

Fit

of

Passion



Liz Hall-Downs

Kim Downs

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Fit of Passion

Liz Hall-Downs has been appearing at poetry readings and performances since the early 1980's. She has been published in Australian and American literary magazines, but performance has been her main method of transmission.

About the poems: "This collection includes what I call the 'die-hards' – the poems that always work in performance no matter how noisy the venue or how bored or hostile the audience. These poems require a great deal of energy for performance and often deal with controversial themes and emotions. For balance, I've included a few of my own special favourites – poems geared not so much towards performance as to an understanding and expansion of the self."

Kim Downs' first solo performance took place in 1965. Twelve years old, playing trombone and accompanied by a pianist his knees literally knocked in terror. Luckily, his lips didn't fail him. It has never been that bad again. Transmission modes include: brass, guitar, voice, print, faking it.

About the poems: "These are mainly vignettes. Some factual some fictional, some a little of both. My poetry heroes include Dr. Seuss, Whitman, Joni Mitchell, Coleridge, Homer; I like it all. Words are magic. Embellished with sound, rhythm, meter, emotion they can weave powerful spells. I grew up in America. Some of my work reflects this. Most often I attempt to write serious pieces but I usually fail. My work is infested with whimsy. I have not found a cure as yet."

Bounding Up Boy

Sandstorm (Nevada, 1958)

I skipped joyously from my kindergarten class,
happy to be freed an hour early by concerned teachers.
A charcoal desert storm front loomed ominous on the horizon.
Packs of tumbleweeds fled before its probing tongue.

I was confident I could negotiate
the familiar finger of arid Nevada desert
separating me from home and sanctuary one mile away.

Half-way across it still seemed like a game;
cradling schoolbooks under jacket
(zipped tight against bulldog gusts
head-butting my five year-old frame).

Then, the shadow of the beast blotted out the sun,
stinging breath licking hungrily at my tender skin;

I am reduced to a slow, tentative, shuffle,
my child hand a paltry shield for weeping eyes.

Trail becoming obscured,
I taste the bitter bile of fear rising in my throat.

I consider dropping into foetal position,
my world become a screeching, biting, void.
I catch the slightest suggestion of my name in the mad ether
and wonder if I have imagined it.

I hear it again

– stronger –

and dimly detect my mother's overcoated form,
floating, flowing celestial in this vision tempest

– calling my name –

come to rescue me (exactly like a guardian angel!)

not unlike the anima within,
maternal protective love personified,
goddess in full glory.

I fall to my knees and do worship.

Childhood Wars

Vivid boyhood memories crowd against the door,
of playing at war,
shooting and killing
kicking and punching
invisible opponents
in exhausting John Wayne duke-ups
that left me strangely elated;
hard-fought victory unsullied
by adult moralizing.

Die Apache Scum!
For 'Apache'
insert 'German', 'Jap', 'Jew',
any variety of 'enemy' child ears had stumbled upon
or dimly discerned justified to wear the black hat.
Mine was forever white – of course –
for these were the wars of childhood.

Or were they?
As adult I have pondered long
the obsessive nature of these countless frays
I was compelled to play out;
the fury and ardor with which I participated.
Surely, I have served a season
as warrior
in former incarnation;
these frenetic childhood compulsions
but residual emotions
leaking through the sensitive Piscean crust
in which I dwell
this turn of the wheel.

Bounding Up Boy

Whence comes this ideal
of children as innocent and free of malice?
If two-year olds were six-foot-six,
muscled as weight-lifters,
capable of acting on their impulses,
what mother would be safe from their wrath?

Thankfully, this life,
I be peaceful adult ;
mercifully spared the violence which radicalizes
and conjures up those smouldering demon memories
slumbering lightly below patina of ego
and social protocol.

We have all been mercenaries, harlots, plunderers,
as our dreams suggest.
Think not that only pure hearts beat
behind the priest's collar,
the surgeon's mask,
the virgin's high-buttoned blouse.

The creator of puppies put snakes in the grass
and humans will play the helpless mouse
as readily as the cruel cat
no matter their politics, gender, genes.
Such is the very stuff of life,
upon this stage of dreams.

When I Called You Daddy

When I called you Daddy,
I lengthened my stride to walk your prints
 in foot
a wide-eyed acolyte,
 poor copy of your towering greatness;
 your face staring out at me,
 from the mirror,
 blurred and grinning over my own,
 like a portrait projected onto smoke.
My hands became yours as you taught me your skills
 how to wield the hammer,
 change the points,
 repair the toaster,
 plaster a ceiling,
 throw a football,
 groom a hedge
 set the broken wing of a bird.

When I called you Daddy,
I welcomed your imprint upon the wet clay
 of my being,
 loved and feared you,
 suffered the strap and welcomed the stroke
 with equal fervour;
 marvelled at the imperfect facsimile of you
 I saw myself becoming,
 baked in the kiln of family,
 glazed with the patina of paternal love,
 cooled on the rack of experience.

When I called you Daddy,
I discerned my own image only vaguely,
 peering through the small replica
 you fashioned and nurtured so carefully.

When I came to call you Dad,
I took chisel in hand,
 chipped the hardened glaze,

Bounding Up Boy

scratched the smooth surface,
gouged relief and furrow into my essence,
 searching for the ore-bearing seam,
 that must surely run through this troubled figurine;
perhaps a soft inner-centre,
 that might have escaped the heat of the oven;
 a cream-filled core of me-ness
 to distinguish
 the me from the you.

Eventually I found it.
Found it and mined it like a drunken 49er,
 crazed and obsessed with the quest,
 picking and shovelling the rocky earth
 sifting for small golden grains of individuality.

I mined this ore and mined this ore
 until I was a honey-comb man,
 riddled with tunnels;
 your cracked visage still shining through me,
 your wrinkled hands shimmering inside my own,
 your hopes and dreams
 ticking inside my temples
 like an ancient alarm clock;
 alarm set,
 mainspring intact,
 gears stripped.

Now I polish the marred surface,
 oil the rusty cogs,
 of this shuddering robotic me,
 this amalgam of components,
 inherited,
 borrowed,
 imprinted,
 created,
 discovered,
 discerned.

I will forever bear your imprint.
These hands practice your wisdom.

You wander through my psyche like a friendly minotaur,

haunting the labyrinth,
staring ghostly from my eyes,
whispering your encouragement in strife-torn moments,
shouting your secrets from the darkened hallways.

I am you and not you.

I am me and not me.

I am the us that is I.

I am son.

I am friend.

I am grateful.

Growing Up Girl

lessons my father taught me

my old man always said
"if you can pour a good beer
and make a decent cup of tea
you'll be okay"

my mother taught me
how to cook, dust, clean, wash, iron
and anything else to do with
serving men. she said
it's the way to catch one.

the man she caught gave her
twenty bucks a week, enough,
he said, to feed and clothe
five children (and i know now
it's not enough, even allowing
for inflation)

but he could pick a horse
(twice a year)
and he could pour a beer
(at the expense of his career)
and he knew how to fight
for his life when in a corner
and he knew how to win the hearts
of women ... and his daughter.

now
i pour beers that look like icecreams
and my tea is weak as bar's piss.

my mother's hands

i toddled through department stores,
holding her safe hand with its familiar
callouses till some silver shining
thing distracted, stopped me dead
to tilt my head at costly glitter.
reaching up, the hand i grasped

was someone else's mother's,
her face a stranger's. I ran down
aisles, calling 'Mamma! Mamma!'
in childish terror; and oh, such tears,
such relief, when at last i found her,
smiling at the lipstick counter.

she says my hands are long now
and slender, like her mother's.
grandma healed with hers but i know
only black/white sepia on the mahogany
mantelpiece, the head shrouded
like a nun's, as pure and self

sacrificing as that martyrdom
running deep through our family's
matriarchy. now my hands split
skin and muscle, massage her years
of anxiety, crackling arthritis,
contracted tendons, joints tight as

the pursed lips of disapproval at that
Lost Reputation of my twenties. i turn
her as she turned me, baby, use
fragrant oils, no Johnson's powder,
feel the remaining years slip under
fingers, find pressure points

and press the point of my maturity
into her aging spine, still striving
to be upright in body, mind,
unyielding to time's ravages.
the invisible threads we women
spin to our daughters connect

in our eyes, and i see myself
at seventy, and all the women who came
before me – maidens, mothers, crones,
goddesses – pulsing through our corded
lives. my hands tremble; her face is mine.
i see my unborn children in her eye's shine.

seeding

yates and hortico
seed packets lay dusty
in the garage
where brown mice lived,
where i sat
on quiet afternoons
pretending it was paradise
(miles from icy stares
and flat five-fingered bruises).

father brought
yates and hortico home
in a grey tweed pocket
on the train.

planting, crouched with knees bent
(not remembering "girls keep legs together")
dropping sprouted broad beans
three inches apart,
covering with dirt,
awaiting green shoots.

sunday mornings
for the roast
picking string beans,
potatoes dirt-deep and egg-shaped,
checking tomatoes turned red
on kitchen windowsill.

at thirteen, father's casket lowered
the garden grassed over –
on yates and hortico packets
even the carrots yellowed.

penis envy, sibling style

my four brothers are the subject of a family mythology
the eldest is the smallest
– they move up in gradations.
i'm talking about penis size
that locker-room lie.
the youngest wins by inches
though i felt no surprise at childhood bathtimes:
we were different, but equal
till we ventured into life.
now he says he's waiting for a family christmas
where he can tackle
– full-frontal –
this story that has made him a legend in our family.

see, he's the proud possessor of a twelve-inch snake
a tiger, or a brown, perhaps
but, more likely, the benign carpet variety
pink and friendly.
he says he'd like to 'pull it out
and whack it on their table'
to shock them from their myth-making, their
talk of his anatomy.

I laugh with him
– i love the way he takes it in his stride.
and he smiles at my suggestion that the lifestyle
of our eldest
– the money prestige
video screens
expensive wines
and mistresses

must really be expressing what
our family therapist said:
compensations of the first in line
for such a tiny dick size!

me, i've never wanted one
– old freud was wrong –
those dangling, strange appendages
did not a jealous sister make
and i have never found a use
for slide rules in the bedroom ...
it's the soft look in my lover's eyes
that gives our sex sustenance.
I feed on his calm humility,
the power his love nurtures in me,
the essential physicality,
raw and primal,
signifying everything.

Frustrated Men

What do You Do?

Whenever women ask me: "What do you do?"

I feel like I've been tossed a hand-grenade

– with the pin pulled –

and I have to toss it back,

before it explodes in my face,

peels back the skin from my life,

exposing nerve and ripping vein

until my very essence spurts and flows across the floor,

for all to examine, tread in – later –

wipe from their shoes

– or maybe – stir about a little

with the stick of their curiosity.

"What do you do?"

Such a loaded question from a woman.

Oh!

You mean, what is my status and probable income?

so you can determine what sub-culture I run with,

my likely views on abortion,

my sexual proclivities,

am I worth making?

or can I be dismissed as: "not a very good catch".

"What do you do?"

Well, I sleep, I eat, I consume, I excrete,

often, I read, I write, I laugh, I cry,

I'm prone to fart under the bedcovers.

If not watched carefully,

I might belch, scratch my balls, stare at your boobs,

and proposition you later in the parking lot!

This is how I feel whenever women ask me:

"What do you do?"

To be perfectly honest,

this is how I feel whenever anyone asks me:

"What do you do?"

So don't bloody ask me what I do!

(and I won't ask you.)

Patrick

Patrick married his childhood sweetheart,
became an insurance underwriter,
fathered four children by thirty,
bought a house in the leafy suburbs,
wrote his haiku in the attic,
drank his liver into mush,
longed for freedom, cried at night,
practiced fidelity towards his wife.

Patrick longs to go to Japan,
become a scholar and a poet.
He is mystic. He is shaman.
He's an insurance underwriter.
He is trapped in a web of commitments:
he is father, lover, provider.
He took up bamboo flute at thirty-eight,
had a quadruple bypass at forty.

Patrick is sinking his early retirement pay
into a teahouse/bookstore/forum for poets.
That quadruple bypass frightened
this enlightened insurance underwriter.
Now, haiku features high in priority;
as do sunsets, passion, time at home.
He is blessed with a wife that loves him
and has a journey all her own.

Frustrated Men

Patrick looks me in the eye and says:
"A lot of men would envy you."
"For what?" I stammer.
"Your freedom ..." he replies, "... and her."
"You're crazy! You've got everything!"
I tell him, and he smiles
(Trying desperately to believe it.
For his sake, so do I).

Patrick fingers his fading vision
like a dusty photograph;
plays his flute and writes his haiku,
dreams of oriental baths,
envies penniless men who drink and wander,
envies me my poet wife.
As bewildered as the rest of us
who are drawn to this poet's life.

Akahihiro the Hero

(The 'Cannonball Run' of 1994)

Akahihiro showered and shaved
in his marble bathroom
with the golden taps.
Sumiko brought him green tea
in a porcelain cup.
He thought of caps.
He thought of drilling and filling the teeth
of sake-soaked widows
and Tokyo brats.

Meet Japanese Caspar Milquetoast.
Meet Samurai in dentist's clothes.
Meet frustrated breadwinner with two sons;
controlled fury in a compact shell.
Sumiko kissed him goodbye at the threshold
of their plush home in the suburbs;
quietly closed the door
against the thunderous roar
of the metal beast.

Akahihiro twisted the key
of the turbo-charged F-40 Ferrari
and three-quarter million dollars
of red Italian menace
hit the streets.
Crawling through Tokyo smog at 40 km an hour,
Akahihiro dreamed of desert roads
and wide open spaces;
of pedal-to-metal
and guts on the line,
and battling it out
with Porsches.

The things that money cannot buy
are said to be worth the most.

But to a Tokyo dentist
– with a hero-complex
and champagne tastes –
an idle boast
of: who's the cleverest,
who's the fastest,
who's the bravest
boy on the block?
could be met with a credit card,
clout,
and a glare;
a stiff cock and a double dare.

Akahiho shipped his red Ferarri
all the way to Australia.
Sumiko stayed at home with their sons:
watching the TV, watching the phone.
Our bespectacled Samurai screamed in glee
to see the speedometer climb past speeds
he'd only dared in dreams.

Did he think of amalgam and blackened teeth
as he flew past the Porsche
at two hundred and twenty?
Did a thousand dusty Tokyo sunrises
dull his fading vision?
Did twenty more years
of staring into open mouths
guide his hand upon the wheel?

Sliding on gravel
– out of control –
slaying two race officials,
his partner and himself,
did Sumiko flash before his eyes
as the metal closed around him?

Akahiho did not die a hero
like the warrior in his dreams.
It was *not* an honourable death
for a man
with sand in his eyes
and milk in his veins.
It was cheap and messy.
Tacky and dumb.
A chimp-in-a-box on the Cannonball Run.
Four bodies mangled in the desert heat.
Four widows grieving.
Officials meet
for damage-control and the race goes on.
“Grab us a tinny, mate, and let’s carry on.
These yuppie gladiators bleed real nice.
It matches their paintjob on the evening news.”

Sumiko sits quiet
and cries in her rice.
She wishes Akahiho had taken up booze.

Building Site

I work with men on a building site
above a lake so blue.
Older men, veterans of wars,
with missing fingers and gnarled thumbs.
This acceptance of life,
how late it comes. How soon it passes.
It gives me fright.
I work with men on a building site.

Their lusty tales fill my head
of Japanese baths, Korean campaigns.
Their musty pasts evoke my present.
They joke with me, are kind and pleasant.
Their cracked hands know the nail and splinter.
We work till dark in the waning winter,
lay down our tools at approach of night.
I work with men on a building site.

I'm forty-one, but child to them.
They are the joist and two-by-four.
If this be wisdom,
give me more and more.
Give me beam and truss, solid and true.
Give me nail and stud to frame a life.
Give me level and plum to gauge my sight.
I work with men on a building site
above a lake so blue.

Tragedies that scar the heart:
the wife that died, the house that burned,
the friend that ran, the child that fell.
These stories that they blithely tell
ring in my ears in morning's frost.
The money they've made, the future they've lost,
hang in the air like a bird in flight.
I work with men on a building site.

Their wives are wise, strong and old.
Their lives are working, brave and bold.
Their bodies in pain, they are weak of eye.
They walk the beams so free and high.
They walk the beams like younger men.
They've walked those beams since God knows when.
Since God knows when, they know no fright.
I work with men on a building site.

It's just a holiday job for me.
Next month I walk away. I'm free.
They labour on past retirement years.
They labour on and on. I fear
I'll never know a peace so frail.
I gain no peace from hammer and nail.
I know no peace in the dark of night.
I work with men on a building site
above a lake so blue.

White Boy's Lament

I'm an anglo-saxon heterosexual able-bodied male.
I'm supposed to be successful. I've got no excuse to fail.
I don't belong to no minority. I'm expected to prevail.
I'm an anglo-saxon heterosexual able-bodied male.

Hey! I survived the ignominy of the birth canal.
I threw away my dummy at two.
When strapped and tortured in the orthodontist's chair at twelve:
I revealed no state secrets.
At fourteen, I swam the raging rivers of algebra and geometry
in full armour (and never sank).
I have tongue-kissed teenaged girls with impunity.
Crossed the rugged mountain range of puberty.
Battled with the dragon of lust ... and lost.
Only to find myself wedged upon the ramparts
beside all the other men.
And when they ask me who I am or where it is I've been,
I tell them:

I'm an anglo-saxon heterosexual able-bodied male.
I'm supposed to be successful. I've got no excuse to fail.
I don't belong to no minority. I'm expected to prevail.
I'm an anglo-saxon heterosexual able-bodied male.

After all, I have grappled in hand-to-hand combat
with condescending social security clerks.
I've gone tequila slammers one-for-one with the toughest
bull-dykes in the pub.
I've seen the sun rise on my own buck's night
and driven home in the sleet.
I've leapt the dark chasm of marriage
and landed safely on my feet.
I've tunnelled under the walls of breadwinner prison
to come up blinking in the light of freedom.
I've even embraced celibacy and lived without a woman
for years and been quite bloody happy about it!
Well ... sorta.
All this! Despite the disadvantage of being...

an anglo-saxon heterosexual able-bodied male.
I'm supposed to be successful. I've got no excuse to fail.
I don't belong to no minority. I'm expected to prevail.
I'm an anglo-saxon heterosexual able-bodied male.

I've done everything that society expects a grown man to do.
(Except maybe hold down a steady job and raise a kid or two.)
I have worked for society's enhancement at every single turn.
(Except when I cheated on my taxes that time and grew that
patch of grass.)
So where's my badge of respect?
(I know I had it on me this morning.)
Where's my gold watch? My pat on the back?
My "Good job, well-done, son."?
I guess I don't really expect it when all is said and done.
No-one hands out big gold stars for blokes like me
who've fought and won.
And you know why?
Because ...

I'm an anglo-saxon heterosexual able-bodied male.
I'm supposed to be successful. I've got no excuse to fail.
I don't belong to no minority. I'm expected to prevail.
I'm an anglo-saxon heterosexual able-bodied male.
I'm an anglo-saxon heterosexual able-bodied male.
I'm an anglo-saxon wash 'em and wax 'em,
work 'em and tax 'em, love 'em and leave 'em
lamb to the slaughter,
cannon-fodder,
able-bodied male.

Angry in the 80's

mad as a ...

snake ! in the grass.
they hide, waiting to strike.
the bite of bitter fangs, waiting
to strike, that old
bush fear, the temptation
the sometime elation ...
strange things that rear up
frighteningly, to test
your bravery.

under the veil of trees, i live
with this paranoia, this dis-ease
and your eyes, cold as winter
trap my mind, numb with fear.

you're brave with the spade
where reptiles sleep; i keep
myself sad with guilt.
your mourning tears, a slithering slyness,
you coiling about me, constriction
could bind me ...

but you are smooth, warm and shiny
sunning yourself in these ruins of my psyche
this pain must pass – i want you
guileless, venomless, you snake
in my grass.

debeaked and dangerous

I. the immortals

you're walking like a spaceman
in a dreamy weightlessness
hardly even feel the barbs
the whizzing whining of the flick-knife
night / over your head / behind
your back / right before your face.

it's all too much / and you've hardly grown up yet.
you're a punk, drink in the pain of ages
but it's not just a stage you're going through;
it's your fight against government and ghetto
(this isn't queensland or soweto –
this is melbourne, 1987 / and at least
when you're drunk, it's heaven ...)

so you shave your head and roll your own.
argue for anger's validity in art,
hit up, stick it up the masses,
go for the shock, the throat cut.
you want equality, but often your bigotry
extends to any with straight tastes and haircuts.
your walls crumble, spirit is smashed
and broken-backed you scavenge slabs
of real life, baby, for rent cheques.

so you sit back, watch your life play out
but it's less real than video.
your friends are hungry much of the time
and know all the best soup kitchens.
you watch hope die in some toilet.
you smoke and sniff behind the stage
till you think you can feel life in your veins

and dance, dance the night away.
then you wake up and it's drab morning.
yawning off a deathless sleep you sniff
the hollow tears of hangover in the faces
of faceless lovers. it's beer for breakfast
and dope at first light
running like a wild child
through the glaring days
and the endless nights
shadowdancing with the world's bleak reflection
trying to find / your own.

II. after words

for two months you throw the coins:
mistrust, rejection, stagnation, standstill,
the lonely piper in fields of death
at world's end.
fragile and easily manipulated
you sought strength in mountains and singing things
but sadness left you easily ridden wild
by black-eyed liars who smiled
(but would beat their wives under pressure).

friends call the aftermath paranoia
treat you strangely, call you crazy,
criticise too much (admit a bastard
is one, you're a man-hating bitch)
and go on writing poems about their death-wish
hoping to live on someday in someone's musty bookshelf.
you flounder for reality in their fields of fantasy.

so you turn to music, rediscover women
but there's always some boy willing
and you run and hide from his eyes, however kind.

(when pricks are something a masochist
sticks herself with
and cynicism faster than cancer, your soul
grows barren. every poem's long gestation
ends in stillbirth.)
you read sylvia plath and 'women and madness',
buy into any kind of booze or other excess
embrace sleep too willingly,
wanting not to wake ...

life is outside this darkness,
this eggshell you can't peck through.

the standard seduction technique

he's mr respectable and julio iglesias
rolled into one, this wouldn't-be-this-way-
if-only-i'd-met you-ten-years-earlier
con-artist of the highest order;
so clingy, so super-smooth peanut butter tacky
you need a stiff drink to wash him down;
all these god-how-beautiful your-eyes-are's
and smooth talkin' good lookin'
baby-i-can-make-you lines
like
'i insist'.

well
i'm a cynic met too many
suave boys good boys hey wanna fuck boys
but let them take you home and you're
an automatic toy, and they're too sly, too shy
want to father babies with you
big talk supermen super-doooper intellect
... till they get you into bed

then it's one notch two notch
see who's got the top notch
conquer stomp her quick this
smart-assed Bitch.

but for now, he's humouring me
and i laugh, say i'll be his friend
analyse his game plan
is he on the wing or in the centre?

it's all so futile, wish
someone would tell him
he's totally attractive.

i could even envisage us entwined
on some sunny afternoon ...

but he's trying so goddamn hard
it's ping-pong in the rain
thinks i can't see that old long shut-down pain
the bankruptcy, the private pact
to never try to love again.

punk in lingerie department

slinking with shaved head
through pastel lace
and flimsy cotton

laughing in the fitting room
at powdered women
who call me 'madam'

while they look me up and down
like some butcher's prime cut.
i expect they think i'll shoplift

from their rows of suspended
corsetry. but even punks grow tits
and need bras and panties

no matter how anti
establishment they may be.
besides, my weird haircut

will probably give them
something to talk about
tonight over tea ...

the raped woman

"Sex will grow horns and warts.

The white sheets of this bed

will be splattered with blood."

Erica Jong, "The Truce Between the Sexes"

the longer this goes on / the purer / i become / i have
regressed / back to young / no breasts / an unawakened
womb / only the bleeding divides my body / from
childhood's / useless red / the lie of fecundity / just another
small hassle / needless expense / i should chop it out / it has
no feeling / a bad man's touch / anaesthetised me / frigidity /
not a sign of sickness / but a sick health / protective malady /
to save me / i am saved like a coin in a money box / all locked
up / i keep the key / tiny, but influential / in my brain's
inaccessible wilderness / where it's green peaceful matriarchal
/ earth our mother / who nurtures me / to grow again / a
small cutting / struggling solo under dark canopy / wet and
warm / squelchy mossy overgrown / hiding from the
bulldozer of desire / i keep downcast eyes / when men walk
by / they have become mysterious other / predator / no lover
/ in this land of no brothers / this land of undercover /
detective me / scouring the sky / for the star of lust / now
turned to space dust / scattered / the milky way / hides behind
bright ones / trying to learn the art of shining / my brain
computes new commands / a biological never-before / until
this regrowth of hymen / impenetrable / raised my bride price
/ out of anyone's affordability / on purpose / the past
forgotten / i am newly virgin / needed no dextrous surgeon /
deep sleeping me / sewing me / stirrugged and oblivious / no /
i grew this myself / from seeds of fear / just enough hole for
the red to flow through / fat wads of cotton i discard /
wrapped in sadness / the waste the lie the dying cry / of all
the never-was / my children my dead ones my buried loves

notes for when the city gets too much

think, then, of beauty
clouds across the moon
a kiss under blackwood trees
the wind's low moaning
all the squalor of cities
lifted from your shoulders
in a moment of colour – pink
heath, golden wattle, wild
call of a kookaburra.

everyone knows it's cold
and dirty, on the street
where the old get rolled
and the young seek fun
through oblivion; glazed
gods and goddesses sniff
the black night, these cats
have powder power.

think, then, of beauty
where surf and cliffs collide
and ghosts of wrecks howl
through bones of human folly,
our greedy irrelevance,
the salt grave choking
life in one sodden moment
and all your concerns are so much
flotsam on the tide.

on the city side of crazy
you get nervous at the curb
waiting for the lights to turn
paranoid in pubs, and drunk
on anything – love, survival,
cigarettes – while joy
is a golden apple on a green
branch, high and out of reach.

think, then, of jen
in her tie-dyed singlet
serene, smiling, saying, “insanity
is sanity’s last bastion”. together
we invent a bush cabin, to wait
out winter, till nodding daffodils
shout spring, and being a hermit
with a dog and half a dozen goats
sounds such a sensible idea.

Bitchpoem

(or its really quite a compliment)

For five years my brother forgot my name:

"Do the dishes, bitch".

At seventeen I got straight A's:

"Unmarriageable bitch".

Equal rights in conversation?

"Loudmouthed bitch".

Intellectual argument?

"Smart-assed bitch".

Justifiable complaint?

"Troublemaking bitch".

Embrace the spiritual?

"Irrational bitch".

Cry when you're sad?

"Over-emotional bitch".

Confront the past with therapy?

"Neurotic bitch".

Admit ignorance?

"Stupid bitch".

Say it's unfair?

"Complaining bitch".

Don't want 'looking after'?

"Ungrateful bitch".

A poem about a sleazebag?

"Man-hating bitch".

Pissed off at injustice?

"Aggressive bitch".

Get your hands off my breasts:

"Frigid bitch".

Sexual feelings?

"Bitch on heat".

Stand up to backstabber?

"Nasty bitch".

Political power?
"Unfeminine bitch".
Tired of voluntary work?
"Selfish bitch".
Work hard for advancement?
"Competitive bitch".
Put on weight?
"Fat bitch".
Say no at the nightclub?
"Stuck-up bitch".
Don't dress like a lady?
"Ugly bitch".
Prefer the company of women?
"Lesbian bitch".
Write about women's lives?
"Feminist bitch".
My favourite coffee cup?
"Life's a bitch
and so
am I".

Tales from Queensland

Confusion in the Ranks

A central-city club on winter's night.
Brisbane. Queensland. 1993.
Sketches of Bobby Sands and pantheon
smile benignly from one corner.
White brick walls drip Medieval pennants.
Green lino, small stage, plastic chairs.
Candles stuffed in cheap wine bottles
squat on every table.
Hungry young fringe-dwellers speak earnestly to the barman,
a grizzled, grinning, revolutionary.
A gaggle of hippy poets enter the club;
spar with the teen-age rock band.
(Light entertainment for the troops.)
The crowd swells with curious students;
snubbers of authority,
misfits and do-fits,
dreaming their anarchic dreams.
The club president announces a rally to see
the highest-ranking member of the ANC
ever to be flown downunder.
Enthusiastic cheering from these eager spear-chuckers,
who loathe the thugs in police uniforms,
prefer their thugs from Ireland and Africa.
Art sleeps with loaded pistols.
Naivety dances with death.
Poets scream to pierce the distracted crowd,
now drunk on Guinness and rhetoric.
The adjacent building is a disposal store.
A sign on the window proclaims:
"Guns and Ammo Available Here Now"
Irony jives with ignorance under a Gemini moon.
In the land of the Queen.
In the land of the Koala.
In the land of the roo
and the fist.

The Japanese Christians

The Japanese Christians sang like angels from the camp hall.
I could not understand their words,
but the familiar melodies flung me back to my own childhood,
belting out Lutheran Hymns,
the California sun streaming through stained-glass windows.
The Japanese Christians sang with a gusto and conviction
matched only by their intrepid guitarist.
Once, from the hall,
I heard a sobbing confession from a young girl,
witnessing to the congregation,
spluttering out her Oriental angst
in staccato bursts of pain and weeping.
The oil and water mix
of Near and Far Eastern religions
must have ripped some psychic tear in her young heart.
Early in the mornings, we heard the Japanese Christians
vomiting in the bushes about the camp;
though whether purging impurities of
thought ... drink ... or cuisine
I couldn't tell.
I was hoping to hear Onward Christian Soldiers
in Japanese,
but I guess it wasn't in their repertoire.

From the Hippie Belt

in a small australian town

it is for the quiet. if she
wanted a man, she would not look
here. but they watch, and wonder,
all the breeding madonnas, who cannot
fathom any other way to beat recession.

the phrase, 'take to the cleaners'
is common here, where the sea's beauty
contrasts with the state of relationships.
this newcomer has work to do, beyond
their comprehension. their lives mostly

are gossip days, and condom nights,
courtesy of babysitters. she honours
the state of woman, but childless cannot
walk among them: they say she is too thin
or fat, too this or that, they call her loving

lies. and the man who brought her teabags,
innocent oranges, tangy conversation
is painted simple charlatan, chameleon,
unfaithful father of two. yet their only crime
was talk of art, how changeable the muse.

the single woman knows this place will never
be her home. homes are for families, not
wanderers of dubious morality. and friends
are able to be labelled, put in boxes, sometimes
slit open, examined on social occasions

over well-scrubbed kitchen tables,
while sharing recipes, home-baked cookies
strong opinions, and bitter coffee.

on acquiring a byron bay suntan

me be all australian beachgirl
for a day – sometime in summer ...
me be reborn teenager
me be victorian sunlover, starved of warmth
me be pictures in magazines – bondi beach or far
north queensland
me be memories, gadget, frankie avalon movies
me be waterskis, boats, oxygen chambers
me be swim with the fishies, hang with the surfies

me be homegrown lettuces, grown in the hippy hills
hydroponically
me be silly and stoned, loud music and bonfires
me be night in a forest of ideas
me be birds, feathers
me be brown as a berry, thin as a sapling,
clichéd as an old saying
me be 'anyway, what profits it
– in these too-late days –
there's no ozone, it's a dead
culture', still. me be dreaming ...

me be fat teenager
me be shy in the highschool cafeteria
me be another me, me i can hardly see
me be standing in the freezing
wind at bell's beach
curled in rags and jumpers
in the backs of station wagons

From The Hippie Belt

me be uptight in bikini
me be best girlfriend of pretty girls
me be never quite
 thin, or brown enough

me be all grown up but still small
me be byron bay on a summer's day
me be rainforest, ocean, ash, dust
me be decaying body, cynical mind, still
 open-hearted to love's lies
me waiting for time, the gravity-pull
 to make me air, to make me free
me be free as that eagle, riding the thermals
 higher than high
me be wind
me be sky

for ms ruthie

across the world, i'm thinking
of you sister, your dark mane of hair
and ready smile, the way we hug
on greeting, rubbing our breasts
together and laughing.

across the world, i'm craving
your kitchen, bright sunlight
and excellent coffee, best
in the neighbourhood, stained glass
casting rainbows on your fine china.

across the world surfaces the memory
of us sweating already on your tropical
verandah, the morning fecund with lettuces
and busy lizzies, how we sucked
on mangoes, anticipated solstice.

across the world i can still see
the motherly way you stroke daughters'
heads when they come home noisily,
dusty from the land of sports' shoes,
science classes and social niceties.

across the world, i remember
the surf foaming at your naked belly ,
your strong hands holding to hip your baby,
proud in your generous resemblance
to an ancient mother goddess.

across the world i peruse
a photograph of me and you,
old friends under a rising moon,
and smell again the scent of that sea
and your hair, adorned with white frangipani.

1.2.94

Lust, Loss and Automobiles

Smooth Guys

Smooth guys don't take "no" for an answer.
Smooth guys just move on if they fail.
Smooth guys can make that mini-skirted momma
 and have her in the back seat
 before I finish my second beer.

Fast girls dispense their favours like candy.
Fast girls tongue-kiss men they've just met!
Fast girls know that I'm not a smooth guy.
 I'd never try it on them
 before my tenth beer, at least!

Smooth guys fuck like satyrs on cocaine.
Smooth guys get it up every time.
Smooth guys got the jokes and the lines,
 carve notches, assign points,
 think little of their conquests.

Fast girls are always two steps ahead of you.
Fast girls aren't concerned if you're smart.
Fast girls size you up like a cucumber,
 pack their own condoms,
 keep you on ice.

Smooth guys think I'm a pathetic coward.
Fast girls think I'm nice, but a bore.
But that's okay.
 Because I've got a lover,
 and she's all that I see.
 I'm velvet to her.
 She's lightening to me.

In the Time of the Yellow Sport's Car

In the time of the yellow sport's car she was prone to ring him
(at ten minutes to eleven)
at the Santa Barbara Taco Bell
where he – jeans rolled up, barefooted –
mopped the floor, minutes before closing.
Her velvet voice vaulted down the telephone lines
– from two hundred miles away –
telling him:
how much she missed him,
what she did with her fingers
(Yes! At that very moment!)
where her lips wanted to play,
where his tongue might explore,
could he please drive down right away?
how she would wait up for him
how she would meet him at the door,
no matter if it be three or four.

This telephone foreplay was calculated to nudge the scales
on which he weighed his discipline so carefully:
Fatigue versus desire.
Gasoline consumption versus ready cash.
Tomorrow's responsibilities versus long legs
(wrapped around his waist tonight).
Mostly ... it worked.

Checking his wallet for funds,
or maybe,
stealing ten dollars from the register if he was a little short,
he would lock up,
finish his beer,
skip the drive home for shower and change,
step over the door and fold into the yellow MGA,
– greasy, no shoes –
smelling of frijoles and onions,
and turn south into the sweltering California night
because ...

she was steaming too,
and did not care if he smelled funky
or what clothes he wore,
because – she had a smell of her own
and the clothes would be on the floor soon enough anyway.

By the time he reached Ventura Highway,
the four-lane concrete ribbon
– bathed in amber–
would be mostly his to glide and weave upon,
eighty miles an hour, 1 am, top down, no cops,
desert wind in hair,
visions of her – spread and moaning –
on the living-room floor,
which is as far as they usually got
when he arrived like this – even though –
she had two roommates in the old beachhouse
and they were notorious light sleepers.

But now ...
a slumbering “City of Angels” whizzed past.
He sniffed factory smoke and the sea,
sensed – somewhere behind his nostrils –
that these nights were like no other
and somehow,
now,
in this time of the yellow sport’s car,
an odd leavening of
youth, lust, poverty, a blond,
and this primal roaring in his ears,
would sear his neural pathways
like a red-hot branding iron
and nothing that came later
would ever feel
quite the same.

Ad From a Personal Column in Universal Cyberspace

Hello! My name is Zortox. I'm a pink and green,
recently divorced, Krolon; 32 feet - 6 inches; 4.8 tons.
I'm seeking a loving, carbon-based, organic,
3-dimensional mammal with which to form
a special relationship. You must enjoy line dancing,
tentacle-tapping, the consumption of raw flesh,
and the Simpsons. You will have at least one
appendage, digit, member, proboscis, tail, or
similar feature, 8 feet long (or bigger!) and up to
3 feet in diameter. No elephants please!
No spines, scales, or feathers. Soft fur is okay.
I'm a Scorpio with Cancer rising. I like a clean den.
My friends tell me I have a sunny disposition.
If you have the right equipment, a romantic heart,
enjoy drinking 50 litres of Chardonnay and eating
a few raw hippopotami around the bonfire with friends,
please relay a digitized light impulse to:
Zortox B - F - 1 - 2 - 1 SCREW - 3 - 3 - 7 - 5 - FUCK ME DRY -
OK - 2. Call me!

Bureaucratic Lasses

I have partied with amoebas of the corporate colossus,
bound their love wounds,
soothed their sobbing,
listened to their tales of hate.
Watched them harden to the desperate,
navigate the crimson tape.

I've bedded these sad lasses in their glasses and their skirts.
Awoken midst the migraine,
the Valium and the guilt;
helped them mix the mortar
with which broken dreams
are built.

I speak not of institutions, governments, conglomerates;
but cathode tubes, typing pools,
secretary spread.
The glass-ceilinged drudgery
that fills bright girls with dread.
That sanatorium in which they earn
their daily bread.

Automobile Love

My first love was a Volvo.
Nordic and solid.
Sturdy-framed and no nonsense.
Slow off the line,
but once she had a head of steam up: Watch out!

For contrast, I went out with a Mini next.
Compact. Light. Low centre of gravity.
Small turning circle and a gas to drive,
but mechanically she was a nightmare.
Worse: She was useless on a rainy day.

After that, I dated a red Ferrari. A real looker.
Hot-blooded and sleek.
She turned a lot of heads.
She was lightening off the line
and a screamer at 140.
Unfortunately, she had a tendency to overheat.
I lost her to a metallic-blue Porsche.
I heard, later, they self-destructed on a nocturnal speed binge.

After that experience, I opted for stability.
I fell hard for an old Dodge Ute.
Not much to look at.
Thick-skinned, full body chassis, reliable as an old dog.
Only drawbacks: She was a guzzler
and had a tendency to spin out on the curves.

There are many ways
to get from Point "A" to Point "Luurv".
My advice?
Stick to economy models
and become a home mechanic.
And lastly: Treat her like a lady and respect her limitations.

Birth, Death & Body Image

shaking the beauty myth

there's a chemical spill in my brain / it happened today before
i found my face / in the melbourne underground railway / it
begins when i enter the station / i buy my ticket, pass the
newsagent, where british monarchy vies with pinup girls for
my eyes / i walk on, down to platform seven / behind me
walks a sure-footed man, who bought the pinup girls and is
smiling / ahead i see the back of a mannequin, swaying on
stilettos, a thin sheaf of wheat, a bunch of bones encased by
skin / i imagine she'd be sailing if a puff of wind blew in / she
and i sit down to wait for the train / the man walks by, his
footsteps even / he is reading the curves of airbrushed women
/ i see the woman pull from her bag the latest *cosmopolitan* / i
watch her face, I glance across the pages that she's reading /
the made-up models stare, glistening / i look at the woman
on the bench beside me / her face has lines of frowning /
they run down from her nose to the sides of her mouth / they
run down the way that sadness does / they run deep like the
lines on a hungry third world child / i guess this first world
woman must be on another diet /

the train comes and we stand / i watch her jutting calves as
she moves towards the carriage / i watch the man shove
broken electric doors apart / i watch the woman enter,
stooping under his raised arm / i watch the man survey the
woman, up and down / on the train the woman sits upright,
as if recalling an etiquette lesson / her mouth is tight and red
and long lines furrow across her brow / i watch the man
sitting opposite, the way he glances up at details,
disembodiments / legs / feet / hands / eyes / the woman
fidgets / she opens her purse / she extracts a tissue and a
bottle of oil / she wipes off the eyes, the lips, the stare / then
she stands, rips off the tights, the split skirt, the liberty blouse
/ she rips off her lacy brassiere / her breasts goosebump in the

gush of cold air, but she doesn't care / the man sits stock still
and stares /

the woman slips off stilettos, picks them up and aims them
down the carriage – there! and there! / the woman stands on
the seat in her knickers / she sways her hips to her own inner
rhythm / she rips up her copy of *cosmopolitan* / the papers
swirl like autumn leaves around her / the woman looks at the
man watching her / she does not posture or pout like the
women in his magazine / she pulls the hair from her scalp till
she is bald and wild / the whites of her eyes flame red in the
twilight / she is becoming before his eyes / witch, crone, wise
woman / her spirit emerging, she is no longer downtrodden /
she's breaking out of beautiful, the gaunt-faced body / she is
big, and strong, brave and healthy / she splits the seams of
her size ten / she's gargantua's sister, she's a-comin' to get ya

her legs stand strong as tree trunks, walk with unhampered
stride / she's walking out now, spanning the cosmos / and
from her huge body she squats and gives birth / to the fertile
round goddess so dim in our memory / the way women used
to be / pre glossy magazines and fashion pornography /

there's a chemical spill in my brain / it was slow and insidious
and took thirty years to reach these toxic proportions / but
now i can smell it, the stench and the flames / i get off the
train / run home to the mirror / i see my real face / for the
very first time /

babytalk

rita says, 'babies? *ha! i'm* never having babies!'
schoolfriends bought houses in the suburbs
– they're progressively filling the rooms.
jill says, 'you're not a *real woman*
till you've dropped a bundle or two'
(and she should know: she's had a dozen).
sally talks about sunshine, rainbows, washing days.
jan claims they cure period pain forever.
ruth says 'you've just got to do it when you're ready.'
erica's philosophical about this one, really.
judy says 'it's god's will and that's that'.
my mum says, it's just like shelling peas
– they just sort of ... pop out!.'

swamped

me, the caught fish
desperate, gasps
for one to cut the line
till i shine silver
in your bucket of gasping,
gills choked with air.

pneumonia would easier
than the blue
hand of distress, rising
in the rip, waving,
engulfed by waves
lungs filled with water.

your pain is splattered
in black paint, your veins
pulse, powdered with no hope.
still you lie smiling,
in your bed of blue flowers
eyes wild with longing.

i cannot shed this
amphibious skin. but it's
so cold, and hard to live in.
pale crustacean, resuscitate.
kiss my blue lips pink.
keep your claws to yourself.

one last drink with the king of gentleness
(for rex buckingham, d.1993)

on the occasion of your visit i tried
to keep you away from the watering hole,
fed you fruit and salads, vitamin tablets.
you smiled like your namesake, Rex,
the king, indulged my desire
to bring your health back full-circle.

but you had already chosen; you left
the suburban house/wife/kids, to follow
a dream of soft poems, hard liquor, saturday
afternoons with the roaring bohemians.
at the pub by the river, we laughed together,
watched the weathered adventurer, fresh

from the phillipines, kiss the feisty lorikeet
on his shoulder. he smiled across the table,
motioned us over. on his ninety-year-old boat
resting in the harbour, we drank and sang,
stroked the old mahogany wheel. and you
told poems, your voice soft and shy

under the dark summer sky, the sea slapping
against the prow to your rhythms. i should
have known that would be our last beer
together, when you, occasional visitor,
stumbled down the gangplank, your feet tripping
you into the rowboat, your old man eyes

tried to hide the sight of effort.
paddling back to dry land, you said
you should have given up boozing. but
this was a too-late admission – your
old bones betrayed you. i offered you massage,
antidote to addiction, took your hobo feet

in my hands, rubbed the veiny mess
that was once your mobility. dear man,
you were young only four years gone.
see you shambling along, so poisoned?
so i was glad for the sea, for the river
birds and treefrogs, for the way that

nature opened throat for you. the early
morning kookaburra laughed at our breakfasting.
an owl hooted in the ti-tree and watched you.
the old koori legend tells us owls are death
sentinels. but i made no connection,
kissed you, spoke of our next meeting.

later, i am shocked at your name
on friends' lips. you have gone,
gentle poet, you have gone so quickly.
your body was tired,
didn't even make fifty;
this small book of poems,
your legacy.

Jungle Life

Life in Gorillaville

Gorilla-man shuffle down to the watering-hole
late on a Friday night.

Gorilla-women in heat down there.

They loiter and pout, wear their dresses tight.

Gorilla-man grab some nuts from the bar to eat
with his gin and tonic.

He gaze at the rear of gorilla-girls. His thoughts,
they are not platonic.

He silently beat his chest and stare.

He don't cut no-one no slack.

He one tough hairy-chested dude.

He ain't scared a bit.

He don't take no shit.

It's a tough exterior he exude.

He one mean silverback.

Gorilla-man stare at his rivals in their expensive three-piece
suits.

He sniff at the women and size them up

Like a chimpanzee with exotic fruits.

He scratch his groin with simian hands.

He grimace. He grunt. He smile.

He longs for one of them gorilla-girls, he ain't had one in a while.

He calms himself and saunters over,

Pulls a pool cue off the rack.

He spits out peanut shells, half-chewed.

Move outa the way.

Or make my day.

It's a tough exterior he exude.

He one mean silverback.

The door burst open. Another ape enter. He look tough.
He big. He mean!

Gorilla-man shocked 'cause this is his turf.

But this is the baddest bastard he's ever seen!

Look at those gorilla-girls starin at him. Oh man!

They checkin his crotch!
Gorilla-man almost beat his chest. Instead, he fidget and watch.

This newcomer walks right up to the ladies
And begins his smooth attack.
He makes them laugh with a joke so rude.
He is handsome and crude!
He is righteous and lewd!
It's a tough exterior he exude.
But he ain't no silverback.

Gorilla-man shove his way to the bar to face this sucker square.
He's feelin bold, though he's tired and old
But gorilla-man he don't care.
This is life and death, tooth and claw, law of the jungle tonight.
The younger ape just smiles and smiles. He's in the
mood for a fight.

Gorilla-man goes him! What else can he do?
You hear the pool cue crack.
A fist is thrown. You see a bone protrude.
The big ape frowns.
The silverback's down.
It's a tough exterior he exude.
Though he's flat upon his back.

Gorilla-man stumble into the darkness nursing a broken hand.
He's gettin too old for this jungle-jive. It's more than
a man can stand.

This is beggar meet thief. Killer meet prey.
The young meeting the old.
This is power ... meet money. Pusher ... meet addict.
The strong meeting the bold.
This is criminal ... meet desperate. Rapist ... meet victim.
White ape ... meet the black.
And laws of the jungle so misconstrued,
That it's no surprise when you look in our eyes,
It's a tough exterior we exude
With that monkey on our back.

Epitaph for Barbie

Up against the wall Matell Doll and spread 'em!
We're gonna make you pay big-time, Momma.
You and your one billion sisters.
Purveyor of sordid stereotypes!
Exploiter of little girl's expectations!
We can't take you with a grain of salt, Barbie,
we need the whole shaker.
Yeah, yeah, we know your history:
astronaut, presidential candidate, UNICEF ambassador, rock
star!
But deep down, Barbie ,
you're just a vacuous clothes horse,
with your big Barbie-boobs
and nothin between your legs.
False advertisement Barbie!
You know, we never even saw you smile until 1977.
I've got a few questions:
Exactly what do you expect little girls to believe about you?
That they'll all grow up to have 36-18-33 figures?
That perfect skin and eyes that never close,
will render them successful and all-seeing?
That designer clothes and flash sports cars bring enlightenment?
That Ken is waiting for them when they're all grown up?
And anyway, what would they do with him if they found him,
with his blow-wave haircut and that bulbous ill-defined lump
that passes for a groin?
And, given your respective anatomies,
exactly what have you and Ken been up to all these years,
sharing waterbeds and steamy nights at the drive-in?
I heard you dumped Ken for GI-Joe 'cause his lump is bigger.
And what about those rumours of you and Gumby,
in a cheap motel?
Hollow-headed whore!
You're so transparent, Barbie.
You think you've passed yourself off
as some kind of buccaneering visionary
but all I see are pathetic attempts to disguise your
corporate invasion of foreign countries with

Indian Barbies, Italian Barbies, Eskimo Barbies,
bloody ... Barbies from Botswana!
Bogus bimbo! Brainless plastic bombshell!!
You can change your stripes, Barbie,
but you'll always be a dumb dolly hung up on fashion
and fast cars.
And now that you're thirty-five
will you be endorsing wrinkle creams and lipo-suction?
Or will your market strategy embrace
new and ever bolder personas to titillate young teen-age girls?
What's next?
Barbie the Bi-sexual? S & M Barbie?
Bangkok Barbie who does odd things
with razor-blades and screwdrivers?
Not this time, Momma!
Your Barbie bacchanal is over, babe.
Didn't you know there's a price on your head?
That's right ... a dollar a head.
Even as we speak, legions of little girls
are ripping the heads off battalions of Barbies
and posting them to us for the rebate.
Our ethnic cleansing of cliched icons has begun
and you're numero uno on the list, Barbie,
so kiss your ass goodbye, bitch, and good riddance!
Off with her head, boys.
Kill Barbie!
Kill Barbie!
Kill Barbie!!!

Scarfhead

Scarfhead! Scarfhead! Don't pick her up!
She looks good from a distance but not close up.
She's ugly and weird, man, she scares me to death.
Don't pick her up!
That's Scarfhead. I'm tellin ya!
Don't pick her up! That's Scarfhead, okay?

Scarfhead squats in a dairy shed one mile from Byron Bay.
She sleeps in her clothes on a mouldy mattress,
Wears pink tights and a golden scarf,
Hitchhikes up and down the coast.
She's rough as guts old Scarfhead.

Scarfhead gropes through a foggy mist of Serapax,
ciggies, and gin.
Bloated, pale, with a whiskered chin,
She's smothered in makeup like an old drag-queen.
She flags your car down, steps inside.
You're just another john for Scarfhead.

Scarfhead puts the seatbelt on. Rolls the window down.
"You got any drugs?" she says with a laugh.
Her wrinkled mouth is a crimson gash,
You stare at the road to avoid her gaze.
The expectant gaze of Scarfhead.

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Scarfhead speaks in demented streams of confusion,
anger, and fear.
Her words are fishhooks, baited and thrown.
She wears desperation like a cheap perfume.
She touches your arm with a brittle claw.
The grasping claw of Scarfhead.

Scarfhead says, "Aye, fancy a headjob? It'll cost you less than
a carton of beer."
She's ocker and loud and laughs like a horse.
She slurs her approval of your music and hair.
She asks you back for a nip of gin.
A nip of gin with Scarfhead.

Scarfhead lives in a thousand sheds one mile from everywhere.
Abandoned, lonely, half insane,
She sleeps alone with her madness and pain.
We don't like to believe that we're all to blame.
Blame for a legion of Scarfheads.

The Permutations of Love

come soft

come soft in the darkness of night
like a sea that is hushed
with the whisper of waves.

come dark moonless oceans and billowing stars
drive out the lovelessness
of sailing alone.

come as the hungry to a bag of grain
searing in the black silent
hunger of cat's eyes.

come bring daisies for my hair
roll in clover by the point
where backseat lovers drop headlights
blindly grope through the clothing of guilt.

come roaring through tunnels
pull me through like a carriage
furnace fired with a prayer
to the pulsating moon

and come like a boxer
knocked into laughter
punch-drunk on the feel
of a strong, solid heartbeat.

come, survive tidal waves
sail treacherous seas
paddle clear-water streams
ride the current of rivers –

come, be my lover.

cycle

I

something's cooking.
all our layers peel off
like an onion, complete
with tears. i cut
my vegetables with knives;
we cut each other
with kisses. when the heat
is on, all our fears
start boiling; i suck
off steam, breathe out
like a pressure cooker; in the midst
of all this stewing
there's no sustenance
for our table, only
the whistling kettle sounds,
shrill in the empty air
– and this is the way
it all
ends.

II

a stranger's hands startle me,
not safe, familiar,
but alien territory, eyes
that see differently, as if
my body were a fresh canvas.
smoking in the dark, i ruin
it all, speak in whispers
of how i wrung a love poem
out of a life so humdrum.
there's no passion in housework;
washing hangs itself

without elegies, and dishes dry
easily. a few lines about
gardening helped me plot
our living - but then
there's always reaping
– and this is the way
it all
ends.

III

now i travel solo, or with friends
talk art and music with strange men
(in cafes where the coffee's gritty
and pubs where drinking's cheap)
and run around this city
in a crazy, whirling circle
of drink, dance, dream
like an overworked machine
until abrasion of the brain
compounds with tears,
exhaustion, pain
and, expanding, bursts
this grey-green shell, reveals
a white, translucent pearl:
a gleaming, shining, perfect thing
– and this is the way
it all
begins.

prem

premature baby, thin and wrinkly,
resents, probably, the myriad arms
cooing to be first to hold,
dreams on inside
her tiny world, stretches
arms, touches edges, universe,
is best left to mother's pouch. she is
skinny pink marsupial
with filmstar eyes ...

so when he put
the baby in my arms
when she took
quick flash photos
i faced my breach
of etiquette
more squarely
than emotion.

the spectres of the miscarried
bubbles of images
rooms in the city, flats
with grey carpet, warm winter sunshine
my stumbling from the bathroom with a handful
of red stuff, and the nonchalant
blame of an old liaison

but when he put
their baby in my arms
the newness
of a smile
smote well thought-out
explanations

for health, or wealth reasons
and what business is it anyway
and living in the midst
of a baby boom, you could think
there's something a little
'different' about you. no-one here
sings no population blues ...

but when he put
that baby in my arms
i sat without thinking
of these things. some primitive
emotion moved my hand, to plug
her mouth with smallest finger:
a nipple, a thought,
or a prayer.



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