

An Elegy

By Wayne Bradshaw

When I was a boy, my father worked for Queensland Rail. He had been spray-painting railway carriages for longer than I had been alive, and he retired in July 2000, suffering from crippling arthritis in his hands after thirty-nine cumulative—though not consecutive—years in the same job. I have only scattered documents and half-remembered stories recording his life as a young man. After leaving school at the age of thirteen, my father spent a few years delivering first bread, and then soft drink door-to-door. At sixteen he began an apprenticeship in housepainting and decorating at Queensland Rail. In a weighty leather photo album I have a yellowed copy of the letter to my father congratulating him on completing his apprenticeship on the seventh of September in 1959. Trade qualification in hand, he struck out for a while, working contract jobs on properties. My father spoke often and fondly of his time working on various properties in rural Queensland, drinking, leching, fighting and shooting kangaroos. In the 2010s I watched the rerelease of *Wake in Fright* with my partner and recalled my father's stories of what he described as the best years of his life.

Another document I have retained locates my father in the town of Ayr—only an hour south-



east of Townsville—working as an automotive spray painter in 1966. A bail notice places him back in Townsville, having fled the scene of an accident, in 1968. Another document situates him in Brisbane in 1971, assembling bus roof hatches. If I have the history right, which I probably do not, he had moved to Brisbane after meeting my mother in Townsville. For her part, my mother was a recent divorcee with three children in the custody of her former husband. She had escaped

an abusive relationship, but at the cost of her children. After a few years in Brisbane, my parents moved to Winton, and then to Rockhampton. From there they returned to Townsville and my father returned to Queensland Rail. According to his stories, the idea was that a stable job in the railways would assist with an application for custody over my mother's children. It worked—my father suddenly found himself a father of three teenaged children. By the time I was born in 1982, my siblings were entering their twenties and had all either moved out of home or been kicked out of home by my father.

My father died in 2017 while I was undertaking a PhD in literature. Our relationship was complicated and fractious, but my father loved my partner as a daughter and my partner loved him back in an uncomplicated way that I admit envying a little. In contemporary language, we would certainly describe my father's behaviour towards my mother in terms of coercive control, accompanied by threats of extreme violence. The monitoring of spending and of petrol consumption, the keeping of a strict itinerary, and near-daily interrogations were accompanied by regular paranoid accusations of infidelity. One day the situation culminated with my father threatening my mother with a knife. She fled a week later, with me in tow. After a brief stint in a women's shelter, we moved into a little flat. Shortly after that, my mother found herself in a relationship with a man even more troubled

than the previous two. At the age of twelve, I moved back home with my father.

None of my siblings had finished high school. My eldest sister, twenty-one years my senior, almost made it to teachers' college before falling pregnant at sixteen. My father's overweening desire was for me to attend university and become a solicitor, so that I might move up a rung in the social strata. It was a desire approached with the same coercive tendencies that he had exhibited with my mother. It made for a challenging five years marked with threats of all kinds. My siblings still regularly apologise for not doing more to try and extricate me from the situation, but there really was nothing to be done. My father's domineering personality was certainly better than any alternative available to me at that time.

Despite this unfortunate history, I consider my father to have been a good man who did his best for me under the conditions he found himself in. One thing I will forever remain indebted to him for is his decision to sacrifice a significant amount of his single income—supplemented by prodigious quantities of overtime at the railway—to send me to a Catholic high school. It was there that I learned a little of how to act like a product of the middleclass and received the kind of education that prepared me for university studies. I can probably say that I excelled in English, though I was never quite the top of the class. I also did sufficiently well in legal studies to keep my father's aspirations burning. I

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think access to this kind of preparatory education remains the greatest force for social mobility, particularly in regional communities, though I worry about what the underfunding of education, the encroachment of devices and so-called artificial intelligence, and the diminished status of reading might mean for children with similar backgrounds to mine.

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I began a law degree at university in 2000. My father had no idea what a bachelor's degree involved and had no friends with experience of university life. I was, it is sufficient to say, not particularly suited to the study of law. I could write a good argumentative essay, and enjoyed reading novels, but was lost at sea when it came to the tedium of case notes and legal readings. After two years of failure and increasingly heavy drinking, I enrolled in an education degree. I was a marginally better education student but, I soon discovered, an award-winning English literature student. I swapped to a Bachelor of Arts—a degree my father could never make sense of—and even began scanning the prize lists to see what subjects might win me some more money. Despite finishing my degree with an uneven GPA due to the law subjects I had used for prior credit, I was admitted into the honours program in

English. After completing a first-class honours thesis on the southern fiction of Cormac McCarthy, I undertook a master's degree in politics, and from there went on to complete a PhD in literature. I was lucky enough to have my research published as a book by Bloomsbury. I don't quite know what my father would have made of that, but I like to think he would have preferred this outcome to my being a very bad and very unhappy solicitor.

Over the course of twenty years studying on and off at a single regional university, much has changed. Little, if any, of that change has been for the better. As an English student I had the opportunity to choose from fifteen literature subjects ranging from Early English through to modernist literature. The course was taught by more than a dozen staff, with dedicated medievalists, romanticism scholars, avant-gardists, and scholars of literature in translation. Lectures were held in dedicated lecture theatres to substantial audiences. Tutorials were small classes of ten to twelve students and involved free and open discussion and sometimes even heated debate. Despite being in regional northern Queensland, there was an air of seriousness to the study of Chaucer, Byron, Woolf, and Hope. The reading load was demanding by current standards—eight books and a selection of shorter texts per thirteen-week subject—but academics

were personable and supportive. Assessment consisted of a minor essay, a major essay, and three or four essays under exam conditions, but penalties for late submission were light and plenty of exam preparation was provided. Students were treated like scholars in training. Even then, members of the old guard would speak fondly of the good old days when the English program was better still. I believe them. Things have been getting worse for a long time now.

Today, the same course is taught by four English staff and consists of seven subjects. Lectures have been replaced by a series of twenty-minute, pre-recorded videos. Workshops are optional, simultaneously in-person and online, and rarely attended in meaningful numbers. Assessment is an online quiz and an essay, both of which could be easily tackled with the assistance of a large language model. I'm certainly not trying to condemn any one institution. These are changes that can be seen at a variety of universities across the country. I've been told by multiple sources that they are developments that reflect the needs of students who increasingly work full time while studying. I worked full time while studying part time. I'm not sure that they put forward a viable argument. Whatever the reasoning, the changes have brought me to hate

universities as much as I continue to love them. They remind me, at times, of my father in this respect.

I finished my PhD just in time to witness what increasingly appears to be the death of my discipline, if not the humanities at large. Reading, it seems has reached its social nadir. The joy of writing seems destined to be farmed out to complex statistical generators by students and teachers alike. I hear rumours of in-class reading in primary schools being replaced by audiobooks. I see evidence of university reading lists being reduced by more than half. We should, I am told, teach the students we have, not the ones we wish for. Many forget that the students we wish for are made in schools and universities. I worry that an entire generation will lose the opportunity to revel in the verses of Kenneth Slessor, Judith Wright, and Evelyn Araluen. I worry that a generation will never experience the Brisbane of David Malouf's *Johnno*. I worry that children will drown in the world of *Fahrenheit 451* before they are old enough to read the words of Ray Bradbury. I write this on a Sunday, looking forward to a week in the university library where I work, read, write, and hope that I am wrong about the future. I am filled to bursting with pity and rage over buried memories.

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