

The West

New Dreams From Noongar

by Andrew O'Hagan

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In the summer of 1976, a thing happened in our house that seriously challenged my notion of international relations. The English came to stay. Ours wasn't the kind of house where people came to stay: it was a council house 25 miles from Glasgow full to the brim with noisy boys, unhappy dogs, phantom parents, and football gloves. But my father had met this man on a building site in Coventry and rashly - or, one might say, merrily - he asked him and his entire family to come and stay in what he now and then called Bonnie Scotland. The discussions and tears before the visit went on for weeks: my mother immediately christened them The English and she threatened to go on strike. I remember her saying she hadn't a clue what to feed the English and where would the English sleep? Did they go to bed at a normal time the English and when they got up in the morning did the English have cornflakes or porridge or did they expect a banquet from Harrods? I'd like to be able to tell you how when the English turned up - all five of them, tumbling out of a hippy caravanette - that everything immediately went well and peace and understanding broke out in the land of Robert Burns. But it didn't. The English colonised the house exactly as my mother predicted. The kids jumped

on the beds and laughed at the three-bar fire. The English daddy never stopped talking in his big English accent and the mother went straight upstairs for a bath and started smoking in the bathroom. I knew the English were different because the children were doing handstands in the hall up against my mother's woodchip and the English mammy and daddy were always having naps. My three brothers and I sat silent on a green sofa. My father examined the Daily Record. My mother was in the kitchen with smelling salts, and one of the English children sang a rude song that included the word 'bastard'.

'Are they Protestants?' I asked my mother.

'Aye, they are,' said my mother. 'And worse!'

Long after the English had gone south, my family discussed, for years actually, the true horror of the summer invasion, but in my antithetical, note-taking way I found myself wondering about them. Who are these exotic beasts, the English, who seemed so to defy in my mind the meaning of exotica and beastliness when you really got down to it. They were individualists – at any rate, they weren't a family in the same way we were. Maybe I was secretly quite pleased that the English had muddied my mother's Anaglypta. Maybe I just reckoned they were freer than us. But my first experience of the English left me with the beginnings of a theory, to be expounded here, that whereas the Scots and Irish were a people, a definite community, innately together and full of songs and speeches about ourselves, the English were

something else altogether: a veritable riot of individualism with no real sense of common purpose and no collective volition as a tribe.

I was still thinking about the English the following summer, when the Queen's Silver Jubilee brought bunting and arguments to our street. Allegiance wasn't much of an option round our way, though the Orangemen of the town wouldn't have agreed, and soon another antithesis floated over the airwaves in the shape of an English group called The Sex Pistols, whom my brothers loved to death for singing a song that included the words, 'God Save the Queen/She aint no human being.' We were happy to go through the motions with the ice cream and jelly on Jubilee Day, but everybody I knew thought the Queen was an English joke and a sign of our neighbour's conformity. The sound of the Sex Pistols sounded more like it - they sounded like a riot, like a political yawp, an altogether different kind of Englishness. Or was the song a mistake, an aberration? The record was soon banned in any event and we went back to imagining the English didn't really know how to behave or how to stand up for themselves or their songs.

I gather you had your own English invasion over here, so I come to you in sympathy. In Scotland, we were never out gathering jilgies or harvesting yams, but in Scotland's west coast, as here on your own vast western world, we felt we were out on our own. We felt we were in some sense, as you are, at the bottom of the world. But as I'll tell you now: we were really at the top of the world, and the journey between the two is a modern journey, the journey of self-realisation. The problem with the English was not

that they were bigger than us, but that they were SOUTH and their imperialism was always of the lazy kind. Everything we trusted was to the West. Ireland and America and John Wayne lived in the West, and that was the end of the story. Not that John Wayne wasn't imperial, but at least he wore a nice hat and drew a gun real fast. Many good human efforts tended towards the West, towards the clean breast of new discovery. We wanted away from colonial assumptions and old-style Southern familiarity. It just seemed that life was to be found in the West, and the big task was to work out how to embrace your own Westernness. The task was to see, at last, that discovery was the better part of your nature.

We had starlings flying overhead, not the green and red of the Western Rosella, and the meaning of Western Australia was not, as advertised, merely as an outpost of colonial expansion. In my childhood, the journey to Australia was a search for a better life, a climate of change and possibility. Truth is, we Scots, in tune with our legacy of Jekyll and Hyde, were both colonisers and colonised, and it wasn't, perhaps, our own Perth that would guide us in how to live with this, but yours. George Fletcher Moore, the Irish lawyer who sought his fortune in the Swan River colony in 1840, recorded the words of Yagan, the aboriginal seer who saw what was happening and named it. 'You came to our country, and disturbed us in our occupations: as we walk in our own country, we are fired upon by the white man. Why should the white man treat us so?'

I have to tell you, my mother, in her own sweet-tempered way, would have understood the feeling, long after the English had gone off with their cigarettes and their baths in the middle of the day. But the notion of the West was complicated for all of us: we knew what it was to feel marginalised, but we, unlike the native people of Western Australia, knew what it was to take the other role, and stamp on people's ground. Some of my ancestors came in convict ships and ended up panning for gold in the Kalgoorlie gold fields of the 1890s. We were westerners who sought our advantage, and for many of us the instinct to go west survives the ages.

I'm sure as soon as I could walk I wanted to go west. I wanted to be there at the going down of the sun, and in the morning, to see what the world was all about. A writer is born, sometimes, with a heart already filled with early promises and lost horizons, and I loved the idea embedded in the seasons and in the turn of every new day that life could begin again. It would take years for me truly to realise that westernness was deep in our DNA. We lived in a kind of suburban dream of improvement: but the new housing estates of Scotland's West Coast led to country fields and hedges aslant the sea, where the water seemed like a lesson in timelessness. I remember as a boy going there to read T.S. Eliot - we didn't get out much, or, when we did, it was to raise our voices in utterances beneath the lyrics of T.S. Eliot. But I remember his words by the Firth of Clyde: these words from The Four Quartets felt like an invocation to the growing imagination. They felt real. And they felt like the key to a way of being.

'What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.
And every phrase
 And sentence that is right
(where every word is at home,
Taking its place to support the others,
The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,
An easy commerce of the old and the new,
 The common word exact without vulgarity,
The formal word precise but not pedantic,
The complete consort dancing together)
Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning,
Every poem an epitaph.'

That already sounded very homely to my Scottish ear. 'In my end is my beginning,' were the last words of Mary Queen of Scots, and I felt, as I looked out, that history was speaking through the mercy of poetry to a new age. Here we were in the West, but what was out there? What was beyond? I found an answer in 'The Dead', that famous story by James Joyce that closes the Irishman's beautiful collection, Dubliners. In that story, the West - the west of Ireland - comes to represent a repository of native essentials, a zone of pure

belonging. Gretta, the woman in that story, is struck dumb on the stairs when she hears an old song, 'The Lass of Augrim'. Her husband, Gabriel Conroy, sees it happening, and he discovers soon enough that she is still haunted by the death of an old lover, a young man called Michael Furey who died for her sake. The story becomes a great and beautiful beacon of truth about how we exist, and the West is both the past, the ghostly present, and the future in that story, which to me is James Joyce's masterpiece. Listen to the western voices echoing through the story, at its very end:

'A few light taps upon the pane made him turn to the window. It had begun to snow again. He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight. The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.'

Did you hear that? 'The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward.' As a boy, I imagined that is a journey we all might wish to make. Standing on the coast, I thought of the Ireland my people had come

from - I have an Irish name, O'Hagan - and, beyond Ireland, further west, there was America, a place that was coming to absorb my generation and whose culture seemed set to absorb the world. They were each out there, the past and the future, the great hunger and the maddening feast, and it seemed possible that westernness and its discontents would become a subject of lasting interest for the likes of me. And so it proved. For in that beautiful story of James Joyce's, 'The Dead', there was also politics and the throb of a changing world: when Miss Ivors wants to insult Gabriel she calls him a 'West Briton'. Ireland wasn't enough for some natives, she seems to imply, not for those who must see themselves attached to the glory of a bigger nation. This process of 'Westernisation' has been a problem for many of our cultures - not least Australia's - and Gabriel rightly sees it as an affront to his sense of progress.

On my own spot of land, my own tiny western amphitheatre of Ayrshire, the sea performed its duty, serving up evidence of western power, in the shapes of submarines. I began taking notes on the American submarines that swept Scotland's coast. They sailed from Faslane, the American base among the glens, and carried Cold War nuclear threat past our very windows. From that moment on, I believe my own sense of the West became a co-mingling of the romantic and the annihilistic: on the one hand, as I said, it was a zone of dreams, of the pioneering hopes that could lead good people into western lands. But on the other, as conjured by those black shapes on my childhood horizon, the west was also a threat to the safety of nations.

We have lived with the West in both senses now, and have come, at last, in 2011, to a moment when the double-dealing of what we call 'Western' governments - selling arms to nations who oppress their people - is seen clearly for the immoral horror that it is. Those black submarines of my childhood are caught now, perhaps, in the floating nets of global freedom-fighting - the social networks of activism - and the world will never be the same again. It was not American and allied invasions of foreign lands - or centuries of 'Westernisation' - that brought people in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya to see the way out of oppressive darkness, but a generation of the intelligent young, who, in company with their mobile phones, set out to question the old order of military and economic patronage networks. Those corrupt governments were often boosted by the West to the advantage of tyrants everywhere and to the enslavement of ordinary people. The West, as we knew it, can never be the same. And on certain days it is necessary to admit the possibility has given the West a bad name. Those rolling covered wagons that once carried the pioneers westward - at one time, those tracks were said to be visible from the air - they had carried dreamers to a land of milk and honey. That was the frontier spirit, and we all followed it in one way or another. Many of you here come from people who followed it directly. But I would argue that the pioneering spirit - the deep work of the individual imagination, and of our communities - has always known something that even government geographers forget: human imagination and idealism is a moveable feast; the journey West also leads to the East; and our search for

betterness for our children, for our nations, is not a journey from A to B, but from A to a better A, and in my childhood that A stood for Australia.

Here's a theory: The West only can only its true glories when it finds its way fairly through the East. That is human nature but it is also modern history. The West, as a privileged zone, has had its day, and the future might take its example for places like Perth, where the West stands proud at the frontier of an eastern promise. There is no nation but the imagination: and in that place, Perth, Australia may stand as a kind of lesson. The journey down and away might lead you to a point where Westernness changes its meaning. With a bit of luck and more hard work, Perth, Australia might stand for some of life's great alternatives: a place not of moral finagling but of civic dignity; a place not of religious piety and racial intolerance and economic bullying but of a new kind of West, the kind that says, like the best of literature, 'Nothing is simply one thing. We are all plural. We are nothing more, each of us, than our power to imagine each other's reality.' Perth us not a backwater but a frontier, and it must shout that fact from the very rooftops of modern Australian life. A national government that kow-tows to old-style American interests is not a national government dong well: it is, rather, a government not looking for the meaning of its own more modern kind of Westernness. Turn off your delinquent American TV channels and go out and look at your own culture, for it tells more beautiful stories.

We live or die - our culture fades or survives - owing to our ability to imagine life afresh and see our territories new. If France today behaved,

internationally, like France in the 19th century then it would be a byword for tyranny. If England today expressed its interests as it did in the 1760s, American would still be struggling to deal with a notion of allegiance to foreign power that it now only understands as being something that other nations should feel to them. America, and a new notion of the West, was founded on the principles of freedom and self-governance enshrined not only in the Constitution but in the literature that gave its language to the Constitution. Literature is like that: it helps us to live our lives and helps nations to know themselves.

Nationhood is not a badge, or a threat: it is a benediction. And we must be free to define it how we like. We may apologise for the past, but we should not do so only to cancer righteous anger. We should do so in order to admit that anger into our moral understanding of how to do better today, not only for ourselves but for the people we are apologising to. Travelling on the outskirts of Perth in 1922, D.H. Lawrence wrote a letter home, where he spoke of 'the primeval ghost in the Bush'. That ghost, that sense of the past warily haunting the present, may finally be coming to rest.

However intentional, however accidental, some cities arrive at a point of clarity about themselves in terms of what the nation is. It is possible that Perth might come to be like that: its westernness might give it a bead on the world, and a consciousness of Australia, that is good for progress. From the Indian Ocean to the Darling Range, and dotted like fireflies along the Swan River, on the old sites of Boorloo, the people of Perth, at their best, send out a

notion – to me a notion at one with the spirit of literary pioneering – that positions human beings and their loved ones and their higher instincts at the helm of change, embracing modernity as if Western dignity depended upon it. Six years before I was born this became known as the City of Light: every one turning on their lights as John Glenn passed overhead whilst orbiting the earth on the vessel Friendship 7.

Perth is a living example of the post-colonial spirit making contact with its own past, ghostly present, and future, as we said earlier of James Joyce's Ireland. Perth is closer to Jakarta than it is to Sydney – it used to be called the most isolated city on earth – which may explain a number of things. It may explain why the city should seize its moment to become a kind of international byword for independence of mind: to me, as a writer, the condition of bliss that writers must learn from their greatest cities is to be industrious apart and socially valiant, keeping, all the while, to your own style. That is Perth. And its example of westernness, a new way of being West, can indeed be heard in Jakarta if not so much in Sydney. In my childhood there was a rabbit-proof fence around the world, from Berlin to China to Iran to Alabama, and – bizarrely, to some – it was not only struggle but the ferment of ideas that brought it down. Perth must take its place, and the job never ends, of pioneering a new 'western' habit of taking down fences.

The acts of the imagination are themselves the best offence to tyranny. Talk to the dissidents of Tahrir Square in Cairo, as I have, and what you discover is modern individuals busy canceling the assumptions of their

political trackers. They are saying no to old concepts of dictatorship but also to old concepts of Western paternalism, the dictatorship of 'benign intervention', 'security', and 'economic advisors'. The events of this year mean that, wherever we come from, from whatever former site of oppression and fear, we will not go back to Moore River, and Perth knows in its cultural bones, I hope, what it means to build a society that knows when the rights of a stolen generation will have their day. We sometimes think we are far from the great world. That was one of the clichés of my own youth: but the black submarines showed me we were closer than we knew. It was the job of literature to connect us to worlds both greater and smaller.

Here, we stand not only on the West, but at a vantage point of Westernness, and a moment has come for Australia. This is an era when Australia might fulfill its imaginative capacities, and engage imaginatively with what it means to be central in the world. For as sure as 'Western values' have freed the world, they have also enslaved it, and – as an energy exemplar to the world – Australia might rebuke the western addiction to oil. The American commentator Thomas L. Friedman has called for a world-wide gasoline tax, and Australia should pioneer it, to remake the West. 'For the last 50 years,' Friedman writes, 'America (and Europe and Asia) have treated the Middle East as if it were just a collection of big gas stations. Our message to the region has been consistent: "Guys, here's the deal. Keep your pumps open, your oil prices low, don't bother the Israelis too much and, as far as we're concerned, you can do whatever you want out back. You can deprive your

people of whatever civil rights you like. You can engage in however much corruption you like. You can preach whatever intolerance you like. You can print whatever conspiracy theories about us in your newspapers that you like. You can keep your women as illiterate as you like. You can create whatever vast welfare-state economies, without any innovative capacity, that you like. You can under-educate your youth as much as you like. It was that attitude that enabled the Arab world to be insulated from history for the last 50 years - to be ruled for decades by the same kings and dictators. Well, history is back.'

More than 60 years ago, the English literary critic Cyril Connolly told us it was 'closing times in the gardens of the West.' He was obviously early with that, and perhaps off the mark altogether, for what we see, if we see our horizons in the round, is what amount to a flowering time in those gardens. The West must make a new role for itself, and must take new western principles and principalities - Perth being one, as demonstrated again by the blossoming of ideas resplendent at the Writers Festival this week - to shake the orthodoxies of self-interest. We must imagine a new relation with the world inside our communities, embedding art and industry at the apex of fairness, and share the world's burdens for the first time as it we carried not only equal rights over them, but equal responsibilities.

Literature is the moral sound of human empathy. And it finds its location everywhere. But only we can find it, only we can secure it, only we can maintain it, and pass it on. Australia, as much as the United Kingdom,

can have a lapdog tendency when it comes to licking the hand of bullying and unquestioning Western power, sometimes ignoring the enlightenments coming from its own dear places. Perth can light up the sky. We've seen it before. And without recourse to timidity or the old provincial notions of dependency, Western Australia may step up and provide a new code of honour for the West in general.

A man I knew once organised a tour of America for Dylan Thomas and he remembers him the last time he saw him, drunk of course, and standing on the steps of a plane out of Nashville. 'I'm going further and further West,' he said. 'Further away from Wales. Further away from home.' But I would argue for another notion of the West - that we go there to find the home of homes, and whilst we leave it, we come back, and we know it again as if for the first time. Among many of the wrong-headed notions that kept me growing as a boy, perhaps one was right: the notion that only poetry can bring us to the heart of human power. I certainly thought so as I read the poems of Robert Burns, another Ayrshire writer who taught us so much about how to feel. At least at the end, even if our imaginative plans fall short, we can sit with a whisky and be warmed by the fire of our former hopes.

I've been talking to you here about how writers can act as a lightning gauge for change across time. And I'd like to pause with you over Robert Burns, because he is, for me, an exemplar of how language and landscape and politics can merge, and go hand-in-hand with a need for transformation in individuals but also in whole societies. What Les Murray did for Australia he

also did for the world; what the novelist Tim Winton does for Perth he also does for all of us, and Robert Burns is one of those writers who constantly renews our capacity for living. I first heard the words 'Robert Burns' when I was a skiving wee blether at a primary school in Kilwinning: the headmistress, Mrs Ferguson, was looking for a young male victim, aged 7, to accompany her on the piano as she rattled out a version of 'My Luv She's But a Lassie Yet'. 'But let her stand a year or twa, I sung - red-faced, mortified, banned forever from the legion of footballing heroes and non-Sissies - 'and she'll no be half so saucy yet'. But I didn't care. I loved the words and the eternity of bare human feeling that lived inside the words. I knew that Burns would never spare my blushes: he didn't that day, and he didn't any day, including all the days of his own life.

Burns was a magician of fellowship. He was a magician of compassion, such as we feel when we use his words to oppose needless wars and inequality. He was a man of his time, but for all time, showing us how to enlarge ourselves in company with others. Years after the humiliation at Mrs Ferguson's piano, only the year before last, I was standing in front of the cameras to present the first of three BBC films. It was a cold day - the BBC always want everything to look sunny, and if you watch our films you'd think we had filmed them in Barbados - but it was cold that day and I was preparing to speak to the camera about Burns and Jean Armour outside the Ship Inn down at the harbour in Irvine. Half the crew were English, so they weren't what we call *au fait* with the old Burnsian enthusiasm. The girl from

the BBC put a blob of something under my eyes to conceal last night's hangover, and I stood looking down the lens, trying to remember Mrs Ferguson's point that a man who couldn't speak in sentences was probably a criminal. Action! Shouted the director. And just at that point, a sonsy-faced, well-oiled, sleekit auld man fell out of the door of The Ship. 'Rabbie Burns, is it?' he shouted. 'I've gi' ye Rabbie Burns. Ye don't know the first thing about the man, ya bunch a university tossers!'

So. That just about summed up the situation. The truth is there are as many Robert Burnses as there are people to admire him, and I'm happy to embrace them all. But when we're speaking about the Immortal Memory of Burns what we're often talking about is the effort to keep his work and his memory alive for new generations of kids, especially those, like I was, who grew up in households that weren't made for poetry or immortality, unless you're talking about the kind of immortality that can be achieved on a football field.

To me, Burns's great legacy is in the way he linked men up no matter what their class or creed. He is one of history's great unifiers, one of its great democrats. He's the libertarian's libertarian. And, as you know, he was seldom the recipient of equality for himself. Scotland has always wished its great writers to be men of the people - even if those writers were not that way inclined -- but few in any language had such a natural instinct as did Burns for inclusion. The popularity of Burns may be a testament to our lust for plain speaking. The national poet hated unfairness and the abuse of power, that is

his signature, giving intellectual and emotional life to notions of common sense and the common good.

Can a single poet summon the essence of a nation? Does Goethe do it for Germany? Pushkin for Russia? Whitman for the United States? Seamus Heaney for Ireland? I once took Heaney up to Alloway to look at the stuff. We were standing outside the Tam O'Shanter Experience when the great Nobel-Prize-Winner shook his head and said what a life had grown up around Burns's talent. Seamus likes a bit of carry-on and I said to him that Ireland would show us The Seamus Heaney Experience before too long. 'And what's going to be in that,' he said, 'bar a confessional box and a couple of auld butter churns.'

We must never forget what literature can do. We love Burns not for his consistencies or even for his convictions, but for the sound of his mind and the song of his humanness. It wasn't a legislator or a party animal who wrote a Marseillaise to the human spirit, but a farmer's son from Ayrshire with an uncanny connection with people's cares and people's wishes for a better life. 'It's coming yet for a' that,' he wrote, 'that man to man the whole world o'er/ Shall brothers be for a that.'

The schools I went to were only ten miles away from his birthplace, and I remember reading him in my bedroom with the rain against the window. With my first typewriter I sat and typed the whole of Tam O'Shanter, trying to understand the turns and periods in the poem, the source of the narrative's urgency and comedy and truth.

Literature is not a compendium of special affects or a log of political attitudes, but a repository of human vision, and Robert Burns compels readers – all of us – to understand their own capacity for fellowship. It was the American poet Wallace Stevens who said that the reading of poetry helps you to live your life, and in Burns’s hands the reader comes away humanised, better equipped to tolerate your own failings and appreciate the world’s glories.

Robert Burns was not merely Scotland’s gift to the world, but humanity’s gift to Scotland. Up in the wards, when my daughter was born, and the London traffic seemed to hush the crowds in lieu of this brand new person, I thought of Robert Burns’ first love poem as I looked into her face.

O once I lov’d a bonnie lass,
An’ aye I love her still,
An’ whilst that virtue warms my breast
I’ll love my handsome Nell.

Great poets follow us, long after we followed them, and they linger like spies in the shadows of the mysterious. Now and then we turn in an empty street and see them light a match: perhaps, we say, you were my best friend all along. You shadowed me. That is not to suggest that poetry is always a source of comfort, but merely to say it is always a source of presence.

Burns was one of those Western voices that have haunted my sense of what is possible for a writer. But you hear it again and again, in those writers, for example, who sang their anthems for doomed youth at the Western Front. And another West appears before us, to break our hearts with a vision of discovery, at the close of Scott Fitzgerald's masterpiece, *The Great Gatsby*. I have spoken tonight of beginnings and endings – of a West that opens up possibility, and another West that closes it down – but it is Fitzgerald's great last paragraphs in *Gatsby* that summon how literature itself might embrace the hopes we invest in the West. The narrator Nick Carraway, like *Gatsby* himself, came to New York from the West, and the search for new dreams, the horror at old politics, will lead him back West again, in search of goodness. Here's Nick Carraway sprawled out on the sand:

'Most of the big shore places were closed now and there were hardly any lights except the shadowy, moving glow of a ferryboat across the Sound. And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes – a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for *Gatsby's* house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.

And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter — to-morrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther. . . . And one fine morning — — So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.'

And here you, are too: at the most Westerly point of all. Why shouldn't the West be among your greatest subjects? Here in Perth, perhaps, we see the western voice distilled and changed: speaking to the new Orient as much as to the old kingdoms across the sea. New republics indeed are rolling on under the night, and it might take a place like this, a place innately happy to live out on its own, at the furthest edge of the western consciousness, to teach us a lesson in how to move the tectonic plates of human understanding into a new formation. History is back, but it will not be history as we used to know it. If there are revolutions, as we have seen, they will be revolutions married to technology and culture; they will be uprisings of the flashing cursor and the instant message; coalitions will spring up across borders and states: we are living through the era when change will appear not from the barrel of a gun, but from the common wishes channeled from a million box

bedrooms. The West is not longer in charge of the world, not for long. The outbacks have found their voice and their moment: there is nowhere too remote to make its mark on our understanding. We are each a principality and each an agent of change. That is what we discovered and literature plays its part. The West is not out there or out here any more: it is inside, in our heads, a place in all of us where ideals might become realities. In *Land's Edge*, Tim Winton wrote, 'West coasts tend to be wild coasts, final coasts to be settled, lonelier places for being last.'

But we may not be last any more: we may be first. I have spend some time this week at the National Museum of Western Australia. Writers live by symbols and sleeping truths, and that wonderful place is a repository of such things. But at the end of the largest room, next to the displays of Kings Park and the aluminum roofing of the suburbs, next to a Colonial house and a display of gold diggers' pans, next to models of megafauna and echidnas, next to digging sticks used by Noongar women, there are 5 TV screens transmitting live webcam pictures from cities around the world. We see Ulan Bataar, we see Paris. There's Los Angeles and Glasgow and Venice. We see London, Istanbul, and Sienna. It felt to me, as I watched them again this morning, that they represented a brand new point in your history. All these world cities, viewed at last from the ancient land of Mooro, this district of Yellagonga, as if to show in one great moment that Westernness had finally come home to itself. Here we are, wherever we are, at the still point of the turning world - today, and now, all frontiers seeming to dissolve in a golden

hope of plurality in Western Australia. Under the citicams of the world there is a quotation from Veronica Brady's *This I Believe*.

'Nor do we humans exist separate and apart. We are part of this great polyphony of being as it is played out on our small and vulnerable planet suspended in infinite space.'

In closing this Festival, let us call it a consummation. The end of the old West is in sight, and, in that ending, we may find a new beginning. This is Noongar land, and this is Perth, and this is the world itself as it reaches for a new definition that protects us all. All roads in literature lead to the domestic interior – that is what we heard again and again this week during the Festival. The small business of life standing for the universe. And it is true of the most global innovations: we take steps to create a better world if only to invest in the future smiles of our children, and let the grace and rhythm of literature cast a spell on them, forever to free them from prejudice and chaos. I came to Perth, I tell you, as if coming to visit an old part of myself, a part that wants western ideals constantly to outfox our western depravities. There is a new notion of the West's potential for light: let us, for now, call it a Noongar of the mind, a Perth of the heart, and let it carry the best human ideals across all boundaries into a world where is no need for a place called The West, The East, The North, and the South.

And so we return to T.S. Eliot, to Little Gidding, and the notion of the returnability of life – the endless West once before us and now, day by day, hour by hour, behind us.

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, unremembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;
At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree
Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.

Ends