EDITATING ON Alberto Giacometti’s engrossing minimalism, the novelist Jean Genet decided that the pared, the contracted, the brief and the occluded offer a peculiar experience of aesthetic ‘recompense’. His essay (a kind of eloquent love letter) is bent on repudiation of the charge of ‘miserabilism’, and preoccupied with the mysterious solemnity of the spare.

The experience of reading Peter Craven’s selection of the ‘best’ 2002 Australian stories invoked not only a memory of Genet’s tender tribute, but also a reconsideration of his essential terms. For what is striking about the volume is the fine quality of the writing — many of the texts affording the experience of intensification and concentration that a Giacometti might summon — and a prevailing misery, a distinct tenor of melancholy, what Robert Burton, the expert-on-the-subject, called ‘melancholising’ writing. This is not to say that the volume is dull: it is a shrewdly selected, audacious and at times riveting assemblage of some of the finest writers working in Australia today. The selected writers include ‘old masters’ such as Gerald Murnane, Jack Hibberd and Peter Mathers, and younger feisty figures such as Sonya Hartnett, Tegan Bennett and Delia Falconer. It should also be noted that the collection is not culturally diverse or excursive (in terms of ethnicity or the inclusion of minority voices), unless giving a guernsey to J.M. Coetzee, now apparently nominally Australian, somehow qualifies it in that regard.

Many of the stories in this collection are elegiac and haunted; many are concerned with illness, mutilation, catastrophe and death. They range from the soundly realist to the extravagantly metatextual: Hibberd’s ‘Christ Stopped at Echuca’, an allegory of demented masculinity that bears no relation at all to the Carlo Levi text echoed in the title, is a virtuoso piece of writing, and one so astonishing and lunatic that it makes A Stretch of the Imagination, Hibberd’s classic drama, look pale, bland and almost decorous by comparison. They range, too, into the metaphysical and quirkily contemplative: Murnane’s story, on the mystery of writing that devolves into praise for the epiphanic unwritten sentence, is a marvellous piece of deconstructive thinking and a wry critique of the arithmetical grading of creative writing submissions in university courses. In this long story, it is the residue of an image and the rhythms of what is unspoken that carry such ineluctable charge. Oddly enough, this is also the conceptual territory of the beautiful realist narratives Craven has managed to garner.

The first three stories in the collection are all compellingly haunted. Hartnett’s ‘The Dying Words of the Archangel’ opens: ‘I am dying: it is a beautiful word, like a long slow sigh of a cello: dying. But that is the only beautiful thing about it.’ With this poignant fracture between words and bodies begins a remarkable piece of writing hinged in the spooky space between the living and the dead, the space of bones talking, of death infecting a small town like a dream or a curse. Amanda Lohrey constructs a subtler haunting. An ancient photograph of a bargemaster’s wife recurs in the fraught story of a modern barge holiday on a British canal, freighted with vague anxiety and unsettling dread. Liam Davison’s ‘Men Like Beattie’ is almost mystical in its concision and suggestivity (and here the Giacometti analogy is relevant), telling of a man surfing against grief, against the weight of silence, against the ominous low-pressure systems that constitute the atmospherics of loss. These are all tonally sure and affecting pieces of writing, each modulated around forms of uncanny experience.
The melancholy of the collection is not simply a matter of content (cancer, death, ghostly presences), but also resides in the sense of symbolic detail that lies at the heart of several of the stories. Delia Falconer’s story of a meeting between a young poet and Kenneth Slessor has about it a fine and encompassing sadness — its grasp of detail so assured that the encounter is completely engulfing — and Catherine Ford’s ‘Anchorage’ sabotages a bourgeois beach picnic (replete with boogie-boards, beach towels and skin-hugging wetsuits), with the search for an anchor, an object that becomes invested with qualities of portentousness, gloom and existential failure. Philomena van Rijswijk’s compassionate and lovely tribute to sisterhood is shadowed by a secret cataclysmic lie; Lisa Merrifield’s story about a daughter’s grief for her father is elaborated — in both an intellectually bold and moving association — with the arcane science of rocks and minerals (in this wonderful tale, hardness is a measure of love, resistance and the poetics of the natural). Bernard Cohen’s ostensibly comic story tips into the melancholy of desire; Anson Cameron’s inventive mindscape turns into radio-waved despair; Tim Richards’s clever school tale turns out to be an exercise in weird grotesquerie and mutilation blues.

These are all texts notable for their originality and risk-taking strangeness; they are deft, daring and satisfyingly contemporary. One of the saddest and most unexpected endings to a story — the tip into melancholy — is Brian Matthews’s short academic tale in which an increasingly self-conscious and awkward professor of literature ends his class with not real but imagined tears, tears falling — this time in a direct allusion to ‘The Dead’ — exactly as Joyce’s snow famously did, pervasively, sorrowfully, upon both the living and the dead.

In his introduction, Craven writes with honourable generosity of the pieces he has chosen. His selection is intelligent, astute and, in some interesting respects, catholic. At the same time, he unfortunately found it necessary to revisit — and with an altogether unbecoming and casual denunciation — his earlier insults to Hilary McPhee and Richard Flanagan. Craven dismisses as merely ‘parochial anxiety’ McPhee’s entirely reasonable query (in her review of the 2001 volume: *ABR*, February 2002) about the inclusion of extracts. This means he refuses again to consider the epistemological separateness of the story and the extract — and all this might imply for textual integrity — and offers in the current volume five extracts from novels not yet published.

While it is always exciting to see the new work of accomplished and seductive writers such as John Scott and Gerard Windsor, or to meet a tantalising murder-mystery fragment from Peter Temple, there is also an element of opportunism here that does not do justice to the writers. Genet said of Giacometti that his most common phrase in speech was ‘we must value’. The final virtue of collections like this one — leaving aside formal disputes — is the reminder of the preciousness and ‘recompense’ of artworks conceived specifically in the compass of the small.