its base four metal sheds, the sole buildings
here, on the bare bluff of the wind-swept cliff-top
where global climate change is monitored —
ozone in the stratosphere, composition
of the air, including its concentration

72.

Of CO2, that gas released the whole world
over from rotting plants and burning fossil
fuels, and second only to water vapour
as an agent thought responsible for the
enhancement of the Earth’s natural ‘greenhouse
effect’, in absence dire of which the mean surface
temp. would be below minus-18 degrees
Celsius, at which everything would freeze

73.

Or be already frozen to a crisp, like
living where the ice cubes harden in your fridge.
‘Enhancement’ here is key: what difference makes
a difference, and what difference does it make
if we, from burning coal and oil, released six
point seven billion tonnes of CO2 in Nineteen
Ninety-Seven, and will do the same again,
plus a whole lot more, in the year Two-oh-ten?

74.

Not to mention methane (though mention it we
must), that gas released from land-fills full of trash
(or ‘rubbish’, if you prefer the English term)
and from the burps and farts of cattle (no, this
is not absurd), and from bacteria too, which
thrive in the terraced, flooded paddies of every
Asian rice field. Voluminous this gas, into
the azure ever spilling, and doing what? ‘Who

75.

Knows?’ is one question that this weather station —
and hundreds more like it placed in parts strategic
round the globe — might answer; as well as giving
updates on the local weather and much else
predictive of climate and its ceaseless changes.
This morning, with the cool dawn in his eyes,
Bruce assists a white-haired Doctor Kato launch two
small weather balloons, released now into

76.
The blue from both their hands. See, one leaps up
on the breeze, and then the next one after flies,
scudding from the cliffs and out to sea, then higher
far above the blue and, riding winds severe there,
to a dizzy height, buoyed by their spheres of
helium that's lighter than air, and hence must rise.
Radar reflectors, from a thirty-metre cord
suspended, shine in the sky — and ride these orbs

77.
That fly first together, then fast go separate
ways, borne on disparate currents of the air.
The first is blue, the second green, made of latex.
Follow now the green, as from a bird's eye view.
Note how its reflector, made from cardboard
wrapped in shiny silver paper, is shaped
triangulate, with inverted base, apex
pointing to the earth. Strung from this point, ex-

78.
Pect to see a 'radiosonde', that device with
many sensors set to test for temperature,
humidity, cloud height, pressure of the air —
and that's your balloon complete: a small one
really, as they go — and go they must, ever higher
through more layers of the thinning, chilling sky.
Ah, what a stunning view, had they but eyes!
Far below, there crawled the leaden sea, rising

79.

To a freshening wind, as The Three Hammocks —
a quaintly named small island — melted far behind.
From their vantage on the naked, windswept bluff
the scientists observe the rising orbs become two
darting dots then, *blink!*, almost gone. A*h, lost them Bruce!*
They punctuate the air, almost out of sight,
before the orbs, in brief close-up, leap to surprising
view again in field-glasses held up to their eyes

80.

And then, again, they fade and disappear above
the dome's blue vault of sky, upon the wings
of Zephyrus (does that breezy Greek have wings?)
who briefly takes them off course to the west,
before they zag-zig east, and back on track again.
And, as they rise, proportionally expand —
as outside pressure drops, and that within
each sphere exerts an outward force on latex thin

81.

As filo pastry, but made much tougher, and
to last… so they complete their voyage up into
the layers of the sky, and to the mainland,
where southern waters bathe the coastal plains.
'The great grey blankets of the air' of course are
nimbostratus clouds, which wrap the green balloon
in mist, just below two kilometres of its flight
up to serious altitude. But this great height

82.
Is still deemed ‘low’, just the first floor (as it were)
of the *troposphere*, where *nimbostratus* help cool
the earth, while higher *cirrostratus* (blankets
truly), trap the heat below their swaddling bands,
warming thus the face, below, of sea and land.
Our balloon, in its flight, next floats high through
middle layers, mashed potato heaps, whipped cream,
the puffy stuff of *altocumulus*, a dream

83.
Of some mad glutton both of atmosphere
and soufflés, and then, higher still, to the roof
of heaven — to finally hit the *tropopause*,
after six kilometres height, where feathery
wisps of *cirrus* curl the air with arabesques of ice
and never rain. The *stratosphere* is next —
a cold and dizzy place at height to fifty k,
then *mesosphere*, above an ozone ‘lake’

84.
Where some absorption of the light one bans
with shades (‘sun-glasses’ to the less than cool)
(and here I mean UV), also helps to heat the Earth.
But our balloon never makes it to this realm, nor
to the greater *thermosphere*, nor very edge
of gas before we leap off into space, where
atoms whiz like bullets, but don’t collide (not much)
ions fizz, and N and O are stripped down, such

85.
That everything is charged, and a sort of plasma
rather than a gas … Phew! Let's step down three
hundred k from here, back to our pretty little
green balloon. We left it just below the *cirrus*
clouds, still close to Earth and its fragile band of life.
Bang! Here is where it bursts. Its data payload
already sent to base, it plummets ever down,
through the layer-cake of air, tossed around

86.
And spinning in the wind, until it gently lands.
Its reflector glints in long spring grass, it shifts
and turns in slight and listless air, and then lies still.
Here, a mob of roos rest in shade beneath a tree.
Eastern Greys, and one, female, with a 'joey'
in her pouch, won't relax her grip to let him out
until she checks for danger. Then, satisfied,
relaxes deep inside, and her pouch falls wide.

87.
All bent legs and awkward tail, he now unfolds
from the soft play-pen — bounds around her in
a circle, bounds around again, to test his springs
and growing body's tensile ease, then the ring-
o-rosy grows smaller, and happily hops back
to her. Mother gives a low, soft cough or 'bark'.
She throws wide her arms, leans back in a slouch
and Joey disappears again in to her pouch.

Part Seven.

88.

AN EARLY summer sky blazes over careless
valleys where a river glides: may all days be
as fine as this! A fledgling parrot is tumbled
from its hollow in a gumtree. There’s a distant farm
house in a paddock and a yard where horses snooze.
A warm wind lifts late blossom over its red roof,
startling an old mare. Four little wagtails wing
for no reason, high above a dam, and the ring

89.

They trace widens as they ride its micro-thermals.
A horse called Bluey, only six years old, a white
blaze across his face, picks and snuffles in the
new spring grass. He disturbs blue butterflies,
each smaller than a fingernail, which re-settle
in blue showers, like bits of sky are falling down.
The horse does not notice that one hoof is tangled
in some string, until something leaps behind, jangling

90.

In the sun — *first flash of fear!* — and seems to creep
up on him, and there’s a slither too of flattening
grass as he snorts and starts, ears back and bolting
off to safer pastures; except that thing is
bouncing after him, three-cornered-hopping
ever faster as he gallops down the hill;
his primal fear of predators switched on — *Eyes wide!*
Flight on! Brain off! — Bluey now is terrified

91.
And drags the spent balloon after him, reflector
leaping on its length of string, until this ‘monster
UFO’ catches in a bush, its tether snaps,
and Blue relaxes to a trot and then a walk,
and soon returns to grazing. His mane-raising
ordeal is over now, until the next Bunyip —
bin lid or bird’s shadow — scares the life from him
and makes him sweat from ears to pastern rim.

92.
Two weeks later, a farmer finds the spooky
bit of foil snared in a wild plum behind his dam,
and souvenirs it as a curiosity,
hanging the ‘radiosonde’ with it in his shed.
“Whataya make of that?” he’d slyly say to
visitors or friends helping him with bales of hay
in cool shadows full of the scent of new summer.
The best reply he ever got was “Er, um, ahh?”

Part Eight.
93.
THAT’S one balloon spoken for, but what happened
to the other: I mean the blue one, released
from Dr Kato’s hand upon the morning light?
Well, it floated past the printed line between
Victoria and South Australia, straying
over Adelaide a while (balloons recognise
marks on our maps about as much as birds do)
before it too burst, and fell ‘out of the blue’

94.

Where in his garden, Ken, a poet, is watering
the grass that grows beneath his feet, grows because
he waters it. And so he waters it, then
goes to another lawn, round a garden shed,
and picks up another hose. Just hours ago, he
put down his pen, from writing graceful lines —
relaxed lines, yet so alert; probing, yet benign,
and of the best reportage it's possible to find.

95.

How will you ever know unless you read them?
I recommend his *Untimely Meditations*
and *A Drawing of The Sky,* in which he shows
a certain 'thing' for clouds when Adelaide's skyline
is 'inky, thick' and 'dark'. It's blue today, however,
and a tiny rainbow hovers in fine spray. He seems
to see, beyond some vines, what he's not looking at.
Grasps the hose as something falls. *Hey, what's that?!*

Part Nine.

96.

WHERE the outer blush of red is on an apple,
in proportion to the whole (that is, the skin)
so on our planet life's confined — to a sliver
thin as this, a band of air and soil. (One limit
is deep below Earth's hot and heavy crust —
a home to weird bacteria that only
divide once per century.) But I digress
from the human life I'd like now to impress

97.

Upon the moist clay of my narrative, before
all sets in confusion and distress here, on our
foolish little round or circus (picture it
a frieze upon a sun-dial, still set to amuse).
The scene a bar, looking down upon the palmy
Sydney harbourside. Crowds at tables, both inside
and out, spill down to a marina then to sand.
Bruce sits at a round one, trying to stop his hand

98.

From drumming on the shaking wooden top, his drink
from spilling. The rapid-fire rhythms of rap
music persuade a wild assonance, and fracture
the internal music of his thoughts, which loop
the loop of common sense and make of logic
accident, a disputed vote of random words.
There's no *raison d'être* or proper measure
in such explosive language thrown together.

99.

Or is there? Bruce lets go his normal careful
calculus, the habit of his studious years,
lets cool liquid in his glass take hold, enjoys
the louche surroundings, drums on harder now.
"There you are!" A tall man darts through the crowd,
and sits by Bruce. "Hello Imre. You're the first."
"Obviously," says Imre Nero, warily
eyeing the table's empty chairs. Then, staring

100.
At Bruce as if he were a fool: “Have you just
come up from your polyps? Back to higher things?
Tell me, that bleaching stuff. There’s nothing to it,
right?” Bruce eyes the man. Always clever, but too sharp.
They’d been rivals once at uni. — first in science, now
the world at large. Imre was a spokesperson
for the mining lobby. Specifically, those
who pump out oil, dig up coal. Bruce supposed

101.
A gun for hire, and with an entire global
industry’s back up, too. A cashed-up lab,
assistants, all the bright equipment he could use.
Sign on, tame expert, just sign on. But Bruce jumped
in with facts: “Of inside reefs, eighty-six percent
were bleached. Reefs near Palm Island were worst hit.
The mortality varied; as did recovery
from bleaching episodes — from five to eighty

102.
“Percent was the range. That’s a lot of damage.
The worst year was ’98, the hottest in
a hundred years. The end of a big El Nino, too.”
Bruce winced. It was a bad start this, he could feel it.
Everything he said was accurate and true,
yet sounded just a dumb barrage of facts.
For a man whose private thoughts were so refined
and subtle, this was despair. He often failed to find

103.
An expression adequate or even okay tone.
His voice was harsh and blunt, without finesse.
Did others notice this? Much more so himself!
Imre smirked, called a waiter over, barked his
order for a beer. “Ha, there’s been bleaching on
the reef since Nineteen Twenty. It’s part of some larger
natural cycle. Same with El Ninos. Solar
flares could explain the heat increase. There are

104.
Charts I’ve seen for pre-Sixties solar output
that suggest as much.” Bruce had expected this:
a bald and blanket put-down at each turn.
“I’ve seen them too,” he said. “Recent highs are not
well correlated. Barrier Reef white-outs
that year were our share of global episodes, when
reefs died round the world. More extreme and more
often — more of wet and hot — is on the cards… I saw

105.
“Some beautiful things while diving on the reef.”
But Imre said: “Yeh, and I saw a lovely factory
yesterday. But can you say the reef waters
are truly warming?” Bruce paused… a direct attack.
“There’s a clear long-term trend since 1903
when records were first kept. The jump’s been mainly
since the Fifties. Now the mean heat is rising by
point one of one degree a decade. That’s too high

106.
“Sure, but long-term trends are really not the point.
Danger for the reef comes with the ‘spikes’, the extremes
shown on the graph. There was only one such spike
in decades up to Nineteen Thirty Three, but now
it’s Russian roulette for coral! One in three years
exceeds their limits, insulting sensitivity.”
“Yours, maybe. You can’t make an omelet…” Imre’d
begun, when the sparring pair were quickly made

107.
Aware, by the frantic pointing of a waiter
at their table, that they would soon be joined by
Doctor Kato, who was a close colleague of Bruce
(both in the past, and with whom he hoped to
work again). The pair stood up and gestured to
the senior scientist. All shook hands and, after
Kato sat, Bruce retrieved more drinks and a pack
of chips. Snowy-haired Kato was leaning back

108.
In his chair — the stem of his glasses poised high
in the air, just level with his chin — when Bruce
returned. This was his manner, Bruce observed, when
others might expect some comment or opinion.
Bruce imagined, in his brief absence, the men
had been talking of something — and had clashed.
“Corals, in their rudimentary wisdom,” the
old man spoke, peering almost playfully

109.
At the younger, poking the wet tip of his glasses
stem up and down, hypnotically, at Imre,
“first colonised our own northern waters some
eighteen million years ago; yet our present reef,
in the splendour of its rich complexity
and full extent, took from five to eight thousand
to evolve. So delicate are these fascinating,
mysterious bits of life — proliferating

110.
“Only when the seas are clean and very clear —
that the water temperature must be stable,
staying below an upper range of twenty-nine
degrees. It is this narrow band that makes them
so vulnerable to stress and chance. Well, God knows,
we all have limits…” He stared pointedly across…
(Kato was high-minded, but his voice was low
and very even, a pleasant nasal drawl followed

111.
By the slightest tang of sinus.) “…and they are sorely
tested now,” he resumed. “In the past hundred years,
we have polluted our reef waters with nitrous
fertilizer, turbid sediment from coasts belted
by erosion. In ’98, some sections reached
thirty-five degrees, far above the bleaching
tolerance for polyps. This last the lethal
icing on the multi-coloured cake, wan wreath all-

112.
“Encompassing, cast on the reef and leaching
it of life. And so, too, in the larger frame —
I mean the global one. You say, quite rightly, Imre,
that all experts don’t agree. Yes, of course I’ve read
your papers — and every press release. You point this
out : our globe, its life, has suffered and survived
through many rounds of warming, and vast ages
next of creeping ice. We don’t have to be sages

113.
“To understand this of Nature, that she never
plays favourites. All must take their chance. Things change
indifferently; animals and plants are weeded
out that can’t adapt. The Earth is far from fragile
in it’s own time scale. Our impact on this planet,
do our worse, will be as nothing in five million
years — stoke up the fires, trigger every atom bomb,
the bacteria, the insects, will of course live on

114.
“Even if we don’t. Live on, mutate, evolve. Such as
it’s ever been. The Earth has already hosted
two mass killings. The first, in the *Cretaceous*, trashed
half of early life. The next, the *Permian*, left
just empty footprints of the reptile giants, and five
percent of life alive on Earth. Death brings space
for rebirth. Species come and go, but mankind
must survive. Industriously, we put our minds

115.
“To this, our larger purpose, as seas of humanity
swell from six billions to another three again
in just five years time. You say our tears for the
sixty-five percent of present species expected
to succumb, over the next hundred years,
to our selfish changes are just bad luck, attrition,
a bit more of the same that keeps things going on.
You say this to a few. Most just hear you throwing

116.
“Doubt on other’s work, and are left confused.
You’re an expert too, so the public listens.
You know the key to survival for a species is
a matter of the *rate of change*. Warming came
between ice ages in the past, but never fast.
Forests had millennia then to spread and grow,
threatened life-forms to move on, migrate, adapt.
Change occurs in decades now — with species trapped

117.
“In remnant habitat; fragmented islands of
their former range, all fringed and compromised by
human use. When push comes down to shove, they’ll
fast go under, shades of a ‘Permian Mark Two’.
I’ll tell you what I know is true — no fudging
of the figures — a conservative account, with
grey bits factored in, along with all the doubts.
The surface temperature has increased about

118.
“Point six degrees since the late nineteenth century,
half of that in the quarter passed. A small figure,
but it has no precedent in the past one
thousand years! The projected rise for the next
century to come — of from three to four degrees,
in metric scale — would be truly catastrophic.
At that rate, global mean sea levels would rise
about half a metre. In Australia, I’ve surmised

119.
“This means the sea will flood an average of ten
metres inland from the coast. And that’s the most
conservative guess you’ll get on any panel here.
Climate warming’s not some hair-brained plot or cause
cooked up by pinko greenies (you apologists
will have to get your colours right!) just to bring
our industry, based on fossil fuel, down to its knees
or gut the vaults of Capital. It’s simply true. Please!”

120.
Kato finished with a loud call to a waiter
gliding past. “Yes, another glass of that Shiraz.”
“Well,” Nero said, “you surely don’t believe the
panic merchants who claim Antarctica will melt?”
“Who could?” chimed in Bruce. “Down there it’s minus
sixty in the shade. Even a ten-degree rise in
the warming won’t melt much ice. In fact, more snow
is likely, and more ice, as precipitation blows

121.
“In from warmer climes.” “Precisely,” said Kato,
holding up his glass against the light. “Look at that,”
he said, “that ruby blush — oh dear, what a grape,
I’ve never known a red so aromatic, warm
and lush with fruit. Forget your test tubes gentlemen,
I call that inspiration in a glass.” Bruce went on:
“But much more must be said. Right now, a slab of ice
as big as London, more than a mile thick, is

122.
“Sliding from the Antarctic centre out to sea.
But there’s nothing strange in this. New snow falls,
new ice forms, displacing the old glaciers
very slowly. The question is, whether changes
to the sea off the Western coast of the frozen
continent can speed up this old creeping ice.
Yes, changes may be small. But note the saw
of the poor old camel’s back, broken by a straw

123.
“That upsets the balance of the camel’s load.
Small changes often have a large effect, such
is Nature, such is Chaos. And they can sometimes
never been foreseen. Suddenly, disaster!
Dire is the calling card of these Critical
Threshold Effects (I’ve just done the maths, for
my climate charts). And what sort of change to these
southern seas might shift a glacier? Precisely

124.
“The increased rate of melt from the *opposite*
Pole — from the Arctic — where the ice is only
two metres thick, floating thin upon the sea
and melting very fast. In just six decades,
northern polar ice will be as volatile, on
the face of Earth, as cologne in a heat-wave.
So, if Arctic ice floes melt, and seas rise slightly,
then, in the south, glaciers so vast and mighty

125.
“That they could make the waters rise by full five
metres, pick up speed and bob-sled out to sea.”
Kato sat back, sipped his drink, and raised his head.
“Ah, if that were all,” he said. “But there is much
more to it. The seas south of Greenland are crucial
in more ways than one. They form a sort of engine
that keeps the vast Gulf Stream — our planet’s major
current — in true and endless circulation. For

126.
“Here warm surface water turns down — in a sort
of giant loop, after cold, evaporating winds
concentrate the surface salt — turns down, heavier,
as I say, and then flows underwater now,
until it loops another loop in the Pacific,
hits a land mass and then rises, slowly heating,
as it rounds the horn of Africa. Up it flows,
to ‘bite’ its Greenland ‘tail’ again, and goes

127.
“Around and back forever, in a loop — if you
take my drift. But, of course, water held as ice
is fresh and light, and without a pinch of salt.
If melt-water floods into the Gulf Stream loop
say goodnight to any future regularity
of climate. Hello chaos! It’s the end of
Meteorology, at least as it’s now known.
Civilisation next! With all your models blown

128.
“There’s no way to predict any final outcome —
except by observation, as the whole disaster
quietly unfolds. Then one day Bruce and I sit back —
at some conference, perhaps in snowshoes — and say:
‘Well, Imre, drinks are on you. We told you so!’
And by the way, they are. *Drinks.* They *are* on you.”
Imre trotted off for beer and wine; and, for Bruce,
a rum with tiny icebergs in some grapefruit juice.

Part Ten.
129.
Climate control transformed his car’s interior
into a precise zone of comfort. The cool air
kissing his ankles and delicious jets streaming
across bare arms seemed that brilliant morning proof
to Imre that life was good, as he glided over
the bridge and Sydney Harbour to the north shore.
And it would become even better, if he
had anything to do with it — with the Quay

130.
Melting into the distance in his rear-view
mirror and the sun throwing bright lances from glass
and duco, from polished water and the whole
bright day. The traffic was light, his destination
a tower of black glass on the North Shore. It climbed
into the sky, as smooth and as beautiful as
a Stealth Bomber, above the tiny walking thing
he might have appeared to someone watching

131.
From any high window, as he parked his car
in the space marked ‘Director’ and quickly ducked
into a café across the road, emerging
later with an ice-cream in a cone and morning
paper, using the latter to shield his face from
the sun’s radiant glare, as the day warmed up.
Sweat bathed his limbs, lubricating an advance
of multiple reflections as he reached the entrance.

132.
The chill inside was instant, but not the smile
and nod from the security guard as Imre
strode to a lift, still licking his ice-cream, and was
elevated past floors of offices and others
housing laboratory equipment, until he reached
the roof where he liked to read his paper before
starting work. A chrome chair on the high atrium
plus wilting palm tree were waiting there for him.

133.

It was hot, but sat down anyway — skimming
a story on Page Three. A dry wind kicked up,
lifting the newsprint and desiccating his hair.
He anchored the paper with one arm, contempt
steadily rising. *Extreme weather events ring*
alarm bells… Thousands evacuated in Prague…
Worst floods for century. Whipped by gales, snow
blankets the Balkans. Flash floods in Morocco…

134.

Friends of the Earth sound warning… A pall of smoke
hangs over half of Asia, from smog and unchecked
slash and burn… Predicted to have a big impact
on El Nino … southern oceans… Respected climate
scientist Miles Kato said… Kyoto protocol…
global warming trends… Imre's eyes had glanced up,
blinked, then slowly narrowed. He'd seen it all before:
the inconclusive data, readiness to ignore

135.

The simple fact that so-called anecdotal
'evidence' meant nothing. That these extreme events
were normal for the Earth, part of the regular
distribution of weather patterns from Year Dot.
He flipped over to the soccer scores and read with
mild pleasure, until it grew too hot out there.
His ice-cream had already melted in its cone,
so he abandoned it beneath the wilted palm.

Part Eleven

136.

DISCONSOLATELY, Bruce stirred a spoon in his
coffee, as he sat outside the Old Post Office
at Medlow Bath. The conference had already
begun. Kato and Nero had delivered their
papers the day before, in an expansive room
set up with chairs and microphones at the Hydro,
a grand hotel and local landmark overlooking
bushland and Blue Mountain views, and drawing

137.

Delegates from all points of the compass to its
luxurious retreat. Today, there was a break
from rounds of climate talk and speculation, and
Bruce took to his feet, walking the tracks behind
the old hotel, until he reached a high lookout
and gazed at Megalong Valley, far below him.
“Why are the hills here,” Bruce thought, “so strangely blue?”
Ecalyptus trees crawled up from valleys, and grew

138.

A less dark green as they aspired to the clouds
along each mountain ridge, then quickly thinned to
raw rock walls and blunt escarpments. But the air
was a sort of azure gauze, a soft blue misty
light that deepened as you looked. It held your gaze,
along with every natural feature,
in an atmosphere of dream. Highlights all bled
to blue; each cloud a bride of blue that was wed

139.

Then to his eyes. “I know why it is so,” Bruce
thought. “Yet is no less beautiful for knowing.”
The thick gums here. Their long blue study left
rich oils on the air, in tiny droplets all dispersed
with fine mists of water vapour, which could catch
and scatter shorter wave-lengths of the sun,
shifting oceans of the air into a bluer spectrum.
He sat, and looked, and was still sad. He had come

140.

To the conference full of thoughts of Miko.
But she had been delayed, and he was brooding.
He thought about himself and the whole wide earth,
of man the not-so-wonderful, and of the stars,
of weather balloons and of the many bars
to any complete knowledge of the boundless skies.
(“Maybe next week,” her voice deflated from a phone…
The Hydro’s not so majestic when you’re alone.)

141.

As he toyed with his coffee, a small blue flitting
thing, a butterfly, landed on his hand and closed
its wings. Bruce held it up against the light. Thin veins
wove through powdery parchment. It was smaller
than a postage stamp. He blew on it softly,
but it gripped his fingernail, quite unruffled.
“Little Stamp,” he said, “You’ve come to cheer me up.”
And he transferred it very gently to his cup

142.
Where it walked along, on the rim, opening
and closing its wings, as he looked into the middle
distance and his eyes glazed almost over. “Ah,
science can be pure,” he thought, “or applied. My work
with climate is important, I suppose, but it’s
not what I really want to do.” And he thought again
of those teasing speculations, intuitions almost,
to do with time. “*But there’s no way in!* The most

143.
“I could hope for is some odd, remote extension
of Heisenberg’s runes, in which the subjective
moment of perception might be part of some grand
calculus of your locus and condition in
space-time… Little Stamp,” he asked, “does the beating
of your wings make waves in Tierra del Fuego?”
Bruce looked at his hand, and slight webs between
his fingers. “No wonder I swim well! It seems

144.
“I’m some sort of freak, and not just physically.”
He recalled diving, that day, out on the reef,
and the brief sensation that had overtaken him
beneath the waves: “What was it now?’ The feeling,
then, that I was *moving through my own body*.
The medium was water, but also space and time —
and it through me? …For what am I, within my
watery body, but life and death, and space and time

145.
“And matter so sublime that it’s expressed in energy,
or particles with charm and spin? …Little Stamp,
you as much as I, who have no need to think.”
The butterfly’s eyes glanced with a compound
logic of their own. Antennae quivered, but it
did not answer. The discourse was one-way. “And
cabbages and kings, my friend. What do you say?”
But Stamp unfolded his blue wings and flew away.

Part Twelve.
146.
“I’VE been looking for you Bruce,” said Kato. “Did you
catch Imre’s paper? What a colossal nerve! He’s saying
now that global warming’s actually a *good*
thing for the Earth! Maintains that human life got
better, and agriculture kicked off, when it was
hot and wetter, about twelve thousand years ago.
(Of course he’s right.) And that was at the start
of the present inter-glacial, now tipped to last

147.
“*Only* another two thousand years. So what
happens when this long warm spell is over? Well,
he produced swags of those Milankovitch charts,
which predict Ice Ages. (They’re due, of course, to our
planet’s tilt and distance, relative to the sun.)
The son of a gun! Two thousand years is too soon
for him. Cooling’s the real thing! He’s certainly bold.
He won’t be around to hang his balls out in the cold

148.
“When the next Ice Age hits. So he couches it all
as a long-term and unselfish view. (Never mind
his mates throwing another briquette on the grate.)
He says that all we’re doing is just to release
the CO^2 that was trapped in giant ferns during
the Carboniferous. (And here, again, he’s right.)
Keeping the home fires burning is a sort of will
to the future’s children, to save them from the chill!

149.
“Can you believe it! I’m sorry Bruce, to lapse
into such vehemence. That bloke’s got on my goat.
Nary a mention, of course, in his lovely
theory, of any pain or cost — of storm or flood
or tempest, crumbling coasts, of massive social
dislocation, water wars, and species lost.
Humanitarian! Ha! He could be splitting hairs
about the fate of insects, for all he cares!”

Part Thirteen.
150.
MIKO, Bruce and Kato held onto the rails
beside the wire cage as it inched its way upon
the single cable poised above them, swaying
slightly, above the valley. It was a corny
thing to do, and in a way Bruce did not approve,
as the chair-lift spoiled the view from The Three Sisters.
Still, maybe Imre was right (in part). He should ‘chill
out’ more often. Life was for living. It was a thrill

151.
To feel that each moment was meant to burn!
What a shocking and a guilty pleasure! (Bruce was
something of a stranger to leisure pursuits,
although his job took him to the great outdoors
often, and that was fun. In fact, Miko called
him her ‘Big Action Man’.) His hand ran idly
down her back, as Kato talked above their squeaky
progress, pointing at some bits of view. “Speaking

152.
“Of the Sisters, Miko, do you know their story?”
Kato looked at her, a funny benign uncle
figure, all blue eyes and loose white tufts of hair.
(I like him, she’d decided.) “Oh yes,” she
confided. “They’re so lovely rocks, and very big.
Such erosion of the cliffs! Kato san, it is
very Shinto to care for rocks. We ‘marry’ them
in Japan, with long white strips of cloth. And then

153.
“We feel they are not so lonely. Not like that
Orphan Rock…” (she pointed to an outcrop far
below) “that’s what it’s called, in my guidebook.”
“Yes,” Kato assented. And she resumed: “Now, I will
tell their story. So, listen please. Yes, rocks are
daughters of the Lyrebird Man, and one day
were playing with some stones — a game, like throwing
knucklebones. You call it ‘marbles’? They were growing

154.

“Bolder, very happy in their game. The sun was bright,
so they did not notice that they played too near
the cliff’s high edge. One daughter said, ‘Oh, no!
Ki o tsukete! (Watch out below!)’ And her
plaything bounce-bounce-bounce right down so far, like a
very disturbing object. It landed with a big, big bang,
like cosmos forming. And it woke up Bunyip Man,
who was very angry. He said, ‘Just let me get my hands

155.

“‘On you, you noisy Lyrebird Sisters! You spoiled
my nap, and now I’m going to get you!’ But,
luckily, the Lyrebird Dad came home. He saw all this.
And he took out his magic bone, and turned his
three daughters into rocks, so Bunyip couldn’t hurt
them. But the Bunyip Man still was very mad.
And glared at Big Dad, who was so upset and shocked,
he dropped his magic bone. And the bone he dropped

156.

“Is the same all Lyrebirds now search for, to put
into their bowers, and bring daughters back to life.
Until bone’s found, they must stay rocks until the end
of time.” Miko looked up and smiled. “Modern view
is this. Rock girls are frozen energy of the
female, denied expression by the tribal
patriarch. Bone is penis. But Dad’s lost his power,
scared of his libido. Domestic now, builds bower.

157.
“It is ‘sublimation myth’, we say. Denial
of desire, in the greater interests of the tribe.”
“Ha ha,” she laughed. “But modern view is cold.
It’s just a lovely story from wise people here.
It’s about the land — I prefer this view — it may
be modern, too, as well as old. And opposite
of Prometheus. Not to wake up natural forces
that we can’t control or understand. And Daughters

158.
“Always standing there can tell us this, if we read
them. They are wise matriarchs, and teaching us.”
Kato sighed. “Yes, yes, what you say is quite
compelling. To me, it feels absolutely right.”
They talked then of Miko’s work at Ueno,
and swapped a few equations, rarefied stuff
that’s like a universal language if you ‘have’
it, but just Greek if (like me) you don’t savvy

159.
Even the basic mathematics of Newton.
(So we’ll leave this arcane discourse out.)
In the course of time, as they made their way
down the steep incline of the Scenic Railway,
Miko asked Kato a casual question:
“*Onegai shimasu*, please, tell me, Kato san,
is your wife at hotel, or with your children?”
“Ah,” he said, smiling. “At neither. Only when

160.
“I have a wife, or kids, can I tell you where they are.
Until then, Miko, I must profess, I have none.
This old professor, just like Orphan Rock, is quite
alone. My work is the only thing that warms
me, like the Sun warms Earth, when I get home.”
“No,” protested Miko. “A man so senior,
handsome and distinguished. How could it be?
(So sorry... I assumed...) Did you not want to marry?”

161.
“Now that, dear Miko,” he said, “is another
story, and not an altogether happy one.
But thank you, *arigato gozaimasu*,
for your kind and far too flattering words.
To explain why I’m unwed, I will have to be
honest. It’s still painful to remember, but
I chose not to evade the truth. Swim or sink,
the water under my bridge is too deep to think

162.
“I can wade about in denial to avoid
an odd pang of self-loathing. Let’s just say that there
once was a girl, and I was in love with her.
She was strong and gentle, with a certain — how
can I say it? — ‘animal grace’. Gail’s face was never
lined with the worries of the world, as if she
accepted her fate quite utterly. And thus, without
strain, stayed true to herself, untouched by doubt.

163.
“Nor had she disguise or guile, but showed
everything she felt, immediately, in her
actions. Not that Gail was silly or impulsive. No,
quite calm and, mostly, what she did was right for
her, in some uncanny way, as if by instinct.
It’s hard to explain. She was wonderful to be with.
And was talented, clever too, and beautiful.
But I was young, and played at being rational.

164.
“(I use the word in its truer sense. For lately,
it’s been debased by bean counters and that
shady ilk.) This was back in Melbourne, where
I earned my degree. We were students both,
and it was tough to make ends meet, though study
was a joy. (You’ll see, I’ll make the story short
soon.) We were very fond, and took our wild chances.
Quite besotted! Perhaps before our romance

165.
“Had really time to mature. Then we learned she was
(as we old-fashioned relics say) ‘with child’. It drove me
wild. I saw my career, not even started, soon going
down the drain. I feel no pride to say it now,
but I was frightened and abandoned her. Swore blind
it was not mine, but someone else’s. My shocking
weakness quite destroyed Gail. (I know I have her death
upon my hands.) Yes, suicide... I placed a wreath

166.
“Surreptitiously on her grave, and for years
stabbed myself to think of it. They never found
the child she had. Perhaps she took it gently
from this life. I think this must be what she did.
I now despair to think on it. There was no way
to ever put things right. Perhaps, to do some good
for others with my work? Certainly, not to chance
myself with another woman was a penance

167.
“I embraced, and still do. And I’m not gay, though
I can envy those who are. (Gay men have love,
and it can make them whole.) But, alas, though the
years have eased the hurt, what remains is just me
and my work.” Bruce was amazed. He’d never heard
this story. He thought his old mentor was a
crusty bachelor by temperament, not choice.
All were stony silent, until Miko found her voice.

168.
“I am sorry. I would not have asked. It is so
sad of you to tell me this. But, perhaps, that
girl, Gail — she did it for some other reason. And the
baby, he or she could be alive somewhere.”
Bruce then had the strangest feeling… and glanced
at his senior colleague. Always so caring and
so loyal, fiercely so. What was he thinking? No,
he couldn’t really say. He wished he could just go

169.
Somewhere far away, and leave the old man to
his pain. For Kato was now staring silently
down into the valley. But they were all trapped
in the cage. There they stayed, till the chair lift reached
the place where they alighted, along with happy
tourist crowds. And later, in the car, passing through
Katoomba, their few words deepened to a silent roar.
And Kato felt even worse than he had before.

Part Fourteen.
170.
THE old man found his window seat and put his
bags into the rack above. The conference was
over, and he was flying home. They would touch
down in Melbourne, briefly, then wing on to Hobart.
Kato had a book, which he placed upon his lap
as the plane slowly taxied prior to take-off.
Soon they were away, climbing fast, up through clouds.
“Click go the seatbelts, click, click, click” he sang, half aloud

171.
As a steel-grey wing, foreshortened to his view
and poised below him, sliced through a mist of white
and tumbling *cumulus.* Sitting next to Kato
was a stranger (to him, Reader, but not to you).
Coincidentally (a word oft used to
justify, as here, meetings quite absurd) the
poet we met before, watering his garden
in *Part Eight,* was also on his way to Melbourne

172.
And he, too, opened a book. Ken and Kato
did not speak throughout the entire flight, nor did
their eyes meet; yet, unknown to each, their thoughts
briefly coincided, precisely as they both turned
page two-three-seven of their respective books.
For both men, an image briefly flashed to mind.
What was it? Something shines, and flies to earth — fast
and light — a green balloon or blue, out of the vast

173.
Blaze of a summer's day. It's quite a stray and
elusive thought for both. For Kato, instant
speculation on the fate of the balloon
he'd released. For Ken, something he'd once seen
from the corner of his eye. Both men give a sort
of mental shrug, and go on reading, as their minds
divide, after this brief meeting, and flow on
separate ways. Ken is deep immersed, but soon

174.
Kato closes *his* book and looks intently
at the open sweep of sky, and at passing
clouds, through the port-side window that affords
a spectacular view of space and earth below.
At times, Kato felt a fear of flying and,
just to ease his nerves, had smoked a tiny joint
in the airport men's room prior to take-off.
As the drug 'took', he was floating on a soft

175.
Air cushion, and at an ease greater than before.
A timely reefer, he had found, made flights seem
briefer, and the bump of landing (an ugly thump
that really shook his cage) did not have the same
dread power to alarm, when he was swaddled in
acrid bands of burning hemp, and soaking up
the TLC of THC. Beyond the arm
of his seat, and the flat glass, a wise and calm

176.
Face soon disheveled into tresses. He stared
at the widening clown's mouth of another,
and at two bolt-blue eyes of sky through torn
sockets of a grinning giant. An ever more
fanciful cavalcade of huge faces floated
in a disembodied circus to the east,
in a complex flotilla of brief cloud masks
of his own imagining, all in a masque

177.
That was amusing and enjoyable to watch,
a pass-time known to every child who ever
imagined faces in random patterns on a wall,
or looked at clouds and found dogs or dragons
in their folds, the outline of a cheek or mouth
in a cloud's voluminous cascade. "It's funny
that," thought Kato, "how the human mind is quick
to find faces before any other shape. They stick

178.
“On the mind, yes, like stamps. (I mean, ‘significant’
faces, ones of our family, and of friends,
of the ‘extended tribe’.) There must be a part
of our brains hard-wired to find them everywhere.
Is that because faces are so many, and
so alike? — the placement of a feature, just
slightly left or right, and *voila*, a new person!
Our complex terrain of features so uncertain

179.
“That we must have a really powerful and
dedicated bunch of neurons to sort the whole
tribe out. (Three born every second now — ten
billion soon, in just six years — that’s quite a clan!)”
A fluffy beard, a score of miles long, unraveled
from the chin of a sideways-blowing pirate,
teased by upper winds across the open sky.
Then, to break his frozen stare, Kato shut his eyes

180.
But still found images forming there: faces
rising from the surface of still waters, in
his mind’s eye. “Sometimes I think we’re always
dreaming,” Kato thought. “Making images, in our
brains, just below a certain conscious threshold.
Our visual world is more than data passed
from eye to brain. It’s everything we learn to see.
Not passive reception, ‘wrought’ almost consciously

181.
“And a two-way street, as the mind seeks limits,
and an envelope for its forms, a sort of
‘best fit’ for the models and the shapes that we
have stored, all within the discipline the external
world enforces — perhaps through other visual systems,
matching light with shade, colours with shape, edge
with plane, and all projected, schematically,
from big to small, from near to far, and in Three-D.

182.
“Thus is our world a mental one, as well as real.
A world that’s full of choices at its core, and I
hope we make the right ones, and paradigms we own
do not cast us on some bleak and fatal shore.”
Kato sighed, and went back to gazing, in a
fuzzy, half distracted way; then briefly napped.
A light meal followed… more reading… some wine.
In this, and other pleasant ways, he passed his time

183.
Until Hobart, where he put his cases on a
trolley and wheeled them to the airport car park.
He found his little car, and turned the key in
the dashboard with a roar. A piece of meteorite
from Cygnus Alpha, collected on a field trip
years before, dangled from his keyring. It was
sawn in half, brightly polished, like a gemstone.
(He had given the other half to Gail, long ago.)

Part Fifteen.

184.

MIKO woke to a chorus of magpies, their liquid
inscription of sound defining spaces outside
their hotel room, as she stretched and yawned in slow
motion on the white sheets thrown back, and Bruce beside
her; his eyes closed and pupils, as she saw, gently
moving under their lids, still in a waking dream.
"Round eyes of Western man," she thought — and poised
above his face, blew softly on them, her lips pursed

185.

Playfully, air streaming in a silent sigh, so
her cool breath made his lashes curl and flutter.
"Truly, they look gateways to his soul. A Western
soul. Look, they are so central, secret, and their fire —
sheltered by two deep-set caves — burns ever outward.
Those strange folds of skin, his eyelids, so heavy now."
Miko remembered how giggles — girls shocked, surprised —
had greeted a friend called Yoko, who was 'Westernised'

186.

One day, her black hair dyed blonde, and the prized,
folding eyelids created with just simple surgery...
An Eighties fad. And the fuss, that first day back
at school in Tokyo. *"Nai des!"* she had shouted,
so rudely, and almost blushed now to remember.
She leant over Bruce, until her naked nipples
grazed his own, both hardening very slightly.
She curled the tip of her tongue over the tightly

187.
Raised curve of skin above his cheekbones, then slid it,
wetly warm, into the outward corner of his
left eye, and swirled it in a little nest there,
like a brush might be refreshed in a pool of
glister, then flicked her tongue in a quick
arc, tracing the upper and lower curves of both
his eyes, which slowly opened, and opened wider.
Bruce saw Miko's out-of-focus lips, which replied

188.
With a smile to his own, and hovered there above
him, her breath warm on his cheek. Until each
pupil focused, each a broad black drop of night;
fully mobile and intelligent, set flatly
in their smooth slits and created, as it were,
on the smooth face, with perfect single strokes.
And so pensive. Her eyes inscribed, so neatly,
more than an aesthetic of oriental beauty

189.
To which he responded with a kiss and an ache
of longing, as Miko traced a long line of kisses
from his neck to his hips, and all over, until
a thread of clear saliva ran down, glistening,
from his cock. Then, overcome by the same moist ache,
she slid her raised pelvis, by degrees, down on him,
and they revived their sport of the day before,
until evening shadows edged across the floor.

Part Sixteen.

190.

"...TROPICAL cyclone Joel has weakened into a
rain depression over Cape York, with more flooding
expected over Northern Queensland. For New South
Wales, hot and dry conditions should persist,
while Sydney's temperature is expected to top
forty degrees, with strong northerly winds
state-wide, and UV levels in the extreme band.
Today has been declared a day of Total Fire Ban…"

191.

Drowsy and abstracted, Miko reached over
to the bed-side radio and turned it off.
She was propped up on pillows, in a Chinese
dressing gown tied at the waist with a single sash.
A flight of cranes flew in a bright silk sky across
her shoulders. She glanced at Bruce, who was tapping
at his lap-top near a window as she read. She resumed
The Mind of God, by Paul Davies, who assumed

192.

Laws of nature were coherent and binding,
bestowing a deep, universal unity —
and so, in that limited sense, might be divine.
She looked around at their corner of chaos,
and sighed. Blankets were thrown on the floor, clothes
tossed or bundled on two chairs, a half-open case
spilling files and papers, the ash-trays all piled
up with squashed tea bags and lolly wrappers. She smiled

193.

To see a paperclip in Bruce's tousled hair. (Did
he put it there?) And then nudged a half-full breakfast
tray, placed at the foot of the bed, with her naked toe.
"That's great!" said Bruce, grinning, and turned suddenly
to her, the paperclip sent spinning half way across
the room. "I've just had an email, and we've got our
funding! The project can continue. I've just learned …
my maps, Kato's projections, all have been confirmed!

194.

"They're consistent with the latest observations
and reports. It would have meant the ruin of our
little team of scientists — but now it's 'glory,
glory, Hallelujah!' We'll get the money to
continue. I feel terrific now! (And I was
already feeling great.) Well, what do you know!
Let's clean up this place and go out for a walk,
and I can think about all this, and we can talk."

Part Seventeen.

195.

IMRE'S shoes crunched pleasantly on the white gravel
drive as he put his cases in the boot. He took off
his hat, and wiped the sweat from around its band.
Soon, he was driving from the small motel in
Katoomba — where he'd caught up with paper work
after the conference — through hills back to Sydney.
Two emails came through to his car's computer
and he switched them over to Voice Reporter

196.
Mode, listening to the same information that
had already reached Bruce… puffing on a thin
cigar, as a parched yet scenic landscape melted past.
He shrugged and almost smiled, half glad his old
adversaries were still in the race. A case of
the devils you know. Then he touched another dial
and the glass slid down, admitting a hot, dry blast —
his casual butt flicked to the road, into the grass.

Part Eighteen.
197.
A HOT wind in the eucalypts; their limp leaves
turned perpendicular to the beating light.
Bruce felt ready to ignite, as he walked happily
beside Miko through the bush, the sweat running
down his back, as they threaded a winding track
along a ridge overlooking the Blue Mountains.
Yet he was brisk and animated as they walked,
and gestured widely with his hands, and talked.

198.
“Think of history,” he said. “Steam powers the
industrial revolution; and Edison’s
electricity — all fired by burning coal!
Steam locos transport it, and rails demand more
steel, and hence *more* coal. And so the whole cycle
chuffs along until 1910, when standard
parts make mass production cheap, and a growing
population fuels demand.” Bruce was becoming

199.
Excited and more voluble as he droned on and on.
Miko nodded, then said: “Now in the First World
we can have more of everything? Ah, but you think
this will not last?” Bruce shooed flies from his face, and said:
“Raw materials, yes, must grow scarce. But that’s solved
last century, by the imperial powers
who sourced the entire planet for raw goods.
They had the means to do it, and the gunboats should

200.
“Their wishes be ignored. Last century, we shaped
colonised countries to our demands,” he said.
“And created banana republics — palm-oil
and tin ones too. We turned local economies
into puppets — their supply would meet our needs,
and not their own. Now, in the West, we consume
like locusts. But are things any better elsewhere?
I don’t think so. The problem’s just as glaring

201.
“In the old Communist world, where technology
is leaky, energy-wasting and obsolete.
The Eastern European motto is still ‘produce
at any cost’. Massive pollution from their
big coal reserves. And China heading down the path
we paved, and paying for it all by exporting coal.
Meanwhile, independent Third World nations no
longer wear one-product-wonder tags, and go

202.
“Cap in hand, to the world’s banks, for cash to aid
development. They are trillions now in debt…
Interest on these loans keeps blowing out. Meanwhile,
people flood to towns from rural centres, and
population soars. The only thing to do is
sell the farm. Strip the forests, sell the timber,
to the carbon cycle’s harm. It’s rake and burn
the whole world over, and now the weather’s warm.”

203.
The pair walked in silence for a while, holding hands,
reflecting on all the complex implications.
They emerged from under a dense canopy of
trees leaning towards each other, mingling their
branches high above the trail. The ridge top here
was rocky, with sudden incisors and knuckles
jutting over drops and sheer escarpments where
the vegetation thinned and gave way to empty air.

204.
They stopped, and leant against a rock, in silence,
each alive to the tender thrill of the other,
until the spell was broken, and Miko spoke
softly, pointing to the distant view — the milky
haze, which seemed to coruscate and tremble in
the heat. Smoke seeped from hills. Then both stood frozen,
turned cold stone. Smoke threaded high into the air.
Flames burst through distant hilltops everywhere!

Part Nineteen.

205.

WILDFIRE! The bush crackled as flames licked,
leaped high into crowns, and sirens wailed ahead
as air grew thick and acrid and the whole blue day
rained embers. Spot fires broke out in dry undergrowth
as bits of burning twigs and leaf fell in smoking
curtains miles from where a molten ribbon crawled
across the hills and blasting gusts of air united
to whip up behind it and everything ignited

206.

Into a sort of dancing and liquid tissue of
continuous heat and flame. The bushfire made
a furnace of the trees it reached, seemingly,
before it touched them, leaping ahead of the
exploding crowns as volatile oils and dry fuel
detonated in white sheets, in glancing flame
and light. Up close, the fire front was like the roar
of passing trains and radiant heat a sword

207.

Of flame that felled every living thing it touched.
Sparks, wind and smoke were everywhere, all swirling
up into the sky as cockatoos flew in zig-zag
paths, calling their alarms. The heat and smoke were in
her throat as Miko held a handkerchief up to
her face and ran with Bruce to the hotel carpark.
Their eyes wept, hearts banged, in a dizzy, gulping faint.
And slick with drenching sweat, they slumped against

208.
Miko’s little hire car, now grey with ash, and tried
to find their wits, as windows detonated in
an old shed along the gravel drive behind them
and flames burst through its roof. Near a smoking hedge,
in the ember bed of what had been a white
gazebo, a metal weathercock had melted.
She fumbled, quickly found her keys, and then the road.
They were the last to leave the hills, and Miko drove

209.
Carefully, peering through a pall of smoke that
obscured every twist and turn, where kangaroos
jumped out, wild-eyed, with other creatures fleeing
from the fire-front, which raced and crackled ever
faster up the steeper slopes, to the ridge-top road.
From the stark and blackened landscape of its wake
no seed or bud would burst until the autumn rains.
Then the burn would turn to a green blush again

210.
To return the bush to its new life, as it
had since ancient times of fire-stick farming.
But the present tense is too alarming to
allow relaxed reflection on the many lives
of this or any other place — for Miko,
suddenly, was face to face with the twisted hulk
of a white-goods truck, overturned, its engine shaft
broken, wheels wreathed in smoke, directly in their path.

211.
She hit the brakes in the time it takes to stop
between heart beats, and the little car skidded
to a halt. All over the road, fridges had burst
from torn cardboard sheaths and smashed packing crates.
One had bounced and opened, its ice trays thrown
into a tree. The entire scene was surrounded
by emergency vehicles, amber flashing lights,
volunteers with beaters, fire crews directing bright

212.
Orange hoses, all fighting minor outbreaks
as they back-burned from the road, taking advantage
of a lucky wind change, to make a fire break
or clearing before the fire-front hit, or could jump
the road. The fire chief shouted: “Just keep driving straight,
you’ll be right now,” and ushered them to a passage
through the maze of wreckage, marked with ‘witches’ hats’.
Miko smiled and gave him the ‘thumbs up’, and that’s

213.
Exactly where she squeezed the little car through,
then glanced down at the gas (Phew! The tank was still
half full!) as they coasted faster now, the smoke
receding to a distant haze in her rear-view
mirror, and reached the highway, approaching Sydney
and the sparkling coast where, for days to come, a pall
of smoke above the Harbour slowly drifted south,
and rained down steady ash upon the Opera House.

Part Twenty.

214.

DANISH summer song-birds a high concert make
and bright their multi-coloured feathers seem to gleam,
lake after quiet lake shines clearer than the sky,
as a peagreen mini-bus scoots quickly to the sea.
Manicured foliage the breezes softly shake,
all along the coast between Arthus and Grena.
The breeze off Kattegat has such a sweet caress,
that nowhere now can the heat of day oppress.

215.

“Look!” Miko pointed to an incredible sight, and
the whole bus, it seemed, stood up from their seats,
to peer and get a better view, of open water
to the right of the road, where tower after white
tower rose from the waves, in long and even
rows, running parallel to the coast, and almost
out of sight, into the far distance. “They’re so high,”
she said, as three long, thin blades rotated, in a Y

216.

Formation, like gigantic clock hands against
the open sky, surmounting each wind turbine.
There was a crackle overhead, and then a voice
commented, first in English, then in Danish:
“Welcome, delegates to the Third Annual
World Sustainable Energy Trade Fair… ladies
and gentlemen…Thank you for joining our tour.
We will visit a turbine plant today, so you’re

217.
“Going to be able to see one of these
large-scale units actually being put
together, part by part, on the factory floor.
Europe’s Wind Energy Association
hopes to have fifty thousand new-model turbines
off-shore by the year Twenty-Twenty — and so far
we are ten per cent ahead of target …” The guide,
mid spiel, then switched to Danish. Miko sighed

218.
As Bruce reached across and patted her fondly
on the belly. “It’s impressive,” he said, speaking
of Danish initiative, not of his lover’s newly
rounding outline. “Even these houses here,” pointing
to a roadside village, “though we’re out in the sticks —
but look at all those solar water heaters,
those photo-voltaic panels fixed to the roofs.
It shows what can really be achieved, if proof

219.
“You need, when the public purse is opened to
subsidise alternatives… And done transparently —
not with all those hidden perks the oil industry
enjoys, through tax write-offs, loan guarantees,
outright grants, to the tune of thirty billion bucks
a year to U.S. Oil alone. The Dane’s are game
alright, they won’t quietly capitulate,
with puppet industries; become a vassal state

220.
“To coal and cars and gasoline, the Dinosaur
Economy, with its big foot still on the brakes.”
Miko was just about to speak when, crackle,
crackle, the English spiel continued: “…and ladies
and gentlemen, please inspect this bus. Beneath the
bonnet, when we stop for lunch, as you will see,
it’s powered by hydrogen fuel, which makes
electricity on demand. The cell, you’ll note, takes

221.
“Methanol (which we pump from garbage dumps)
and combines this gas with oxygen from air,
to make electricity, and water as its
sole, clean by-products…” Towering turbine after
turbine melted past, reflected in bus windows,
as the highway ran alongside the fair shores
of Kattegat Strait, that ‘cat’s throat’ or sea, then
partially enclosed, to the north, by Sweden

222.
And to the south embraced by Denmark’s kingdom.
The guide’s voice was a purr as he described
more wonders: “…A ‘geo-thermal loop’ beneath
each city, with water pumped three hundred feet
straight down, resurfacing as steam and hot
enough to circulate in the district’s heating system,
or galvanise a power plant…” Bruce had a hunch,
when they finally stopped, that it was time for lunch.

Part Twenty-one.

223.

TWILIGHT, as they walked hand in hand to the edge
of the sandy beach, and stood watching the world
revolve and first stars of night appear. The long, thin
elegant clock hands were still turning, far above the
waves and fading light, describing invisible arcs
against the infinite open cloak of darkness
descending. The hour, minute and second hands
sharp against night's clock-face, and its scale of sands

224.

Thrown high, into pinpoints of light from distant
suns. And they walked and paddled further along
the beach, until their little bus became just
a silhouette, held in a cup of liquid glare behind
them, with more quick shadows busy with bags
around it, outside Grena's sole beachfront hotel.
They stand, close together now — the shipwrecked sun,
a crimson wedge at the sea's edge. And look on.

225.

These lines came to Bruce, as he stood there, in Denmark:
"Um… All the seas across the Earth are one sea now…
while, in the warm Pacific, coral grows as patient as a pearl…
We look from widening skies down onto waters,
where birds go as shift workers to the dawn…
And the gentle chaos of these days brings a tiny blue butterfly
home (home?) to its blue cup of clouds… (Does that go?)…
Um… and… He ran out of words. "Go on!" said Miko.

226.

“And, er… We walk together now, two tiny
sparks of life – bright sparks, actually - across a rim of beach
and the horizon’s curve…”
A seagull hovered above, then swerved ahead.
“Hey, that’s weird,” said Bruce. “I wonder where all that
came from!?” He paused, grinning, as his poem trailed
away. A wave splashed up and ran across his shoes.
He looked down at them, annoyed, pleased and amused

227.

All at the same time. He’d never tried to make up
poetry — on the spot and in his head — before,
and when Miko laughed at him her laughter was
carried quickly by the wind and out to sea.
Both were sensitive to mood, and became
attentive to the night, as if listening to
a silence. Miko spoke first, breaking it. “Out there,”
she said. “The future. There it is!” pointing to where

228.

The giant wind machines turned above the Danish sea.
Bruce smiled, and said: “No, here’s the future Miko,”
and ran his hand across the curve beneath her breasts.
They both paused, as if listening to soft music
ferried by the waves. “So, Bruce,” she said, after
a pause. “Don’t you think that’s a bit corny? I mean —
for an ending?” Bruce laughed. “It would be,” he said
if this were a novel, or a movie. “Time for bed?”

229.
And they ambled back along the shore, the fresh
wind in their eyes, until Bruce stopped again, with
a start. “Miko, we both heard it, didn’t we! That
distant music?” He laughed. “It’s *the chance symphony*
of the stars. Look up there, you can almost hear it,
or imagine you do. “And *thinner* rhymes with
dinner,” Miko joked, “Bruce, I didn’t know — that
you were a poet.” “I’m not sure I am,” he said. “But

230.
“Just before?” she said. “Bruce, I am interested.
I like poetry. But it seems mysterious
to me. You are a scientist, and can explain,
perhaps, how it works? I mean, how it is born
in your head. (Is that the right thing to say?)
And its method, its logic, its shape. Because it
has all these — in a sense. But, more so, it seems
like music, that brings back the feelings some dreams

231.
“Leave you with when you awake — when you open the
blinds, then find it is still dark outside. It’s not the
same as I think when I think about science and maths,
yet poetry can have an argument that makes
me like to jump ‘outside the box’ — creatively, like
science does — and has the same buzz, of intellectual
excitement. It can make me dream, and feel and think,
and is an entertainment, or pleasure, that links

232.
“A lot of odd things together — in nice, profound
and moving ways — and in amusing ones, too.
Is it like that for you? Have I got it right Bruce? How
does the earth move under your feet when you make up
poetry? Give me a lesson now!” “Ahem…”
he mocked himself, clearing his throat, and took up
a stick from the sand, plus a professorial
stance. He sketched briskly with the stick. “Where shall

233.
“We begin?” he said, “hmm — ” gesturing at an outline
of the human brain at his feet. He placed two
stick figures in the fore-brain. “In every one
there is a little poet,” he said. “Scientist, too.
They are not so far apart. In fact, they’re linked.
They use language, and symbols. Both have feelings.
Both rely on memory, pick its fruits, re-sow its seed.
Miko snuck in: “If you cut them, don’t they bleed?”

234.
“Precisely,” he said, pointing at the two little
figures with his driftwood pointer. “They are like us,”
she said. “But I’m not so skinny now.” Bruce pondered
a bit. “Us…? In that case, I should have put them closer
to the limbic. Never mind… As I said, or was
about to, language plus time equals memory.”
“Then you add the senses,” said Miko. “Blue above,
plus cool nights by a beach, and being in love!”

235.
“All that?” said Bruce, and drew symbols in the sand,
flicking at his grainy ‘blackboard’ with the stick.
“Well, time here is key, for me — our special
medium, no? — with art, and science, and history —
all bracketed by various constraints.” “Constraints?”
questioned Miko. “Paradigms, if you like. For science,
it’s evidence, testability. Aesthetics, too.
An elegance born of logic graces thought, as you

236.
“Well know — a sense of something brought to a complete
and adequate expression, as in art. This, too,
links our happy little figures and makes them one.”
“What’s this mad equation?” she said, looking at wild
squiggles by her foot. “I suppose,” Bruce said,
“problem-solving, in poetry, is a matter more
of aesthetics — and of truth to a greater vision
of the human — than pure logic. So it reels in

237.
“Things deeply personal — dreams, associations,
memory — as well as bits of the general
culture floating all about us… and of this,
novelty is born, and originality
takes wing. So here is my answer to Einstein:
‘The Modern Ape Divided by a Sack of
Raisins in Space Equals Grandma!’ There! The field
is unified at last! And now we can turn with the tide

238.
“That’s rising and stroll back for dinner. Here endeth
my peroration.” “But you didn’t draw the TV
aerials on their heads,” protested Miko. “What
aerials?” said Bruce. “The ones that channel down
the poetry from passing clouds.” He stopped and looked
at her. “That’s *your* thesis,” he said. “And it’s not the
only thing I’ve let slip. To tie the ends secure
and really answer your first question, of just before…

239.
“I thought I was a poet only when those lines came
into my head, like they’d floated in from nowhere,
or surfed-in on some feeling, or just surfaced.
Maybe I’m getting a little softer in the head?
Hey, poetry can help free me from all this!” Bruce
laughed, slid off his watch, and tossed it in the sea.
Miko stood there. “Bruce…?” Then shook her head.
“We are just in time — not running out of it!’’ he said.

Part twenty-two.
240.
Of course, it was waterproof, and he found it
by wading in the shallows. “Now they’re really wet.”
He kicked some water from his shoes. “It would have
been a silly gesture, for ‘a man of science’.
Besides, I like my watch.” And wiped it on his sleeve.
“Come on, or we’ll be late,” said Miko. “Kato’s san
is meeting us for dinner at the hotel. He rang
from his meeting in Alborg, and said he’d bring

241.

“ ‘Something cheeky and piquant from Burgundy.’
He’ll visit the ‘steam mine’ — the geo-thermal loop —
with us tomorrow.’’ Bruce nodded as they walked.
“And our so-called ‘colleague’, Mr Nero, he’ll be there
too.” “Oh?” said Miko. “Imre’s also at the meeting.
Burns he got in those bushfires in Australia
last summer have all healed. He gave a paper
in Alborg, too. He’s back at his same old caper.

242.

“A touch of fire hasn’t stopped him, I’m afraid,
from fiddling with facts while our world is burning.”
“Will I meet him there — what’s he like?” asked Miko.
“He’s arrogant and testy,” said Bruce. “We always
fight, and no one wins. Then he’ll challenge Kato,
who seems perversely to enjoy it.” Miko smiled.
“Well, I might too,” she said. “Yes, it could be fun,”
he said. “The odds are ours now — four against one!”

243.

The dark closed around them. As they hurried on,
Miko shone a small torch and its beam danced between
their walking feet in front. Soon, they became a spot
of light, an erratic firefly threading the night.
The next day, Bruce woke with a passing headache
and went for an early stroll along the beach.
The air was fresh and clear, waves clean on the sand
as Little Stamp fluttered down, landing on his hand.

Coda.

244.

Ten years have passed. The sun is rising over
an unkempt garden in December, where magpies
warm up for their liquid chorus, or swoop down
on noisy miners, and chase these neighbours from
a favourite patch of grub-filled lawn where a little
girl, Miranda, crouches now on hands and knees
beneath a clothes line. She is silently entranced,
sprinkling sugar granules, one by one, near some ants.

245.

Such mad, random scurrying labour, as they swarm
back-tracking on what seem aimless detour paths
and ant forays, before one carries off the sweet
prize in its jaws, joining a parade of others,
all with trophies held high, disappearing down
the entrance to their nest. A new day blushes
on the child's face as birdsong bursts from trees
and over rooftops as she rises from her knees

246.

And runs back to a weatherboard on the far
outskirts of the lawn. It's going to be another
beautiful day, she knows, and starts drawing
pictures with a crayon on a pad, humming
to herself, surprised her tune doesn't wake up Bruce
and Miko, who are still asleep in their bedroom.
Sunday stirs to life, but they 'sleep in' instead,
before savouring coffee and croissants in bed.

247.

Is the whole world bathed in a similar glow of
domestic bliss? It would be pleasant to believe
it so, but this scene of tranquillity, alas,
is far from universal. Along the West Coast
of the USA a long-term drought persists through
the warmest winter ever known, while on the East,
tiny figures huff against the driven snow
that outlines humps of cars, blanketing all below.

248.

In sub-Saharan Africa, the desert creeps
a little further, blows up and swirls in
empty bowls, while Kenya is dry from March
to May, food shortages acute. Rain simply
does not fall from skies that drum back desert glare.
Lines and pointers on a graph may rise and fall —
cool calculation is a way of asking why.
The fate of everything that lives beneath the sky

249.

That creeps on earth or soars above it, runs
or leaps or swims, that elaborates green
leaves or tendrils, puts down roots and thrives, from
day to day, from year to year, and for millennia…
All these are enveloped now in fog, obscuring
the old ways of living and dying, with new
questions still unanswered, as the oceans rise
by slow degrees, and a haze obscures our eyes.

250.
Shall we be wise or foolish? Is this a time
of transition, at the end of a third and vast
industrial age the economy of oil
and coal has fuelled, giving way to something
smarter and sustainable, an endlessly
renewable bright future? Or are we simply
labouring in ignorance, spurred on by greed
and fear — First World excess, Third World need?

251.
Miranda plays on, as rich coffee smells waft
in sunlight, and she hears her parents laughing
in their bed, and cars drone through a suburban
Sunday in Perth, the capital that always
rises last on this continent — two hours
after the eastern coast's first taste of 'morning'.
And she returns outside, on this brilliant one,
placing a red beach ball, to represent *'the Sun'*

252.
In the centre of the garden, and runs, giggling,
around it. She twirls a golf ball in one hand,
twirling faster as she runs, and lets it be —
as Mummy said — *'the Earth'*. A speck of blue crayon
the same colour as her dress. *That's me, is it?*
Running round and round on roundness is a puzzle.
No ups or downs in space, anywhere, a*nd that's true.*
Sky whirling. She stops for breath. *Such a pretty blue!*

NOTES:

These notes are optional and incidental to your enjoyment of *A Break in the Weather*; but some readers might find them useful or interesting.

Verse 12. *The High Tides* is a longish and playful narrative poem originally published in *Airborne Dogs and Other Collaborations* (Brunswick Hills Press, 1988) and republished in *The Wild White Sea* (Little Esther, 1990). *The High Tides* ends with the promise of a sequel, which I hope *A Break in the Weather* delivers. Those who do not know the earlier poem, however, can still understand and enjoy *A Break in the Weather*, which stands as a separate piece in its own right.

Verse 15. *or Orlando Furioso*. Ariosto's poem was written in the Italian ottava rima, with eight-line verses, each of ten syllables, and following an ab-ab-ab-cc rhyming scheme. A similar form was chosen by Byron for his *Don Juan. A Break in the Weather* is written in octaves, but the lines vary between 10, 11, 12 and (occasionally) 13 syllables. I have dispensed with the ab-ab-ab structure for my first six lines, substituting a shifting, decorative pattern of internal rhymes; of full, half and part rhymes. But the couplet is (usually) more or less retained because of its punch, clock-like regularity and the opportunity it gives to make a concluding point.

Verse 28. *Miko Tanaka.* There is also a character called Miko in *The Ferrara Poems*, a verse novel I co-wrote with Ken Bolton in 1989. Everyone in *The Ferrara Poems* makes an entrance by falling over something or having a small accident. See also Verse 146*: "Now, I will / tell you their story."* Some characters in *The Ferrara Poems* introduced anecdotes by saying *"I will tell you my story".* I have jokingly reprised similar devices here. Finally, I have introduced Ken Bolton as a character in *A Break in the Weather*. See Verses 94 and 95, which are, in part, a re-written version of a JJ/KB poem called 'In My Yard', published in *The Wallah Group* (Little Esther, 2001). The two books mentioned in Verse 95, *Untimely Meditations* and *A Drawing of The Sky* are by Ken. In the latter, there is a moody description of Adelaide's skyline.

Verse 35. *Kata-Tjuta*, also widely known as 'The Olgas'.

Verse 37. *And within a cave at noontime they repair*. This line, from Ariosto, also recalls the Haidee episode in Canto II of *Don Juan*.

Verse 40. *Pachinko* is a popular arcade game in Japan, in which hundreds of tiny ball-bearings have to be sent flowing and ricocheting through a maze.

Verse 41. I am indebted to the excellent article on Strehlow by Barry Hill, in *Overland* 126.

Verse 55. *coral brain*. Brain coral. In the same verse, *cleaner wrasse* are small reef fish which pick parasites from larger fish at 'cleaning stations', where the wrasse are immune from predation while they carry out their work.

Verse 58. *with algae living inside.*… Which helps to explain why coral bleaching occurs when reef waters heat up. The higher temperature makes the algae (tiny plants) produce more oxygen than the host coral polyp (an animal) needs, 'poisoning' the latter. It reacts by expelling the algae and dies of 'suffocation', remaining in the reef lattice as just a bleached skeleton.

Verse 59. *lance / of mirrored rays so blinding dance and shot* is a fragment from Dante, *Il Purgatorio*, Canto IX, verse 82. I have changed it here to *trance / of mirrored rays so blinding shot and danced*

Verse 72. *CO2*. Carbon dioxide.

Verse 83. *thirty k*. Thirty kilometres.

Verse 84. *UV*. Ultra violet. In the same verse, *N and O* are nitrogen and oxygen.

Verse 113. *Nature… never plays favourites*… A point made by Stephen Jay Gould in his introduction to *Bully For Brontosaurus* (Penguin, 1992).

Verse 140. *He thought about himself and the whole wide earth*. This line, and the trio following, are deliberately misquoted from *Don Juan*, Canto I, verse 92.

Verse 143. *Heisenberg's runes*. Werner Heisenberg (1901-1976) formulated his famous 'uncertainty principle' in 1927. Some believe observer-dependency introduces absolute limits for knowledge based on measurements within the quantum realm, and the meanings we might assign to those measurements. It's not because the laws of nature are subjective, far from it; but are grounded in "an a priori ontological realm of pre-established harmonies", and we must interpret any measurements that pertain to this realm. This is a huge and very difficult subject, but there's a good summary at http://www.mountainlake.com/beyond/complem2.htm

Verse 145. *cabbages and kings*. Yes, a bow to the genius of Lewis Carroll. And there's one to Edward Lear *(The Owl and the Pussycat)* in Part 20, verse 216.

Verse 147. *Milankovitch charts*. Milutin Milankovitch was a Serb mathematician who, in 1914, published his modelling for large-scale terrestrial climate changes, including projections for future Ice Ages.

Verse 148. *Carboniferous.* The first epoch of the Mesozoic era, about 345 million years ago, when forests of giant early ferns covered the Earth. Oil and coal are, largely, the buried and compressed remains of those ancient forests.

Verse 159. *Onegai shimasu*. Japanese. 'Please'.

Verse 161. *Arigato gozaimasu*. 'Thank you'.

Verse 175. *The TLC of THC*. The tender loving care of *tetrahydrocannabinol* (the active agent in marijuana which causes a euphoric state).

Verses 184 to 188. *Domo,* Roland Barthes. See 'The Eyelid' in *Empire of Sign*s (Hill and Wang/Noonday Press, 1989).

Verse 186. *Nai des!* 'It's not!' or 'No!'

Verses 198 to 202. Thank you Mr. James 'Video' Burke for inspiring this lightning history.

Verse 214. The entire octave is a re-worked misquotation from *Orlando Furioso* (Book 2, Canto XXXIV, verse 50).

Verse 218. Denmark is the world's leading manufacturer of wind turbine electricity generators. It has invested hugely in alternative energy of many kinds. Those who are interested can find an excellent report at www.davidsuzuki.org

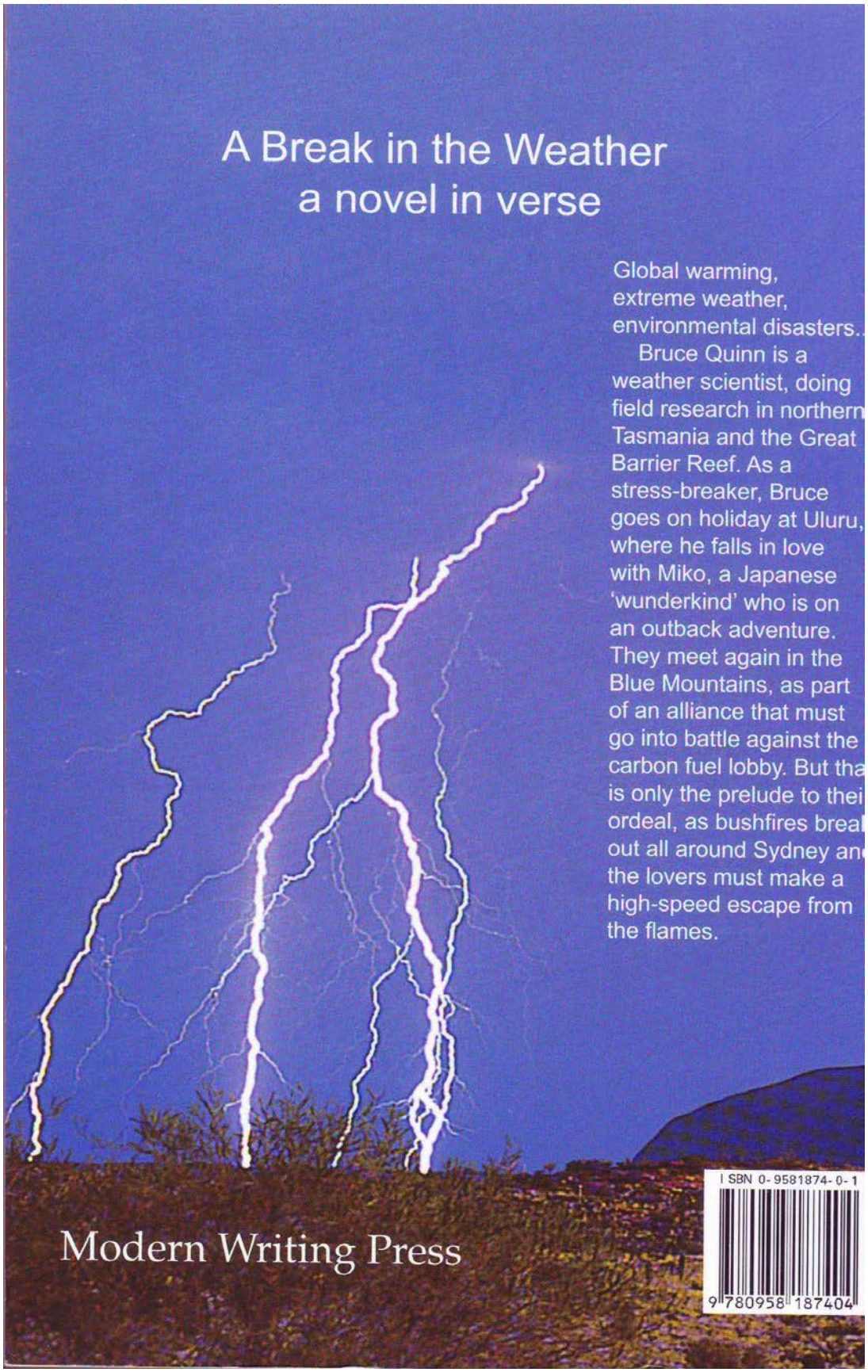
Verse 221. *Kattegat* means 'cat's throat' in Danish.

Verses 225 and 226. This passage of free verse, which Bruce suddenly improvises and recites to Miko, breaks into the regular octave pattern as if from nowhere; revealing that Bruce has a poetic intelligence, unbeknown to himself until this point. The (slightly misquoted) line, *'where birds go as shift workers to the dawn',* is from a poem by the Australian poet Nigel Roberts (for which I thank him). Perhaps Bruce is unconsciously remembering this line here, and incorporates it into his poem without realising it is a quote.

Verse 229. *the chance symphony of the stars*. This line comes from Adrian Martin, the Melbourne film critic. At a party some years ago, he said something like: "Hey, you're a poet. So how do poets see things? 'The chance symphony of the stars' or something?"

Verse 237. *'The Modern Ape Divided by a Sack of / Raisins in Space Equals Grandma!'* Bruce's playful equation is a version of lines I have borrowed from — I forget where they came from — perhaps Ted Berrigan or another 'New York School' poet?

Verse 239. One of the flipped-out hipsters in Allen Ginsberg's famous poem, *'Howl'* throws his watch away, in an act of defiance against time. I discovered this only after writing this verse. But Bruce's gesture has a different impulse. Rather than being defiant, it is celebratory. He throws his watch away because he is glad to have finally 'solved' the 'problem' of his teasing obsession with time. He suddenly realises his meditations on the elusive subject have been more a matter of poetry than science, and have arisen from a part of his creative intelligence he can now enjoy and explore. The action, and his words following it, are also gestures of hope in a much wider sense.


A Break in the Weather
a novel in verse
Global warming, extreme weather, environmental disasters..
Bruce Quinn is a weather scientist, doing field research in northern Tasmania and the Great Barrier Reef. As a stress-breaker, Bruce goes on holiday at Uluru, where he falls in love with Miko, a Japanese 'wunderkind' who is on an outback adventure. They meet again in the Blue Mountains, as part of an alliance that must go into battle against the carbon fuel lobby. But tha is only the prelude to thei ordeal, as bushfires breal out all around Sydney an the lovers must make a high-speed escape from the flames.
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