

Possum Palm Summer / On turning sixty

Summer morning a-squabble with starlings,
at Fairfield Station, shrill dissonance,
wrap-around sound rains down from date-palm.
Date palm soars upward, bract builds on bract
to petticoats of faded fronds to deep green shock-top,
to tangerine spurt of date-bearing stalks.
Date palm of many summers, whole clusters
of communes housed within this roof of fronds.
Full moon tonight, in Sagittarius,
a ripe old age, this sixty summers' moon.

Noon-day sun, and date palm
evicts ashrams of Indian Mynas
scuttling down skirts of fronds,
sudden shock of summery protest
in tatters of branches.
Wings a-flap, showers of sparrows
snatch sweetness at date palm crown.
Within are Wattle Birds gobbling orange fruits,
erratic experts in unexpected flights,
claiming title to the heart of palm,
celebrating ripeness.

Full moon is golden,
round date-fruit moon
takes it slow and easy,
flood-lights date palm,
gilds date fruits,
moon-icing shimmer on
cobble lozenges
of date palm trunk.

Night train decants weary workers
'Look, look! Possums climbing!'
No one sees the moonlight climb,
the silhouettes of possums purpose-full,
pink possum hands clutch golden dates.
The shout breaks the feast,
a hurtle of possums
clatters into friendly fronds.
The watcher, bereft, stands
in a hail of date-fruits,
abandoned possum lollies,
like Jaffas down the aisle,
up-dated, at possum movies...
Like I said, full moon's
in Sagittarius, belly-laugh moon,
and the joke's on me.

The Eltham Line

Impeccable in dinner suit, old-fella Magpie
struts the station, sandwich secure
in oyster-shell beak.
Wattle Birds career in from Diamond Creek
and hills' arms enfold the Diamond Valley.

The girl on the railway seat bends, sways, asleep perhaps,
in layers of scarves, hair the colour of sunset,
she slides all in a heroin heap, collapses to the platform,
a heap of tattered scarves...
'She's lucky, though, staff on *this* station,'
he says, as the ambos clatter down the slope,
'If it'd been Fairfield or Darebin...most stations on the Eltham line...'

Citriodora, lemon scented gum, makes a statement,
rose-pink limbs emboldened in winter sunset,
the gentleness of giant eucalypt, a power and blessing,
a proclamation pungent with lemon-scented wildness, that,
while one girl, hair the colour of sunsets, slides,
all in a heap, to unstaffed platforms on the Eltham line.

As Black Ducks zip across to Diamond Creek,
speeding silhouettes, as sky-crimson fades to pink
'It's not on. Unacceptable. Who can tolerate such a thing?'
As black ducks zip across to Diamond Creek,
silhouettes stabbing horizons of hope and loss,
gone to havens in reeds and rushes.
The question remains,
arrows in air.

For Cassie

Dry-paper leaves,
they rustle and whisper
across blankface paper
wrinkled with lines,
unfinished poems,
bone dry, tinder dry.
Not possible, my darling,
Spring's not the pruning time.

Green and growing, supple-strong,
the unfolding of the promise,
clear eyes, the set of jaw,
holding the line -
Pine Gap,
Roxby Downs -
your world peace desert-dreaming.

Struck down so soon.
The clutching vine,
its clammy fingers,
they sprawl and they smother.
You offered no support
for the twisted tendrils.
The clinging of the parasite
was not your doing.

No more the unfurling,
unseasonal you go,
and all is at odds.
Sky drips. Sun melts.
Veiled air barely breathes
in the place of flowers.

And, with the knowing,
we can no more be
what we were before.
No answers, but a question:
How to follow, how be true?
As bud speeds unnatural to fruiting-time,
the tears seal the promise.

1988

Escarpment

Escarpment looms.
The edge, razor edge.
Consider the escarpment.
You know those depths.

Familiar, too, with the black dark,
the fright of simply standing
on this edge crumbling,
the folds, crannies,
the ripping and the breaking
but, most of all, the breaking
and, yes, the fighting,
you fight the escarpment,
its dark black edge, the
falling and the falling.

The child sobs in darkness, wraps the dark blanket round.
The schoolgirl, folded in sheer embarrassment.
Young woman, cloaked in clouds and longing,
and losing, and breaking, and being broken.
Standing free and wild, on edges.

Older, the plunge
is heavy-hard.
Deeper.
Return is laboured.
So you stand.
Stand under.
Under-stand.

Shawled and shrouded, a kind of embrace
this wrapping-round,
now that you are the escarpment.

Can We All Dance Together All The Women / Reflections on my Mother's photograph

In faded photographs -
the dream child
with merry eyes,
white smock,
flyaway ringlets,
the rosy smile,
socks at half-mast.
The green eyes twinkle,
too knowing for a child,
can we all dance together, all the women?

The woman, wasted and bent,
slippers empty on the polished floor,
Get well soon on postcards, flowers.
'I'm sorry dear. There's nothing we can do.'
Dark rain falls on ruins,
streaming in grooves and gutters.
The lines etch, deeper into the clay of us,
and you are who you are,
through those makers of *your* freedom,
those foremothers.
So, can we dance together, all the women?

Was sisterhood a dream, the struggle
worth the cost? That all of us
could stand in sunlight, hair flying,
be what we could not even imagine?
And for all that, acknowledge that,
not really knowing what it is that we are making,
we continue still the beauty-trail of the mothers?
That one day we could all learn to dance?

Time reaches out through turbulence,
unfreezes, ice packed tight at the parting.
Quick now, hold by the hand, the child!
And warm hand takes cold hand,
one clasp of the hand, and in she sidles -
the woman with the eyes that know,
though cracks and through crannies,
horizons of a weary world.
Drained of all colour, they flicker and swivel,
look within and far, and, almost,
all the way home again -
so can we dance together, all the women?

And, tentative we tap, feet clasp,
tap, connect, feel earth, Earth-feel.
Roots, rock, well-spring,
the turnings

and the windings.
And always there has been this,
and you are in it,
the struggle of the women.
And always this has been the only dance.
So can we dance together, all the women?

July, 1986

**New Year Moon /
Camp Eureka 1987**

'Here, at Yarra Junction, all is in readiness for the rising
of the New Year Full Moon.
No moon yet, however, just the splintered diamonds of the stars.
A faint, luminous glow behind Mt Sugarloaf where -
Yes, yes...'

With syncopation awry, ooh awry on the upbeat,
a falter of frogs plonks a dozy, lazy loopy,
liquid kerplonk percussion in puddles,
gloomp-a-gloomp

patter platter flatter
patter platter flatter

As the rhythm frays and sways,
this-a-way and this-a-way,
and a-here's -
What y'r a-waiting forrr, folks!
The moon, th' moon, the MOON is a-rising!

One more fanfare of frogs, a sprinkle of moon-dust...
then...up she bounces, hey!

Straining at the rigging
of goddam gawky gums,
one more push,
and UP she rises,
bellying through the branches,
ready to roll down the new year,
and down the New Year,
FULL VOLTAGE FLICS ON!

A-shining and a-shining, and she's away . . .

May the full moon's blessing be upon you,
and we wish you a Happy New Year.

April 1988

And After Three Days / For whistle-blowers (1988)

The day before the verdict. In memory of all those retrenched, packaged and intimidated during the Kennet years. Anubis is of course the one who leads people across to the underworld. The colour red should speak for itself.

Three days cross-examined.
And, after three days -

*On flowering gums,
the red wheels turn and turn*

This you should expect,
you, whistle-blowers, that wheel.
Crimson spikes encircle wounds.

*On flowering gums, honey-sweet,
a gift, that nectar, not for the giver*

And after three days
you wilt and wait, you seek
sweetness, a little healing.
A night of Mahler at The Bowl,
a chill wind and shifting stars.
Cold sky is a chess-board,
and the Pawn is grounded.

*On flowering gums, the parrots and cockatoos
tear fragile blossoms, shred scarlet stamens*

'Trouble-maker!' 'Unstable!'
They spew this out, the gatekeepers.
They say it's 'evidence' and, after three days,
you seek sweetness, a little healing.
A hot morning of tea and tarot -
blood lies quieter in scarlet pools -
you still the hurt, it's what
they want, the hurt, the fear.

*Walking to the station where flowering gums gather,
mottled trunks leaning, turning and turning,
the red wheels, colour of your true integrity,
on uncertain paths that twist and falter*

Enter Anubis, black kelpie courting cars,
crazy dog he turns and grins,
heading for the last muster.

*On flowering gums, the red wheels, turn on roads
of no returning. So, pick up the broken blossoms.
Wear the Red Badge and, after...three...days...?*

Sunset-sad Woman

Sunset-sad woman scuttles on edges,
wanders wraith-like, absorbing
all those libel-labels:
out-worker, single mum, bitch,
man-hater, house-wife, spinster.

Sunset-sad woman, rain-plastered hair
sodden as winter grass,
cold hands clutching thin coat,
holding the sadness in grey fingers,
cloud-fingers, thin as mist,
trailing tentative as tomorrow,
feeling her way through cloud-curtains.

Sunset-sad, the woman heads off
into that cloud-cuckoo land, slipping, unnoticed,
through that lemon-lit slot at the edge of the earth,
the blue-green gap where, so recently,
the small sun squashed through,
a hurried departure, after all,
to, maybe, better times.

In the after-glow, she turns 'I want a women's movement,'
she decides, 'that's walking down safe streets, equality pure and simple,
no, difference *and* equality, forget the glory clouds,
but justice alone is not enough, a women's movement
where we can be what we could be... have we ever known that?'

The moon's eyebrow quirks 'No point in playing with the scraps,'
she says, while sunset fades in peach and apricot, 'the apricot dollops
are only leavings from the rich men's table, remnants of the light'.

Sunset-sad woman throws a thin leg over ranges, purple-dark,
'Til the Fourth wave of feminism then!' is that what she mumbled,
tumbling into potentials, uncertainties, her eyes glint with hints of sunrise,

'So night it is then.'

1997 & 2000

**Saxophone Lady /
1996**

Drought detective tracks us down,
oven-breath panting in our faces,
gum-shoeing drought, in slipper soft feet,
hot-footing it into the Big Top,
kicking up dry dust in cloying gloom,
clammy, sweaty, sticking to the gritty seats,
the very air a steamy circus act.
Unexpectedly, the saxophone lady,
big-boned, raw and rosy,
the quivering crest of hair
promising a cockatoo display,
with all the oozing, ambling lope of a real pro,
a true lady of the golden horn,
starting sloooow
ear-bending
LOUD!!
High octave cockatoo,
that shivering squawk,
it shot like jagged steel
out of that gleaming horn,
pierced our wan disparity,
molten music wrapping us
round its old and gold,
high sweet singing, swinging,
in the hothouse, cool,
yes, coooool!

Feb 2001

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The Dancers Are Gone

Warringal is the old name for today's Heidelberg. Catherine O'Brien was, in a sense, dispossessed by her father. She is my ancestor. Catherine wrote poems. It is likely, though the story is lost, that her grandfather, aged 22, was hanged in the 1798 Irish Uprising. Written in honour of Black Deaths in Custody, and for all who have been dispossessed, and for all difficult women.

Catherine O'Brien, her boots
all dusty, strides the river-bank,
strides the white dust of Warringal.
Suspicion? Premonition...?
Don't know.
Don't know. There,
up there, Corroboree Ground!
But the dancers are gone,
there's a city up there,
but no, not yet, at any rate.

Light trickles on water, in water.
Not lantern-light, never seen such a light.
Not fire. Not fire, for the dancers are gone.
Banshee-light? Coming from this land?
The past? No, not the past,
unless distant perhaps?
Distant, distant times.
Full was the river. Yes full.
Back home, home in the green land.
Does river speak to river? Hard to say...
there is a need to know this thing.
Full was the River Slaney,
Irish river, full, black and tumbling.
At Enniscorthy by the mill, he dances
at the end o' the rope, the vanished dancer,
on the dry-stone bridge with arches three,
my father's father, hanged from the tree.

Does river speak to river?
The rivers of grief where dancers are gone...
Slaney River speaks of grief but I must know this,
does Yarra River, depleted, struggling, yellow-brown
and on the banks the straw-white grass?
A strange soup this river. It echoes.
From where? The past, yes, but more.
There's more in spirals of current,
these vanished dancers,
this land of white grass,
dust skies that blind the eyes...
"Would to God she had never come to this country."
My own father said it, for in my heart I know it,
that this land is never mine, and me,
longing for the dear green hills of Bree.
And when light trickles on water,

those vanished dancers, spirals on water,
in water, can they intertwine?
And tears of rivers course down dry creeks,
cry across oceans?

January, 1997

Our Rivers Are of the Earth

Irish rivers and Australian rivers are so very different. Because of the Aboriginal creation stories of the Rainbow Serpent, there is a very different perception about serpents, too. In both cases, though, rivers conceal hidden truths. Saint Brendan's coracle refers to how ancient Irish monks in little, round leather boats, sailed out into unknown waters. The victors and history-makers only tell us the dominant versions of famine and dispossession. In 1848, the Irish came to Australia. Fleeing imposed famine and dispossession, they came to a land of dispossession of the First Peoples of this land.

Bus Eireann crackles over frost,
express bus to Dublin, cracks
and crazes ice-glaze on the Liffey bridge.
Every Irish river, you tell me, has its river-god.
So, as you cross the river, you honour the god.
And it seems to me at least,
that the passengers do pause for a bit,
hold still, eyes caught by the grey eyes of the river,
sacred river Liffey, brimming in her running,
circling white swans dipping red beaks in water-spirals.

The black water holds quite still, it seems,
the white and silent swans - and more besides -
down there below that tumbling torrent.
And I tell you then how deep this river is to me,
reared among rivers that saunter and coil
on sun-burnt plains. And then I say,
our rivers coil through earth, are of the earth,
the rainbow serpent shaping land.
"Serpents!" you say "Saint Patrick drove them all away,
banished the snakes from the green land."
But, something bothers me about the serpents.

I lean on the old, stone bridge. The ancient arches'
cloak shadows, I thought, were cast away.
No. Re-modelled, the river tells me, like cut-down clothes,
hand-me-downs, re-fashioned into Pioneer Pride,
don't you see, into 'First Fleeters', 'Convict Descendants',
'Great Famine Irish', with theft of the land, the floggings,
the Great Hunger, all denied, in the blinding light
of the Australian sun, all dressed up in re-modelled suits
for Bi-centennials, Australia Day Re-enactments,
the Olympics, cut from the cloth of shadow-land.
Yes. Yes. We in Oz do Festivals with Style!
Well, it's all coming up for light now,
make no mistake about it.

In Dublin Museum there's room-fulls
of precious stuff,
the treasure-hoard of the Old Ones
dredged up from the Liffey,
gold torcs so heavy
a neck could hardly bear them,
massive cloak-pins of Tara's purest gold,

the tiny, perfect coracle.
Like the coracle of Brendan,
altogether without oars or compass,
that let the currents have their way,
launching out into western oceans.
So, there it is then,
riding Bus Eirreann to Dublin,
the galloping Irish Setter on the prow,
I voice the words they could not speak,
the million and more who sailed away,
the words unspoken lest they break the teller,
carrying the silences across the Southern Oceans.

I break the silence for the story is mine,
ours, broken threads to weave again into the cloth,
strong men dropping dead on the roads of Wexford,
hundreds of people dead in heaps,
death carts from Enniscorthy poor-house
trundling out daily, for the typhus was there.
People round Ballymorris digging up
the planted seed, eating it raw.
By Navan mill, where grey rock clasps
the turning wheel, tears fall in water.
A black dog by the cross-roads barks,
urgently, in frost.

So, who am I, I wonder,
and who are we, exiles in *this* stolen land,
until we stop the thieving, face our bitter truth.
It's not my journey only. But a People's.

January, 1997

**Wexford to Warringal /
January 1997**

Crows in black shards circle
the Slaney River.
Black slate the ould roofs
of Enniscorthy,
and black the circling crows,
and the Norman tower
has a great bite out of it,
where grey stones scutter
and shudder down Vinegar Hill.

The girl, with mahogany hair
springing in wings, says the tittie
on top might be the paps of Danu,
"Sure she was a prolific ould woman",
she says with a twinkle, "And that might account
for the green fields of Bree, fifty white sheep
to a field and all, and the rich black bogs
round Ballymorris." 'But,' I think in my head,
but do not say, 'that stream at Bree
that swirls down to the Slaney,
that stream, the Boro, d'you call it?
It brims with ancestors' tears'.

Great-grandfather Pat O'Brien,
losing six of the twelve,
till the Famine claims Bridget, too.
The Hedge Teachers dismissed
in '46 by the Education Board,
and Gerald gone to Liverpool,
Patrick packs up for Plymouth
and Catherine, the eldest,
refuses to go, but leave she must.
The Aurora sails for Melbourne Town,
on oceans of tears.

Sixteen years he teaches, there,
the sunburnt croppie children.
But come the winter months,
when mists wrap Warringal in grey shawls,
he remembers for a bit,
as the fog, on soft, grey, possum feet,
scuttles up River Yarra,
remembers the red stain in the Slaney,
where they hanged his father
in '98 at Vinegar Hill,
the six children he lost,
and Bridget, too.

Thank God, though, say I, that James

married Annie, my mother's line,
ran away and married a Protestant.
James wrote the note for her,
"By the time you read this note
I will be the wife of James O'Brien",
Annie Hollis, little English girl,
illiterate, for her mother ran a Dame School,
a ha'penny a week, and a stick
brought each day for the fire,
while Annie cleaned the house,
minded all the children for her mam,
never learned to read herself.

And Annie's mother died on the coffin-ships.
Annie married the Aurora's captain,
but he died. She ran away,
and married James.
A brown silk handkerchief
she sewed for James,
the thread, her own brown hair.

Ellen O'Brien, the farmeress they called her,
widowed, she married Paddy Gannon,
him with three and her with three,
two Ellens, two Williams, yours, mine and ours,
reared fifteen children up the Loddon.

But Catherine O'Brien,
lonely among River Redgums,
still rails against the parting
from Bree's green hills,
from green moss quilting the black roof,
the stone cottage by the school.

Come Spring at Warringal,
it is not rain that blinds the grey eyes
to Wattle trees fluffing yellow coverlets,
along the Yarra banks
where Catherine rages,
tramping through the Wallaby Grass,
heart breaking for the dear, green hills.

And come every rainy spring,
when Yarra floods Warringal,
washes out the Irish
in their cabbage patches, on the flats,
Catherine O'Brien, I bear her name,
Catherine O'Brien, her boots all muddied,
rages and tramps down Cape Street Hill,
writes poems on tear-wet pages,
longing for '*the green hills,
the dear green hills of Bree...*'

while crows in black shards circle
over Yarra River, river
brimming with ancestors' tears.

November, 1997

**East Alligator River /
Kakadu**

Rainbow-serpent river slithers,
sun-splashed over sand in hollows,
snake mother river in your new skin,
cool and sleek in brown satin,
serpent-lazy, moving easy
those green-gold flanks,
gum leaves,
those riders of running waters,
ripple-skipping, trailing new moon
shadows on the sandy bottom,
among the clarity of rainbow-fish

There beyond the shallows,
over the sand-bank's hump,
a clutch of pandanus holding earth,
they writhe serpentine contorted
against the river's skin,
spikes of fronds, affrighted
at deeper waters, when the Big Wet
lacerates the paper-barks,
at that first tearing of the skin.

July, 1998

New Year's Eve, and the Last of the Loquats

Written at the time of the MUA dispute, the greatest display of intimidation of unions in decades, during the Reith/Kennet years, and a hot, dispirited summer.

1. The Last of the Loquats

I wait in the cool for the turning of the year.
Exhausted starlings twitter, uneasily asleep,
in loquat tree, under leaves of green leather,
fruit pecked to pieces, brown-blotched and rotten,
wrinkled orange globes shrunken by summer sun
and the ageing of the year - it's New Year's Eve,
and the last of the loquats. It's cool on the veranda,
faint-feather breeze lifts honey-suckle skirts,
crinoline canes curving, agile as leaping ladies
springing off the roof, getting ready-set
to smother jasmine to the left, grape-vine to the right,
and scramble aboard the tottering loquat, the wilting plum,
while I wait in the cool for the turning of the year,
sucking the last of the loquats.

2. The Last of the Plums

The last of the jasmine flowers departed in November,
the last of the honey-suckle didn't survive December,
the violets have packed it in,
the little leaves pale and paper-thin,
dead-head daisies struggle in the dry

The radio declares
the year has been
economically rational

Come Christmas week, the plums
splashed on the pavement,
blackberry-dark,
a hazard to old ladies
in this heat, tottering home,
shopping jeeps all laden
past the plimsoll-line,
with whisky for New Year,
ice-cream for the heat

The kids have stripped the lowest branches,
the last of the plums, gutted on the foot-path,
yellow innards spilling from purple skin,
like carcasses at the knacking-yards,
plump purple carcasses, two months to go
till autumn and messy summer spills her guts,
making a ski slope of my footpath,
doesn't ask why, doesn't say: is this okay?
To give and to give till it's gone, all gone,

and plums rot down on rainless soil -
slippin' away, just slippin' away -
the year's run by like the last of the plums.

3. I'd rather be a Plum Tree than a Politician

In halls of power, the plum-pip counters toil
and count their options on Spring Street Hill,
they trim their budgets, slashing honey-suckle,
insisting that violets and jasmine embrace
micro-economic reform, trade their Eight-Hour Day
for individual contracts. The loquats won't diversify
but, at the end of the day, Total Quality Management
defeats the loquats, their shelf-life performance
is inadequate, they are required to attend
a Performance Appraisal Meeting.

The loquat union, in a pickle, refuses to go value-added,
"Bring in the troops," scream the tabloids, "Bring in the troops!"
Mercenary non-union loquats are secretly trained in Dubai.

"You'll have to SELL YOURSELF!" say the Train the Trainers
to the grapes, "You're too immature! The market won't wait
till autumn, you'll end up as casuals in a sultana box,
if you don't compete."

A Global Conglomerate stockpiles the plums,
they never even hit the pavement... "But never fear!"
we are reassured, that one bull-market day,
gorge on the plums, the fruits WILL tumble out on that far,
fair distant day, from a Treasury slush fund,
when the Rich feel they can risk pulling out the thumb.
"But plums," we are reminded, "don't store so well."
So I am led to conclude that something is rotten
in the Inner Cabinet. And in truth,
who can prevent a run on the plum?

Slippin' away. Just slippin away.
The year's on the turn, like plum vinegar.

It's New Year's Day.
The fireworks spurt on Southbank.
The booze buses harvest the last of the revellers.
The city reeks of rotten plums.
Though New Year's revolutions may still be possible,
My Friends, I'd rather be a plum tree than a politician.

1.1.1999

Bru Na Boyne

"New Grange" is the name of the ancient site of Bru Na Boyne – the Palace of the Boyne. Older than the pyramids of Egypt, a spectacular Temple-Cenotaph and ritual centre of megalithic Ireland. It is constructed of granite from the Mourne Mountains and its facade of white Wicklow quartz. It was built fifty-five thousand years after Aboriginal people are known to have been living in Australia.

It's the rock that claims you at the outset,
massive calligraphy of spiral-swirls on Entrance Stone,
carved and curved, great lozenge-diamonds
receding within and within.
You edge in sideways, rock brushing body -
too intimate, this rock -
captured by rock, by white ground,
white-powdered on hard-packed earth.
The passage narrows, dark utterly, no going back,
edging sideways, and the slope is upwards.
Inward you go - Australian inland,
this white-cream Earth - hard-packed,
the surface silk-soft from long-dry rivers,
ochre! "Paint your face with ochre"
the Law-woman said, "Lose your every-day self,
become of earth, a Being of stone and sand."
But not for you, caught, clasped within this cream-white,
thin earth-passage, you, reared in Sky-God's Domain
and, for the de-throning, He exacts due measure.
And now the Centre: a kind of peace,
peace pricked with tension, uneasy, like a truce,
eyes in darkness, faint wisps and feelings,
like a Presence, just out of reach,
and a Silence as thick as five thousand years.

Light now, not of the eye,
the corbelled roof-stones rising,
stone set upon stone,
like the undersides of stair-cases
curving to the cap-stone,
high vertigo of stone,
uneasy peace in the three-spiral chamber.
In each chamber, a great stone basin,
giant, delicate ritual bowls,
pink granite, hollowed out,
open, like water-lily leaves at Kakadu.
Here, they say, is the resting-place
of Tara's Kings, Tara, seat of the High Kings.
But the great cairn's older by far than Tara!
Go further then, further back and back -
here it is, Earth home, it lies below the mound,
lost in soil and stone, the ancestral beings,
it's here they dwell, the Faery.
With them (the People of Danu) the Kings of Tara
made a pact, a solemn promise, a treaty
with those First Peoples of the Land,

for Sovereignty, co-existence.
"But, this land," you say, "this land, Erin,
is ancestor-land", not home for you
caught in the white-rock passage,
sloping down, back, to some outer world,
escaping, you might think, that world of
rock and stone. You gasp for air.

From outside, the Mound, perfect, complete,
green turf topped, the wall, white quartz, stark,
precise, the ancient contours strangely modern,
and then the connection - spurious, surely?
Uluru! Something in the shape, perhaps?
But Uluru sprawls, red rock and stone, convoluted,
most ancient, yet Present in our Red Centre.
The Aboriginal Way, partly you know in your head,
through your heart's language is quite incomplete,
this Earth, the Mother, the land owns the people,
the people speaking land, but you are caught
in the white-rock passage, rising perhaps to a little light.

This land in which you live, uneasy,
your ancestors fleeing betrayal, famine, war,
their letters cry with exiles' grief, with longing
for their own green land, but no word at all,
not one word - were they implicated?
The letters quite silent about the stealing of land,
the stealing of the children - no word, no story,
not one thought. So you are caught,
as if in a passage of stone, and you know
this as truth, you come not from some sky-god,
but from this world of earth and stone,
Bru Na Boinne! To Land of the South,
the traveller's story circles in spirals of stone.

Time it is for restoration,
a freeing of people and land
from sorrows two centuries long,
a commitment, legal and true,
true as the Kings of Tara, enduring
as Mourne Mountains Granite,
pure and strong as Wicklow Quartz,
Sovereignty, co-existence,
the Walking Together.

There, in inmost chamber, faint
like possibility, light touches rock,
long buried, first rays of winter solstice,
there, the Triple Spiral,
the Turning Point of Seasons.

16.1.1998

Touch Country

Cold. A dry cold. Cloying cold - and airless too. Out of country, the Aborigines would call it. And of course, I am precisely that here in the Northern Hemisphere. Strange how the cold has a resonance, as it were, with heat - with the humid heat of central Australia. A clammy cold, like a sunless Uluru.

Of course, there are more logical parallels, I jest. I try to jest. I am no jester, though. It is parallels of latitude that I refer to. Direct line from Uluru to force-lines of Tara perhaps? Oz is down-under, while I am up-over, here, in the vale of Tara's Kings feeling out-of-country. But, I berate myself, I should feel at home! This after all is ancestor land. Look now, with what facility that un-Australian word 'vale' tripped off the tongue. Vale!

Once in the tunnel, we head upwards into the dark. The track is pink-white, like the white tracks in the Dandenongs that I knew as a child. But this track leads up in darkness. Not the lazy, open bush tracks, no. A terrible urgency takes me by the throat - something I must find, take back, back home to dispel darkness. Darkness in my blue-sky country? The Lucky Country? Get a grip! I try to just breathe. The track rises sharply. She appears out of nowhere.

"Ah, to be sure, you're the looking girl!"

"The looking girl! Can't you talk the Queen's English?"

"No. Can't and won't!"

She's a historian, it seems. Studied Bru Na Boinne for a lifetime. She guides my hand on the white, rock wall. Reminds me of home somehow. No. What might be, could be, home. The dust. The rock - ochre! Yes, ochre.

"Paint your face with the white clay. Lose it. Lose your everyday self," she says, her shadow snaking across the cavern floor, and up the corbelled roof. I must have misheard. Lose what? I'm no Irish mystic, muddling through mists. I'm a cynic Australian cynic, famed for taking the piss out of fruit-loops. Clear light and blue skies. That's more my style.

We are in the Centre now. The triple-spiral coils like a black snake. The custodian woman looms taller than the Mimi Spirits of Kakadu. I stumble back to the entrance. Breathe air of no solutions. No. Not till we face it - the dark in the land of light. Touch country.

10.11.2001

The Blood-red Tree

Turning pages, turning
beneath the blood-red tree,
eyes flicker and slide - ancestor album.
Is it healing you seek, or redemption?
This morning I hailed a taxi,
Javed it was, he drives a yellow cab.
His son, he tells me, was shot last week.
"Back in my homeland, they said, we did
nothing with the land... twenty generations,
and now we all are gone." "Twenty generations,
I am sorry" I say, knowing it is not enough.
I close the door. Home! I have a home.

Turning pages, turning beneath
the blood-red tree - bottle-brush spikes
are red as blood - the ancestor album.
Five generations, these ghosts of
my own blood-people, four generations,
1848, since you, Patrick, posed for
the sepia photograph. No sign,
though your neck is wrapped
in the black cravat, no sign...
Your own father choked
on the creaking rope,
in your mild eyes, no hint
of the rebel's son, the 'terrorist',
your winged collar white and high,
your own father choking on the rope
at Vinegar Hill, twenty-two he was!

No sign from you, the widow's boy,
siring twelve children till the famine
felled Bridget and the six,
Ignorant Hedge-school Teacher,
Hobbledehoy! Away, now away,
to colonize Antipodes.
It's what we do with scum like you -
the people there do nothing with the land.
No sign on the calm brow,
the grave demeanour, that daughter Catherine
bore a girl to an uncle twice her age.

Four generations gone, your small round spectacles
open on the leather-bound book, (quite the scholar,
my ancestor!) I carry your genes, awkwardly.

Your letters, on yellowed pages,
the firm and graceful script
drips words like taste of honey -
solicitude, sweet breathings of holy faith.

No sign of the splintered sweets,
the wee ones felled to the famine,
cracked and shattered, no words -
the clouded-syrup words without balm or blessing.
But I, Great-grandfather, have seen your darkness,
the creaking rope, the words of blood
framed in the small, round spectacles.
May I bear witness to those words
you could not voice.
Javed drives a yellow taxi.
His son, he tells me, was shot last week.
Bottle-brush spikes are red as blood.

11.11.2000

Prickly Moses - Kelly Country

Kelly Country,
wheels clattering on gunmetal rails,
rainy night, voices of ghosts in black smoke,
the fierce breath, yellow eyes, black dingo train
prowls the rails, Wombat Ranges to Eleven Mile Creek,
howls in black steam for the soon-to-die.
Thirty troopers, they rode the Glenrowan line,
a century and more ago, to catch the Kellys,
a carriage for the gattling and the muskets,
a carriage for the journalists, another for
the horses skittering in fear in the black train.
And in the headlights' glare, Prickly Moses,
profligate bush, burning with the yellow flame
on sidings and verges, where trains slew sideways
with screech of brakes, with steel-shower sparks
ripping through the underbrush, sharp as musket-shot,
banshee wail, on *that* bend, Curnow on the tracks,
pale Curnow with the red scarf,
candle sputtering with the hard light,
the troopers saddle up, ride rough through
Prickly Moses, burning bush of the hard land,
Prickly Moses that slashes and jabs at horses' flanks

Prickly Moses scrabbling at Kate Kelly's skirts,
that break-neck ride, the flight from Fitzpatrick -
bent copper, rapist, lackey of the coloniser -
nemesis of selectors - dirt-poor croppies.
Turn-coat Irish trash, that Trooper Fitzpatrick.
Kate Kelly on that wild ride, Ellen Kelly
in the prison, longing to suckle her twelfth,
and in their eyes the yellow flame, how
they'd scratch a living yet from that hard land

Prickly Moses gilding Kelly-green country,
the scratch and tear for freedom,
and Kate Kelly on that wild ride,
where hills slip and slide in soggy velvet,
where bones of fences run silver-grey
in the hard land, where Kelly sweethearts,
Kelly friends, leave the pots of stew
on fence posts for Kellys on the run

And somewhere, somewhere hidden in a hollow log
or billy-can, or a cobwebbed hob, or, under
a tumble of rocks, pock-marked and pitted,
the iron-grey of Glenrowan's plough-share armour -
there! The Minutes of *that* Meeting (is it truth
or legend, who can tell?) the Republic of the North East!
The yellowed paper, the urgent scrawl, like the hand
that penned the Jerilderie letter, it burns the page,

springtime flame, Prickly Moses flame

Today still it burns, that flame,
in eyes of poets and fools
under the baton-charge,
school-kids and grandmothers,
workers and the out-of-work,
arms linked under Casino towers,
Prickly Moses people,
People of a land so hard,
they must call in boots and batons
for the shifting of `em, Prickly Moses people,
impenetrable as ever by gunmetal sheen of city river,
and in their eyes the flame, make no mistake

For this too is Kelly Country,
where before that, and back and back,
this is Kulin Country, always will be,
the corduroy of bush-tracks, braiding
and coiling, to lizard-skin river,
to water chocolate-sleek.
Mother-love land,
we nearly lost the dream
in relentless towers, Casino shadows,
eyes blurred to that other seeing -
Myall Creek, Glenrowan, Woomera, Eureka,
that focus from the ploughshare mask.
Casinos can collapse,
colonisers have been known to
pack their bags, capitulate
to the prod of the pike,
resolve and will of Prickly Moses -
the scratch and tear for freedom,
Kate Kelly on that wild ride -
Prickly Moses people, Prickly Moses land,
burning with the yellow flame.

11.11.2000

**Eyes of Jade – the April Fool Woman /
Waiheke Island, NZ**

Full tide running down inlets,
down estuaries, running, running in cups
and bowls of bays, of rock-pools, the stretching
of surface, tension, the brimming over, jade-sliver promontories,
promontories fingering seas, those seas with their teeth slicing shores

jade-tool waves, the first of all implements, skin-scraper,
spear-tip chisel-waves, jade waves, and it is endless this,
timeless this, gone to sea-spray, this jadegreen stone,
where what is wave, and what is stone, is lost in Plato's cave

can we risk it? that hard-sharp green of light and dark,
the look beyond, within, the sense of history's
sickening trough and spill, the blood on the stone,
wave-break, into ears and spirals of shells

that flame of green, that furling,
feathering round toffee-wedge islands,
surfacing from jade harbours,
that sea-people journey,
that green hope of rounding the headland,
of beaching on islands that roll in greens of waves,
stumbling on knife-edges of knowingness,
the jade of stone that stores light

the April Fool woman, the Green Woman,
innocent-wise, ancient as jade, newborn in sea-foam,
I the Stranger, no Islander I, will wish for salt
on the mouth, to speak peace and fire, for eyes of jade,
luminous and hard with the journey of it, see a new seeing.

1.4.2001

To Have Without Holding

Learning to love differently is hard,
love with the hands wide open, love
with the doors banging on their hinges,
the cupboard unlocked, the wind
roaring and whimpering in the rooms
rustling the sheets and snapping
the blinds that thwack, like
rubber bands, in an open palm

It hurts to love wide open,
stretching the muscles that feel
as if they are made of wet plaster,
then of blunt knives, then of sharp knives

It hurts to thwart the reflexes of grab,
of clutch, to love and let go again
and again. It pesters to remember
the lover who is not in the bed,
to hold back what is owed to the work
that gutters like a candle in a cave
without the air, to love consciously,
conscientiously, constructively

I can't do it, you say, it's killing me,
but you thrive, you glow on the street
like a neon raspberry, you float and sail,
a helium balloon, bright bachelor's button
and bobbing on the cold and hot winds
of our breath, as we make and unmake
in passionate diastole and systole
the rhythm of our unbound bonding,
to have and not to hold, to love
with minimized malice, hunger and
anger, moment by moment, balanced

(Writer unknown)

Mamaku / Rotarua

Tree-fern, Mamaku,
tree-ferns of the world take off their hats to you,
you skinny-black shaggy-trunk,
you rag-tag beauty-fern, lace-maker, spiral-furler

Feather-flicking Kauris, you forest-huddler,
it's *community* you make, you crowd-cuddler!
Deep night bush, it's your doing, Mamaku,
you shady-top, Home Sweet Home for Kiwi

Plump, little, unassuming furry-football bird,
grubbing, scratching under Mamaku,
Kiwi - night-stalker peering thru mamaku-lace -
I am feather-fronded, quite away in wisps and wisdoms,
the deep, leaf-litter humus of Mamaku

7.4.2001

The Disordering / Auckland Harbour

Two minutes out from the quay
the sea takes over,
in the restaurant you left the brochure
*'The company a driving force /
A Competitive Edge'*
The sea-gale batters at heart's door,
but you left the brochure by the Chablis.
Two minutes out, and the washing sea
churns at the wake, mocks memory
in slash of winds,
the brochure perhaps *'The global /
Regional New Economies'?*
You catch at fragments, but left
the brochure where it was, where a basket,
dripping with petunias, that world...no more!

Two minutes out from the quay,
the foam-cascades, the groan of decks,
the lift and fall clutch-release of sea-grip,
the dwarfing-down of city towers,
Hilton-ghost reduced to Lego,
entire city spume-spattered,
a peg-board of kiddie-toys
that dwindle and shrink.
This is a city built on volcanos,
peaks sliced off for cricket-greens,
volcano vents drowned in willow-bordered lakes,
that ordered world, that brochure, glossy
as oil-slick on queasy water, slips and blurs,
with Auckland Bridge a spindle-span in mist.

Rain slinks in, cloaked in cloud-shawls.
Mauled in sea-teeth the ferry bucks,
in white-foam world no way to calculate,
no time, in rain-cold tears, in roil of waves,
this thunder-foam world is all there is.
It feels like dying, and velvet-shoulder hills -
those cardiac-screen hills, snaking round
the harbour - have turned away,
the city reduced to proper scale, primal land
flexes its muscles, sea-coiled island grabs you
in fists and fingers, that strong mother grasp,
you let go, the brochure, in your heart you let go,
and love, first love, sea-grabs the heart of you,
you dwindle in mists of seas, you surface,
small and gleaming from feather-touch water,
promising the fading of footsteps, the
scaling-down, the disordering that restores.

7.4.2001

Mud-pool Philosophy / Rotarua

NB – In this poem the term CD means Community Development – not compact disc

Grey porridge mud-pool,
bubble boilings of mud,
earth-core's soup-kitchen,
whole city's built on top of mud-pools,
circles of palings protect the unwary,
fumeroles and grilles spurt and spit,
noxiously, in pleasant streets

Mud-dregs slopping darkly
at the Big End of Town,
over-boiled cappuccino mud-sludge,
the ghost in the Machine hisses -
the smoke-screen of spins and scams
that stain the corporate shirt-front.
Bubble-pop mud slops in craters
concentrically, down to the depths
for a think and a rest,
up to the heights for Action,
up and back and up and back,
like sheep-tracks down a gully

The long drop opens,
then the farty build-up,
gurgle-slurp and gargle-glug -
this, oh, this is structural reform!
Only last week, a massive
mud-fart split the park!

Mud-skinned bubble-domes
swell their warty toad-skins,
another pop! Another!
Folks pray for a mud-pool
to swallow, whole,
the Inland Revenue,
the city's only tall(ish) building,
flush down the gurgler the dole office,
estate agencies and used-car lots -
sucked into the mud-maw!

For 'tis the season of corporate-
community partnerships,
slickers in suits holding the purse-strings,
'creative' corporates speaking our lingo,
'Social Harmony' (read Domestication)
'Consensus' (we all agree, cooperate,
for the price is right...!)

The mud-pool simmers -

you have only to comply with the grilles
and grids of corporate guidelines,
clean up your act, delete the unpredictable -
the diarrhoea of mud-pools,
cess-pit of deeps heaves up its guts.
Sign on the dotted line, containment
of all that is gluggy, messy, uncontrollable!

Mind you sup with the long spoon,
when you sup at the slush-fund!
Watch out! Any moment,
your leather-look, three-piece,
slim-line club lounge, matching coffee-table
and standard lamp could be floating
in a sea of mud from the arsehole of the universe!

Why not try the CD Way?
Think concentrically. Then spit it out!

Get active as a geyser.

Better to go out, on top of things

7.4.2001

Seaprints / Auckland Harbour

So it's homeward-heading on heave of seas,
wind-force roars into lungs, wind-voice flying out
in sea-mist leaping from wind-battered mouth, spirit-breath!
Could it possibly be? The glaze of eyes, sea-shadowed,
eyes sea-drinking, borrowing blue, but jade-flecked,
magicked, in that swim and brim of water-tears
on wet-flank sand, that smoky-glass sky of eyes,
that flash on rock-gleam skin, flint-grey,
with grind and wash of time

So it's homeward-heading on velvet-crush tide,
those sand-grit, shell-grit, lace-tattering tides,
scrawl-scribbler sea-prints whipping away the me of me
into sand-sprinkle, sea-crust, foam-flecking on lemon-hump beach,
sand-banking, shell-banking shores, so faint the trip and dance of sea-print,
those ragged spirals near lost in gullies and creases of me,
in shifts of tide-lines of inlets folding into inlets

So it's homeward-heading,
on this lurch and sway of velvet-crush current,
throat's door unstopped with wind keening home,
the spirit-breath pluming, earth-home sea-bird,
the wing-brush on sand, the strain and creak of sail-set,
thud and splash of anchor-haul, and ever and ever the departures
and returnings, the unravelling, wave-breaking of me,
the lips salt-cracked, speaking spirit-breath, could it possibly be,
wind-torn, from dry mouth? The wrinkle-seabrow-lift,
horizon-eyes brimming the sea-deep city, and me,
of the ochre-land, oldland, give sea-thank, harbour-deep.

7.4.2001

Weeping Over Words

We are weeping
behind the waterfall,
we are weeping over words,
demolished in water-splinters,
weeping in the word-surge
that floods and colonizes,
each tear flies with rain and water,
lost language, words debased,
cliff-face cracked with the crying.
Once were words, our words -
'co-operation', 'sharing', 'sisterhood' -
ridiculous, this weeping and forgetting,
the soggy moss, ice-melt, milky-mountain trickle,
rush and squirt of waterfall tears!

Behind the waterfall we are weeping
for lost language, words debased, replaced with
'Efficiency Audit', 'Quality Management', 'Customer',
the words that wound, deplete the heart of us,
not ridiculous, the weeping and forgetting!
In this slide and sleaze of words, the fountain-fall,
slick-shine veil that slithers over broken rock,
to foam-sprawl scraps that flick away,
lost in wind-tatter water.

The rivers are losing their language!
They are a violence these words,
'Work-place Reforms', 'Market Testing',
'Labour-Unit Costs and, she, the 'Labour Unit',
trudging home, bone-weary from her twelve-hour shift!
For the weeping and forgetting is here,
in these words that smother and drown,
they have no place, these words,
in the pure flow where we, the voice of rivers,
will speak and weep until flood-time brims again -
'justice', 'equality', 'co-operation' -
the nourishment of words, they overflow,
spill and spin in sun-tumble torrents.

2.8.2001

A Beingness of Rock

The rock, hand-hollow,
palm-nested, speaks
to ground of me,
well able, this rock
to take the grind of stone
on stone, flint-cutter rock,
you could be, could I?
No! Not for me, no,
the knife-haft balance,
senses sharpened
to a beingness of rock!

Pocked and pitted from sea-tumblings,
wind-scrapings, your holes and gullies
age-grizzled to rock-polish
smooth-slide,
the ochre, freckle-face of you -
look into freckle-face rock,
see those white, wee spirals!
Those tubes and curls -
sea-rock, you, sea-stone!

Such creatures coil in you
as I am made of! Rock-stuff
of my rock strong being,
stay with your sea-ways - in me.

8.8.2001

Caged Thylacine / 1936

Frantic paw-prints back and forth,
the blood on the dust, this cage,
the first, and the last prison -
Thylacine, you wear the convict stripe,
the stripes of shame, bitter heritage
for oldest of all lands, the last to be tamed.
The pattering, the swerving, in endless circles,
implacability of iron - the purpose of cage
and its intent, to civilize, domesticate.

Outside cages is wilderness,
no walls or bars - untamed -
until the measuring, until the fence,
until the counting, the plundering,
the straightening out, and - scrawled
in blood - the deed of ownership.
The wild gives up its fruits,
no more singing up the land
and those beings,
a thousand upon a thousand
that pace and swerve -
Kooris, convicts, refugees,
all who *will* be uncaged
or they will die -
re-classified Tourist Potential, Illegals,
Forest products, Freaks and Fruits
for the eating and the tasting.

Captured at the end of celluloid,
wavering, fitful, faint as lantern-light
in mist and smoke, a scrap of time,
when there was -
Thylacine pacing, pacing,
the sepia-flickering image rattling
on its sprockets, it's all that's left -
spotched and guttering,
a dwindling candle.
That footfall scrabbling, loping,
that lift of the great head,
the cave-mouth stretched, the eyes,
can you read the eyes in shadow of the cage,
the rattling film? Those stripes of bars on flanks
that quiver and shift, lost moonlight on creeks
and waterholes, Tiger! Tasmanian Tiger,
Marsupial Wolf - these are the classifications.
Let us be precise as to who it is, that is
in the cage pacing, fading, in stripes of bars,
moon-shadow slashing waters that slide
and heave, receding in cage of flickering eyes.

2001

Holding Up the Children

The boat, rust-red on seas of silk -
low-rolling, deep-laden, turtle-heavy -
near 500 souls aboard, under mango sun
dripping heat, like juice of love,
this love that sent the boy - 15 he was,
10 years and more they saved,
the people of the mountains, they sold up,
sold the great-grandfather's land,
to send their green-eyed boy
on sapphire seas - it was, they reasoned,
a chance for one of them at least

Holding up the children
holding up the children
"THERE'S KIDS ON BOARD!"

Silent seas holding the green-eyed boy -
no word will reach the mountain-people -
the boy, drifting, rolling turtle-heavy
down and down in seas of silk,
the mother and the girls, sweet children -
pink dresses, faces floating like flowers
in the blue ocean - sinking, calling thin as gulls

Holding up the children
Holding up the children
"THERE'S KIDS ON BOARD!"

And the father weeps,
he may not go to the lost wife,
the drowned, sweet girls -
it is forbidden - and the sun
dripping heat, like juice of love.
The late-night sitting, Parliament,
'The Pacific Solution' it is agreed,
both Parties pass this law -
Troop ships, Special Assault Forces,
legal and necessary for deterrence
of 'Illegals', for border protection -
it will win them an Election.

The scattering across the decks,
the sliding, the screaming, the shots
across the bows - "Will they shoot us,
will they?" - the boat listing, slipping
in seas as warm as treacle,
those boats that should, in safety,
bear harbour-home the precious bounty,
should roll in on homeward-spilling waves,

should beach at last, hands clasping
hands, on shores that smile

Not THIS, not like pink flowers floating,
the children's faces sinking in blue seas,
the green-eyed boy rolling, turtle-heavy down,
not this, the tears of waves spilling
on white-bone reefs, not this shameful tide,
this cry, thin as gulls, pleading to the pale moon
to pull and homing-heave the waters,
to surge in fullness onto shores -
THE GREAT TURNING - can we possibly do this?
We must, or all, we all are lost
in blue seas, sinking.

29.11.2001

Finding the Stories on Rucker's Hill / To stand on this hill is to stand on a Hard Place

The stories, in layers of clay and rock,
can we find the stories?
They are thin and hungry, the stories,
damp and lost beneath the hill,
and the topmost layer is shallow soil,
imported at some cost.
Half-remembered, the stories, faked
like that gazebo topping of the Shopping Plaza,
imitating a tower, commemorating some small,
lost history, irrelevant surely?
Unless, if layer by layer, with care,
we sort and sift, they might find us, our stories,
for if the soil is shallow, do we not have need of them?

The top layer, then, flags flying, dignitaries,
for this day is, could, well be significant?
Or the beginnings of something not shallow at all,
something we do not yet know, it is there,
perhaps, in layers of rock and earth.

The next layer, the clay, the stories stick and clog,
the horses strain up Ruckers Hill, ten horse drays
rightturning, dragging to a halt at the public house,
gazebo tower of The Carters Arms,
the stained glass windows swimming in air
thick with smoke and booze at knock-off time,
and brick-dust from the quarry,
and all of the bricks in all of the houses
of old Melbourne town are from this place -
The Brickworks! 500 men working and the flames
blazing from beehive kilns, the clay of the bricks,
the stories in earth in clay, leaf-prints, footprints,
First People's footprints by the river, on the hill,
this hill, looking out to ranges that fold still
the Kulin lands, can we all see it with right seeing,
those times before that signing of the shameful deed
and the losing of the stories? With the arms of ranges
holding us all, like the arms of mothers?

The last layer, can we face it, rock becomes fire!
The race of liquid flame that built this hill from stuff
earth-deep, ancient, spilling its scarlet flow to river's edge,
and Yarra, *Birrarung*, river of mists, steaming, snaking,
round the lava-wall, rock-hard, the old hill, the oldest hill,
Ruckers Hill, volcanic cone, womb of this land,
rocks from your fire huddle at the peak,
holding the stories in their hard bones,
stories of the cooling fire, fire that becomes earth

We stand uneasy on the topsoil,
the clay cap three metres thick,
keeping at bay the noxious fumes,
the rubbish-tip seething, the
stories trashed and hazardous, tip-side,
Brickworks, Kulin country, Hill of Fire!
Like clumps of didgeridoos,
clusters of methane pipes release
the buried stories, takin' it slow and easy,
those vapours seep from the deep land,
can we handle it,
those hard tales from other times?
Spirit-breath whispers, can we really do it,
put aside the trash and prejudice
of saccharine promises - 'Harmony in Diversity' –
or the beginnings, at least,
of something not shallow at all,
is it the sharing of story,
or something we do not yet know,
it is here perhaps in layers of rock and earth

To stand on this hill is to stand on a hard place,
rock-solid, forged in fires.

22.2.2002

Civilised now is it? / Castlemaine Gaol 2002

High on Castlemaine Hill, the sandstone gaol,
the model prison, transformed into a B&B,
herb-handcuffed - a guest house now,
raucous weddings,
drunken in the dungeons,
twenty-three hours locked down,
those 1890's inmates -
lavender-locked, the poet's words
twist in a posy of razor wire.
How demurely the daisies smile,
their soft cushions purple-clasped
in cat-mint manacles.

Better today - ask Guantanamo Bay.
Civilised now is it? You tell me.

Sparrows in razor-wire,
knowing not the cliches 'Spine-chilling
incarceration!', 'Murder-mystery tour!'
'Illegals!' 'Queue-jumpers!'
Free sparrows, all unknowing
that this sweet world is freshly-caged
in vengeance-fettered laws 'Pacific
Solution', 'Temporary Protection Visas',
and poets knowing spirals twist
in and out the razor-wire.

Civilised now is it? You tell me.

Castlemaine Gaol, flashlight-
waving schoolkids screech, on
full-moon nights, in flapping sheets,
the poet, immersed in paradox,
twists words in razor-wire,
cell bedroom, just coffin-wide,
unlocked by French Manager.
Hibiscus behind the ear she has,
but NOTHING is what it seems
in prison of this world, lounging
in soft sofas under the gallows?
One world melts into another
in blaze of hibiscus and bombs,
to stay just one night in the gaol
is simply to live in this world, as it is.

Civilised now is it? You tell me.

The prison-yard - the whitest azaleas,
they curl and foam, become oceans,

they roar - the inmates executed,
buried standing up, the unfree standing up,
looking out and out -
Khabul, New York, Ramullah, Bali!
The tabloids' word-cage shackles reason,
mere speculation inflated to dogma,
thousands imprisoned without trial
in the outlands - Nauru, Manus Island -
'guilty until proven innocent!'
Words twist in razor-wire,
the cell-door slams,
Castlemaine Gaol, a Bed & Breakfast

Civilised now is it? You tell me.

Castlemaine Gaol - solemn eight year old,
her dad in prison, 'she wanted to sleep
in a cell' says back-packer mum,
children in desert prisons 'we are not animals'
shouting thin as razor-wire sparrows.
On dungeon tables - the wedding candles,
the murder-mystery weekend leaflet rack,
plastic ball and chain.
The poet, immersed in paradox,
twists words that cyclone-spiral round
dungeons of preconceptions,
wind roars round dry-bone leaves, exploding,
they whine and hurtle - chasing freedom

Civilised now is it, you tell me.

So - should we then be buried standing up,
the critical thinker looking out and out,
facing this sweet world as it truly is,
facing it and facing it, and may it be so
and so may it be and so may we all do.

3.11.2002

**The Smallest Grain /
Written at Castlemaine Gaol, 2002**

Dedicated to Madeleine Allbright, and all those who own shares in oil and weapons of mass destruction

Sand, creek sand,
warm crystals, water-ripple clean,
in creek sand bones lie soft, sand-settled,
sickle-moon bones, curve of claw bones,
cycle back to source, mother kangaroo,
earth-home, safe in sand, the smallest grains.

They built this place in the goldfields days,
sandstone block on sandstone block,
Castlemaine Gaol, built to last a lifetime,
from gallows to dungeon, a model prison,
built on the Pentonville Model,
each wing splaying out from central turret
allowing uninhibited view, no escape,
there is no escape, secure
and necessary for future good.

Madeleine Allbright it was who, when asked,
was it necessary, really necessary
to drop...filled with a yellow sand derivative,
it was, some of those grains,
from Mary Kathleen up Kakadu way could be?
To drop, those grains potent as a million suns -
Hiroshima, Nagasaki - and Madeleine Allbright,
All Bright as a million suns, considering
killing kids, considering the FUTURE GOOD,
weighing it all up, grain by grain,
against the loss of AMERICAN LIVES, the time,
the EXTRA months it would have taken
for Japan to collapse, without 'intervention' that is,
but Japan was all set to surrender, we know that now,
the smallest grain and don't you remember,
Gareth Evans wore a 'Uranium No Thanks' badge,
Collingwood Town Hall stage, 30 years ago,
he spoke of grains, minute grains, symmetrical, safe,
like pollen, only smaller, plutonium-pollen,
half-life, something like that, of 250,000 years,
can you imagine, I frankly can't, but Alan Roberts,
Physicist (Monash Uni), it beds down in your bones,
he said, 30 years maybe, Madeleine Allbright,
in her red suit, considers, but Diamond Jim McLellan
won the Maralinga case, a few million they won,
the Maralinga Tjarutja people, the sand by the springs,
creek sand warm, water-ripple clean, here bones
lie soft, sand-settled, sickle-moon bones, curve of
claw bones cycle back to source, mother kangaroo,
earth-home safe in sand, the smallest grains,

plutonium-pollen safe, like Gareth said.

Art of Dissent conference in the famous
Spiegel tent, Melbourne Festival, 30 years since
Gareth's pollen-promise, yellow drought-dust
cakes Southbank, the inland is emptying!
Aboriginal elder, name of Archie, wasn't it,
heads up the Maralinga-Tjarutja corporation,
tells the politicians a thing or two, he does,
cohorts of facilitators in Allbright suits,
document the Maralinga stories these days
" 'd bones, 'd bones on desert floors, oh man oh man,
hip hop da beat, bro, sista, cuz; commoonity arts,
we got d' grains, pollen grains"

These days we got mother kangaroo, sand-settled soft,
plutonium-pollen sand, so who's selling what to whom?
Spirit of Gareth livin' on ay, in pollen-grain sand,
in uranium-bullets headed for the Gulf?
Sandstone block on sandstone block,
is it prisons of the mind we build?
Castlemaine gaol?
No escape, there is no escape
"Boom boom cuz,
2 cheers for the atom age,
Allbright all bright."

Madeleine Allbright said, she said,
I truly thought she'd answer differently,
but like Gareth Evans' pollen, she said,
"Really necessary to drop" it was, sad,
she looked sad, and Condoleeza Rice,
the bullets uranium-tipped, sad, she looked,
"It is they" she said, "who have weapons
of mass-destruction, we can neither confirm nor deny".
The war-fleet flat out clustering like cockroaches
congregating in the Gulf, she looked sad -
Carlyle Group, weapons manufacturers' shares,
Condoleeza has, same as Colin Powell, lots of shares -
and George and Dick and Donald, the oil boys,
Halliburton Oil, oh, and Lockheed Weapons' n planes
AND the contract for Afghanistan,
outfitting/feeding the Gulf troops, too,
AND building Guantanamo Bay, no escape,
there is no escape, but the Oil Boys,
Dick Cheney's lot, sad, they looked, oh and angry too,
at terrorists you know, was it the poison gas,
was it the depleted uranium?
Civilians anyway, mothers and kids,
the bones curved soft, Euphrates marshlands,
sand-settled, earth-home safe, new-moon cradled.
We have to be realistic, they said.

Rice / or How the UN voted to go in to Iraq (2002)

It's in the air, rice-rain, like tiny bullets
pattering on weddings, in laughter-gales,
smiling in white tulle, floating in summer air,
soft shreds of winnowed rice, straw shards,
honey-gold blizzard, lifting, spinning,
rice, the seeds of life, rice, Condoleezza,
Condoleezza... Rice, what's in a name?

Rice, the songs of women,
in rhythm pounding, separating
good seed from the trash,
a little waste, Condoleezza,
'collateral damage' that how you'd put it?
Rice... Condoleezza, rice.

The farmers in muddy water, stooping,
planting green sprouts, lines and rows,
the boy in the straw hat treading the wheel,
the water not to be depleted, depleted?
The Euphrates Delta, depleted uranium bullets,
you can dig 'em up all over the place,
numerous as grains of rice, well, not really,
it's just that they act slowly, do they glow in your bones,
'click go the geiger-counters, click, click, click',
oh, those rice-spatter bullets', Condoleezza,
depleting is it those Bhagdad boys, girls, too,
'Condoleezza, Condoleezza, Condoleezza,
they have made you', are you just a cold and lonely...
Weapons of mass destruction are they, no, not really,
because, you see, they're made in the land of the free,
AND the UN voted YES, remembering Yemen, 1991,
Yemen's NO to the Gulf War vote, US envoy said,
to the Yemenis he said, 'this will be the most expensive vote
you will ever cast', its entire 70m aid cut immediately,
here's the current list, \$380m to Colombia, Mexico 28m,
Guinea next year gets 20m, Cameroon 2.5m PLUS free,
surplus US weapons to on-sell to neighbours, is that OK?
Bulgaria 13.5m to buy US weapons systems AND 69m aid for SEED,
acronym for 'Support for European Economic Democracy, SEED!
Seed for the vote-buying. Seed for the war? Condoleezza ...

Rice roots in water, rooting out terrorists, farmers
stooping, water-wrinkled skin, mud-smearred hands -
is it blood on the hands, Condoleezza?
The river in flames, is that next on the agenda?
Cradle of life, Euphrates and the green sprouts,
can they surface to the sun? Rice-shards, lifting, spinning,
honey-gold blizzard, the good seed, rice, Condoleezza.
Rice condol, condole, Condole. All in the muddy water.

Found Objects

Christmas morning among rosebuds,
the cicada wing glinting, it's poised now,
settled with roses on my window-sill,
helicopter-blades riding over the Tigris,
grim cicadas spinning above Baghdad,
one only cicada-wing! Just one of
those found objects you accumulate

Found-object dagger, scary it is,
leaning by the rose-pot,
balanced upright, quite gruesome actually,
the dagger, metal-studded sheath stitched
in thick and wrinkled leather,
shaped to the blade,
scimitar blade rusted blood-red,
handle wire-wrapped to the blade,
wax-string twined, frayed and tattered,
clumsy the carving, primitive human torso
that is the haft, narrow the head, lips cruel,
eyes prominent, man-handle!
Is it human, the rough-hewn figure?
And blood, is it blood like jewels beading the blade?
Where's it been, this dagger?
Could be in some vine-choked valley
tight-clasping that demon haft,
sparks showering from whetstone,
high-raising the blade, blood-letting
to purpose beyond comprehension
under savagery of yellow moon?
Where's it been, this dagger?
Home-made it is of a certainty,
probably just some kid's scouting knife,
a goblin-eyed boy honing the knife-edge,
stick-whittling, tent-peg shaping innocent tool -
but the devil is in the detail.
For all its dire/innocent possibility,
I keep it - human almost, that dagger,
balanced by the rose-bowl of this sweet world -
across the carven shoulder a leather bandolier,
studded, holding knife safe within sheath.

So - from this morning's summer path,
from rose-bowl to dagger - the tracery of light,
cicada-wing, transferred for the goblin child.
Springing from the bandolier - one only,
lacy network wing - could be in some
vine-clad valley, helicopters over the Tigris,
bombs showering from Lockheeds,
blood-letting to purpose beyond comprehension
under oil-yellow, savage moon,

one only cicada-wing, dagger-shoulder balanced,
living on knife-edge, transparency of rainbow-gleam

Nice try - with the devil in the detail.

28.12.2002

The Pen is Mightier?

Fallen colossus, sand-choked Ozymandias,
every dog will have its day, the Brits,
let's say, ruled for 200 yrs give or take,
with atlas coloured red from pole to pole,
the sword was mightier than the pen,
but their technology was outdated,
the war drained the coffers.

The empire of the yanks -
with loan profits after that same war -
bankroller for the war-torn and the poor,
has lasted only 50 yrs, maybe nearer to 80,
but decline runs faster in these modern times,
the signs of decay - arrogance, gross display,
overreaching, obsession with perfection, minutiae.

And I quote:

When NASA began the launch of astronauts into space,
they found out that the pens wouldn't work at zero gravity,
the ink wouldn't flow down to the writing surface.

To solve this problem, they hired Andersen Consulting,
the consultant being the high priest,
the court magician of contemporary culture.

One decade and 12 million dollars later,
they developed a pen that worked at zero gravity,
upside down AND under water,
on practically any surface, including crystal,
AND in a temperature range from below freezing
to over 300 degrees Celsius. Aha! The pen IS mightier,
oh fallen colossus, hey sand-choked Ozymandias.
Checkmate sword! The Russians used a pencil...

9.1.2003

Blue Helmet

Day blue cap, peak at the back,
on sidelines shouting "Strike!"
my schooldays kids,
"Goin' in... we're goin' in..."
skidding in to base,
and the sky's a blue helmet.
My schooldays kids, wish you
were here, blue helmet dreaming

Blue sky cloak, roses and tulle floating,
Children of Mary sing "Mother of Mercy",
the click-click of rosaries, my schooldays girls,
why do coffins fill my dreams?
Procession-shuffle off to Bethlehem,
by way of Baghdad,
and the sky's a blue cloak

Blue helmet sky-shelter,
peace-keeper, protector sky,
fragile as life-egg,
slash of talons, the rip and crack of sky-shell,
eagle revenge, eagle, wounded in its towers,
surgical, precise, tearing up precedent,
convention of blue-helmet,
fifty years of bridge-building

But who'd carry the can for the blue helmet,
passive in Rwanda, helpless in Bosnia,
sidelined completely in Baghdad's oil-cloud skies?
Battered, dented double-dealing,
the imperfect peace-keeper,
who'd carry the can for the blue helmet -
not goin' in, they're not goin' in -
our sweet blue globe, eagle slashed.
Peace-keeper, protector sky!
My schooldays kids, wish you were here.
Pax Americana, why do coffins fill my dreams?

8.4.2003

Black Coat Judgement

The black coat past, it's coming back,
the past is the black coat I can't escape,
the susso kids it was, they wore the black coat,
"Susso kids, half a quid, Susso kids, half a quid..."
tottering, enveloped in big, black coats,
1929 to 1935, the black coats on the susso kids,
army greatcoats cut down for the susso kids,
the coats of war dyed black, heavy-felted,
great, black coats, stiff and scratchy on
skinny legs, feet without socks,
shivering in canvas shoes

"Susso kids, half a quid, Susso kids, half a quid..."
in their black coats, scorned, black coat judgement,
the fruits of war, they dog my steps, those black coats,
the black coat wool, it clogs the throat,
fists clench lost in drooping sleeves,
fingers clutch the thick fibres, piled,
entangled in those black-shred plumes of war,
oil wells like black wool burning, I wear the black coat,
this shroud for the soul, black coat,
from Twin Towers smoking to Baghdad burning,
the black coat that stifles reason, black coat,
blanketing the sky of us, black coats
for the next generation of the Susso Kids,
black coat judgement.

8.4.2003

I Want to be Gertrude Bell / Beyond Borders

In lantern-flicker frowning,
a cartographer studies the blank map,
with slide-rule, compass, he draws the first line.
Surveyors, squinting in sun-dazzle,
under pith-helmets, assessing the gradient,
theodolite, telescope, consulting blue-prints,
overseeing fencing-wire, boundary-posts.
Is the river a boundary or the bio-region's Centre?
Giver of life to valley and flood-plain, this I ask you.
"I should like to have a hand in the peace-settlement",
said Gertrude Bell, finger-jabbing Euphrates delta,
tracing all along the snowy Zagros Mountains,
tearing apart the Kurdish lands, pasting them together
with the Sunnis, the Turkomans, the Christians,
thus ensuring perpetual ungovernability.
I am the cartographer.
I am the surveyor.
I am Gertrude Bell. My river is a boundary,
border of beyond, forbidden territory, shadow lands?
Gertrude Bell, mentor to Lawrence of Arabia,
Gertrude, like Lawrence, adored the Arabs,
Gertrude Bell of British Intelligence fame,
spy if you like, dismembering Mesopotamia, cleanly.

Surveyors, cartographers,
secret agents re-drawing boundaries,
re-defining heartland, identity -
the contemporary art of de-construction -
'And what emotions exactly were you feeling
when the borders collapsed?'
'You need to speak closer to the microphone...'
So where's the STORY in all the fragments?
In shards of lives, are you,
am I Sudan/Yugoslavia/Timor/Belfast?

Ungainly lines on re-drawn maps crawling
like worms, my post war treaties
jig-sawing this globe of me -
I want to be Mostar Bridge,
broken and restored,
splash-down, laughter!
Diving once more from Mostar Bridge!

But still here, at my border, I sit sinister -
Gertrude Bell establishing my boundaries,
Sudan/Yugoslavia/Timor/Belfast/Chechnya?
My bulldozers lurch through olive groves,
slice through villages, houses flattened
by my wreckers' ball, salt-poisoning

river-land and islands, concrete wall rising,
and the valley drowning, I, Gertrude Bell,
tinkering with, adjusting borders - "We will decide
who comes into this country, and on what terms",
excising from unauthorised entry, Ashmore Reef,
Christmas Island - Gertrude Bell, taking a stand
against the terror of no boundaries,
sifting through the rubble of ruined cities,
the chaos at the frontiers, and I am beseeching
Gertrude Bell for the map across Mostar Bridge

I intend to be sometimes ruthless,
smash down walls of me, flash-dazzle
forensic across my very shadow-lands,
cockroach-scuttle under pebbles, close down
my far-flung borders, contract my territories
to tiny, chambered, snail-shell spirals,
triple-padlocked, name you Invader! Terrorist! Other!
Strip-search the you of you in hood and handcuffs!
I yearn to be a Gated City! Raise high my boundaries!
Make secure my borders! But the paradox -
Sans Frontiers - I want to be, Mostar Bridge!
"I want to be part of the peace-settlement",
said Gertrude Bell.

4.9.2004

**So Sorry Eye /
Caty Kyne 18.11.05**

**So sorry eye . . .
Sorry to see you going , , , or
(not to see – not)
"I" lose "eye" . . .
"Eye" loses "I" , , ,
No "I" replacement?
No "eye/I?" – No!
New "I"/"Eye."**

**Valerian /
25.11.2005**

Those flower-heads,
strawberry squash of crowding florets,
strawberry-cone florets piled and packed
in great fat candy-cones, a fuzz of furry
stamens, a froth of crimson on pink,
Valerian, vale-rian, beloved of insomniacs,
sleep easy sleepless sisters with Valerian!
Bees up to their knees in Valerian,
Strawberry jam valerian, drowsing, murmuring
"the angel's in the detail", whispering, like lovers,
the old name, the village name, "Kiss-me-Quick!"
Rioting in Wales, Ireland, Salisbury and Devon!
"Kiss-me-Quick" 100 feet up, Cathedral Kiss-me-Quick!
On bell-tower ruins, a-leaping from mouldering
mortar at Glastonbury and Tara, Kiss-me-Quick
defacing merrily turrets and arches.
So, when my eyes no longer see
those pink hillock Kiss-me Quicks
sprouting scarlet stubble,
as the devil steals the detail of Valerian,
Vale-rian, Vale valerian,
may Kiss-me-Quick's strawberry-fat candy-cones
still flash upon my inward eye.

Finished 9.1.2006

It is the Eyes that have it...

It is the eyes that have it,
hooded, hungry watchful,
eyes swivelling within,
the eyes observe the roiling
gut-wrench, only observe,
the eyes themselves
are still, the sea, the eye,
see with eye, inner eye see sea

The first ferment,
bleeding tree, seeping,
torn in the very core,
tears/tears brewed like wine
and new bread, cauldron
steaming, cooking up
a life beyond seeing.

4.12.2005

The Underground / Reconciliation Poetry, 2006

Twelve-fifteen, the last
train leaves the city loop,
empty tunnels yawn and stretch,
the midnight to dawn parade
re-assembles on platform nine.
The memory train - spirit train -
just a few of them pass by in daylight,
challenging your tunnel vision.
Like the seagulls that know
how to catch the underground,
the koalas in steel helmets -
whole carriages of them,
if you know how to look -
toddlers travelling alone, unsupervised,
following the cattle carts, calling
"father, father, dad, my father.."
you'll not hear them in the day,
though their little mouths are clearly open.

But here come the Night Riders,
at Flinders Street!
Sugar Gliders whispering, chittering, train-surfing,
their giant red gums crashing down -
it's 1835, Elizabeth/Collins Streets corner,
the stump-hole lake, red gum lake -
holding on for dear life with their little pink hands,
sugar gliders drowning in the red gum lake.
Melbourne Central, and all the city
seagulls flit out through the turnstiles.
They take the first train for the coast,
following the old South Melbourne track
through the tea trees to wetlands,
mingling with magpie geese, black swans,
eels, spoon bills, night herons, wheeling
over the ghost of Flagstaff Hill, calling, cheeping,
honking, whooping to koalas in steel helmets
and work shirts, whole carriages of them,
out of work koalas, displaced Blinky Bills,
mistaking the Docklands stadium
for a grazing-ground of manna gums.

Ah, the memory train, spirit train, goods
trains of bones at Spencer Street siding -
tarpaulin-wrapped, giant wombats,
kangaroos, five metres tall!
15,000 years those bones lay,
soft in river soil, till disinterred
by drills and jackhammers

Trains o' bones
just lookin' fo' home,
just lookin' for home.

Ah the memory train, spirit train,
when will we live, comfortably, with history?
Toddlers travelling, alone and
unsupervised, following the cattle carts,
you'll not hear them in the day,
though their little mouths are clearly open,
calling "father, father, dad, my father..."
The cattle carts of chained men,
shackled at the neck in the black train,
dingo train roaring unstoppable,
steaming away from Camp Fires,
Wetlands, Magpie Geese, Night Herons,
Eels, Black Swans, Koalas, Sugar Gliders,
and toddlers travelling alone and unsupervised,
calling "father, father, dad, my father..."
Might be he'll come to rest some day,
that dingo train, when hands clasp in a treaty,
and underground rises up to meet the light.

30.4.2006