

# I in the Stream

Poems: Volume IV



Glenn Martin

**Glenn Martin (1950 - )** grew up in Sydney, Australia. He lived in the hills on the far north coast of New South Wales for twenty years before coming back to Sydney. He has worked at many occupations: high school teacher, manager of community-sector organisations, psychiatric nurse, community development worker and social researcher, as well as being a writer on management, employment law, training, and business ethics. He has been an editor of professional and academic publications, and is currently an instructional designer for online tertiary education courses.

His previous books are:

Places in the Bush: A history of the Kyogle Shire

The Kyogle Public School Centenary Book: From New Park to 1995

Human Values and Ethics in the Workplace

Flames in the Open

Love and Armour

The Little Book of Ethics

The Ten Thousand Things: A story of the lived experience of the I Ching

Sustenance

The Big Story Falls Apart

To the Bush and Back to Business

They Went to Australia

A Modest Quest

# I in the Stream

Poems: Volume 4

Glenn Martin

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"I in the stream"? There's no "I" in stream.  
It would have to be a river.

Well it is, eventually.

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## Preamble: About this volume

**Note 1:** The preamble comes before the amble.

**Note 2:** In my mind, this is volume IV of my poetry. In one sense (the literal one), this is a blatant untruth: this is not Glenn Martin's fourth volume of poetry. It comes after *Flames in the Open* and *Love and Armour*, so it must be the third. But there is logic in my assertion, although you may not consider it to be acceptable logic. If somebody bought this volume and died before the intended volume III was produced, there would be a flaw in the order of things.

Volumes I and II were conceived at the same time, at Horseshoe Creek, Kyogle, in 1989. I compiled the two volumes from poems I had written over a period of about twenty years; the two volumes were loosely themed around their titles, but in parallel over time.

Volume III was also conceived at this time, but not executed. It was intended to be a judicious selection from my earlier poems, judicious because we are talking about my young days and....

After rather a long time, I still haven't produced volume III, so volume IV usurps its place, at least chronologically.

Yet I say, unapologetically: Nevertheless.

I acknowledge also that the 'IV' owes something to Led Zeppelin. They had the cheek to issue their fourth album without a name at all, maintaining that people would know who they were by then. And people did. That was the album containing "Stairway to heaven", the album that had the strong lore (or lure) of Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings* about it.

Our days have been rich. We have heard glorious music and it inhabits the caverns and byways of our minds. We have seen and experienced wondrous things. Amidst all of the horrors, the cruelties and harshness that attend our lives on this planet, the



bliss climbs to the stars and shines out of deep sky. All of this we have imbibed and it dwells within us. It is the bliss we must coax again into the doorway.

**Note 3:** Why the title? Like much of what happens in poetry, the phrase just came to me, and I liked it. We all have a bank of elemental concepts that float around our minds (both physical – like earth, mountain, ocean, tree – and abstract, like large, and force, and gentle). And occasionally, phrases emerge out of the constant buzz and flow of these concepts.

The phrase seemed to articulate nicely what I was doing – looking back into the stream of my own life and picking out pieces that were floating by (leaves, twigs) to enjoy, and to wonder about once more.

**Note 4:** What is to be said about the content of *I in the Stream*? I say this: We are of the spirit. We are not machines. We may have become quite good at being machines, but without spirit we die, or at least, we render life into a state where it is difficult for us to muster meaning or joy.

The cat that purrs in the doorway while it is watching traffic is not executing a plan; the purring is the full and complete message. Or, the purring ceases precisely at the moment it even becomes a message.

My poems are just a cat watching the traffic. I am making sense of experience: “and on good days, we run together”.

**Note 5:** Quirks

There are a couple of poems that may not be poems. They could be discursive dissertations about poetry. I don't care. I think I proved to myself in these experiences that the boundary between prose and poetry can become porous. It is the kind of territory where unicorns can pass across, and guards from either side of the border are powerless to prevent it.

“This is a moment.  
You will need A4 paper, and any kind of pen.  
I don’t care if you drink or not.  
I don’t care if you laugh or cry.  
I only beseech you to get to the other side.”

**Note 6:** I am struck by the unevenness of this poetic endeavour. The dates give me away. And there is the other side of disclosure – context. As a critic of an instance of particularly bad philosophy, I said: “Text without context is a con.”

I am sometimes frustrated by poetry books that offer only the poems, as if the context was always either self-evident or irrelevant, or as if the words were always shining pronouncements from an exalted plane. Yes, sometimes context fades and becomes irrelevant, and only the universal truth remains, but often, knowing the context helps you to see inside the meaning. Mine is a modest endeavor, and sometimes the parameters of my exercises need to be spelled out.

For example. The “Five words” poetry workshop occurred because I was reading Stephen Harrod Buhner’s book, *Ensouling Language: On the art of nonfiction and the writer’s life*. I was staying at my mother’s house in Ballina. I had just taken her down to Sydney to a nursing home, so she would be nearer to me, and I had her house on the market. I had to start cleaning out the house, going through her possessions and packing up what was to be kept.

I was there for several days, alone, so Buhner’s book on writing non-fiction from a spirit perspective lobbed into my mental space like a bomb: “I wasn’t prepared”.

I hadn’t tried to make sense of my life like that before. I mean, the idea of my life as a writer, and a writer’s experience of life; indeed, the obligations of such a life. So, I carried out the workshop exercise he proposed, over several hours one afternoon out the back of mum’s house under a large sky. The sun went down and the moon came out.

Shortly before my mother died, I showed her the latest book I had written. She was never going to read it, but she said, "You always were good with words".

And this volume contains another poem about poetry ("Workshop on poetry"). It was an actual workshop, at the New South Wales Writers' Centre. There, the poet MTC Cronin (Margaret) had us address the question of what poetry is. I was interested. At the time, I was writing articles and commentary on prosaic subjects such as management, training, employment law and business ethics.

At the same time, I was occasionally assailed by the "crude flush of words" that poetry can be. The soft boundary to the land of poetry was persistently present. It infiltrated. It stood next to me in serious moments and said, inappropriately, "Poetry is the shape of sky".

**Note 7:** The dates on the poems

I know, I don't have to do it, and few poets do. But it's evidence and it's context, and it may illuminate something that I haven't thought of yet. Sure, it may not matter, but it's true: some of these poems happened in rapid succession, and there have been long gaps between other poems.

I have had gainful occupations; I am only intermittently a poet. But there have often been times when I have rubbed shoulders with luminous words and phrases, generally at times when I have been endeavouring to be sensible.

**Note 8:** Which is my favourite poem?

Your choices may be different to mine; I expect so. For me, "I live in the city" was epochal, and I am still living in that sensibility after twenty years of being back in the city (it was 2008 when I wrote it, more than ten years after I came back to Sydney). (I find it astounding how long a current can run underground before it surfaces, like the freesias that have bloomed along my driveway after 15 years.)

And “Kookaburra (2)”. I decided years ago, indigenous fashion, that the kookaburra was my totem animal, and a kookaburra comes to sit on my fence regularly, sometimes with its partner. It looks me in the eye and I say: “Nevertheless. I am here”.

**Note 9:** I realise that I am still being sparing with context. But you know I will make no apology for that. I will write an afterword. I will try, but not too hard. Enjoy.

*The great enterprise can never be truly exhausted.  
Souls and spirits enter the great stream. Gather  
your energy to make the decisive move. The dragon  
is released from the river of ghosts.*

Cherrybrook (Sydney), August 2017

I see it  
slowly –  
it is a small book,  
like a secret,  
something that can be kept safe  
from the brash light  
of the world we deem necessary.

## I live in the city

I live in the city,  
but at night I hear  
the sound of the mopoke,  
and in the morning the laugh  
of kookaburras.

I live in the city,  
but it is an abode.  
I sojourn here.  
I wonder about the people  
who see it like a prison,  
their eyes focused on a tiny square  
of barred light,  
hoping for Noah's dove  
to bring them a branch  
of olive  
from some paradise  
buttressed by remoteness.

I live in the city.  
I admit that at night I hear  
the sound of traffic and trains also.  
But there is silence in between,  
and it is the same silence.  
I ask,  
is it the traffic that is silent,  
or is it the mopoke?

I burn a candle.  
The flame is steady.  
The flame burns  
oxygen and travail equally.

Travail withers in the still burn  
of wick in night's embrace.  
It is the same light.

27 January 2008

## A recitation for meditation

I breathe in, I breathe out.

Breathe in, breathe out.

I set the omens at the four corners of the hidden lands –

I set the omen of light before me,

I set the omen of darkness behind me,

I set the omen of thoughts and thinking to my left,

and the omen of feelings and emotion to my right.

I sit within the omens, where all light arises,

breathing in, and out.

I sit in the golden light,

and blue light surrounds me,

I am protected.

I am grace, I am energy, I am love.

I make a new day.

Wordless, I let go of the striving

to be eternal.

Here,

still,

I am older than the earth,

infinite,

and days will take their place.

17 April 2008



# The shape of sky

I have pondered the shape of sky  
poured down cracks between buildings,  
leaning on trees,  
a blank canvas for the sun,  
a host for clouds.

I have seen the sky angular  
and as the softest margin over far hills.  
I ponder the shape of sky,  
patient with the limits we set for it.

31 July 2009

# Monk

The sun rises over jigsaw of buildings,  
this is a season benign but delicate,  
breezes lilting across morning shadows,  
with young women neatly attired and intent  
on making the office in time.  
Around the corner a throng of early risers chatters,  
bound for leisure pursuits  
in a jauntily painted bus.

Breathe in, breathe out, sip tea,  
stretch for openness,  
stretch for vast goals, or none whatever.  
Recall the dreaming monks  
in mountains who, day in, day out,  
committed the silence to memory  
and painted the cherry blossoms for eternity.  
Breathe in the chatter, the eager expectation,  
and out, again.

Quell the tempests and carry the smile.  
Today the monk is travelling  
to a crowded village.  
He will be watching in the town square,  
observing the crows cawing  
on scrappy fences,  
and the farmer straining  
to haul the obstinate ox across the bridge.  
He will repaint the canvas.

4 April 2008 (morning)

## Kookaburra (2)

Kookaburra come look me this day.  
No laughing, just look me.  
One eye sideways.  
My clothes line, his perch.  
I say (no talking, just mind)  
I been Australia long time,  
mother and father, long way back.  
Kookaburra, he still look me,  
he no go.  
I say, I grow roots down;  
this home now,  
nowhere else.

Next day I hear laughter in  
old mother gum tree.  
Two kookaburras.  
That welcome call.  
I stay now.

28 November 2015

## Afterword

In my previous two volumes, I attempted to say something about what was going on when I wrote each of the poems. This was probably mostly for my own sense-making rather than any help it may have provided for readers.

With this volume I have been wrestling with the idea of the need to articulate context. This time, I can see the value of keeping the mystery. When we dream of something it is perfect, then when it comes into reality it is circumscribed and invariably somewhat short of perfect, or it is only a limited version of the perfect. This is the double-edged sword of context.

Sometimes words anchor a particular place or event and that is all we want the words to do. That is their purpose. And sometimes we want the opposite – the sweep of feeling that crosses (transcends) time, place and circumstance. The words soar, and the ground they lifted off from no longer matters.

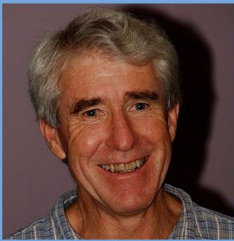
And sometimes we are not sure which way the ground is falling, and then I have to remember: it is my book and I must keep my balance.

These poems were written between 2007 and 2017, mostly but not entirely in Sydney, mostly but not entirely at home. Beyond this, I am going to retreat from particularity. I will say, of these poems, “Everything is real”. The people are real; I ventured inside the circle of their consciousness, or it may have been the other way around. It’s often hard to say, and in any case, I never knew what I was going to say. And there was always something at stake.

Like the monk, I continue to repaint the canvas. And I try to remember: “The ox is slow, but the earth is patient”.

In the end the words  
will have to fit on the pages.  
I accept the constraint.

Words are like a flock of birds. When a flock of birds  
flies into a tree, the tree is still a tree, but it starts to  
look rather more like a flock of birds.



It is becoming clearer. First light falling on sinews of tree. I say “My tree” just so that people know that I am protecting it. In my head, I say “Tree. Sun”, because it is becoming clearer.

(In the end, at times, despite the hospitableness of poetry, the lines don’t break. Only the rules have broken, and I in the stream allow what drifts in my wake.)



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