

Martin Johnston *looked* like a poet.

The first time I saw him, he was sitting in the arched sandstone embrasure of one of the windows of the pseudo-Gothic building that housed the English Department at Sydney University. Dressed in a black skivvy and black pants so tight that they seemed to have been sprayed onto his pencil-thin frame, he was smoking a black Sobranie cigarette. Its clouds of aromatic smoke added to the halo-effect created by the sunlight catching on the split ends of his long, fine, dark hair. Yes, obviously a poet.

Whenever any of us other students in the Second Year Honours seminar ventured an opinion, our tutor immediately asked Martin Johnston what *he* thought. As he replied, in his light, precise voice, he seemed to know everything about everything. At the end of class, she always pounced on him before he could escape out the door. ‘What is your mother writing about this week?’ she would inquire as he desperately fumbled another Black Russian from the packet. ‘And when will your father be publishing his sequel?’

Yes, he was *that* Martin Johnston. Son of Charmian Clift, who had a weekly column in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Son of George Johnston, whose novel *My Brother Jack* had won the 1965 Miles Franklin Award. In the latter half of the 1960s, it seemed that you could barely open a newspaper without reading about this couple who had returned from a decade of expatriation in Greece to take the Australian literary world by storm. Even George Johnston’s chronic lung disease added to the mystique.

Despite the fact that Martin never traded on his parents’ reputation, the fuss that was made about them infuriated me so much that I made a childish vow never to read anything written by Charmian Clift or George Johnston. And if I wouldn’t read

anything *by* these writers, I was damned if I was going to read *about* them. So when the newspapers reported their untimely and tragic deaths, I did my best not to notice.

It is ironic, of course, that I would later end up living with Martin, and even more ironic that I would spend twenty years of my life researching and writing a biography of Charmian Clift. But if I 'out' my immature self in this way, it is simply to show that I fell in love with Martin *in spite of* the literary legend.

As time went on, I became aware that Martin Johnston had abandoned university and became initially a journalist and later a scrounging freelancer. Meanwhile I too escaped the Leavisite factional war of the English Department, by the more cautious move of transferring to History. By 1972, I was enrolled in a Masters degree when my circle of friends at the Forest Lodge Hotel came to include a number of chess players; through them I found myself sometimes sitting at the same table as Martin Johnston.

I guess it helped that he was always totally absorbed in moving pieces around a board, and it probably also helped that he had changed from Sobranies to Alpine, although he still marked his individuality by having a dash of cloves in his beer. And as I was on a Commonwealth postgraduate scholarship and he was broke, I sometimes bought him a beer (with a dash of cloves). Before returning to his 'little people' (as he dubbed his chess pieces), he always thanked me in a way that was almost excessively polite. Beyond these brief courtesies, however, Martin and I did not talk to each other.

Then one night, the assembled chess players packed themselves into my blue Bellett and we went to a different drinking hole, outside our usual territory. As I went up to the bar to buy my first drink, I happened to be standing next to Martin when a complete stranger bowled up to him and started asking him personal questions about his parents.

Martin's face instantly became even paler than usual, and his long fingers were trembling so much that he could hardly hold a match to his Alpine.

'Do you want to get out of here?' I asked him.

Back at my house in Gilpin Street, Camperdown, we stayed up till dawn, drinking flagon wine, smoking cigarettes, listening to *Surrealistic Pillow*. That was some time in winter. Shortly before Christmas, Martin moved in.

In those days, my self-esteem was so low that no one could have been more astonished than I was to discover that I was Martin Johnston's latest girlfriend. Looking back, however, I think that that first Christmas gives a bit of a window into the need that we filled for each other. Like Martin, I had no parents, no family obligations. As our house-mates and friends went off for what we believed to be boring family get-togethers, we were smug about our mutual status as orphans. And as the afternoon turned to evening, a number of renegades escaped back to us for wine and food and conversation and chess. So we had the best of both worlds. Or so we felt.

Many years later, a friend who knew my family history asked me: 'Did you realise that you chose the most damaged boy that you could find?' Of course I didn't. The premature death of my mother had happened in very different circumstances from the death of Martin's mother; neither he nor I realised that we were each carrying a huge burden of grief and remorse. Or perhaps it was the case that, for both of us, grieving was simply our normal state. As well, we were young, and were much more interested in the present than the past. And in that era, you were not advised to ask people, 'R U OK?' As Terry Larsen writes in his very moving recollection of Martin: 'Singing and drinking seemed a solution to most problems.' I couldn't sing (or not in tune), but I made up for that by the amount of drinking I did.

Yet if Martin did not talk about his parents' deaths, their lives were by no means a taboo topic. Although he hated to be *asked* about Charmian Clift and George Johnston, and especially by strangers, he often talked about them in passing. Thus Martin would frequently refer to something that 'Mum always said' or which 'Dad used to say', and there were details such as the fact that 'Dad used to make a really good egg and bacon pie' or 'When my mother was a little girl, she used to starbake on the beach at night, in the belief that she would turn silver.' Certainly, everything Martin ever did say about his family and his childhood was happy and positive.

I write this mindful of the current trend in blaming Charmian Clift and George Johnston, and especially Charmian, for being bad parents. Both from the things Martin told me, and from the research I did for Clift's biography, I am certain that no child could have been more loved, or more encouraged in his talents and his passions, than Martin Clift Johnston.

Of course, Martin's deep love for his parents made their deaths even harder to bear. But I know he would be horrified at any suggestion that his own death should be laid at their door.

By the time Martin moved into Gilpin Street, he had pretty much finished the text for *Ithaka, Modern Greek Poetry in Translation*. Although he had been working on some of these translations since his school days on Hydra, he regarded the book's publication at this time as part of his public stand against the Junta that had overthrown democratic government in Greece in 1967. At the time of the coup, he had read poetry at rallies organised by the Committee for the Restoration of Democracy in Greece, of which his mother was one of the vice-presidents. Martin's sister Shane had taken an even more active role by working in the Sydney office of the left-wing Greek newspaper, the *Hellenic Herald*, and — on a trip to Greece— even smuggling

medicine to Mikis Theodorakis in jail. Fittingly, when *Ithaka* was published by Island Press in 1973, Martin dedicated the book to her.

Through 1972 and 1973, Martin scraped a living by writing book reviews for the *Sydney Morning Herald* and film reviews for the *Sun-Herald*. For the former, he was usually given that week's would-be literary masterpiece, but as the second-string film reviewer for the *Sun-Herald* he was assigned to all the rubbish. I remember a particularly ghastly Friday when we watched *Blood, Sweat and Gunpowder*, followed by *The House that Dripped Blood*, and finally—with the aid of 3D spectacles—a Scandi porn flick called *Dagmar's Hot Pants*. To recover, we went to a newly opened restaurant called *Tony's Bon Gout*, where we splurged the whole of the review-fee.

In 1974, Martin was able to drop the film reviewing when he received what seemed like the extraordinary sum of \$5000 as part of the Whitlam government's hugely expanded program of Literature Board grants. He had applied, not for poetry, but to write a novel with the working title of *Heady*. Inspired by a plaster-of-Paris human head Martin had found in a dump bin, a short story with this title, written in an experimental prose style, had won a university literary prize. Attributed to Martin's alter ego Sean MacLan, the story would be incorporated into the novel, which by the end of that year would change its name to *Cicada Gambit*. Obviously a chess reference, this title also reflects Martin's passion for insects. (Indeed, he was fascinated by all creatures; the poems written in Greece feature bees, frogs, lizards, an owl, a hedgehog, and the perennial cats.)

The irruption of public money bought Martin time to write, exactly as grants are meant to do. In the time I had known him, he had always worked hard on his book reviews. (Film reviews were another matter.) Never a dilettante, he did as many drafts as the job required. And like his mother, who had never missed a deadline for her weekly column, he was scrupulous about getting his copy in on time. (In those pre-

email days, the *Sydney Morning Herald* would send a car to collect the typescript.) But the process of reviewing was, by its nature, intermittent, and the product was ephemeral: the peerless prose of today's critical piece would be tomorrow's fish wrap. Writing the novel was a different matter. As I look back at the way Martin worked on *Cicada Gambit*, I see him developing a regular work pattern that he would continue throughout the time we lived together. Crucially, it was a pattern set by his parents.

Although many commentators describe Clift and Johnston drinking on the Hydra waterfront, they fail to point out that when the couple arrived at the port at midday to meet the mail boat—yes, and to have lunch and a drink—they had both been at work since dawn. Clift was a painstakingly slow writer, who constructed her novels or travel books in little pieces, but when Johnston was writing a novel he started at the beginning of the story and worked on to its end, with a regular production rate of three typed pages a day. As the author pointed out, this meant that a first draft could be produced in three or four months.

If Charmian Clift had set the example for the way Martin produced short pieces, it was George Johnston's method that Martin would follow when he began his own first novel.

Starting mid-morning, he used to sit in the upstairs back room of the Gilpin Street terrace and hammer away with his nicotine-stained single typing finger until he had completed his quota of three pages. In the early evening, when he came downstairs, he would read the ongoing serial to whoever was in the house at the time. Infuriatingly, if the third page ended mid-sentence, there Martin would stop, and we would have to wait until the next evening to find out what had happened to the eccentric and paranoid Greek-Australian chess-player Vlastos, to the cadet journalist Sean MacIan, to the autistic boy Nicky, or to the pretentious English Department academic Dr Skogg.

Unfortunately, publishers did not prove as keen about this experimental work as we all were; the reading public of Australia would have to wait for it until 1983. But at least the novel got finished, as did my postgraduate thesis.

Along with many Hellenophiles, Martin had refused to go to Greece while the Colonels were in power. In July 1974, the Junta fell. In November 1975, Australia suffered its own *coup d'état*. A month later, we exchanged Australia for Greece.

This was not intended to be a holiday, but an expatriation. Yet if we were copying Clift and Johnston, there was to be a significant difference. With the exception of Grace Edwards (Big Grace, in George Johnston's novel, *Clean Straw for Nothing*), Martin would avoid the foreign colony like the plague that they were. We would not even go to the island of Hydra, except for a single fraught night at the very end of our three-year sojourn.

Within minutes of our arrival at Athens airport, I met a new Martin Johnston. The person I knew was always uneasy with strangers, but this unfamiliar Martin jumped into the front seat of the taxi and for the entire trip to our hotel talked non-stop with the driver. In Sydney, I'd heard Martin speak Greek from time to time—with his sister, or with members of the Greek community, or with the waiters at the *New Hellas* or *Diethnes*—so it wasn't his fluency in the language that amazed me. It was the way he was relating to the taxi driver.

'What were you talking about?' I asked as soon as we reached our destination.

'Oh—politics... music... football...'

Football?

'Yes, it turned out that the taxi driver and I follow for the same team.'

Martin Johnston had a soccer team?

Of course he did. Olympiakos: the red and white team from Piraeus—the team to which Melina Mercouri (a family friend of the Johnstons) sings the theme song in the film *Never on Sunday*.

Over the years that we spent in Greece, this was Martin Johnston. Whereas, in Sydney, his friends were fellow poets and critics and chess players, in Greece he could talk to anyone. Most of his friends were the elderly and infinitely gentle men he talked to for hours on end in *kafeneia*, but he also sometimes made an instant connection with wild young men who dragged us to bouzouki bars. (If this gender balance seems sexist, it is simply because in those days in Greece, in the kind of places we frequented, there were not any women—except me, and sometimes the proprietress.)

In other ways, too, Martin was different in Greece. Much less stressed, less nervy. You can see something of the change in the photos on this website: his skinny frame even fleshed out a little, thanks to his huge lunches of bread and honey. But what I want to focus on here is the sheer amount of writing he did. As he would say in a 1980 interview for the National Library, ‘After a long hiatus, in which I hadn’t written all that much poetry ... suddenly things seemed to be going right again. It was going back to Greece that did it.’

Although Martin had spent the first six years of his life in Sydney and London, Greece was the place that shaped his identity. His crucial years of education were done in the Greek state school system, where he learned ancient Greek and the artificial language of *katharevousa* as well as *thimotiki*, the people’s Greek, which he wrote and spoke. His heroes were not just the Homeric alpha males but also the *pallikaria*, the pirates and brigands who had won the War of Independence. So deeply was Martin’s Greek identity imprinted that, after he returned to Australia at the age of seventeen, he had continued for some time to dream in Greek.

Yet while the return to what was really his homeland did provide ideas and inspiration, it also greatly helped that there was no one in Greece to interrupt Martin while he was working. The regular pattern, of an eight-hour day, that he had established with *Cicada Gambit* now flowed on into the writing of poetry.

At the time, I myself was making the switch from writing history to writing fiction, and the practice of writing every day in a routine was one of the two great legacies that Martin bequeathed to me. Through my first few books, I would even take on the three-pages-a-day rule.

If I mention Martin's other great gift to me, it is because it provides an insight into his relationships with women in general.

Shortly after he died, one of his long-term male friends asked me, in a tone of bewilderment, the secret of Martin's success with women.

'He liked them,' I replied. Yes, he liked to fuck women—he was not by nature monogamous—but he also actually *liked* women, as few heterosexual men of his generation did. Thus he listened to what women were saying. And by the way that Martin listened, giving his full attention, he made women feel that that their ideas were interesting and important. In short, he empowered women, by raising their sense of their own value and abilities.

One funny anecdote demonstrates this.

For our first Christmas together, I gave Martin an edition of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* illustrated by Gustave Doré. A few nights later, when we went to bed, he asked me to read the poem out loud to him. I had not long started when he fell asleep, wineglass in one hand, cigarette in the other, as was his wont. After removing these, and taking off his spectacles, I continued reading Samuel Taylor Coleridge out loud.

After a few more pages, Martin woke, listened for a minute or two, blinked at me with his beautiful myopic eyes, and said in his precise voice, ‘This is really very good. Is it your own?’

Before I could even think of my reply, he was again asleep. But that did not matter. If Martin Johnston, even dead drunk, thought I could write—then maybe I could.

I do not give him the credit for my career choice. That was something I had decided by the age of four. But without him, I would have continued to write history for longer, before daring to try my hand at fiction.

I perhaps should add that, as to any actual mentoring of my work, he did not do it. As well as passing on his father’s three-page rule, he passed on to me his mother’s rule about never showing work in progress. This too would become a part of my writing practice.

But to get back to *Greece!*

I will run through dates and places here, because they indicate the context, and often indeed the content, for a great deal of Martin’s poetry. From ‘Microclimatology’ on to the long sequence, ‘To the Innate Island’ and beyond, the poems spring from the places where Martin and I lived and some of the places we visited. I realise that to give this information may seem to make literal what is better left to the reader’s imagination; I dare it only because Martin himself provided extensive geographical and historical notes for ‘To the Innate Island’, albeit prefaced by contradictory advice from Marianne Moore and William Empson about the value of such explication.

So—within a week of our arrival in Athens in December 1975, we headed to Chania in northwest Crete. This was not a town that Martin knew. Indeed, his only

previous visit to the island had been on a school excursion. We ensconced ourselves for the festive season in a waterfront hotel, and proceeded to get to know the secret nooks and crannies of the Venetian-cum-Turkish town and to enjoy the wild storms that battered the small harbour. For both of us, this was the beginning of a love affair with Chania, but we needed to find a place where we could settle and work.

As there were no furnished apartments for lease in the town, in early January we moved up the coast to a flat underneath a modern house that belonged to the rifle-shooting champion of Crete. Although there was a five-kilometre walk up the mountain to the nearest shop, this was a good enough place to stay until our landlord took a dislike to our house guest, John Forbes. When Forbes finally set off before dawn one morning in order to hike across the snow-bound White Mountains to the south coast of the island, Martin and I heard the landlord's voice ringing out, '*Tha kopsete ta pothia!*' This threat—to cut off Forbes's feet—fell upon his notoriously deaf ears, but it worked its way into Martin's poem, 'The Rent'. Other poems from this time are 'The Evidence' (about Chania) and 'The Unreality of Roosters' (with its side-swipe at Sir John Kerr). After a couple of months, it was obvious that we too needed to get moving. 'And so we left,' Martin wrote, 'giving them little gilt Qantas kangaroos.'

After meeting up in Athens with Grace Edwards, we spent *Apokreas*—the pre-Lent carnival—with her on the island of Skyros, where the costumes and customs were still very traditional (right down to the islanders' transgender outfits and the bulls' testicles that were the *mezethaikia* accompanying our drinks). On our return to Grace's flat, she arranged for us to rent, sight-unseen, a cottage in the Arcadian village of Paralion Astros ('Seaside Star'), where she herself owned a house. Our place comprised two tiny rooms above a stable that had a distinct smell of goat; there

was a single-burner gas stove, a cold-water tap outside the door, a toilet without a cistern, and a view over the Gulf of Argos. What more could one want?

A photograph on this website shows Martin standing on the balcony of this cottage; in another, he is sitting there typing ‘The Typewriter Considered as a Bee-Trap’. The day memorialised in that poem was particularly blue and sunny, and I scandalised the locals by going for a swim, despite their dire warnings that May was the month of magic.

Living in Arcadia, we were in the Homeric heartland of the Peloponnese. As it was impossible to buy meat, vegetables or fruit in the village, we did our main shopping in the town of Argos, an hour or so away on the bus. From there, it was a hop and a jump to Tiryns and Mycenae. This sort of geographical closeness to the legendary world somehow compressed the time-span as well. And the sense that we might bump into Agamemnon and co at any moment was furthered one day when our picnic in the hinterland of Arcadia was visited by an old man who rode down on his donkey from the mountain and proceeded to speak a Dorian dialect that pre-dated the ancient Greek Martin had learned at school. (This scene is also described by Wayne Davies, in his recollection on this website.)

After a couple of months in Astros, we received a surprising offer. Further up the village’s amphitheatrical hillside was a two-storey villa, owned by someone known to the locals as *O Congolese*, literally ‘The Man from the Congo’. Notwithstanding his exotic name, this was in fact an Austrian brain surgeon who divided his time between his properties in Astros, New York, France, Vienna and Hong Kong — the well-known capital of the Congo. (Always a bit wonky on geography, the villagers also believed that the moon landing had been filmed in the Nevada desert.) Anyway, although *O Congolese* had never met us, he had heard of us through Grace Edwards; fancying himself as a patron of the arts, he left a message at

the post office, offering us his house rent free, with the sole requirement that we vacate it for the summer.

‘We’ve climbed very slowly up the hill,’ Martin wrote in ‘The House’, which forms part of the sequence titled ‘Microclimatology’. The young cats, the yellow frogs, the owl, the watering-lady, the first drafts of spiders on the sill: all were plucked straight from that *spiti* and its large walled garden. The same owl, and probably the same frogs, made their way into ‘Notes from the Noctarium’. The protagonist of the poem ‘Pebble’ came from the nearby beach; I have it still.

Paralion Astros also sets the scene for the long sequence ‘To the Innate Island’, where it provides the landscape for the first poem, ‘The Shadow Screen’. I had forgotten, until I recently re-read Martin’s notes to that poem, that the fishing village was ‘situated on what used to be an island but has gradually been silted up into a peninsula’. He helpfully refers us back to ‘Microclimatology’, for ‘the village, the sea and the cat’. The shadow screen of this poem’s title referred to the white sheet or curtain that was used as the screen for performances of the Greek shadow puppet theatre, known by the name of the protagonist of these dramas, the wily Karagiosis. Martin had adored these puppet plays since his childhood, and when he discovered the memoir of an elderly puppeteer, Sotiris Spatharis, he embarked upon a translation.

‘Do you think you should contact the publisher first?’ I asked as he included *Behind the White Screen* in his work routine.

But Martin was not one for writing letters, especially business letters.

He also did not write to Stephen Knight, a friend and Sydney University academic, who had commissioned Martin to write about SF for what was to be part of a series of short books about genre fiction aimed at a popular audience. Interpreting SF as covering speculative as well as science fiction, Martin took to Greece all the information he needed inside his formidable memory, and he proceeded to produce

the book over about three months. I have a photograph of him lying on a deck lounge on the balcony of the Astros villa on the day he posted the typescript to Australia. Unfortunately, Stephen wrote back to say that in the six months since we'd gone to Greece the series had been dumped by the publisher. That was towards the end of June.

Around this same time Martin wrote the poem titled 'The Bills', which would become Number 8 in the 'Innate Island' sequence. While this work (like 'The Typewriter Considered as a Bee-Trap') is almost photographic in its description of the scene, what Martin did not mention is that in Paralion Astros we were obliged to pay all our household bills to the extreme-right-wing village president, who owned the taverna where we were eating our 'salad of cabbage' and our 'tepid spaghetti', meanwhile keeping our eyes from glancing derisively at the huge photograph of King Costa, the Greek monarch in exile, that was displayed on the wall.

When July brought the start of the tourist season, we were happy to get out of Astros. But while the foreign visitors headed for Greece's islands and beaches, we went north, in search of lakes and mountains; this was again a part of the country that was previously unknown to Martin. Of all our travels, this journey, which lasted about two months, would be for him the most fertile in terms of providing material.

First stop, after a two-week bank crisis in Athens (not an uncommon experience) was the city of Yannina, where Lake Pamvotis with its perfect small island and its grisly history provided the over-arching concept for 'To the Innate Island'. However, as is probably already clear, the poems that make up this sequence would be written at various times, and not in the order in which they appear. In fact, while we were travelling, Martin did little actual writing—not even notes. Although he did always have his portable type-writer with him, it was the exploring, the observing, the storing up and filtering of experience that was important.

Another crucial point on this journey was Mount Pelion, which lies behind (or above) the seaport of Volos. In those days, the area was rarely visited by foreign tourists and we had no guidebook information about it. So when we caught a bus up the precipitous road to the village of Makrinitza, it was completely ‘by accident’ (Martin would say) that he saw his ‘first Theofilos’. Some years later, he would describe this moment:

I had almost finished my ouzo in the dark, frowsty little *kafeneio* of the village square when I noticed, through the smoke and gloom, a mural entirely covering one wall. It was dark, as I say, and the forty-watt light did little to alleviate it. The painting, here and there, was sadly faded and stained and shredded. Besides, someone had elected to place a fuse box and assorted sockets in one of its corners at one time; but from what I had read already there was only one thing that mural could be.

This the proprietor confirmed. Yes, it had been done, many years before in his father’s time by that crazy vagabond Theofilos, who went about in the gear of a hero of the War of Independence, only caring about painting.¹

This so-called ‘primitive’ painter appealed to Martin not just because Theofilos idolised the War of Independence heroes as much as Martin himself did, but because of his poignant personal story and his commitment to his art. (See ‘The Modern Primitive.’) We found more paintings by him in a house further down the mountain, and a couple of years later we would make a special Theofilos pilgrimage to the painter’s home island of Mytilene.

But there was more to Pelion than Theofilos. Travelling into the hinterland, we discovered villages that seemed to be hidden inside a fairytale forest of plane trees. This was the site of Mr Achilopoulos’s Mercantile School (see Number 8 in ‘Microclimatology’).

Onwards we went to the ‘hanging monasteries’ of Meteora, and then to the remote mountain village of Metsovo, where the inhabitants were reputed to be the descendants of a Scottish regiment left to guard the border in the time of Julius

¹ Martin’s article “‘That Wretched Kilt-Wearer’”: The Paintings of Theofilos’, which appeared in *The Athenian* in 1980, is reproduced on this website.

Caesar. Their language (as Martin notes) was a form of camp-Latin. North to Kavala, Kastoria and Thessaloniki, then finally back to Paralion Astros in time for the change of seasons recorded in 'Winter Solstice'.

It was in the depths of that winter that we made a short trip south, to visit the ruins of the Byzantine city of Mystra and the tiny island of Monemvasia, linked by a causeway to the east coast of the Peloponnese. This would provide the material for the fifth poem in 'To the Innate Island'. ('On Malmsey rock the nerves converge, /wintry throb of veins/ tortoise pulsing asleep in still water.') And it also gave rise to one of Martin's neatest jokes. (See the allusion to the death of the Duke of Clarence in his Note to this poem).

As spring approached, it was again time to move on. Free accommodation was all very well, but after nearly a year in the village we needed more people, different people. A different place. In March 1977 we returned to our beloved Chania, where this time we settled in the old town.

One alleyway back from the waterfront arc of tavernas, there was a semi-derelict 16th century Venetian mansion that belonged to the octogenarian Kyria Androulidaki. Bedridden for many years, she inhabited the first floor. We rented the floor above. Like our cottage in Astros, this apartment had only two rooms: but what rooms! One was a former ballroom, with a once-exquisite parquet floor; a small metal table and matching chair made it my work-room. The other room... well, it might once have been a ballroom, too, but a mattress on the floor turned it into our bedroom, and it had a large table that doubled as dining table and Martin's desk. There was no glass in any of the windows, but there were what real estate agents call 'harbour glimpses'. There was also no shower or bath. In theory, the noxious toilet could be flushed with a bucket of water from the single cold tap, but for much of the summer the water supply was cut off, so I used to carry my bucket down two flights of stairs,

along the lane, across the waterfront street, and down the steps to the harbour; once it was full I would splosh my way back through the diners at the outdoor tables of the lobster restaurant. Meanwhile, the sound of my footsteps on the stairs would have caused our landlady to summons Martin down for a chat.

Despite the somewhat basic plumbing arrangements, life in the Chania apartment was very good. Among the photographs on this website is one I took of Martin sitting shirt-less at the table. Behind him on the wall are a couple of prints of the War of Independence heroes he loved so dearly. He looks distinctly self-satisfied.

In the next-door ballroom, I was writing the story that would turn into the children's novel *Five Times Dizzy*. I began it at Easter, and by my birthday (30 April) I had a first draft. We celebrated by taking a trip to the other side of the island, to visit the windmill-covered plateau of Lassithi and the Minoan ruin of Phaistos, which (as Martin describes in 'The Whistlers of Phaistos') 'lacks Sir Arthur Evans' red-ochre signature'. The poem 'Windows' comes from this same visit. ('We walk for a moment /under the blue monkeys in the grove, and the prince of lilies.')

Once this journey was completed, Martin had all the places he needed for 'To the Innate Island'. This long poem became his main task over that summer, but in these months he also wrote 'Reading Moby-Dick backwards', 'Aristarchus and the Whale', and 'Annula' (which is like a guide to Chania). In between, he continued to work on the translation of Spatharis.

I remember Martin saying at this time that a writer was a public servant. He was only half joking. Every day, from 11 am, he would sit at the typewriter. At 7 pm, on the dot, we went to a backstreet taverna that did not have a name, but which was known as 'The Grandfathers'' because every drinker at the establishment, with the exception of Martin and myself, was a grandfather. The oldest was reputed to be 103; the youngest was in his late forties. Another dear friend in Chania was Nikos

Papasifakis; aged in his sixties, he was the proprietor of our favourite waterfront *kafeneio*. These men were Martin's *parea*, his gang of mates. He loved to hear their stories, some of which went all the way back to the time of the Turkish occupation of the island.

But these friendships proved to be our downfall. Like all *xeni* living in Greece, we were obliged to re-apply to the police for residency permits every three months. As well as producing bank statements to prove we had a certain amount of foreign currency coming in, we had to answer questions about the company we kept. In Astros, where the police knew what everyone in the village did, this had not been a problem, but the Chania police were suspicious of foreigners—not least because the town's foreign colony over recent years had included CIA agents and (even worse in the eyes of the constabulary) homosexuals. There had even been a gay murder case. Although we did not know any of the resident *xeni*, this made the police regard us with even more hostility. Why were we hanging out with Greeks, if we were not spies? Another cause for suspicion was the fact that Martin spoke such good Greek. At the police station, we were put in separate rooms and asked questions. I probably do not need to say that Martin was not someone who did well under police interrogation. We finally managed to get our permits stamped, but we dreaded the next quarterly visit to the cop shop.

Yet another blow was the discovery that a small American publishing company had just brought out a translation of *Behind the White Screen*. This book was now in the basket of lost causes, along with *Cicada Gambit* and the SF lit crit book. So much time spent, with no publications to show for it!

Meanwhile, though we had no desire to mix with local English-speakers, the disconnection from English-language bookshops and the literary world was becoming a bit acute. In particular, Martin wanted to find English publishers for his poetry. I had

had a story published in the London-based feminist magazine *Spare Rib*, and was keen to meet the collective. The prospect of winter in our window-less Venetian ballrooms was also a bit daunting. So we caught a Magic Bus to London, arriving after seven days and as many breakdowns into the turmoil of Victoria Station at midnight on the Saturday of August Bank Holiday weekend.

After that, London did not get any better.

We rented the ground floor of a house in Clapham South (not yet trendy) but we were too poor to go to galleries and museums and we could not work out how to meet English people in the local pub, let alone how to break into the literary scene. I went to the *Spare Rib* office, and was snubbed. Martin went to a poetry reading, and was snubbed. Obviously colonials were not welcome. Far lonelier than we had ever been in Greece, we huddled by the gas fire, watching the black and white television. ‘Rain walks all night across the greenhouse roof / on awkward spike-footed stilts’, Martin wrote in one of the five poems that came out of that miserable winter that dragged from 1977 into 1978. Working six days a week in a bread shop to support us, I went to work in the dark and came home in the dark.

When Easter approached, we caught a ferry to Ireland and hitchhiked around a number of literary sites. As photos on this website show, we visited James Joyce’s house in Dublin, Yeats’s grave, Lake Innisfree, and Thoor Ballylee, but the stand-out memory of that pilgrimage was not literary but political. Imagine our surprise when we went exploring in the Sligo cemetery on Easter Sunday and found ourselves to be the only people not wearing black balaclavas and carrying machine guns. As the brother of Provisional IRA member Frank Stagg (who had died in a British prison after a sixty-two day hunger strike) gave an impassioned speech from the pediment of the memorial to the martyrs of the Easter Rising, we both did our best to look like Australians.

We survived the IRA, but our partnership did not survive England.

We spent a final penniless summer together in Greece, being tourists: island-hopping on over-crowded ships, sleeping on beaches, and getting diarrhoea. It was now that we had our one night on Hydra. Then I stayed on in Chania while Martin came back to Sydney by himself.

It was soon after Martin's return to Australia that he fell in love with Roseanne Bonney, whom he would later marry. Martin had never wanted to have children, but he delighted in the company of Roseanne's daughter, Vivienne, who was fifteen in 1979 when he moved into their Darlinghurst household.

In May of that year, Martin scored a \$3000 Special Purpose Grant from the Literature Board for a biography of his parents. He had never had any burning desire to write such a thing, but had applied because he was broke after his return from overseas and he'd had the idea (probably mistaken) that the Literature Board would not be interested in funding his poetry. By that time, I too had returned from Greece, and I remember him talking about Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son* as the literary model he had in mind. That is, his book would be a personal view from inside the family circle. Fair enough, but what about *Mother and Son*?

At the end of that year, Martin used the grant to travel back to Greece, where he talked to Grace Edwards and other associates of his parents. He even spent a couple of nights on Hydra, staying in a hotel that had once been a house where a family friend had hanged himself. (This is memorialised in 'The Plato's Cave Hotel'.) Roseanne had accompanied Martin overseas but, when he stayed on alone after her return to Sydney, a lengthy Greek bank strike left him stranded for a couple of months in the Hotel Tempí. (See the recollection of Helen Randerson on this website.)

Poems produced during this miserable time include 'Room 23', and a number of the sonnets that would be collected together in the sequence 'In Transit: A Sonnet Square' (dedicated to Roseanne). One of these, 'Biography', is often quoted as if it were some sort of evidence of how Martin regarded his parents. It reveals a great deal more about his distaste for the project that had taken him back to Greece.

By the time Martin returned to Australia in March 1980 he was very apprehensive about the pain that would be involved in writing a memoir of his parents. Because of the grant, however, he felt himself committed to it. One Literature Board grant (for the still unpublished *Cicada Gambit*) could perhaps be shrugged aside; it was harder to dismiss two. After all, a writer was a public servant.

Meanwhile, I had completed a novel that nobody wanted to publish. I was feeling discouraged about that on the day Martin arrived at Gilpin Street for lunch and started talking about the difficulties of writing a biography of his parents. Although he felt comfortable with the prospect of writing about his father, he could not face the idea of writing about his mother, and especially about her death.

At what stage of that afternoon did we get the crazy notion that we could both solve our problems by combining them? All I know is that, by the time he left, we had a piece of paper on which we had a plan for a collaborative biography of Charmian Clift and George Johnston. The idea was that I would do Charmian and he would do George.

I don't think it ever would have worked, but soon Martin had a day-job that saved him from feeling guilty about not doing his half.

In June 1980, he joined the fledgling Special Broadcasting Service, where he would work, both as a Greek subtitler and as a sub-editor, for the rest of the decade. With its cosmopolitan staff and its commitment to multiculturalism, this was a place where Martin Johnston could be both European and Australian. Deeply respected and

even loved by his colleagues, he was very fond of them in turn. But the job had a very destructive effect on him, overall.

I myself worked in the Subtitling Unit as a part-time sub-editor, doing a three-month stint in 1981 and another in 1983. On both occasions, most of the dozen or so sub-editors were writers; like me, they were working part-time to support their literary projects. But the three days at SBS seemed to eat up the other four days of the week. As well, the creative energy that went into re-writing subtitles left nothing over for real writing. Although ‘Channel Nothing’ (as Sasha Saldatow called it) was a lively and interesting workplace, I remember a number of my colleagues lamenting that they just wanted to get back to their poetry or their novels. And if working three days a week drained everything out of us part-timers, Martin—who was in the Subtitling Unit five days a week—had no hope of writing on the side. As a result, he would produce almost no poetry between 1980 and 1989.

But at least he managed to get rid of the albatross that was hanging around his neck. When academic Garry Kinnane approached him, wanting to write a book about George Johnston, Martin leapt at the chance to be relieved of his half of our joint project. By now, I’d had three books published and would have been happy to abandon Charmian Clift, but Martin looked at me beseechingly and said, ‘Oh, but Nard...’ and I kept going. Although he very much wanted the biography to happen, he wasn’t able to help.

On one occasion, in 1985, I managed to get him to come with me to the ABC radio studio in Darlinghurst, where I interviewed him for a program about Clift and Johnston that Garry Kinnane and I were doing. Even with me, Martin clearly found it a torture to be asked questions about his parents. Sitting with him in the booth, I felt I was holding him together, and in the recording (which is on this website) you can hear the constant flick-flick of the cigarette lighter. When we came back out into the

morning sunlight, he said to me, 'Well, Nard, that's your lot.' I feel really sad that it took me so long to write the biography of his mother that he never got to read it.

Through the 1980s, Martin and Roseanne travelled to Europe a few times, once in the company of Vivienne and her partner (later husband) Chris Latham.

In 1988, Martin took an extended break from SBS, and the couple went overseas again. For Martin, this was intended to be a time to get back to writing. And indeed, it was. While living in a farmhouse in Tuscany and later on the Greek island of Lesbos, he worked on a novel about General Makriyannis (a hero from the Greek War of Independence) and a number of poems. In a rare letter written to Vivienne that July, he was so confident about this return to work that he said, 'The way things are going, it looks as if I'll have a (totally unexpected) new collection of poetry ready for publication when we get back.'

That was not to be, but a dozen of these poems were published in *Scriptsi* in February 1990, a few months before Martin's death. The same edition of the journal included a review of Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*, written with all the brilliance and (dare I say) erudition typical of Martin Johnston.

After Martin's return to Australia in early 1989, his drinking took on a new dimension. The recent death of his half-sister, Gae, in tragic circumstances seemed part of a pattern with the deaths of his parents and of his sister Shane, who had taken her own life in 1974. Martin's grief (expressed in the poem of that name, written at this time) was mingled with a kind of survivor guilt that caused him to talk as if his own premature death was also predestined.

In the way of such things, this proved to be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

His wife, his friends, his brother Jason, and I myself—we all undertook various projects to get Martin off the grog. He put up with us politely, patiently, but ultimately he went back to the pub.

Bloomsday (16 June) was always a milestone in Martin Johnston's year. Back in 1972, he had hosted a famous Bloomsday party at which the floor-to-ceiling brick-and-board bookshelves had collapsed onto the assembled guests. And in the novel *Cicada Gambit*, there is a long Bloomsday episode involving the seedy academic Dr Skogg, who gets up that morning knowing (as he always did on Bloomsday) 'that everything was going to go wrong'. Nevertheless, 'he went ahead in the same way every year, obviously expectant that just this once everything would go off perfectly'.

On 16 June 1990, Martin paid his respects to James Joyce's *Ulysses* by going on a binge with his drinking pals at the Toxteth Hotel in Glebe. After a few hours, he suffered a fit, and was taken by ambulance to Royal Prince Alfred Hospital. When triage staff began their assessment by asking him what day it was, he replied (politely as always) that it was 'Mr Bloom's Day'. The nurses thought he was rambling. He was diagnosed as suffering from *delirium tremens* and pneumonia.

Some forty-eight hours later, as Martin lay unmonitored in a hospital bed, he had a severe heart attack, which caused his heart to stop. When he was discovered, his heart was re-started, but he never regained consciousness. I arrived at the Intensive Care Unit on the afternoon of June 18 to find him living with the aid of a machine. With great generosity, Roseanne invited me to remain with her at Martin's bedside. I had taken his four books of poetry to the hospital with me, and I read them aloud to him, from cover to cover, over and over. As the nurse kindly said when I asked permission, 'It couldn't hurt.'

On the afternoon of June 20, the doctors came and turned off the machine. The striped curtains of the hospital cubicle were closed around us.

Even without assistance, Martin's heart beat on powerfully beneath his bony ribcage, for hour upon hour. Through that last night, as his body fought on, I kept reading the folk ballad he had translated, 'The Death of Dhiyenis', about the hero who had 'never feared a man among the brave'. Finally, however, Dhiyenis meets a stranger who challenges him to a contest of strength, 'and whichever should win would take the loser's soul'.

And they went and wrestled on the marble threshing-floor;
and where Dhiyenis struck the blood filled a trench,
but where Death struck the blood filled a river.

When it was over, Roseanne and I went out onto the hospital forecourt. It was the dawn of the winter solstice.

Martin Johnston's sense of poetic timing was always perfect.