EUREKA STREET .com.au
Discerning humanity.

14 November 2006 Volume: 16 Issue: 17

Eureka Street is published fortnightly online, a minimum of 24 times per year by Eureka Street Magazine Pty Ltd

Responsibility for editorial content is accepted by the publisher.

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Volume 16 Issue: 17
14 November 2006

US mid-terms' outcome will keep Canberra on its toes

EDITORIAL

Published *13-Nov-2006*

The US mid term election results have been decided, and the Democrats are sharing power not only with President George W. Bush, but also responsibility for his policies that continue to wreak havoc in the Middle East.

This election has in many ways been a wake-up call for the Democrats, as much as it has been for the Republicans. Nancy Pelosi, the new House majority leader, has led the party to victory by opposing the policies of the Bush administration without elucidating a comprehensive alternative vision for the country. It's now time for her to engage in proactive policymaking.

From a certain point of view, the Australian government has benefited significantly from the formerly Republican Congress. Australia and the US have drawn strength from each other in their shared recalcitrance regarding the Kyoto protocols. The free trade agreement between the countries that came into effect just under two years ago, would have struggled to pass through a Democrat-dominated congress. Similarly, the two leaders have drawn strength from each other, standing side-by-side on the Iraq intervention.

John Howard will now need to watch the situation in Iraq even more closely, if, as expected, the Democrats decide on a change of direction, and demands for a clear exit strategy are realised.

Meanwhile, Canberra will be watching with interest, and perhaps, just maybe, wondering if these results might somehow reflect a seachange in people's sympathies—or worse still—presage a change in the Australian body politic.

Certainly the Howard government has done itself no favours by "staying the course" in Iraq nor, more recently, with its perceived lack of concern for the environmental challenges facing Australia. Climate change may be one of the major deciding factors in the federal election next year—and, across the Pacific, you can bet the Democrats will not be quiet about that.

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Biotech revolution promises to alter human nature

OPINION

Published *13-Nov-2006*

There is no doubt that recent major breakthroughs in biotechnology have made a huge contribution to human life. We don't have to look far to think of examples: how the human tissue grown into new skin was used by Dr Fiona Wood and her team, for example, to save the life of the victims of the Bali bombings. How wonderful to know that Herceptin, the first drug approved for use with a matching diagnostic test, is now available to treat breast cancer in women whose cancer cells express the protein HER2.

So it may seem churlish to introduce a note of caution in a discussion about the role of biotech discoveries in our future directions as human beings—but it is an important part of the bioethical debate being played out across the world.

Part of being human is the desire, even the urge, to become better—to strive for perfection. And who could begrudge such an urge? But equally, part of what makes us human is our differences, our very imperfections.

It is important, therefore, that we think clearly about the path we are taking towards the solution of all our human imperfections. How do we continue to cherish our diversity and individual uniqueness even while we try to use our human talents to improve our lot?

A good starting point in this discussion is Francis Fukuyama's book, *Our Post Human Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*. Fukuyama's provocative book argues that the biotechnology revolution will ultimately have profound consequences for our society—and some of these may be quite damaging.

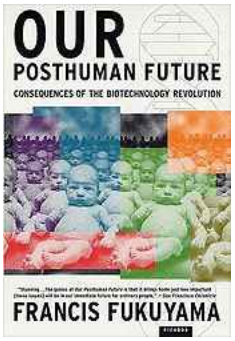
For example, he sees the most significant threat posed by contemporary biotechnology as the possibility that it will alter human nature, and thereby move us into what he calls a "post human" stage of history.
We are generally an egalitarian species, and use our intellect and our resources as well as our good fortune to ensure the survival of our species. This applies whether we live in the developed world of the "haves", or the developing world of the "have nots".

So the notion of biotechnology as a way of "improving" us or our children goes right to the heart of the idea of altering human nature. We could consider this to be at one end of the interventionist spectrum that Fukuyama seeks to address.

At the core of his argument is the fact that biotechnology is allowing us to modify human behaviour, and that we need to be aware of the costs as well as of the benefits. As he so cogently puts it, "biotechnology in contrast to many other scientific advances mixes obvious benefits with subtle harms, in one seamless package".

Right now we are facing ethical choices about genetic privacy, proper use of drugs, research involving embryos, and human cloning. The Lockhart Report and the Patterson Bill,

which are before the parliament, take us further, into the realms of embryo selection and the degree to which medical technologies can be used for enhancement rather than therapeutic purposes.



The ultimate destination, or "prize" of the biotech revolution will be intervention in the "germ line" to manipulate the DNA of all of one person's descendants This may happen for a variety of reasons—to eliminate Huntington's disease, for instance, or for more questionable purposes. But biotechnology is much broader than genetic engineering.

As biotechnology increasingly confers the power to manipulate our biological make-up, there is a distinct possibility, and danger, that ordinary (or at least wealthy) parents will seek to use this technology to "improve" their children. This is not in the realm of fantasy, but is the concern of many thinkers who are following the biotech revolution closely. Gregory Stock, in his book *Redesigning Humans*, suggests that musical people may want to enhance their children's musical abilities, athletes their children's athletic abilities, and so on.

Just think: we may also want to enhance for more ideological or political reasons as well. And if this trend goes far enough it may lead us to shift the way we think about genetically different classes of human beings, which will then inevitably affect our view of human rights.

So-called "improving" human beings can be an extremely ambiguous enterprise, particularly when it comes to modifying elements of our emotional system and personality.

The fact is that some individual genes have multiple effects, and sometimes it takes the interaction of many genes working together at different points to produce other effects. This complexity is what makes germ-line engineering different from conventional medicine: the bottom line is that if you make a mistake when you genetically engineer a child, you can't correct it.

Hence the urge to proceed with caution, particularly in terms of decision-making—which leads me back to the role and responsibilities of parliamentarians as elected representatives of all Australians. We are all aware of the democratic tendency to delegate decision-making to expert communities in certain areas that require great technical expertise. This has always been true of biomedicine, where drug regulation, rules concerning human experimentation and the like have always been within the purview of a limited expert community with occasional interventions by government.

Our tendency to frame behavioural differences (such as ADHD, for example) as medical conditions, coupled with society's respect for medical solutions, make it all the more essential that we think carefully about this issue of regulation. The medical profession is pressured to provide quick fixes, and in public policy terms we complicitly support this approach in our search for affordable outcomes and so-called "solutions.

It is therefore very important that any decisions relating to biotechnologies are truly democratic ones. And for that democratisation to happen, we need to inform ourselves about the nature of scientific advances and the larger, human questions they raise.

When we consider the Lockhart recommendations, these are the kinds of conversations we all need to be having.

Too often our discussion descends to a mutually disrespectful debate in which opponents are simply pigeonholed into crude categories—such as irresponsible futurists or repressive conservatives, secular re-designers or religious closed minds. It is not only valid, it is imperative for us to ask probing questions—all the more so if they are uncomfortable, unfamiliar questions that yield no simple, forthright answer.

If you're happy and you know it clap your hands

OPINION

Published *13-Nov-2006*

Out of all my unhappy childhood memories, the one that continues to haunt me relates to the classroom sing-along. Although my grade one primary school teacher did her best to inspire joy in the classroom, by encouraging us to sing songs like "if you're happy and you know it clap your hands" • , there were one or two gloomy types such as myself who refused to join in.

It's not that I was an unhappy child. It's just that institutionalised fun wasn't my idea of a good time. It still isn't. I don't find "funny hat" • days at work particularly fun, and I fail to the see the point in attending work-sponsored Karaoke nights. If I were to sing and clap on cue I'd do it, as Frank Sinatra famously put it, "My Way".

It was around the time the music video clip was emerging as a popular entertainment form in the '70s, when suburban misfits like myself encountered our counter-culture messiah in all his glory. The image of Sid Vicious dressed like an unruly high school debutant spitting out "My Way" with his trademark punk snarl, could not have been more out of step with the original French version that was first performed in 1967.

Sid's act of cultural defiance convinced dissatisfied delinquents such as myself that the UK punk movement would deliver us from the banalities of middle-class sensibilities.

Punks like Vicious didn't receive music awards. Why should they? They were nothing more than a bunch of sub-standard musicians behaving badly. The best thing that the mainstream music establishment could do was to ignore them. To do otherwise would have landed them a swag of music awards and public recognition to boot.

Unfortunately the same can't be said for today's "happy-clappers" • . The fact that there's a Grammy Award dedicated to "Contemporary/Pop Gospel" music shows just how much influence the American Religious Right has on popular culture. Let's face it, "contemporary gospel music" • (as opposed to authentic gospel) is the unofficial soundtrack to ultraconservative America—just as the term "family values" • has become code for conservative Christian values in Australia.

Many within the conservative Christian camp have come to accept music as an effective means of spreading the gospel. It's a purist view that harks back to a time when Martin Luther recognised music as a valuable proselytising tool. As he put it, "I would gladly see all arts, especially music, in the service of Him who has given and created them. Why should the devil have all the good music?" •

The way I see it, Australians prefer to do things their way. We've never been big on choreographed hoopla as seen on American Presidential campaigns, evangelical television shows, and American award ceremonies. I'd like to think that we prefer to acknowledge our achievements without the glitz and hype typical of such productions.

Many of the students I teach resent formal awards. And it's not because they lack the

talent or hunger to succeed. It's just that the joy and satisfaction that comes from creative expression is killed off by the politicised nature of school-sponsored prizes. I recently encouraged a student to enter her short story in writing competition only to be told by her that she was not prepared to have her personal writing used as marketing tool by the school.

There have been artists throughout history who have declined awards for fear of unsettling their delicate relationship with their muse. For such artists, awards are nothing more than a promotion tool used by the industry to shift merchandise. As Jean Paul Sartre put it after declining his Nobel Prize in Literature in 1964, "an artist must refuse to allow himself to be transformed into an institution ..." •

Given that the American Christian Right has been successful in forming alliances with governments, influencing public policy, and infiltrating popular culture, it could be said that they are comfortable doing business with political and artistic institutions for the explicit purpose of promoting their narrow brand of values.

Politics can corrupt, whereas genuine art enlightens. Artists, by virtue of their creative independence can, if they choose, talk "truth" to the State. We've seen this with the protest songs of the '60s, and with Australian hip hop artists that have come out of the working-class, underprivileged, and crime-ridden suburbs of Melbourne.

The Christian musician and producer, T-Bone Burnett, once said that "you can sing about the Light, or you can sing about what you see because of the Light. I prefer the latter" • . I too prefer songs that shed light on political corruption and injustice, to the songs that ring out of evangelical and Pentecostal mega-churches modelled on modern-day shopping centres.

These songs are nothing more than muzak for George W. Bush's America—nursery rhymes that echo in the heads of inward-looking individuals, who march to the monotony of a single, puritanical drumbeat.

In Australia, there are as many music genres, styles and musical interpretations as there are political views and opinions. No group—whether political or musical—should force anyone to sing and clap to a single tune. It just wouldn't make us happy.

A man of Middle Eastern appearance who dreams of peace

COLUMNS
By the way

Published *13-Nov-2006*

At exactly 2.41 a few mornings ago, I woke suddenly from a dreamless sleep. There was an eerie luminescence in the room, yet the night was moonless. As I sat up, realising that something, some sound or aberration, must have plucked me from the shades of my Deep REM phase, or whatever kind of sleep I was having at the time, I made one of those random, unaccountable mental connections that such occasions often invoke. I thought of a poem I had to learn off by heart at school.

"Abou Ben Adhem (may his tribe increase)/ Awoke one night from a deep dream of peace/ And saw, within the moonlight in his room/ Making it rich, and like a lily in bloom/ An Angel writing in a book of gold"|"

The whole poem—induced no doubt by shock and a certain amount of fear (after all, what the hell had woken me? And where was the light coming from?)—came straight back to me, testimony to the profound and durable impact of punishment-assisted rote learning. That was how, for example, in the same period of my life I got a lasting hold on Byron.

"The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,/ And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;/ And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,/ When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee."

To reach that level of assurance, however, required an intense learning experience.

"Who came down, Matthews?"

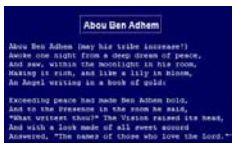
"The Syrian, Brother." WHACK!

"The ASSyrian Matthews, ASS—very appropriate in your case. Came down like what, Matthews?"

"A ... tiger, Brother?" WHACK!

"A wolf Matthews, a wolf. And what were gleaming Matthews?"

His"|? "Jodhpurs, Brother?" WHACK.



"Wrong continent, Matthews; wrong war. Stay in and write the whole poem out five times." And thus I gained my love of literature.

And from that same deeply buried source came the story of Abou Ben Adhem who, finding that the Angel was writing the "names of those who love the Lord" and that his was not on the list, proposed that he be recorded as "one who loves his fellow men". The Angel wrote and vanished. Returning the next night "with a great wakening light", the Angel revealed "the names whom love of God had blessed/ And lo! Ben Adhem's name led all the rest".

This modest poetic epiphany did not, however, do anything for my predicament. The briefest of scrutinies showed me beyond any doubt that the room was absolutely devoid of angels and their accoutrements. And the light, falling a bit short of "a great wakening"

effulgence was actually coming through our window, outside and above which is one of those sensor lights that switch on if they detect movement. So something was moving around outside.

Through the window I saw two very large shapes only metres away in the middle of a garden bed and just at the edge of the light's circle. The tracery of backdrop shadows and the trickery of the arc of light made these forms look monstrous. Elephants! Only the day before, I'd been reading that something strange is happening to the world's elephants.

They are on the rampage in Sumatra, among other places, where illegal logging and land clearances are rapidly diminishing their habitats. Wild elephants are invading residential areas at night, crushing houses, devouring crops and attacking people. In Zimbabwe, conversely, massively burgeoning elephant numbers are destroying the environment and threatening other already endangered animals. And now, here they were in the obscure light and shade of our bush garden—huge, dominant, unstoppable.


smh.com.au
Order of the board Jungle

Of course, just as a few minutes earlier, calmer inspection had revealed the absence of angels in our room, so now did less fevered scrutiny show me that there were two large kangaroos dining on our grasses and prostrates. This is not unusual: kangaroos graze the paddock most nights, but such proximity to the civilised bit of our place was a new and strange phenomenon. As for the sensor light, far from being frightened away by it, they seemed to appreciate the convenience.

The bright light of dawn, as it has a habit of doing, put things in perspective. Stories about elephants were no doubt exaggerated. Surely. And there was nothing weird really about the way the kangaroos were looking us straight in the eye from the middle of our garden (not to mention at sunset the next evening practically joining us for a drink on the lawn, their liquid eyes inscrutable, their haunches bunched like car springs).

And then there's Abou Ben Adhem—a man of Middle Eastern appearance, number one with the Lord, loving all mankind and having a dream of peace! Come off it.

Next they'll be telling us the planet's getting hotter.

A place where story and song make race and recrimination obsolete

CORRESPONDENCE

Published *13-Nov-2006*

As a skinny guy only 178cm tall I was never much of a horse physically, but I did have enough pop to beat up my kid brothers, which I did until they got powerful and I went off to college juuuuust in time. In college, I kept thinking that power had to do with bodies, and that girls were impressed with muscles, and that burliness led to success, and it took forever for me to realise that this was a lie, and that women were really after hearts they could trust.

Plus I started noticing that often the men and women who were most influential, most startling, most amazing—most powerful, really—were, by pretty much every definition of powerful, powerless.

They were skinny penniless guys like Christ and Gandhi, or cheerful brilliant cripples like Franklin Roosevelt and Flannery O'Connor, or stubborn dignified folks like Rosa Parks or Michael Long, or unknown geeky guys with courage coming out of their ears—like the guy who was carrying his grocery bags home one June day in Beijing in 1989, and suddenly had just about enough of army tanks rolling by to smash kids in Tiananmen Square, and he jumped into the street and made 18 tanks stop and he changed the world, didn't he? And isn't it cool, almost 20 years later, that no-one knows who he is?

And aren't there a million acts of incredible power and poetry like that every day?

Like the firefighters who ran up inside the World Trade Centre towers instead of running away, which by all sense, reason and logic they should have. And the teenage boys who patrol terrified but intent through the murk and blood of Baghdad for us. And the million business owners who scratch and kick and wrestle to stay in business because they know that if their companies fail, whole families and clans and towns will suffer.

I think about power all the time as a dad, too. In the old days, when my children were tiny and squirming and peeing on the floor like puppies, I was king, I made the rules, I fed and wiped and bathed. I thundered, I was the last word. (Well, the second-to-last word; as my daughter noted wryly when quite small, "Mom is the boss and you are the second boss." •)

But now that hormone hurricanes have swept through the house and my kids are suddenly supercilious teenagers, I have only the power to persuade, to suggest, to remonstrate, to hint, to remind. It took me a while to shift gears from boss to bemused. Power is a tool, but tools at rest are only sculptures, lovely and useless.

Listen, I know what you are thinking: what does all this have to do with me and my job and my life? And I reply: I am only reminding you of what you already know in your heart. You spent years finding and focusing your skills and talents and energies, and now you have a career, you're supporting a family, you employ a lot of people maybe, you give away gobs

of cash for good causes, but sometimes deep down at night you wonder if there's some way to do more to really change things, you know?

To really hammer hunger and poverty, and the shiver of fear that haunts families without insurance or next month's rent or much more in the pantry than pasta, to stitch a world where your kids won't be afraid of murderers in Afghani caves or fouled water or joblessness. I wonder too, late at night, and I wrack my brains, and I conclude that for me it's stories, my job is to collect and tell stories and try to connect people along electric holy lines.

I don't know much, but I know this: my country, for all its muddle and burly selfishness, is still an absolutely extraordinary national idea that could change the world, and your country, for all its wrangle and bumble, might be a new kind of national idea altogether, a verb of a country, an idea that's never been tried, a place where story and song make race and recrimination obsolete.

The two places where the Celtic diaspora and native energies might fuse into a New New World—what if together we were the arrow of a new kind of living? What if America and Australia led the way past mere power to a planetary peace that surpasseth understanding?

No politician or poet from the Old World will lead us there. It will be someone from the new lands—someone like you, who creates ideas, who articulates and defends and shares them in the public market, who mills ideas into food and education and healing for thousands of people, who understands that power only matters, finally, when it is a verb. It will be someone like you, who finally has had just about enough of greed and lies crushing possibility, and jumps into history, and changes everything forever.

The battle of ideas within Islam

INTERNATIONAL

Published *13-Nov-2006*

Ten years after Samuel Huntington charged Muslim societies as having "bloody borders", some may now see his comments as prescient. Indiscriminate slaughter on the streets of London, Madrid and Baghdad, violent protests against the drawings of the Prophet earlier this year, and the backlash surrounding Pope Benedict's recent comments have led some people to ask whether Islam is a religion of hate.

Are Muslims more prone to violence? Indeed, are Muslims too sensitive about their religion? There certainly are those within the "Western world", particularly in the United States, who feel a stifled political environment and economic stagnation contribute to the broadening of the call to jihad, particularly in the Middle East. Conversely, the "War on Terror" is seen by many as equating to a "War against Islam".

The 9/11 attacks invigorated the debate about what role, if any, Islam should play in Muslim nations; secondly, whether Islamic rule is the antithesis of democracy; and thirdly, what is the role of the West's own Muslim minorities. The growing chorus demanding "western" Muslims publicly and forcibly denounce the perpetrators of violence is bordering on hysteria.

What is more vital, however, and often ignored is that there is also a battle of ideas within Islam at present, rarely heard by the West. This revolves around what it means to be Muslim in the 21st century, and the conduct of East-West relations. It is a debate that has been going on since the 19th century. Framing the debate are ideas about colonialism, the decline of the Islamic world, and the need for modernity.

It is also a debate seeking to re-define Islam and its relevance to the modern world. The question "Whose Islam?" is a very difficult one to demarcate—do we mean "official" Islam, as sanctioned and enforced by Saudi Arabia or Egypt, where the government controls al-Azhar? Or are we talking about it as one of personal faith?

One of the challenges facing thinkers and intellectuals alike is the lack of any central authority in Islam. There is no Pope-like figure. Similarly, almost anyone can issue a religious edict (fatwa) without having undertaken any theological training. The raft of fatwas issued by bin Laden calling upon Muslims to fight "the crusaders", despite his own lack of theological training is a pertinent example.

In response to this phenomenon, the Muslim world's top scholars have agreed that fatwas should only be issued by clerics with religious authority. Dubbed the "Amman Message", the group featuring ten top Muslim clergymen—including Egypt's Grand Imam Sheik al-Azhar Mohammed Sayyed Tantawi and Iraq's Grand Ayat Allah Ali al-Sistani—ruled that fatwas must only be in the hands of qualified clerics recognised by Islam's eight schools of thought.

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In an effort to promote a more tolerant Islam, the Moroccan government appointed 50 female preachers to curb the influence of radicals, especially in poorer communities, many of whom benefit from the activities of (radical and moderate) Islamic charities.

This follows the decision by Turkey's Religious Affairs Directorate, which controls the Islamic institutions in the country, to appoint 450 women as preachers to combat extremism. The Directorate caused a stir in June when it announced its plans to "filter" the *hadith*(sayings of the prophet) for misogynist statements and delete them from the collection, arguing that many are not relevant in the contemporary world, and ignore the socio-political environment at the time.

Demands for *ijtihad*, or re-interpretation, by the outspoken leader of Sudan's Popular Congress Party, Hassan Turabi, made headlines in April this year. The politician and thinker took a swipe at many accepted practices in Islam, claiming they have been distorted, and were cultural, not religious, norms. Turabi said that women can lead prayer and it is not the sole domain of men, giving the example of one of the Prophet's wives, and claimed wearing of the hijab is in fact alien to Islam.

There are many other reformists throughout the Muslim World trying to effect change. While they do not represent a single or coherent bloc with a unified set of ideas, scholars such as Abdul Karim Soroush in Iran, Moroccan feminist Fatima Mernissi, Hassan Hanafi, and Nasr Abu Zayd do represent a more progressive face.

Despite these voices, many remain unheard. The problem of integrating the burgeoning Muslim population in Europe is only now starting to be addressed. The inertia that has held back the discussion until now has reinforced the sense of other, and heightened fear that Islam is the target in the "War on Terror", thus negating any moderate message.

The challenge of reformists is very complicated in many Muslim countries. Islam is used as a political ideology to provide elites with political legitimacy in Egypt, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. The ultra-conservatives and traditionalists maintain a close alliance with autocratic governments.

Nominated by the government to present the official Islam, they are faithful servants to those in power. In return, these *ulama*(scholars of Islamic law and jurisprudence) are given the role of censors of society, the guarantors of tradition, and are thus able to block any and all social change.

For some, the debate isn't so much about reforming Islam as it is Islamism and the challenge of modernity. What needs to occur is a movement beyond an intellectual experiment in modernising to a grassroots, popular movement. The obvious need for moderates to reclaim the central tenets of Islam is often cited by some Muslims as one of the few positive results of the events in the last few years. There is still a long way to go, but progress is being made.

Cambodia's slow recovery from Khmer Rouge

INTERNATIONAL

Published *13-Nov-2006*

"I want to make my country safe for my people," says Cambodian Aki Ra. It's a nice sentiment but when the story behind those words is known, it takes on a whole new meaning.

Cambodia is littered with landmines. It is estimated that between six million and 11 million mines are still active and in the ground. Furthermore, countless unexploded ordnance (UXO) including bombs, mortars, grenades and bullets remains. Much of it was originally connected to trip wires and rigged as booby traps.

It is estimated that 800 people are killed or wounded as a result of this ordnance in Cambodia every year. Put another way, two or three people will step on a landmine or walk through a trip wire, every single day.

A living example of the continual plight affecting Cambodia is Sopphart, a man I met on my recent trip to Cambodia. Sopphart comes from Poipet, in Cambodia's north. One day, while collecting firewood with his older brothers, Sopphart stepped on a mine that blew off his foot.

Hearing the explosion, his brothers, who were a short distance away, ran towards him to help. As they did, one of them ran through a tripwire connected to a fragmentation grenade. That grenade killed his brothers instantly and a fragment from the grenade blinded Sopphart in one eye. Within seconds, Sopphart had lost his foot, his eye and his two brothers.

Like all Cambodians alive at the time, Aki Ra became part of Pol Pot's extreme communist experiment that tried to turn Cambodia into a worker's paradise. When the Khmer Rouge seized power on 17 April 1975, the cities and towns were evacuated and all residents, including Aki Ra and his family, were moved into labour camps.

By the time he was five years old, the Khmer Rouge had killed both of Aki Ra's parents. Orphaned, he was conscripted into the Khmer Rouge. By age ten, he was a soldier. The Khmer Rouge greatly exploited the innocence of children who, in their eyes, were unspoiled by old

ways and western ideas. “They had my innocence in their hands and were able to warp it any way they chose,”• Aki Ra said. “I came to accept their ways more and more.”•

The Vietnamese entered Cambodia in 1979 and rapidly overthrew the Khmer Rouge. Strong resistance was encountered in some areas, however, and it wasn’t until 1983 that Aki Ra was captured. Like the Khmer Rouge, the Vietnamese were desperate for soldiers and Aki Ra was subsequently conscripted by the Vietnamese to fight the remaining Khmer Rouge factions.

In 1989, the Vietnamese withdrew from Cambodia, leaving the “cleanup operation” to the restored Cambodian Army. Aki Ra entered his third fighting force. Fortunately, Aki Ra was linked to United Nations Peacekeepers who had come in to begin de-mining operations. “I worked with the UN for three years until they left Cambodia. I decided that the best step for me was to carry on working to clear the mines. However, I did not have the use of the specialist equipment and had to make do with more simple tools which I have mastered,”• Aki Ra said.

Now in his mid thirties, Aki Ra has dedicated his life to the removal of mines and UXO throughout Cambodia. Having collected bits and pieces over the years and with easy access to all manner of weaponry and war relics, Aki Ra turned his growing collection into a museum hoping to educate tourists and locals alike about the horrors of landmines and UXO.

As a side issue, Aki Ra and his wife Hourt act as guardians to many landmine victims, who stay with them at their home and museum in Siem Reap. Incidentally, one of those children is Sopphart. A fund was established in early 2006 to ensure the children in Aki Ra and Hourt’s care will have a chance at a university education if they choose. The fund has been so successful that a second phase has begun to benefit other landmine victims.

Aki Ra’s work is becoming well known throughout Cambodia. When landmines or UXO are found, villagers send word to him and Aki Ra simply travels to the village, goes to where the mine was detonated and finds and disarms all the others. Having spent so much of his early life laying landmines, and with his UN experience, Aki Ra knows instinctively the patterns they were laid in, and thus where to look. On a good day, Aki Ra will find 100 to 200 mines.

The sheer volume of landmines in Cambodia, and the devastation they have brought Cambodia, is mind-boggling. Aki Ra’s dedication to the removal of every mine and unexploded ordnance is in a realm beyond admirable. Through sheer determination he hopes to make his country safe for its people. While he cannot possibly hope to do it alone, it is people such as Aki Ra who give cause to hope that one day Cambodia will be able to put the reign of Khmer Rouge behind it, and look to a brighter future.

Post Script: In early 2005 Aki Ra accidentally inhaled dynamite, bringing him close to death and leaving him with severe health problems. It has done little to slow him down but rather strengthened his resolve to make his country safe. More can be found out about Aki Ra at his website: www.akiramineaction.com .

Close cloning vote reflects complex and confronting issue

AUSTRALIA

Published *13-Nov-2006*

Last Tuesday night, the Senate passed Kay Patterson's private member's bill to legalise human embryo cloning. It was carried by the barest of margins, two votes. As a conscience vote it exposed senators to a level of public scrutiny seldom paralleled in normal debates. Many felt exposed and vulnerable. Most registered the weight of the decisions before them. It stretched their comfort zones. Speeches were impassioned, and oscillated between those promoting cloning in the search for disease therapies, and those anxious to safeguard human life from deliberate destruction. Ultimately it came down to numbers, just enough for some, frustratingly short for others.

The next day Senator Andrew Bartlett mused publicly whether his vote was too hasty, even cast in the wrong direction. Such was the pressure.

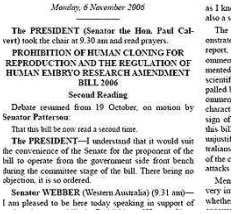
The debate was too short and intense. It lasted only two days. A senate committee had held separate hearings, but even these were hurriedly convened and tightly managed. The upshot was a divided report coming on the back of a commissioned technical study, which raised as many questions as it answered.

The fair-minded would quickly concede that these issues are complex and confronting. They are far from settled in the scientific and ethical academy, let alone the community generally. So there's little chance that overworked and hard-pressed parliamentarians can easily rise above the clutter of their daily lives, to ponder the application of fundamental principles in moments of pause and reflection!

However, the debate reflected what previous inquiries had revealed. Maintaining rational argument and logical deduction is difficult in the face of moving human anecdote.

Nowhere is this more acute, than when dealing with the crusade to alleviate suffering and chronic disabilities. Yet experimenting with human life is fraught. The prospect of miracle cures stirs the imagination and excites curiosity. It conjures what could be possible, but challenges long-held fundamental values which underscore our sense of community, even human rights. As much as the challenge is to courageously march into the unknown, so too is the conviction that correct behaviour often involves restraint.

Thus the dilemma faced in making a conscience vote. It is not enough to base decisions on emotional responses, intuitive reactions or mindless obedience. It calls for a deeper, more exacting introspection of what is important. Put simply, it asks an individual to discern which values should prevail in the inevitable contest between desirable outcomes.



Monday, 6 November 2006

The PRESIDENT (Senator the Hon. Paul Calvert) took the chair at 9.30 am and read prayers.

PROHIBITION OF HUMAN CLONING FOR REPRODUCTION AND THE REGULATION OF HUMAN EMBRYO RESEARCH AMENDMENT BILL 2006

Second Reading

Debate resumed from 19 October, on motion by Senator Patterson:

That this bill be now read a second time.

The PRESIDENT—I understand that it would suit the convenience of the Senate for the proponent of the bill to operate from the government side front bench during the committee stage of the bill. There being no objection, it is so ordered.

Senator WEBBER (Western Australia) (9.31 am)—I am pleased to be here today speaking in support of

What was placed before the senate did a disservice to the advancement of both the protection of human life, and the search for disease therapies. Senators were asked to choose between the two, rather than be implored to deliver for both. Despite well-founded concerns from medical research scientists about the effectiveness and productivity of embryo cloning, the senators were presented with a choice which insisted that only through embryo cloning could the hope of disease therapies be properly advanced. A choice that necessitates the destruction of embryos, and as such diminishes the intrinsic value of human life in general.

This decision has taken the senate to a new place. It has effectively enshrined a precedent that human life is expendable. By permitting the cloning of human embryos the senate has given approval to the deliberate destruction of innocent human life. A precedent which cannot be justified in the context of advancing disease therapies, given the almost universal recognition that such therapies may, if ever, eventuate at best no sooner than twenty years from now.

ABC NEWS ONLINE

Stem cell debate to dominate Senate

It is said that at times of intense conflict of conscience, prudence is a virtue. So too is having adequate time to digest all the relevant information. In the rush of this decision, some senators pleaded for more time. Others felt corralled into hasty, uncertain voting. Too few seriously debated the health risks associated with amendments that place extraordinary burdens on women to produce enough eggs to satisfy the research agenda and timelines.

This wasn't the senate at its best. Often it is noted that conscience votes bring out the best of parliamentary debates. It liberates members to speak their minds free of party constraints. This debate had some of that, but it was sadly wanting on time for contemplation.

Maybe this is what Senator Andrew Bartlett means. Surely having second thoughts is not a crime, but doing nothing about them could be.

EUREKA STREET .com.au
Discerning humanity.

Volume 16 Issue: 17
14 November 2006

Indonesian democracy is maturing

AUSTRALIA

Published *13-Nov-2006*

Two hundred and forty thousand dollars will build a school for 150 primary school kids in the tsunami-devastated city of Banda Aceh, Indonesia. When I visited in September, parents and teachers glowed with pride at their simple, clean new school, built with Australian aid money. Girls and boys have separate toilets for the first time.

After listening to the principal, who has gathered together the 40 survivors of his previous school, some of whom lost all their families in the tsunami, it's hard not to squirm at the talking heads of tabloid television who swagger into Indonesia looking for "cannibals"• to prove that the Indonesians are barbarians.

Indonesia has changed a lot over the past decade. Once a corrupt military dictatorship, it is now on the way to becoming a healthy democracy. Many Australians don't seem to have absorbed this fact, as shown by pathetic stereotypes about Indonesian judges being monkeys, (a claim made by a Sydney shock-jock when "our Schappelle"• was first jailed) or agit-prop by professional anti-Indonesian academics who tilt at straw men such as the "born again Jakarta lobby"•.

Australian opinion has barely registered the important survey by the Jakarta-based Indonesia Survey Institute, which showed that only 11 per cent of Indonesians thought that the country should adopt an "Islamic form of government"•. The great majority supported Indonesia's moderate official ideology, Pancasila.

Institute Director Denny J.A. told the *Jakarta Post*: "This corroborates the old belief that Muslims here are mostly moderate."• Another more recent poll showed that only 9 per cent of Indonesians would vote for an Islamist party, a big drop from a few years ago. Over 80 per cent of Indonesians said they supported democracy.

It can't be denied, however, that there are still difficulties in the Australia-Indonesia relationship. There are forces on both sides trying to whip up hostility for their own political reasons.

In Indonesia, the minority of radical Islamists see Australia as a source of western and liberal ideas, which undermine their own efforts to subvert and supplant Indonesian Islam,

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which is traditionally tolerant and pluralistic, with imported Salafist or Wahhabist ideologies.


The Jakarta Post
Friday, August 25, 2006

Muslim moderates 'still the majority'

Ary Hermawan, The Jakarta Post, Jakarta

The majority of Indonesian Muslims still b
suitable for the country than an Islamic
found.

But the Indonesian Survey Circle (LSI) als
respondents that fundamentalist groups are
an Islamic state through the implementatic

A total of 69.6 percent of the 700 respond

Unfortunately, these negative trends in Indonesia, unrepresentative though they are, do influence opinion in Australia. The Lowy poll suggested that many Australians continue to be hostile to Indonesia. There are several obvious reasons for this. The behaviour of the Indonesian Army in East Timor is still remembered, even though those events took place under the old regime.

Improving Indonesia-Australia relations requires patience and persistence on both sides. While we cannot compromise on basic principles such as support for East Timor's independence or opposition to the death penalty, we should be aware of Indonesian sensitivities, just as Indonesians need to be aware of ours.

The two most difficult current issues are Papua and the death penalty. It is true that violations of human rights are still taking place in Papua, but I do not believe that the solution to this problem lies in support for Papuan separatism. Indonesia is now a country in which the rule of law and respect for human rights are being established, albeit imperfectly. If Australia is to take a position on Papua, it should be one of support for a special autonomous status for Papua within Indonesia, similar to the status recently agreed on for Aceh.

The death penalty is also a difficult issue in Australia-Indonesia relations. It is no good Australians accepting, or even applauding, the execution of convicted terrorists such as the Bali bomber Amrozi, and then loudly protesting when it is applied to convicted Australian drug-runners such as the Bali Nine. Indonesians can respect a consistent opposition to the death penalty in all cases, but they won't respect double standards. If we want to argue for the Bali Nine to be spared then we can hardly applaud the execution of the Bali bombers.

Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's reforming presidency remains popular and its policy progress creditable. But, as the well-informed analyst Jusuf Wanandi argues, the peaceful resolution in Aceh and the reduction in the fuel subsidy have to be balanced against a "rainbow cabinet"• that accommodates too many incompetent ministers, because of the president's desire to include so many parties in his government.

Jakarta faces real problems. Forty million Indonesians live below the poverty line ($US1 a day), and around 12 million are unemployed. President Yudhoyono's major concern is the economy. Current economic growth, at 5.2 per cent, is less than is necessary to absorb new entrants into the workforce.

As Jusuf Wanandi says, the onus is on President Yudhoyono to provide the leadership to help the country overcome these and other problems. With the next presidential election due in 2009, he still has time to do so.

A close political and now revived military relationship with Indonesia is essential for Australia's security. Maintaining a close relationship between a large, poor, Muslim, developing country and a small, rich, western country will never be easy, but now that Indonesia is a democracy, under a reforming president who is friendly to Australia and eager to improve the relationship, the task is much easier. But it will always require tact and restraint on both sides.

New media's role in US mid-term sensation

MEDIA

The Net

Published *13-Nov-2006*

New media extended the life of sensational old-fashioned negative television advertising, used extensively in this month's mid-term congressional elections in the United States.

Blogs, videos and campaign websites added diversity—some successful, some mediocre at best—to the continued use of a range of old media by seasoned campaigners in electoral districts across the nation.

Street verges from California to Maine were littered with kerbside advertising for aspirants to the US Senate and Congress, State Governships, and a range of State positions from Lieutenant Governor and Attorney-General, through to district School Boards and Judicial roles.

Many of these roadside signs featured website addresses for candidates that were focused on the candidate's name. Rarely does the name of the party of the candidate feature on the signs, and rarely does the party feature prominently in the website.

In Arizona, it was simply www.janet2006.com for the incumbent governor Janet Napolitano, while her Republican challenger and Christian candidate Len Munsil used the simple www.lenmunsil.com . Of course, it is not in the interests of the extremely popular Democratic governor to highlight her party too greatly when she is the most popular politician in a overwhelmingly red state. Temperamentally conservative, she has carved out a "centrist"• position which is popular in a state that many commentators believe should become more moderate, with the influx of retirees from the north and east. However, it takes some effort to find the word "Democrat" on her website.

Roadside billboards were also commandeered by candidates, including the incumbent president of the Navajo nation, Joe Shirley Jr and his opponent Lynda Lovejoy, a New Mexico commissioner on the state's Public Regulation Commission. Lovejoy campaigned to become the first female leader of a native American tribe. The Navajo nation is the largest native American reservation in the United States, and extends into New Mexico, Arizona and Utah.

Both sides' election websites had a softer feel and greater gravitas, while lacking the immediacy and responsiveness of many modern campaigns. Both Shirley and Lovejoy had fairly static, policy-based websites, www.reelectjoeshirleyjr.com and www.lovejoyphelps2006.com , providing fact sheets and "traditional" press statements. While the Navajo are a matriarchal society, for this important election traditional Navajo stuck to the belief that only men should serve as president; women are seen as the caretakers of the home and children, men are the providers and leaders.

Negative television campaigns continued to be a feature of the US elections. In many cases, these local commercials were followed up online by a variety of bloggers and websites with copies of many incendiary advertisements finding their way onto the ubiquitous YouTube.

After a campaign of negative television advertising, where the New Mexican Democratic Attorney General Patricia Madrid targeted incumbent Republican Congresswoman Heather Wilson's support for George W. Bush and the war in Iraq, and the Wilson team linked the Attorney-General to the release of attempted rapist Matthew Ward , the internet was still being used on election day to publicise attempts by the Republicans to mislead non-Republican voters as to the location of polling booths.

A plethora of blogs covered this close contest including the detailed www.newmexicomatters.com and the www.onlyinnewmexico.blogspot.com , with audio and video supplied of the Madrid-Wilson debates.

YouTube also featured many of the debates and negative advertising campaigns of the elections. Many of the candidates have their own gateway on YouTube, including Ms Madrid, who is featured here .

From the accusation that Heather Wilson voted against paying US soldiers in Iraq a bonus of $1500, while voting six times for increased salaries for members of Congress (video available here), to re-watching the Wilson team's negative advertising regarding Madrid's previous drug use, viewers are constantly reminded of the questionable ethics demonstrated by both sides.

Other politicans also took to the social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook with gusto, hoping to interest usually disinterested youth in the elections. Republican state senator Chuck Poochigian, who ran for Californian Attorney General, joined MySpace in early August and within two months he reported that the number of online donations to his campaign jumped by more than 50 per cent. Mr Poochigian's opponent, the once youthful Jerry Brown, has also joined MySpace but his site lacks much detail.

Many older political hands have jumped onto the online bandwagon without

understanding what is really required to successfully use the new medium. As a result, the campaign online was a mixed bag of dull and worthy websites, gossip, news and chat-driven blogs.

The forum offered by new media has provided a major extension to old media campaigning. New and often national audiences have been able to witness local negative television campaigns through exposure on candidate websites, blogs and social networking sites such as YouTube and MySpace. Whether or not this is a good thing is another matter entirely. Certainly the availability of material is no bad thing, it is simply the calibre of that material which is a cause for concern.

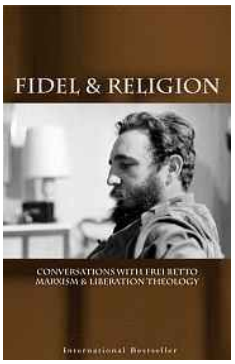
Fidel's social justice legacy

BOOK REVIEW

Non-Fiction

Published *13-Nov-2006*

Frei Betto, *Fidel and Religion: Conversations with Frei Betto on Marxism & Liberation Theology*, Ocean Press, Melbourne, 2006. RRP $30, 292pp. Paperback, ISBN 1-920888-45-4, website .



On 15 August, two days after Fidel Castro turned 80, and amid rumours that he was dying, the former Franciscan priest Leonardo Boff made a startling revelation to an Italian journalist about a conversation he and Brazilian priest Frei Betto had once had with the Cuban dictator.

"One day,"• Boff recalled, "Fidel told us: Betto and Leonardo, on the day of my death, I want you both to be here at my side."•

Castro has never confirmed the comment and, if it is true, whether it suggests the possibility of a deathbed conversion for a man who was baptised a Catholic only to be excommunicated when he became a Communist, is anyone's guess.

What is clear, however, is that no assessment of Fidel Castro's legacy will be complete without serious attention to his thoughts on religion and to how and why, over the past 20 years, this last disciple of Marxism has turned Cuba from an international troublemaker into a global champion for social justice.

That, and continuing uncertainties over Castro's health, makes the re-publication of *Fidel and Religion*exceptionally timely. The book, an account of conversations between Castro and Frei Betto about faith, theology and revolutionary commitment, was originally released 20 years ago. It soon sold one million copies in Cuba alone and has since been translated into 23 languages.

Apart from an updated introduction, there is nothing new in this latest edition. But what is old may not be familiar to everyone, and it still makes compelling reading for anyone interested in the historical clash of Christianity and Marxism.

"We are living at a time when politics has entered a near-religious sphere with regard to man and his behaviour,"• Castro told a gathering of Chilean Catholic clergy as far back as

1971. “I also believe that we have come to a time when religion can enter the political sphere with regard to man and his material needs.”•

That has happened—but hardly in the way Castro envisaged. Except for the brief eruption of liberation theology in Latin America in the ‘70s and early ‘80s, religion has not been a major factor for radical social change in any positive sense. Still, a year after liberation theology was denounced by the Vatican as sailing too close to Marxism, Castro reminded Betto of its continuing tug on the consciences of those who take the gospel seriously:

“I could define the Liberation Church, or Liberation Theology, as Christianity’s going back to its roots, its most beautiful, attractive, heroic and glorious history. It’s so important that it forces all of the Latin American left to take notice of it as one of the most important events of our time.”

Fast-forward to June 2002. During a graduation address at West Point Academy, President George W. Bush announced a new doctrine of “pre-emptive” military defence against rogue states and terrorists—as defined by Washington. It was America’s right, Bush declared, and the graduates’ duty, to “be ready to strike at a moment’s notice in any dark corner of the world”• where the US felt threatened.

Present-day Iraq is a consequence of that thinking, as are Guantanamo Bay, secret CIA-run prisons around the world, and America’s flouting of the Geneva Conventions on the treatment of enemy combatants.

Eight months after Bush’s West Point address, Castro warned a summit of the Non-Aligned Movement in Malaysia that “dark corners”• was how the US and its allies now viewed the countries (and consequently peoples) of the Third World:

“There is nothing like full independence, fair treatment on an equal footing or national security for any of us; none is a permanent member of the UN Security Council with a veto right; none has any possibility of being involved in the decisions of the international financial institutions; none can keep its best talents; none can protect itself from capital flight or the destruction of nature and the environment caused by the squandering, selfish and insatiable consumerism of the economically developed countries.”•

When was the last time anyone heard a leader of the Christian West be quite so blunt?

Under Castro, Cuba has backed up this call for international justice by sending medical teams to poor countries (including, most recently, to East Timor and parts of the Pacific), helping to tackle the AIDS pandemic in Africa by making its pharmaceuticals available to sufferers cheaply, and opening its universities to under-privileged students from around the world to study medicine (more than 3,000 now study in Cuba)—even extending the invitation

to low-income Americans.

There is a pragmatic angle to all this, of course, just as there is an unsavoury side to Castro's long dictatorship that neither Boff nor Betto seem eager to confront.

Still, *Fidel and Religion* offers an important insight into the thinking and behaviour of one of the towering political figures of the last 50 years. More importantly, in an era when the message of Jesus appears to have been appropriated exclusively by the political Right, it offers a tantalising glimpse of what the gospels may mean by building the Kingdom of God in the here and now.

EUREKA STREET .com.au
Discerning humanity.
Volume 16 Issue: 17
14 November 2006

Humiliation at the hands of the US military

FILM REVIEW

Published *13-Nov-2006*

The Road To Guantanamo, 95 minutes, Rating: MA. Directors: Michael Winterbottom, Mat Whitecross, Starring: Riz Ahmed, Farhad Harun and Arfan Usman. Website .

UK director Michael Winterbottom has certainly earned his reputation as one of the more confronting filmmakers of his generation. Whether his subject is the plight of refugees smuggled into the UK (*In This World*), the decadent rock scene of late-1970s/1980s Manchester (*24 Hour Party People*) or the intimate world of human sexuality (*9 Songs*), he hits hard and pulls no punches.

In *The Road to Guantanamo*, Winterbottom, with co-director Mat Whitecross, turns a didactic eye on the ordeal of the "Tipton Trio"—three British Muslim men whose two-and-a-half-year detainment under the ultimately disproved suspicion of terrorist activity, stands as one of the most dramatic examples of post-9/11 injustice.

The men (then aged in their late teens to early 20s) were holidaying in Pakistan when the US-led War on Terror broke out, after which they headed to Afghanistan to volunteer humanitarian aid. Captured in Konduz by the Northern Alliance, they were imprisoned in Sheberghan before being relocated to the US' notorious detainment camps in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Guantanamo intersperses talking-head interviews with extensive dramatic recreations of the men's experiences. Shot on location and using a hand-held, fly-on-the-wall approach to filming that integrates seamlessly with stock news footage, the film places viewers squarely in the Trio's shoes.

We experience their anxiety as they arrive in Afghanistan and witness bombs exploding in the near distance. We share their helplessness as they are captured for no other reason than being in the wrong place (and of the "wrong" religion) at the wrong time. We feel their distress and humiliation suffered at the hands of the US military, and their infuriation as they are repeatedly and periodically plied with baseless allegations of terrorist involvement.

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The three "unknowns" who portray the trio during the recreations (Ahmed, Harun and Usman) do so in an understated and naturalistic way that fends off any sense of melodrama. Their camaraderie as a group and, later, the emotional "realness"• of each one's individual ordeal feel so authentic that it's easy to imagine the film as pure documentary, rather than docu-drama.

There are those, no doubt, who would write the Trio's ordeal off as necessary collateral damage during a difficult and complicated military operation. Such people are unlikely to be swayed by Winterbottom's one-sided focus.

But for those of us who recognise the injustice inherent in a system that could justify the imprisonment of innocent people based only on the colour of their skin, *The Road To Guantanamo* stands as a stark reminder that it's not only radical Islamic fundamentalists who "terrorise" their perceived enemy.

Three poems by Anne Elvey

POETRY

Published *13-Nov-2006*

Torquay cliffs
Ochre opens into dark—
seaweed lairs—where
ocean sheds its leather
clear to the cool inside,
and the close-ceilinged air pricks my skin.
Loose hair snags on shell shards, random
amid tight
grains, as waves' insistence builds and takes—
hollows; walls—
and selves stone here without eye and tongue.
Earth tells itself in this dense unwhispering chill,
sea's breath fingering my ears.
My eyes taste salt.
In a thousand, thousand years of cliff's becoming, I visit
the touch of a child at my side.
The water between our toes appears clear.
Yes! (Yet the cinder scent of heaven).
And skin shivers
at the solemn courtesy of things.
Coming into town from Holy Thursday to Ash Wednesday

At the dark turn of the hill, the track of family prayer

draws me toward home. Beyond

the window's silhouette of self,

a vast emptiness—tomorrow

pocked with rain—will echo sky. Yet

now, clear of this bend, with faintest shiver of silk

the soft chasuble of night is laid
for morning's mass. I remember:

in the child's church the stone communion rails are white

marbled with grey: all quarried, cut and polished, and set

to mark faith's limit, as golden gates

seal the sanctuary from a toddler's desire to play.

But outside, in evening's shadow a cow stirs

and the peal of consecration sounds. Earth's

tabernacles open to the world. And breath

of vigil late on Maundy night is quick

with autumn chill. Once more

we set aside the vestments of our hopes

and travel light, while labourers print

the city's brow with ash: Remember

you are dust. Peace,

like the scent of rain approaching,

is the measure of our procession,

a welling from the land.

Eucharist

Under the pew two rows ahead

lies a beetle,

with its motorcycle gleam of carapace,

wings folded underneath

and six stiff legs extended.

Body glows against the dry wood of the floor.

A hymn is sung; the water's crossed

and slaves set free.

I wait to see if you will turn and live.

But someone shifts and feet brush near

your corpse. The plate

goes by. The gifts

are brought and raised.

We stand by rote, then bend to kneel.

Our bodies sign

a stilling chance

of change, and benediction echoes

in the blood.

No breath

is yours. Does God

breathe here?

As words

make flesh of bread,

and matter turns

to dust, as hands

stretch out to bless,

I look for the pin that fastened this scarab

upon a pharaoh's breast.

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