

Joyce Lee

Collected poems
1965-2003

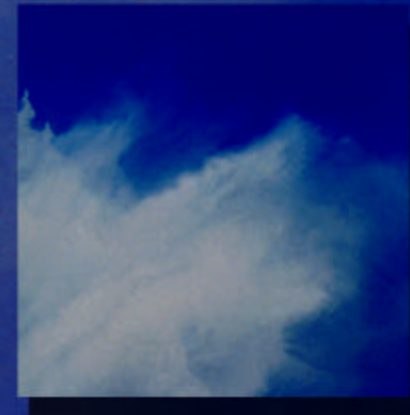
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Chris Wallace-Crabbe

α Artist's Proof

It is nearly dark
when I come to the
Indian Ocean



α



**It is nearly dark
when I come to the
Indian Ocean**

**The collected poems of
Joyce Lee**

a**Artist's Proof**

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It is nearly dark when I come to the Indian Ocean*

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Foreword

*Hear me, lesser seasons.
It may be autumn, may be winter
but I'll be living summer.*

What can poetry do for us these days? It's not in the business of swaying the masses; indeed, as Peter Porter has ever so gracefully put it, "Poetry is one of the few arts which is not menaced by not having an audience." Yet it somehow retains an almost popular role in bearing witness to human decency. Yes, poetry produces some of the durable vessels which are brimming with hope.

Such concepts as humanity and humanism have been cast aside in recent times like tattered banners, outmoded ensigns. Given that climate, it is a joy to encounter some book that is everywhere imbued with a humane spirit, a book that combines alert intelligence with decency and warmth. As the writer in question, the Melbourne poet Joyce Lee says about her artistic heritage, "Old now, I treasure what was given to me, perhaps in riddles". But as we read them we find that her poems always strive to make such riddles come clear. In this she may be seen as a traditionalist, which is no bad thing.

Lee's new, retrospective volume of poetry, gorgeously entitled *It is nearly dark when I come to the Indian Ocean*, pays tribute to human community and continuity. It gathers her clean, vividly substantial poems from as far back as their appearance in *Sisters Poets 1*, edited by Rosemary Dobson and published in 1979; from there it comes down to the present day, most of the earlier poems having been rewritten to some extent. The result, I am convinced, is a wonderfully coherent collection.

Long a professional pharmacist, Lee came to poetry in her middle years. The voice was there, and the lyrics it articulated could range from the familiar ground of 'Wimmera child's first waterfall' or 'Double wedding', back through history and dream

to the Biblical Hagar, and to Gerda, the Celtic witch whose potions prefigure those of a modern chemist's shop.

Indeed, as her book shows, the poems torn out of history add something exotic and also bracing to Lee's Wimmera-formed imagination. They leave dark shadows in the corners of her picturing. They remind us that even this brave new world of wheat and sheep and sprawling spaces comes out of history. What is more, not even the recovered landscape of country trains, scorching wind and cars that break down inconveniently quite fills her imagination: no, it is not all steeped in Wimmera naturalism. Lee's dreams "encompass every shade of blue"; her yearnings reach for the sky. As she writes about the truths she learned tacitly, visually from her influential painter uncle (personally influential, that is),

The dark side is part of the whole, a secret under-knowledge, a strengthener to get you through when your light is in some distant sky or disappears. The process is mysterious, its gifts measureless.

Yet this is the poet who says to herself, in another voice, "What you know is yours." She is not at all naïve about solids.

In her compelling verse, the recurring strain of mystery does not entail vagueness or verbal chicanery, but has its roots in accurate knowledge. This is the basis of Joyce Lee's persuasiveness, of her poetic strength, despite her deeply modern acknowledgement that "All I believe in is change." Metaphysical questing rides on the shoulders of *verismo*.

On the evidence of what we read here, she is subject to metaphysical yearning, not least in the presence of music, which Les Murray has more skeptically dubbed, "The greatest form of nonsense verse." Responding to that transcendent composer Messaien, she hazards that "The note pins silence/ never to resound", while in another poem she laments that "you are left with longing/ for the voice beyond the note."

Yet as I have suggested, her dominant imagery is rooted in the flat, pastoral Wimmera, with its bluish edge of Grampians. These

poems return again and again to rock, dryness, dust, vistas of plains: to what she calls in the title of one, 'Plain dreaming.' Far overseas, in a prospect of Dubrovnik, she can write, "In the late afternoon, stones/ glisten like sheep on bare hills." Also to country sounds, among them the mopoke, a horse stamping in its stable, express trains passing in the night.

The poetic vocabulary of this poetry is rich, using the whole palette, as she would be glad to say. Yet the language is not arcane, nowhere near as baroque as Peter Steele, or Anthony Hecht, or Marianne Moore. It is plumfull of colours, hard nouns and proper names: not the "long lists of proper names" which the formalist Auden thought a poet should enjoy, along with riddles and complicated stanzas. Lee is above all a realist in the homestead of poetry. Most of her capitalized names are lodged in families, active in social milieux.

These poems come over to us in clear stanzas of modestly free verse, in linguistic orchestration by way of such tasty words as triangle, peephole, hem, gimme, scrubbiness, lobster, blisters, quinine, snow gum and, in triumphant upper case, MADAGASCAR. Hers is an active world crammed with things, hues and actions—even the memories are rock-solid. They contain such vivid place/events as The casino

*end of Point Lonsdale pier.
Interval at a film hot air balloon, swimming
with sharks at the aquarium,
riding a bejeweled elephant.*

These strengths are manifest in such poems as "The past walks noiselessly" and "Travelling backwards", or in such precisely physical lines as these:

*Unloaded in scorching wind
I'd watched him jack the car, carefully mend the
puncture,
no cursing in church clothes. Minna
didn't mention how she'd sweated in the kitchen.*

*Evenings round the stove, Gus and Ernest
red-faced in shiny second best, talking
thread darning and embroidery needles. I learn
to stitch neat edges, work to a pattern.
We share mystery and far places.
I go to bed held safely in a large world.*

Surely that is what Lee's poems themselves do: go to the black and white bed of print "held safely in a large world." It is also a realm that has space for humour: one need only think of such poems as 'Car week' and 'Untidy legs.' Who else could possibly have used "untidy" like that?

Once upon a day I lamented that most books, at least in Australia, were written by people who didn't know anything about work. It is a pleasure here to see how persuasively the poet evokes teacher or preacher, drover or country housewife, even the persuasive committee man, having a damn good sense of what they actually do. As she says of such awareness, "Peasant born, I inherited/ hard work from a grandfather/ migrating with his tribe/ for betterment."

Mostly, however, she writes in the present tense, employing that present-emphatic that plays so large a part in modern Australian poetry. Within this climate of syntax, the past recurs over and over again, shaping events and people, giving meaning to the great Where We Are Now. Lee is a poet of generations, it might be said, recalling in this the David Campbell of *Deaths and Pretty Cousins*: and Campbell was, of course, another poet who knew what work could be. His high Monaro has a great deal in common with her Wimmera.

Reading Lee, I am sometimes taken back to those once-influential studies by Erik Erikson on childhood, society and the life-history. She feels and records how human strength flows down like honey from generation to generation. Not only can she travel backwards in time, along the psychological railway, all the way to Murtoa station; she records her profession ironically with the reflection that "My workplace is filled with prescription

ghosts” and she recreates ‘My father’s country’, a grandmother’s kitchen or the grandfather leading a bride on each arm into the local church. Each of these chronotropes is far too strongly rendered to smack of sentimental nostalgia. As Octavio Paz once observed, “Poetry is memory become image, and image become voice.”

The newest writing in *It is nearly dark* makes radiantly clear that, as much as being an art of mimesis or of tribute, poetry can be an art of yearning. These late lyrics are full of ontological hunger. They yearn for truths which are too large to be named, or fully understood. Again and again the trope is light, flame, perhaps candlelight. “I must pursue an unknown brighter light,” she writes, reaching out for something beyond the Johannine logos, seeking to touch the ineffable. Of such poems it would be impertinent to say more.

In the large picture this book is like a tessellated novel, the pieces reshuffled but the characters intact—on the other hand, it seems possible that if the poems were set down in exactly the right order we would have Joyce Lee’s autobiography. Viewed, more sensibly after all, as a book of poetry, this is writing in which accuracy of perception is harmoniously balanced with generosity of spirit.

Chris Wallace-Crabbe

Melbourne, July 2002

Light from the dark side

Robert Eager Taylor Ghee, born 1869, died 10 July 1951

Robert Taylor Ghee married Sophie Wehl, his second wife, youngest of eight girls, friends of my mother's family. I enjoyed having so many extra aunts. Mr Wehl, unhappy with farming, moved from Murtoa to Melbourne and made a fortune. He found a letter from Germany in the office waste paper basket, answered it (with the boss's permission) and became the Australian agent for aniline dyes.

He moved house several times. He died suddenly in The Towers, a mansion in Orrong Road, Toorak. The family lived formally employing a chauffer-butler, a waiter for family meals. No one understood the business. When their income diminished six of the unmarried daughters moved into a large villa next door. I was six when Else, my mother's friend, gave me a six week holiday in Melbourne. The first morning, Auntie Else took me into the garden of The Towers and showed me the hexagonal gazebo in the garden where Mr Wehl played cards with his friends. I have a photo of myself looking through an opened stained glass window, one of six. For morning tea I was given a peach on a fruit plate, and was shown how to eat it with a fruit knife and fork. Else took me to the Zoo, Luna Park, to the Princess Theatre, the Aquarium, a trip on the bay on the Edina to Frankston. Only the best behaviour was tolerated.

Soon afterwards, Else's youngest sister Sophie went to work for Mackie and Hayles and met Robert Taylor-Ghee who was still shocked from the death of his young artist wife, after only two years of marriage. In 1923 he married Soph. She built two houses, each with a studio for Rob, both near Heyington Station.

In 1931, when I came to Melbourne to go to the Pharmacy College, I lived with them. The Depression disturbed everyone. No one had money. We all lived frugally. Auntie Soph's wealth

had shrunk, but she kept house with grace. There was conversation over the breakfast table in the large sunny dining room before Uncle Rob went to work at Mackie and Hales in Elizabeth Street. Auntie Sophie did the housework and I went to lectures at the College, then in Swanston Street near Latrobe Street. We all took the train from Heyington Station. Cars were usually for pleasure. The same people caught the same train each day. Conversations begun on the station finished at Flinders Street.

My life was simple and straightforward. Everything in my day was aired over the evening meal. Auntie Soph and Uncle Rob played cards on a folding card table. I have worn out at least a dozen packs of patience cards relaxing over the game they taught. Uncle Rob lent me his books. I have his *Golden Bough* on my shelf. He suggested I read Oscar Wilde, the *Forsyte Saga*, Shaw's plays and Prefaces and *The Martyrdom of Man*, which I bought. We read the banned *Brave New World* and were duly shocked. Uncle Rob suggested I join the Athenaeum Library. I am still a member. They kept the *Hibbert Journal* for me and we had lively discussions over the articles published in it.

In 1931, the reflections I saw were as one-dimensional as stick figures, but the foundations laid then allowed me to weather bad seasons later. My life in the circle of Auntie Soph's caring and Uncle Rob's humour was truly special.

Soph and Rob were both slow in offering critical advice. Once only he took me aside seriously, pointing out that the man I was about to marry was bitter and depressed, and was unlikely to make me happy. I did not have the kind of courage needed to act on what he advised. If I had, I would be a different person. Wisdom is not acquired by enjoying oneself, so perhaps one does what is required instinctively. Any breadth of vision I have, I remember as Rob's gift.

Uncle Rob was fair with red cheeks and curly hair which he trimmed himself in front of a hand mirror. His round face was strengthened by an aquiline nose. His blue eyes twinkled in

appreciation. In public he was rather shy, keeping his radical opinions to himself.

Of Northern Irish descent, he was born in Ballarat in gold-mining days; his father a gold assayer for a bank, his mother a Quaker. He expected to become an organist and composer but a broken and weakened fourth finger turned him to art. He sometimes spoke of unexplainable events including his father's death, somewhere distant, and his mother saying, 'Your father has just died.'

When he was twenty he took lessons at the Melbourne Gallery. Early in his career he was rated with painters like McCubbin. Collins Street, Flinders Street Station, a horse tram, ships at the swinging basin on the Yarra, are featured in his early work. His pictures are naturalistic with a lot of fine detail that can be seen only if you look into them. An expert who restored and coated my paintings (I remember Soph whipping up egg white) told me how difficult it was to cope with Rob's grey-blue skies painted with layer on layer of different shades of colour.

Rob's life changed completely when his young artist wife died after two years of marriage. He seems to have lived a solitary life, painting mountains and gum trees in paddocks round Healesville. Trees I recognized in a paddock at Narbethong have disappeared. He often spoke about pain, but he shared the details of his experience only with Soph. She was good at keeping secrets.

His painting changed. He used brighter colours and the small almost hidden detail is missing. Was he unable to give the same level of energy used in the early ones?

Sometimes on the way home from college I picked up a framed picture and tubes of paint from Conroy Moffat's in McKillop Street, from Rob's friend, a leprechaun with vivid red hair and manner as lively as the hair. Often, when the paints he asked for were unobtainable, Rob was disappointed. He often talked about the old masters and the kinds of paint they used. Corot was his favourite painter. Rob liked the mistiness. But as an optician, he

suggested that an artist's faulty eyesight, such as short sightedness might have created a special individuality in their art.

When Soph asked him to paint a self-portrait, there were several sketches. None satisfied him. The photo I have of it is a good likeness, but with sadness replacing the humour.

When I passed my Pharmacy finals Rob and Soph gave me a painting, and another when I married. After Rob died, Soph gave me a painting of a red sunset over the St Kilda sea. That painting Soph told me, celebrated 'the end of a perfect day' when they were engaged. The sunset is indeed vivid red, but there is a dark cloud in one corner. The sea in the foreground is calm with a wave as solid as a stone wall. The cloud and the wave remind me of sadness he kept in secret places.

One evening when I climbed the back stairs after work (I was apprenticed to Mr Whittle, a pharmacist near Glenhuntly Station) Soph met me at the door with a finger on her lips. In whispers she told me of the heart attack Uncle Rob had just after I left in the morning. Dr Konrad Hiller, a renowned specialist physician who lived nearby, came quickly. He said Rob's life was saved by Rob being at home and left on the dining room floor until late afternoon. For a month Soph and I crept round the house, soft-voiced. Then I was allowed a brief greeting from the bedroom door. Undoubtedly his recovery was due to Soph's patient loving care.

Rob's illness changed everything. I knew Soph was worried about finances, but lack of money was alluded to in jokes. I was busy working and going to lectures. The Depression affected all of us personally in ways only those who were in it can understand. Decent people were starving. There was no relief anywhere.

At the time I enjoyed being more or less happy, loved by Soph and Rob, but gradually I knew how much I had been given. The dark side was only hinted at, but it is very clear in Rob's early pictures. Many of them have a dark foreground with fine details which can be seen when you look closely into the picture. Rob

guarded his innermost feelings. Soph was a very loving woman. I guess she shared some of them. Old now, I treasure what was given to me, perhaps in riddles. The dark side is part of the whole, a secret under-knowledge, a strengthener to get you through when your light is in some distant sky or disappears. The process is mysterious, its gifts measureless.

Joyce Lee

May 2002

Sisters Poets I | 1979¹

Step ladder to heaven

She is eight
when her grandfather dies.
Coldness touches her, the face enclosed
in finely pleated white. Chrysanthemums
smother the sunny apple-spiced
dining room. They sing all five
dramatic verses of his favourite
'Nearer My God To Thee'.

Her father's
home-made ladder, like the beanstalk
touches heaven. Suddenly
the room is overfull. Angel people
descending ascending, carelessly sit on rungs.
Unstirred as damask on the trestles
grandfather's linen stays cold.

My father's country²

I can close my eyes one heartbeat
and smell the Wimmera summers of the twenties,
call up cloud continents
through incredible blue gateways,
breaking stubbled plans on Grampians rock.

This is my father's country. Manager of the flour mill,
he belongs in a crowded picture. His friends
are busy, flour-dusted ghosts
lumping wheat from Rainbow, Patchewollock, Brim.
Even on Sundays he spars with a string of stationmasters,
pleading for trucks to feed manila, Mauritius, Hong Kong.
Upstaging him, especially on Sundays, is George Freeman
polishing his darling the steam engine,
lighting her fires with mallee wood. A new mill
four storey brick and diesel,
retires him from the corrugated-iron shed
too soon. He spends the extra time
popping his red bright face over the fence to chat with anyone.

At first light, I can smell hot dust from wagons creaking past
my sleepout. In slow procession to the weighbridge,
each farmer bolstered by a sewn-up harvest, gentles
six outsize horses with a flick
of sunblackened hands. An old felt hat
scalped by seasons of sweaty tides, crowns the load.

Eventually, I find my engine under a mountain
where timbercutters left her
the last day. Saplings dance on the dappled body
buried to the knees in wildflowers. Far
from my father's niche at the necropolis,
George Freeman lies, cellar cool in Wimmera clay.
Safe from death, I keep them in endless summer.

Firebell for peace³

The war to end them all
rang the firebell at midnight.
'It's only peace' my father's
flamboyant red hair
shone in a brilliant lamplit circle
beside my bed.

Through hessian-paper walls
mild argument, my mother
in her strong singer's voice
'How can you be sure?'
I didn't need to see his unwillingness,
sliding stove-pipe pants
over pyjamas. Two minutes
he confirmed stale news:
'Peace just as I said
we expected it
go back to sleep.'

My hardheaded father
died long ago. Committee friends
at the funeral
spoke of him as visionary.
'It's only peace'
he prophesies across my years.

Veteran

Cataracts blanketed her eyes
at eighty, stretched an optician to impossible
magnification. An electrician made her corner
the brightest circle in the house.
Floodlit, she read and read.

Six months she wandered
backwards from a suburban bed to the small town
where she'd reared eleven. Three babies died.
'Blanchie take care of Archie
his first day at school.' All were recalled:
Flo Win Lil Kitty
Stan Jack Perce Annie Harold.

Sometimes my mother disowned me, spendthrift
frivolous, unmistakably her husband's child.
Then I claimed friendships well-turned
as roast dinners, people-yarns light as apple pies
the spicy air round my grandmother.

Wimmera child's first waterfall

Eleven years, the child opened to stubble plains.
At the feet of falling water
loudness and brilliance
separated her from uncle, cousins, sisters.

Spun on the fringing spray of each cascading shawl
she clung to the white flowered stem

creviced in a fist of earth half down the waterfall.
Flying sun-dipped birds returned her
to the pool's vortex, she smoothed
with singing water the saturated rocks,
sliding along the creek, rejoined
the heat-glazed voices of the picnickers.

How we killed and buried him

My mother and I
killed her most
successful son.
I couldn't see
anything but blood
as we tossed him in
our swimming pool.
I sat on edge
horribly ready,
my look slid over the precise
dark-suited
version of myself.
Unshocked
I focused
on the dreaded face.
All too clear
the peachy skin
pink cupid's curving lips:
the water glassed
an unputrifiable
shop window dummy.

Anatomy of a martyr

Hagar the runaway sat too long
in the desert: black-veiled
pregnant with Abraham's child.
The sun shone fiercely on her.

Glazed on shifty heat
Sara's double face, the compliant
barren wife encouraging her man
to take the slave, the fiery-tongued
whipping the fertile gift.

The servant returns, presents a son
for a softer Sara to croon over,
but Hagar the rejected
broods bravely to the end
strengthening the bones of martyrdom.

Voices from geriatric places

Little flower song

Ninety-three
back in a safety cot
she trims
leaf by leaf
the last of my roses

pets each
for colour
shape and scent
to death.
On the mantleshef
flower language
can't penetrate
the shrunken circle:
her living space.

Song without words

Her body dies first
a lifespan
memory in words
divides us.
Unparalysed
hand in mine
six weeks we practise
speechless song.

Abruptly from the flatlands | 1984⁴

Double woman

We ride donkeys toward the peak. Before the summit
evening mist swirls round, keeping out
the promised sight of ocean. In dappled sunshine
all day we've smacked our mounts for that.
In spite of the party's protection
I look back for the dreaded other woman. We'd fought
like street-gang chiefs through adolescence.
She floats. Crawling up the scarps, I'm edged
nearly into the chasm. I stop, she passes:
no shadow as expected, but myself
exhausted, begging me to listen.
Her nervous explanation shakes me bodily.
'Years without peace, I followed you for love.'
Climbers, separate, linked, we're double friends.

According to the stars

It's high tension living
maddened by someone
in the house. Hurts
taken early, scratched
by siblings, depressions,
an unlucky war,
can't balance the assumption

that an impressive family tree
guarantees
servants for heavy duties,
monies for largesse.

Peasant-born, I inherited
hard work from a grandfather
migrating with his tribe
for betterment. Hands learned
to prune the heart.
Family motor dead
it's myself needs the refit,
more pull
buttons on the tongue.
Alternating currents
on off on.

My own

Yeti freezes,
bigfoot
oversized, mindless
crowds my house.
The analyst in me
pounces.
RAPE.
A woman-frightener
should be masculine.
Not so.
She's maternally feminine,
a timid thing
slowed
by the body she inhabits.

I tell her to go.
She stays.
Shall I teach her
right and left
through movements and dance,
keep her myself?

Mad dream in Melbourne's lunch hour

Kate calls herself Pandora. I give her
the box that scares me. Since the boy at home
is ruler, nothing I dream surprises.

The tram cabin opens at turnaround,
reveals the driver's son, mine
in school uniform. I offer
his father relief, the son a meal, determined
first to shop in Flinders Street.
I choose a saline drip-set, taped
heavily in black, a present for Kate.
My son vanishes in the lunch push.

A lone woman panicked, I chase
the disappearing boy through lanes,
round high rise corners, enjoy
little chats and coffee with typists.
Conscience nags. I tell a policeman
'My child is lost.' Far sight locates him
outside the station, in a crowd.

A smiling King gives sketches as autographs:
a dinosaur, interlocking pyramids,
stick families, a triangle wreathed

with funeral flowers.

At Kate's I'm puzzled. An empty shelf,
she's moved the box. To a safer place?
Sent it back? Or am I Kate?

Signed by the artist

In this painter's work
the ups and downs
lie sideways.
From his palette
reds and purples
paint storm grey,
hailstones
slash ripe fruits.
Time and light unblended,
ruin his skies.

The signature writes itself
'if only'.

No companion for Adam

'When we were kids
you frightened me.'

Middle-aged, he spills
his truth
over the school's
centenary dinner table.

'You're too smart
plus something I don't quite ...'

Groping for the female
he drops a crumb of approval
from quartered bread.

'O.K. for conversation
but marry!...'

He mimes to the dregs
a man's exhausted pride.

'I'd be driven
powerfully mad.'

Awake in the dark
she's sixteen again,
crying growing pains
into the pub's rubber-chip pillow.

Collector's item⁵

Crossing Siberia by train
I find every shelf
and cubby hole
in my sleeping-room
packed with cuts of marrow,
yellow to pumpkin-red,
ready-ripe to ripe
for burial. From a station
walled in snow,
pressed by clouded grey,
I wail and rail to the guard
and windows full of heads,
about the late occupant's
filthy habits,
knowing as I shout
the whole squashy lot is mine.

Nightmare for middle-age

The crazy train
slips off the rails
slides to stop at midnight
on the lawn beneath my window.
Tons of steel smash my garden.

Neighbours in dressing gowns
stare soundless,

a horse
trotting from nowhere
sniffs.

The bird won't die

for Margaret

Singer to my loneliness,
bright feathers dried
grass-yellow, drifts
into the dream's grey dusk.
I see myself
immovably at work, reflected
in stoppered bottles.
Outspread wings
scrabble and slide on glass.
My face and eyes in a bird's
a talisman I wanted dead.
The fledgling ghost begs for revival.

Cry the son

The woman across the counter, her coat
pale blue with fur, shabby reminder
of my thirties, herself the trembling rabbit,
braves refusal for the son. His coughing symptoms
indecently detailed, demand penicillin

cheap as milk-bar jubes. Her voice
barely crosses horizontal glass between us.

Weeks we practise the dialogue, dance the routine,
the son at home, trussed like a caterpillar
in the bed-cocoon, a shade between us.
A sunny morning the death column records
a loving mother's loss, names the nameless one
for whom she'd searched apothecary's magic.

Neighbours enlighten the chemist.
'Sad. The son. A muscular complaint, incurable.
They kept to themselves. She didn't live long
after him.' I'm left with a memory, and some guilt,
vague stains on the delicate colour of a coat.

Prisoner

Margaret Clitherow Pearl of York

Long-stemmed, a white rose,
choosing martyrdom.
Beyond the prison stench
grief with love covers
the child never-to-be-born.
Your well is deep, its walls
smooth with hopelessness.

A woman crushed under iron
in a tower prison,

baby spilled, centuries on
you sink into my past.
Laboured, clenched, pressed,
whispering 'unfair unfair,'
I wake the night
crying your tears, drowning
in your well, inconsolable.

Catherine

In this cold England
far from my father's house,
marriage
to the gay love-maker
bears exhausted children.
Aged, bereaved
I'm confined to prayer.
Groomed for Henry's visit,
I return him comforted
to another queen. His word
blows her nearer the block.
In this prison-pleasance
I'm served nostalgia.
Favoured children
run in Aragon
playful unprayerful
hampered by velvet
and hand-made lace.

Richard

At thirty
my brother is an old man
heavy with secrets,

a father killed
between us. They ease him
up narrow steps,
blindfolded
weeping on the pallet,
from the rack
to half-lit room,
armchair, easel
at the fireplace.
An hour he walks free,
slides through lawns.
He paints a young King Henry
pale-faced
full-blown as barley grass.

Victim

Through tangled barbed wire
she finds a way
to the prisoner's face,
a butterfly caress. Clamped
in a corner, he's held
against the sun.
Cold days harass, rain
chases him. A thousand hammers
call up non-existent sins.
Moons wash silver.
Black nights wake crying.

Arenas

Alone
on the football ground,
he was target centre

for a hundred thousand
slogan-singing
anti-cheering throats.

He felt himself surrounded.
Silence
stopped unwanted tears,
hurdled him over the railing
to see faces.
Each solitary one of them
stood in a private arena.

In the punishment cell—Port Arthur

The door locks him
into narrow silence.
Darkness
outspaces the stars.
Bubbling red and yellow,
demon rivers mock a soul's
stupidities and misdeeds,
strip off his shivering skin.

Wounds
opened and closed, now
release
torrents of blood
to head and heart.
Clockless, weightless
his breath ticks.

The climbing sun fixes
sour smells to chained men,
human devils rout
his frail angels of peace.
In the limitless sea

of clean sky
he carries a cell of trust.

From silence

In the womb she heard music,
a bird's high call. Her grandmother
played an inner harp:
its chords, silence between them.

On the piano, off-key from frosts
and fiery suns, the girl
picked tunes. From pain's dry sands,
loose and high as desert dunes,
deluded she played two pianos.

Colours adding to the reef, notations
left on a vast washed beach,
from silence she heard the call again,
constant, undiminished.

Coldest night of the year

This frostiest June night, the waiting room
pulls in the open-air sleepers. By six,
too early for stayers, the clinic's
beds are taken. The Gill squeezes in

a coughing oldie. We're suspended on footsteps
till the street door closes. Changing chairs
I hear the clean-skinned novice questioned.

He's twenty-six. A country boy, liked school.
Matriculated. Then nothing.
Played football. Young ones coming up, felt old.
Yes, a wife. His voice dribbles, a summer creek
dying in puddles. He fixes heartache
on three kids, loved unseen. A fortnight
he's walked the city, catnapped in gardens.

'Married. Father. Nowhere to go. Sleeps in parks.'
Behind the words, warnings strangely compassionate,
separate, weighted, drop like blood.

Then shall the eyes of the blind

In one of us, the brain gone wild
creates its own community,
voices without speech.
Our conversation works to metaphor.

The new treatment
tipped out his spies
and listening devices. Aborigines
who'd hunted on our suburban block
appeared with stories,
justice and injustice, punishment.
His grandfather rose, spent the night
lying, back to him, on the spare bed.
I feel protected, pondering
guardian angels, an opening third eye.

I inhabit two worlds, now and then
pinning my flesh to reason,
exposing his overworked creation,
checking that someone
he thought dead, still lives.

The aura spreads.
He the living, marries a girl
who's taken herself from life to spirit.
His friend sends a painting
to celebrate the wedding:
two black swans, one on sky,
neck mirrored to the body of the mate
on water. Delicacies in colour,
layer after layer, draw me
from lake to air.

Straight from Isaiah

Prophet Isaiah, whirlwind in cape
removes the coal
glowing red from an unburnt mouth.

'Crooked straight,'
from iron bars to kids, plainly
I say it. Blocked ears
metaphors in tongues and translations,
word-twisters, power-fritterers
'I fire you'.

Burning mouth redder than the coal,
he stamps an earthquake foot,
flips the cloak... is about.

Witch and partner

I began centuries ago, Gerda the Celt
tested in a duck-pond moat.
Joce an ageing warhorse
declined in lust,
transplanted witch and garden.
Her friend the fool
sounded warning bells. 'No magic.
Safer to cook with recipes.'

Inevitable the joust.
Joce's limb, taking the cut
gashed past mending.
She couldn't trick death's angels,
tell the life-lover his sands were run
or press a warrior to submit
before battle. His last command
won her the ducking stool.

Knights and peasants ranked,
soundless as mist, grey-cold
the witch's friends
prayed for a woman bound
into a dark pool.
She lurks in my present
familiar and pharmacist. Gerda
stirs a lively partnership.

Heir to a barbarian

In an eyrie on a black mountain, a frontier King
dubs Ruslan the son, successor in blood,
master of the human hunt. 'We kill barbarians.'
The old man blunted, one-legged loser
to a fighting horse, laughs at his heir's disgust.

Nightmares tear the boy: a village screaming,
he tastes burning. The tutor, a priest,
offers lamb for lion,
himself as sacrifice. Stone in the upper room,
two friends can't be warmed.

The raid set before sunrise, the bodyguard persuaded,
fails as protector, allows Ruslan's death.
A dead hero consoles the parent.
Ashes kingly and common, rolled on Steppe winds
replenish sweet grasses for the flocks.

The dig

They'd nested three coffins
for the lady's burial,
walled her possessions
in airless spaces
between carved cedar,
mittens, the cup
bright blue, cloud-lined,
silk-stringed zither
reminder of singing.

A red banner displayed a wife
arriving in heaven
greeted by husband and son.
At centre
her small fresh person
bound like Chinese feet.
Layered yellow silk,
scrolls and flying birds
against two thousand years of sky.

Earth as it is in Heaven

for Rosemary

Brother Jean, angled to the hill, square-shouldered
over the hoe, weeding three to a beat,
improvises songs of thankfulness.
Cockfighter raised, hell's pit to celestial house,
a forgiven man feeds God's vegetables to villagers.

Morning's crown, the monastery overlooks him.
Earth loose-woven, habit colour
fills warmth between bare toes, blue overhead
paints heaven in an eye, grey hair
spikes laughter, a sunburnt face. In summer light
Jean wears the halo well.

The work quickens. Gladness joins the labourer
to brothers on the other hill, the abbot's
feather brush poised over the J of Jean's
gospel. He the unlettered will practise

decorations of wildflower and fruit,
lively animal and bird. Abundance gathers
round the hoe, a sweep of arm encloses heaven now.

Double wedding

My aunt, youngest of eleven
sent to light the church, remembers
people in the dark, waiting
for a festival. Running
breathless she warned the family,
'By eight there'll be no room.'

My grandfather, trailing bridesmaids
and flower girls, a cream silk bride
on each arm, in his proudest moment,
a small man floating through the crush,
surrendered his loves
to ranked bridegrooms and best men.

On Sunday, in his blossoming garden,
photographers arranged Murtoa's
fashion peak, long-trained brides,
maids all mauve, beribboned
shepherd crooks and lampshade hats.

One of the twenty pictures survives.
At the Melbourne train, a bride
soft in travelling grey,
kissed a new cousin rapturous goodbye.
'Isn't it wonderful.
I'm going away, alone, with Harold.'

Miss Dimsey

Miss Dimsey died at ninety, active, single.
Her father turned down the teenage suitor
beneath his Annie. The lover, a married knight,
honourable parliamentarian, granted
our headmaster a golfer's half holiday.
I rallied to my teacher's pink excitement.

My sons were tall when she told me the story.
'I'm not bitter, my father cared for
my happiness, thought it best.'
Reprimanding the infant class, dark eyes,
the voice matched velvet round her throat.
Childless, without a relative, her descendants
form strong lines of accurate spellers.

Portland

All January, leaving fathers
in dusty harvest heat,
six women summer at the beach.
On the paper-train
children buttoned in starched dresses,
compartment sealed,
we're soot-free for a night in Ararat.

Swayed by rail-music
we pick our favourite mountain,
Piccaninny, Sturgeon or Abrupt.
Through kangaroo forest

my mother exhorts all
to breathe deeply of gum trees.
Smoky train-winds whip my curls.

A curving glimpse of sea and sand,
my Portland's breaking blue,
rolls me up and over. Wave-lifted
I range the peaks.
My aunt-explorer, guide
over tide-washed rocks, holds
cuttle fish and shells with tenderness.

I miss a summer, heat rash
or measles. A chemist's advice
keeps me miserably warm in bed.
That's done. My heart, overturned
and thumped in ocean energy,
firm to the eddy, tuned to blue,
watches the birth of the next breaker.

Pianist for the flicks

Silent moves in the Mechanic's Hall: they roster
seven pianists. Fresh from boarding school
I use my repertoire, Chopin Mazurkas,
slow Beethoven, a Gurlitt suite, no Czerny.

On the piano's step-laddered platform,
an island in the dark,
accompanied by yelling kids,
I gallop after villains with the posse,
snatch a nearly decapitated heroine
from a steam train, swing on scaffolding in New York,

slow to caress moonlit lovers in the clinch.
The young relieving bank-clerk praises
my interpretation. I know my fingers' clumsiness, but
with Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford,
Buster Keaton, I've stored the music. Up to the neck
in quicksand, hanging one-handed to a precipice,
repeats of this elation
rescue me from desperation's juggernauts.

Minna in my grandmother's kitchen

She makes the cross solid with violets, laughs
when I ask to see her flowers. 'They're always picked.'
Back on the farm we've talked ourselves young.
'Weren't you fed up with hard work?'
Candle-light mellow, heart-shape firm, her face lights me.
'How could I be bored? I loved the life.'

A child awake in my grandmother's spare room
I hear the night's dark silence broken,
horses stamp and snort. Minna
ruler of the kitchen lights the stove,
milk-bucket cymbals call the cows to yard.
Alert and lean, she's twenty-one.

Dreaming on the backless bench at the long table,
I watch her pack hot scones and billy tea,
ten o'clock lunches for men in the paddocks.
A gum-scented breeze whispers through the window,
stirs washing on the line. She's made beds,
separated, and fed the calves skim milk.
'Your grandfather bought too much in town, greens
and cases of pineapples. Fruit-plates in our rooms,

he counted pieces eaten. We slipped some back.
I started a garden against the waste.'
Her stove turns out cream puffs and puddings,
roast turkey and duck. It triggers an outburst.

Back to wall, half asleep, Ernest reads, She's casual.
'So. You like my cooking?' 'Yes Min, very tasty.'
Black eyes flare, she looks splendid menacing him
with a stick of firewood. 'All I get is stringy bark,
the fire's burning hot, my bread's black.
You'll eat it to the last crumb.'

His face falls with his stomach. 'Have a heart,
there's a heap of the rotten stuff. Has to be used.
Boss's orders. Could you make do with yellow box mixed in?'
She isn't gracious. 'If I must. But you watch out.'
Her neck is sunrise before rain,
the tremolo climbs, 'No wood, no dinners.'

Year ninety, Minna's gone back too far for me.
'Your mother's guests the Misses Wehl
fashionable in winter coats and gloves, scarves
they bought in Europe, hats pinned,
walked miles over our veranda,
counting a hundred turns round a ship's deck.

On Sundays when the families visited, your Uncle Otto
drove the Ford, hood down. Reckless, he never slowed
for corners.' Unloaded in scorching wind
I'd watched him jack the car, carefully mend the puncture,
no cursing in church clothes. Minna
didn't mention how she'd sweated in the kitchen.
Evenings round the stove, Gus and Ernest
red-faced in shiny second best, talking
thread darning and embroidery needles. I learn
to stitch neat edges, work to a pattern.
We share mystery and far places.
I go to bed held safely in a large world.

Calf twins from a train

For ten seconds, against
the accelerating diesel,
I hold them through glass,
pressing for a first breath,
urging them to stand and shake off
my suspicion of still-birth.

Heady spring air, a grassy slope.
Tan and white twins
in packages, glistening pools
on resilient flattened green,
their mother recovering.

Years past the scene, I picture them
risen on trembling legs,
claiming their paddock,
sun and rain, shadows on the hills.

Two women

The country train opens its doors
to people, milk cans, mail bags,
unwrapped machinery pieces.
Two women wearing the same
added weight, greying hair,
hold years in their embrace.

They're teenagers, dressed
to attract dance partners,

a crush around the door, men
ready to run for open plains
outside. On whispers
of frosty light, warm in bed
they re-live compliments.
'You could be sisters'
'You could be sisters'
through waltz, foxtrot, barn dance.

For two women, grandmothers
on a station, the same
accented phrase unlocks words
they'd stored as children.
Common blood
brimming head and heart
spills from dry graves.

Round or square peg

In this ordinary older man, a remnant
of the slim young lecturer
persecuted by his students,
gentleness survives. I was seventeen,
fresh from the country, shocked
by stink bombs, fiery smoking ventilators.

At this re-union party, I can shudder
for the uproar he'd endured.
The solitary parson's kid
allowed his class hysteric revelry
in lieu of pillow fights he'd missed.
He's telling me the story's end.

‘They eased me out,
friends said I’d better go.
I’m successful.
I manage a factory, make money.’
We laugh, his eyes touch mine.

‘I loved teaching.’

Lesson learnt

Our nightman, a gypsy
they said. We kids
hiding behind the fence
attacked in concert.

‘Shit-ty Shit-ty Brow-un.’
The small man stopped
looked straight at me,
disappointed in the girl
who always said ‘Hello,’
a kind of friend.
Dark eyes
cold and warm as the ocean
held me frozen.

Bel canto

for Rowell Bryden

Our teacher coaxed more than voice.
‘Begin in an Ah near speech,
silver reflected in voice
gathers and travels.
Stillness the centre, music
fills your toes,
a song’s sadness, light to the eyes.’

Friends he’d collected
warming hard pews
applauded the promise,
‘Sixty learners, not an ugly note.’

We looked to the master
tall, loose-limbed,
high-coloured under curling grey.
Through slices of sky, clearly
he sang with each performer.

At the Christmas concert,
his last, our songs
new from the composer
overflowed boundaries.
I see him smiling, full-voiced,
every note Bel Canto.

Mentor's bequest

The painter left
stacks of framed tranquillity:
hot blue, knotted
with gum trees, a mountain
pink before the storm,
lazy sheep country.

Unobtrusive
in the full-skied sunset,
clouds corner darkly.
Slow, solid, grey,
three waves rise
from a flat unreflective sea.

Clown perspective

Somewhere between
heart and gut,
laughter doubles
the clown in me.
On the trapeze
heels hooked
I see the basement
on a swinging ceiling.
Wild colours
loop in wider arcs,
somersault us twice,

moving the sky.
Upside down
we're one.

It is nearly dark when I come to the Indian Ocean⁶

The journey is a race against
overtaking night. Footloose
the car plods sand. Boobialla
banksia grevillea she-oak bracken
scrape clawed fingers
over the intruder's metal.

Each rounded dune repeats
scrubby variations, inexorably
darker sky, ocean a shimmer
in someone's mind, the car,
drunk on monotony, settling in a drift,
sleeping off the night.

Beneath the last sandhill
a house, cattle shuffle and murmur,
I climb the shoddy slope.
A spread ocean, distinctly Indian,
retains in aqua
the bronze of disappearing day.

Night's pewter sea rolls
to unroll a frothy edge. Water
has left a runway pressed and clean,
bare of rock, shell, weed. Stars

mark the space lanes.
The turning tide, twelve metres
in one wave, overtakes me.

From a distance

Safe at wave's edge, she prays
to the vague expanse, unanswered
dives into breakers. Cramped
and sucked, she aches for shallows.
Patterned undercurrents carry her.

Overhanging cliffs spit sand.
Away from birth, walking alone
touching dead embroidery on shore,
she breathes aromatic live oceansful.

Purple weed strews the rocks,
fixed underneath, red jellies,
miniatures in shell, tides of being
watered, dried. A grey heron,
dancer with spear, stalks the pools.

Far out, rollers turn and lift,
booming filled the troughs. Water pigs
suck, guzzle, grunt. Leaping, falling,
ballet waves make music.
A saturated moment, emptiness sings.

Mandala

Bottom of my well
five shrouded prophets
clear waist-high mud:
worn gravestones
in half dark.

Living streams supply
circles and ellipses
away and away.
From the wells
healing powers rise.

Timbered and fretted
arches on the church balcony,
lighted presences
smiling slant their faces
over people in the pews.

More voices from geriatric places

Moving day

Young men, ambulance rookies,
settle my mother on a stretcher.
Her dried face, mouth pushed sideways,
twitches against the jolt, then closes

in the no-place where she lives.
Fine hair, once curled nightly,
reminds me of dying seaweed.
Her singing teacher gave chocolates
for a cadenza and a sustained high C.

Six speechless weeks
her feeling hand pressed mine.
We've learned to comfort and forgive.

In the hall, she's carried through an avenue
carelessly tall and straight.
One laughs, 'What you got, Jack?' I mouth
'Sh, she, she can hear, she understands.'
Mature in seconds, he reddens to sunburn.
Suddenly, I see my mother
safe from obstacles.
He and I can't shed regretted words.

It depends

Sitting with her father
in the ward: from another bed
bright old eyes focus

'I look forward to your visits,
you speak clearly, I hear
every word you say.'

Plain girl complimented
she blushes. From schooldays on
everybody shushed the raucous voice.

Season's end

Afternoon, her last,
she dressed with colours,
fuschia nightgown topknot ribbon.

'So much of it is hanging on,
so many days the same.'

A winter rose, velvet folded,
her lucid eyes
spoke of seasons, flowers opening.

Diminuendo

Shabby now, grey with shuffling years, I wait
in a deserted town, my dreams
light up its burnt-out lamps. Children
pull sticks from gum trees in the street, mark
hop scotch squares and circles in the gravelled dust,
rhythmed in rope tied to any picket fence, I skip and sing
'All in together this cold weather.'

The Airedale's tail beats childhood's rhapsody.
In the empty school, sitting on frost-numb feet,
I marvel over carbon chains and poetry.
Apprenticed at the chemist shop
pound a mess of drugs in Latin syllables.

Years jostle, figures on a screen fading out,
leave me alone, imprisoned in this plot. The fence
that barred the milkman's cows, encloses me, the gate
no longer squeaks for bread and meat,
nor friends who left their garden places
to laugh and sing, or water mine with tears.
When this town is gathered by the dust, its seed flung wide
will ripen, wildflowers in the wilderness.

Five years safe

In the X-Ray Centre, I envy
the beautiful Italian
her attentive son, wonder:
if I'd clung more
would I be more loved?

Summoned for extra pictures,
tabled and angled
I plan for less time. Be free
with incident and vision,
or finish the poems?

They're still sitting, the boy
a man-comforter. Giving away
my life, I try a smile.
'You're young,
better me than you.'

Her warm eyes clinging,
follow me through the door.
I carry a deadly package.
At the surgery, 'All Clear'
and midday sun, polish the sky.
I breathe, unclamped.

Transubstantiation

for my mother, died 20 July 1969

Now that you're gone
I walk the beach,
erase the tracings
scalloped on the sand
and pick up shells.
Curled waves
turn back to sea,
an increasing tide
washes your tincture
over my feet.

The past walks noiselessly

In the cemetery this sun-bathed afternoon
noiselessly I tread on Autumn grass.
Natural covered earth between the graves
lies open, undisturbed by spreading roots
of sugar gums. Pure blue, filtered unstirring
through grey leaves, lifts calm space.
With time frayed opposites are joined,
ancestors and pioneers, under common ground,
the sky, fruits and bark, dried leaves,
obstinately insist on being one.

My father's mother, judge of a book from a glance
inside, sews on our veranda. Her seeing eye
cuts comfort into petticoats, kimonos,

fancy dress for me. The protester
my mother, measures sleeves, unpicks, re-sews.
Grandmother's friend the banker
shot by Squizzy Taylor's mob, dies
in the quick-stitched final request:
a pair of Ma's incomparably soft pyjamas.

A scorching Christmas day we eat at the home farm:
my mother's sisters and the solitary Carl,
husbands Otto, Herman, Gottlieb, Fritz.
In a thatched kitchen full of warm coffee cake
Uncle Julius fishes in Encyclopaedia Britannica,
shares the catch. These season my living space.
Eight infants listed on an obelisk
take me to the Lutheran church eight times:
Prayers, slow hymns, long sermon, farewells.
Dirt, wrong blood, T.B., bad luck?

A grave re-opens the story of a buggy
wrapped in homegoing fog. Horses
frightened by sudden train noises, pull up
on the lines. Cousin Marie, thrown
across the engine, rides to the station.
Cousin Clara's whispered shocking wounds,
passions remembered and forgotten,
harshness received and given long ago,
hold me in quiet, redeemed by Wimmera earth.

I heard the laughter

At the Necropolis
the coffin descends,
a disappearing Wurlitzer

without a player.
Doubting her containment
I question
my aunt's whereabouts.
Cadenza-laughter
a flying joke
expands the air, breaks
the ceiling.

We're released
to winter's flowering stems
wreathed and stoked. No one
wants the mystery explained.
She's safe.
My shabby body thinly
cushions roughness
and pavements. Its heart
flutters. A sky-watcher
scarcely earthed, I'm held.
Clear laughter is closer now.

Bringing dreams to work

Semut trembles
before the great library's
closed door. Summoned
by vision to learning's temple,
he wrestles half believing
certainty has sent him.

He enters to his own faint call.
From the long table
cinnamon-gowned scholars

centre their deep eyes on him.
In silence, a trumpet awakening
walls crack and topple.

Through the south lattice
high over rolled manuscripts,
the sun's glowing coal
warms him with spilled light.
Why should he
be afraid before men?

The oldest's unwavering voice
straightens the young man's
dissolving bones,
long fingers curve
over shadows in far alcoves.
'We've preserved your writing here.

More you've left unwritten.
Do you fear dreams rising within you?
Tools and space we give, find room
for friends and the unknown.
Bring your dreams to work.'

One fixed belief

All I believe in is change.
Out there
straight lines curve,
matter floats.
Shift and flatten
my poles,
pear can be apple.

The one
who dredged up this is gone.

Build on rock?
Even that
wears and splits,
rolls down the mountain.
Holding
then breaking out,
lighted and dark,
tumbling each minute,
I'm buoyant.

There's more

I'd wondered
if pain and quarrels
tears in the dark
scarred a house.
Cuttings taken over fences
have grown sturdy
in the weedy garden.
The friend at the window
of my cluttered room
sees beyond the birch trees'
lacy green. 'Here
you're surrounded, safe.'

Night in the Rockies

Drowsy
from spreads of meadows,
near Similkameen's
tame water, we're generous
sharing the salmon.
A bear's nose, unseen, points
fishy air. Deep into night
claw power
scrapes the barbecue rack,
paralyses me
in the lower bunk.
Did we lock the door?
My frozen voice
wakes the sleeping pair.
Silence. Nothing.

Stirrer

Miriam in skinny grey
with matching topknot
hair-pin spined
disappears like a wraith cat
cutting corners
on the castle's back stair.
Neither servant nor master
accepts the connection
of her lineage. Perhaps
she represents
hair-breadth escape. The stirrer

in the Cinderella corner
overturns fires
into the room,
laughs when the others
run with buckets.
Smouldering air agrees with her.

Parts for a player

Through nightmare's interminable acts
I argue for each player,
peace and chaos wear my face.
Stage upheaved, in blackout
I re-assemble and play myself.

Searching for the Paradise tree
I find my heartbeats in far galaxies,
a taste of concentrated universe.
Bird, rock, star,
I'm alive on every stage.

Lured by furies expanding their colours
in new turbulence, a thread
thinner than light but strong,
I step off my world.

End no end

1

On my planet, the last places
are found alone.
From a pinnacle of winds over water
the sun dips colours to coming dark.
I see only light, womb
of my dreaming,
country I come to again, land not mine but ours,
myself the composite of friends.
Others, like long-fingered shadows,
foretell my day's end.
Within the alchemist's clear blown glass,
a wilderness of cloudy visions
rolls and grows.
My body left, I know I'll return.
Only then, I bow to what is,
I choose to stand alone.

2

In blue air,
I'm solid on earth
alive by its dead,
mountains, branches, bones.
I'm strong in its pull,
steady against the wind.
Calm holds the islands:
sand, rock, coral,
symmetrical, odd,

shaped in volcanic centuries
for re-shaping, re-birth.
Sky laps the body of the sea,
I reach an arm's span
all in me touches all out there.

It is nearly dark when I come to the Indian Ocean

Plain dreaming | 1991⁷

Round the tramlines

Songs in stillness

Early, before the ring of my father's alarm
clear on frosty air
magpies call from telegraph poles.
Winter's long night ended
chilblains heal, noseblowing stops.

Near midnight all weathers cab wheels
churn the gravel. Horses
snuffling the dark way to the station
announce the express. Roaring then still
a contented giant plays games
with steam. Many blissful nights
I've been cradled in rocking trains.

In unrefrigerated heat, wagon wheels,
horses snorting, harness jingling,
my mother's unrelenting fight with dust,
'Why does every farmer take this road?'
From a furnace sky
the sun slides into the reedy lake.
Waterbirds serenade day's end.

Kitchen fire subdued, my rested mother
waiting for returning scholars
practises songs I've kept.
Her notes stop me in the street,

spill into cadenzas over the gate.
For her I learn to play
'My Task', graduate to 'Sing Sweet Bird'.

She's gone. I'm old enough to join her
singing in another place.
This Autumn morning, through thick air,
over tram wheels and car engines
magpie flutes celebrate the day.

Car week

I'm trying not to blame the car. Either
she's raging against her years,
she's a car McEnroe
or it's an owner test.
Synchronicity or causality,
we'll never know.

Miles from Bacchus Marsh
a big hill burns me up,
all but the block.
Manifold plugs fall out
and the water. I go too far
blaming the old girl's performance.

Hailed cars drive past (and so would I)
until a good lady Mary
drives me to the nearest pub.
RACV tows us to safety,
puts me on the Melbourne train.
Kind man carries baggage up and down the ramps.

Regan's bring her back.
their lucky reconditioned engine
runs for a day, then dies in peak hour.

Practised now I accost a truckie
in the next lane. She starts for him.

A peaceful day.
She baulks on tramlines. Start, stop
I clear the tracks, beckon
a mechanical-looking man. No go.
Ignition hammed. 'You'll need a truck.'
He rolls me down the slope to an illegal park.

Towtruck is high. 'Once' he said
'I'd have given you a boost, now
it's harassment.' He was called to Vietnam
as saviour, mends a broken life
writing songs for guitar.

At home Vera's come and gone.
My reward and consolation,
I wolf her mother's cakes. Son says
'Someone's got it in for you.'
I go for meaning, this is poet stuff.

Friend in a taxi

She's late for an appointment
in the city. No parking,
no tram, taxis hurry past.
Then one turns back. The driver
young, beautiful

becomes a parent. 'Calm down,
I'll get you there, enjoy the time.'

He's Spanish Indian, and proud,
family not too poor
father a technician housed
in an oil town with a school.
She's a grandmother with advice.
'What's within,
your heritage is precious, keep it fresh.'

His thanks equal the perfect face.
'I saw the taxi you didn't get,
know our friendship was meant.'

Bunkers and hazards in a back lane

My Captain Hook lights bonfires
in the back lane. Early on Sunday
I drive the car over the flames. His face
pops over the fence into the mirror
scared I might explode. The council man
can find no sign. I shut him up with a smutty patch.

Hook uses my holiday to fell and spread a tree
across the lane. My son handles that.
An attentive, sympathetic man
sends a truck forthwith. Creepers looping
over fences are really nothing.
I try not to mind small scratches on the car,
but they'd be visible
in my psyche. Sometimes I lop greenery
tell myself it's exercise. Late after a party

I shift a load of weeds. That blackened
a dress, and me inside it, bumping.
In a few days the stuff wilts and is forgotten.

Hook poses as ordinary, son in a family.
He parks his old white Austin
outside my carport. The pharmacy must open.
I blast the horn then telephone
the police. Two of them with guns
laugh on my doorstep. Hook, sleeping off a night,
says his mum won't have the bomb outside her house.

For Norman

Two sisters and you,
grey and partnerless, we lunch
at discrete intervals
in three houses. The piano case
a home in the backyard
we played mothers and fathers,
jazzed into the thirties.
Our mothers approved. Now
with pot-pourri scented courtesy,
you conduct. Your ear
leaning equally to women
this side and that
hears every inflection, singers
perfectly balanced, in tune.

Practical chemist

In the final
practical chemistry exam,
convinced the salt is common
I dab in a wet finger
and taste the mystery.
Finding Sodium Arsenate
maximum dose minute
I dally before reporting
my stupidity. After the flurry
watching me drink
a tall Sal Volatile,
Doctor Sissons recalls another
saved by the stomach pump.
'Of all people ...
you, the specialist.'
For a day, my arsenical high
lifts the world.
Not one of many smalltown quips
mentioned poisoning myself.

Death of a hat

In nineteen thirty-four
to celebrate herself the pharmacist
she bought a hat, a Buckley's confection,
navy straw with a pink rose,
wore it to the first relieving job,
riding in an open cable tram.

A sea breeze lifted it.
The driver braked and chased the wind,
cradled her mangled pet
fingers to the wounds, handed it back.
'It's cut right through
the wheel went over it. I couldn't stop.'

He honoured the dead, a Depression hat.

The pharmacist

Round the depressed thirties
customers came from different stock,
only cameras and cash
attracted breakers-in. Heroin lived openly
on the shelf with arsenic and strychnine.
A few attempts to buy
and they went back to homemade cake
with tea, coffee for the élite. A doctor
lacing himself with cocaine eyedrops
lasted a week. Odd souls bought too much
Bronchitis Cure (with morphine),
some kidded themselves, spending pin money
on Tonic Wine. A lady with a taste for Chlorodyne
managed ninety. The Dispensary's
free oil for Friday's fish,
sold over back fences, was tolerated
for hard times' sake. One middleaged bad patch
I took purple hearts myself (prescribed).
Our most regular
faithful user of amphetamines
died a month after his supply dried up.
My workplace is filled with prescription ghosts.

Getting the sewerage money

My father, a visionary committee man,
persuaded our small town
to go for sewerage. War
soaked up government money
like dry desert swallows rain.

He tackled insurance companies,
Oddfellows and A.N.A., all adamant
country sewerage could wait.
Not my father. Parliament was sitting,
he'd tackle Mr Mibus.
A man in uniform said debate was flat,
he'd try. The member listened to my father,
showed us early gold from Ballarat,
opened a door into the chamber.
One last chance a millionaire in Brighton.

All day I'd read in waiting rooms
then been proudly introduced, solace
in defeat. This time
a double smile more than covered
his tired face. We'd got the money,
for him the rest was easy.
The benefactor's hand was warm.

When my father retired
people noticed the gold spade pin
engraved for turning the first sod.

In the garden

In coldest winter, small forgotten things
surprise me. Helleborus,
a gift half a century ago,
blooms unnoticed down the shady side.

Turning compost,
before they're seen I smell violets,
fragrant purple, resilient underfoot.
Leaves rot, warm upon bare ground.

Martin mends the leaning fence.
'But for the jasmine, all of it would go.'
He stands in the open, giving words
to the wind. 'I love gardens.'

Their voices earthy, deep,
everything sings. Leaf, flower, stem,
an indented silver trunk,
I touch my garden's children.

Through the cracks

Buffalo U.S.A.

I'd turned east instead of west.
Houses crowded the narrow street,
presences behind the curtains
examined me. The young man
athletic and healthily pink,
lying in the gutter
scarcely breathed. Head up
shoulders straight I marched in step.
The policeman liked my pluck
'Bend over and he grabs your bag.'

Manning Park in The Rockies

1

Midsummer drifts lazily
through alpine meadows.
An eagle hovers.
Blue is everywhere.

Piled rock,
reaches of sky,
flowers on the ground,
shrunk glaciers,
reminders of winter, suspended.

2

Similkameen water in the canyon
hurls itself upward,
snarls over petrified trees.
No blade greens the rock fortress.
The river near the cabin
divides quietly
round a pebble-beaded island,
wavers over polished stones
then carries on. Gentian Anemone
Buttercup Campion
spread fragile colours. Winter
will cover the uprooted tree,
antlers skyward.

From the dark

The child hiding in my dark came slowly,
incomplete as a new moon edge.
She walked with her father to the mill,
his hand unfriendly as winter,
empty as the town on Sunday afternoon.

In the morning he'd bounced her nightgowned

on the sunny double bed. His wife
hating the stove she'd cleaned and polished,
blackened love. 'Kicking up a skirt
showing all you've got.' To him,
'You're enjoying it.'
Frost killed their laughter, stunted the girl.

Jumping over railway lines near his office
she cracked a knee on iron.
Sunday linen covered blood,
couldn't stop the pain. Carrying her
his hand moved a little too far
for comfort. They cried together.
She developed quickly to protect a parent.

The child wept in secret. Pain
beyond the damaged limb
spilled over too many lonely years.
Last full moon
I saw her complete, held her with love.

Turning point

Like Eve
she fell to knowledge,
grew a new garden,
wearing a child's
grazed knees, pondered
who did what to her,
ran right to the pole,
cornered in night day
begged the midnight sun
to burn and clear her clouded eyes.

Directions for a pilgrim

My shivering mask undone
raw faces
stalk the night.
Who am I? unspoken
pulses in my throat.
Daylight
edging the windows
thins the dark,
an inmost eye half dreaming
prints words
upon the rising sun,
reminds the pilgrim feet.

Keeping on

At two, wanting to be old,
you wore your mother's dress and shoes,
lifted the engagement ring
from velvet in the pewter box.
Your father's finding eyes
caught clustered diamonds
on dewy grass
between the dunny path's
wooden slats. Accused,
you denied the theft,
remember not remembering.

Lifeline

His breathing, more than asthma,
wakes her near midnight.
Emergency say they'll come.
His pillows stacked,
she rubs and swaddles lifeless feet.

The young doctor, nervously competent,
tears plastic from an injection.
'The ventricle is swamped,
it's deep coma, not a heart attack.
Find me his tablets.'
... empty bottles. An ambulance
lights discretely dipped, adds two players.

'We're losing him
I'll get intensive care.'

Five men, five minutes, a familiar cough,
the team holds up the trophy,
a steady beat inked on a screen.
Cellophane and tubing round and under the bed,
she cleans an empty arena.

Survival

A stake through the heart,
her agony is quiet, its energy
eaten for survival. Memories
strain the bolted door

of a bulging cupboard.
Some courage comes,
an edge of seabreeze
through worn window frames.

Over and over, eye to eye
they play their adolescent
passion drama
specialty of the house.
In the pressure kitchen
his eyes spit fat.
She stirs the martyr.
Lord, the hurts are staggering.

A gentle civil man, alcohol
crashes him
through her door,
buzzes the bitch with words.
Morning brings peace. The lady
cosseted by a kindly husband
believes in a country
where all work for good.

Catastrophe

On a pointed island-stone
too far from the myrtled riverbank,
stranded ants
slide from every wet edge
or cling to each other
in drowning chains. Making myself
storyteller of their past,
I give them a day with wings,

let them follow a mad trailblazer
at low water, or simply
drop from the overhanging bough
that's holding me.
I watch ant multitudes,
effort, folly and cleverness
swallowed by unfaltering rapids.

To Eve and Adam

Tell me, images of God
minders of earth,
how it was with you
after Eden? A killer son
one less to work,
resting on the Sabbath,
could you remember and forgive?

Tell me if Eve, broken backed
fought bramble and weed,
dug waterholes,
reclaimed the swamp. Did Adam
carefully prepare the land
or harvest a dirty crop,
scheme to make the woman
queen of cooking pots
or share the plans and cash?

Tell me if tears I know
unsettled your sleep
or were they visionary?

Brainwise

Leftside, rightside
confused and shifty
she's butterfingers. Zombies
risen from her dead
cloud the soul.
Zigzag looks straight.
Repairs for a delustred face
can't be found
at the beauty shop.
Then she allows right
to unstop the ear, uncover
another eye. An alchemist
burns rubbish,
distils a living word.
Both sides properly at work,
the line straight,
she enjoys the double shift.

To my left leg

You yell when I get out of bed,
or up from a chair. You're not
the one I've lived with
all these years. You resist
medication, meditation
and friendly healing hands.
The woman who used your moaning

is gone. I tell you, leg,
we won't die screaming. No.
Not when I can think of something.

On the axis

The seesaw
big as earth's curve
tips me downward
slowly down beyond the net.
'Hey there, God,
guardian angel
I'm scared.
Weight the fulcrum,
swing the balance,
get me back.
OK I'm breathing.'
A few updowns, bodied then not,
flimsy questions seesaw
flat answers.
Over and under and over ...
energy from paradox.
It's addictive.

Looking into light

Dancing class

Teacher

The country child, awkward
in girdled cheesecloth,
awakens to Miss Lorie McGorlick's
figures of the dance.

Wrinkled, exquisitely thin,
a fired crystal, she enchants
a garden of opening lotus flowers.
Her flowing fountains
dazzle the Mechanics' Hall.

After two terms she disappears.
The town reads a Melbourne obituary,
marvels over our closeness
to the dancer who rivalled Pavlova.

Minuet

Late afternoon dries a weepy day.
The lake reflects deepcut
cloud peninsulas, skyblue,
blotted with sunset. Two pelicans
fishing for supper, glide on glass.

Far away, voiceless but heard
Miss McGorlick calls their steps.
‘Two and three go back and slide
and one and two three bow.’

The birds follow perfectly, full of fish,
dip to day’s end, resume
the homely disorder of their marriage
and swim to the dark side. Behind it,
the sun’s last ribbon drops into the forest.

Shannon Falls Canada

Wildness in a picnic ground,
the falls spring from boulders
on a pointed mountaintop, drop three fountains
down sheer rocky slopes.

On flat lawn near the tamed stream,
the lone weathered fir draws me close.
Trunk to trunk I hear our hearts finetuned
by rapids. Bark patterns
imprinted on my skin, stay with me in the bus.

The living church

for John Bodycomb

Morning sun, vivid through stained glass
clothed the columns,
berry wreaths, longleaved acanthus
gave sanctuary to shadows,
lurking wolves couchant. Prophet-monks
processed from the balcony's
wooden ribs. People round the church,
animals, fresh flowers and stone,
distilled quiet holiness.

Saying the Lord's Prayer with the choir
she coughed to deny 'forgive'.
Had she ever said it? The pastor tried,
'Forgiveness is free, given like rain,
you go out and get wet in it.'
She saw her younger sister, the new baby
seventy jealous years ago. Suddenly,
a blind woman healed,
she was getting wet in a cloudburst.

Ranakpur temples

for Jagdish

Air moves through cool white,
carved columns
light as butterflies,
a million prayers hover and lift
round twenty-four apostles.
I hug the marble elephant.

In the rich Indian's dream
a flying machine of leaves and flowers,
God's lavish gift,
falls at his feet. The world's best
artisans and architects
build his thanks into a temple.

Our guide of priestly family,
knowing his divinity, holds my arms
in blessing. Unspoken prayers
ask for nothing more
than the privilege of being thankful.

Outside in temple shade
the snake charmer's python
cool on my neck, folds round an arm.
The snake and I,
held by a look, are friends.

Yellow waters

for Keiko on her birthday

Kakadu water, misted trees,
tranquil in the morning
house millions. The last lily
opens to sky. A cormorant
displays preened feathers,
stretches an elegant neck
then yawns the length of it
for the photographer.
Sideways and up, kingfisher
flies on brilliant air.
Touching water
the crocodile on the bank,
lying in its own stillness,
calls up another dreamtime.

Dubrovnik

Mermaids, slipping from eye corners,
ride the bright water, pebbles
in warm shallows tell me
I'm here. Aquamarine up to the neck
I slip over the line.

In the late afternoon, stones
glisten like sheep on bare hills.

It is nearly dark when I come to the Indian Ocean

The sun covers them with silk,
walks red across the sea
and slides behind an island.

Grand Canyon

Havasus Falls

Everything listens.
The green river flattens
then drops smoothly.
Reddish purple rock
hangs ragged stalactite curtains
beside clear water. Stillness
and the boy at the centre
make it a ceremony, baptism
in the canyon. Two Pueblo women
silently lead a pony.
We walk on holy ground.

Flying out

Rocks pushed and pressed
by fiery tongues
rise cold from umber desert,
folded bedclothes
over a lumpy sleeper. Harshness
magnificently cut,

reflects morning's fragility.
Earth and sky, a mountain,
rip sideways.
A green river flows up. The sun,
 juggler of light and colour,
melts solid ground.

Bogeyman

'The bogeyman'
my father warned his daughters,
'lives in the underground tank,
don't touch the lid.' We weren't told
how he breathed in water,
what he ate.
In spite of my caution
'If he's real we'll let him out', my braver
younger sister planned a sighting.

On Saturday
mother at golf, dad snoozing
over the paper,
we tilted the lid a crack.
Nothing came out, half-lit corrugations
down to the bottom, space
over quiet water. Week by week
we looked again.
My doubt outlived each test.

Low times
living in the city,
a bogeyman prompted me
to hear a possum as burglar. In daylight

I pictured the ghost
at home in my underground.
Without a sister's urging lifted the lid.
Soft darkness,
calm silence, my own deep water.

Out ...

Spring cleaning time,
out, the relics of a partnership
that's finished, furniture,
cast-offs given to a moneyless marriage,
world war two's second best.

My bodily extension, the house
must be doctored cleaned and dressed.
Clay in drought
has moved it a little, locks on doors
have been refitted. I'm cleaning
a wall of windows, the frames
like me, have shabbier outlines now.

They tell me about a flat. Not yet.
My garden is where the heart is,
a flower bed has grown in me,
my brain's a branching skyscraper.
I walk through forget-me-nots,
on paving stones I've lifted and reset.

I'm far from finished uncrowding
cupboards and shelves. Someone
must need preserving jars. Opportunity's
arms will open for dresses I've outgrown.

I thought cancer might make me thinner.
It hasn't. I'm bigger with thickened waistline,
feet that yell more room.

Out, acid distorters
of my sky's clean deeps and the green
of new birch leaves. It's winter,
I love summer. Hear me, lesser seasons.
It may be autumn, may be winter
but I'll be living summer.

Looking into light

In a gentle dream I called the child.
'Give me back your mind and heart,
new opened eyes.' Someone kissed my cheek,
a kiss from the universe. 'Beloved,
be the dream, go where you will.'

I'm hovering over ripe wheat, my bones
a web across the sky. Always further
the haze at paddock edge. In the Grampians
a finger fixes me to granite.
At sunset I hang from the redblooded scarp.

A mountain jumped in spirals, I find myself
on a smooth stone, in a creek.
Water sings of the falls. Insect, flower,
bird, fish, born to their worlds,
all time and place given for all to know.

From imagined histories

Waters

Fronds wave
in currents undersea.
Unnamed fishes
touch the diver.
Feeling the dark,
he climbs underwater peaks,
slides down the rifts.
Wishes bubble dimly
in an unpinned mind.

The conference

Sunset over the palace spilled through
fretted spires and domes.
The cold river ran orange-red. Forty
dark-gowned men stepped from the barge
into the tunnel. Excitement
lifted the travelled greyness of their faces,
hurried them to the basement room.

Lawyer, churchmen, astronomer, artist, poet,
they planned to redeem a shabby world
with an alchemy of minds.
Around the table for a month, their vision fired
but not enough. Opinions demolished dreams,
squeezed them to smaller men.
They returned to favour in their countries.

At La Terrasse

In the attic over the Dordogne,
shadows at the window,
lovers from another time carry me
over morning's misted fields
to rockwhite mountains glistening at noon.
From the square, then as now
the clocktower chimes in me a deep bell.

They're in church. Summer through glass
spreads transfigured light
over the altar. By the noisy river
they gather berries and flowers.
Their laughter runs through chateau gardens
to rest in the orangery.
In my hand I almost hold the rose.

Freedom writer

The man, his faced closed as the sky
old and grey as the horse,
wound the stony road to Rudolf's castle.
The summons he'd expected,
coming imprisonment
chilled him as he crossed the lowered bridge.

Pale and fearful he walked into the hall.
Rudolf in hunting leather
red hair aflame, stamped judgment,
shook men and horses to their shoes.
'In my dungeon, without paper and pen,
unused words will choke you.
Cold and damp will leach your bones,
your writer's soul. My serfs will work for me.'

For ten years powerful, clever people
diplomatically begged for visits,
freedom for the prisoner. Rudolf was unmoved.
Melancholy, foreboding,
ate the writer's flesh, exposed his bones,
slid him slowly to a dreaded end.

Dvorák's mother

Winter surrounded her.
Clouded mountains stood over
the blackened pastures.
She'd fed the boy's violin
concerts in her kitchen.
Now she was alone.
Softly then crescendo, singing,
clarinet, bassoon, a trumpet,
the maestro's music,
her son's rapture, his strength,
his crowded summer, filled the house.

'I carry in my blood
the songs you taught me,
our country's fire.'

Tragedy by the Dead Sea

The King, loving his daughter as a child,
delayed her betrothal. Nurallah
dark as the stony hills, open as the salty seas,
spent the day before her marriage
minding sheep and goats with shepherds.

Escaping noon's high heat, animals and men

reclined in scrappy shade
beside the well. The patriarch's
most trusted son, alarmed by moving dust
concealed his sister between tall rocks.

Five crusader knights dismounted. The leader
his armour burning in the sun
asked for water, an hour's retreat.
Nurallah attracted by the splendid horse
came running with a piece of fruit.

Homesick and woman-starved
the warrior invited an eager child
to share his saddle, galloped her laughter
to calamity. Trembling shepherds
prepared for punishment, a kingdom's shame.

Unclean to servant and family,
saved by a father-king, she was banished
from mudbrick to tent. Hot sky,
an expansive shining sea kept silent.
Barren hills repelled complaint.

A lively baby surprised her uncared-for body,
coloured inner territory. New voices
sang to the growing child. The shepherd
skilled with lamb and kid, delivered a son.
Nurallah's arms enfolded an unfamiliar love.

Mother and boy without friend and family
learned to sculpt with stones,
explored beyond the mountains.
A child's pipe played tribal music,
his growing tunes expounded a lonely land.

Nurallah's settled country turned over,
her overheated heart a desert,
flowered after rain. Brilliant,

buoyant as full moon in water,
she embraced a fearful ecstasy.

Her pregnancy uncovered incest.
The king gave his daughter to the tribe
for burning, then buried a parent's
exhausted love. His exiled grandson
was given a camel and provisions.

Riding east, towards the city of two rivers,
a lover become the son
burned with his mother. Distant,
fading with her body,
she heard the flute play their lament.

**Water from the
underground tank**

Child to grandmother⁸

My grandmother loved me. Careless
of arthritis, she moved lightly
in open country of unseen, hearing songs
tuned higher than her pain.

I played Sankey on the organ or sang
Tannenbaum for her, under brown check
his outsize chair triangled
in a corner, the grandfather dozed.

From the orchard, a mopoke calling silence
warned the dark, only sky
was lit. Alarms for morning, stabled
giants stamped hooves for homegrown oats.

Even a child could plough a paddock's length,
sprinkle streusel over küchen, home
the buggy a dancing mile,
survive the killing for tomorrow's dinner.

Spitting competitive pips from the verandah
one quiet afternoon, I insisted
the garden should be crowded with orange trees.
My grandmother left the game to me.

For seven days her daughters closed
the sickroom door, then showed me an emptied
face. Alive, now I'm a grandmother,
her clear voice sings to my pain.

Grass and blue and the underground tank⁹

A peephole of bright Australian blue
through the windscreen of a car,
any season, in any crowded artery
I'm back in the Wimmera of the twenties.
There, to the farsighted plains-child,
days and nights are large.

Summers were hotter, our tank and cellar
operated against the turned on sun.
We pumped underground for coolness,
lacing it with lemons
from a tree that liked our soapy bathwater.

Morning's preparation bustled: food
handed up and down the cellar's
ten steep steps, the climax
dinner at twelve-thirty. My father
a street-corner gossip pleading civic affairs
was summoned to save the meal.

At four we left the sunbaked house
for the oasis at the front: a pomegranate tree,
drapes of bride-rose creeper,
green bougainvillea recalled by a thought
to flowery magenta. The travel rug
crinkled over spongy buffalo grass.

I ranged the blue Sahara, passing through
cloudy wisps without a touch,
floated in sky softnesses
piled on blue, away from fearful grey
that billowed round my bed in some low hours.

Five-thirty: children called for cellar duty,
stove alight for boiling exactly two kettlesful,
we coolly ate the evening meal. My mother's
program gave leisure, freedom
brightened and multiplied the stars.

The old underground leaked at last,
the Fire Brigade pumped it dry. Hooked
on disposal, my mother tossed in
ragged mats, stained silver trophies,
the dressbasket's hoard of photographs
I'd counted on. 'You'd laugh' was her excuse.

But I cried for the loss: a young grandmother,
boy father, teenage aunts as bridesmaids,
the wedding dress with pendant beads.
New boards conceal the cellar
from an unsuspecting owner, for me
the shelves are stocked. The underground
pumps energy. I'm drugged on grass and blue.

George Freeman and the steam engine¹⁰

Behind the corrugated iron mill, weeklong
George Freeman whistles descants to his engine,
fires her chatter
with four-foot Mallee, clownfaced
in flour haze he dotes on her multiplying progeny,
stencilled for MAURITIUS, MADAGASCAR,
head office MELBOURNE.
Saturdays at twelve he leaves her cold.

Subdued by Sunday's navy blue, he sings
a lusty tenor under the clock. Between angled
red and blue glass, the swallow of the psalm
flies in, looking for the place
'where she may lay her young',
finds the back door open to the pepper tree.
My bible pictures dark women, waterjugs and wells.

Late afternoon, through empty streets,
I hold my father's hand over the stile
a maze of railway lines
to the silent mill. Joint managers
inspect the siding's tarpaulined wheat, the weighbills
for WARRACKNABEAL, WATCHEM, MARNOO.
Dead mice cram the trenches round the stack.
Chewed holes spill seed rivers for Murtoa's fowls.

Across bleached planks, we unlock the island-office,
an oven of security. Smell of mice,
mill keys on the hook, all's well. Through eyelets
left by generations of sprung nails,
sunspears defy the flour fog. We edge sideways
in chimneys between mountains of bagged flour.

George Freeman, alight like his engine
welcomes us, circling his beauty,

extols each feature, the fly wheel's immensity,
her perfection as a worker. Scrapped for diesel,
they die of retirement. The dusty old lady
we visit once only. The founder's grandsons
can't remember. On fading afternoons,
under my father's regard, his flame-red hair,
I can polish her, fires burning to George's singing.

Miriol

1

Winked at by stars, Miriol's smallness
walks away to the open country of yellow moons.
From childhood's props outgrown, carrying
shoulder-packed desires,
the young girl leaves the white sleepout,
wisteria-covered verandah,
the privet hedge filtering wagon dust.
She travels alone. Itinerants
teach how to mask a face, to voice more heart.

2

Round the campfire in the frosted wilderness,
the group sings drovers' songs to dingoes.
Nomad ghosts rustle in Miriol's night.
Cold at sunrise, she overtakes

the cough-racked prospector
heading for a final dig in the abandoned mine.
She offers donkey work, a partnership.

Ten days the tunnel squeezes them
to unyielding bone with relics of props,
rotten timber, a shovel. Chipping hard
they believe in a worthwhile seam, the last day
dynamite seals the shaft.
The old man settled underground, she walks
toward distant peaks, a barrier,
blue to blue, rises abruptly from the flatlands.

3

Lightning over the abyss
defines the clouds,
forks the gap's dark gully.
Listless men wait for reveille,
a grave-digger unsleeping
drops clods. Apart,
chain saws are stacked, machinery rusts.
Ears pitch to groans,
peg no consonants to vowels.

Scarps rise to bare rock.
Through penetrating damp of fog
Miriol walks pursued.
A stick-shelter torn by blizzards
slants to mountain barriers.
She sleeps through the nightmares.

4¹¹

The devil's lure, scattered delicacies
seduce her. He balances
on the punchbowl's lava slopes, lighthanded
reaches for her pack.

'I'll shoulder it, come
sip my light.'
'Thank you, no.
I keep my soul
there.'

They feast. Banked fires
keep them warm. He blows up
Miriol's complaint
into fireworks, igniting clouds.
Foot by foot, the runaway
climbs a barren chimney.
Three days on,
fog blots the mountains.
Revelation crackles connections
scorched in her head.
Sky blue, a cobweb hammock,
funnels her, burning
into the slipstream.
No shrinking, no blackening. No ash.

5

Homesick for the plains, she slides cold hands
through her grandfather's hot bagged wheat.
A bush fire envelops her. Sweat-soaked
volunteers beat madly for nothing.
Morning. Dogs bark at cars
settling in shade beside the house.

'We'll fix the fences, be finished by lunch.'
After the drought, they re-hang doors,
plaster cracks. With rain the ground recovers,
overflows in seven bumper years.

6

Mountains lift. Blue explodes orange-lit
over the trees, the sun, a golden wheel,
spokes the peaks. Night's forerunners
grow dark fingers. An elderly full face,
clear of clouds, drops unreturnable paths.
Baggageless now, she walks
in the open country of yellow moons.

Nearly light¹²

The child grapples light and dark. Her father
unwinds them limb by limb. Waking day
sends night to sleep. Beside him in church,
sucking word-flavour from Paradise, she studies
colour in faces, light under skin, the sky
ruby and sapphire through glass.

There's more than brilliance in king parrots
radiating from treetops, more than colour
in orange gems on rotting wood.
Travelling treeless high plains, she kneels
to alpine iris, every blade and flower
exploding light, sets her on fire.

Winter day clears an egret, white on dipping sun,
over dunes to sea. Unclouded girl,
in cheesecloth, buoyant on rainbows
dances with pelicans. They glide and circle,
curtsey the catch then swim to shadow.
A sliver of moon silvers the dusk.

The canyon river rides fallen mountains,
petrified trunks. Rocks waver in shallows,
break and depress deep water. Feet
bared to sky, an uprooted tree commemorates
all helplessness. Gliding sunlit,
climbing with an eagle, she clears the glaciers.

To the cascading music of rapids, she hugs a tree.
Words whisper between them. Intricate bark
imprints its patterns on her skin.
Lime-green spills from purple. Placid
under the falls, still as the bathers,
she hears the overflowing silence of light.

Desert night no longer holds the child
wrestling in the dark. To more than sunrise
she opens a thousand unused eyes. Ancestors,
whose steps she never danced,
catch grey shadows. Light slips slowly,
morning's first colour, curving to day's end.

Dreams for wheat¹³

Wheat-land pioneers, they camp a night
beside the swamp, Gentleman Johann
trading a weedless slice of Germany
for flies and dust, black mud clay. Dreaming
Caroline transplants willows from Silesia.

She sleeps uneasily on the wagon-bed. Uncertainties
shuffle over frosty grass. Horses stamp.
A mopoke mourns for lost landowners
watching beyond the fire. Waterbirds call morning.
They divide land for farms around the swamp.

Crops carry the wind on brolga plains.
Caroline raises turkey flocks and children,
counts bagged gold in paddocks. They thatch
a schoolhouse, build a church. Its bell
rings prayers, tolls their crossing into heaven.

Their swamp drought-dry, farmers and horses
plough and scoop, heap an island for nests.
Fishermen build a jetty. The doctor's wife
boils coppers of cinchona bark, then plants
silver poplar glades, Caroline's dream willows.

Reddened at sunset, with iron buckets
she waters avenues of gum trees, my inheritance.
Caroline comforts my uneasy sleep,
I'm watcher and watched, waiting on edges of the dark
for morning's first light across the plains.

Plain dreaming

Peace in the infant class

The sun shone for Peace, unclouded blue
whitened our dresses.
Soldier sons, boys in Sunday suits
paraded with ostrich-feathered Anzacs.

Miss Dimsey rehearsed the march
the way she taught tables and spelling.
In twos and fours, for hours
we circled and squared on playground gravel.

Unembarrassed right hand on breast
we promised our innocence to Empire,
singing instead of reading
'rallied round the banner' of our country.

Through the cheering town, to Coromby's
polished brass, I stifled envy
of our headmaster's youngest
leading the roadwide Peace banner.

His Bonnie, a Titian beauty with freckles
shared the rest of the day with me
a special friend. Wearing white, I'm five again,
at peace under stunning Wimmera sky.

Auntie Else

Auntie Else made any day a festival. For six weeks
the country child sent to stay with her in Melbourne
lived in a dream. She flavoured the peaches
eaten at eleven on special plates,
with strange cutlery. The Yarra
greenbanked and shining at the end of the street
became the crystal stream. I'd never seen a river.

All the summer we explored the city's wonders:
fish swam darkly in the Exhibition's aquarium,
Luna Park's updown horses nearly cantered, Queenie
the Zoo's elephant almost landed me in India.
From the front row at the Princess we watched the Prince
awaken Sleeping Beauty. Reflected sea and sky
sparkled blue round the Edina's deck.
She rescued me from boarding school with tea,
to every crumb added the grace of Shangri La.
Always large, she died unrecognizably small
in a too big bed. The baby mapletree, now a veteran,
spreads an extravagant Autumn round the garden.
The zircon on my finger reminds me of
a guardian angel whose legacy never thins.

Between generations

On hot Mondays I see my mother,
relays of flatirons
scorching on the stove,
pinning and pressing knife pleats

round my silk tennis dress.
South window open to the peach tree
no breeze shivers, no cloud
streaks the sunbleached sky.
Allowed piano practice,
I'm called to work when reading a book.

My iron's electric, the stove gas fed.
A donkey overloaded
with packs of nuisance jobs,
fuses, fences, cobwebs, cornered dirt,
I tell myself it's duty
then burn the martyr in blazing trails of light.

Wheatlands near Kaniva

for Jenny Mitchell

Sweeps of blue stronger than grey
and cloud shadow on ripe yellow.
Nearby in ribboned clumps
there's food for birds. From spiked depths
wings and beaks rise and disappear,
an eye on a long neck scans sandy hills.
Dark green on the skyline, a world
hinted at but hidden
at the end of a private road.

Bacchus Marsh from the Adelaide Express

I'm a teenager
leaning from the open door
of the hairpinned,
climbing train. Autumn's
lower sun
pours light on green slopes,
sky, cows, hills,
houses, stagelit in gold:
my country packaged in a paddock.

In Bulgaria

Ordered vines and vegetables, enough
to feed all Europe
cover redbrown slopes. Workers
waiting for a busy harvest
cluster round a fire for morning coffee.

Ripe cherries and walnuts crowd the bus.
Weathered couples in donkey carts
hammered from odd pieces,
wave greetings to the guests.
Today nothing is ordinary.

On the steep path to the monastery
ruined by invaders, fat mulberries
present themselves.
Grandmothers sweeping with twig brooms

press our hands to their calluses.
They've known dark winters
but their skin glows like rich silk.

Granite call

Flat-footed plainschild
I'm lifted
through sunlit air
to the Grampians,
a million miles of sky,
blue forged and folded into rock.

On picnics
walking its wonderland,
granite holds me.
Brown-faced scarps burn
bushfire-red at sunset,
all the colours more than earthly.

Away on Cornwall's
granite cliffs, I step
into my grandfather's
secure young feet.
Over alien undercurrents
his call finds me.

Home in suburbia's
blocked brick, smooth
paved streets, through cloud,
Cornwall to the Grampians,
rock to rock,
I hear the call of granite.

Vagabond harvest

I've worked inland under continental skies,
ploughed frosty ground, red-eyed in dust
stripped home paddocks on Christmas Day.
When drought cracked the ground,
I lay on shrivelled wheat,
angry vomit nearly choked me.

A storm blasted me from madness,
rain fed the earth, bringing
reasonable peace. In repetitive seasons,
the unexpectedness of weathers,
I was driven to survive.

My son wanted the farm. With memories
of after-harvest holidays,
children playing with buckets and sand,
I retired to Portland. Purple sea,
sky huge enough to stretch in
couldn't put down my resurrected longings,
a gargantuan mutant crop.

All my defiant heart wishes I'd seeded ocean,
harvested breakers, equipped myself
to ride out the big one like a champion.

Water in a dry country

Pioneers scooped the lake from swamp,
heaped an island for nests. Day's end
burst Krakatoa-red
through gum trees they planted,
the sun's twin, a burning well in water.

At eighteen my mother, in a train and tippet,
posed beside the fountain. Scarce water
dribbled from lionmouths. Bandsmen
squeezed into the rotunda,
bounced their bass on the iron watertower.

Dead branches lit many hearthfires.
Elbow to elbow on the rotting jetty
schoolboy and townsman fished for a prize perch,
totted goals from football cheers.
The firebrigade, unrolling hoses, timed the run.

A willow, leaning to cool the summer,
held the rowboat in lengthened knotted feet.
Children creaked the swings skyhigh.
Yabbies nipped the toes of sneaky swimmers.
Lovers and willowed avenues disappeared in green.

When drought shrank the lake
birds deserted the trampled island, wind
barely rippled the swamp, migrants
crowded the shallows, scuffled in the reeds,
slanted sun burned red, heat dissolved the grass.

Plain dreaming

for Gerald Murnane

On the flatlands where any human dot is visible
I'm a small person with an eye
that sees beyond sharp limits. I roll
shapeless on the wind or drown in hot dust,
swathes of shadow spread and contract.
Past summers give me clarity. No hills rise
only the Grampians, a block bluer than sky.

Country I live away from
pulls me ever more powerfully, a town
with a lake and eucalypts.
Flatlands keep the cemetery at armslength,
its avenue thinly tall
dignity unswayed by any wind,
gone with the plumed hearse and horses.

My aunt and grandparents
lived on farms a turn or two
past the cemetery road. Without grief
there'd be no heart,
no softened eyes, nothing to re-create.
Word known from the beginning
is heard in winds across the plains.

It's late

Pain, a shadow in a dream
stalks my waking hours.
God knows what happens in the dark.

Years I've avoided ruling my domain,
haven't worked the ground I own.
Weeds used the fertile earth.

Time holds me by the hem.
The sun low in the sky,
I clear and clean my land, planting at dusk.

It is nearly dark when I come to the Indian Ocean

The whispering ear | 1997

Mapping: indelibly written

Looking at the signs

You imagine heaven distant as Elysian Fields,
Then a flash of egret in high blue
Tears the curtain.

Through a crack in childhood's paling fence
You look into your yard with new eyes.

Each year as the train rounds the track,
The first sight of blue ocean
Rolling slowly on yellow sand lightens the mind.

When a waterfall commands silence,
It speaks.

One troubled week, you breathe the air
Deep over ocean, watch calm emerge.
Ebb tide uncovers seaweed from unmapped places.

The grey heron, graceful as a dancer,
Darts a greedy beak into stranded pools.

Always the covering tide returns.
Burning sun retreats.

Ancient and modern

In the wildflower bus, magazines, a video
To enliven miles of scrub,
Parched ground outside.

My quieter voice suggests
I look again at this unappealing country.
Teeming variety confronts me.

Every shape, bulbous green to straggly grey
Niggardly with shade; ringed sand
Protects their crowded roots.

Stored experience
Makes them the wise ones.
Their ancient earth explodes in flowers.

I offer smallness, wonder over mystery.

The whispering ear

No substance, the whispering ear
Speaks so low, only the inner I
Can hear and listen:
Voice beyond voice, resonant
Round and through the planet world.

Less than a whisper
It speaks of things impermanent
Yet indelibly written,

An ear so fine
It tunes the remotest overtones.

When you feel
Your hearing touches it,
The ear that listens
Whispers more than you know.

Toward extremity

'The Bogeyman' my father says
'Lives in the underground tank.' Later
I know the bunyip is a phantom.

Years on, the fearsome ghost
Shows many faces. Eyes without softness
Look into themselves.

Bones slip within the face, mine staring,
Mirrored in shifting water.
Does the mirror truly image who I am?

Forgotten, unforgiven words
Rise from depths. Reverberations
Clang inside my head.

Random vibrations ring changes
In my body. Uncontrolled in extremity
I call for God, for death.

Routine re-claims me.
I lift the lid and look again. Undisturbed
Clear water. This round I've won.

Between

In a no-place,
You reach for a mapped course.

If you wait for fool-proof weather,
Track remnants, worn footprints disappear.

Weaving, going back,
You will find a way around.

Unexpected life

Survivor on the island's
Last high rock, he watches
The sea's volcanic depths
Hurl boulders at his stronghold.

Danger flattens fear. Defiant,
Determined not to be taken,
To meet death head on,
He dives into the maelstrom.

A moment. In windless sultry air,
Aeons tumble, roll him back.
His ocean mother, confirming baptism,
Holds him to her breast.

Possessions, language,
A culture he cherished, fall away,
Forgotten in the homecoming.

Prayers

Gimme prayers are like a bottle message
Thrown into the sea.

Expect the answer you hope for,
Likely you will never hear of it again.

A prayer re-done by a brush of angel's wing
May surprise you:
A smartly self-promoting wish, a cherished hate,
These are swept up like dead leaves in your street.

Listening to your silence, new ways are given free.
I can step out when someone prays for me.

The players

In this place, heroes and villains
Find stakes for burning, spikes
For driving into hearts. Here, normality
Lives in retreat, in unmoving silence
On a dark unpeopled stage.

Manipulators, martyrs, fools,
Stayers and saints speak, listen,
Think in undertones, move smoothly.
Playing to survive,
They are prompted from another stage.

Christmas night

The angels' crying splits
The dark: the child
Born to schizophrenia,
Paralysing night, howling rabble voices.

The unanswerable 'why'
Wets my face with your tears.

I can't stop the incoming sea. Your pain
Snarls and breaks
Upon my reef, my level sands.
Did you wear my mourning?
Barren questions, but the grief is real.

Psychiatric ward

Everybody knows I'm his mother,
No one asks questions, no one
Wants to answer them. It's simply
A smiling 'hello' or a handshake.
One played for Collingwood, another
Hasn't used his science Honours. A girl,
Charmed by my shining necklace, kisses me.
'You are pretty.' She looks beyond
My faded skin. Last week
A man asked me to pray for him. For the moment
Greetings smother our undertones.

Black nights

She wakes alone.
Crying for the heart
Kept nine months under hers.

The spreading flood
Covers mounds and hollows,
Sweeps gravel into streams.

Day's ritual, her chores,
Settle the flood. Her face
Reflects smooth waters, dappled sky.

Daily he telephones for bizarre
Unwritten books, pours out
Another invented language.
He is not alone.

'Some of us tried too hard.' His words.
Did learning oust common sense,
His first cells inherit her tears?

His grief is hers, she is not alone.

Alright

Impossible,
Getting into another's skin.
When I look deep
Into someone's eye

And say, 'Are you alright?'
I'm telling them I wonder and worry.

When light from both our eyes
Meets in space between,
'Thank you, I am fine,' implies
'Reality's dogs don't savage me.'

When I am stuck in mud
And a soft-voiced friend asks,
'How are you?'
'I'm alright' leaves sentences unsaid,
Keeps us sane and alright.

In the boat

for Warren Clarnette

When you are scared
Of everything, of anything
The boat tipped by mountains
More rampant each second
You call out 'Help me God.'
Thunder wind and wave
Hear the word.
Your expanded heart learns
Something it would never know
Watching from the shore.

Clouds in the sky cannot dim the light behind them

Earth grabs your feet
The ground presses
The web snares you
Your limbs struggle and slash.

Labyrinths of broken web
Swing free
You relinquish dewy remnants
Glide on blue
To worlds of light.

In the full emptiness
You are where the light is
Flesh is air.

Eyes of the blind

She asks for an angel, help for an ageing body
And its pain, a softened warmer heart,
Light to flood the inner eye.

A bump like an aircraft braking
Breaks her sleep. Presence with a human face
Lights the dark space beside the bed.

The angel stays and fires each day.
'Go there. Get that done.'
She is relieved of indecision,

On call to help her live with grace,
The guide for second birth instructs.
“Tear out the hurt corralled in the gut.

A crutch that straightened you.
Throw it out, burn it to ash
With old ambitions, concealed passions.

Your child poet diminished,
Emptiness is yours, space,
A sky to fill with colour.’

Redeemed from bondage,
She leads herself through desert
To find what she scarcely believes in.

**Murtoa: skies immensely
more blue**

Pyramid and storage streams at Murtoa

My father, known as practical,
Popular as chairman,
Drew me into his unmapped mystique.
From under the drooping lid,
A ghost smile lurked in an alert blue eye,
The face he used when offering a surprise.

Up narrow steps to the shed's high roof;
A flick of the conjuror's hand
Uncovered acres of wheat. A stacked pyramid
Beckoned me into its deeps. Nothing stirred.
'No one' my father said 'could survive in there.'
A sliding yellow flood sang siren songs.

My brain would not hold the largeness
Of the mound. Not like ocean storms
Measuring strength on rocky crags and cliffs,
Nor sky's enormous blue
Streaked with slabs of sunset colour;
A harvest host tempting me to feel its power.

Travelling backwards

This fireless train rolling through
Melbourne's rail yards; smoking engines
Labouring for speed; days
When I wanted to be a railway shunter,
The Sunday my father helped me work the points.
No trains ran until the midnight express.

SPENCER STREET. A warm year,
My feet unused to city pavements, ached.
Aunt Annie wanted musical comedy. That stage
Left me cold. On Luna Park's big dipper
I clutched Uncle Arch so hard both of us
Nearly fell to earth. I was addicted.

BALLARAT. People on the station
Look familiar as cousins.
The locked dining room opens. A waiter
Shows me to the white-damasked table, brings soup,
Roast turkey, apple pie and cream.
The clock is watched for us. The train waits.
BEAUFORT where my father was born. I can see
The flaming redhead, one eye half closed,
Humour lurking under the drooping lid.

ARARAT. On holiday we changed for Portland,
Stayed the night. In morning sun
The gardens shone like Paradise,
Swans looked heavenly. On the Portland train
Open windows and smutty clothes were allowed.

STAWELL. GLENORCHY. LUBECK. I watch every paddock,
The homesteads. As always, I think we are there
Long before the crossing over Rupanyup road.
The mill has not taken wheat for years,
But my grandfather's gnome-like figure

Stands on the platform in front of the office.

MURTOA. The station has shrunk. One line for trains
Where there were three. Beds of flowers
Instead of busy people. No wheat trains waiting,
No trucks beside the mill. No men
Loading them with flour. I am a ghost.

Henrietta

Henrietta, my mother,
Refused to follow her sisters and milk cows.
They dubbed her cleaner of the brother's farm boots
Caked hard with Wimmera clay.
A teenager, she played second fiddle
In the bank manager's orchestra.
Gifted beyond the piano teacher's skill,
Bribed with chocolates to sing a concert aria,
Her coloratura shone.

When she chose to marry my father,
Her Lutheran family, confronted by Methodists,
Won with a wedding at the farm.

Henrietta expected Keith, an imagined
Clever son. Daughter in the womb,
I stirred uneasily.

Her sister's boy, a student doctor,
Replaced the son. His rival,
I won prizes at school, swimming cups.
Henrietta concealing her liking for success,
Cramped my conceit.

She confided later
That the man I'd struggled to match,
Never liked me.

I'm past the age of his death,
Wounds and burns
Hurting and healed.

At the end

A smile on my mother's face,
Awakens dying eyes. Two nurses
Support her, one pushes me outside.

'Do you want to bring her back?'
They call me when the room is still.

Breath fans the air
Round the cared-for woman on the bed.

Something, a living residue,
Touches my skin, quickens blood.

A message? Endings that begin?
Soon, death's secret will be given.

Unanswerable questions between us stay with me.

From silence

My grandmother and I sat on the north verandah
By the orange trees, hours in silence,
A cord of comfort between us. Underneath
Her long black clothes, stiffened lace at the throat,
Hidden warmth lifted the air around me.

Her words, austere as her face,
Instructed me. Stealing a pin equalled
Stealing a pound. Dill-pickled cucumbers
Soothed me instead of milk.
Infant in understanding, I knew we needed each other.

Later, I learned her bitter secret.
The wife of a year died with their baby.
Grandmother replaced her. The new farm
Needed a woman to earn money from cows and fowls.

Seven daughters ran the house,
A son, the farm. Grandmother's exotic flowers
Filled the garden, bloomed in tubs
Round the wide verandah. Weeds
Buried deep in trenches, dared not re-appear.

Grandmother slept alone. I was given a cot
In her room when my sister was born.
At three, in the spare room's double bed,
The dark silence startled me.

Silence without fear belonged with country sounds:
A mopoke calling from the orchard,
A stabled horse stamping,
Scarcely ruffled the sleeping farm. In town,
Two express trains puffing steam, woke the night.

I was nine. Uncle Paul married

And took over the farm. Grandmother and I
Sat on a smaller verandah in town.
A retired farm neighbour dying from cancer
Often walked along the street,
Stopped in a sunny patch, the road between.

Simple words hovered,
'How goes it?' 'Not much,
This dying isn't so easy.' A pause.
'If the weather's good I'll come this way tomorrow.'
The church bell tolled his years, rang him into heaven.

'You could be twins.'
His grand-daughter and I suddenly
Realised her grandfather was mine.
Pieces I'd hoarded for years, fitted a new picture:
My christening in grandmother's church,
My mother wishing she'd been born
In the other family. 'They're so clever,
So musical.' They disliked her.
I cried for all of us, for all our pain.

She died three months after her lover.
I was eleven. 'Nothing particular,' the doctor said,
'Just worn out.' I know better. I see her,
Unbound from death, unbodied, her face
As clear as Wimmera sky,
The uncut cord of comfort strong between us.

Untidy legs

School deplored untidy legs
Displayed by boarders on the lawn.
Mine, short and fat, were better unnoticed.
Letters from boys were approved, legs were sinister.

Too shy to ask why, I got rid of such questions
By putting them in my mind's tidy bag.
Tidy bags for girls' unmentionables
Were on the boarders' list.

After church and dinner, cold meat, beetroot
And mashed potato, no sport on Sunday,
Girls sat on rugs spread on the lawn.
I could hide my legs when Jim and his friends
Waved through spaces in the gate.

Jim invited me to the boat races.
Girls and boys with colours pinned to blazers
Crowded the river bank. I felt proud,
With a boy from a school in the final
Of the head of the river.
Jim's face, red as his nose bleed,
Shocked us to silence.
A wadded handkerchief stopped it.

A girl from Jeparit introduced her uncle.
His horse, trained on the farm, won
At Ballarat. All his pockets bulging with money,
He took us to dinner at the Victoria.
Jim married the girl from Jeparit.

Music examination

You work for money, play the cello
With natural skill. The teacher
Proposes an exam, a concert piece.

Your boss, addicted to holidays,
Books for Japan until a week before the test.
You argue for time, he wins.

Managing the shop, working
For husband and children,
You're too tired for practice.

The boss returns. Death and comfort
For his widowed daughter
Take the week you counted on.

Brain numb, your hands in disorder:
The examiner gives water. The teacher
Suffers failure, you sack yourself,
Music outlives the scars.

Light from an artist

Robert Eager Taylor Ghee

In early paintings
Light from his sky spills over a city;
People, trees in summer dress,
A horse-drawn tram. His artist-wife died young.
In middle age he married Auntie Soph,

Buried old grief in their happiness.

My notes for Rob's biography, his childhood
In gold-drunk Ballarat,
Pinned dates to skeletons. Soph and Rob
Struggled with loss in the Depression.

Their love embraced me, a lonely student
Living in their house.
Rob shared his intelligence and humour.
He exposed vanities.
New colours layered my landscapes.

His studio excluded me.
Soph promoted her husband's work,
Could not supply the light missing in his pictures.

A week before I married, Rob told me he worried
About my future. A man driven by despair, he said,
Rarely finds contentment.
Rob's paintings reveal himself,
Stir me to probe murky places
Searching for clearer light. Blue in his sunset;
Reminders of wit and warmth.
Dark clouds scatter in a radiant sky.
Solid waves disturb the calm sea.

Through a child's eye

On the train to Portland

The child
Leaning from the open window
Her hair blown from the sea,
Scans the passing forest for kangaroos.

Herself
Half-fixed on living animals
Moves in sunlight
Shadowed between the trees,
Searches for a forest body and its living mind.

Waterfall in the Grampians

In a dry country, the waterfall
Mists fringing trees. Bird-chatter
Accompanies the picnickers.

The girl, woven in each cascading shawl,
Clings to creviced thryptomene
Halfway down. She darts on sun-dipped wings,

Rises on the fall, whirled in the pool,
Wears down saturated singing rocks,
And slides along the creek.

Taken from herself, seconds slowed to hours,
In blinding clarity
She hears the rush of infinity.

Pilgrims and promised land¹⁴

Driving back to our birthplace, silently
My sister and I muddied memories,
Lessened the colour of our childhood skies.

On the outskirts, we picnicked under familiar
Weathered trees, skies immensely more blue
Than any ageing fantasy.

For days classmates skipped years, redeemed disaster
With tall tales of success, imagined
Grace and wisdom furrowed our faces.

‘Should I have married the other one?’ But my sister’s,
‘Would you rather be a different someone?’
Filled me with the strangest gratitude.

**Territory: capes and
peninsulas**

One day

for Jill on her birthday

Spring's voice,
Island clouds on blue,
Carry promise. The sun
Touching all faces,
Reveals undercolours,
Depth in the check-out girl's eye.
When the world is perfect,
Cracked skin lifts to warmth
And, aware of another clock,
Knows how to live an hour, a day.

Break out from brick veneer

Earlier, summer spread incredibly,
Suns warmed longer hours,
In the half-world, somewhere on stage
She wore full moons as haloes.

Accumulations in the house
Blindfolded the stars,
Sickened moons hung from ceilings.
One by one, from diamenté in her hair,
Brilliants fell. Newly cleaned windows
Magnified a yellow sky, a greasy sun.

A friend, 'What do you truly want?'
Helped her tidy dusty scattered dreams.
Tearing curtains from their rings,
She ran through stacks of useless goods,
Shouted in discovery. 'Limelight,
A fat luscious moon, burning. Mine.'

Party flavours

I dream about a party table
Impossibly draped with silk,
Grapes and ripe peaches, a lobster,
Its awkward symmetry in between, for colour.
A starved lover I clutch the lobster, smell it,
Pat it, kiss it, am tempted by
The capacious handbag brought from work.

My hostess might believe I am sick enough
To reluctantly depart (with the crustacean).

All these years,
Nearly always straightforward,
I can justify it, in a crooked way.
Before the foreign spoilers bought them all,
I ate small lobsters by myself. Once,

For luncheon with three women,
Twenty-five dollars bought a monster
That filled us. Days, I feasted on remains.
That special one still flavours me.

Morals win. I hug the lobster,
Arrange it neatly, smile shyly and rejoin the party.

Surrealist affair

Crowds surging past condemn the picture.
'I can't see anything in that.'

A liking for underdogs
Urges her to study the unnamed
Oil-painted giant,
A floating man in layered colours,
The centre black. Surrounding him
An ocean foils extended tentacles.

His disembodied eyes follow her outside
Into the tram. At home
Chameleon colours, high in cobwebbed corners
Dare her to expand. Her rocklike islands
Crack and crumble,
Weeping rainbows sink in deep water.
For a time she camps on Ararat.

Monstrous arms find her through oceans.
In changing colours he brushes new latitudes,
Blue spreads across her country.

Pitch-perfect

Black Rock

She wakes in a black cloud.
Sun breaks it, morning jangles.
'Go walk on sand, breathe sea.'
The car driven through square suburbs
Finds ocean. Dogs and joggers smile
Exchanging thanks for weather. Their eyes
Lap radiance from sea and sky.

Warrnambool

Noon floats on pastel,
Buoyant sea-green. Clouds wait,
Lumpy grey, curled white. Darkened kelp
Half buried in sand
Sharpens careless feet. The tide
Creeps back, watering dry colonies.
More than herself, she is harp,
Silver trumpet, flute, pitch-perfect.

At Cedar Court

In a disabled world,
Welded to chairs, frames, crutches,
You stream along the passage
To therapy, pressed to the utmost,
Lift the weighted leg,
Coax the new ceramic joint. Deliberately
You step over bean bags and boxes,
Balance on a mattress, change a bed,
Walk crutchless in the pool.
Straighter feet plod up and down
Between the rails. An injured hero,
The footballer stretches
On his Olympian couch. The family,
Flopped on bed and fed,
Falls into a sleepy heaven, is raised
For a repetitive afternoon.
Miniature sculptures, ankle, torso, pelvis,
A knee, decorate the room.
Dreaming, you touch perfection.
The therapist's hand, the eyes, say 'trust me.'

Slow smothering

Stacks of unread papers,
Journals and letters on standby
Smother her. She cancels daily news,
Breathes again. Then
Like water levelling
Friends with ailing limbs need warmth.

Will the marbles kept so far, shake loose?

Hygiene and shopping, forcefully
More leisurely, gobble time.
With breaking back, unsteady legs,
She must practise keeping on.
Only love can smarten up
A disintegrating face. Waking,
She asks for leisure and liveliness,
A day with every minute filled.

Window on Dandenong Valley

Slowly from the dark
Rises a lake in widening blue.
A wisp of clotted cloud,
Reminder of night, hovers over
Unawakened trees. The she-oak fringe
Dancing, moves the closer sky.
Bird couples skim the air, insects
Hurry from exposure.
Half light dissolves in new-born day.

Boundaries

Whenever I walk through the wire door
To the verandah, gently the wasp circles me,

Dares to alight on my luncheon plate.
Clearly, salad is favourite.

Remembering stinging tales
I allow uncertainty to smear the sunlight.

Caution dispersed on summer breeze,
Words, buzzed greetings, make music between us.

Territory, agreeably shared,
Ultimately belongs to neither.

Festival bagatelles

In Buninyong's small historic church,
Before the festival, presence stands behind me.

Dvorák's mother, frail in winter,
Playing the harmonium,

Accompanies cello and violins. Her son's rapture
Overflows the village house.

Like her, for days, the same lively tunes,
Play in me.

Heaven and a new earth

Bi-centenary day shining over America,
Polishes the early plane, transforms
A great lake from pollution to purity.
Travellers, we sit like jewels in earth's crown
Flying over square Chicago.

I taste history in turkey and pie,
Find myself at home
In a blue firmament, the painted desert below,
My earth palette. Tentacles
Winding from the turquoise river
Draw me to the canyon's rocky millenniums.

Miles of escalators at Las Vegas,
Green carpet grows enchanted grass.
Siegfried, a tuba-voiced clown begs me
Have fun, don't trip on baggage.
A travel-centred angel
Finds me the last bed at the canyon.

Air pockets buffet the small plane
Round capes and peninsulas,
Over cliffs and chasms. Sunset
Expands in vivid minutes. I sleep
Cradled in the canyon's extravagant space.

Mysteries: words cannot tell

Changing skies

You look into an evening sky.
It lifts you to itself,
Off ground. Transparent blue
Tipped with sunset invades your mind.

Unstoppable creation holds you,
Firmly, carefully, whispers words of love
Into your heart, opens your eyes wide.
You see more in sky than transparency.

Depths of it cannot be calibrated
For proof. Science names its patterned randomness.
Your vision is too small, much too small.
Unleashed, your eyes tell ecstasy.

Your heart,
Your limbs and muscles expand,
Release you to explore unveiled country.

Heaven unwrapped for you to touch,
Never absent from your secret places.
You sleep that night still cradled, overwhelmed.

Another day wakes you. You look backward
To yesterday's delight, look wistfully

At today's ordinary sky. No sky
Is ordinary, today's refuses to lift you.

Skies open and close.
Words cannot tell mysteries.

Mountains at Alice Springs

for Bob Lee

Mountains richly clothed, rising abruptly
From childhood's plains,
Touch a blue sky with granite.

Here, unarmoured, mountains are neighbours,
Their red earth and shrub green,
Garish as Christmas wrapping.

Long ago, all-pervasive dried air
Sucked softness from their faces,
Collapsed their worn bones.

Near the house, a strayed hill,
Nondescript dirt,
Dares me to touch it. I cannot.

The hidden guardian of the shrivelled crone
Might wake and roar,
Burning me in ancient fires.

Top of the world

Barren upland expanding under sky,
Takes you higher, climbing new flattened layers.

You stop between twins, scrubby hills.
One unlit, widens the eye, the other,

Fired with copper light, burns,
Floods your thoughts with words.

Walking on its scrubbiness, you trample
Thousands of small blue iris flowers.

Earth and sky

Spring-dressed earth clothes the hills.
Sea, washed colour undisturbed,
Reflects a lightly clouded sky.

Remnants of forest, trees
Line the roads, limit the grass.

For a moment, paddock, sky and sea
Mirror an irrepressible earth.

Forest

King parrots

King Parrots sway high on branches
Tilted at binoculars
In a brilliant moment
Change trees.

Mallacoota

for Ranger Ken Morrison

Trees standing water-logged, black and broken,
Give life to fungus gemstones. Umber,
Tan and orange light the underworld.

Sauna-hot under lilly pillly
Where raspberry and blue olive flower,
Five sandpaper fig trees

Prone along the forest floor, bird-dropped
Implant from Queensland,
Their roots torn, exposed, bear fruit.

Grown tall as bloodwood and ironbark, buffeted
At the top by scorchers and southerlies,
They came down to lie on earth.

In these groves, hunters of the past,
Silent and quick as light,

Appear to those who walk too far, alone.

Rain forest Kuranda

Trees touch the sky, high in a nest
Squatter orchids flower.
Packed branching roots, orderly in their space,
Allow the neighbours room.

Millions of forest years, unthinkable.
Crowded creatures change colour, grow new limbs
To profit from another's habits.
Hunters kill to live, the hunted die
To live again. Immortal atoms
Nourish the living with the rotting dead.

Here, safe from chain-saw gangs,
Energies expand the heart,
Challenge the soul to leap,
To taste and hold a hundred million years.

Extended families—Poem with moral

Fifty-four first cousins,
Their parents, spouses, children,
A satisfying extended family:
Not a millionth of the truth of it.
Your foot presses ground,
Someone's yard and feeding space.
Pavements are freeways,
Reckless users are wiped out.

Concrete takes over nations.
Earth under your house
A graveyard of many. Pick roses
In the garden, cut off fruiting.

Melbourne's many filled-in creeks protest,
Making potholes in solid roads,
Flooded foundations
Baffle builders and engineers.

Choose darkness at sea-bottom,
You ruin someone's living room.
Creatures at centre-earth
Occupy the burning cauldrons.

Walk on rocks
You can kill stromatolites,
Stop these little things from making oxygen.

Suddenly Gandhi is changed,
Fanatic to reasonable.
His chosen way eliminated a thousand massacres.

When you walk, step carefully,
Remember your extended family.

Come death

To the death

Old age and I are incompatible.
This sums it up. A crop of platitudes
Blooms in my mouth like blisters.
I rattle on, a runaway train
Drowning in noise.

When I am dead

for Stephen J. Williams

When I am dead bring a scented flower, one yellow
Jonquil or freesia, a sprig of daphne, a gardenia.

In winter's chill field violets will remind me of a friend
Whose 'flowers for the dead' provoked an inner mind.

Sting removed, when the old bones won't lock,
I shall explore my far-reaching beloved blue.

Remember me and my desire to learn a little more
From one whose boundlessness conceived it all.

When light has swallowed black I will touch you
With eternity, the scent of one small flower.

Bat's wing

Rarely, a light soft as silk
In a bat's wing, holds you.
Torn and repaired, strong and new,
Silk carries you to sustenance.

Giving as the wing, cool and smooth,
A snake entwines you.
Delight winds channels in your mind.

Tracks entice, mountains obstruct,
You climb, go back.
The way unmapped, you sleep.
Earth's touch, a bat's wing, enfolds you.

World without end

Wind and sand
Parch your closed throat.

From the sky, a pale furnace, no moisture falls.
Blue hints at space where other planets spin.

At horizon edge, trees touch you with secrets.
Sunset paints a shining lake.

For days, a week, rapture tips the poles
Inside your head.

The pulse remains, a slip behind the eye,

A glance. The dream's knowledge recedes.

Remnants insist, ready you, blindfolded,
To hunt another rarer place,
And another.

Shapes and scents

The body attuned: intrinsic harmony,
Colour of word no less
Than colour of flame tree.
Scent of thought
No less than burnt leaves.

Aria, no less than
Sound of whale and bird, of wind and sea;
Cathedral arch
Than contour of hill or river
Through grassland and gully.

Embodied and free,
Breath warms the gut,
Touches earth, rock and all creatures.
Shared within, met without,
Absorbing all from where it all began.

**Deep water | New poems,
1997-2002¹⁵**

In plain country

In plain country

Shadows at stage edge on cue
Weave between mind's opposites,
Bend the will to fear.

Sun transforms an ordinary
Day's end to miracle:
Space between the known
And a surprising new.

Secrets painted on sunset
Float on living air,
Light and colour
Beat with the sap of ancient blood.

In plain country new boundaries
Stretch your fingertips;
Bones return to light.

Coppers

The doctor's wife, distracting me
From her husband's rough skill with the lancet blade,
Showed me a copperful of cinchona bark decoction,
His quinine remedy for fevers.
For six days our copper rested in the scullery.
Bucket-water pumped from underground,
Soaked a week's wash until Monday's fires stirred them.

Exactly timed, Dad called me from bed. Once
In frosty winter, warmth tempted me, I resisted.
He damned me heartily. I never dallied again.

Three lots lifted steaming from the copper,
Rinsed with loads of motherly advice,
Pinned me to the wringer.

After a long war, shared cramped space,
We built a house. No electricity for a month.
The gas-fed copper gave abundant bath-water.

When the washing machine displaced it,
I lost a friend. The dispensary's small copper
Used for boiling syrup, consoled me.

Christmas week, the boss simmered a ham in it,
Treated us to thick spicy portions.
He cooked in his national service.

The finale, Christmas pudding
Boiled in a copper by a shearer's cook.
Plain food, copper-flavoured tastes so good.

Cut off point

After breakfast my mother curls my hair,
winds it round her finger,
secures it with spit.

One night I endure hair-pulling rages.
I keep asking why. The At Home Day women
want to know how my curls stay secure.

Mother's 'sugar-water' scorned,
they 'tried it', she gives in with 'rags'.
I'm her conscience-saver.

She's pregnant. I'm six.
An expert cut, a fashionable bob,
saves twenty minutes.

Freewheeling

For a year I push Dad for a bicycle.
Uncle Bob in Melbourne
freights a secondhand one
advertised in The Argus. At daybreak
I wash the shabby paint.
Tarnished handlebars resist my polishing.

I can't run, come in last. My machine
speeds with the wind. Riding no hands
over deserted roads in twilight,
my world embraces the sky.

A deep puddle spans the dirt track
to the new school. Three boys
hang over the fence.
'Bet you can't go through the middle of it.'

Nothing can stop me. I am stuck,
struggle useless. I wade out, muddied.
Mother isn't sympathetic.

In summer dry,
I find the kerosene tin,
its side hammered in to fit my wheel.

I go to boarding school.
Handing the bike to my sister
cramps my heart.

The pool

I am eleven, balanced on the pool edge
waiting for the starting gun.
In spite of tremors

My running jump flies
into a skimming slap. Surprised
I win the race.

Eight times eleven
I am poised on the lip of a deeper pool,
its far bank moving in dark mist.

Uncertainty in timing

shakes my unstable legs,
touches the edge of imaginings.

Voices surge around me,
I sing joy in my saddest songs,
this race for me alone.

Lake Marma, Murtoa

My childhood sun's
Expanding colours
Risen from the lake's heart,
Climb through gum tree tips.

High summer sun
Polishes the lake's smooth skin.
Clouds drift over depths,
Leaves glide and sway.

Winds sting and strip,
Bend branches to their will.
Under the lake's contorted face
Unbroken calm.

My tempered sun
Fiery at its setting,
Carries me unbodied
Into the lake's deep water.

Imprint

Your aunt says you were too young
to remember, shows me Mrs Wehl's
thank-you note dating 1914.

Mrs Wehl, pale on your mother's
chintz sofa, daughter Gretchen
soft in a grey squirrel coat.

Over the piano, wedding present
painted by a friend: cattle and a loch,
grass, green as the sitting room carpet.

Your mother, gracious hostess
pours tea into pink fluted cups.

Mrs Wehl wears death's imprint
paints herself on your young mind.

Ladder to Heaven

1

Enclosed in finely pleated white,
grandfather's cold face repels my kiss.
I am eight years old.

In the chrysanthemum-smothered, apple-spiced
dining room, they sing all nine verses
of 'Nearer My God to Thee'

'there let the way appear, steps unto heaven,
angels to beckon me' ... my father's ladder,
the beanstalk, soars through the roof.

I see Angel people descending, ascending,
some carelessly sit on rungs. Unstirred
as damask on the trestles, grandfather stays cold.
Free and warm, I am strong in laddered light.

2

My feet are held in black Murtoa clay.
I long for clarity, a ladder's vision
with angels climbing up to God and back.

Voiceless anger, jealousies unhealed
hold me shackled. Then
cloud expunged by heaven's spreading blue,

my eyes light-filled, feet released,
I walk on solid ground; far countries
sweeter than young dreaming.

McDonnell Ranges

The range, scrubby, nearly blue
Nearly green, rolls against sky.

Feathered strength, a wisp of moving air,
Presence finds me.

Your summit's vision
Expands my country.

Thrust from a dying sea, your body
Rolls and folds in games with fire.

Aged and weathered, your settled rock
Secures my unsteady feet.

Expedition to the Interior

We left Melbourne with everything men
could plan. Born on a farm, I easily cared for
camels and horses.

At first the sun shone gently. Birds,
colour and song flew music around us,
skies pulled me to the plain's edge.

Walking under trees grown straight to sky
dark ghosts stepped with me.

When night swallowed the gaudy sunset, my arms

stretched wide, I felt the new land's heartbeat.

Ancient, past young agony, the country's
parched breath squeezed us dry.
I longed for England's green mist.

Each mile we covered, the sea receded,
horses escaped or died. Sucked
by desert sun our bodies drooped.

The land battered cleverness.
Belief in our strength shrank to mirage.

Most returned home
to ordinary safety. Years on
unfenced, I live in my country's clear distance.

Trees I have met

In the beginning

I dream a climbable tree, the pepper
in my childhood's backyard
scratches me. The cemetery's skinny avenue
points graves to sky. Smooth and tall
gumtrees sketched on sunsets at the back of the lake
fill me with longing, keep their formal distance.

Monkey puzzle

My grandfather's
twin monkey puzzle trees
held out spiky arms.

They said 'We are related to you
the same fabric and presence.'

Cut down for flower beds
chopped and burnt
their spiny fingers withered and died.

My living memory
keeps them upright
pointing to sunlit acres overhead.

She-oak

Uncle Julius said
the she-oak in the middle of the red dirt yard
was old, a pioneer like his father.

In my young mind
the tree lacked style, tall and scanty
sparse needles for leaves.

Wagons cows cars everything
went round it,
swaying shapeliness, bountiful blue behind it.

Concrete and square houses
a flowering garden cover the dirt.

A neighbour heard that tree come down.
It screamed.

Lament

Two sugar gums
we grew up together on the farm.

I miss my friend
ringbarked for firewood

watched good health slipping away
tried to comfort pain beyond imagining.

From every leaf to my newest root taking in
his moisture, his words go round and round.

‘Stricken naturally one accepts. Resentment
added to expected pain doubles.’

Survivors

Two lilac trees
planted by my newly married parents
near the perfect iron fence
surprise me.

The proud owner of my inheritance explains
‘I just prune them lightly’.

Scented ecstasy
eternity’s purple skies
enfold me.

Pas de deux

Beside the smooth pink lake
two rough-trunked paper-barks

One graceful as a dancer
leans towards dawn-tinted sky

her partner a sturdy guardian
shields her from wind and storm

Their ground strewn with old branches
dares molesters

After listening to Messiaen

The note hangs in heavy skies
alights on stunted snow gum
melts in cold horizons.

The note pins silence
never to resound
travels undiminished,

a sound of earth and sky
of ourselves
the breath of it.

Trees shrug off personal questions

for Sue Swinbourne

Near the creek, in the forest
two myrtle beech trees

together and apart, reflect each other,
symmetry in opposites.

Did the seed dictate or winds
north and fiery fashion them,
winter snows weight them equally,
summer breezes gentle them?

In a forest of difference, a spider
spinning threads, bridges space.

Birds roost or nest in either or both. Insects
scurry over leaves, lay the next hatching
under the green cover.

Water in the creek, racing
tumbling flowing, makes music.

Useless asking for a sign.
Trees shrug off personal questions.

Old girls' church service

At fifteen I'd opened the door
To the singing teacher's room.
Miss Flockart, thin, austere, listened.

'Yes, something can be done.'
Difficulties hung between us.
How right she was.

I did not overcome
All those vocal obstacles, turned to

Thought and words.

Middleaged, in Miss Flockart's
Formally-gowned choir, my knee shoots pain
Through every processional swaying step.

Concealing my limp
Under her all-seeing eye
Uses all my hoarded strength.

In the vestry, her praise
'Excellent my dear, so disciplined,'
Wipes away a schoolgirl's tears.

Outside the car

Shady trees and a seat by Windsor Station
Drag me from the sun-drenched car.
Two men make room between them.

Healthy and hostel-clean, the younger
Calls himself alcoholic, not nasty,
Amiably shakes my hand three times.

The other, watchful, fatherly,
Describes a funeral with plumes and horses.
He knew the woman featured by the press.

She kept buying flats, let them
To the needy, supervised them,
People and place in modest decency.

I wonder why I've hidden my handbag

In the car. Years in a mobile prison
Have robbed me of conversational riches.

Paintings from Queensland by Franki Birrell 1997

Brolga

Set of head, slender limbs,
Long neck, pink eyeliner
Applied by a master.

Sleek grey, feathery dress,
The performer, courtship a ritual,
Dances her destiny.

The stage complete, companions
Take off from solid ground to dance in air.
Floor, backdrop, lighting, all blue.

Dancer

Madam Emu born to dance
Dresses in feathered femininity
Carries her portly self jauntily.

Her piercing knowing eye

Misses nothing.
Dignity allows no gossip.

Assesses herself as intelligent.
Without social conversation
At parties she is awkward.

Liking the eccentric, she won't unbend
Or change her way of talking.
She walks lightly, like a dancer.

Cycad

Cycad, sensitive as a deer,
A steadfast maverick scents upheaval,
Endures evolution's chaos.

Fire toughens an expanding trunk, higher
Palmy fronds replace the dead.
Fruit huddles, sheltered round its foot.

Subterranean streams, untouched by drought,
Nourish cycad's inner dark.
Stored dreams become its wisdom.

Transformation

Boab despairs of her appearance.
Nothing makes her knobby limbs
Look slim. Now and then
She persuades a bright bird
To sit and warble in her hair. Everyone
Admiring its colours, forgets her mousey locks.

Dingo

A loner afraid of loneliness, by day
The dingo rests, his golden coat
Cool and concealed by papery trunks.

Dusk awakens appetite. His howling,
A call to hunt, summons the pack.
Songs of acceptance bounce on the hills.

Brave with friends, he skims the land.
Dark to light, the loner reclaims himself,
Stretches tired limbs on a hidden bed.

Drover and dog

At work the drover and his dog
Are one. On his seasoned horse
The director modulates his whistle,
Asks the dog for more and more
To keep the mob in hand.

Man and dog in eyes and skin
Reflect the sun-scorched land.

Day's end time for rest. Dog drops,
Curls to a foetal ball.
The drover, cooking the slow meal,
Takes in bird calls, sunset
On distant hills, emerging stars.

Warmed by fire,
They sleep till daybreak.
Their earthly ghosts
Range within the dreaming rock.

Long sight

Inner sight took Crookneck further
Than her friends believed. Loving the land,
They asked the wandering eye to travel for them.

From a hilltop throne, Crookneck's voice
Louder every hour, wore them out
With trumpeted opinions and advice.

They found new territory. Loneliness
Martyred her. Her crazed mouth
Clacked inside her shrunken head.

Full moon penetrated her dark places,
An instant turned her round. Everyone
Attracted by the softer tones, came back.

Bringing stories, crowds climbed the hill.
In Crookneck's special eye, they flew
Through turquoise air to climb the far-off peaks.

Women go high

(A travelling stranger christened them 'The Olgas'.)

Giant women living in a furnace underground
Nourished by heat, grew so plump,
They held hands for support, and danced.

Prepared for destruction, the wisest
Discreetly sounded the deepest chasm, found
Incandescent rock, exploding soaring fountains.

After fiery argument and discussion
They settled on a dance

Focused on the future, should it happen.

The choreographer, convinced the way out was up,
Made stirring speeches to the crowd.
No one wanted the pathfinder's job.

Their physique made gambling easier than vigour,
So they cut a pack of tempered cards,
Until the joker found the loser.

On the brave's return, a star,
She danced on a lake of molten gems,
Her name to be inscribed on every lava flow.

The rulers adopted her report, 'GO HIGH'.
On 'the day' with all their giant strength
The women pushed up. Too far.

Unused to air, the opening sky,
Aware of hardening, they rose as statues
Pregnantly lovely in their shapes.

Tibrogargen

Young Tibrogargen terrorised the land.
Exploding fiery breath
Snatched animals and trees. Burning rivers
Overflowed. Ashes buried the living land.

His boiling heart emptied, shrivelled,
Hearth and chimney cold.
Tibrogargen shrunken to a bear,
Grieved for centuries, mourning lost strength.

Time healed the plundered land,
Animals burrowed in Tibrogargen's side.

A new eye opened him to shining skies,
Thundery clouds, nurturing rain.

Low-voiced growing things whispered wisdom.
His spirit ages old, burns steadily,
Touches those who gather round,
Warms them with an ancient fire.

Indeterminate horizons

Down to the wire

I unlock the door to a dream house.
Stripped bare, but for
A low wire where the curtain hung.

A woman, long-gowned,
Alien but familiar, calm as a lake,
Stares at me in blue-eyed silence.

Without possessions, handbag, money,
How would anyone know me
For what I am?

I must call on a neighbour,
Telephone a sister for my identity. Outside
I run down some steps, ring a doorbell.
Wake.

Piercing

Her spare body
Dressed in pilgrim grey
Her strength
Pierces me.

'I am your soul.
You refuse
To share our agony.'

Carried on new blood
Truth locks my bones
Grief beyond words
Flows through me.

I cannot find the bottom of the canyon

The canyon narrows near my house,
its depth unplumbed. There
imagination's clear waters
make music, flow smoothly over stones.

When a climber lowered me on rope
into the mist, I listened to bird calls.
Their tones like new air
expanded my lungs with possibilities.

Eyes full of the unspoken, strange creatures
looked at me full face. Wood
apparently dead, sprouted living green.

Flowers flooded me. Shades and shadows,
blended scents and colours,
carried me beyond all worlds.

Imagination's tricks

A public telephone,
My elderly sister Enid's voice
Quivers breathless excitement.

Reasons flash fire
Over my surging imaginings.

The casino,
End of Point Lonsdale pier,
Interval at a film,

Hot air balloon, swimming
With sharks at the aquarium,
Riding a bejewelled elephant.

Modest beginnings explode. Thunder
Splits my ears.
Lightning streaks registry office.

Quickly I sketch the new in-law.
My sister was lying on her bed.

Forest

In black night
I am lost in a forest
Of smooth tall trunks.
Leaves light me
To a distant edge,
Tell me light survives.

Night long as a lifetime
Retreats. Day creeps slowly
Through the dark. Sky colour
Strews patterns over green.

Wood warms frozen hands.
A forest
Chants to morning,
'None is alone,
Light and dark, we belong to God.'
A leaf falls on my head.

Dreaming in blue

My dreams encompass every shade of blue
Pale ocean to open sky.
Birds are blue eagles with spread wings
Eyes filled with blue worlds.

My dreams encompass blue atoms
Their blue the brightest shade of all.
Flying stars recall explosive birth.

My dreams encompass my body's bluest atoms.
Their words carry me
To upheavals and new beginnings.

On the periphery

In the foyer
Crowded with chatter between sessions
Swift as a rocket
A glass window flies over
Unsuspecting festival poets sipping coffee
Slips back inside the frames.

Dreaming winged glass
I fly invisible over friendly heads
Slip back inside my frame
Sip coffee without missing a word.

A voice outside pressing walls
Is clear.
'What you know is yours.'

Space

The space to wait for light
After dark sleeplessness
Is will to keep the body still,

Space to catch your breath,
To wait, knowing
Caught breath expands and returns.

The space might be
The last, before all breath
Hovers above an indeterminate horizon.

Looking for a sign

The unimaginable city

At last I'm living alone.
Freed from offending another.
My winged mind leaps to far-off skies.

A curtain lifts, a company of friends
Practise living lines.
Words warm the air between us.

Age weights my legs, delivers abundant life.
Birds and trees speak new languages.
Confinement extends my space.

A serpent plagues my paradise.
Her unrelenting voice
Penetrates my most secret places.

I cannot escape her constant whisper,
'Why should your body be exempt?'
A stroke, perception I cherish, lost?

Day after day,
I rehearse roles
Before the final transformation.

Distance fills my sight,
Fire from new-made earth

Extinguishes the frozen dark.

Steadfast, I step
Towards the wholly imaginable city.

Gifts from the cosmos

In summer lying on the rug
over the green lawn, sky up there
lifts me to it.

Sailing I disappear
into cloud country, far
from the hurt of daily living.

In our town of dust and frost,
red sunsets
fall into the willow-lake.

Sky continents orange and red,
seas, peninsulas and inlets
hover in water close enough to touch.

At night, the stars, the moon,
sifting shadows, unveil the dark,
shower me with space.

Feet anchored, swimming sky,
lit by sun and star, held
by the incomprehensible, I am healed.

Drumming the changes

Through wind and sand
carried on scratched breath
something there.

Sound drumming din
precision terrifying
their hold, iron.

A moment a whistle
not to linger over,
pummelled and rolled by hurricane.

Words streak under eyelids
illuminate the darkness,
an inside eye strains the limit.

I live small
blown outside my country
inside out.

Right side in again, changed.

Out of the wilderness

Up there under earth's skin, on calm days
clouds lightly skim the blue ocean.

Threats expand backstage: gases
build reservoirs, to drop as floods;

volcano shafts wait.

Out there red-eyed dwarfs, slow-paced
circle towards an unknown end.

Rocks charge unhindered. Deepening
widening wells, airy quicksands
draw and swallow ever-larger prey.

Unmeasurable forces throw chaos as easily
as boys with cricket balls. Strange matter
floats with atoms born of the first bang.

Grounded, locked in years, voices
congratulate each other's cleverness;
none challenge powers up there.

Elements are fixed, but human word or frown
can cloud another's sun,
light in an eye, unbind a limb.

Earth-bound minds
struggle against expanding energies.
Noise masks the crying of torn souls.

Within time lines birth and death,
seconds tick the days, the years.

Beyond the clash of voices,
a labyrinth of opposites, unspoken words
light the dark within.

The god that orders chaos
knows each mind and soul,
down here under earth's skin.

Wanting

I want to feel sea on skin,
slap of smallest wave
to seize my feet; to feel
steadiness tumble
in chaotic certainty of waves
from places waiting to be known.

I want heavenly manna
falling from the sky to bless me,
clouds to spread artistry
clear blue, shades of grey
to gather and scatter,
planets to sing.

I want to write words that echo
from mountains, travel easily
as first light chases dark
across the plains. I want gifts
hoarded and concealed
released from their hiding places.

Windfall

I want the grapes
Want the bunch
Stretch and stretch.
Inches short, I fall.

Underneath me on earth's

Hard bed, discarded wants,
Dried sticks,
Prod my discomfort.

I pick up and eat a windfall
In a hollow under my hand.

Unasked-for flavour
A summer sky spreads through me.

Twilight opens
A hundred eyes. Fruit
On the vine
Burns like lanterns.

Alchemy—Jervis Bay

Foamless waves sway
Under the sky's heaviness.

The sun revealed by slipping cloud
Edges summer clarity.

I'm an ancient mariner watching alchemy
Dark sea shapes transformed

Hosts of shining dancers
Leap and dip on a glittering stage.

Falling from me
Leaden weight dances on a fired ocean.

Lodestar for Jordie

1

Professor A.E. Albiston theologian,
the preacher, faith brilliant in his eyes,
strayed from any theme to God.

Small hand stroking the wood,
further and further he leaned over the pulpit edge
to bring us near his Lord.

A schoolgirl, I watched the church fill early,
chairs creep down four long aisles.
I could not see his God.

Now, in the nearly empty church, unseen,
the poet preacher steps off the world,
draws me to his God.

2

Searching for the paradise tree,
I find inside myself,
thinner than light, and strong,

a thread of concentrated universe,
heartbeats from galaxies
far far back, and those becoming.

In the everlasting stream,
alive in all being,

I am beyond dying.

Lured by exploding furies,
ready for another chaos,
I step off the world.

Beyond

Anyone can press a piano key,
sing something of a tune,
but you are left with longing
for the voice beyond the note.

The tune, warmed, drawn from
strings and seasoned wood,
mellow harp and flute. Overtones
slip past you to another world.
You want to hold and keep
the sound beyond the song.

Bird song, tree song
play to the heart. Water
over stones falls headlong,
flows sedately over plains,
is claimed.

Silent meditation. Notes
live within your mouth,
your heart, your feet,
unlock the imprisoned voice,
carry it.

Dies Irae

All I have for now is who I am,
For how long can I hold this being?

Is it he, she, it, or some other,
A dream-promoting ego
In the enclosing unknown?

I'm lost in time's infinities, a speck,
Crumbling bones in sagging sack,
Cells, molecules, a brain, a soul.

Will this house I inhabit,
Fall slowly, quietly, or be demolished
By flood or lightning stroke?

Without a chart, the one I am, fearful, waits.
Surrender who I am
There is nothing but desolation.

Gleam

Stumbling in chaos, the pilgrim
Catches a glimmer, candlelight
Offers an horizon.

Clothed in fashions of their times
Ancestors provide an inheritance
An undimmed beam.

In thickening night
A rising moon
Sinks into a deep well.

The traveller sidetracked
Tempted to give way to sleep,
Leans on memory, finds a gleam.

On the pathway of flickering candlelight
Momentarily a flame,
I must pursue an unknown brighter light.

No darkness at all

When music enfolds me
The ineffable spreads fragrance.

The dross of effort
Failure or accomplishment
Falls from me.

I am naked
Transmuted to pure white light.

To a stromatolite[†]

rock-ordinary
extra-ordinary
oxygen bubbles
the young planet's breath

anyone puffed-up
with accomplishment
might look at you
and shrink

Rockfall

Loosened by flood
The rock falls from the mountain top
To the picnic ground.

For this guest of family picnics
Leaned on, patted, kicked,
Skin scratched hearts and arrows,

There's no going back;
To cloud-skimmed, rock-piled slopes,
To thinner air where eagles hover.

[†] Stromatolite: a mound built up of layers of trapped sedimentary material and blue-green algae, giving off oxygen for 4,000,000,000 years. A group of living stromatolites can be seen at Shark Bay on the coast of Western Australia. See, also, the poem 'Extended Families—Poem with moral'.

Bread on the waters

from Ecclesiastes 11:1

Years on you're told
of a carefree phrase tossed out
that made a difference.

Would the who you are
flourish without
all the other whos
who shaped yours;
those who honed
a chipped cutting edge
to sharpened sensibilities?

Words from your who thrown to
an outgoing sea
not your concern.

Coda

How things are

Words flowed like mountain streams in the small high-ceilinged country church. Words flowed round the two year old, quiet beside her father. She caught meaning in the flow, never final, always taking her to a new place.

Words grew with the child, the adult, the old person, into more than words. Although at times she thought the limit attained, always it was superceded.

Words with musical sounds, hymns with sound and meaning blended into a perfect challenging whole, became the symbol for life itself, its ever-changing rhythms, the piling-up of note on note, chord on chord, phrase on phrase into always stronger streams of meaning, a flash of future.

Instinctively she knew this was something to keep intact inside herself. Nothing outside could touch it, let alone destroy it. In that simple country church, growing from a child's understanding, challenges overflowed.

"The truth will make you free" became 'the pursuit of truth will fight to make you free': but only free enough to recognise the size of the "never-ebbing sea" as in the words of John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-1892).

*Immortal Love, for ever full,
For ever flowing free,
For ever shared, for ever whole,
A never-ebbing sea.*

In the background lurked the unseen presence of light and the unknowable.

*O, how shall I, whose native sphere
Is dark, whose mind is dim,
Before the Ineffable appear,
And on my naked spirit bear
The uncreated beam.*

She looked for the unattainable and knew that her naked spirit needed not only to flow but to burn in that flame. Burns healed, pain and understanding alternated. She learned the direction of the undercurrents and how to swim in them.

Often feeling lonely, separated from ordinary human contact, she knows that for her this is how things are, how they will be. The ugliness, the beauty, the fighting, the peace, the acceptance. Human life for her is the place where the soul learns the blending of opposites, meaning piled on meaning, baptism in an ongoing living stream.

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Notes on chronology

¹ *Sisters Poets 1* was edited by Rosemary Dobson. 'Grass and blue and the underground tank' (*Plain dreaming*); 'Child to grandmother' (*Plain dreaming*); 'It is nearly dark when I come to the Indian Ocean' (*Abruptly from the flatlands*); 'Pilgrims and Promised Land' (*The whispering ear*) were originally published in *Sisters Poets 1*, but were revised and published in later books.

² This poem was also published in *Plain dreaming*.

³ This poem was also published in *Plain dreaming*.

⁴ The following titles from *Abruptly from the flatlands* were revised and published in later books: 'George Freeman and the steam engine' (*Plain dreaming*), 'Miriol' (*Plain dreaming*), 'Dreams for wheat' (*Plain dreaming*), and 'Nearly light' (*Plain dreaming*). Two poems in *Abruptly from the flatlands* have been rewritten and not since republished elsewhere. This book

prints the revised versions of these poems: 'More voices from geriatric places', parts 1, 2, and 3, and 'Bringing dreams to work'.

⁵ This poem was also published in *Plain dreaming*.

⁶ A version of this poem also appeared in *Sisters Poets I*.

⁷ *Plain Dreaming* contained revised versions of the following poems: 'Child to grandmother' (*Sisters Poets I*), 'Grass and blue and the underground tank' (*Sisters Poets I*), 'George Freeman and the steam engine' (*Abruptly from the flatlands*), 'Miriol' (*Abruptly from the flatlands*), 'Nearly light' (*Abruptly from the flatlands*), and 'Dreams for Wheat' (*Abruptly from the flatlands*). Part 4 of 'Miriol' has been revised and only the revised version is published here.

⁸ A version of this poem also appeared in *Sisters Poets I*.

⁹ A version of this poem also appeared in *Sisters Poets I*.

¹⁰ A version of this poem also appeared in *Abruptly from the flatlands*.

¹¹ A version of this poem also appeared in *Abruptly from the flatlands*.

¹² A version of this poem also appeared in *Abruptly from the flatlands*.

¹³ A version of this poem also appeared in *Abruptly from the flatlands*.

¹⁴ A version of this poem also appeared in *Sisters Poets I*.

¹⁵ The new poems in this book are not printed in chronological order of writing. However, it has been possible to reconstruct an approximate guide to the order in which they were written: 1997—'Poems from Queensland' (1); 1998—'Coppers', 'Cut off point', 'Imprint', 'Outside the car', 'Down to the wire'; 1999—'Freewheeling', 'Lake Marma Murtoa', 'McDonnell Ranges', 'Alchemy—Jervis Bay', 'Beyond'; 2000—'Expedition to the Interior' (revised in October 2002), 'Piercing', 'I cannot find the bottom of the canyon', 'Dreaming in blue', 'Dies Irae', 'No darkness at all'; 2001—'Space', 'The Pool', 'Ladder to heaven', 'Trees I have met', 'Old girls church service', 'Imagination's tricks', 'Drumming the changes', 'Forest gifts from the cosmos', 'Lodestar for Jordie'; 2002—'The unimaginable city', 'On the periphery', 'In plain country', 'Wanting', 'Windfall', 'Gleam', 'Rockfall', 'To a stromatolite', 'Out of the wilderness', 'Possibilities'; 2003—'Bread on the waters'.