

A SOULSPEAK BOOK

Here's what Readers Are Saying About MIRRORS:

"MIRRORS is an extraordinary book. Not only do we get a chance to read some haunting poems aimed directly at the heart, but we also get the author's incredible account of what happened after the poems of aborigine Eldred Van-Ooy were sent to him by an Australian business acquaintance. Perhaps Justin Spring says it best when he steps back at the end of MIRRORS and sums up his experience with Van-Ooy: *Who can say what it is that brings these messengers from the other world into our lives? Spirit wants a body, it wants roots in this world, it wants to walk the walk and talk the talk. It's as simple as that. Every soul, every spirit, that arrives in this world ripples the very real water and disturbs the very real earth in a way we can only bend to. They create a truth that will not be denied. Next to that truth, most of our speculations about what is true and what is real and what is illusory seem somewhat beside the point. Truth is what spirit wants it to be. And it can change in a moment. Just like that. Get used to it.*"

*Christopher Hickey,
Writer, Biographer of Alice Hickey*

Here's what Readers Are Saying About MIRRORS:

MIRRORS. FOREWORD. AFTERWORD. In *medias res*. The poetry and the poet. Two children. Travelers. "Where is our house?" Half in the station—the house, the horses behind you, nudging forward. Your head half in the house of the railroad knowing the right thing and things that should be done to make things right—immediately. Horses in back of you. Fires arisen. Distant stars. Your voice. Rising, falling. Two children full of years. A house. A predestined destination—a calling. We are tired of wandering. What voice? With hands as roots. A small town in Mexico. A separate peace. In *medias res*. These are peripatetic pidgin poems—hieratic, prophetic, intuitive, with interpolated necessity—not concluded in duties, pragmatically called to certain acts. In languages, half there, half not, struggling, beautiful, within the interstices. In *medias res*. Well worth reading.

Ray Uzwyshyn,

Dir. Collections and Digital Services, Texas State University

MIRRORS

The Aborigine Poetry of Eldred Van-Ooy

JUSTIN SPRING

Revised Edition

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MIRRORS

The Aborigine Poetry of Eldred Van-Ooy

JUSTIN SPRING

REVISED EDITION

For Kelby

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FOREWORD

These translations from Melanesian pidgin (Tok Pisin) are selections from twelve poems written by the Australian aborigine Eldred Van-Ooy. The poems were published by Van-Ooy as a multi-page advertisement in a socialist Brisbane paper, *The Worker*, on January 27, 1960—although the poems themselves are all dated as being written in January 1939. Of the twelve poems, I have translated only four: *Dreamtime*, *Naming Things*, *Homecoming* and *I'm Tired*. Although the others are often quite cleverly constructed, given the incredible limitations of Tok Pisin, they border dangerously on doggerel. I cannot explain this apparent discrepancy in quality. For the curious, I have translated one of them, *Nambartu Meri*, at the end of this Foreword.

Much of Van-Ooy's history is unknown, though several biographical facts have been gleaned from a short *Worker* editorial that accompanied the poems. A pure-blood aborigine, Van-Ooy was taken from the outback at birth in 1891 and subsequently raised by a white, middle-class couple, Cinque and Mildred Van-Ooy, on the outskirts of Brisbane. In his early twenties, as an instructor in Hydraulic Engineering at the Queensland Institute of Technology in Brisbane, he achieved a modicum of local scientific fame by designing an ingenious waste-pumping system of vacuum and ball valves that continues to function in the Southern Queensland Water and Sewage Management District despite the fact that it makes minimal use of the force of gravity, the mainstay of all such systems past and present.

I do not know if these poems have ever been formally translated elsewhere. The only knowledge I have of Van-Ooy and his poems comes from the editorial and several inquiries I made on my own. That I was able to piece together any information some fifty-odd years after the fact still amazes me. If Van-Ooy wasn't obscure, he was close to it.

The poems themselves, despite their simplicity, present the translator with a number of problems. One is the absence of any other pidgin poems against which to gage Van-Ooy's efforts. (There is no Tok Pisin literature outside of the oral myths and ramblings that have been phonetically transcribed by scholars). Another is determining whether Van-Ooy wished the poems to be read as curiosities, protests, jokes, or as "serious" poetry. All that I had to go on were some microfiche of the pages containing the various poems and editorial, all of which had been forwarded to me in 1985 by an old Australian computer acquaintance, Boyd Munro, who had come across them during the conversion of some old microfiche files belonging to *The Worker*.

For information on Boyd Munro:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grasp_\(software\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grasp_(software))

In addition to these difficulties, there were many others. First of all I had to find some formal way of truly understanding the pidgin. Its vocabulary and syntax for starters. Many words and phrases can be intuitively grasped, but some can't. For a while, I had no choice but to guess at meanings and then I somehow managed to locate several dictionaries, one in particular being a dictionary on a Melanesian pidgin called Tok Pisin. It was a bit of luck finding it, because the poems (as I subsequently discovered) were written in the same pidgin. Without that dictionary, I doubt if I would have ever been able to accurately translate the poems.

But there were often problems that couldn't be solved by any dictionary. As I mentioned earlier, I had been unable to locate samples of pidgin poetry in any linguistic or anthropological journals. There was no history, no tradition of pidgin poetry to give me some feel for what Van-Ooy was trying to do. Many times I had to make instinctual decisions as to the essential emotional tone of a poem. This is always potentially dangerous business for a translator, i.e., bleeding into the original, but

pidgin is so elemental I had no other choice. I bled all over it.

Related to this is the fact that the language is so lacking in vocabulary, flexibility, nuance and tense that many times there is simply no way to accurately sense the underlying emotional tenor of a poem. Sometimes a poem would strike me as funny, and then a little later, pensive, almost poignant. I found that when you really “entered” the pidgin, by being open emotionally, the language was so fundamental there were many ways for the imagination to go. It was as if the words were reflective crystals. You could never predict the results. This is partly due to the fact that pidgin, to Westerners, often seems funny at first hearing. To get past that perception, and sense the underlying emotional texture of the poem, you have to go beneath the surface. You have to take your chances. You have to open up and enter the pidgin and let it take you on an essentially unpredictable journey. The poem might turn out to be outrageously funny. Or it might turn out to be incredibly poignant. There’s no way to tell.

Pidgin, to put it bluntly, is a very strange language with which to create a written poetry, a poetry in which the words on the page have to do everything. If Van-Ooy had created these poems orally and spoken them to us, or even read them off the page to us, we would have no doubts as to their intended tone, as the poems would fill out emotionally. But just reading them silently on the page can often give you the impression Van-Ooy thought everything around him was a joke.

Despite these inherent problems, I am sure that Van-Ooy’s decision to write the poems in pidgin was very deliberate. Surely it was a signal of some kind. One has only to put oneself in his place to begin to guess the nature of that signal, and hence begin to sense the true tone of the poems. For one thing, the use of pidgin, which is a “half-way” language, surely indicates a desire to at least go “half way” and offer the European (white) reader a more direct way of understanding the aboriginal

sensibility. Thus, one sense I had almost immediately (with regard to tone) is that of an "offering", although some might call it a bargaining chip. Connected to that is a sense of alienation and yet a very erect pride of heritage: the insistence that his white readers leave their world and learn a new, but not especially difficult language, if they wished to partake of his.

That sense of alienation becomes even more complicated once you realize pidgin is a "borrowed" language. The aborigines no more speak pidgin among themselves than do the white men who trade with them. The language is really so elemental it can only properly be used for its original purpose of establishing commerce and avoiding conflict between native and white. In short, pidgin is a "No-man's" language, brought out solely for the occasion.

Yet it is the language Van-Ooy chose to communicate in even though he had other choices. As the facts of his upbringing indicate, English was his language from birth. As to whether he knew an aborigine tongue is unknown, yet there is no reason to believe he grew up being completely ignorant of tribal languages. In other words, he had other, more flexible choices (English for sure, and perhaps an aborigine tongue) but he didn't take them. My sense is he wanted a language that truly fit who he was: a man with no language of his own. "No man", "Half man", take your pick.

This becomes even more ironic after you discover, as I eventually did, that the pidgin used by Van-Ooy was not an Australian pidgin but a New Guinea pidgin, which is what Tok Pisin really is. This choice may have been dictated by the fact that the Australian government had all but extinguished pidgin by 1950. Yet there is every reason to believe that there were still places in Queensland where an Australian pidgin could have been easily picked up. Indeed, Van-Ooy could have possibly known both pidgins. After all, the pidgins wouldn't have been that far apart

except for specialized terms. As to how he was able to pick up the Melanesian pidgin is anybody's guess. My own is that Brisbane's close proximity to New Guinea would have given Van-Ooy plenty of opportunity to bump into Tok Pisin speakers.

The choice of a New Guinea pidgin therefore seems to have been deliberate. It is my own guess that the choice was made simply because unlike the Australian pidgin, Tok Pisin had not been eliminated. Nor has it to this day. In many ways, it must have stood as a symbol to Van-Ooy of the stubborn will of the New Guinea aborigines to survive on their own terms. And again it was a secret language, known only to "border" people. And although pidgin is an oral language, as are the various aborigine languages (the aborigines have no written language), and thus might seem an appropriate choice to use in place of an aborigine language, Van-Ooy's decision to publish the poems in a newspaper resulted in his having to adopt the written pidgin script utilized by colonial governments in their uncontrollable desire to communicate through the normal channels of newspapers, directives, road signs, et al.

Van-Ooy must have known how rough (and comic) they'd appear on the page without his voice to fill them out. But the only real option open to him in those days was print. He may have published in small magazines and quarterlies and things like that, but it's clear he wanted to be published in newspapers. This tells us, I think, that Van-Ooy didn't create them as an academic exercise. He wanted people to read his poems. Lots of people. All kinds of people. And he was willing to suffer the consequences, including being laughed at it seems.

What he was actually willing to go through becomes even clearer when one realizes that despite Van-Ooy's position at the Institute, he had to pay to have his poems published (as advertisements). Or he may have deliberately chosen to print them as advertisements as a way of mocking, or commenting on the Western emphasis on profit. There is no way to tell, but

either scenario seems equally likely. It is equally unclear whether he chose *The Worker* or that *The Worker*, being a socialist paper, was the only paper that would accept the poems. It is always possible of course that he could have been in collusion with the editors of the paper, who may have agreed to print them for free (as advertisements) as a joint protest against the exploitation of aborigines, but then again the editors may have been as unenlightened as everyone else and actually made him pay.

The accompanying editorial, which is mostly factual, doesn't give any hints. Its presence, however, does suggest the editors thought it best to give some sort of explanation for the decidedly strange advertisements. My guess is that Van-Ooy had decided from the start that they would be only printed as advertisements. If someone chose to help, fine; if not, that was fine too.

One other consideration with regard to tone has to be mentioned, and that is the inherent tension of trying to express feelings in a very limited language of approximately 400 words. (There are about 40,000 words in the head of an educated English-speaking Westerner.) This tension may not be especially evident in my finished translations, (although I hope I have captured some of it) but it will be immediately evident to anyone who takes the time to read the pidgin originals and their literal translations. For although pidgin has an inherently comic nature (and Van-Ooy was not above taking advantage of that fact in his comic poems), the poems I have translated are serious personal and philosophical poems which stretch pidgin to the breaking point.

I think it's important to remember that Van-Ooy was as well educated as the average Australian college graduate of his time, and it is obvious from at least one of his poems, *Nambartu Meri*, that he was acquainted with 17th century English verse. His frame of reference was not that of a bushman, but an educated Westerner. I think this is important to understand and is the reason my formal translations have that type of surface. Some

have found my translations of the intensely literal pidgin a bit too polished, but, alas, that is how they came to me, that is to say, my inherent sense of the "English version" of Eldred was of a man who read newspapers and drank tea on his patio in Brisbane, rather than someone who lived in a hut and speared pigs. At the same time, my inherent sense of the "pidgin" Eldred was of someone much more primal and mysterious. So to give you some idea of what a very direct, literal translation might look like (for those who prefer a more "primitive" translation, and who's to say that they're wrong) I have supplied a literal translation of each poem in a separate section. Who knows? Perhaps there are as many Eldreds as there are readers.

I should say something about the positive side of pidgin as a language for poetry. As I mentioned earlier, expressing sophisticated emotions and ideas in a language like pidgin can create an incredible tension, a tension that, at times, is quite tangible, because it stretches the language to a point where you think it will break, or fail, and then somehow, and this is the miracle of all languages, something in the language finds a way to say what has to be said. Van-Ooy's use of pidgin lets us really feel that tension, that same dangerous yet beautiful tension that is at the heart of every act of true artistic creation. Because such acts, when all is said and done, are always attempts to portray the unknowable world in terms of the knowable—an act, that on the face of it, would seem impossible. That perceived impossibility, of course, is what gives rise to the tension (and eventual release) that every artist feels during the act of creation.

I have come to the conclusion that Van-Ooy felt, and wanted his readers to feel the beauty of this "birthing" process. What he wanted others to feel is the beautiful danger of trying to say something very deep and very complex in a very simple language. That's one of things I think he was up to with these poems. The average Brisbane reader attempting a translation would feel that tension. You might say he wanted to remind us of the essential creative fire within us and was willing to offer us a

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