

Flinders University

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Climate change – excerpt from ‘Vanishing point’

Biographical note:

Professor Jeri Kroll is Program Coordinator of Creative Writing at Flinders University in Adelaide. Since 1997 she has published extensively on creative writing research and pedagogy. Past President of the Australian Association of Writing Programs, she is on the UK Editorial Boards of *New Writing* and *Write4Children* as well as *TEXT*. She has published over twenty titles for adults and young people, including poetry, picture books and novels. *Creative Writing Studies* (co-edited with Graeme Harper) and *felis domestica* (poems) are recent books. In 2009, she was a Visiting Fellow at George Washington University in Washington, D. C., collaborating on a staged reading of her verse novel, ‘Vanishing Point,’ and was awarded a Varuna Fellowship to finish the novel. A full staged reading will take place in 2011. In 2010-2011, Palgrave Macmillan will publish *Research Methods in Creative Writing* (co-edited with Harper) and Picaro Press a selection of children’s poems. Jeri.Kroll@flinders.edu.au

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Diana: Temptation

There he is, that boy from class.
Don't stare. Sip your latte.
This café's packed. He won't notice me.

The way he moves reminds me of that colt
by grandma's place nearly ten years back –
free and easy. What a leggy beauty

and so is Conor striding to the bar.
Look at those glossy girls
shoving to make space for him –

a lean male with tangled chestnut hair.
Wait till they hear his voice,
its welcome rhythm and swing.

Makes me think of Irish pubs in town
with jigs and reels spilling out the door,
inviting anyone in.

Makes me think as well there's more to him
than meets the eye. Sometimes the eye's enough.
I envy that he seems so much himself.

Their order comes. The girls have to give way.
Now Conor has his meal he needs a seat,
scans the room. Our eyes lock for an instant.

I jump, caught out, retreat to reading. What?
Black figures prance before me on the page,
then freeze when the other seat scrapes out.

'Mind if I sit?'

'Fine. It's free.'

He slides his crowded tray over to mine.

The silky smell of melted mozzarella,
tomatoes, garlic, basil,
makes my nostrils flare.

Some temptations are easy to resist.
I choose another, sitting opposite,
look up and smile.

Conor: Climate change

What I miss most is green. The misty morning grass that crushed sweet under the horses' hooves as I led them out from the field. And my father's fields fringed by sycamores, larches and oaks, with their leaves flapping in a brisk wind making the horses skittish. The leaves shiny like cooking apples. Typical of my family's luck. We sold up just before the housing boom reached us and money started flowing into our county from Dublin.

Our land bordered a lake there. I remember how the swans scattered in the dawn, creasing the water like Mother's forehead when I hauled the stroppy geldings past. Horses always mean early starts. We needed to work them before we headed for other jobs, the ones that gave us cash so we could keep the gallopers going. We left our three acres in early June when the days stretched out towards twelve at midsummer night. Still a lick of cold in the air. It was cobweb light again by four.

It's crazy here. So much is reversed. Native swans are black as my dress boots, not a proper white like ours. Green's a winter colour mostly. We don't have tank water to waste on a lawn in summer. We grow a few vegetables, though, and keep buckets in the shower to catch water for them.

I'm still not used to summer. I sneeze every time that bloody north wind gusts, the light sears even through dark glasses and the heat squeezes me out so I drip like a dishcloth. Coated with sunblock, I think we're ready for frying. The toasted paddocks lie down bare and flat under the sun as if they had given up hope. I know they're just playing dead now, biding their time till the season breaks in March. If it breaks at all. But even beaten down they're my father's fields – paddocks they call them here – fifteen, more than he could afford in Ireland.

A few weeks ago we had a grand Christmas gift – a summer shower. It dusted the paddocks with green. Kikuyu grass is mostly what we've got. At first we didn't know how lucky we were. It's as stubborn as Father and grasping as any weed. That old grey mare we bought to teach the colt some manners, she nibbles the tender shoots as soon as they appear and already she's put on weight.

I don't go to Church anymore, not since Mother died, but when the evening sea breeze rolls in, it's like I've been to confession again and the priest's granted me absolution. Or like when Mother used to put a damp cloth on my head when I had a fever. If the tide goes out at dusk and it's cool, we can exercise the horses on the beach. But the heat knocks them around so sometimes they're still sluggish.

Dawn's my favourite time now, even if I've had a late night at the pub. There's a busy kind of quiet. Cockatoos strip the acacias and crackle over the seed pods that litter the grass. Galahs peck at leavings in the feed bins. The magpies look like clockwork toys when they snatch at beetles burrowing in the dung. Whatever the hot day holds for me hasn't begun to pulse in my temples. I'm free for an hour. I suck in air that's icy-pole cool.

That's when I saddle up Quinn, the sherry-bay colt with the white blaze, and take him to the beach. That's where I get to know what he's made of. The shore's wide and flat, swept clean by receding waves. It unfurls like a cat's tail from the jetty towards

the ridge and a horse can stretch its full length, nose reaching into the breeze. As I crouch over Quinn's neck, we flatten out in a line that I like to think might never end. Tears leak from my eyes, my cheeks tighten as if I've got a bit in my mouth too, and someone's hauling me back. But I run on. That's why living here's worth it.

Diana: Lunch again

Conor wonders I'm not turning green,
thinks I'm nine-tenths rabbit.
Salad's all I eat.

For now I'll pay the price
for this type of temptation.
I feel I've almost woken

after years of sleep.
He's opened the glass coffin
but hasn't kissed me yet.

He knows the way he stares at me
whets our appetites for something more.
My insides stir when our fingers brush
as he flips through the menu to desserts.
Luscious words alone could weigh me down:
cocoa fantasy, Kahlua cream.

His voice, too, a dangerous invitation.
I pack up and choose escape
into a surprising summer rain
that soaks us through, revealing what we are.
We can't help but look. I touch his throat –
the fair skin's slick as stone.

Suddenly I ask,
'What do you miss the most?'
He doesn't hesitate. 'Green.'

Research statement

Research background

The contemporary verse novel has colonized young adult literature in Australia and the US (Alexander 2005). Its practitioners favour free verse and colloquial language but have not taken risks, exploiting poetry's imaginative potential. Story (focusing on 'issues') and character are privileged at the expense of a largely unsophisticated style; no one has replicated the electricity and passion of a Dorothy Porter for this audience. As well, the genre itself has not been extended.

Research contribution

These extracts come from a verse novel, 'Vanishing Point,' which experiments with generic hybridity, alternating between poetry and prose in order to test whether a comprehensive structural doubling can more fully express character and story. The doubling extends to the incorporation of two subjects, first love and anorexia, mediated through a passion for horses. Metaphors relating to food, colour and bodies (human and animal) permeate the work as a whole, facilitating character portrayal as well as thematic and narrative coherence. Meaning is embedded in this 'interstitial' (Heinz Insu Fenkl 2002) structure, not achieved before in a verse novel, where generic boundaries dissolve and reform.

Research significance

Texts can only grow and alter through full reader interaction, as Margaret Atwood suggests (2002). 'Vanishing Point' challenges readers with its metaphorical echoes and stylistic tensions, underpinning the novel, therefore, with both a metaphorical and generic architecture. Never losing sight of its dual origins, the interstitial work inhabits a permanent liminal space that is positive rather than negative, introducing a young adult audience to the potential of both genres.

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