I suspect that few Australian writers have ever known less about Australian literature and history at the age of eighteen as I did. Growing up in Colorado, I encountered nothing whatsoever about my home country on my high school curriculum, which was heavy on American standards like Dickinson, Whitman, Hemingway, T.S. Eliot, Melville and Plath, along with the Romantics, Shakespeare, Russian literature and a hefty serving of Homer. In history, we were quizzed about the founding fathers, the Mayflower, the legacies of slavery, the civil rights movement, the arms race and the Cold War. Each class, I frantically jotted down unfamiliar names: Benjamin Franklin, Harriet Tubman, Susan B. Anthony, W.E.B. DuBois. Panicked by my relative ignorance, I stayed up late trying and failing to memorise the names and order of all the Presidents, which at that stage—the Clinton era—numbered forty-two. Looking out of my bedroom window past a stand of ghostly birch trees, I could see the snow-capped peaks of the Rockies, which everyone in Denver used as a navigational guide when driving, because they were always in the west. Australia floated gently at the back of my mind like a lily pad, weightless and impossibly distant.

By the time I graduated high school, my mind had been colonised completely by American slang, culture and politics. I'd watched the Monica Lewinsky affair play out in graphic detail on Fox News, whose tanned and vulturous news anchors my parents seemed to be unable to switch off, for reasons that remained elusive to me. Like most of America, I'd been gripped by an obscene fascination with the JonBenét Ramsey murder, which had taken place at a house in Boulder a few streets down from my piano teacher. I'd watched the O.J. Simpson trial live on television with my mother, who knew all of Simpson's attorneys by name and, judging by the volume and frequency of her interjections, seemed to think of herself as an adjunct to the prosecution. And I'd been discomfortingly close to the Columbine high school massacre, which took place a single mile down the road from my own school, one April day in my junior year. I'd attended the subsequent vigils, and protested Charlton Heston's subsequent NRA rally at Denver's Capitol building. I'd picked up a Coloradoan accent, and learnt to drive on the right-hand side of the road. Fundamentally, in many ways, I'd become American.

Moving back home and starting my literature degree in Brisbane, I felt a familiar dismay: I was behind again, with new points of reference, fresh vowels, and a clutch of unfamiliar waypoints. My only memories of Australian literature came from the annals of childhood: Banjo Patterson, *The Magic Pudding,* May Gibbs, and Dick Roughsey's *The Rainbow Serpent*. I had a hell of a lot of catching up to do. I shucked my accent. I made new friends who were interested in reading and writing. We drank cheap red wine together and read the poems of Dorothy Porter, Judith Beveridge, John Kinsella, Gig Ryan, Anthony Lawrence, Jennifer Maiden and Robert Adamson. I went to the Lifeline Bookfest every year, and snagged all the Australian poetry I could get my hands on. At university, I met the brilliant critic Martin Duwell, who offered to give me a grounding in Australian poetry outside of the courses I was formally enrolled in. We met regularly to discuss a clutch of poems by seminal Australian poets: Kenneth Slessor, Gwen Harwood, Christopher Brennan, A.D. Hope, J.S. Harry, Michael Dransfield, John Tranter, Les Murray and others. Each conversation with Martin produced new names to chase down. Far from feeling as though I was catching up, each poet I discovered under Martin's guidance underscored just how far behind I was, and how much more work was ahead.

It's hard to pinpoint the precise moment that the impulse to start publishing my own poetry kicked in during these reading years. I'd been writing poems since my time in Colorado: mostly imitations of the American poets I'd grown up reading. Eventually, I started going to the UQ library to read issues of literary journals and see what was being published. I gravitated to *Meanjin, HEAT* and *Southerly:* a trifecta which held a particular cachet among my poetry friends. I started to harbour the modest ambition that one day a poem of mine might grace their pages. Knowing that I wasn't yet *Meanjin* material, I bundled off my poems to smaller, less prominent magazines in envelopes, with polite letters to the editor saying that I hoped something might suit. Submissions in those days were posted by snail mail, and met by a

pregnant silence of indeterminate length before the inevitable rejection slip. I accumulated my share of rejections, and a few acceptances. I learnt a lot from those early poems that were rejected; I returned to them, sought a different through line or emphasis, and tried again. Incrementally, my writing came to seek more of a conversation with the Australian poets I was reading in those journals than with the American poets who had shaped my early years. I started to test my work in my mind against that of my living Australian peers. Eventually, I landed my first poem in *Meanjin,* back when Judith Beveridge was editing poetry for the journal.

That acceptance from Judith—a poet whose works I admired so greatly but never met—felt like a watershed in my writing life, because it suggested to me that I was learning how to write poems that might speak to a distant and impartial reader. It was also a valuable moment of connection to a broader literary culture from which I felt a few steps removed in Brisbane. Despite *Meanjin's* founding in that city in 1940 by Clem Christesen, and the journal's Turrbal toponym, by the time I had come along, its connection to Brisbane was historical. Like many of my university friends, it had departed south.

The tyranny of distance is real. Having spent much of my adult life in Brisbane, there are still many poets who I've admired, corresponded with, published and written about, but never met, or met only briefly. In the absence of socialising that takes place when poets live in the same city, literary journals have often been the conduit through which I've met the works of others. Reading *Meanjin's* pages is always an encounter with a larger Australia than any one place could admit, and with more writers than one could hope to meet in a lifetime. It creates a conversation that can bridge geographic divides. The poems in its pages are always contextualised by each other, but also with those that have come before, stretching back to landmark poems by Judith Wright, Oodgeroo, Gwen Harwood and David Malouf, as part of an ongoing colloquy.

I've never been—nor am I likely to become—a prolific poet. In the two decades since my first appearance, I've published a clutch of poems in *Meanjin*, fewer than many of my contemporaries, because I'm slow to write and slower still to publish. Upon being invited to write something for this issue, I looked to see what I had last published in *Meanjin's* pages. True to form, my most recent outing is several years old now: a poem called "The Jaguar," which went on to become the titular poem of a book of the same name. While I'm sceptical of the language of artistic watersheds, looking back on that poem, I can see that it represents an important reorientation in the tone and style of my poetry, incorporating a sweep of humour and intimate anecdotalism that was mostly absent in my first two books, and largely relinquishing a more formal lyricism that marked my earlier work.

The poem "The Jaguar" came out of an intense wrestling with the question of what, if anything, I could do aesthetically and artistically with the material life had dealt me: the relentless and devastating decline of my father into Parkinson's and dementia. Initially, this material did not seem poetically promising. My father's nightmarish decline and the grief it elicited were often beyond articulation out loud, let alone in poetry. Too keenly felt to be translated into anything other than undiluted anguish and self-pity—two poetic notes I hold in special contempt—and too mundane and specific to be elevated into anything universal, those experiences and emotions seemed destined to languish in the overbrimming department of the unwritten.

One day, walking on a trail in the rain at Springbrook—a place I often walked with my father in my childhood—I ruminated on my inability to write about the subject that had been consuming my inner life for so long. As I turned the question over, I found myself thinking scornfully about my tendency towards metaphor. Metaphor has always been the driving engine of my poetry: the longing to transform, to reach for language that can turn one thing into another, has always exercised my imagination the most. This is perhaps because the free-associating, liberating nature of metaphor lets the

poem move, and move *away* from. Much like riffing in jazz or other forms of improvisation, metaphor retains only the loosest connection to reality and fixity; it is inherently changeable, malleable and escapist. It deflects.

On my hike, it struck me that my experiences with my father resisted metaphor in part because they were more interesting as they were, not as they might become. My father's decision to buy a vintage Jaguar as a rebellion against being asked to surrender his driver's license was a poem in and of itself, I realised. It didn't need supplementation with metaphor. Instead, a poetry that addressed that experience, and others like it, would need to show self-awareness about its own motives and a suspicion of overt poeticism. In other words, it would need to keep sight of the surreal reality I was experiencing, while still retaining enough interest in image, sound, form and language to cohere as poetry should.

Back in the cabin, "The Jaguar" was the first poem I drafted with these ideas in mind. It is deliberately blunt in tone, and overtly refuses metaphor at its conclusion. It also embraces a kind of defeatism that up to that point had seemed antithetical to my platonic ideal of poetry. Its Gallic shrug of an ending—"I can't make anything of it"—is not one I could have ever written had I not spent all those futile years in the wilderness trying to find alternate ways of imagining my father's suffering. It will always remain an important poem to be because it offered me an orienting principle—to accept that sometimes a poem's duty is to look hard at things exactly as they are, rather than retreat into flights of language—that ultimately animated my book of the same name. And I will always be grateful that poem appeared in *Meanjin's* pages, and for the home *Meanjin* continues to give to my words—and to those of my fellow poets, near and far.

**Sarah Holland-Batt**