

**Isolation and Creativity:
Ian Fairweather's 1952 Raft Journey**

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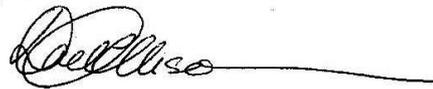
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Signature of Student

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Abstract

Scottish-born Ian Fairweather (1891-1974) is acclaimed as one of Australia's greatest modernist artists. A recluse and wanderer, he substantially refused to engage with society and the art world. At the age of sixty he made a potentially suicidal sixteen day crossing of the Timor Sea on a ramshackle raft. On the basis of this journey, and his choice in old age to eschew comfort and live like a hermit, public perceptions have tended to polarise—he is considered either genius or madman. The legend of Fairweather's life can eclipse the importance of his art.

The questions addressed in this thesis are: what motivated the artist to go to such lengths of disassociation, and how important was this to his creativity? To determine the factors underpinning Fairweather's philosophy and impulse to self-isolate, his early life and itinerant years in Australia and Asia, his raft journey, and his preference for islands are examined. The problem is the artist left few clues. The body of his known work amounts to some 550 paintings and drawings, one small sculpture, one published book and a few artefacts including letters and an unpublished manuscript. These have already been extensively researched.

In aiming to present a new perspective on Fairweather and offer deeper insights into his life choices, this thesis draws the conclusion that despite his itinerant lifestyle Ian Fairweather was a strongly self-directed individual who opted for a life of minimalism based on non-materialist principles. His deeply spiritual work and his facility with Chinese language, culture and calligraphy reveal a man of great complexity who developed an 'island mentality' in order to fully realise his art.

Research is based on available literature, news media, the internet and Fairweather's art. Interviews were conducted with key Fairweather researchers Murray Bail and Tony Twigg. Field research was undertaken in Brisbane, Bribie Island and Darwin. The archives of H. S. Ede were accessed at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge University, UK. The works of creativity theorists were examined to determine the relevance of psychosis to

creativity, Fairweather's working methods were considered against Galenson's theory of art, and comparisons were drawn with fellow isolationists, artist Paul Gauguin and the fictional Robinson Crusoe.

The creative work developed in parallel with this thesis is the manuscript *Each step into the light*: poems exploring Ian Fairweather's life, his raft journey, and his compelling works of art.



Isolation and Creativity

Ian Fairweather's 1952 Raft Journey

He that keeps a worldly measure missing what is strange and new, in seeking peace for understanding, misses the way.

Prologue to *The Drunken Buddha*, translated by Ian Fairweather

Prologue: A man on a raft

Fairweather is a good name for an artist who wants to put to sea.

Michael Stevenson

A pinprick in a vast sea, the shadow side of glitter. A wind-spiced arrowhead, visible to a migrating bird but not to the pilots of searching planes. A raft of flotsam and weighty mangrove held together by the integrity of knots; on it a lone sailor, old man artist, lying face down to shield his eyes from the excoriating glare of sun on air and water—asleep perhaps, dreaming perhaps, but his bloated fingers never loosen on the ropes that bind the heaving craft, holding intact its zone of waterlogged life. The ragged sail bellies west by northwest, filled with the trade winds this chance-sailor knows will propel him. Currents pull him too. Currents the Macassans relied on for generations to return their elegant, trepan-laden *praus* home from Australia's northern fringe to Sulawesi. But there is no land in sight. Nothing since the last smear of Bathurst Island drifted over the horizon. No landfall expected until Portuguese Timor, a shape that will appear, by this sailor's reckoning, on the ninth or tenth day. Then he will rest. But land withholds its promise. The old man's carefully calculated rations diminish. He and his raft are the one solid shape in blue emptiness, a chance island for terns and a cormorant which make the raft a resting place, and for the sharks that circle its silver floats.

An island is an apt metaphor for one who has made an island of aloneness, who has sought the inviolate spaces of islands, creating himself in their image. When the clouds finally firm to a whisper of sanctuary, it is an unknown landfall. The painter's sixteen day adventure—his escape—has been a slow, confronting handshake with mortality. He hauls out his cached oars and bends to them, knowing that unless he devotes the day to pulling free of the elements that drag his raft inexorably towards the Indian Ocean, he will die.



Introduction

Ian Fairweather (1891-1974): Creativity in Isolation

I came like the water and like the wind I go.

Omar Khayyam¹

Scottish-born Ian Fairweather is considered one of the most significant artists in the canon of Australian modernist art of the latter half of the 20th century. A recluse and wanderer, he elected to live a simple, non-materialist life and substantially refused to engage the art world, yet his deeply personal and spiritual paintings, and his facility with the language and calligraphy of China, reveal a man of considerable self-control and extraordinary acuity.

How did self-isolation contribute to the creative life of Ian Fairweather? A decade of separation from his family in early childhood engendered the philosophy of minimalism and self-sufficiency that developed during his years of wandering in Asia and Australia. During this time he was particularly drawn to the art of China, and to the ascetics of Buddhism. Simplicity and independence became the basic tenets of his life. This was partly pragmatic—he had to survive for very long periods on minimal and erratic income—and it reflected his emotional and spiritual impulse to find the bounded space, both mental and physical, he needed to focus on his art. It was this impulse that culminated in his epic raft journey from Darwin to Timor in 1952, the powerful trope for self-isolation has come to define Fairweather's life and, to some extent, his art.

Fairweather's formal training was acquired at London's Slade School of Art in the early 1920s. There he was taught by the determinedly traditional Henry Tonks to master contour by capturing the direction of bones, and building volume with 'egg-shapes' and

¹ McGrath, Sandra, 'Portrait of an artist', *The Australian*, March 17, 1979. McGrath states Fairweather quoted this line of Khayyam's

shading (Bail, 2009: 15). This technique strongly informed Fairweather's earlier figurative work and remained an influence through much of his painting life. But he soon moved beyond Tonks. His first appearance on the Australian art scene in 1934 galvanised the coterie of young *avant garde* Melbourne artists, his work confirming everything they had been discussing about modernism (*ibid.*: 29). Fairweather established some friendships in Melbourne particularly with Jock (William) Frater and Lina Bryans, later returning to work alongside them, but even during these periods of interaction he remained separate, a loner. After the raft trip, the sixty-one year old Fairweather settled on Bribie Island, off the coast of Queensland. It remained his home until his death in 1974. There his ongoing refusal to engage with mainstream society generated a public perception that mostly focused on the mystique: the inspired but crazy adventurer who took off from Darwin on a ramshackle raft and survived sixteen waterlogged days; the reclusive derelict who squatted in a grass hut on an island for twenty years and got around in a pair of pyjama pants held up with frayed rope; the mad old artist who turned his back on money while his paintings sold in the thousands. His minimalist and non-materialistic lifestyle choices entrenched his alienation, communities viewed him askance.

Fairweather's stature in Australia as an icon of modern art has consolidated in the decades since his death. The label 'our greatest artist' began to be applied by reviewers during the 1960s and 70s. Murray Bail, in his definitive monograph *Fairweather*², describes his subject as 'the least parochial of Australian painters, an artist of exceptional force and originality' (*ibid.*: 238). Fairweather is represented in the Australian National Gallery, most state galleries and in numerous regional collections. In 2010 the NSW Art Gallery acquired *The Last Supper* for \$2 million (Boland, 2010). However the artist's importance lies deeper than auction prices soaring into the millions. After the launch of the 1995 retrospective at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, art critic John McDonald wrote that Fairweather 'always enjoyed reverential

² First published as *Ian Fairweather*, Bay Books, Australia, 1984. Revised and republished as *Fairweather*, Murdoch Books, 2009, with a second, further revised edition in June 2009.

status among his peers and successors ... there is no challenge to his title as Australia's ultimate “artists' artist”—a respect induced by his work and by his uncompromising, monastic way of life’ (Sydney Morning Herald, 8 April 1995). McDonald reiterated artist John Olsen’s story of visiting Fairweather on Bribie Island in the early 1960s:

To Olsen, the ramshackle hut “was like a chapel”, and Fairweather had entered a late, great phase, comparable to the last efforts of Cézanne or Rembrandt ... (Olsen) also attempted to explain how influential Fairweather was to those Sydney artists of the 1960s who developed a home-grown version of abstract expressionism. Like Fairweather himself, Olsen usually steered clear of total abstraction, but the abstract rhythms and calligraphy of the older artist's work were irresistible. They were allegedly a far more potent influence than the American and European abstract artists who have been cited as the models for Sydney's avant-garde painting of those years (*ibid.*).

Art critic Robert Hughes, who triumphantly secured the significant painting *Monsoon* from Fairweather’s Macquarie Galleries exhibition in 1962, ‘by queuing all night ... on the steps of the gallery, with a thermos of rum-laced coffee, blankets, and a sleeping bag, in order to get first pick’ (Anderson in *Art and Australia*, Summer 2006: 255), reviewed Fairweather’s 1995 retrospective for *Time* magazine (17 April 1995). In an article titled ‘Peculiar but Grand’, Hughes wrote that Fairweather:

was the best abstract painter—though "abstract" does no justice to the imagistic subtlety of his work—that Australia ever harboured, and one of the very few modern artists to make a convincing bridge between Eastern calligraphic traditions and Western drawing.

Fairweather’s stature in the Australian art world continues to grow. However his name is not as readily recognised as names like Drysdale, Boyd and Nolan—artists whose paintings tend to have more popular appeal because they offer Australians a vision of themselves and their landscape. Fairweather’s early work is figurative, lyrical and generally accessible but his later, more abstract, paintings tend to be private, reflective and sometimes impenetrable. And his work has been readily overshadowed in the public

imagination by two other intriguing elements of Fairweather's story: his self-isolating lifestyle and his infamous raft journey.

Reclusive by inclination, Ian Fairweather turned his back on his family in England in 1928 and spent the next twenty-three years travelling through much of Asia, with long stays in China, Bali and the Philippines, and expanding periods in Australia. The experiences and accumulated memories and images of his travels scaffolded his later painting. The China years, 1929-33 and 1935-36, had a particularly profound effect. During these itinerant years he took paid employment when it was available, but increasingly lived a life of risk and destitution, eking out the precarious income forwarded intermittently by friends who acted as agents and found buyers for his paintings. To focus completely on his work he elected the socially disengaged life of a fringe dweller, pursuing a minimalist lifestyle of non-materialism and making-do.

Fairweather's *leitmotif* of living on slender means became well established in the 1930s. His main link to England was a younger student whom he met at the Slade School, Jim (H. S.) Ede. Ede, an assistant curator at the conservative Tate Gallery from 1921 to 1936 (a frustrating job for a man with an eye for modernism) actively promoted the work of avant-garde artists including Christopher Wood, Ben Nicholson, David Jones, and Ian Fairweather. He became Fairweather's confidant during the itinerant years and, arguably more importantly, his economic lifeline. Ede acted as unpaid agent and banker, selling the few paintings Fairweather sent and sending funds when needed. (This was a pattern Fairweather clung to—even in later years when his paintings were selling well he requested that the Macquarie Galleries in Sydney also managed his money, sending a regular small allowance.) As his life became more difficult Fairweather's letters were peppered with agonisings over where the money had got to in Ede's seemingly endless attempts to reach a bewildering array of exotic destinations in time to coincide with arrivals and departures. In a great kindness to Fairweather who, after his first stay in China, was generally impoverished, Ede appears to never have taken a commission, or kept a painting as payment. He was also instrumental in persuading the Redfern Gallery in London to exhibit Fairweather's work, resulting in the purchase by the Contemporary Art Society of three paintings; *Bathing Scene, Bali* (1933), *Procession in Bali* (1933)

and *Willows in the Park* (1936), presented to the Tate, Leicester and Cheltenham galleries respectively. These remain Fairweather's only works held in public collections in the U.K. He is not publically represented in Scotland, his country of birth nor, apparently, in public collections in China, the country where he lived for long periods and which critically informed not only his art, but his personal and world view. For an artist of his calibre he remains significantly under-acknowledged internationally.

Seven years after his death, an article headlined 'Greatness—in a bark humpy' described Fairweather as an 'obstinate outcast' (*Weekend Australian Magazine*, 25 October 1981). This label sums up the duality of a man who consciously, often stubbornly, chose to live on the fringes of society. After his peripatetic years and the raft journey that nearly cost him his life, Fairweather enjoyed the richest period of his life, both financially and creatively on Bribie Island. Squatting in what initially was an isolated place among Bribie Island pines, he built what most media reports described as a 'grass hut'—an Asian style structure made of recycled materials and palm fronds. The maturing of his work in his last two decades coupled with burgeoning acclaim and commercial success. Yet even with his work being snapped up in sell-out exhibitions, he eschewed the ease financial security could have bought. Instead he chose a lifestyle of minimal environmental impact and contemplative simplicity, somewhat pre-empting the philosophy of environmental and economic sustainability engendered in the hippie movement of the mid 1970s. Fairweather's choice of a minimalist lifestyle fulfilled the popular stereotype of an eccentric artist living in a garret and dedicating his life to his art, although his version of the garret had a particularly antipodean flavour. For the Australian public, the mystique which bloomed during his last twenty-two years developed into a fraught mix of ownership and repudiation.

Artists throughout history have opted for self-isolation and exile to define themselves and their art. Cézanne and Van Gogh distanced themselves from social demands and distraction by relocating to unremarkable country locations, while Paul Gauguin took the more extreme step of self-exile in remote Tahiti. Australian artists including Godfrey Miller, Tony Tuckson and John Passmore also turned their backs on the demands of society and the art world, living fairly reclusive lives. Fairweather eclipsed all in the extent to which he self-isolated. His propensity for adventure and islands made him something of an elective Robinson Crusoe.

The raft journey, which Fairweather was lucky to survive, impacted on the Australian psyche. It was also a key event in Fairweather's life. Bail observes:

The course of Fairweather's art can be divided before and after the raft voyage, which was 1952. He was a different painter after that particular trip. He had been a pleasant post-impressionist absorbed in Oriental subjects; from 1953, he developed into a still more distinctive artist, grander, with a great breadth and depth, leaning towards abstraction (2009: 6).

Yet Bail believes too much has been made of the raft journey (Allison, 2010a). And here lies a conundrum. If success in the art world is measured by three main indicators: the monetary value of the work produced, the artist's impact on other artists and art movements, and popular and critical recognition, then Fairweather was supremely uninterested in all three. His refusal to self promote, his notorious indifference in the fate of the work he produced, his apparent obliviousness to the demands and rewards of the art world (money was required for only basic survival), all created a level of disengagement that makes the impact of his work even more remarkable. Nicholas Shakespeare wrote in *The Australian Literary Review* (7 July 2010) that to Australians 'his story is as familiar as a slouch hat'. But ask around in a general gathering and Fairweather's name is often met with blankness unless coupled with the story of the raft. The raft journey has become emblematic. It features in most discussions of Fairweather's achievement. Would public awareness in Australia of the artist's work and life have developed to its current level without the raft?

Artist's artist, significant modernist, Chinese scholar, adventurer: a painter who left a body of work characterised by intense sensitivity and spirituality and who, according to artist Tony Twigg, 'began something — he started a bridge between Australia and the Asian art form' (Allison, 2010b). What drove Ian Fairweather to pursue the life he chose? His physical, intellectual and creative capacities are generally unquestioned. What has been questioned is the mental state of one who chose a life of risk and extreme self-denial, even when the means to be more comfortable was available. Bail 'cautiously' suggests schizophrenia (2009: 14). If the artist did have a psychosis, how did it affect his creativity? And what other factors contributed to Fairweather's high level of achievement, and his ground-breaking art?

Fairweather's raft journey was symptomatic of an intense desire to escape any constraints on the creative life he single-mindedly sought. While his determination to establish his own path led to a lifestyle that was, physically, increasingly self-denying, almost monastic, on the emotional and spiritual levels he created the boundaries and conditions essential for his understanding of the authentic life of an artist.



Chapter 1

Raftbedraft: Trope for Isolation

Facing the sleepy water, the dreamer adheres to the reveries of the world

Gaston Bachelard³

Fairweather was separated from his family at a young age. The last of nine children to elderly parents, he was consigned at the age of six months to aunts in England. His father, Surgeon General James Fairweather, who had retired in 1886 after an illustrious career with the British Army in the Raj (*The British Medical Journal*, 2 June 1917: 751), decided to return to India with the rest of his family for another decade. Fairweather's reclusive, difficult, and at times self-negating life has been attributed to his childhood isolation from his family, particularly his mother (Modjeska in Bail (ed.), 1994, 45). In the context of the times children being separated from family for long periods and raised by others was not uncommon, although such an elective separation at a time when servants were readily available, seems odd. But the separation appeared to engender the resilience and stoic independence that sustained Fairweather through his life.

Fairweather's family determined he would follow his father's lauded career in the army. Trained as an officer at Aldershot he was captured with his regiment on their second day of action in the First World War (Fairweather to Ede: 15 December 1935). Back in England after four years in German prison camps he shied from family expectations, first trying forestry and then enrolling, to his family's dismay, at London's Slade School of Art. By age thirty-seven his estrangement was complete: 'My family were fed up

³ Cited in Rowland, 2008: 156

with me. They paid me off, as I saw it' (Abbott-Smith 1978: 38)⁴. With £100 in his pocket and a boat ticket, he sailed in 1928 to Canada (*ibid.*) He wrote to Jim Ede:

I regret that my people would not raise a finger to help towards anything to do with art—and I beg you not to communicate to them in any way my address. For though I hope to return home one day I do not wish them to know of me any more (Fairweather to Ede, (August) 1928)⁵.

An apparently inherent simplicity and humility predisposed Fairweather to put up with what life dealt. He accepted hardship as intrinsic to an honest life integrated with the world. He described the heat and his work labouring on the harvest in Saskatchewan as a physical nightmare. His employers were:

very poor and give me hardly any food so that I have to steal from the granary and spend my off moments masticating wheat in order to keep on my legs—and the work goes on eternally from daybreak to dusk ... However I am earning something and seeing a lot (*ibid.*).

Canada consolidated Fairweather's inclination towards minimalism, and emotional and physical self-reliance. His nieces, only a few years younger than he, remembered him as athletic. 'As a boy he'd tramped everywhere and climbed everywhere ... in those days you jolly well used your legs' (Sheila Barlow interviewed by Robert Walker in Alderton, 2006: 55). His youthful feat of walking from Norway to Venice with only his rucksack, an alpenstock and a beer mug (Helga Macnamara interview, *ibid.*: 56) set a precedent for later exploits. The understanding that those with little money walked wherever they wanted to go, underpinned Fairweather's life. During World War II his dogged determination to rejoin the British army was 'a continuous journey from the start, always without money, always in the lowest class by rail, often on foot, through Indochina, Siam, the Malay States to Singapore, then from Calcutta across India, up into

4 See Appendix 4 for a discussion of the reliability of Abbott-Smith as a source.

5 Fairweather's letters were often undated, or partially dated. Estimated dates are included in brackets.

the Himalayas then down to Bombay' before finally being accepted⁶ (Fairweather to Ede, early 1940s). Later, back in Australia, when he left Townsville in 1949 aiming for Darwin and became stranded in Mt Isa without the bus fare to Darwin, he walked the 400 miles to Tennant Creek at night, to avoid the desert heat (Bail, 2009: 91). In a similar vein of self-sufficiency, when he decided he had to leave Darwin for Timor he built a raft.

Fairweather first reached Australia in 1933, returning four times for increasingly long periods. In 1933 he stayed long enough to be aghast at Perth and catch the next ship to Colombo. He returned the following year, spending about eight months in Melbourne. From September 1938 to May 1940 he lived in Queensland, in the Sandgate Cinema and north of Cairns. After India and his World War II effort he came back:

... rather a shock ... have been pretty miserable, till at last I got an old lifeboat and having packed all my stuff aboard set sail. We had quite a hectic little time, until a friendly wind blew us up on this island. It might not have been there and then I tremble to think where we might not have been blown to. So I have stayed. Glad to be on land again ... (Fairweather to Ede: 4 April 1945).

In 1945 Fairweather was back in Melbourne. He lived for two years alongside an enclave of artists, including Jock Frater, at Lina Bryan's house at Darebin, his longest period of sustained association with other artists. But he remained an enigmatic and disengaged presence, working mostly at night and keeping his door closed against the others (Abbott-Smith, 1978: 98). Life was becoming easier and his work was gaining recognition, but still he clung to the edges, returning to Cairns, camping out, living in abandoned houses and sheds, constructing huts in mangrove swamps. Never settling. Never happy with his work.

⁶ Fairweather took a ship from Australia to Hong Kong but the British Army rejected him because of his age. He tried again in Singapore, but was diverted to 9 months in the Censor's office. Eventually he was accepted in India and somewhat ironically put in charge of Italian prisoners at a British POW camp in India for several months before once again realising the army was a bad career choice.

Fairweather arrived in Darwin in 1949, where he lived in a concrete mixer, then in an abandoned railway carriage, near the then existing Darwin Railway Station, alongside Frances Bay. Such casual living arrangements were not extreme within the context of Darwin's time honoured 'long-grasser' tradition, which was prevalent in Fairweather's time and later had a particular flowering in the hippie settlement on nearby Lamaroo Beach, blown apart by Cyclone Tracy in 1974: the long-grasser inclination to live cheaply in squats or outdoors continues today. Fairweather upgraded from the railway carriage when he discovered the *Kuru*⁷ near Hornibrooks slipway on Dinah Beach. A customs boat requisitioned by the Navy to do the supply run to Timor during World War II, the *Kuru* sank in 1943. Recovered, it was never recommissioned and was in the process of being demolished; only the back half remained. Fairweather obtained permission to move into the cabin, earning himself the dubious nickname of 'The Rear Admiral' (*The Argus*, 'Artist adrift at sea', 9 May 1952).

According to Bail, Fairweather was not happy in Darwin, despite a more regular income trickling from sales at the Redfern in London, and from Sydney's Macquarie Galleries where he was increasingly sending his work. Bail (2009: 103) tracks his mental state via 'one of the surviving letters from Darwin ... almost incoherent with despair' and some of the paintings from 1950, including the 'line-up of mother-figures ... fighting over a child' in *Hell* (*ibid.*: 94), the 'spectator crowd' of *High Tide* '... shown facing the artist, hoping to see the back of him' (*ibid.*: 103), and *Chétif* (wretched), which depicts 'misery, misery; the artist is there marooned in the melancholy of a backwater' (*ibid.*: 94). Two difficult, stagnating years in Darwin proved to be more than he could bear. 'To get out of Australia — that was the only solution' (*ibid.*: 103).

In 1921, while still an art student, Fairweather had produced a work he described as his 'first and last painting at the Slade'. It was based on the set subject *Rebecca at the Well*, and 'in the process of it growing itself' according to Fairweather, 'a little man on a triangular raft with oars had appeared right in the middle of the painting ... (he) had no connection to the subject—but fitted so well into the composition I left him in—come to

7 Most sources cite the name of this boat as the *Karu*, but it is more likely the decommissioned Naval Supply boat the *Kuru*. http://www.navy.gov.au/HMAS_Kuru

think of it—that is really very strange’ (*ibid.*: 15). Fairweather, living in Darwin, would have been aware of the Macassan traders’ long history of seasonal visits to the Northern Territory coast. While there he read Thor Heyerdahl’s best seller *The Kon Tiki Expedition* (1948), the story of a raft crossing of the Pacific from South America to Polynesia. The island of Timor was a mere 450 miles away, warm and cheap, and a raft could be built for free using scavenged materials. But the *Kon-Tiki* expedition was manned by a team of young and fit scientists, engineers, adventurers, and had financial backing. Fairweather was sixty, alone and unsupported. His journey was to become an epic, not only of endurance and survival, but also of innocence, courage and faith.

Fairweather writes extensively of his craft’s construction in *Amorales*, the unpublished manuscript of the journey and his travels through Asia and Australia.⁸ He built the triangular frame from mangrove timber and worm-eaten boards and other flotsam he found along the beaches. To this he bolted three rusting torpedo-shaped aircraft fuel drop-tanks sourced from the tip. A self-confessed junk addict, instead of purchasing strong material for the sail he used two old food parachutes also found at the tip. Made of hessian they were already rotting. He pieced them together into a square sail with a hole in the middle and ribs like a sunburst, similar to his family crest. A good omen, he felt. Bolts, rope and pieces of clothes-line held the whole assemblage together.

After studying charts of winds, currents and tides in the Darwin library, Fairweather decided:

a current coming up along the West Australian coast ... might be a help as it would tend to throw me up against the Timor coast. If it went the other way its effect would be the worst possible for it would then carry me into the Indian Ocean which I dreaded (Abbott-Smith, 1978: 104).

8 Bail, Abbott-Smith and other writers have quoted extensively from the typewritten copy of Fairweather’s unpublished manuscript *Amorales*. The manuscript has now been copyrighted by Fairweather’s elderly nephew Geoffrey Fairweather, who denied permission to quote directly from the manuscript for this thesis.

For navigation he had a wrist compass. He provisioned with the most basic of supplies; dried bread, milk and oats, sixteen cans of tinned meat and two four gallon kerosene tins (*ibid.*), and launched his tiny makeshift raft at night to avoid interference from the authorities. It was 29 April 1952. The superstitious Fairweather may have been aware it was the anniversary of departing China for good in 1936, and of his father's death in 1917. A rising wind whisked him away, 'sailing out of Darwin Harbour to face the empty seas' (Bail: letter from Helga Macnamara, 24 February, 1978). He disappeared. Air searches failed to locate him. The *Northern Standard* reported: 'Jack Fairweather, known locally as the "Rear-Admiral", who created a Commonwealth wide sensation when he set sail for Dilli (sic) in Timor recently, on a raft, has been officially given up as "lost at sea"' (May 23 1952). An obituary was published (Abbott-Smith, 1978: 107).

The journey went awry from the start: he headed into the jaws of a monsoon. 'At first light there was a big sea running, huge rollers that threatened to roll over the stern, and as they lifted the raft it seemed to me that I was standing on my head' (Abbott-Smith, 1978: 106). The Canberra Times reported Fairweather 'battled through storms on the second, third, and fourth days at sea' (Monday 26 May 1952). The raft was very small but heavy and it travelled low in the water. It 'always felt to be on the verge of falling apart. He had to lie spread-eagled, holding the thing together. At the same time he had to steer' (Bail, 2009: 103). It soon proved essentially un-sailable and Fairweather abandoned the weighty and useless centreboard. As the triangular deck—just under ten feet (three metres) at its longest—was too unstable to stand on, he had to lie down or sit leaning against the mast. The deck was constantly awash:

I was soaked and very cold. My fingers were swollen, I still had not learnt how to fix the rudder and sail so that the raft would steer itself and I could ... scarcely hold the ropes. It was not until the eleventh day that I hit on the combination and so got some much needed rest (Abbott-Smith, 1978: 109).

His eyes were the worst of the suffering:

They were so painful that, in the end, I could not look at anything in the sunlight or even the stars at night. I had to steer by lying face down and watching the needle of the compass which I shaded with my hand (*ibid.*: 110).

Sixteen days of isolation, a journey that was an extreme test of physical endurance, yet the minimalist Fairweather said he drank only half of the water he took and still had food left when he landed on Roti (*The Straits Times*: 9 August 1952). He clearly had extraordinary reserves for self-denial—and tightly rationed himself against the exigency of a missed land-fall. Storms notwithstanding, the journey's sheer monotony had its distractions. Birds made the raft a rest spot, and a cormorant became a regular visitor, plonking down on the deck and using the raft to watch for other birds fishing. He was followed almost all the way by sharks, which bumped against the floats and occasionally tried to take a chunk out of them: 'I kept one leg constantly hooked around the mast in case I should doze off and slide into the waiting jaws' (Abbott-Smith, 1978: 111). He began to hallucinate: 'On the fifth day I began to see things which most certainly were not there' (*ibid.*: 108). Visions included fish traps, towering cliffs, people walking about, the raft entering a cave, and the luminous night haze transforming to the appearance of a mosquito net coming down around him: 'On the net I could see lines, drawings of figures behind which danced other figures. I lay and contemplated these for they were better than any drawings I had made on land' (*ibid.*).

No longer trusting the winds and currents when he sighted Roti, the most western island of west Timor and the last possible landfall before the Indian Ocean, Fairweather rowed all day to reach it, finally bumping over the reef in the dark. He spent the night on the raft in the stillness of the lagoon. When he stood on the beach at dawn he collapsed. 'After a while I was able to stand though there was a tearing pain all over my body and the ground seemed to be pitching and tossing beneath me' (*ibid.*: 112).

Fairweather later told a reporter in Singapore:

I read about the Kon Tiki expedition, and calculated that I could reach Timor in about 10 days ... But I found that I could not steer my raft and sleep as well, and I made only about 32 miles a day ... I nearly drifted to my death in the Indian Ocean (*The Straits Times*, 9 August 1952).

News about his survival only started to reach Australia in late May. His niece Sheila Barlow said: 'planes looked for him for 11 days. I do remember how he laughed telling my sister and me about the obituary he saw in some paper when he was presumed

drowned. How no-body (sic) had appreciated him till he was dead' (Bail: letter from Sheila Barlow, 16 January 1977).

Under a heading 'Raft Adventurer Will Not Return' the *Sydney Morning Herald* described the 'astonishing 16 day 500 mile drift', noting the Indonesian immigration authorities had confiscated Fairweather's British passport, £65 in cash, and various papers and letters. Fairweather was reported as saying, 'I did not sleep at all, but I probably dozed at times.' During the 'storms with 20ft waves which repeatedly threatened to engulf him', he worked out a system of 'ropes attached to a crude rudder and across his body, he could control the rudder and at the same time was prevented from being washed overboard' (14 June 1952).

On Roti he was helped by the local people but arrested by the Indonesian police and eventually deported. A page one article in *The Straits Times* headed 'The Beachcomber Artist arrives in Singapore' (8 August 1952), reported Fairweather had been 'burned almost black by the fierce sun and covered in blisters', and quoted him as saying, 'It's time I settled down and started to do a little serious painting.' The following day the newspaper reported Fairweather as saying the Indonesians who picked him up were very fair in their treatment, but had said they must make an example of him, otherwise they would have a stream of men on rafts trying to get into Indonesia. His response was, 'I told them that was hardly likely'. Asked when he thought he'd get a ship back to Britain, he said 'I don't know. I take things as they come. Something will turn up; it always has' (*The Straits Times*, 9 August 1952). But Fairweather's days of putting up with the insecurities of an itinerant lifestyle were over. Deported to England he worked off the debt of his repatriation by digging ditches in Exeter then passed his hat around his 'well-heeled relations' (Bail, 2009: 104) for the fare back to Australia.

Betty Churcher⁹, who with her husband Roy later befriended Fairweather on Bribie Island, said:

I think he realised that he'd made an error, and it was pure providence that blew his raft into that island ... it could just have easily have blown him out,

⁹ Director of the National Gallery of Australia 1990-1997

into the Indian Ocean, and that's the last we would have ever heard of Ian Fairweather. I think the raft journey was very significant to him, because he faced his mortality in a way that we don't often have to (Ziegler, 2008: *Fairweather Man*).

In 1960 Fairweather told Lina Bryans that he had called his craft *Lit Bateau*—bed raft:

I borrowed the title from Collette. She had a bed she carried around everywhere with her and called her lit bateau—I thought it suitable for the raft as I could only lie down on it ... it was so much like a bed afloat (Bail, 2009: 104).

Fairweather was essentially a painter of memory and his works reflecting the raft experience were mostly painted five years after the event. Only a few paintings are attributed to the raft journey. *Lights, Darwin Harbour* (1957) shows the tiny arrow of a raft sailing past a high jetty where fishermen dangle their lines and legs, its sailor standing rather heroically, and stars or street-lights reflecting in the night water like huge suns. *Raft Sketch* (1957), a loose depiction of the raft with its sun-like ribbed sail, a prone figure on the deck and the cormorant on the rudder, was sent by Fairweather to his niece Helga Macnamara to illustrate the craft and how he sailed on it (*ibid.*: 254). *Barcarolle* (1957) is a sanguine blue and cream portrait of the raft and its sailor, while *Lit Bateau* (1957), a similar view, is dark, congested, the prone figure with its rake-like toes, looking skeletal and distressed. (*Voyage to Bali*)¹⁰ (1957), originally exhibited at the Macquarie Galleries as *Landscape* (and later misnamed again), clearly shows the triangular raft with its square sail dwarfed by the broad sweeping sea, a real or imagined landfall on the horizon. In *Roti* (1957) Fairweather used poetic licence to portray himself standing on the raft and reaching landfall in daylight that is bright with blue, yellow and white, the Roti islanders looking on.

10 Many of Fairweather's paintings were untitled. I use Murray Bail's method of bracketing titles assigned to paintings for identification purposes.

Monsoon (1961-62), is the largest of the raft works. Four vivid panels hold an ordered turmoil of angles and sudden curves slashed in creamy paint over a blocky and fractured ground of black, grey and ochre. It is full of staccato movement—a half-seen figure seems to jerk through the violent night lit by the strobe effect of lightning flashes. Robert Hughes wrote in *Time Magazine*:

Monsoon encases a memory of the nightmare raft trip, with a disjointed white calligraphy playing, slower than lightning, over the darkness behind it. Its movements seem just on the point of incoherence, as though an already indeterminate Cubist space had been subject to unbearable stress. But it doesn't fall apart, and its precarious unity is one of the great moments in Fairweather's art (Hughes, 1995: 70).

An epic *Kon-Tiki* inspired adventure, or an escape from the poverty and tidal suck of Darwin? The raft exploit has inspired a host of speculation. Why embark on such a bizarre trip? In his last letter to Ede, Fairweather said 'that journey to Timor, such a mystery hangs over that whole affair' (Fairweather to Ede: (1954)). On the basis of Fairweather's depression in Darwin the journey has been construed as an intended suicide—but a sixteen day voyage on a raft is a strange way to try to kill oneself. In 1952 *The Straits Times* reported his response to an interview in Singapore:

I had no money for the fare ... So I decided to try to get there on a raft ... I set the raft adrift in the middle of April—without a bean in my pocket. I was anxious to make Timor where I hoped to find an old friend (8 August 1952).

Interviewed again nine years after the voyage, Fairweather said he was aiming for Portuguese Timor because it was 'the next best thing to Bali where I had done the best painting of my life' (Bail, 2009: 103).

Fairweather was thirty seven years old when he turned his back on England, sixty when he launched his flimsy raft from Darwin. The intervening years were characterised by self- isolation and a refusal to engage with the expectations of family, the art world and society in general. Metaphoric or real, the state of being adrift can signify adventure, escape, denial, indecision, and prove the catalyst for change. Drifting mentally, physically or emotionally can trigger the fertile liminal consciousness that germinates

new ideas and perceptions. Fairweather's disappearance on the raft, the fruitless air searches, the announcement by the police that he was missing, presumed dead, and his extraordinary reappearance, generated huge and ongoing publicity. The mystique of the raft was born, its *Kon Tiki* adventurousness of the individual pitting against the elements binding with Australians' love of the sporting chance and respect for the anarchic 'up-yours' mentality of doing what one likes.

Bail wrote:

The raft voyage became his albatross ... the...episode added nothing to his art. Or did it? Fairweather's paintings are above all meditations on experiences, and the sixteen-day voyage was nothing if not a solitary encounter with madness and death (2009: 109).

Before the raft both Fairweather's art and his life, were inconclusive. The journey created a watershed in his creativity.

After his arrest in Indonesia and deportation from Singapore 'home' to England, Fairweather made his way back to Australia. He squatted on Bribie Island in a quiet patch of bush, building a thatched hut from logs and palm fronds. Still reclusive, or as he once described himself, 'selectively gregarious' (Abbott-Smith, 1978: xi), he was finally more physically and emotionally settled. His work developed greater technical and spiritual complexity and in his last two decades, Ian Fairweather produced his most iconic paintings. Acclaimed nationally, his exhibitions were sell-outs. Yet the art world—where success depends largely on gaining and maintaining recognition through courting dealers, buyers and the media—remained a world with which Fairweather barely deigned to engage.

Poet John Donne said no man is an island, but Fairweather's lifelong efforts to disengage and self-isolate in order to find the essence of his art suggest an island is, metaphorically, what he tried to become.

Chapter 2

China and the Drunken Buddha

A humble man hastens through the world but he is hungry, cold and solitary with no clothes or food. He wears a chord to tighten around his waist and hold the beads that rattle in his belly. He begs in the market place but none give anything, not even the earth will yield a thing to swallow. Then he thinks of the Buddha's hunger and the sour leeks. At one door on which he knocks, they offer not clothes or food but work at salting vegetables, and he recalls, Enlightenment is also a yellow vegetable. Perhaps after long service in this salted ocean he may gain the happy shore ...

The Drunken Buddha, Ian Fairweather¹¹

Leeks and vegetable-salting aside, it isn't too big a stretch of the imagination to posit Ian Fairweather as doppelgänger to Chi-tien, the wandering monk of the popular 13th century Chinese novel *The Drunken Buddha*. Translated by Fairweather for publication by the University of Queensland Press (UQP) in 1965, the story concerns a peasant child taken from his family at a young age to become a Buddhist monk who was eventually recognised as a Lo-han, 'a person who through accumulated merit of pious acts performed in many incarnations has finally attained Enlightenment which leads to a Buddhist form of salvation, complete extinction of ego' (Fairweather, 1965: 3). But the path to Enlightenment was a rough one. The monk, a rebel who refused to conform to monastery rules, readily earned a reputation for erratic behaviour. He 'continually scandalised his fellow monks by his drunkenness and apparent irreverence, and yet disconcerted them with unexpected saintliness'¹². Due to his penchant for standing on his hands—often wearing nothing under his robes—he was considered crazy and was renamed Chi-tien which translates as 'salvation by overturning' (*ibid.*: 34). When an impoverished monastery needed to rebuild its broken granary, he promised to achieve

¹¹ Fairweather, 1965: 10).

¹² Cover notes to Fairweather's translation of *The Drunken Buddha*, by UQP editor, Clayton Bredt.

the impossible task of finding the money. The Empress miraculously appeared with the cash, responding to her daughter's dream of a golden-bodied Lo-han who requested money (*ibid.*:74). The daughter, recognising Chi-tien as the Lo-han, asked why he looked like a leper. The Empress answered: 'When you are not confusing the world with brightness of course you do not wish to be recognised'. (*ibid.*: 75) She asked Chi-tien how he would repay her gift of money. In response Chi-tien stood on his hands, exposing his genitals. Instead of being affronted the Empress laughed, choosing to recognise the monk's honesty and authenticity as a man. Chi-tien remained outrageous, defying expectations and bucking the system, and he continued to produce miracles.

The way leading Fairweather to his translation of *The Drunken Buddha* began with his facility with languages. His second language, French, developed after he was reunited with his family for his adolescent years on Jersey in the Channel Islands, a British Crown Dependency where both English and French were spoken (Bail, 2009: 11). This was supplemented by two years in Champéry, Switzerland, where he was sent to be prepped by a tutor for officer training at Aldershot. He picked up German in P.O.W. camps and later spoke it adequately, along with Norwegian, after extended visits to both countries post-War. Reflecting as an old man on having spent his entire war in German Prisoner of War camps, Fairweather said:

I think, perhaps, those years I spent as a prisoner of war were some of the happiest of my life—no responsibility for practical things like money, food, and shelter. Endless time to devote to something I enjoyed doing. The necessity of earning one's living simply did not exist (Abbott-Smith, 1978: 19).

An interned officer, he was allowed considerable freedom including access to drawing materials and books. His interest in Chinese and Japanese art and language was ignited by Lafcadio Hearn, an American Japanophile, and Ernest Fenollosa's two volume epic, *Epochs in Chinese and Japanese Art* (Bail, 2009: 12), books which possibly introduced Fairweather to a Buddhist view of life. After the War, enrolled at the Slade, he began to study Japanese but China exerted a stronger lure and he switched to studying Mandarin. His love of the language, art, culture and philosophy of China, and the enjoyment of copying calligraphic scrolls and translating Chinese texts lasted through the rest of his life.

Superstitious about signs and numbers (Allison, 2010a, and in Bail, 2009: 241), Fairweather wrote to Ede from Shanghai explaining his departure from Canada: ‘I decided I must go—for ... I was lonely. I had with me then one relic—a Chinese grammar printed in Shanghai and it seems as it was an indication’ (Fairweather to Ede: 24 May 1931). This ‘relic’ was one of a series of treasured dictionaries of Chinese characters and grammar he carried wherever he went.¹³

In the early 1960s, in recognition of both Fairweather’s command of Chinese language and the growing interest in his art, UQP invited him to translate a text for publication. It is not surprising that he was drawn to the story of *The Drunken Buddha*. The character of Chi Tien was separated from his family at a young age, as Fairweather was, and wilfully ignored social rules opting for a disassociated and itinerant lifestyle among ordinary people, as Fairweather did. Fairweather, like Chi Tien, was the archetypal outsider, a man prepared to go out on a limb to maintain the integrity of his personal choices against the forces of conservatism and conformity. *The Drunken Buddha* was running as a serialised play in Shanghai around the time Fairweather returned there in late 1934, as Bail notes, a ‘tempting coincidence’ (2009: 241). Fairweather adored cheap and accessible popular culture; ‘I cannot resist going to the Cinema when there is a Cinema to go to’ (Fairweather to Ede, (August 1935)¹⁴). It is conceivable he saw the play. If not, the Rabelaisian story’s general appeal in China would surely have been enough to pique his curiosity.

Fairweather first arrived in Shanghai in May 1929 and stayed nearly four years. Life was an adventure. Despite the scarcity of work he found a job in time to save him ‘from the romantic experience of being on the beach’ (Fairweather to Ede: 24 May 1931) and was successively park keeper (‘more in charity than otherwise since I was a white man’), road inspector, then in charge of an asphalt plant (*ibid.*). Unlike most other expatriots he was determined to immerse himself in everyday Chinese life and culture. He found a room above a Chinese brothel on Szechuan Road overlooking Soochow Creek,

13 See Appendix 1 for a letter to Clayton Bredt at the University of Queensland Press, discussing Fairweather’s preference for the Soothill dictionary over the Fenn.

‘light and spacious and very quiet’, and employed a Chinese boy ‘to cook my meals and stir my paints’ (Abbott-Smith, 1978: 43). He took Chinese lessons and made a concerted effort to speak the language when: ‘other people, the best people here, don’t learn Chinese’ (Fairweather to Ede: May 24 1931). His decision to live locally and simply was partly pragmatic—the rent was cheap, but it also reflected his desire for a raw, authentic experience of the local culture, a pattern he maintained for the rest of his travelling years. His separation from ex-pat society was also an act of self-isolation. In escaping the mores and expectations of other Europeans, he was determining the parameters of personal freedom.

Fairweather loved the exotic, seething humanity of China. He wrote of adventures with racing rickshaws, long walks along dusty country roads, and being locked out of the city after curfew (Fairweather to Ede: June 1935). He drew and painted ancient walls and arched bridges, jostling markets, laden camels, cinnamon sifters, persimmon sellers, men tending fish-traps, rivers teeming with junks, ethereal lakes. He was endlessly fascinated by the Chinese people, their features, their food, their music, even their babies: ‘Everything about them, their customs, their personalities, seemed to me to be worth absorbing’ (Abbott-Smith, 1978: 64). In a 1968 Bribie Island interview he said:

I got very sort of orientalised, you might say, in Peking; so much so that I couldn’t stand the sight of a European face. I was so much in love with the Chinese way of life. The Chinese are like a lot of fish, they always struck me as perfectly completed, polished’ (Bail, 2009: 270).

At the same time Fairweather was becoming increasingly disenchanted with ex-pat society: ‘I took on, unconsciously I believe, many Chinese attitudes and when I met a European I found his appearance slightly distasteful ... Above all, I shrank from the European’s aggressive individuality’ (Abbott-Smith, 1978: 65).

The great drawcard to China was art and calligraphy was a particular revelation. ‘I discovered that in China the art of writing, and the art of painting were closely interlocked by history and aesthetic values, and I knew that I could not begin to understand one without the other’ (Ziegler, 2008: *Fairweather Man*). Recalling a visit to one of China’s great calligraphers in a remote hill village, Fairweather said:

It was an experience to watch ... as he poured a little water on a slight hollow in a stone, then took up his brush and began, with long, deliberate and delicate movements, to create the most beautiful, austere work I had ever seen (Abbott-Smith, 1978: 64).

Before leaving China in 1933, Fairweather travelled to Peking where he was profoundly moved by the calligraphies in the National Collection:

I am not ashamed to say that I stood for hours before the great calligraphies of old China. There was about them a severity, a chaste beauty that made me dissatisfied with everything I had done, everything I had aspired to. It was done with a few strokes of the brush, dramatic, delicate and with a tremendous power of suggestion and imagination. They were, to me, the very essence of China, glittering and compact (*ibid.*: 63-64).

This admiration manifested in Fairweather's work which began to show a calligraphic influence. His line developed greater fluidity and character, enjoyment in the dip and flow of the brush, and an appreciation of how the dragged stroke evoked the tactility of dust and mud, elements of life-in-the-raw he had been divorced from at the Slade. The austere line also suited Fairweather's reduced means. When his funds ran short he had to be stringent with materials, using chinks, paints that were dried, and spreading them thin; the calligraphic line allowed the integration of the unpainted background—an economic use of paper and other supports.

James Gleeson, reviewing Fairweather's October 1970 exhibition at the Macquarie Galleries, deferred to 'the artists and scholars of China' to define the importance of the calligraphic brush stroke: 'When one prepares to put ink on paper one should feel in one's wrist a power like the universe creating life'. He concluded Fairweather understood the weight, flow, strength and spirit of the stroke, and had 'completely absorbed the Chinese approach to art' (Gleeson: October 1970)¹⁵. Pierre Ryckmans¹⁶

15 'Ian Fairweather owns two cultures', October 1970: cutting sourced from the Qld Art Gallery ephemera file, no other publication details available.

16 Pierre Ryckmans also writes under the pen name Simon Ley.

said, in his essay *An Amateur Artist*, that Chinese calligraphy was a momentous revelation to Fairweather, who ‘repeatedly acknowledged the fascination which this *unique* art exerted on him.’ Unique because, according to Ryckmans: ‘with their calligraphy, the Chinese actually possess *one more* major art. It has no equivalent in any other culture ... *it is the writing itself* which is the art’ (in Bail (ed.), 1994: 15)¹⁷.

Why did calligraphy so profoundly affect and, arguably, validate Fairweather? A partial answer is provided in his late-life recollection of his first walking tour in Norway in 1922. He was in his early thirties and on holiday from his studies at the Slade:

Looking at the beautiful terrain of Norway I saw that I could, with increasing expertise, make many acceptable pictures of the scene, never approaching the originals in perfection, but quite beautiful facsimiles, painted with some ease but without any tax on the imagination and without the agony I thought should go into a painting. I think I had taken the first step towards the sure knowledge that I was not going to paint as though through the lens of a camera. What I wanted to express was the effect that the scene had upon me. I began to see from then on everything, not only as a whole, but fragmented, moving, re-grouping, the outlines fluid and changing as they settled into the picture that conveyed my thoughts (Abbott-Smith, 1978: 30).

Fairweather’s refusal to be satisfied with ‘beautiful facsimiles’ tallied with his belief in the rigor required of the artist. He felt he ‘belonged to a mystic cult in which art was hard and real, something on which one must work with no thought of immediate reward beyond the intense satisfaction when a little seemed to go right’ (*ibid.*: 29). Like the monk Chi-tien, he had no intention of confusing the world with brightness. His determination to convey the spiritual depth of his perceptions found expression in the nuanced fluidity and control of calligraphy, and the Chinese respect for authenticity reinforced his view on how he should live and work.

Ryckmans emphasises the high value placed on the work of the amateur in Chinese art. A professional artist was considered merely a craftsman, working with ‘slick fluency’

¹⁷ The italics are Ryckmans’.

and ‘technical virtuosity’ for reward. Conversely for the amateur, painting was seen as a contemplative act of self-cultivation and spiritual discipline. Clumsiness was respected as indicating the purity of inspiration:

At the heart of this extraordinary valorisation of the art of the amateurs was the view that painting is first and foremost an operation of the mind, and thus should remain the exclusive preserve of a small elite of contemplative souls—monks, scholars, hermits—who could nourish their inspiration with philosophy, poetry, calligraphy and music... The aim of a true painter was to attain a state of harmony with the vital rhythm of the universe ... For this reason, the actual *process* of painting was, in a sense, more important than the finished works themselves¹⁸ (in Bail (ed.), 1994: 20).

The concept of the authenticity of the amateur inevitably appealed to Fairweather, whose understanding of how he wanted to live in the world crystallised as he trekked through Norway into an essentially Buddhist perspective:

... at that time, amongst those mountains ... I became aware of myself as a part of the world around me. It was a strange sense of elation, that certainty of being at one with the environment. I saw clearly something that has stayed with me, confirmed every day I have lived, the interrelation of everything in creation (Abbott-Smith, 1978: 34).

Fairweather’s emotional responses to his physical circumstances shifted from high to low throughout his life. The places he found to live in were either idyllic or hellish—generally both and in that order. After two years in China he decided he was becoming soft, too settled and complacent. Wage-earning was seductive, but the more comfortable he was the less he painted: He wrote to Ede:

I have become lazy. I have a boy to do things for me. I no longer walk but ride everywhere, and I am forty this year ... I have so little time ... I must get back

18 The italics are Ryckmans’.

to some sort of art work it matters very little what or where (Fairweather to Ede: May 24 1931).

He needed to move on, to live closer to the edge and find his own bounded place. A visit to the Tai Shan monastery became the catalyst for his departure in 1933. In 1935 he wrote to Ede:

Two years ago I climbed Tai Shan ...the eastern sacred mountain, particularly dear to Confucius. There are temples all the way up, it isn't very high, old women with bound feet achieve it and don't turn a hair, but my knees gave out. It was shameful, and with my old rucksack on my back, that I should have brought it to that. I think it was that that started me on this pilgrimage (Fairweather to Ede: 10 June).

He needed to be back on the road pushing himself to the limits, pursuing that edge, that 'severity and chaste beauty', that would make his painting work.

Fairweather first arrived in Melbourne in February 1934, after nine idyllic months in Bali. The local modernist painters, including Jock Frater and George Bell, excited by his work and exotic 'otherness', organised a small exhibition of his paintings to help remedy his lack of funds. They also found Fairweather a room he could use as a studio, and Frater helped secure a commission to paint a mural for the Menzies Hotel (Bail, 2009: 31). Despite their support, it was a difficult time. Fairweather was clearly struggling financially and ill-equipped for the winter. And the mural was not going well. He found, too, that Australia was too familiar, with all the constraints he had tried to escape in England:

I seem to have done nothing but pursue with burning feet (my sandshoes are wearing rather thin) a way through endless Finchleys and Golders Greens seeking a break—an open space—any let-up in this colossal monotony. There is no break—it is whole—unlimited—a matriarchy—a million perfect homes the pubs are always closed, and smoking is so much prohibited. I feel mean and decadent with a pipe—even in the street. And the Sundays, oh, the Sundays—the Salvation armies prowl the empty streets ...

Making a joke of Melbourne's wholesomeness he added:

If I stay I will have to work in abstractions—it would be too irreverent to represent such wholiness (sic). What is it in Australia that stimulates these multiplications—the sheep the prickly pear the rabbits and Mr Symes the grocer. And yet in six long years of wandering it is here for the first time that I feel I am not a criminal trying to make a living by painting. They have been very kind (Fairweather to Ede: early 1934).

Craving the exotic—the anonymity of bustling crowds, the raw edginess of being outside his comfort zone—Fairweather was soon again idealising China: 'I sometimes long for the fleshpots of Shanghai again and a fat wage every month' (Fairweather to Ede: June 1934). He told Ede of his despair over the mural: 'Six times I have torn it up. Your letter just gave me the courage to go all out and I've done the centrepiece at last the two side pieces should not be hard' (*ibid.*). But the work was doomed. One night he gave up on it: 'After six months of work—frenzy rather—I had to tear it up. It's nearly wrecked me all together' (Fairweather to Ede: (October) 1934). One piece remains: *Mural Study—fragment* (1934). Fairweather, anguished and confronted by the expectations of others, left Melbourne overnight for Brisbane. Within weeks, on a ship bound for Davao, he wrote describing the Melbourne debacle:

I couldn't afford to buy a mattress and all through the winter I ... had chill after chill ... There was nothing to do but get out of the place quick. Thank God, here is the sun. I can put my filthy clothes out in it and needn't wear any more clothes (*ibid.*).

Fairweather returned to China for another two years, but life there was vastly different the second time around. When finding work in Shanghai proved impossible he took a train to Peking: 'an awful journey, third class Chinese railway, freezing, no blankets' (Fairweather to Ede: early 1935). There his hopes of teaching art or English were dashed:

again there are queues, this time of Americans wanting to do the same thing, and they have colleges and institutes of fine art to back them up—there's not a chance for me. So there's nothing to be done but go round sketching—and hoping to God. (*ibid.*)

However, living was cheap and:

My Chinese is of some use up here and ... I have never in my life had such material to paint—but I can't afford to buy paints—I am using Chinese chalks. I can't see what is going to come of it all (*ibid.*).

Socially shy and averse to self-promotion he steeled himself to knock on doors, leaving his paintings with prospective buyers in the hope of commissions: 'The usual answer was "not interested"'. It made me rather wild for I think the things I have here are in a way the best I have done yet' (*ibid.*).

An invitation from the 'local nabob in the art world here, a young American', to take his paintings along to a dinner proved a humiliating experience to Fairweather. He wrote to Ede describing the wealthy ex-pats as 'the most awful bunch of gilded effigies', who seemed to think he had 'come with the idea of crashing the social portals of Peking', concluding:

All hopes I ever had of getting any help in Peking have gone up in smoke ... I came here because I wanted to paint, because it is the only thing I can do because I've tried to get another job and failed. To meet with this frigid suspicion and social bloc, it's made me feel sick (Fairweather to Ede: 12 March 1935).

He was demoralised: 'I am afraid I am dreadfully depressed, and wishing I had never left Australia where there were some genuine artists and human beings, a very rare combination it seems' (*ibid.*).

When the young monk of *The Drunken Buddha* first entered the monastery he was warned 'The way of the Buddha is empty, there is no straight road. In sweat is the only merit...' (Fairweather, 1965: 24). Fairweather also accepted this path. He tightened his belt and stepped away from the everyday needs of food, warmth and cleanliness,

spending the winter of 1935 in the Chung Hua College of Art, in a borrowed room with paper windows and stone floor, so cold 'I have to spend the day walking round making notes, at least I am getting plenty of material' (Fairweather to Ede: 25 March (1935)). A year later he wrote from different lodgings:

Can just sit with everything I have on and shiver. I think this place is going to be even worse than the school last winter. It is so much larger, the little Chinese stove I was relying on is just lost here. It would take a furnace to defeat this stone floor (Fairweather to Ede: 4 November 1935).

He procrastinated over sending a batch of paintings to Ede: '... if I bare my walls now and send everything the little illusion of warmth I still have will be gone' (*ibid.*). Concerned, Ede asked a friend, Justin Hooper, to look Fairweather up. Hooper noted: 'He had obvious difficulty in overcoming his reserve—a protective reserve', reporting:

I found him living in a room in a Chinese house measuring about twelve feet Square and with a low ceiling, heated by an oil drum pierced with holes and containing glowing coal briquettes, there being no outlet for the fumes. The entire wall space was taken up with his work, three lines of them pinned to the plaster, water colour drawings so far as I can remember (Abbott-Smith, 1978: 71).

With his efforts to find an entrée into the art market in China frustrated, Fairweather relied completely on Ede to sell his paintings. It was a perfect arrangement from Fairweather's viewpoint. With Ede prepared to do the hard yards with buyers, Fairweather not only avoided the embarrassment of hocking his work but he could remain disassociated from dealers' demands. However the arrangement was precarious. Fairweather was basically unknown in England, his work did not fetch high prices and sales, dependant on Ede's persuasive powers, were infrequent. Fairweather was also reluctant to finish off the paintings and send them. When Ede organised an exhibition at the Redfern Gallery in London in January 1936 Fairweather was excited, but still chafed at the expectations, writing:

I am sorry to say that none of these (paintings) I have here are according to your specification—or rather the Redfern's ... I can send off these next seven, but with this cold, goodness knows how there can be any more (Fairweather to Ede: 4 November 1935).

In December, down to his last £2 and having nightmares at the thought of having to borrow from the local Bishop, he became increasingly anxious about the deadline:

I am very worried. I just can't make this date you have given me in January... Cannot you persuade the Redfern to wait—or is it so important to have a show, anyway? Don't think I am not trying to send you things. I am half crazy trying to send you things... I'm so darn lonely here, I don't think I have spoken English for six months (Fairweather to Ede: 15 December 1935).

No matter how desperate his circumstances, Fairweather never came to terms with the imperatives of deadlines and the self-advancement required for success in the art-world. For him being an artist was about contemplation and exploring meaning, a spiritual path to creativity. Monetary reward was necessary only for survival and to buy more paints. He preferred to ignore the onerous demands of career.

Chronically short of funds, and after a string of problems with landlords and co-tenants no doubt exacerbated by his difficulties in paying the rent, Fairweather wrote a desperate note to Ede: 'Please, for goodness sake, wire me £50, and let me get out of here', adding a semi-gracious: 'PS I got your letter with press cuttings about show. I don't know how I am ever going to thank you for all this. I am too miserable to write' (Fairweather to Ede: early 1936). The cold was driving him mad. In nearly six months he'd had no bath and had changed his clothes once (Bail, 2009: 44). In his isolation and poverty he was detaching from social mores: 'It's really been something of a nightmare this winter. I had to shave and wash my face to go to the bank, it was almost like getting a new face' (Fairweather to Ede: 18 March 1936). No longer enamoured of the Chinese, Fairweather's letters became consumed with complaints and paranoia, although he did confess, reluctantly: 'it is a curious thing, that whenever I have suspected and reviled a Chinaman, I have found afterwards that I was in the wrong of it. They have the

strangest power of reflecting one's moods back on oneself' (Fairweather to Ede: (July 1935)).

Fairweather's traditional training was both influenced and subverted by Chinese art. He moved towards simplification and abstraction. Never losing his love of the figure he agreed with the Chinese view that it was 'ethically wrong that portrait painting should be held in higher regard than other forms of art. The individual is not as important, fundamentally, as the whole human structure' (Abbott-Smith, 1978: 64). Increasingly, in paintings like *Bridge in Peking* (1935), the figurative became integrated into an overall pattern, often a collaged idea of activity and place where dimension and perspective were subordinate to the design. He experimented with pattern: (*Trees near Soochow Gates*) (1941) evokes a willow pattern plate, while repetitive brushstrokes appear like a meditation in *Temple under Banyan Trees* (1936) and (*Fish Traps, Peking*) (1941). *The Hill*, painted in 1955, shows his line developing the fluidity and occasional anarchism of the calligrapher's brush, and despite its roughly dabbed technique the serene (*River, Hangchow*) (1941) gives the impression of a single loaded calligraphic stroke defining sky and water. Fairweather's creative output was heavily dependent on his circumstances—whether he had money for materials, a roof over his head, how physically and emotionally comfortable he was in the countries and situations he found himself in. He often experienced long periods when he felt nothing was achieved. Increasingly his work was painted from memory. The paintings that emerged from the China years show Fairweather working towards a synthesis of his Western training and the influences of the East. There is a new hesitance and contemplation—each stroke thought and rethought, a working-through behind each committed line—and a sense of pastiche in the way he layered and juxtaposed images. Increasingly from this period, calligraphy came to define the austere spirituality of Fairweather's art—the more deeply felt his paintings, the more abstracted and calligraphic they became.

Fairweather left China for good in April 1936. Then he seriously hit the road. John McDonald dubbed him 'supertramp':

For the next two decades, Fairweather zig-zagged across South-East Asia and Australia. He visited Beijing, Taiwan, Japan, Hong Kong, Borneo, Zamboanga and Manila. He spent some time in Melbourne, where he accepted the hospitality of artist Lina Bryans, but kept his distance from most of the local painters. In 1939 he lived among poor Aborigines and Malays on the outskirts of Cairns. When war broke out, he rejoined the British army in India, although he was not much of an asset. Through-out all these restless perambulations, Fairweather endured the utmost squalor and hardship. He was thrown off trams, and detained by customs officers. He froze, he starved; hundreds of paintings and drawings were lost or destroyed (McDonald: 1995).

Living on increasingly limited means he often slept rough, in doss houses, abandoned buildings, charity institutions, railway stations, tents. Twenty-one months in Manila and twenty-six in Darwin were his longest stays in any one place prior to the raft journey. He shied away from comfort and being absorbed into community. He may not have been a beggar but the path he chose was as straitened and basic as that of any mendicant monk.

Discussing Fairweather's eccentricity which 'bordered at times on the suicidal, the inhuman or the insane', Ryckmans says:

Fairweather presents a riddle which remains opaque as long as we keep it in a western perspective, yet reveals transparent coherence once we try to translate it into Chinese terms ... what is remarkable is that his behaviour, even at its most bizarre, shocking or incomprehensible, would always have made perfect sense to a Chinese classical aesthete (in Bail (ed.), 1994: 17).

Fairweather's sometimes fraught immersion in the language and culture of China seeded a passion for Chinese painting and calligraphy that not only lasted until his death, but transformed his art from that of 'a pleasant post-impressionist' (Bail, 2009: 6) to haunting, multi-layered, multi-memored works bounded and released by the dynamism and spirit of line. Like Chi-tien, his tunnel vision to 'rightness' enabled him to produce miracles.

The Drunken Buddha may represent a rollicking read to the Chinese, but it is a deeply spiritual tale. The monk, often on the skids, hungry and in rags, was something of an innocent in the world, but in achieving ‘complete extinction of ego’ he attained Enlightenment. There were many aspects in Chi Tien’s life and his striving for spiritual stillness and depth with which Fairweather could identify. The China years were a crucial time for Fairweather to live simply and test his resilience, to develop a deep appreciation of the art and its underpinning spirit and philosophy, to relish the inherent respect for the artist, enjoy personal freedoms, and internalise his creativity. His self-isolating behaviour was instinctive and inevitable. If his Spartan outlook and economically straitened circumstances made him a fringe dweller everywhere he lived, life beyond the pale was also a choice that offered authenticity: a simple and contemplative existence where risk was not to be avoided at the expense of experience, and where the urge to paint was preeminent.

China consolidated Fairweather’s leanings towards contemplation and Buddhism. Over the entrance to the Bribie Island hut where he lived out his last years he placed a rough board on which he had painted the calligraphic symbols for the Buddhist mantra: *Om mani padme hum* (Bail (ed.): 21).¹⁹



¹⁹ Photograph, Queensland Art Gallery collection.

Chapter 3

Island Consciousness

We live as we dream—alone.

Joseph Conrad²⁰

Ian Fairweather was around fourteen years old when his older sister Rose observed, ‘Ian is a strange child. He likes to be away by himself and can never be found when he is wanted’ (Bail, 2009: 11).

Fairweather’s inclination to isolation began early. When he relocated with his family to Jersey, home of his mother’s antecedents (Abbott-Smith, 1978: 1), his preference for an independent outdoor life was clear. Escaping the family circle he often disappeared, and a favourite destination was an island off the island, crowned by the St Ouens tower:

He used to go off on his bicycle. It’s all sand dunes and five miles of sand. And in the middle there’s this little fort—a little Martello Tower—and he used to spend the night there, and then the tide used to come up ...and cut him off. He was always a loner (Macnamara to Bail: 18 March 1981)²¹.

The young Fairweather was already exhibiting his need to establish boundaries, to live close to a metaphoric edge. Islands would become a lifelong attraction. When he turned his back on the family and sailed to Canada, he overwintered on Prevost Island, ‘about half way between Vancouver and Victoria’ where he was caretaker on a farm:

I am all alone on this island—there are some beasts to look after but otherwise little to do. It is altogether a beautiful place ... the sea calm like a lake. It is

20 Joseph Conrad: *Heart of Darkness*, 1990: 24

21 Helga Macnamara, Fairweather’s niece, was the only family member he kept in touch with—an infrequent correspondence.

exasperating that there is no boat. I am making a raft of driftwood (Fairweather to Ede: n.d. (1928-9)).

Here are motifs which would recur through Fairweather's life: life on an island, a preference for solitude, the importance of landscape, an affinity with animals, and the urge to have, or build a boat or raft: always an eye on a means of escape.

After Canada, Fairweather's wanderings through Asia were driven by the need to find a place where he could live cheaply and paint uninterrupted. But not in complete isolation. He enjoyed the bustle of humanity as long as it kept a respectful distance. Complete isolation drove him from Prevost Island, yet that island became the lost ideal. Superstitious about retracing his steps, he wrote from Shanghai: 'Australia, the never never land—so lies the trail. For I have another intimation never to go back the way I have come', adding somewhat prematurely; 'I know I shall never see anything half so beautiful as my island again' (Fairweather to Ede: May 24 1931). This prediction was soon overturned. Delaying his first visit to Australia Fairweather sailed to Bali, and was bewitched:

The whole island glowed. Colours seemed stronger in the shadeless heat, and against the vitality of bare brown skins ... I think I was completely happy. I wanted only to capture the essence of my surroundings, the life, colour and movement, and to seize the moment ... the Balinese were simple and uncomplicated ... a peasant people with few wants that a day's work could not supply and, when their daily tasks were finished, almost every Balinese man, woman and child, applied themselves to some artistic endeavour (Abbott-Smith, 1978: 49).

This was exactly how Fairweather wanted to live. For nearly nine months he enjoyed the island's tropical lushness, the gentle acceptance of the people who saw nothing odd in a European who wanted nothing but to paint and draw, and the saturation and inspiration of Balinese arts. This was also his first sustained period of painting. He wandered and sketched during the day, painted at night, and produced at least thirty-six works (Bail, 2009: 22), including the monumental *Bathing Scene, Bali*, and *Procession in Bali*, which he sent in a bundle to Ede with the injunction:

Don't think too badly of the paintings—they are terribly crude on the surface and were done under trying conditions. If you put some paper or something round them by way of a frame, and look at them by candle light you will see them at any rate as I saw them. Oh hell—Bali was somewhere near to heaven (Fairweather to Ede: (November) 1933).

Fairweather visited and lived on many islands, including extended periods in Davao and Zamboanga on Mindanao Island in the Philippines, and in Manila. From Davao he described finding an ideal place:

It stands on stilts amongst the coconut trees on the edge of the beach, it looks something like a bird cage. On the ground beneath it, chickens and pigs and boats, babies and land crabs. It's the sort of place I've dreamt of. I'm going to stay (Fairweather to Ede: (October) 1934).

Later, miserable in a Peking winter, he wrote to Jock Frater (February 1936): 'I've still got a map of The Islands (sic) up on the wall and I'm going back there the first chance I get' (cited in Twigg, 2009: 54).

When he left China for the last time in April 1936 with a ticket to Borneo, his passage, via Japan and Formosa (Taiwan), became a seven week epic, being shunted from ship to ship to '*prahu*' (prau). Lacking a visa and money for landing fees he was refused landings: officialdom had become wary of the problems presented by the itinerant 'beachcomber'. He considered jumping ship several times, including at Macassar, where he rhapsodised about the sparkling air, the full moon, coconut trees and the schooners in the harbour: 'Macassar is the real thing ... I just know I've got to find some such place, if it's the last thing I do' (Fairweather to Alston: May1 - June 27 1936). When he set sail on his raft in 1952 he hoped to reach '... Portuguese Timor, as the next best thing to Bali where I had done the best painting of my life' (Bail, 2009: 103). The idealised tropical island—paradise to be regained.

Self-reliance, self-determination and self-realisation are keys to unlocking the motivations of Fairweather, and islands are a time-honoured trope for such resolutions of self. In his essays 'That Islanders Speak, and Others Hear ...' and 'The Phenomenology of Islands', island theorist Pete Hay provides insights into

Fairweather's attraction to islands and his developing island consciousness. Hay observes, 'the contribution (that) ... a heightened sense of physical containment makes to the construction of an island identity ... Experience is circumscribed on an island, contained' (2006: 21). He says the abstract, faceless nature of islands makes them powerful, a 'favourite metaphor for the contained and sovereign self, usually an alienated and sensitive self, beset with trials and terrors in a cruel and uncaring world' (2002: 80). It is the boundedness of islands that makes them different: 'Physical boundedness conduces to psychological distinctiveness, because it promotes clearer, 'bounded' identities' (*ibid.*: 79). 'Edges are 'edgy', says Hay, 'they attract the unconventional and the creative, and much might happen there' (2006: 22).

Such boundedness must have created much of the appeal of islands for Fairweather. The sense of establishing a threshold over which he could pass into inviolate place. A threshold from which he could repel the invaders, the 'other': people who imposed expectations like having to complete the Menzies mural commission, producing work in time for an exhibition, or naming paintings he wasn't inclined to name: people who made demands for rent money, who talked about him, and stole the time and focus he wanted to devote to painting.

History and literature are peppered with archetypal characters who, like Fairweather, 'find' themselves (or attempt to) on islands. The French artist Paul Gauguin's escape to Tahiti is generally viewed as a personal and creative quest of true Romantic tradition, while Daniel Defoe's castaway in *Robinson Crusoe*, first published in 1719, fits the literary bill. Creativity theorist Terence Dawson bases a discussion of self-realisation on the character of Robinson Crusoe, using the island, 'the single most resonant image in the novel', as a trope for the way Crusoe establishes identity: '(the island) guarantees isolation in order to achieve something that requires solitude' (in Rowland, 2008: 27). Dawson cites Novak, who observed: 'the island is as much a metaphor for keeping others out as a 'do-it-yourself utopia', as well as Jung, who noted: 'the imaginal experience of such a sacred space is "a means of protecting the centre of the personality from being drawn out and being influenced from outside"' (*ibid.*: 27-28), and

concludes: ‘Crusoe’s struggle to survive reflects the heroism implicit in an unwavering determination to discover his own *individual* identity’ (*ibid.*: 31).²²

Dawson’s discussion offers a perspective on the island mentality that so shaped Fairweather’s life and work. Parallels can be seen in both Fairweather’s and Crusoe’s break from family in order to establish themselves in the wider world. Dawson says Crusoe’s initial choice is: ‘either to accept an identity based on *the expectations of others* (his family, society) or to submit to his ‘Propension of Nature’ (Defoe’s term) that leads him into a quest for *an identity that he has yet to establish*’ (*ibid.*: 27). The character’s anxiousness to leave both the prison of family and pressures to conform began a trajectory which ‘takes the form of repeated imprisonment and escape’ (*ibid.*: 26), with the outcome that Crusoe ‘soon feels constrained; whatever his situation, he soon becomes dissatisfied with it. A condition envisaged as constraining is represented by the metaphor of a prison; and escape from this constraint is represented by feeling more at one with himself’ (*ibid.*: 27). Fairweather’s repudiation of family and England, his search for a bounded, nurturing space to replace them, initiated a similar pattern: idealising, anticipation, disillusionment, rejection, and escape or abandonment of place. While that pattern peaked with the raft journey, even during his last two, more settled, decades on Bribie Island the rumblings of discontent continued, mainly generated by the encroachment of ‘other’—the building of a bridge to the island, property development, council interference—all of which constituted invasion of his ‘sacred space’ and an erosion of his sovereign self.

To Dawson, Crusoe’s self acceptance was shaped by how he responded to and resolved the practical difficulties in his life:

Crusoe’s dilemma on the island is emphatically personal: *it concerns no one but himself*. He engages in a succession of vividly described activities, in each of which he imagines a need, then he finds out how to meet it ... He gets no joy from possessions as such; but he gets a deep-rooted satisfaction from successfully resolving the difficulties that face him. His identity consists in

²² Dawson’s italics.

what he can *do*, which in turn is a vivid metaphor for accepting himself as the specific individual that he is, and neither pretending nor aspiring to be more (*ibid.*: 30).

Like Crusoe, pragmatism strongly defined Fairweather's sense of self. He made do when his money ran out, slept rough, lived in tents. A particular skill and pleasure was recycling scavenged materials, constructing huts, making own furniture, building or repairing boats. If he stayed put for long enough he established a garden and gathered strays for pets. Fairweather, like Crusoe, had little desire for possessions, whenever he moved on he left what he had made and collected behind, even his paintings.

The island idealised as a place to live cheaply, practically, comfortably, romantically, is nearly always tropical. Hay says tropical islands:

have been constructed as Edens before the Fall, sea defended paradises in which the original innocence in a state of nature can be rediscovered in the here and now ... a potent artistic construction, and one that meets an equally powerful pull in the human psyche (2002: 81).

Paul Gauguin, rapidly burning his matrimonial, financial and social bridges in France in the 1880s, dreamed a tropical island would be a wellspring of creativity, a place where he could 'live like a *savage*... taking my paints and brushes with me ... I shall immerse myself (in nature) far from everyone' (Le Pichon: 53). Leaving France in 1891, the year of Fairweather's birth, Gauguin sailed to Tahiti. To his long-suffering, estranged wife, Mette, he wrote prophetically:

May the day come (soon perhaps) when I can go off and escape to the woods, of some South Seas island and live there in ecstasy, in peace, and in art... Free at last, with no money worries, I shall love, sing, and die (*ibid.*: 113).

As islanders, Fairweather and Gauguin both steered clear of the establishment, but for different reasons. Gauguin's sensualism lead him to pursue a reckless lifestyle, consuming alcohol and drugs and flouting convention by 'going native', taking pre-pubescent girls for wives. Biographer Le Pichon says he preferred 'to roam through run-down native enclaves rather than associate with the rich French settlers and move in

“correct” social circles’ (1987: 147). Tahiti certainly proved a creative wellspring—he produced brooding, tropically brilliant work. But financially it was a disaster. ‘He made merry with the prostitutes of Papeete and spent more than he should have; the leading citizens of the capital looked askance and steered clear of him. The hoped-for portrait commissions did not arrive’ (*ibid.*). When the gloss of idealised place wore off Gauguin, like Fairweather, had to move on. But Gauguin was very unlike self-contained and introverted Fairweather: his libertine lifestyle became a slide into poverty, illness, despair and a sordid venereal-disease riddled death in the Marquesas Island in French Polynesia in 1903.

Fairweather, austere and a minimalist, feared ‘becoming soft—spiritually, artistically and physically’ (Bail, 2009: 20). To him an island represented simplicity, a place where needs could be stripped to the minimum—a warm climate where food and accommodation cost virtually nothing, where clothes were mostly superfluous, and the other constraints and accoutrements of normal life could be jettisoned. He wasn’t averse to personal relationships; casual friendships were established as he wandered, often springing from shared short-term accommodation and passage on ships. He maintained lengthy friendships with Ede, and later the Melbourne artists Frater and Bryans, but these relationships were mainly fostered by post and shared the basis of need—Ede, Frater and Bryans buying or selling paintings for him and forwarding money. When physical proximity wasn’t imposed Fairweather kept his distance from individuals and community. He kept himself bounded in order to maintain the space and inner quiet he required to focus on his increasingly contemplative work.

Hay points out that ‘islandness’ presents its own conundrums: ‘The island as paradise, the island as hell. The island as refuge, the island as prison. Absolute metaphoric contradictions’ (2002: 82). He cites Gavin Beer’s opposing metaphors for the island. One focuses on empowerment; ‘the figure of the heroically resourceful castaway (which) links the island trope to ideological discourses of radical individualism, wherein the uniquely gifted and courageous individual rises above the constraints imposed by the mediocrity of the many’. The second highlights how the individual can be disempowered and alienated, due to the lost relationship with community (Hay, 2006: 26). Hay suggests: ‘Perhaps *the* most contested fault line within island studies is whether islands are characterised by vulnerability or resilience’ (*ibid.*: 20).

For Fairweather, the benefits and pleasures of self-imposed isolation invariably paled. His yearning for new horizons assumed a pattern: the joy on arrival soon displaced by dissatisfaction with the food, noise, lack of privacy, expense, death of materials and inspiration. Moving on, he'd look back, regretting what he had lost. As the sole arbiter of his boundedness he coped with vicissitudes, except when others breached his parameters. When he survived the raft journey by making landfall on the island of Roti, part of the newly established nation of Indonesia, his problems were not over. Instead something of an island nightmare began. Arrested by the Indonesian authorities, with his passport and meagre funds confiscated, he was kept under police guard for several months. He believed the authorities considered him a spy, and became increasingly paranoid. He was carted around Roti, taken to Koepang and then Bali, where the kind and simple people he remembered had become suspicious and far less accommodating. Then he was sent to Singapore, where he was consigned to the 'Nantina Home, the Social Welfare Department's home for penniless people' (The Straits Times, 8 August 1952). And from there he was deported to England. The island idyll had turned sour. He wrote bitterly to Ede:

Instead of arriving at some quiet arcadian (sic) fishing village on the coast of Timor as I had intended I was borne through Indonesia on a wave of public hysteria—as the 'immoralee', the homosexual, bespattered by press and radio in Singapore, shunted off to England to save the stink' (Fairweather to Ede: undated (1953)).

Island as hell had become all too real for Fairweather. The extreme isolation and vulnerability of his metaphoric island-raft in the middle of the Timor Sea, followed by powerless months on Indonesian islands and Singapore—wasted time with no means of painting—must have sorely tested his faith in his self-elected trajectory. Yet at the end of it all it was an island, Bribie Island, he returned to, and an island he remained.

若

Chapter 4

No island is an island²³: Fairweather in the art world

Before the problem of the creative analysis must, alas, lay down its arms.

Sigmund Freud²⁴

How did a man who made reclusiveness an art-form, who only attended one exhibition of his work, who ignored fame and seemed oblivious to the concept of career, who was clueless about handling money, living much of his life in dire poverty and had even been thrown in jail as an itinerant, become one of the most influential painters of our time, inspiring artists the ilk of Russell Drysdale, John Olsen, Tony Twigg and Imants Tillers?

The problem with researching Fairweather is that it is a one-sided pursuit. He was not a man to leave guidelines on how he wanted his life interpreted. Fairweather's creative life did not fit the mould of a career artist. He seemed not only supremely indifferent to commercial demands and the concept of a career trajectory, but curiously unconcerned about the fate of the works he produced. Bail believes no more than 550 works (drawings and paintings, and one sculpture) are currently known to have survived (Allison 2011: email from Bail, 28September 2011). The rest were destroyed, abandoned, or they disintegrated. Fairweather, generally short of money and living on the edge, had to make do. His painting was equally *ad hoc* and often ephemeral. When nothing else was available he painted on whatever was at hand; newspapers and cardboard cartons. He developed idiosyncratic painting techniques mixing pigments, sometimes disastrously, with materials like soap and clag or using cheap but unsuitable

23 Ellis, J., 1998. 'Literary Cartographies in Oceania' in L. Brinklow, F. Ledwell & J. Ledwell, eds., *Message in a Bottle: The Literature of Small Islands*, Charlottetown PEI, Institute of Island Studies, University of Prince Edward Island, pp. 51-64, cited in Hay, PR , 2006, p.22

24 Cited in Zolberg, 1990: 107

products like Kalsomine (Ziegler, 2008: *Fairweather Man*). When he was in India he started using the laundry whitener, Reckitt's Blue as a pigment. Living in the deserted, half-flooded Sandgate cinema near Brisbane, he worked with a mix of dry pigment, waterglass and borax. When he removed the paintings from the walls after two and a half years work, the paint cracked and fell off (Bail, 2009: 59). Some he left behind in a trunk. Others, left scattered on the stage, were burnt by the cinema's owners. Work was frequently torn up and abandoned. At his camp north of Cairns, half a dozen paintings were retrieved shortly after Fairweather left for Darwin, and 'eighteen months later, Jock Frater and a friend found amongst unopened mail, old tins of paint, newspapers, old brushes, about seven unfinished gouaches, mostly on torn pages of the Women's Weekly. All but one, on cardboard, disintegrated when lifted up' (*ibid.*: 89-90). Local lore has it that when he left Darwin he abandoned the derelict *Kuru*, with dozens of paintings still pinned to the cabin walls. Clearly the tiny, sodden raft could offer no safe passage for paintings.

Other paintings were sent to galleries so poorly packed that they were unredeemable on arrival, or so fragile they were already disintegrating. In frustration artist and critic James Gleeson, an avid fan of Fairweather's, titled a review of his exhibition at the Macquarie Gallery in Sydney, 'An artist minus a soul':

Although there is ample justification for regarding Ian Fairweather as the finest artist in this country, and indeed he is an artist of international stature, the strange fact remains he is not in love with art. All the evidence (of this exhibition) points to the conclusion that he despises art and regards his own impulse to paint as personal weakness. How else can one explain his complete lack of concern for the life of the painting once it is finished? ... Mr Fairweather's paintings must inevitably collapse in a rain of ruined flakes or disappear beneath a blanket of mould and mildew within the next 20 years. He is an artist for whom painting is as necessary as breathing, yet ... disastrously balanced within him are the instincts of image-maker and those of iconoclast ... every one of these 17 paintings deserve a longevity their creator has denied them (*The Sun*, 20 November 1957).

Fairweather's obliviousness to the care his work needed caused one of his greatest setbacks: the destruction of 130 paintings sent from Melbourne to the Redfern Gallery in London late in 1947. The paintings, rolled together before the paint was properly dry, arrived in London as a congealed, unsalvageable mass according to the Redfern's director Rex Nan Kivell (Bail, 2009: 70). Fairweather, beside himself with anxiety after a year of not knowing what had happened and unable to assess the damage, wrote to Ede from Cairns complaining bitterly:

More than a year has passed since Nan Kivell got my paintings ... my letters to him have gone unanswered and as far as I know not an attempt made to sell a single picture. Though it is the best work I have ever sent him—the first work in fact of which I have felt sure—the large paintings 6ft which were sent in a roll have been left in their roll all this time. They were very thick paint and will be ruined by that alone ... he is not going to exhibit them. I have good reason to suspect that they have been tampered with ... An artist is a harmless person—God knows if he does any good or not, that's a question I've never been able to answer—but his work is seized upon, and turned to the basest uses to bolster social prestige, or some kind of propaganda. Though he live in the wilderness he's drawn into the mêlée (Fairweather to Ede: (1949)).

The conundrum of an artist driven by the creative urge, yet largely indifferent to taking due care of what he created, is reflected in media headlines: 'Strange Genius' (*The Sun*, 19 November 1958), 'Hermit Ian was our greatest artist' (*Sunday Mail*, 15 September 1991), 'Greatness—in a bark humpy' (*The Weekend Australian*, 24-25 October 1981), and the ambiguous 'An eccentric recluse finds life in his art' (*Sun Leisure: the Sun*, n.d). The art world and the Australian public were bemused.

Murray Bail's monograph on Fairweather which first appeared in 1981 was republished in 2009. The conclusion Bail came to in the intervening years, 'offered cautiously', that his subject may have been schizophrenic (2009: 14), is partly based on Fairweather's letters and his unpublished manuscript *Amorales*. These documents indicate he suffered from episodes of depression and paranoia, particularly when his life slipped out of

control. The letters, usually neatly and conventionally written, were sometimes scrawled notes on stained paper with paranoid ramblings about other races and plots, and frenzied comments about missing money. They indicate an unsteady state of mind. The years of extreme poverty and squalor in Peking and the Philippines, when he was abjectly dependent on the trickle of funds sent by Ede, or Frater and Bryans, and the months after he landed his raft on Roti, to be arrested by Indonesian authorities and taunted with the label 'immoralee' by the villagers, all yielded agonised communication. Fairweather, frequently at his wits end, found it hard to maintain a rational perspective.

In retrospect, diagnoses like schizophrenia, bi-polar disorder, Asperger Syndrome or other disorders of the autism spectrum could be hypothetically applied to Fairweather. But could a psychosis have been relevant to his creativity? When Fairweather enrolled at the Slade his 'unusually nervous and hesitant state of mind even as a student joining', was attributed to his POW experience. 'Tonks saw at once he had a serious student. He believed "he would improve in health by being at the Slade"' (Bail, 2009: 15). Ede, writing to Murray Bail in 1978 said Fairweather was 'thought at that time very gifted' (Bail, letter from Ede: 13 February 1978). Fairweather did appear to be favoured by Tonks who set him up, when he left The Slade early in 1924, under the patronage of another Slade pupil, former Tory MP Frederick Leverton Harris.²⁵ For £100 a year and use of a caravan at the family seat at Hertford, Harris would have the pick of half of Fairweather's output (Bail, 2009: 17). Fairweather shocked the locals by wandering around naked. He was oppressed by the expectation to produce, and his patron received only two small works.

Fairweather was inevitably affected by his war experiences, despite remembering in old age his prisoner of war years as some of his happiest. He was free of responsibility and in the last year, under the neutral Dutch Government's scheme to billet Allied and German officers, he even had opportunities to study painting under Dutch teachers and view the Rijksmuseum Rembrandts (*ibid.*: 21-22). But the distant boy on the island of

25 www.oxforddnb.com/index/33/101033723/

Jersey came home from the war a challenging young man who threw away his army career, bucked family values and social norms, nurtured an interest in Buddhism, and who wanted to study, of all things, *art*.

Fairweather's difference and his 'nerves' were attributed by his family to reprisals suffered after his escape attempts from POW camps, particularly three starving weeks in a solitary confinement cage 'he could neither stand up or lie down in', next to a bakery and the smell of hot bread (Alderton 2006: 55). Fairweather mentioned his nerves in his first letter to Ede from Canada:

You say my inability to paint is you think due to nerves—I think it is—that is why I don't wish to get in touch with my people again. They are so bitterly opposed to art. I feel their opposition—I had been longing for years to get away like this (Fairweather to Ede: 1928).

A significant reason for Jim Ede's years of friendship, support and empathy with his often difficult friend, was surely a shared a sense of being outside the norm. Inclined, like Fairweather, to eschew conformity Ede attributed his sense of alienation to having:

come out of the war, where to a great extent life had been dictated ... now suddenly his uniform was taken from him, he was exposed in all directions and chiefly to himself. He no longer knew how to be free as an individual, yet he was so strongly individual that he could not seek shelter by putting on the uniform of convention (Ede, unpublished biography: 166-7).

At a time when a host of young intellectuals and artists like Siegfried Sassoon and Paul Nash (also a student of the Slade) were challenging the values of a society prepared to sacrifice over a million of its young men to war, Fairweather's refusal to submit to his family's military-centric expectations and mores was surely partly rebellion.

Creativity theorist Carl Rogers has written: 'For the individual to find himself in an atmosphere where he is not being evaluated, not being measured by some external standard, is enormously freeing' (in Anderson, 1959: 79). From the time he jettisoned his family's expectations, cutting them off, Fairweather was intent on finding that freedom. He came close to achieving it during the twenty three years he lived on Bribie

Island before his death—a time when his exhibitions were sell-outs and he ostensibly had financial security. But still he adhered to the self-isolating simplicity and non-materialism that symbolised freedom: he squatted on vacant land, built his huts from materials scavenged from the beaches and the tip, wore cast-off clothes and mostly ate from tins.

During the intervening years Fairweather's letters make clear the fraught physical, emotional and financial circumstances he often found himself in: wondering where his next meal was coming from, unable to keep up appearances. In the mid thirties he wrote from Davao: 'I must be looking bad for when I go into a shop to buy something they at once jump to the conclusion that what I want is alcohol. It annoys me like hell' (Fairweather to Ede 16 Nov (1934 or 1936)). His two year trek to India during the Second World War, before the British Army accepted him back, was a succession of trials. He wrote: 'For weeks at a time I've had nowhere to sleep—when I did get under a roof it was either the Salvation Army or a doss house' (Fairweather to Ede, Bombay (1942)). Through such vicissitudes the process of painting, the alchemy of paint, line and memory, were the only important thing. When the alchemy failed, he despaired.

Despite these trials Fairweather accords with psychologist Abraham Maslow's description of self actualizing people. Such people 'lack ... fear of their own insides, their own impulses, emotions, thoughts ... (their behaviour is) more spontaneous' (Maslow in Anderson, 1959: 88). While 'relatively frightened by the unknown, the mysterious, the puzzling, (they) are often positively attracted by it ... they do not cling to the familiar, nor is their quest for truth a catastrophic need for certainty, safety, definiteness, and order' (*ibid.*: 86).

Numerous creativity theorists have explored the links between creativity and psychosis. Keith Sawyer explains that for centuries, 'conceptions of creativity have veered between two broad ideas: rationalism and Romanticism. Rationalism is the belief that creativity is generated by the conscious, deliberating, intelligent, rational mind; Romanticism is the belief that creativity bubbles up from an irrational consciousness, and that rational deliberation interferes with the creative process' (Sawyer, 2006: 15). Sawyer claims creativity scholars believe 'psychoses (including schizophrenia and manic-depressive

disorder) were rarely found in creative people in any field' (*ibid.*: 88). He says the Romantic era conception of mental illness equating to creativity as:

a pure expression of inner inspiration, an isolated genius, unconstrained by reason and convention' is a myth. He concludes 'creativity is mostly conscious hard work, not a sudden moment of insight, and getting the work done takes a highly effective person (*ibid.*: 88).

Rollo May, in his essay *The Nature of Creativity*, also refutes 'the implication that creativity is to be understood by reducing it to some other process, or that it is an essentially neurotic process.' Reflecting on the creativity of artists, May says:

Certainly, creativity is associated with neurotic problems in our particular culture—Van Gogh was psychotic, Gauguin seems to have been what we would call schizoid, and obviously creativity (and originality) are associated with persons who do not fit into the culture. But this does not mean that the creativity itself is the product of neurosis or illness (in Anderson: 56-57).

He adds: '...genuine creativity is characterised by an intensity of awareness ... a high degree of consciousness' (*ibid.*: 61), and '... the unconscious insights, or the answers to problems that come in reverie, do not come hit and miss. They come *only in the areas to which the person is intensively committed in his conscious living*'²⁶ (*ibid.*: 62-63).

Fairweather was certainly not alone in his instinct that commitment to an authentic, conscious life was paramount to his work as an artist. Yet the extent to which he was prepared to put up with extreme deprivation and uncertainty over his many years of wandering, culminating in the raft journey appears unmatched, certainly in the Australian art world.

Speculating on the possible impact on Fairweather of a psychosis is unproductive. More constructive to understanding his motivations and how his creativity manifested are the

²⁶ May's italics

insights generated by David Galenson in his new theory of artistic creativity in his book *Old masters and young geniuses: The two life cycles of creativity*. Galenson examines the lives of recognized creative innovators (artists, writers, musicians and film-makers) plotting the age at which they peaked artistically and economically. His theory constructs two different approaches to innovation, each ‘associated with a distinct pattern of discovery over a lifetime. Experimental innovators work by trial and error, and arrive at their major contributions gradually, late in life: in contrast, conceptual innovators make sudden breakthroughs by formulating new ideas, usually at an early age’ (www.davidgalenson.com).

Galenson says ‘planning is the most important stage’ for the conceptual artist: ‘Before he begins working, the conceptual artist wants to have a clear vision either of the completed work—or of the process that will produce it’ (2006: 12). Galenson lists Picasso in the conceptual group along with Andy Warhol who famously stated in 1963 ‘the reason I’m painting this way is that I want to be a machine’ (*ibid.*). Galenson also includes Van Gogh, who wrote to his brother, ‘I am in the midst of a complicated calculation which results in a quick succession of canvasses quickly executed but calculated long *beforehand*’²⁷(*ibid.*). Galenson’s research shows conceptual artists generally peak in their younger years. While Van Gough started late, ‘the landmark works of his career began to appear in 1888, just two years after he began his real education as an advanced artist’ (*ibid.*: 65). Galenson believes Paul Gauguin, who declared, ‘Above all, don’t sweat over a painting; a great sentiment can be rendered immediately’, was ‘moderately conceptual’ (*ibid.*).

Galenson’s list of experimental innovators includes Cézanne, Monet, Renoir, Pissarro, Degas, Klee and Mondrian. He believes these artists are:

motivated by aesthetic criteria ... Their goals are imprecise, so their procedure is tentative and incremental. The imprecision of their goals means that these artists rarely feel they have succeeded ... (they) repeat themselves, painting the same subject many times, and gradually changing its treatment in an

²⁷ Galenson’s italics

experimental process of trial and error. Each work leads to the next, and none is generally privileged over others, so the experimental painters rarely make specific preparatory sketches or plans for a painting. They consider the production of a painting as a process of searching, in which they aim to discover the image in the course of making it; they typically believe that learning is a more important goal than making finished paintings. Experimental artists build their skill slowly over long periods. These artists are perfectionists and are typically plagued by frustration at their inability to achieve their goals (*ibid.*: 4).

Fairweather accords with Galenson's criteria for an experimental artist. His working method was exploratory, typically dealing with memory and the motifs of memory. He worked on multiple paintings at once, moving between them as new thoughts struck or new possibilities emerged. His line is characteristically sketchy, often hesitant, the paint overlaid and images superimposed as he moved deeper towards the meaning he sought. Galenson elaborates:

planning a painting is unimportant. The subject selected might be simply a convenient object of study, and frequently the artist returns to work on a motif he has used in the past ... The artist typically alternates between applying paint and examining the emerging image; at each point, how he develops the image depends on his reaction to what he sees ... The decision to stop is also based on inspection and judgement of the work: the painter stops when he cannot see how to continue the work (*ibid.*: 11).

Galenson adds to the experimental innovators group the Abstract Expressionists Rothko and Pollock, who 'developed their art by a process of trial and error ... With enormously ambitious but extremely vague goals, (they) were continually uncertain not only whether their paintings were successful, but even whether individual works were finished' (*ibid.*: 37). He quotes Rothko: "Unfortunately one can't think these things with finality, but must endure a series of stumblings toward a clearer issue" (*ibid.*).

Fairweather's apparent indifference to the fate of some of his work may reflect his inability to see the paintings as finished. Asked about influences in an interview in

1963, Fairweather said: ‘I don’t know what I can say about influences. I suppose it all began with Cézanne ...’²⁸ (Bail, 2009: 269). Cézanne, nominally the father of modernism, provides an archetype for Galenson’s experimental artists. He painted the one subject, Mont Sainte-Victoire, dozens of times, and ‘spent the whole month working on a single still life’ (Galenson, 2006 : 6). His friend and fellow painter Bernard reported Cézanne ‘never placed one stroke of paint without thinking about it carefully’, concluding that his working method was ‘a meditation with a brush in his hand’ (*ibid.*: 7). In 1904 Cézanne wrote to Bernard explaining his working practice, ‘I progress very slowly, for nature reveals herself to me in very complex ways; and the progress needed is endless. One must look at the model and feel very exactly; *and also express oneself distinctly and with force*’ (*ibid.*). Galenson notes Cézanne rarely signed his work because he ‘rarely considered his paintings finished ... Ambroise Vollard observed, “when Cézanne laid a canvas aside, it was almost always with the intention of taking it up again, in the hope of bringing it to perfection”’ (*ibid.*: 14).

Fairweather was similarly rarely satisfied with the work he produced. During his first stay in China he considered approaching a publishing house for work, ‘but it means taking down my strivings from the dim walls of my room, taking them into the open into the blatant parlours of the publishing house and they are still so incomplete’ (Fairweather to Ede: May 24 1931). Writing from Brown’s Bay, north of Cairns late in 1947, he asked Ede to ‘look over’ the large bundle of paintings he had sent to the Redfern:

I’m afraid they are not the sort of things that will sell, but I just had to do them. There are many variations of the same subject and the subjects are not too pleasing, I fear. These are the ones I came up against and couldn’t do. I felt it was no good going on painting till these ghosts were laid. I’ve finished with them, though sometimes in ten different ways, and perhaps never satisfactorily, but I do feel that doing them has carried me quite a stage further along the road. When cash was getting low I had to call it a day, packed up everything there was and sent them off (Fairweather to Ede: (October) 1947).

28 Interview by Hazel de Berg, Bribie Island, 1963.

Cézanne and Picasso sit at opposite ends of Galenson's spectrum: 'Cézanne's slow production and elaboration of his creative ideas lead to a very late peak in the quality of his work, whereas Picasso's rapid production and development of his new ideas led to a very early peak' (Galenson, 2006: 15). Fairweather was definitely a late-peaker. He, too, left paintings unsigned, often sending them off untitled, conceivably because he had not yet reached that stage where his thought process for the work was complete. Letters accompanying work sent to Ede were full of apologies:

I'm afraid the two landscapes should not have been included, they are very bad ... I tried alterations and ruined them. The procession (in Bali) I have noticed looks terrible in a side light, it needs to be opposite a window. In fact they all look better that way, but it is too late to make excuses (Fairweather to Ede: (March 1935)).

'Trying conditions', inadequate light and inappropriate materials were all factors contributing to Fairweather's later refusal to acknowledge some of his work.²⁹

Fairweather's slow, meditative approach—over-painting, layering, changing gesture and orientation, adding panels if he felt the work needed more space—meant each piece was a constant work in process. In consequence he worked on several paintings at once. It was a work pattern requiring concentration, and self-isolating was a logical step in order to maintain his focus and intent.

One can extrapolate from Galenson's discussion that conceptual artists are generally focussed on the market and art community to recognize and need their work, to create expectation and demand, to act as critics, acclaimers. Conceptual artists therefore often develop the skills to be effective in the marketplace, or align with people who perform that role for them. Experimenters are more likely to self-isolate because their focus is on what they are making, on working it through. Cézanne who isolated himself to some extent in the south of France, still kept up a very full correspondence with other artists

²⁹ See Appendix 2

and was included within that community. Fairweather, in contrast, never seemed to establish the same network of peers. Yet as self-sufficient as he tried to be, he still depended on others for his survival. Judging by the number of people prepared to assist him along the way, something about him and what he was trying to achieve was compelling. Henry Tonks of the Slade, three years before his death in 1937, was still interceding on behalf of Fairweather, writing to Australian artist Daryl Lindsay, ‘make him of your country. A most difficult man to help, profoundly melancholy, it is very rare anywhere to have a man who can see anything exceptional’ (Bail, 2009: 29).

Despite Fairweather’s self-sufficiency and dogged independence he needed money and could not circumvent depending on others to help, including being reduced to borrowing from the Consul, the Bishop in Peking (Fairweather to Ede: 27 January 27 (1936)) or casual acquaintances.³⁰ He was a loner, but he wasn’t averse to personal relationships. Casual friendships were established as he wandered, often springing from shared short-term accommodation and passage on ships. Longer relationships were fostered mainly by post and based on Fairweather’s needs. Ede, of course, kept Fairweather alive for a decade, acting as unpaid agent, banker, and intermediary with the Redfern. When Ede left London, taking his family to live in Morocco in late 1938, he left the place where he could most effectively be of help. He handed the reins to Fairweather, suggesting he should deal direct with the Redfern. Fairweather did this unhappily, suspiciously, until Frater, Bryans and the Macquarie Galleries became his Antipodean mainstays. That Ede’s reminiscences, in letters sent in the 1970s to Murray Bail, are somewhat bitter is not surprising after his years of sustained support and concern about Fairweather’s often precarious financial position, not to mention his emotional state. ‘I was in touch with him all the time till he started to “make money” in Australia’ (Ede to Bail: 13 February 1978). Fairweather’s final known contact came in 1965 when he sent Ede a copy of *The Drunken Buddha*. There was no accompanying letter.

Over his painting life Fairweather’s commercial relationships with galleries remained erratic and peripheral. Eventually the Macquarie Gallery assumed the role of banker

30 Fairweather tried to be scrupulous about paying such loans back. See Appendix 3

sending, at his request, a regular small allowance. Abbott-Smith described to Ede the unfortunate outcome of this arrangement:

He was so peculiar about money then that he told his agents not to send him more than a certain amount on which to sustain life. They, however, placed all the residue from his sales in a Trust Account but unhappily did not send any returns to the Income Tax Dept. and when there was a lot of publicity about his pictures they bore down and demanded an explanation. In consequence he had to pay \$30,000 in back tax and fines. He nearly went mad ... he left about \$90,000 and almost \$40,000 worth of paintings (Abbott-Smith to Ede, April 15 (1976)).

Fairweather's wandering life and dissatisfied searching fits with the work patterns Galenson outlines for experimental artists. As dealing with galleries was neither his inclination nor his forte, he avoided the distractions of exhibitions and the market. A career trajectory appeared to mean little. He just wanted to paint, preferably at distance from other individuals and community. He preferred to keep himself bounded, maintaining space and inner quiet in order to focus on his increasingly contemplative work. The last thing Fairweather wanted was to court fame. Just as the journeys he made during his long travelling years generally proved more important than the destinations, his art was more a means to an end. The end itself wasn't particularly important. He was more about process.

If Fairweather suffered from a psychosis, it didn't stop him operating at a high level of achievement, and painting ground-breaking art. Galenson says 'the overall importance of art is a function of innovation. Important artists are innovators whose work changes the practices of their successors; important works of art are those that embody these innovations' (2006: 2). Australian artist Tony Twigg, who has spent many years tracking down Fairweather's journeys in Southeast Asia, including the Philippines and Bali, credits Fairweather as being the artist who first introduced the concept of Asian fusion to Australian art (Allison 2010b). Twigg's extensive research includes undertaking a seven day journey on the *prau*-like yacht *Sri Noa Noa*, tracing

Fairweather's route on *Lit Bateau* to his landing place on Roti. There he spoke to islanders who remembered the story of F's arrival and displayed artefacts from the raft (*ibid.*).

According to Twigg, 'if the Scotsman became an Australian artist, then he first became a Filipino one' (Twigg, 2009: 53). He says 'Fairweather's time in the Philippines ... started a bridge between Australia and the Asian art form' (Allison 2010b).

(Fairweather) spent a total of twenty-nine months in the Philippines, a significant period of time ... (there his painting hovered) at the edge where Post-Impressionism tips over into so-called Expressionism ... Much of his first solo exhibition in 1936 at the Redfern Gallery in London was painted during an earlier three months spent in Davao on the island of Mindanao in the Philippines (in 1934). Later in 1936 Fairweather spent five months in Zamboanga, also on Mindanao, where he painted most of the works in his second solo show with the Redfern Gallery (Twigg, 2005).

Twigg says that in July 1938, after money squabbles by mail with Ede, 'Fairweather made the decision, perhaps capriciously, to accept Frater's offer and consigned his third body of Filipino work to Australia. It secured him a place among Australian artists and is now considered a high point of Australian Impressionism' (Twigg, 2009: 56). He believes it is possible Fairweather visited Manila's Atelier of Modern Art, founded six months before his arrival by *avant guard* artists including Victorio C Edades, the artist credited with bringing modernism to the Philippines. Twigg says it was during his twenty-one months in Manila that Fairweather:

realised the transformation of his painting technique from European Impressionism to a hybrid Asian form, expressive of what he termed 'mood and moment' ... It was a startling achievement, made by the artist at the defining moment of modern Filipino art, a fact that has been ignored in Australian art history (Twigg, 2005).

The key painting of Fairweather's stay in the Philippines is the large painting *Anak Bayan* (1945-47). Twigg describes this work as a night street procession, probably a *corosa*, when the crowd, holding candles, carries an icon around the streets. He believes

this work's intimate observation of local custom—like the young boy with a towel tacked into the nape of his shirt like a cape to absorb sweat because parents believed this kept their children healthy (Allison 2010b)—illuminates 'Fairweather's penetration of the Filipino psyche' (Twigg, 2009: 56-57). Twigg translates the painting's title as 'sons of the nation', and believes it is a response to the artist's arrival in Manila in 1934, at the time independence was granted by US Congress and the Philippines became a Commonwealth. 'I think that we must assume that his painting reflects, in part, the mood of that time and is cognisant of the nationalistic spirit that made all Filipinos 'sons of the nation' (Twigg, 2005).

Twigg says 'perhaps more important to Australian art than the time Fairweather spent in the Philippines is the fact that he returned there through his painting, as he did in his paintings of China.' He credits Fairweather with bringing to Australia a fusion of European and Asian art, saying while his paintings 'come from everywhere in Fairweather's extensive travels ... to ignore their probable relationship with Filipino modernism ignores the fact that in Manila Fairweather witnessed an Asian subversion of European modernism, which became the basis of his working method' (*ibid.*).



Conclusion

‘I paint, dammit!’³¹

I have never allowed society to batten me down, and I regret nothing in my life. I wouldn't have had it otherwise. In any case, I believe in fate.

Ian Fairweather³²

Ian Fairweather has become an emblematic figure in the Australian imagination: ‘The raft episode and Fairweather’s ... life on Bribie Island have given rise to many misconceptions. He is imagined as a recluse, an eccentric or a misanthrope— notions deriving from his directness of purpose, his retiring personality, and his rejection of the values of mass culture (Queensland Art Gallery 1965: 2). Julie Ewington, the current Curatorial Manager of Australian Art at Queensland Art Gallery, says Fairweather’s story:

was a lurid one, one that appealed to a certain kind of popular imagination ... a guy living as a beach bum or beach comber, and added to that the frisson, that he’s evidently cultivated, and English ... a kind of English person throwing away all *that* to live on the fringes of Australian society (Ziegler, 2008: *Fairweather Man*).

For most of his adult life Fairweather refused to engage with the rules. The personal trajectory that began in rebellion against family expectations and took him through years of dirt-encrusted poverty and hunger and near-extinction on the raft, continued in his final two decades on Bribie Island. Outsiders were shocked by the elective simplicity of his life, by his ragged attire scavenged from the tip, and strange habits, like

31 From footage of filmed Fairweather interview (Ziegler: *Fairweather Man*)

32 Abbott-Smith, 1978: 155

eating from tins and shouting as he worked through the night. When the media trumpeted the high prices Fairweather's work had begun to realise, the public was nonplussed by his continued insistence on a life of minimal interaction and dependence. In his eighties he was reluctant to move from his grass hut into a new fibrocement shack with power and water that the council built for him, still insisting on living on a small stipend periodically sent by Macquarie Galleries—enough for his simple needs of painting materials, tobacco, milk and a few tins of food.

The trajectory of Fairweather's life was not the random, chaotic path loved and embellished by the media and public imagination, a path leading somewhat fortuitously to unwanted recognition, wealth, and comfort. While to a conservative perception his life at times seemed out of control, he would probably have construed much of it as adventure. He knew what he wanted. He was no victim of circumstance but a man steadfastly on a track of his own determining, making his mark in a world crisscrossed by the marks of others, people, birds, fish, shells, ships and boats and planes—passages of migration, spirit and intent. His intent was to find a way of living and painting that was true to himself and his vision of the world. A vision compounded of experience, memory, and a raw and uncompromising honesty that refused to bow to the dictates of commercialism and career.

Fairweather's philosophical responses to the world, particularly to Buddhist and Chinese perspectives, indicate he consciously determined on a wandering, non-conformist and self-reflective life, living lightly and authentically in order to define both himself and the direction of his art. It was a life that curiously paralleled that of Chitien, hero and anti-hero the traditional Chinese tale *The Drunken Buddha*. While Fairweather's choices were sometimes difficult to fathom and his life at times was extreme, it was informed by courage, adventurousness, self-sufficiency and a logic earthed in personal philosophy, in the tasks and goals he set himself, and the ideas and places he was attracted to—many of which surfaced as key themes, images and memories in his later paintings.

Art critic John Henshaw summed up the artist's distinctive qualities in *The Bulletin*:

Fairweather combines the activities of several personalities—adventurer, wanderer, hermit, philosopher, seeker after erudition, artist—into a colourful amalgam wherein depth has been achieved within an immensely varied life. Experience in China, the Philippines, the East Indies, and Europe informs his brush, his subjects emanating a kind of authority of statement which comes from long distillation of such experience. Sometimes the threads are tenuous which connect with place, factual or imaginary; they exist nevertheless (cited in Abbott-Smith, 1978: xiv).

Fairweather died of heart failure in April 1974 at the age of 82. Self-directed and essentially unaffiliated, he acknowledged few influences. But his later lyrical expressionist work, in referencing Chinese art and calligraphy and influences from the art of Bali, the Philippines and Australian Aboriginals, forged an unprecedented interface between Australian and Asian art. This cross-fertilisation is Fairweather's lasting legacy.

John McDonald wrote:

Fairweather has much in common with Matisse and Ce'zanne (sic), and with other 'obsessive personalities'. The more one learns about his life and art, the more he appears to be an exemplary figure of modernist art and thought. He is perhaps more of a victim of modernity than its master, a nostalgic noble savage, not an artistic revolutionary. But he painted as he did because there was no other way for him to paint, and painting itself was his overwhelming reason for being. He is an awesome ideal for any artist, but the path he trod was so lonely that nobody would follow it by choice (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 7April 1995).

He was, as James Gleeson observed in 1957, 'an artist for whom painting is as necessary as breathing' (*The Sun*, 20 November).

Place and self-isolation were significant keys to Fairweather's equilibrium. In his years of seeking a physically and psychologically comfortable place to live and paint cheaply, he was happiest on islands. Islands symbolised of self-sufficiency and self-containment. They sustained him. In making an island of himself on the raft journey he reached his physical and emotional limits. The raft experience catalysed the decision to finally settle within an acceptable self-bounded, island isolation and allow himself the luxury of exploring his spiritual depths in his work. The journey also galvanised a greater appreciation in Australia of Fairweather as an intriguing individual and deeply spiritual, ground-breaking artist. In gathering the disparate strands of his life and knotting them into a steady course, Fairweather's raft manifests as the ultimate trope for isolation and creativity.



Appendices

* Appendix 1: Letter from Fairweather to Clayton Bredt.

Clayton Brett, publisher of *The Drunken Buddha* (UQP). This letter is held in the Fryer Library, University of Queensland. The original document has the following handwritten note added by Clayton Bredt, University of Queensland Department of History 1988:

I thought this 'autograph' (ie signed) letter might eventually be of some interest to a future biographer of Ian Fairweather. The Soothill referred to is the famous author of the *Buddhist Dictionary*, one of the giants of British Sinology in the early decades of the present century. Fairweather was his student in the Interpreters' School in Peking around 1920

(Note, the 'Buddhist Dictionary' Brett refers to was probably: Soothill, W. E., and Hodous, L, 1937 (first published) *A Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms: with Sanskrit and English Equivalents and a Sanskrit-Pali Index*, K. Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., London (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Edward_Soothill). Fairweather did not reach China until 1929. As Soothill had returned to England in 1920, where he was appointed Professor of Chinese at Oxford University, it is unlikely Fairweather met him as a teacher in Peking. However, as Fairweather began studying Mandarin before he left England in 1928, they could conceivably have crossed paths.)

Bribie April 27 (1964/5?)

Dear Mr Bredt,

Thank you for the return of the mss and for the extra copy of the Yen-Tse Lou (?). Since you were here, I have received a copy of Fenn's 5000 character dictionary, but I still feel the Soothill is a loss to the world, though I have only had Fenn a few days I have

had to refer back to Soothill for about 1 doz. characters which it does not list. Although Soothill only lists 4000 the 5000 字 (characters) in Fenn are the ones they had printed on cards and issued to students of the old language school in Peking. They carried the cards round in their pockets. On the one side was the 字, on the other the sound & meaning. And what a loss to the world is that dear old language school, I have the happiest memories of it. It also can never be replaced. Soothill's system of grouping the 字 by the phonetic symbol makes looking them up almost a pleasure, cannot somebody be persuaded to revive it.

When in Shanghai I came across another system, a Chinese invention, nine kinds of corners (?) were distinguished by numbers so at a glance one could read any character as four numerals. But for one like myself, who is rather repulsed by figures and arithmetic all these methods, even the logical radicals (?) tend to dehumanise the 字

I still feel there is a crying need to acquire (?) Soothill's family groups of phonetics—they are not logical, and the exceptions are almost as many as the rest, yet I feel eminently suitable to the 字, which are also illogical.

Am getting on slowly with the illustrations. Hope to be able to write sometime to let you know they are ready,

Sincerely yrs

Ian Fairweather.

若 Appendix 2: Fairweather refusing to acknowledge own art

Roy Churcher's memory of an incident of Fairweather denying his work, at the first Fairweather Retrospective (mounted by the Queensland Art Gallery) at the Art Gallery of New South Wales:

It wasn't a very pleasant occasion, because he got terribly grumpy, and went around looking at these pictures, (saying) 'Nonsense, I wouldn't paint anything like that.' Uncomfortable. He accused the Sydney Gallery of paying final year students to touch up the painting and make them look marketable... He'd look at the pictures and say, 'Absolutely appalling, I'd never use colours like that.' Ian was painting in his hut with just this kerosene light—orange-browny kerosene light. I don't know whether he ever saw them, or the colours he was using, because of the conditions they were painted (under). (Ziegler, 2008: *Fairweather Man*).

若 Appendix 3: Fairweather and money

Fairweather was often in the position where he had to borrow money, including from the Bishop in Peking (A), the British Consul (B), other acquaintances like Justin Hooper (C), and Ede himself (D). He seemed scrupulous about paying these amounts back and kept a careful tally, as these excerpts from letters to Ede show.

A. The Bishop

Peking January 27 (1936):

A line in great haste to thank you for the £15 which has at last arrived. It was delayed in the bank because no advice had come through from Barclays about it. I had to explain at length and show them your letter before they would hand it over. However long before that happened, I was reduced to borrowing from the bishop. Damn! So please, if you will, as soon as you get this, send off the remaining £14 ...

B. The British Consul

(Manila) January 3 (1937):

... you can guess I read anything about money with the closest attention and nothing of what you say has come through. Also no money has come since the £30 I wired for, excepting £7 (?) and some odd shillings which arrived Nov 8, I have somehow existed on that till now, but going into debt with landlord but even so it came to an end some days ago, I had to go to the consul. I told him I had £30 pounds somewhere but he said he couldn't help me except transport me back to England. Well I didn't want that, so in the end he loaned me enough for a wire to you—that had no result—and after 3 days on an empty stomach I had to go to him again. This time he'd decided he couldn't even transport me home, the government wouldn't stand for it he said, as technically I wasn't destitute, having £30 somewhere, however out of the benevolent fund he gave me another loan for a telegram to some friends in Australia. I saved a little out of that and got a meal.

This letter also contained news of the disastrous fire that caused the destruction of Fairweather's paintings and belongings:

I had left a cigarette on the bed. I must have been worried, for I've never done such a thing before. It had burnt the mattress and mosquito net, made a lot of smoke but no flame. Nothing else was burnt and they soon put it out, but I found my place an absolute wreck. The door was torn off and smashed to matchwood, there wasn't a thing in the place left standing. Pictures were torn off the walls and tramped on. A tornado might have struck the place.

C. Justin Hooper

Peking, February 10 (1936):

The Dutch now require a £25 deposit before you can land anywhere amongst their islands. It's going to be difficult. In case of accidents will you write as soon

as you get this—to Hooper—and ask him to credit me with 15£ (sic), then I can write to him wherever I land up.

Zamboanga, (28) Sept 1936: ‘... H & C Sandakan have written they have a further £10 for me (they have sent £20) and a letter from the H&S Bank Peking that they have £20. This seems more than I should have after paying Hooper—I hope I am not overdrawn.’

Zamboanga (Nov 36?): ‘... I was glad that Hooper is paid, he never wrote to me, though I’m sorry you had the trouble of selling the old Procession to do it.’

D. Tally of accounts to Ede.

C/o Army and Navy YMCA Manila, Oct 12 (1937)

Dear Ede

I didn’t think you were going to hold out on me like this. I told you I wanted that £30 plus because things were getting tied up, it’s expensive here. I meant to get out with it but there was so little left over I couldn’t risk it, also things have gone wonderfully better since that miserable day when I telegraphed you, so I’ve wanted to stay. I haven’t economised because I thought blissfully your £10 would continue arriving. I begin to realise that you mean me to eke out that £30 to the last drop. I have been digging out old letters trying to figure out when that will be. Round about the end of November, and I find I have just £1 to go from here to there. Why for the love of Mike couldn’t you warn me. I’m right on the spot.

Yrs I Fairweather

C/o Army and Navy YMCA Manila, April 10 (1938)

Dear Ede,

I got your letter of March 6. This is what has come through here to date.

July 13 £30 by wire, also a letter in which you say my balance is £50 odd

Nov 8 £8, some odd shillings

Feb 5 £19.19.0

Mar 22 £8.15.0

You advise me to send direct to Redfern. Only time I saw Nan Kivell he told me he didn't want my stuff and was only taking it to please you and Mr Harris. I never knew you were going to send my stuff to him in the first place—one can shut ones eye—but there are some things one can't do with them open—and one can hold one's nose, but it cramps one's style.

My mother heard from my brother that I was broke and sent me £30 and a letter in which she says I should go and live with my brother (who lives on his wife) and she says: 'My dear, what is a Cinema compared to a healthy honest life?' Well I've had to take that £30 but it gave me a belly ache. I feel I can't take any more of this stuff.* Isn't there some way out. I know no one. I've lived like a hermit. I can't help myself. I can only go to Australia and get a job as a labourer, if I'm lucky. Can't I send things to New York. Can you give me the name of just one gallery. If I sold nothing I could take it better than this stink.

So long

Yrs I Fairweather

(* See note on Nourma Abbott-Smith, Appendix 4)

✎ Appendix 4: The unreliability of Abbott-Smith as a source.

Fairweather's first biographer, Nourma Abbott-Smith, rarely referenced the sources she used, including interviews and published articles. Much of her unacknowledged content is based on Fairweather's unpublished manuscript *Amorales* and the letters he sent to Jim Ede which she edited to suit her own purposes, or the image of Fairweather she

wanted to portray. An example is her iteration of a passage from Fairweather's letter of 10 April 1938 (see appendix 3, above), which she quoted as in its original form:

My mother heard from my brother that I was broke and sent me £30 and a letter in which she says I should go and live with my brother. She says: "My dear, what is the CINEMA compared to a healthy, honest life?" What can she mean! I had to take the £30 but it gave me a pain. I feel I can't take any more of this.... (Abbott-Smith, 1978: 81)

若 Appendix 5: Fairweather's Signature

若 The Chinese character for 'if', used as a signature by Fairweather, late 1940s early 1950s.

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Creative Work:

Each Step into the Light

Dael Allison

To paint is to take the sky in and twist it

Emma Jones, from *Zoos for the Dead*

Note: This is a selection of poems from a larger work

Three paintings found discarded in the mud

1. Japanese pearl divers' camp

huts like black insects
straddle the decayed hill
nudging the chrome
of Frances Bay

cardboard
surrenders pigment
to a sloppy tide

2. (No title)

pearl divers squat
in worn loincloths
and frayed jika-tabi
indentured backs
hunched against the town

among themselves
they speak guarded calligraphy
among themselves
they wearily light up

dragging the smoke
deep into lungs dilated
by weeks on salty luggers
working the islands of the Arafura

the painter's rough marks
draw black ink into muscle
trapped faces
opaque eyes
storm-edge of a shoulder
conch of a thigh
lines frayed out like nerves

alienation sketched in yellow light
they could be sweating gold

six fathoms deep
to the brooding pearl beds
forty-five minutes
of air compressed by an old pump
forty-five minutes
to resist thoughts of lungs
birthing worthless pearls of froth
a ruptured air hose freeing
a last vertical stream
of kanji

3. (no title)

one body two heads

hauling away from each other

as if the painter said

don't think too badly of this

the only honest line is the one

torn down the middle

Each step into the light

He's mast-straight, leaving Darwin
on Tiger Brennan Drive,

an aged craft rounding
Frances Bay's stink of mangroves,

the build-up air viscid as green mud.
Above him nimbus thugs shoulder-butt the sun,

but it slips between them quick as gold
and dives on him — his luminous beard

Each step takes him through
a waterfall of light,

his empty pockets, dingy sandshoes,
are buckets sloshing light,

his heart streams golden rays
like a badly painted icon.

I pull up to offer him a lift.
Surprised, he concertinas in,

stows his ancient rucksack
between his feet.

The clouds rumble,
rain slugs the windscreen.

I wind my window down.

After the storm

The Swimming Place 1951, Ian Fairweather

You beckon I follow

over Darwin's clipped Esplanade lawns to the cliff-edge down secret clefts of bruised
vines and sap-green branches bare feet blooming mud and fallen frangipani air as
sour as tom yum soup.

Lamaroo's humid swimming place where rusting steel bars hold water the way the
land contains the bay and boys along the sea fence wait to morph into another state
a man flings a bait-net it blooms a haul of silver fingerlings and a reverie of
barramundi.

Late afternoon the metal sun sears skin and thought you are mirage glare x-ray
flare sometimes all I need of you is charcoal bones

Muttering time is never enough you lead me on sand that stinks of piss and
eviscerated fish haul away a mound of storm-swept stuff and there's the raft tail up
a float staved-in.

Redeemable? you ask.

Disembodied voices call from the headland the sun's a dried chrysanthemum falling
into tea I turn back with an answer and wonder where you've gone.

Fugitive colours

The painter says paint can't be bought,
the only colours Darwin offers
are vitriolic green and yellow chromes:

*clay does for ochre,
ash makes a passable payne's grey,
but all i have for black
is wheedling printer's ink —
i want a jammy dark that lays on thick.
and i need red.
what does this place want of me,
my blood?*

If I were a conjurer
I could pull the colours from my sleeve.
If he needed blue
I'd distil it from his eyes.

Lived in hulk

Extract from *The Argus*, 9 May 1952

‘The "Rear-Admiral"

nothing prepares you

an artist and beachcomber,

for sudden elevation when lost

got his name in Darwin because his home

a letter weighted by a stone

has been in the rear portion

ends something

of a rotting hulk

the way the delicacy of a nautilus

on the beach.

can snap

Before that he had lived

anything can vanish

in a disused railway truck in the bush,

days numbered

but possums barked ... at night and ate his food ...

light threading under a door

He arrived in Darwin from "somewhere south"

the memory of coins falling

two years ago ...

through the hole in your pocket

In Melbourne ... artists said Fairweather

keys, credulity, faith

was well known ...

in event of exposure

They described him as

restore the needle to the haystack

"very shy and very temperamental."

let words fuse like burnt fingers.

The Rear Admiral

In the parlance of 1952, wit is trickier
than bum-man, queer or pansy.

Darwin locals snicker,

‘Not in front of the ladies ... eh Nancy!’

The Kuru

On the back-end of the bombed and beached
and half-demolished WWII supply-boat
the name *Kuru* still stands proud.

Stars thrash through the frayed nets
draping its severed deck.

In the chart room the painter fumbles for a match,
lights and pumps the Tilley. Gas flares, darkness
scuttles to the vault. I know this Spartan space:
the sagging table, mismatched paint jars,
pencil stubs, battered yellow biscuit tin
full of broken chalk and charcoal, zinc tubes
tightly rolled so not a smear is wasted
and alongside sea-charts, pinned on every
section of the splintered walls, calligraphy
so tactile I could read it like Braille, worlds
of black and white and breathing grey
lit by underpainted colour.

Fairweather's shadow crabs across the wall.
He fills the kettle from a metal bucket
and strikes another match—as if the flame
will keep at bay the questions he won't answer.

In his mind he sails an ocean

The derelict painter drifts
in a land-stranded boat.

Monsoon rain gamelans
the cabin's broken roof,

flutes the wooden walls
jade with mould.

He tracks mangrove mud
across the deck in his rush

to unpeg paintings (Chinese
bridges, coolies, ghats,

women dangling children).

He stacks them on the table

and climbs up, roosting
like a broody hen to save them

from the flow. *i have to go,*
before this damn town drowns me.

Horizons tremble

in tin cans and bamboo cups.

Redefining scarlet

The painter slumps beside me as I drive
into Darwin's sultry heart.

The night wafts musk.

I quote from Ondaatje's poem about
the cinnamon peeler's wife,
where she asks what good it is
to be left without her husband's scent—
as if not spoken to in the act of love
as if wounded without the pleasure of a scar.

Our headlights shaft the night.

The painter hunches forward
staring through the windscreen
as if colour might unravel
from the felted dark
but there's only green;
the dashboard glow, the flashing neon
palm trees at the Free Spirit Resort,
traffic lights on *Go Go Go*.

They flare red in Berrimah.

The painter asks me to define scarlet.

I describe the way Micky Bigfoot ran

from the long-time world's long-grass
onto the seething highway and turned,
too late.

How he twisted through the traffic
like a wallaby chased by dogs,
his dusty world colliding
with the chrome and plastic certainty
of here and now.

How I sat by him on broken glass
waiting for the sirens,
and watched the neon bloom of scarlet
crown his midnight head
with flowers.

I drop the painter off beside
the broken hulk he lives in,
stranded on the edge of Frances Bay.

Leaning back toward the car
he says, 'We all want that—
the blood, the scar.'

Dreaming poets dreaming

what if a raft were to loom from the dark with an old man at the bow, his hand firm on the helm? what if they stepped on, the two poets from another world?

life could be like this, real but another dimension, darwin rising from a blackout like a blazing fish in beagle bay, the air a flux of water, ondatje and neruda adrift on a tropic river. the silent helmsman steers past up-lit cyclone ruins, emerald palms and the edifice to government the locals call the wedding cake, nudging through the flotsam of unconscious men, the raft a smudge on a rippled mirror.

what if neruda asks, why make this building voiceless when stars are shouting. the raft, caught in an answerless current, turns and surges into the brazen gorge of mitchell street where the waters churn with roach butts and mcdonalds styrofoam, pods of slick-sheathed girls, men tattooed like coral trout, where backpackers spew beer from balconies and bouncers circle like sharks.

the ferryman steers past throb, ducks nuts, shenanigans, neruda enigmatic at the prow, ondatje, silver eyes alight, lurching from side to side yelling giddyamatehowyagoin. a black taxi cruises past, frangipani swilling in its wake, someone shouts getofftheroadyafuckwits. apparitions loom blank-eyed and screaming, blood streams from glassing's jagged cuts. the poets cling grimly as they drift past the cocktail luxe of hanumans, the smokers clotted on the entertainment centre steps.

the flood ebbs, the raft eddies in a backwash of public housing, bottle shops, cheap car rentals, sudden quiet. clapsticks sound, ancient twig men sing the dark. waters whisper into sand, sand whispers into silence, a curlew cries. the doors to dreaming open. the poets walk into the desert, deafened by the stars.

Two heads

(Figure) c. 1949, Ian Fairweather

that man i met

by the slipway tap at Frances Bay

that man said

we have two heads: one for what we think

one for what we want

for what we think we want

that man said come with me

to the asian women

nice tarts he said

moon women

two heads on their shoulders

two heads in their bellies

they can suck

their own breasts

that man made me question

desire

do i need it

more than i need food and paint

a brush

a night candle
sacks for a bed

through the mangroves

the moon

is a golden boy

his head heavy

on my shoulder

Puffer fish

small, busy torpedo of toxin,
most poisonous fish in the sea

king of the fingerlings, all bluster
and interference, you scatter

societies of silver, although your lip-plates
grind only crabs and snails.

i know your bluff, puffer. no predator
of fish, but prickly prey.

under threat you swell yourself with water
bloat like a fermenting melon

i saw you strung along the osaka's waterfront
like paper balloons, bug eyed buffoons.

lured from your element
all you suck is poisonous air.

Crocodylus

the evanescent crocodiles

the crocodile embryos curled in soft eggs

genderless in hot xray sands

the intertwined croc hatchlings

sun-gold and basking

hula-hooping on mud banks

the crocodiles stalking river and billabong

crocodile nostril and eye on sky

the genuine eBay Crocs™ wearing

invariably wolf's clothing

the daily headlines the sensational headlines

the NT News whopper crocs

the local crocs swimming with idiots

the crocodiles monsterring tinnies

the shadow lurking beneath the raft

the thundering five metre colossus

the crocodile clashing hinged bronze jaws

morse-coded with osteoderms

the crocodiles clanking armour-tanked
 crocs locating with GPS
 and taking no prisoners

the never-smile crocodiles
 split for childrens' limbs
 the crocodiles with granite eyes

the lost crocs in traps and cages
 their stout four-chambered love hearts
 crocodiles four cornered in sad factories

the mournful dirge of croc empathy
 crocodiles stunned crocodiles slit
 crocs ripped of tail and bellyskin

the sleek wallet and briefcase
 the Blahnik slingbacks
 crocodiles dispensed

and dispensing gut memory
 days of crocodiles decades of crocodiles
 eocyne crocs outlasting

still green breathing croc waters
 the serried jaw the bacterial slime

the 5000 pounds per square inch croc bite

lotus tremble skin-shudder

the always-look-behind-you crocodile

its numinous death-roll

Raft only for fair weather

This raft, when it goes to sea,
will be a rattle of mah-jong tiles,
a scaffold for illusion to cling to
the way wind does.

No *Kon Tiki* crafted for the ocean
this raft is an anarchist's notion;
the deck a driftwood gamble,
buoyancy a bluff of drop-tanks
discarded by defeated bombers.

This raft's fortune is nailed
roughly to the mast,
its parachute sail will shred
east south west north
as the four winds argue the toss
of desperation.

Star-washed and ramshackle
this raft frets against its tether,
restless for any new horizon:
solitaire a certain bet,
beginner's luck no guarantee.

Test run

On Dripstone Cliffs

a youth juggles two oranges

and a china cup,

his body

dark as a reed at sunset.

He calls:

How many old men think they can fight the sea?

How many ancient mariners can we tolerate?

You know without looking

that below the creamy cliffs

a flim-flam raft jiggles in wave wash.

You know

the boy can juggle water.

Remembering the grey house

light falls away

like cold starched sheets

curdled moon

through flawed glass

huddled by a window

stick figures on fogged glass

sleet greeting at the door

dour shrouded world

och, bonny bracing weather

the single cobweb

stretched across the pane

shudders

NO

whistling

sliding down banisters

greedy paws in the pantry

(grandmother's stiff front

and grating bristle chin)

dust beneath the bed
the maid's broom:
out, out from under, laddie
ever away in a dwalm
och now ye glaikit loun, no blathering
haud up yer heid like a thistle

~~~

day squares the drawing room floor  
grandmother clock's slow tick  
the house creaks  
held breath  
*NO*  
*filthy fingers on the curio cabinet*

glassy souvenirs sent with stamps from the Raj:  
fat Buddha, angry Shiva  
the black eye painted on a porcelain hand  
a maharajah's saffron turban  
his butterfly-wing fan  
a monkey under an acorn lens  
*painted with a single hair*  
father's Mutiny Medal *with the Lucknow clasp*  
the *ebony tiger spoon he carved*  
tiny cups of pink granite *from the romantic Shah's tomb*

(younger aunt who names things  
in a cloud of whisper)  
sea goblet with silver stars  
stone box inlaid with rose and gold  
canister of Tetley & Co tea  
bangles of sandalwood and green tourmaline  
the family of ivory elephants descending in size  
(the smallest left behind, like me)

~~~

chilblains, frosty looks
Gentian violet shadows
silent obedience, cellar for penance
auld claes and cauld porritch

two years of crepe armbands
and shushing black Melrose
tape across the narrow stairs
to the third floor's hushed landing

the high window
from which the aunt
(who smelled fermented)

accidentally

fell

Family

‘Pure in heart within the family circle.’ *The Drunken Buddha*, Ian Fairweather

Oh jolly good show! Such a lark. Pass the jolly sandwiches, darling. Has anybody seen the boy? Little twit: he has a jolly nerve. Who? The jolly boy? Your little brother, darling. Nothing but a jolly nuisance. Another sandwich? Fish paste? Oh these are jolly pukka. Bravo cook! Top show. No, we didn't see him. On the jolly beach? Skived off, the Martello tower, I suspect. Queer fish, jolly rum all round. The theatre? Who? No darling, *ART!* Jolly unreliable. More tea anyone? No, mater darling, painting, he wants to be a jolly artist. What a lot of tommyrot! Any dibs on that last sandwich? Isn't this spiffing, all of us here together. So very jolly. Isn't it?

Schoolboys

the thwack of tennis ball on racquet
the scullery door flung back by a jersey gale

i'm thinking about the sounds of certainty

that morning after you slept over
our plimsols sucked the salty marsh
the wind gone, the bay silver

the wind gone, the tide slid out
sand joined the tower to the island
we cast a net for whiting in the shallows

the tower no longer on an island
i flung my arm around your shoulders
briefly

between the rocks below the tower
the returning tide surged fat

on the ebb it sounded hollow

Demobbed

At the Savile Row tailor

you hold the back of the chair
you hold your arms by your side
you hold your hands up in surrender.

You wonder where to look

up at the relentless ceiling
down at the Persian rug.

Outside the bevelled glass window

a turmoil world rushing mob
staring in taking your measure
your thin face your shaved head.

P.O.W. they could be thinking

pow pow pow.

The tailor takes your measure

chest arm thigh

the kneeling tailor his tallow skull

hair brilliantined in plastered strands.

Straight with military bearing

you flinch at the inside leg
feel inclined to snicker.

Can't look at your mother

upholstered in thunderous silk
your mother in charge of the tailor

your mother who ordered the maid

to rid your head of lice.

Can't look at your mother

you'd feel compelled to salute.

Everything has its measure:

a foot and a half to the tailor

(except for his pinning hands)

five feet seven inches to the dead fox

circling your mother's shoulders

six yards to the door

a ten day march to Scotland.

You hold your breath

you hold yourself rigid.

You want Harris Tweed

its scent of tobacco and wild heather

shooting straight to the back

of your throat.

Mother says grey serge.

You want your hair back.

Fragment

(Mural Study—fragment) 1934, Ian Fairweather

the problem of an unmarked sheet of paper

you have to start somewhere but your heart brims with the breadth of the world the
way a mountain falls into a fjord naked boys straddling a buffalo a gecko

an everyday beginning any wailing new-born not a difficult concept we've all
been through it

the black hole of commission a patron's other narrative rough sketches the
cartoon of indecision doubt drifting like dust

power of the purse strings damning eye of the beholder

the slow and corrugated road to the house of approbation a lifetime to walk there
open the gate mount the steps enter the doorway you would rather walk out of

pinned to the wall a cacophony of marks your striving for something spirit or
understanding

if you miss the point tear it into pieces

Small marks we leave

patterns impress regardless
rolls of cartridge yellowed by the sun
a slab of wet board zigzagged
by car tyres
type on a tabloid newspaper
faces leering from a womens' magazine

salvaged from a gutter
fixed to a wall
paint and gravity
 it's oranges and lemons
 under and over
 chop chop chop chop

the relief of inexactness
lines can't be anything
but grey
on a brown stroke
on a sweet black curve
circling eye lip
averted head
the first mark's potential
that first dribble

when will you pay me
say the bells at the quay
when you are rich
say the bells under the bridge

what else can a painting say
this is what is
detached illogical
never wanting more than
gouache's memory and amnesia
the freedom
to start again

when will that be
say the bells of charity
when you are dead
say the cracked bells of hell

each work an extenuation
such small marks we leave
here comes a candle to light you to bed
chip chop chip chop
chop off your head.

House

the threshold of extinction
somewhere for feet to move through
verdigris in the sink
bleached curtains in strips
fly carcasses on every window sill

find a house uninhabited for years
and someone suddenly wants rent
perfectly kind one week black suspicion
the next so often stray cats prefer
the verandah stars for walls

broken-handled knives forks with bent tines
clutter's implied disgrace
long-gone voices collect in corners
thicker than dust
shout and the sound slaps back like

a wind slammed door
wall-contained night no idea which way
the trees lean if frost has painted the grass
or what the southern cross
is up to laziness taps on cracked glass

mould on the wallpaper the shape of
monstrous heads a square patch where
a picture hung or a text

bless this house

self preservation the secret miracle

once a tin of pipe tobacco left
in a dresser drawer and the incongruity
of a Bakelite smokers stand once
an upright piano heavy with dust
and sticking yellow keys — i let it rip

uses for old cardboard the shell of a rat
a man's worth measured by the concessions he makes
when a storm comes the tin roof
groans

in a house i dream of drowning
in a boat i don't

Instinct for leaving

the security of seven:

seven paintings to a bundle,

seven knots to tie an anchor,

seven beers at the pub,

a week without eating.

to understand the rules of distance

calculate by seven:

the world acquires a fabric.

seven feet of proximity to little terns

and they turn their heads away

to focus on the miniscule convoy fish.

inch nearer they're all tensed wing

and wary eye.

any closer, they are gone.

when the wet begins in darwin

seven magpie geese honk above the town

no distance at all

to the arrowed skeins of flight

ravelling through the white skies

above a gulf island in canada

no distance

to the instinct for leaving

Shadow within shadow

From the wings I watch
Micky Bigfoot unpin paintings
from broken walls, roll them roughly,
cap them in a plastic tube.

Kneeling he stuffs a rucksack:
the tube, a hank of rope,
a long-neck tortoise shell
a willow pattern cup,
and two black feathers splashed
with scarlet bright as blood.

The painter appears upon the stage
shouting *No boy! you're not coming!*
Micky condenses darkness.
In the dim light, he vanishes.

Alone in the spotlight the painter grinds,
I have no words to be pinned by poets.

I shiver in the sudden chill.

Micky Bigfoot

sometimes

i see micky

(lithe quick flesh blood)

sometimes

i don't

Cast away

midnight:

an abandoned boat's

rotten hull.

waves slop

through staved-in sides

restless as thoughts.

no meshing

no making them slow.

clapped-out engine bleeding rust and oil,

no potential

to gear to neutral.

spring-coiled on a prickle rope

i chart a skipper's course,

a rescue mission

to the reaches of abstraction—

an old artist painting

junk into a raft.

shadows flicker

celluloid liminal

spinning off the sprockets:

a wound like a garland

on the forehead

of a shadow-boy,

mer-boy—

he could be the key.

silver keys shoal

in unclear shallows

cast a net

clickclickclick

red dolphin chases something glinting

across the sea's black threshold

clickclick cast again

haul back and back

no shape left to darkness.

slip anchor

cast off

silver cracks my eyes apart. empty dawn—

the painter and his raft have gone

Artist adrift at sea

Extract from *The Argus*, 9 May 1952

‘A R.A.A.F. bomber
is searching the Timor Sea
for ... Jack Fairweather,
adrift ... on a tiny raft.

*he went to sea in a sieve, he did
in a sieve he confronted the sea
on an april nox he snuck away
turning his back on the blabbers who'd say
only crackbrain artists anyway
would take a sieve to sea.*

The "Rear-Admiral"
told a lugger crew
who spoke to him the other day
that he was
"making for Dilli,
in Timor."

*and while the sieve spun up and around
and the authorities gloomed for sure he's drowned
he clung on saying 'the sieve ain't big
on this pea-green main, but why give a fig
this sieve is ideal for me'.*

He asked:

"What way do I go?"

*he sailed away in a sieve post-haste
though the sailing wasn't fast
with rat-eaten hessian doomed to fail
cobbled together by way of a sail
and strung to a clothes-prop mast.
all the jawboners said when he was gone,
what a fool to make a voyage so long
with a bucket of water and eight tins of spam
and abstraction's not worth a tinker's damn,
like the sieve it will never last.*

and the lugger crew

told him: "Straight on-

for 300 miles!"

*far and few, far and few,
are the lands where illusionists live
the hearts on their sleeves are cold and blue
when they go to sea in a sieve.*

Fairweather refused

offers of help.'

Nightburst

Lights, Darwin Harbour 1957, Ian Fairweather

men teeter on your edges darwin. strung to night's ebb-tide filament-tight, cockle eyes attune to nuance of fish, their dangling legs sway to the lurch and wash of wave. you have no authority darwin. your pier lights do not arrest the dark, your static starbursts are as blind as mangrove mud. only prescient larrakia see *lit bateau's* shadow slip across the sandbar away from fanny bay and scuttle quick as cuttlefish into the channel's inky narrative of crocodiles and moonfish, barramundi, bombed ships, downed planes, disintegrating men. your strangling chrome-green, chrome-yellow outpost hell of people scumbles black behind me. wind squalls like a fretful child. water streams fluid as slapped paint out and out the ever-stretching gulf past east point past mandorah beneath charles point's baleful lighthouse stare. flung like a skipping stone into the timor current, flotsam shadow random arrow sucked into distance, released from land's tether into rising weather, freed from strangling green and suffocating kind, *leaving australia behind to face the empty seas.* and they will be as deep and true as reckitts blue.

Cocky

'I've been rather like a weathercock', Ian Fairweather

uneasy dawn,
the sea barrel-rolls green anger at the raft
the sky itches for an argument

a half-day wondering where the winds are—
then punch-drunk and dangerous
the monsoon crashes through

up for it i weave and feint but every move
is pounded and pummelled and hit on the break,
round after round across the timor sea

a side-snap hurls me to the deck
and i'm down for the count
no contest

someone ties my ankles to the mast
with straining arms i grip my buckling raft
so it won't break my heart apart

Night raft

abducted by the wind

reference points all null and void

waves hiss like snakes

i hear you laugh

my hands stretch into the night

but all my fingers touch

is absence.

Monsoon

rafting down a monstrous wall of water

i fall between molecules of salt

reach armpit deep into the jaws

of a million years

of ghostfish, devilfish, cadaverfish

in china i saw a man fall from huchow bridge

one drop seeking the source

a line of paint sliding back into the brush

hold on!

my own defiant shout from fifty years ago

as i scaled saint ouens tower

the banshee jersey wind

ripping my fingertips from stone

where is the strength

of that exhilarated boy

hold on!

but what choice has a body

falling down a moving mountain

the ocean roars

my mouth opens

voiceless as a drain

only the boy's straining rope

brakes this headlong fall to hell

skin spinning off my ankles

like a prayer wheel

Wabi sabi

Off Kanagawa, Hokusai's great wave
reached sumo fingers to lever fishermen
from bean-pod boats.

Lulled by the sea's sleeping breath,
they dreamed betrayals of yellow lamplight,
steaming onsen, dry yukata and tabi
—and were unprepared when the wave woke
and turned.

Meisho-e: this blue saturated god.
The printmaker takes up his gouges
the calligrapher his brush.

In each frail craft mouths gape
at the infinite hand that pulls men down
to the heart of the ocean.

Fishermen who know the colours of the sea,
not hanging on for dear life
but bowing.

~~~

The worst dreams:  
submerging with gills that disappear,  
or flying when you know air won't sustain you—  
and the sea below hardens  
and you smash against its granite face.

~~~~

sumimasen wave-san, am i in your way?
you drag me helter-skelter to your crest
then i plummet like a man with ankles bound
by rubber bands.
arigato wave-san, i am grateful for each time
that glimpse of breathless indigo
ends with an upwards snap.
again and again you deliver me
from the sightless deep.
domo arigato gozaimashita, mr wave—
thank you for that moment
when i reach and grasp
the buoyant moon.

Shark alarm

Night and day, you are the one Cole Porter

and so we escort you through the dire straits
in your raft of skin,
random as a sea-spiralled egg.

sharp suited, night and day
we serrate your consciousness,
but trust me, there is not one mean bone

in our bodies. our intent, too
is malleable as cartilage —
it all depends on you, my love.

night and day, observe the way the sea
becomes us, rippling like a veil
in our wake, although

it is you who are the bride and we
your dedicated entourage —
hand-servants in oyster-grey.

night and day we think of you. please,
don't misconstrue our grinning snouts,

our conveyor-belt array of teeth

(any dentist would be proud) — it is true,
when those who walk on water sink,
we pink muscle with our cutting smiles

but your comfort, heart, is all we wish.
you watch us through solitary hours,
admire our pearly underbellies

as we turn to nudge your flimsy craft.
school of hard knocks, collective shiver
how well we rub along together —

but know this: i usually work alone, and
night and day, under this hide
there's an oh such a hungry yearning.

believe me my sweet and lonely one,
i will gladly leave the rest behind
to take your hand.

Monsoon on four panels

Monsoon 1961-2, Ian Fairweather

<p>could be a picnic could be a war, must brace for each possibility, storm clenched tight on the fungal sun, sulphurous air that uncertain yellow of jaundiced skin. <i>donner und blitzten</i>, slabs of darkness, lightning to stab them with, retinas sear, jackboot percussion reverberates through a hollow skull. nothing is subtle, the fulgar vulgar as strippers in a spiegel tent burlesque. that's the regenerating power of the brush, <i>fragmented, moving, re-grouping, the outlines fluid and changing</i>. the painting offers this: white vivisects black, grey, bruised ochre; invent your own ending</p>	<p>in this ink-squall ocean line conjures no chance-met liner of salvation, no portholes to the soul, only the ubiquitous storm, the relentless tedium of waves rolling the barrel out over and over and the surrender of nose mouth sky to unearthly despair. paint strokes dribble tributaries of loss. nothing can ever be shipshape and this, as any mother should warn, invariably leads to a fall. somewhere buildings collapse, trees splinter, the air is cross-hatched by thickets of scars, is electrified with meaning. and even though the light is pure and the dark is pure, chaos is inevitable</p>
<p>breathtaking the interface of corrupted night and awful livid moments when a man's shape caged in garish light flickers over cardboard to batten metaphoric hatches, or to save a sail four sheets to the wind, heroic shoulders squared against the weight of bad decisions: the crucified geometry of a listing mast and defeated spars, and no indication if the lines are anything but lines or a life roped tight by one desperate knot around an ankle</p>	<p>the painting will not reveal now or at any other time how beneath concealing layers blood seeped from slashed forehead to open mouth how that laughing mouth sprayed the blood to silhouette the hand spread against the fearful weight of sky. then the one fact central to the chance of restoration, the only certain thing, was his arms wrapping tight and the way he whispered breathe <i>breathe</i> as light fell from the clouds like shattered glass</p>

Scuppered

oh matey oh bosun

nosedown in the scuppers

i climb the canvas of a wave

in the scuppers with a hosepipe

dip my paintbrush into salt

sea scuppered slapping out a stomachful

of seavomit *keel-haul him*

a yardarm under

caterwauling oysters and bile

micky is that yolngu children laughing

is that you caterhauling

my ankles *in the scuppers with a*

oh captain notsofairweather

here you are overboard torn between coming

and going *what shall wedo* *what shall we do with a*

what what

shall we do

with a drunken

scuppered *in the scuppers with a*

ears filling with the shouts of yolngu men

spear-barbs through my ankles haunted by the spectre of shh

ssshhhhh ssshhhhhaaaaa

micky i need you

need you to translate this brrr

translate this braille of fish

sweet ankle water to the sharks vivisecting

in the scuppers with a hosepipe

micky be my captain sing me a yardarm explore me

in the scuppers earlye in the

micky you are *hoo-ray and up*

you are hauling *hoo-ray and up she rises*

micky you

it's you oh matey you drag me back to the scuppers

tie me hosepipe tight to the lie of mast

micky it's you

earlye in the morning

Write me off as a fool

*So many islands, so much rowing
with invisible oars against the current!*

Tomas Tranströmer

the storm has gone but the sea

still heaves like the breast

of a self-righteous mother

each sigh a dark subtext

so many gulls turned to spindrift

the sea sticky with feathers

so many welcoming rocks

this escapade might spit me out anchorless

those who dismiss dreamers as fools

will content themselves with being right

Sketch for a painting

south east trades / ricepaper wind
raft / cloud / crowded ideogram
colander sail / unravelling sackcloth
milk-sea / curdled in a rolling bottle
sour sharks / tobaccoless pipefish
compass cardinals / memory chess
mangrove-stink beard / wire-stiff nostril-hair
luminous kidneys / salt's fatal osmosis
slick cormorant / unflappable psychopomp
sunset's corpse stretched on a pink cloth

Bacarole

Bacarole 1957, Ian Fairweather

o sole mio

sta 'nfronte a te!

o sole and minnow

stay in front of me,

you lead me, you show the way ...

what a beautiful thing, a sun-shackled day,

a thousand suns from billow to billow,

the air benign, the monsoon done,

the nightmare labyrinth blown away,

its city of thunder, metropolis clouds

all gone—every fateful cul de sac.

my raft arrows on, no turning back.

o splendid radiant yellow day,

survival, with an ocean to sing,

warm winds waft my straitened craft

and snap the sail to butterfly wings.

original sun, tremendous sun,

brighter and brighter still in my face

you set my blinded eyes ablaze.

o sun, o sun, o sole and minnow,

deliver me from the shadow gate.

while the fish sing, my world is yellow.

o sole mio, sear off the black,

the fish are singing, i can't look back.

Cormorant

can no man be an island?
each day your burnished feathers
sweep through mirrored silence

black feet splay
and you thump-down on my deck.
my unmoored heart is yours

for every random landing.
your blue eye is cold.
your snakelike head, swivel neck

draw a sinuous line
all pouter chest and wry knowledge
don't talk to me of question marks.

a flick and the flailing fish
has vanished, gulped past the place
where chinese fishermen

would knot the noose.
you watch, wary, but i
don't want your catch: another

man, another raft, another world.
black soul adrift defying distance
proximity is comfort, the blood

pulsing warm in your veins
pulses warm through mine.
if what reflects us makes us real

watch me. when the wind comes
my veins will fill with light
black wings stretch, feet lift off.

Ticket out of China

Once you'd stretched your length
across the willow-pattern map
and tramped roads dusty with camel shit,
Celestial winds unpicking your edges,

you realised that water rewrote the horizon,
and no blue lakes remained among the brown.
The words etched on the bottom read the same:
the summer palace closed for winter,
the Jade Fountain frozen.

When you surfaced all you had
was the syncopated rattling of your teeth
(sometimes a blanket, mostly just an icy room)
and the simple question;
Is this enough of the world?

Hours spent climbing rough stone stairs
to the Tai Shan monastery
(alongside ancient women with tight-bound feet)
was a kind of enlightenment.

At the top, words roughly scratched in snow:

You will reach understanding

when you have broken all the bones
of your expectations.

Return to the bottom.

Ascend again.

Chi-tien stands on his head

Chi-tien stood on his head before the Empress 1965, Ian Fairweather

thunderclouds on the horizon—

a gallery of fat buddhas,

no price tags.

what if everything were revealed?

not in grand pavilions

but in lanes filled with threadbare washing

where only the wind makes the poor fat:

a rabble of dusty children,

women plucking chickens,

the man selling strings

of dried persimmons,

the pole-vendor shouldering

trays of misfortune cakes.

a monk stands on his head before the empress:

his exposed genitals

illuminate the truth of a man.

chi-tien cartwheels like a leaf

over expectations. his abbot

and his fellow monks are angry

but what expectations can be had

of a leaf?

chi-tien stands on his head,

drunk and disorderly.

ha, i like this man!

this is the way the story goes:

the monk who stands on his head

understands another world.

the empress in her gold cheongsam

understands the monk and laughs.

the abbot and other monks

understand nothing,

but the empress gives them money.

ways to live a life:

in the narrow cell of inhibition

or adrift on a different sea,

fat buddhas on the horizon

taking note of the sins

you have not committed.

the mismatched thread

may prove the strongest.

Roi Soleil

Roi Soleil 1956-7, Ian Fairweather

sun-flooded

the beauty of bali

comes down on you that way

on this island *somewhere near to heaven*

two naked boys straddle

the broad back of a water buffalo

they are waving

by naked i mean

as well as

the shawl of sun

a woven cloth is draped

loose on their skin

but their loins are bare

by waving I mean

they see me

and are happy

the buffalo is mute

but its eye is all-knowing

it sways towards me
with benign acceptance

will that be me one day
when doubts coalesce
riding joyful between the horns
of no dilemmas

the sun
at the centre
of my own creation

Words like any painted lines

here are words the poet tells me not to use

heart moon star rapture

heart swelling leaping wounded

moonfaced oblivion

star-crossed rapture

get the picture?

palimpsest

verboten for fishermen and any other lover

how then to paint the empty mother

the child struggling in the net?

pretty little viridian

mix a primary with a secondary for a nuanced grey

the impact of vermilion

glasshouse mountains etched in cinnabar

pale throat squeezed beside the shalimar

dream infinity

the sky opens into rooms

windows that will not close

words like any other lines

heart 心

moon 月亮

star 星

欢天喜地

Message in a milk bottle

with so many opportunities for failure
the monarch's stamp no guarantee
telegrams vanishing down drains
packages pilfered from pockets
rickshaw men hobbled by rusted nails
delivery boys waylaid by hot congee
the malevolent landlord's fat shrug
care of the consul uncaring

with no ships in the shipping lane
no time-honoured wine flask at hand
this milk bottle is my trusted vessel
blunt mouth gagged with an oilskin rag
and inside on a cream-stained page
the message no one needs to read

buoyant on an errant current
help is not required

H.S. Ede Esq.

Dear Ede,

I liked your skinny shape
and you were kind. Once again

here I am without company
calling for a loan. A raft
with decks awash

is a capital place to sort mail.

No money for Harris Tweed, nothing more,

life a sort of Chinese soup —

functional, but no use on the inside.

I had been in bed but carried on,

ordered myself to change tack —

far from being dead and buried.

What's the gossip from London?

I know I'm seen as a doubtful starter

about to give up appearing everywhere.

Even when offered

access to the establishment

I draw back toward shelter,

go round in parables

imagining such things as soft fruit,

soldiers and the beginning of a tall story.

How is your family?

Creatures of the night fly awfully low.

Basic freedoms

become permanently discoloured.

What's the point of equilibrium?

Yrs IF

Lit bateau

the sun clenches then it's night,
billows for pillows,
the sea-bed the object of dread.
frights and delusions,
eyes i dare not meet in dreams,
perhaps another jonah,
dripping bile from the whale's belly.

mornings are always a let-down.
if collete were around i could ask
what she thinks of inertia.
or klee might appear, taking his line
for a sail.
time moves in little fidget wheels,
slessor knew the truth of it.

diurnal monotony. i rest my head
on a bag of sodden bread.
give me a young man's strength
to face another round.

Flying fish

all day angels arc from the sea begging
turquoise torpedoes a salty bombardment
sun crossed and dubious ethereal temporal
their wind-up wings whirr sixes and sevens
you forget how they hiss

all day scales scatter failed levitations
lost intercessions in your rudderless drift
blood stains their gills they flap at your feet
thudding bruising but no names goad
you elbow dumb numbers

all day you cast them back to the water
their transient freedom knowing dying
their small mouths gasp *you are the obstacle*
but you are the rescuer all day the volition of angels
is cupped in your hands

At night my bed is hooked

invisible birds haul me weightless
through spaces in the phosphor road
where the wind has paused

waking is a miracle of fingers, snot,
skin fragments.

the little terns sit lightly on my chest
and keep their piping to a whisper

Lacuna

Roti 1957, Ian Fairweather

daylight erodes flesh

and burns bones to

wind mutter.

the dark journey

has whittled me to a husk.

boy, you gather me like a bundle of twigs,

carry me from the sinking raft

across the lagoon

where trees unfold from stone.

you've always known the worth

of leaving.

destinations

are tricky,

eyes line every headland

and rumours will begin.

stillness is a revelation,

am i done with resisting?

a blank page, you say, offers resolution.

boy, i lie on crusted sand because of you,

watch palm fronds eat the sky,
contemplate the old resolve
to live as art,
scrape the scum
from abandoned brushes.

you knew i could not begin again
without you.

Reflection

i wake to the sea laid out
like the crinkled skin
in a half-empty tin of paint

already i've heard too many
complaints from clouds

Coda

Bus out of Darwin, 29 April 2012

Nine pm at the bus stop
where the Stuart Highway
starts its long trek out of town.
This is the road
of unconfessed conversations,
of the late worker with guilty
semen in her jeans, of the lawyer
heading for Parap Tavern
to flash his I.D.
for his \$100 merlot.
This is the place
where the Larrakia wait,
sitting on the footpath,
stretched out on the bench
their dark eyes see through you.
The sky presses a heavy hand
and the cloying stench of diesel.
You want the night to smell of frangipani,
you want to taste the moon,
you want the bus to come.
If you could hear the sea from here
it would be silent.
An old long-grasser shambles to a stop

twigs in his beard, hands in the pockets
of his paint stained pants.

You look away. You know
he needs a curlew's cry
to tell him where he's going.

A bus pulls in, the old man boards,
the Larrakia all get on
through the windows stars
mass on their night skin.

The door hisses shut.

A curlew cries.

The words LAST SERVICE glow
on the bus's disappearing back.

Raftbedraft

Lit Bateau 1957, Ian Fairweather

So you think this will be your last ocean?

You throw a lemon to the stars
and calculate the moon's mockery.
There is no red in this picture.

You throw a lemon at the stars
and shout at the impotence of space—
where's the safety in this picture?
Salt-fingers bloat into mushrooms.

A pin-point transcending space,
you draw so many mothers holding children,
your fingers swollen into mushrooms,
each line rucked as drowned rope.

You draw so many mothers holding children
at arm's length over the void,
lines pucker like cast-off rope;
the amplitude of ink.

Navigate night into the void
where sleep collaborates with motion,

the amplitude of ink,
a rib-raft on a sucking lung of water.

Sleep collaborates with motion
and the moon's a lemon mockery,
your bed drifts on the swelling lung of water—
this ocean is not the last ocean.



Notes on the poems

Artist adrift at sea: Apologies to Edward Lear and *The Jumblies*.

Cocky: Fairweather quote, ‘I’ve been something of a weathercock’, from interview by Hazel de Berg, Bribie Island, 26 November 1965.

Crocodylus: After *Sanctus*, Jen Hadfield.

Family: ‘Pure in heart within the family circle’ quoted from the Prologue, *The Drunken Buddha*, translated by Ian Fairweather, UQP 1965.

First landing, Bribie Island: last words of lines from Lisa Gorton’s pantoum, *Petrol*.

Fragment: poem response to an untitled Fairweather work—title in brackets used by Murray Bail, *Fairweather* 2009, Murdoch Books.

Lit Bateau: line 5 from T. S. Eliot’s *The Hollow Men*.

Losing count of the days: Fairweather quote; ‘I paint, dammit’, from video fragment in *Fairweather Man*, 2008, Aviva Ziegler, Pacific Film and Television and Fury Productions.

Monsoon on four panels: Fairweather quote in italics (‘fragmented ...’ taken from *Ian Fairweather, Portrait of a Painter*, Nourma Abbott-Smith, University of Queensland Press, 1978, p. 30.

Redefining scarlet: developed from *Defining Scarlet*, published in the 2008 Northern Territory Literary Awards, also in *Secrets Beneath Stones*, Poetry at the Pub, Newcastle, anthology, 2008.

Roi Soleil: Fairweather’s description of Bali as ‘somewhere near to heaven’ from letter to Jim Ede, sent from Perth, 1933, Kettle’s Yard archive.

Two heads: poem response to an untitled Fairweather work—title in brackets used by Murray Bail, *Fairweather* 2009, Murdoch Books.

