

IN LIEU OF AN EDITORIAL

A REFLECTION ON LITERARY JOURNALS AND ON THE WRITING LIFE

BY EMILY BALLOU

At the launch of my novel *Aphelion*, a small child arrived, only seduced into coming at all on his own imaginative understanding that there would be a big rocket in the room and that a book would come exploding out of it. That the room would be silent before it sounded and that when it sounded the book would become a shooting star.

Afterwards, I imagined the book in orbit around the dark side of the universe. I thought of a book drifting in zero gravity. Would that all of our attempts to deliver literary offerings to the planet be as joyful as this, and as easily let go of, so that a book might do its work without us fussing, so that it might soar until it finds a new and separate existence from us.

But the lovely thing about a literary journal is that its existence is perpetual, like the zero chamber room in a rocket, and the book hovers around you, and every now and then, you can grab it down and add something else to its pages. It is a blank book, in that it is never quite finished and you are continually filling it as it is filling you, and you change and grow together.

The place a journal occupies, to extend the metaphor, is a dialogue between inner and outer space. Maybe all books are. But we hope a journal has built within it a mechanism of persistence. We launch these

voices into the room, and we do not know how far or how long into space and time they will continue to reverberate.

How does it begin? How does it start, and at what point does the need to write grow into a need to collect? Between writing and collecting, between collecting and soliciting, encouraging, assembling, and then going out before it is finished to collect more; a journal, if it hovers between the inner and outer, is a constant dialogue, in this case, between the privacy of writers, photographers and painters and the *primacy* of words, of art and forms of speaking, between these public and private spaces. Yet still, the reason why we need to make journals is as nebulous perhaps as the reason the poet John Tranter makes poems. In his interview in *Etchings 2* he says: 'I've always wondered what actual function poetry had. I can write poetry, so I do—but *why* would anyone do it? What value does it have to society in the end?' But maybe that question can be answered by the stencil artist FORM (*Etchings 1*) when he illustrates within the pages a person spray-painting a wall with the words: 'BLANK WALLS ARE CRIMINAL'.

A journal is a wall continually being inscribed.

Milan Kundera says that the greatest wisdom is found in the gaps. I think of this wall, then, not as a solid thing, but one whose bricks are being constantly moved around, one brick replaced with another, one gap with a brick, one brick with another gap, creating spaces where apparent solidity had been.

I remember years ago, in the US, eighteen and part of a basement film department, spending our nights in editing suites and days wide-eyed with exhaustion, cobbling together posters for film nights and poetry nights at pubs where old men threw popcorn at me as I read in my either loud or quiet voice, the words I'd dared to type onto thin pages. The energy of that time is what I remember best; the feeling that we were on the brink of the reaches of our world, making things, trying to say

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that things matter. And while we were learning to write and learning how to best deliver that writing and our art to the world, it was the sense of family I felt there that was most nourishing for me. It was this that gave me the confidence to continue to work in words as a way of life.

A literary journal is also a way of making a new family. In this family, each of the editors contributes something, and though no one person can take all the credit, neither can one person take all the blame. Together they make a space in which new work and voices can evolve, friendships can be made, and an intellectual community can grow larger, incrementally larger with each issue. All of this feeds a broader understanding of what a literary community *is*. It is borne of old dreams, not yet outdated, but often jostled aside in a commodity-driven market of individuals forced to peddle their books at literary festivals like door-to-door salesmen. Here instead, debate and intellectual sparring are understood to be different from and more satisfying than mere review, implying a dialogue, a joyful dream of engagement and a belief as much in the importance of what people are trying to say, as how they say it. And finally, a journal such as this one attempts to connect people internationally so that we might find that the space of the written world is deeper than we previously felt it to be.

Poet, screenwriter and novelist EMILY BALLOU was born in the US in 1968 and moved to Australia in 1991. Her novels are *Father Lands* (Picador, 2002) and *Aphelion* (Picador, 2007). Her children's picture book, *One Blue Sock*, is forthcoming from Random House. She is currently adapting *Father Lands* into a film, and writing a book of poems about Charles Darwin.

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photograph by Ari Hatzis

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