

## **University of Adelaide**

### **Brian Castro**

### **The archivist**

#### Biographical note:

Brian Castro is the author of nine novels, including the multi award-winning *Double-Wolf* and *Shanghai Dancing*. His novels have been translated into French, German and Chinese. He has also published a volume of essays. His latest novel is *The Bath Fugues* (Giramondo), which was short-listed for four prizes, including the Miles Franklin Literary Award. He holds the Chair in Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide.

#### Keywords:

Prose poem – the archive – Benjamin

Paris ...

The rue des Archives.  
 Once called the *rue où Dieu fut bouilli*,  
 (the street where God was boiled.)  
 In 1437, a Jewish book-keeper  
 stabbed a sacred wafer,  
 threw it into a pot and watched it fry,  
 but then the host began to bleed.  
 He ran outside in panic and the mob went after him,  
 destroyed his shop, burnt every tome.  
 Don't try this stunt at home.

In like manner they will come after me.  
 I unlock my bicycle from the Director-General's *No Parking* sign.  
 They've stolen my saddle, last time it was the bell.  
 My station is cruel.  
 On the rue des Archives.  
 In the busy Marais.

Where there is always rain at night and dogshit on the footpath and that woman in a red hat looking in shop windows, watching herself reflected in my gaze.

I'm unfazed. It could be 1944.

I'm sure she's the one who sends me letters.

Come in.

Here in the National Archives, the *Palais Soubise*, an eighteenth-century palace, there are six billion documents on a hundred and seventy-five miles of shelves.

But the archives are shifting.

They've already moved the 'Modern' section (1789-1940).

They're dismantling the 'miscellaneous' section, sending art and music works to other museums.

The 'Contemporary' archives are relocating to a forest in Fontainebleau, spread through scattered buildings, some subterranean. Pandemonium.

I am losing all my treasures.

Between the trees I shoot down anything that flies. Compress them in hidden files.

I turn on taps. Run a little when others walk.

I'm an archivist. Aquarius in the sidereal system.

I'm losing my memory.

Living in places others cannot visit.

I have onion-breath from eating Hemingway's sandwiches.

I drink Hugo's wine.

Sometimes I search through women's handbags when they enter the *Caran*, the research centre.

You never know what you might find.

On the second floor by the ancient spiral stairs which lead to an elevated iron catwalk, you can preen the ancient pages.

Inhale: 1790.

Smell the vintage; a consommé of chaos and black cigars. Listen for the sliding guillotine.

You scamper all the way to the modern wing without descending, where one imagines fluorescent lighting, metallic shelves and carpet, paper smelling of old perfume and national plunder; but there is instead this scene: floodlit gardens, verdure, atria and out beyond, chimneys, pipes, the wet and gritty city.

Your eye returns. Feeding on diary notes, napkin scribbles, poetry which someone once began. Cocteau perhaps, on a *tapas* menu. Oil stains.

You will have to sort this wreckage. You never know what people leave behind, when the gun is at their head or their wives start ringing lawyers.

In one carton a collection of women's underwear.

In another, manuals on gonorrhea.

Sometimes everything swarms.

You may well ask why I'm interested in these things. The answer is simple: because it is perfidious. And because it is false, deceitful, untrustworthy, it mirrors memory. And because memory is perfidious it makes for a belief in transformation.

Fame and dirt.

My mother, for example, was glad to lose her mind, finding herself suddenly released from hatred, calumny and deceit. "Your father," she said. "For example."

Sample:



Les réactions à la mort

THE  TIMES

*"Under-age models seen in  
his apartment"*

*"sordid affairs"*

I paste these in my album. You never know what you can use.  
 My name? Just call me Capuchin.  
 It's a kind of monkey.  
 On my desk, the figurine of an ancient phallus. It once belonged to Freud.  
 In my living room, a black piano once owned by Maria Callas.  
 Even as a child I was surrounded by such priceless things.  
 Here's Vermeer's cape.  
 It was a frock-coat once, which his wife altered into a riding habit.  
 A dandy has exclusive tastes.  
 It occurred to me that dress had been the cause of civilization.  
 Fashion goes round and round,  
 it spins its tissue, discards its waste  
 while the future waits.

Since moving to Paris, I've lived a large part of my life next to the Vladimir Gaming Club, and have hardly left the *Palais*, the inner circle of my rooms, the Metro, the string of museums I frequented in the *quartier*. People say Parisians are closed in, that their lives are interior, mental. A city of collectors.

A glass eye above the door is weeping back and forth. The only industry so far in the shadow of wet stone. Later it will turn frenetic.  
 The floors once used to creak to warn of intruders.  
 The building was alive.  
 Now wires claw into the walls.  
 They are installing video surveillance.  
 There is a voice message lighting up my phone.  
 I long for earlier methods of communication; the vacuum tube, the *pneumatique*.  
 A message sucked through a pipe appeals to me.  
 It approximates the retrieval of memory ... together with pneumonia, trench fever, Spanish 'flu and other spirits caught in manuscripts.  
 Some are smeared with blood.  
 You could say it was more than a mystery.

The ancient Greeks knew that blood was not enough, and upon the eve of another battle, shivering in their tents before history, their horses in foam outside, twisted memory out of air.

It would be well to remember this form verging on poetry was once original, wrought internally, not to be erased eternally, for there was only breath which hung mightily upon the line before it died.

The prose poem. Breathing,  
 blindness and suffering.  
 These days chick-poets score cheap points,  
 rhyme and bank their cheques quickly upon the shallows.

Listen.  
 By the Greek word *arkhē*, we understood the beginning and the law and drew comfort from its authority.  
*Arkheion* was the Town Hall, where they kept the public records.  
 But now the archives are crumbling, borders soon to be reshaped by mighty rivers whose waters, finding their own level, hollow out different landscapes.

I block the toilets; form fountains in the urinals.

I am losing my memory.

I know. Disastrous for an archivist.

But does that make me a terrorist?

Time for a coffee.

David H.

He told me he was changing skin.

I walk the Paris night.

The Panthéon looms. Its blue laser light, its slow pendulum, all give me a headache.

It made me reflect as well.

Who am I?

I'm Chinese.

We invented records and record-keeping.

Noted the number of orgasms and bowel movements of huge dynasties.

Note all these treasure boxes my father sent in 1923 to aid Japan's earthquake casualties.

Born archivists.

I open a carton with my carpet knife, wearing carpet slippers, a carpet-bagger with lives to sell.

I'm wary about my own, there's nothing to tell—cut off from my country, traditions and history.

If I reveal too much they will soon come knocking at the door.

It's best to keep one step ahead, one floor above with no regrets, and play the goon by masquerading as the investigator of someone else instead.

I am also he; I have no fears nor regrets. I have no papers of my own.

I can do the police in different voices: *hello hello, we'll have no trouble here.*

This is my work. I examine the evidence and classify. Lately I've been following a lead – a disappearance. His effects are before me now.

Take, for example, this ordinary cardboard box.

You keep it free of worms, cockroaches, microbes, acidity and humidity.

You label it *David H.*

He was a *grand couturier*.

Sometimes David wrote in columns – one side straightforward, the other tensioned with all kinds of stresses.

He cut his patterns from old newspaper, designed his tabloid dresses from fractured news reports of Marxist philosophers murdering their wives; of anorexic bodies found in silken shrouds; high heels with spurs.

David H. – a designer, short-lived.

Those who knew him loved and hated his mania, boyishness, dusty library of leather-bound books, and for a while his two-toned shoes as he walked and talked his self-taught adaptations of high theory. Of course there was his disappearance.

He began as an artist, millionaire-pornographer. Air-brushing was his hobby.

In days gone by the public preferred images of private worlds—of winter firelight, fur rugs and white underwear, and went to bed fearing mystique, struggling with the weak, unspeakable drapery of their sexual suburbia—

and took pleasure in *The Sound Of Music* or the white charms of Doris's day which glazed their eyes and numbed their hearts.

Then suddenly the public wanted more.  
They wanted it raw, unfiltered, engorged, enhanced with silicon.  
They wanted colour. They wanted access to excess: they were the mob.  
Soon David found he was out of a job.  
For several years he attended art school until he came into his fortune.  
It was then he began the waste, the extravagance of *living cool*, which broke the hearts  
of thrifty hoarders like me.  
*David H. The Temple of Fashion.*  
He probably wore a ponytail, dark glasses, and went unshaven,  
lingering long enough to read the obsequies beside fresh graves;  
every event an opportunity for outrageous self-promotion.  
These are his effects. He bought them all.  
So many dead to be embalmed ... articles belonging to Duchamp or Man Ray: a  
woman's hat with a pearl-headed pin; slingback shoes stuffed with silken stockings;  
panty-girdles in disarray upon your desk.  
I hold them to my nose. Just dust.  
It may take some years to punctuate, to display these museum items, to sort logic from  
rhythm and sense-decay. To find the flavours history has erased.  
They want me to archive but also expose, a contradiction with which I am ill-  
disposed.  
Archives are not for public viewing; only time justifies them with lust, air-brushing  
guilty connections between someone's padlocked death and another's dust.  
There are no dates; the writing is illegible.  
He was the first to revisit Greece and skin the fleece from 6 BC.  
Long white linen dresses ruffled his catwalks.  
Others followed on, taking stone and samples from the Parthenon.  
Perhaps it was at the beginning, perhaps the end, when these pages were salvaged and  
taped together; yellowed, kippered with cigarette smoke, they smell of theft.  
His show the following year was bereft of sex.  
*Lex*, a Fascist law, was what he saw approaching.  
He caught the plane from Istanbul to Athens and sitting next to him, with the  
familiarity of someone lost in a maze of speed and time, was a girl scarcely into her  
adult years.  
Her eyes were wet.  
For him it was the usual revelation that  
the faces of fallen angels are awash with tears,  
not because they have lost paradise  
but because their gaze is not returned.  
This is a dangerous thing to know.  
H. then unlocked his obsession, its murderous flow.  
Meth-amphetamine with all that dough.  
That was when it all began.  
On Lemnos.

*On Lemnos*

*the girls shriek with pleasure.*

*Not easy to forget the ruthlessness implanted in those screams.*

*They play for me alone.*

*I wheel myself around to study them, my chequebook open.*

*In the world of tissues there are only lies. I have become old before my time.*

*Sorrow hangs indelicately on the line, stockings with escape-ladders;*

*all these transmutations.*

*I am King David, my forehead high, white-tailed behind.*

*It has been centuries since my crack-up crime; in my mind I'm always nine.*

*The washing vats spew steam.*

*In the fire I hammer out new plates and then at night, hard by the darkling desk,*

*make fire-wheels of spikes and armor for my amazons.*

*I like to catch my beauties hitching up their skirts. It's what I've always taught them.*

*Look how their hearts break over some young Leonardo who's scarcely grown enough whiskers for his brush. I pay off the gigolos, one after the other, with orders never to see my girls again. The delicate things pine and weep in their concrete houses and waste away. Then I hold banquets with wine and roasts. They sway between the turnkey and the victual, and fit the fashion better in this Elizabethan ritual. They grow thin and docile. Again I win.*

*On this island a former model comes to visit, wet skirts flapping in the wind. She steps up from the sea, an Aphrodite conceived from coral spawn.*

*I only see a fluttering. They call this blindness blepharoclonus.*

*Particles of light flash between her legs, voltage between my temples, then a robotic walk, her metallic clouds gently building over ruffled sea.*

*Dark, she flies, underdreamt, a squidding ink beneath, smelling of salt and ultramarine, lifting her petticoats of watered tabinets, pentimentoes and repentance, layer upon layer.*

*I train her remorseful, come-to-daddy response, stepping up in sheer denier, naked leather, to heel and turn and toe the fence.*

*An eye on each finger I probe her mouth between the wire; she, slip-kissing me memories, and I, parched by the years, unable to look upon love, make her swallow prohibitions.*

*In return she passes me paper, coiled, smoke-thin upon her breath as I receive her passion.*

*My burin flays the marble, chiselling the word for truth. Hot, she helps; she dresses me across taboo. Chiasmus.*

*This is how we animate the golem of fashion.*

*The Confessor's eyes are tired.*

*I drape whiteness over their dresses.*

*Here, beneath this skullcap where everything drives against the sky, against the law, I compile all that cannot be spoken, climbing ratlines in the whistling wind.*

*Don't ask what delight sneaks in upon such toil.*

*After confession I press upon their tongues a little Eucharist in silver foil—you know, for their salvation.*

*Methamorphosis...*

So we have David H.'s beginnings and his ends.

The full range of his diary: the middle is entirely missing, scattered in the sad effects of his models who surfaced suddenly, victims of his bends; voices from the catwalk; he was black and he was white. In between he was totally tight. He never rose before eleven.

I went to the Greek island in pursuit – a holiday to restore myself, I said to the Director.

I was covered in dust counting tourist buses heading up towards volcanic lust, donkeys standing sideways, honking in valleys silvery with olives and steeped in wine.

I did what old men do: across the hilltops they hurl their sighs, early in the morning, good for the chest and lungs, standing there in their off-white singlets howling and dreaming of girls.

Hephaestia:

I can't remember much else, a necropolis by the bay where several coins or buttons surfaced in the sand. Upon dead eyes they may have lain to pay the ferryman.

H. had passed this way a year before leaving a trail of tragedies so often associated with love, searching for ruins and hard stone upon which he grazed young flesh.

And I, a mongrel hound, sniffed through Vulcan's vents to learn the smithy's molten craftiness.

It was my job to hunt for diamonds, to find the fugitive fractured in light and colour.

Behind him, a cloak of darkness, the island spiked with smokestacks, silos and the nuclear future.

I don't remember any more.

I travelled, like Byron, to the Aegean, to entrap exhilaration before all shut down, to understand the tides, attracted by the frown they left on sand.

Women marched over me wearing backpacks, bracelets, black suspenders.

They didn't appreciate my fatigue with Being.

They did not even hear their competition, a blur in one eternal afternoon when like a monk, *ευτελός μουός*, doomed, I heard a girl sing deep-throated songs accompanied by a crackling Leonard Cohen record, a bare room in Hydra, olive groves sandwiched in the air.

I thought I'd found David there

but it was the current *pensionnaire*.

She told me of his cruelty, of her hair

which he used to grip and study.

Then it all disappeared; the wind full of haste.

My pages stalled, turned despotic, rained autumnal leaves.

The ground turned muddy, the room filled with dead cicadas.

The girl despaired, inhaled more substance; a line of ants, from here to there.

She to whom H. had made so many promises since a dusty airport in Constantinople, she whose trusting nature held him spellbound for a week as he rubbed one dark nipple and then the other, found what she did not seek.

Suicide.

The Terror always comes.

\*



Every morning I open one of David H.'s cartons first ...  
It smells to me of youth: the rising of the sun, horse-riding before breakfast,  
colour, light and a champagne career.  
David was impulsive. For a young man in his twenties, there was too much money.  
Overnight he outdid his masters; 'an exhibition of near-genius' exclaimed the  
magazine *Nouvelle*.  
He was pictured above a photo of treacherous Coco Chanel in Vichy France.

I hang onto the cardboard box, a lifebuoy for old Oriental men; closure.  
I must remember, or my days are numbered.  
Memory is architectural.  
I see with stone eyes: marble buildings, colonnades; beneath arcades and portals his  
beauties are dancing something eternal; a vague discomposure.  
He was invisible behind his shades, said nothing at interviews, appearing like a mental  
defective, sometimes repeating questions, smiling, ineffectual, save when whispering  
atonal verses into the delicious ear of a svelte interpreter who produced terse  
translations of the genius's latest venture.  
Later the rooms would be filled with incense, and upon the jade night-table he would  
take his fill of speed and play on life's absurdity, an anarchy limited only by good  
form.  
The Temple of David seemed to cast a light long dimmed.  
I seek its restoration.

Aided by their visualizing of rooms, Homeric rhapsodists, the *Aoidoi*, sang epic  
chants with perfect memory and rapped a staff in rhythm upon the floor.  
This apartment and its furniture, these filmy nets cast by an orderly arrangement of  
thought; these boxes hauled in by means of pulley and beam, they speak of  
earthquakes or what is in the wind: that there is only war and chaos in the history of  
fashion.  
Then suddenly the building collapses and we remember where the bodies are.  
The archives creak and groan with ancient song and it is I who stand alone in their  
defense.  
It's the end.  
The archives are moving. A coffin line. And I, a bard to sing their slow procession.  
This is how David's boxes disappeared; right next to a *tarte savoyarde*. My lunch.  
A concession to a hunch that he was self-sufficient.

Oh yes, the ancient Greeks.  
Whole armies raise their dust upon the plains to mask the memory of lust and  
jealousy, their bows backsprung with anti-reason.  
Blood was not enough, and upon the eve of another battle while their horses twisted in  
their harnesses, they cracked covetousness out of air.  
This was their drug:  
a captured woman  
the cutting of a throat  
veins of lightning  
a rainstorm suddenly  
the tearing of a veil between my fingers.  
Chaos.  
The Terror comes from right to left.

In my father's time they played a version of the game called 'Loving Cup' in cabarets when the rains came to China.

A circle of half-clad boys and girls inhaled a debilitating and arousing drug and passed the smoke through erotic kisses from right to left until desire reached its peak and when the pungency declined, or the weather leavened, began again from left to right.

It was nineteen-thirty-seven.

There was a slender spy within their midst who passed on secrets with an active tongue and who, though masked, was neither high nor dizzy but pretended to a lassitude not entirely beyond seduction.

They say she was an expert in other things as well: a choreographer, torturer, writer of plays-within-a-play, she could dance and sing, too.

Her name was Kitty.

She was hung in 'forty-nine when the Communists reorganised the Forbidden City and forbade such perverse instruction.

It was only then they found out she was he.

That same luscious aunt took me aside one day and teased my ear with whispered sighs.

I was a child and understood nothing, but the words still stake out haunts on lonely nights, some echo that such courtesy can never overstep the mark.

*Excuse, my lord, the liberty I take in thus undressing you*, she said, and proceeded to place a silken mask upon my face and take my boyhood in her mouth through poetry, her voice trembling in the breeze.

While blinded thus I cannot now remember  
what the weather was,  
if it came from north or south,  
as the inversion took its toll.

I was overcome by vertigo  
while my bird was being swallowed whole  
in a nest of words high up in branches.

*Did you feel*, she said in extrication  
of her tongue from such untidy verse,  
(ventriloquism, in fine,)

*how you came to be a woman then?*

From that time I wanted  
to recapture that strange game to see  
if her play within the play  
on words had ever left me.

So when I stumbled upon David's story  
and sampled fashion upon the catwalks  
of my own perilous memory

I understood the theory  
of all this allegory.

It was what united H. to me.

Like my father, I was made of clay;  
I signed the *lettre de cachet*.

*Vogue* published my piece with great fanfare  
billing it as the glossy truth of David H.  
without a moment's hesitation

to consider how I'd used this cage,  
 this snare from youth  
 to catch all our fine reflections.  
 Of course I didn't use his name.  
 It's why I return so often to Vermeer.  
 His paintings conceal dilemma:  
 the imperative to tell without really telling.  
 The power of this secret order  
 was to release the visual clue, the game  
 that one could not bear witness to oneself.  
 His women's quarters contained reflective tiles  
 returning crocodile smiles.  
 He dressed his women upon himself:  
 neither pentimento nor palimpsest,  
 his paintings sought revelation rather than wealth.

I witnessed my Aunt Kitty on the marble floor  
 after she had drunk her poison  
 retching with shorter pauses and then  
 disgorging blood, her eyes turning wild.  
 This was payment for her duty  
 towards an older world where finer  
 sensibilities were not only out of fashion  
 but outlawed; payment for her tragic liaison  
 with the last emperor of China  
 and I, his bastard child.

So H. saw his life somewhat parallel to mine  
 in terms of how we had to escape old worlds  
 for which we were not responsible.  
 Our lives were tragically Oedipal.  
 But someone – he in mime and I in rhyme –  
 had to point the finger, a gesture not quite civil,  
 at the mask itself as a necessary evil.  
 He and I – the interchange.  
 Not a prosthetic device for the soul  
 to ease its load, but a reminder of the greater loss  
 the spirit undergoes when it is spoken.  
 Nothing repairs the broken  
 past except forgetting.  
 But who is let through the filmy net?  
 Who has the privileged right to thus forget?  
 They employ me for the record;  
 I speak and seek accord.  
 To be silent would be violent.

The Director-General did not press charges.  
 After all, it was he that hired me for this game  
 and I was simply doing my sworn duty... publicity.  
 It was a new era and the archives needed money;  
 it was called research, but they fired me just the same.

I found a room not far from the Seine  
 and wrote to stay afloat,  
 my only assets a dictionary,  
 a free-entry museum card,  
 my rain-cape and  
 much unresolved anguish.  
 No one will escape.  
 In this noisy swell of words the rest go down as well:  
 David H., the friend who did not save my life but turned instead into another sex to  
 neutralise his past;  
 all his mannequins who were taught not to speak;  
 and I.

This little pageant, our pastoral dance, is over.  
 Pack up the picnic things.  
 In Venice David filed up the Campanile—  
 (it was closed during intemperate weather)  
 and looked down at the flooded piazza below  
 where waiters waded after floating tables, and umbrellas  
 sailed downwind, and he saw the people pointing up at him—  
 when a submerged and chequered tile of russet stone came rapidly rising up.  
*Acceleration = 32'/'second<sup>2</sup>.*  
 No one really cared.  
 The waiters were unperturbed;  
 tourists are never curbed of their desires.  
 Did he slip? Was he pushed?  
 The coroner's report referred to drugs;  
 Forensics set up a crime-scene tent,  
 so in the end it remained a media event.  
 In the palace-hotel they overlooked the copy of *Vogue*  
 I'd left beside the wigs and rugs.  
 A forlorn shoe, a purloined letter or two.  
 A pity there is no lead; they've forgotten how to read.  
 Paris sleeps tonight.  
 And I watch over the city.

## Research statement

### *Research background*

*The Archivist* is a work of exploration: principally of sexuality and gender conducted by an unreliable narrator unearthing ‘revelations’ from the archive. ‘The Archive’ has been a source of serious research by scholars for centuries. Jacques Derrida, in his Freudian interpretation of the Archive (1996), suggests there is a connection between psychic processes and technologies of inscription, putting into play the vexations of public and private issues. This ‘fever’ he relates to the Death Drive, in its obsession to incite amnesia, threatening memory as an accumulation of capital (1996: 12).

In 1993 an article appeared in the French newspaper *Le Monde*. It reported that the director of a famous fashion house had committed suicide by jumping from a tall building. Nothing else was reported.

### *Research contribution*

Inspired by W.G. Sebald’s practice of employing fragmented biographies as a vehicle for prose narrative, I contrived to do this in a prose poem. While dispersion and fragmentation rupture the dominant modes of writing, the fragment, when framed as a gesture and an epic, becomes whole unto itself and creates the illusion of a totalized self. As archival, biographical research tends to deal mainly with fragments, there is a danger of disrupting intimacy with intention, thus putting under pressure an ethics of inscription. This is the research undertaken in *The Archivist*.

### *Research significance*

The research undertaken here weds Walter Benjamin’s idea of the fragment-as-gesture with his notion of poetry as a collection of refuse.

## Work cited

Derrida, Jacques 1966 *Archive Fever*, trans. Eric Prenowitz, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.