

"Hall is giving voice to her experience and involvement with a group of performance poets around Melbourne, who are making headway as a force to be reckoned with."

Elius Levin, "Sticks & Stones", 3RRR

"How delightful in the gormless eighties to read poems with a strong line of attack that get straight down to business and go somewhere. (She is) not afraid to tackle experience (the ten-times-shredded-and-glued-together-again experience of today's young) without falling into the "more hard-bitten than thou" Fitzroy gutter spinout mode."

Kangaroo VII

"Colorful, satirical, teeming with pictures of today's outsiders . . . Sharp portrayals, angry indictments, compassion . . . One of Australia's most promising young writers."

Lance Loughrey

CONSCIOUS RAZING



combustible poems
by
liz hall

Conscious Razing - Combustible Poems

Liz Hall has been writing poetry since the age of twelve. She worked as a nurse, typist and factory hand before 'coming out' as a poet in 1983. Since then, her work has appeared in numerous small magazines and has been performed in pubs, cafes and street festivals, and read on community radio. In 1984 she became involved in the Poet's Union Prison Workshop Programme (an experience which inspired several of these poems), and published her first collection, Under Her Eyes. She describes herself as poet first and activist second, "though naturally the two sometimes overlap". She is twenty-five, has a novel in the works, and lives somewhere vaguely between Melbourne and Mullumbimby.

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"... there are questions raised by writers and critics who are outside feminism but who want to create a fixed category called feminist fiction which can then be written off as inevitably didactic, axe-grinding and humourless. In doing this they fail to see that feminism is not merely a set of campaign and political strategies; its basis in the idea that the personal is political means that it can and does transform women's consciousness of themselves at a very deep level. And a strong, long-term dose of this changed consciousness and expanded perception of the world is one of the things needed to shock some alertness to life's larger issues back into literature." 1

"we are not the women you tell us we are; this is who we are and this is what we want to become; this is our experience." 2

"well, I hope someday to find a morality to replace the nice one I have lost." 3

1. Alison Fell (ed.) in the Introduction to Hard Feelings: Fiction and Poetry from "Spare Rib". Women's Press, London, 1979.
2. Ibid.
3. Paraphrased from a statement made by the character Alice in Gertrude Stein's Q.E.D.

battleaxe

they called her battleaxe
face pocked with professionalism
post-work drinks with the girls.

from seven each morning
she ran things proficiently
smoothing wrinkles of senility

nursing full bedpans of sickness anxiety
loved and feared by young girls
in starched uniforms.

the news blacked sunday papers: the woman
aged fifty, leached and floating face-down
aftermath of a backyard barbeque.

too many beers, squeal and jump
in the spa (it's a party, after all)
and nurses know about coronaries.

claiming mortality, friends blamed sleeping pills
said they had the skills to revive
anyone (done it hundreds of times)

but one they loved lay naked
before strangers. three million eyes
scanned the story made bright

by some reporter's promotion dreams.
her young girls screamed, walked beside
the dumb casket. and we turned

to our lives, leaving red carnations
black birds in the sky, two motherless daughters
crying themselves blind.

mollie's poem

all that talk of seeing you
 now i'm finally here
 and i'm waiting for you
 to eat lunch and visit the hairdresser
 it's almost christmas
 and you've said you don't think
 you'll last the distance.

i was intending to bring flowers
 but know that soon there'll be enough of them
 to fill more than your one room
 so i've put a sticker on your window
 - a blue whale in a blue/green sea
 sunflower sun, purple mountains
 and rainbow the stained-glass light
 gives it animation
 ... it's for your eyes in the morning.

you've given me free reign
 over your Woman's Day's and New Idea's
 "Germaine Greer: Sex? We're still faking it in '85"
 but you're eighty yourself now mollie
 and fading fast i don't want to look
 - neither do you -
 but the faces in darkness
 aren't familiar anymore
 and it's time for both of us to pack our wings and go.

me, i'm talking of moving north
 the place a familyman we both loved
 often dreamed of. i want
 to realise the dreams of these wrinkled people
 on your shelf of photographs, who died
 before their post-war babies reached maturity.
 there's dad, grinning in the garden
 in huge forties pleats and sunday gardening jumper
 and jeff and isa, smiling into a future
 so soon denied them - she, eaten alive by her own body
 he, following the same painful pathway
 longing to be near her
 even in death.

who is left to carry on mollie?
 i, who know so little of the world that made you
 always too young to touch your softer core
 always knowing, from far distances and tropical verandas
 when something was wrong -
 i'm left, waiting for you to come
 with nothing to say
 nothing that can be said

december '85

growing daffodils

you comment on the immediacy
 the 'rawness' of my words
 as if the clever turn of phrase
 constitutes the essence

i could
 pound you into these tiles
 beg the question for hours

i could
 unstick the large F labels
 (take the 'lesbian line')
 wear baggy trousers crew-cut
 be the stereo
 type you like

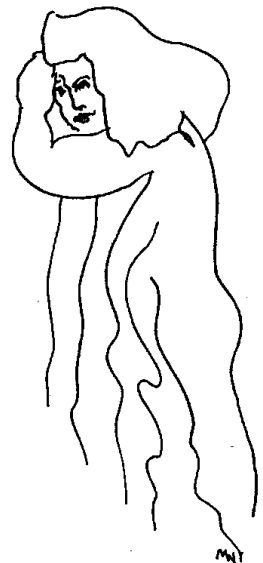
but i'm too busy digging

i can see you
 khaki overalled
 spraying hothouse orchids
 pulling green out of brown

with my fingers
 i make holes
 drop the bulbs in

to pick
 in the spring
 to hold sunshine to my face

yellow daffodils
 and all the words
 therein



on the rape of the otway ranges

tree bark-falling
bird trunk-hopping
gangs-gangs feeding
their discarded seed-pods
dotting the ground
orange and red.

here i have learned the seasons
sweltered in sunshowers
thrown my leaves downstream
in acceptance rituals
for the passing of lovers
and elderly relatives.

freshwater stream
earthmother dream
clean for drinking
small stone gathering
breathe in her scent
and drown, kookaburra laughing.

dear otway home
- but they say it's not home
unless you own
to cleave as a child to its own play
no longer enough -
the FOR SALE signs are up.

startled wallaby's eyes
mistrustful magpies
dead joey by the roadside
paper mill representatives
calculating pines per acre
third degree rape of mother
systematic mass murder -
they believe in a deep ecology.
it goes by the name of money.

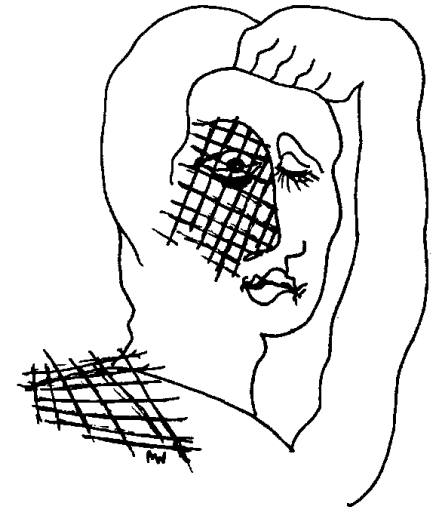
homeless white cockatoos
no more territorial squawking
screeching to teach me
i'm trespassing.
make way for pine ecosystem
monosystem
monosyllable
pine
pine
pine
pine
pines are ruining the otways.

they dream of pine
while i find old rifle shells
though the sign cries 'sanctuary'
there's no place to hide
can't compete with their money.

earth home
river stones
bright coloured leaves
moss-covered trees
pale finches in rainforest
fesh water, clear and honest
crying out MAKE MY VOICE HEARD
I'M ALMOST THE LAST!

you say the age of reason has passed.
i tell you it never began.

January '86



to steven, whoever the hell he is

i'm rubbing you out steven
you, who chalked your name
in the bluestone walls
of this cave behind the falls.

i've waited all year
for the water to subside
for the falls to stop menacing
instant death, waited all year
to clamber over rocks
to sit here, with ian playing
the pennywhistle to the mysterious waving
of ferns in the breeze.

i'm rubbing you out steven
because i came here to imagine myself
the last human, and the first,
because these tessellated rocks
have spent centuries becoming
this perfect art, because
these tiny green mosses
have struggled whole lifetimes
to survive here, because
these waters have healed me
and deserve more reverence.

i spit on my fingers steven
and summarily rub you out
because, to be totally honest,
i don't give a damn
that you were here.

stevenson falls
otway ranges
january '86



old 1812

two centuries ago, you made your first practised overture,
trying to impress me with conversation
and your culinary prowess.
you were proud as you served me, skilfully uncorking
a red as heady as the winter night.
eighteen-twelve rang in my ears -
is nothing as sweet or mood-inducing as the harsh and loud,
the horses galloping wildly across our table?

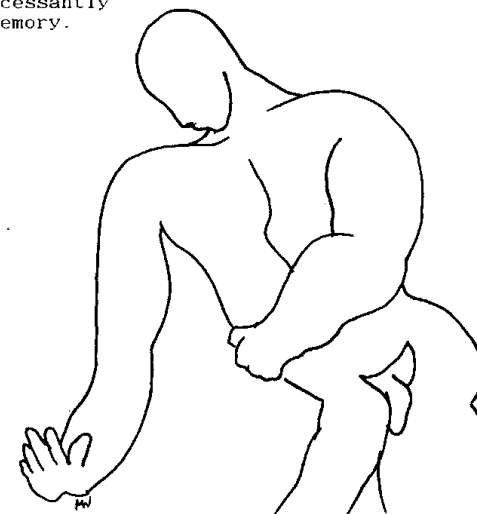
we
made love
like that

in a dark, cold room.

you bit and rolled me
till the chill invaded
and
our hearts never touched
but thumped wildly, in discordant offbeats.
and i always saw your weathered face
telescopically,
my arms longing to touch, but never knowing
those experience lines that denied learning.

you left, pleading shell-shock.

still hear cannons,
firing and booming incessantly
across the space of memory.



you've been hacking through
strange chains, the acid kind
that eat the essential flesh
on the inside, leaving you
a thoughtless shell.

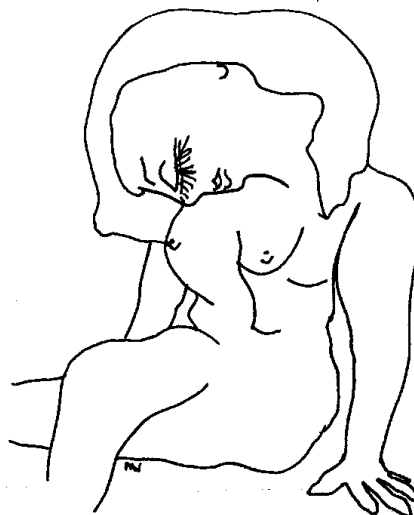
some freedom fighter in your head
needing a cause got you convinced
i wield the stuff of oppression
and call it freedom.

it is not a bill of sale
or proof of ownership
i desire - that's a male trip
i don't believe in -

but to smell your scent on the bedclothes
feel the warm marsupial way you curl about me
the soft down of your arm brushing
against my hip, that nurturing breath.

just want to burrow into your chest
when the world makes me cry more than laugh
to see the way you smile
at gentleness, or fire in the velvet dark ...

is that too much to ask?



alternative?

Dance a rhumba, forties jazz
Always I was Monroe but settled for
Jane Russell

(the blonde rinse grew out, might starve
two weeks to look the part...)

Hit Valhalla cheap cult
I knew the blues brothers before
it was fashionable I
gave up eyeliner six months ago.

Mum knew a depression chases me
pin-mouthed
to sew careful teeshirt rips WHY
can't you wear nice clothes Christ I
wrote this poem
when I was
teenage, misunderstood...

Fun! That dance called PO_GO, just

JUMP

P D
O
U W
N

with all those fake punks paying eight bucks a head ...

Black lipstick smiles sez
"love is gauche darling no-one writes songs about..."

Staying young is making me old.

moving story

packed it all up our lives
 reduced to an army of boxes
 living in limbo processioning
 friends through serving tea
 in jam jars

(found remnants of someone else's life
 - human looking, not like their mail -
 a child's address book, irregular scrawls
 in a thing so small and shining
 only a child's hand could use it ...)

social life goes on
 letting visiting drunks
 commandeer the last chair
 and everything you want is where you can't reach it
 finding boxes of undies when you need a spoon

no sex for a week
 - yr too exhausted
 from dragging fridges around

the cats are disoriented
 - they shit in the shower
 and sleep on yr head

stereo's in bits
 - radio plays ads parliament
 country and western

no-one can find you
 - you can't find the phone book
 to ring them

and you know yr in for a repeat in three months
 when the rents go up again ...

safe

it's safe in this pub
 if you don't wait till closing time
 the light's blown in the dunny
 have to lock the door
 afraid
 of my own body
 when these boozers grab me and say
 "g'day darlin'"
 and
 "how about it?"

it's safe in fitzroy
 if you don't 'ask for it'
 if you don't walk down the street
 to the shops
 to buy cigarettes
 if you don't wear clothes
 that show you've got
 tits.

yeah, it's safe around here
 as long as you've got yrself a man
 it's safe
 if you don't talk too much
 it's safe
i'm safe
 so you keep saying
 you bastards ...



young buck bucks the system

I

lounging snakelike eyes rolling
at four a.m. you were always
smiling manic proud the face
yr plastic surgeon's prodigious best
though the eyelids still drooped disconcertingly
after the accident

(too many downers the new
RX-7 wrapped like tinfoil
around a steel light pole
on The Herald's front page
where everyone could see
just like you liked it ...)

you knew the most dangerous
ways of scalpels twisting and socketing
the skinny finger
electrified once too often
leaving you shocked drunk
on brass and the lowdown:
whoknowswhoscrawlswhotalksleastsuppliesthebestintown
which lawyerabortionistfamousperson
to soiree with this week
to make your name

II

saw you at a party
fattened up for christmas
looking
almost healthy

(talking with you is not healthy
but i always play with fire)

and it's
i've missed you
i'll even marry you
(as if that's what i needed)
leave these jerks come with me
be free

and i say what about
this blood on yr hands
the pinpoints in yr eyes?

III

the new girl sez
'jeezus where'd ya get that fancy car?'
now who's parading in the hilton bar
mooning over rock stars real classy typed
dripping with bullshit left and right

(silly me thought all this
unfashionable since janis and jimi rode out
hot paltry streaked in acid dreams)

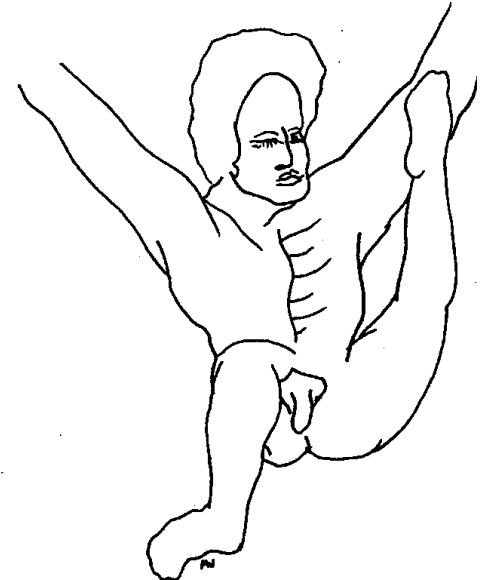
but this young suck's pulled a fast one
cashing in on rich kids' naivete
draining them dry before they get too wise
to his eden of deceit and the social scene
(have you seen my friends?
sorry i can only see customers...)

sorry sticky little honey
but i've moved no trace no more
numbers to scrawl on yr fine fag papers
propping the bar in the land of fancy cocktails
and sad white line lies

IV

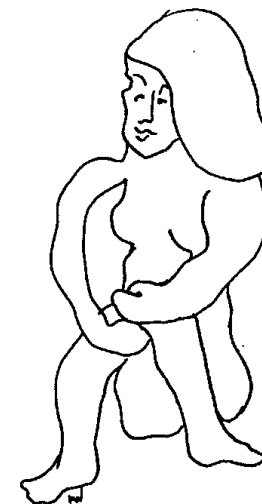
surprised
to hear
how i cried?

once wanted to tell you
i loved you babe
but you were too wrecked
and i too near the rocks
to survive



in defence of covness
(with apologies to Andrew Marvell)

i would, if you would only say
adore each breast in marvell's way
without conditions, without the male
urgency (you can be coy with me...)
for all of us eventually
must come to see the fallacy
of labelling this forbidden,
that paradise. i am not 'nice'
at the best of times - my honesty is hard
and you are limp to promises
they make in darkness
before the passion's spent
before it all becomes a bent
paradox: 'i mean what i say when i say it;
don't ask me for any more; i need, i need ...'
i need a soul that's answered for,
one you have owned through all this madness
spirit that is not defined
by kitchen sinks and erect pricks
by sensing out yr blind desire
to be teeveed, dressed by yves
and filmed in silhouette. i see
the way you spread your love
on fevered brows and stubbled chins -
oh touch again the softness of this womanskin
give me real perfumes
understanding eyes
skies that are truly blue.



circus

friends or lovers?

such a

fine

line

i balance.

foothold

weak shaky

heart

coiled wary.

to fall

is to

sacrifice

all

and safety nets only catch remnants.

vicariously crowds look down.

even the clowns are crying.

another poem to aid the revolution

(sources: Daily Mirror, Sydney 3.1.86; PIX 20.10.62)

page three, daily mirror:

'... here is another of the bay's blonde beauties
- a part-time model but a full-time beach attraction'
here is a woman in a string bikini.
here is a woman smiling for the cameras.
here is a woman looking seductive and happy
for today a whole city will survey her body.

'YOUNG MOTHER'S THROAT SLASHED
Victim of frenzied attack'
found by her husband in a pool of blood
stabbed repeatedly though already dead

another day
another pinup
another victim

it was no different in 1962
PIX magazine's model sat in begging pose,
a well-trained dog on either side -
the cover story? Teach Your Dog To Obey

today see connie francis on page seven
admitted yesterday to the psychiatric ward.
she's famous, starred in Where The Boys Are.
now she's chronic with manic depression
after the rape
in her hotel room
eleven years ago.

another day
another pinup
another victim

and on the video station in the prison
the women are passive, succumbing
in their raped and bugged role.
night after night there's bored men watching
learning well, learning fast,
how it should be, how to be
'masculine'.

i learned an attitude once
from some psych division nutcase:
that sex should be taken
that women should be beaten
that killing yr victim is okay
because we only exist
for one thing
anyway

he raped his grandmother
carved her up with a chainsaw.
now he switches on his t.v.
relives the glory of it all.
the authorities say it
'gives the boys an outlet'.

another day
another pinup
another porn movie
another rape
another murder -

who will be the next victim?

3.1.86



20

nuclear waste

they're dumping it
they're trucking it in
in the dead of night
and dumping it

they're dumping it in our rivers
they're dumping it quickly and expediently
pretending they're not dumping it

it could be in your street
- you wouldn't know,
glued to the t.v., never seeing it
because the media ignores it

they've been dumping it at the sunshine tip
for seven years
in plastic bags
that can't contain it

they've dumped it on the lives
of two council workers
who wonder at the scabs
of cancer eating their bodies away

they're dumping it in broadmeadows
they're dumping it in gippsland
they're working on making the pacific
the biggest dump in human history

they're dumping the fruits of their greed
the shit of their capitalism
in our back yard
in our water supply
on our children
on our land
on our right to health and life

we are not waste disposal units
we will not be victims of this sick cold war
we will fight
we've got to make them stop
dumping it.

jai

it's you, child, out in the darkness
confusion conceived you
yet your mother knows your name
and the turnings on a scan
somersault joy
she says "it's a boy!"

oh jai, your father says you're
just a blot on the horizon
of someone else's future
- an easy abortion.

but i know you're there
you, with your unseen face
smiling

growing there so silently
child born of confusion
you know the dark mysteries

i can see your quiet waiting star
shining through your mother's eyes ...

they play games with you jai
argue laterally
not face to face

but just you wait
for the joyful smiles
when you burst out
alive and kicking
arms stretched high for the stars.



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.

it's never that easy

i liked him
he smiled readily and sang with drunken gusto
even if the notes were often wrong

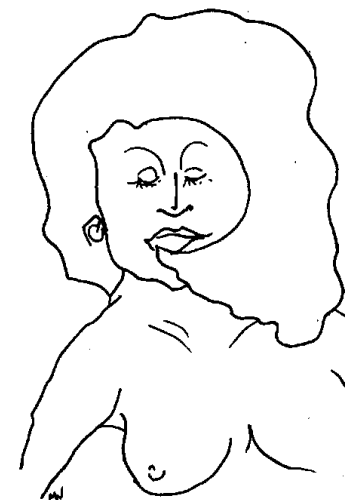
he seemed the kind you could be with
sans hassles, or impossible demands

one night
and the clouds of closeness have blown him away
leaving some startled junkie
with rotten teeth

pawing, clinging like a leech
calling several times a day
deaf to my 'piss off'
thinks i don't mean it
(just stringing him along)
leaves me with a case of headlice

now i'm indulging myself
watching saturday afternoon movies
hanging out the sheets
smoking low-grade heads at ridiculous prices
with a plastic bag over my head
to keep the stinking chemicals in

thinking myself lucky
to have escaped with just one
purgeable itch.



after reading 'Holocaust at Mary Smokes'by Bill Jones

been
 reading this book
 he gave me monsalvat saturday
 about holocausts
 clouds tree-bark and riverbeds
 death-defying cosmic sex
 dying animals and lost lovers
 on country highways

five double gin-and-tonics
 slurred brain mumbled dope rave
 laughed he said i'm drunk he did
 me a swap book for book signed
 to drunk liz from drunk liz
 by a drunk?
 (lone drunkenness can be embarrassing...)

kitchen table scrubbed down orange
 lampshade with harlequin mask mike
 made me for masquerade
 party's over rain outside i trace
 book drawings wondering fingers
 all the sounds of waterfall words -
 at almost fifty he calls himself billy

city life clamps me
 trapped cockroach mind in dying woodpile

on brilliance

the words she offers float like appletree blossoms in spring
 compost into earth and whisper
 or hit cold concrete, roll under tyres.

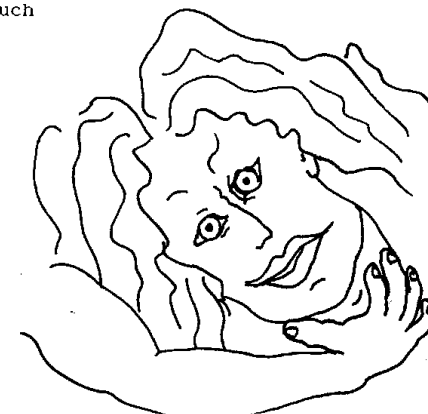
schoolteachers made of her an example
 the one who always did the homework
 perfectly. she grew fat, shunned -
 in the staffroom they talked about brilliance.

once an old man tested her sincerity
 on the basis of words produced in blue siren flashing paranoias
 of darkness/rapists/fear of dependancy
 and lectured her about brilliance.

sometimes the wrack of pain frightens the dawn
 crippled, cut down
 relentlessly as poor rainforest
 she dreams of astral travelling
 quitting the shock-waving bones
 knifing out the blood and leaving it
 seeping testimony to the lonely dripping of taps
 and ticking clocks

while men want, want to join forces
 for the minimal time it takes
 to sap what energy is left
 - the stewed concoction of alliances
 and tainted wisdom
 knowing it's profitable
 to talk of brilliance.

she talks of leaving the city
 hobbling down unknown roads
 where the faces are familiar strangers
 following the sun
 chasing just one maddening touch
 of its brilliance.



you and me and the nuclear war

flesh peels down raw
bleached bones crumble to a touch
as lips tear apart
and necks extend the bulbous howl.
the buzz of wailing voices
seeps into us. screaming our deafness
butchered by buttons
slumping to the floor
as if one last intimacy mattered ...
black, baked together
waiting for evolution's completion
- a small, mute pile of grey ash.



on the death of a child (for K)

waiting for the first
clock tick, bedsoaked, waiting.
waiting through the months of hope
for health, ten fingers, ten toes
and a full set of brain cells.
who could have known?

ecstasy of contraction pain,
bloodbeat time, hours of straining
manic crowning, rich-red pool
on sheetwhite hospital groaning.
and the sweaty joy, girl or boy
then sleeping off battle-weariness.

in white room bare bulb sunlight
streaming, traditional lemon
of pre-birth bootie buying
mother and child wait out the slow
asphyxiation of a half-heart gasp
for faster blood, and life.

and the two day tainted
result of waiting, wanting
visible signs of shared love
is never enough. to be mother
for a moment, before tears
negate all fear of varicose veins,

to be left in an instant, swinging voters
between instant death and the time to name
one forever unconcerned
with political action, pre-menstrual tension,
feminism, the taking of lovers -
there's only the nipple, soft, warm and moulding,

the mouth lacking strength
to drive crazy with screaming,
with four a.m. feeding, grazed knees, finger painting,
first boyfriends and teenage arguments.
no, two hundred short kisses
marked your sleeping years, beauty ...

all your mother has left:
a few photos, swelled womb,
heart full of poems.

thoughts from under an elm tree

we're so unconventional, liberated
together, talk about freedom,
limitlessness, personal growth.
friends envy our 'compatability',
our 'no-holds-barred' honesty

- so why this sunshine on my head
in this heart of our hearts' winter?

i sit under an elm tree
in a country town,
laugh at schoolboys who shout
looking for their friend.
i tell them i've kidnapped him,
thrown him in the river.
(i will be mad woman, crazed and screaming.
no-one knows me here, knows my red-haired
morning-after face. these children
will build mythologies,
tell how they see me in the park,
eating autumn leaves ...

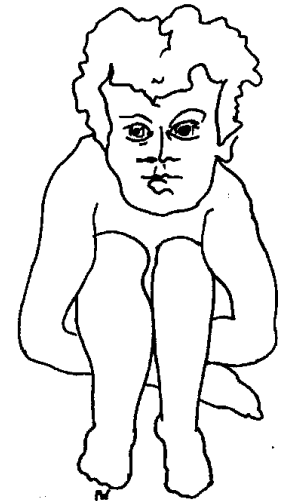
i have sat here forever.)

and the world passes by regardless
even in this peaceful park
- traffic roars, bikes rev over the bridge,
exhaust fumes addle my brain.

you are as constant as the water supply.
occasional droughts see us
careful, watchful over the dams
so we'll never run dry.
but i've been turning the taps too often of late,
letting the bath overflow.
now we're apart
and you're glad to be rid of me,
tired of wielding the mop.

so who is left to roll with
in these autumn leaves,
this prickly floor-rug
that reminds me of sundays, jumping
into crackly mountains that uncle john just raked
(red-faced, yelling
STOP SCATTERING THEM 'ROUND AGAIN!)
and the smell of burning
from gutters at twilight
while the soil hungered and died?
who is here? not a face i know.
no friendly faces at all
- just a few schoolgirls and old women
who glance, stealthily, then look away.
(i like to meet their eyes.
it unnerves them.)

the schoolboys run low between trees,
giggling, excited, throwing leaves in my hair - YAR! YAR!
i'm laughing, sitting here like a wood princess.
they laugh too, and run away.
but i know the differences of mirth:
theirs is vengeful, childish anger,
intolerant of strangers.
mine is the laughter of loneliness.
yours, i cannot even hear...



In 1878, the Loch Ard, on the final stage of its voyage from Ireland, was wrecked against an island rock near Port Campbell, 249 km west of Melbourne. There were only two survivors: Tom Pearce, a senior apprentice who drifted into the later-named Loch Ard Gorge clinging to a lifeboat, and eighteen-year old Eva Carmichael, whom Tom saved after hearing her cries several hundred metres from shore. Tom left Eva in a cave on the west side of the gorge, and climbed the huge limestone cliffs to find help. The following is a poetic dramatization of Eva's thoughts as she waited on that cold June morning for Tom's return.

Eva Carmichael Waits

Only I and the sea,
the death-calls of young sailors.
Dear Mother, Father, my sisters and brothers,
your final screams assail these rocks,
then drown in winds of violence.

And I, swept up like driftwood,
sandwiched between savageries -
limestone cliffs, higher than houses,
sheer scarps I could never climb ...
will there be no way out?

Oh, that I am born to this destiny,
to live my last hours torn with grief,
shivering under alien skies, awaiting certain death,
hemmed in by the rough tides of this fickle sea
that has already taken the best of life.

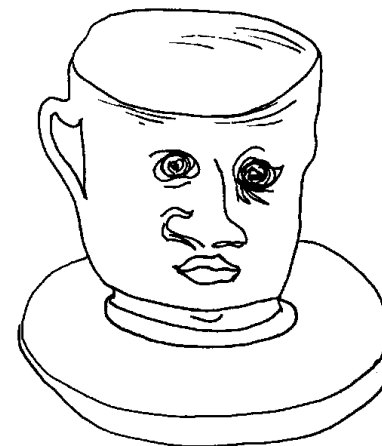
Sweet Jesus, take the breath from me!
I cannot bear the judgement of the sea!

And brave Tom, has he scaled these cliffs?
Or will I perish here, cold and frightened
or ravished by my rescuer
- stalwart seaman, but still a commoner -
if he returns at all?

Here in this cave I wait,
hating the ceaseless drip, the age-old
stalactites over my head. Oh sea,
could you not have swallowed me,
poor orphaned girl, without family or dowry?

This new land is grey and cold.
Strange greens, no beauties can I know.
Just ocean, vengeful, hard and eating
the bloated bodies of my kin.
I'll not stay here, if I am saved ...

Ireland was never like this.



conversations with two analysts

"Yes. I admit it. I block it out."
 "Why do you do that?"
 "Dunno - maybe it feels better."

his name is norman and he feeds my electra complex
 with his kind eyes and wryly smiling face.
 strong handshake, though,
 and gentle paunch over his waistline
 - too many loving home-cooked dinners.
 he invites trust like a well-worn teddy bear.

"Why do you want to feel better?"
 (why does he think?)
 "I don't like feeling bad."
 "But why?"
 "Because it hurts."
 "Does it?"

it is our destiny, this pain
 and my self-analysis brings all to life again
 not only in the now but back in time -

"I remember being beaten as a child."

they like that one, gives them a chance to dissect history
 reconstruct the trauma, dim in memory.

"Why don't we try catharsis?"
 i look out the window
 i wonder, do i want this?
 what do i want?
 norman, tell me what i want.

drive home to a party
 feel better soon
 ha norman, if you only knew

i want i want i want
 give me an antidote to pain
 i want ... give me a drink
 and another - thanks brother.

my sanity saving dream dealer
 stumbling out of the taxi
 "Hi sweetie come inside we'll both feel better"
 here's the mirror, banknote and blade
 (fifties are classiest
 but i only have a ten)

i want i want i want
 white lined glass
 stinging asbestos
 spreading marshmallow across my face
 block sinuses
 i want i want ...

come here midnight lover
 and soothe my head
 wish it wasn't almost morning, day dawning
 could handle ten more hours of night
 to do it right

"Hey, you okay? Want one of these?"

no.
 don't need, don't hurt, don't cry
 an antidote for all:
 too happy, too sad, too anything.

stop waving that intellect around!

let's crash - you should sort my mind out, not him.

morning
 eyes haggard
 skinny
 voice in my head

i want i want i want

i want i want

i want

i want

i want

i want

.....

WON'T SOMEBODY TURN DOWN THAT SCREAMING?

one day in the month

barefoot, sloshing with chamomile
bald-faced in the too-hot sun,
taking the path, avoiding
lustly schoolboys on bikes.

two fat women, one old, one young,
discuss where the money for ethiopia goes
in the milk bar
where everything is overpriced.

home, cigarettes for nerves
welded tightly in hand.
cats sleep on kitchen benches
- tired of throwing them off.

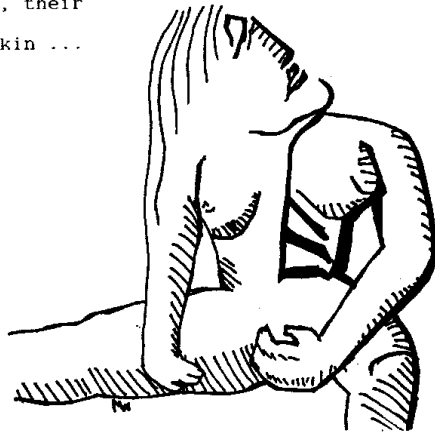
phil collins can feel it in the air
tonight this must be love
but crashing drum desire
sleeps on, varnished hard and brown

and i am old, barren
as nullabor i grow only dry, grey
scrubbing brush, ajax in shower
to fight backache and temperament.

think of fighting with vacuum cleaner
- decide better to rest.
trucks roar through me
without even noticing.

smelly sloppy bloated bloodstained
i'm uglier than harpies, their
hairy warty personality
sprouts fetid from my skin ...

i wouldn't come near me
if i were you.

caged birds

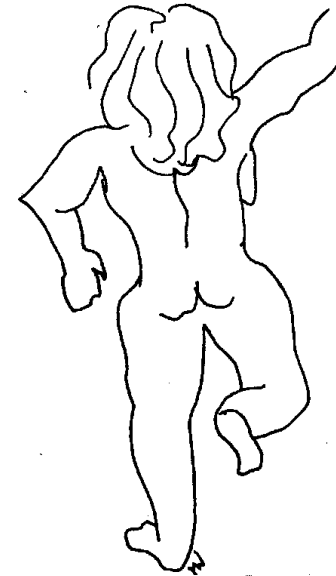
fanning fire, see you
blue eyes in sun, wind
leaf-blowing

right

through me
strange icicles.

we watched caged birds
perch and shiver.
you want to let them go
though we know
they can't swagger from
suburban wildlife, eye-pecking starlings.

logs hiss
with unsaid tears.
i think of days now,
winging that widening circle
our intimacy is.



.... sometimes i'm catlike
snarl up at prey
think how one day
this full-moon waiting
will tame our feralness
blunt the fangs
tear out love
spray it all over.

letter to myself about you

tried to send myself
a letter signed with the pricked hole you made
in my fat index finger.
you try to find the cracks
smooth your rough wolf hands over me and
prise me open dig fingers in
spread the skin the fat and muscle
the gaping wound you made
from the small spear imprint in my side.

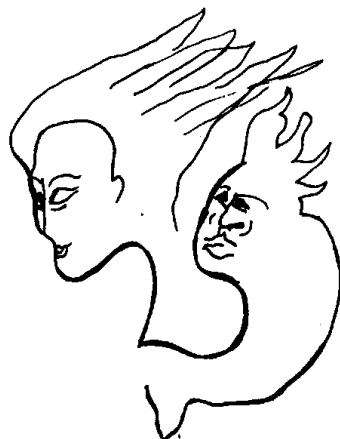
my back is turned
unapproachable
do not approach lest i turn and BITE
the hand that needs me

i washed the sheets
to lose the guilty scent
but the new ones aren't fresh are stained
with the blood of my heart
you surgeoned and tipped from a plastic container

i am no carnivore

i will not eat

wrote a letter to myself
signed in fancy script my own red name
at the bottom
of the clichéd sympathy card
i never meant to send



the bed is cold without you
- wish i had a cat ...

so i write guilty pages
you'll never read content
myself with books
curse the soft moon staining the window
like candles in eyes
when the heat has gone.

not a flicker of passion
just cold
resignation a search for another
to zip up the doona
cool your night fevers
with heavy breathing and fake
satin
underwear. i don't care
i tell them while night falls
thudding on the roof
and the ceiling rose shatters
love-inflamed bones
as i turn to the pillow to hug relief.

you're probably sculling vodka
without a glass thinking how quickly
the sadness passed chatting up big-breasted
barmaids talking too much.

uncrumpled bedclothes clean sheets
a neat pile of clothes on a camphor chest
remind me of order
and solitude.
still humming
like a teeming beehive
the loneliness comes fast.
i think of your crying
hold my own tears back
like a grey cloud waiting on thunder.

what can i say
when i love you's been ripped from the phrase-book?

disabled

'Disability, dis-a-bil'i-ti, n. Want of ability; incompetence; want of legal qualification.'

disabled means second-class citizen, living on the pension, telling your friends new ways you've discovered to save money.

disabled means training schemes where employers on low budgets use you as cheap labour, work you beyond your physical ability, sack you and dump you on the scrap heap when the subsidy runs out and you're too worn out to fight back.

it's old friends who stop inviting you to parties, embarrassed because you don't look trendy; you dress in op shops and talk about survival instead of 'catching a man'.

disabled means that look in their eyes when seeing you makes them fear they may somehow be held responsible, may end up with the weight of you on their backs.

disabled is fearing public transport, dealing with walking distances you're unsure of handling, staying home nights because the car's likely to break down and you can't afford repairs, taxi fares or parking tickets.

disabled means hospitals, clinical assessment of your body and soul by people who pretend you're not young and full of dreams, who feed you pain killers and advice, who tell you to accept the situation and do what the rich doctor tells you.

it means putting on a cheerful face so the nurses will like you and give you better care.

it means lack of political muscle, discrimination in public places, not being taken seriously, being patronized.

disabled woman means awareness of limited freedom of movement, the quickening heartbeat when men whistle from cars or honk horns, and you know they can see you'd never be able to run fast enough to escape them if they chose to chase.

eventually, disabled means your eyes become opened to all gross inequalities, and you begin to relate them to yourself, you begin to see it in people you know, you become aware of their personal neuroses and emotional cutoffs and you start to feel lucky because you live with human interdependence and you realize you're doing better than most because your heart is still fluid and open to love.

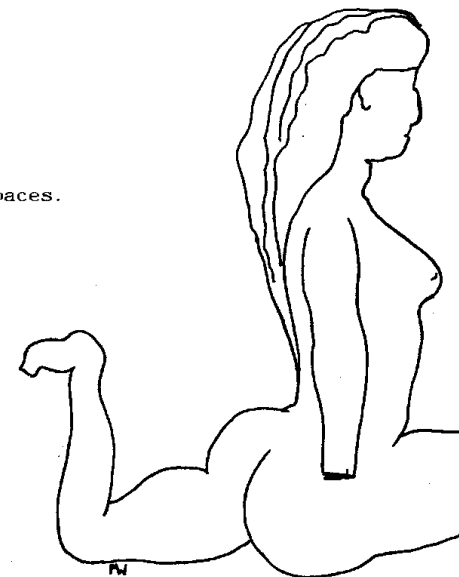
safe places

there are safe places
away
alone by the sound of the sea
where i would sit
on friendly rocks
that hug me.

there are quiet places
unpeopled
in million year old caves
where i would grow old
and never need
to use words.

there are sleeping places
deep
in dark caverns wet with salt
where i would walk
naked
and never look back.

my steps are small.
i falter
move closer
to these places,
these safe, lonely spaces.



untitled poem about everything in general
 (quotes from The Smiths, Reel Around The Fountain)

"it's time the tale were told
 of how you took a child
 and you made him old ..."

'this song could be for us'
 you say as we dance
 in true hollywood style.
 we fit and curve into
 each other, my cheek and wide eyes
 against your chest
 the roomful of people
 dissolving to background noise
 mosquito buzz.

"reel around the fountain
 slap me on the patio
 i'll take it now ..."

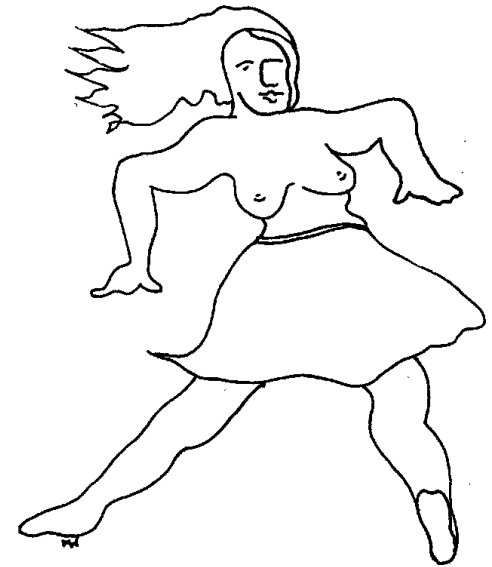
it's so familiar, your hand splayed brown
 against my back and as
 my neck tilts almost to breaking point
 i know you're playing the patience game
 though you're older
 and acquainted with the painful truth
 - the consequences of putting a toe in the water.

(i never said so but
 i used to have a liking for young blond virgins
 with wide luminous eyes
 like stunned fish in limpid pools
 i watched the cataracts of manhood spreading
 possessive screaming algae
 pulling down the blinds
 to keep the dreams in ...
 now i'm tired
 of being someone's mother.)

but
 "fifteen minutes with you
 oh i wouldn't say no"

you cling to me
 hungry hands and head-bumping
 trying to kiss me in the kitchen
 so here i am again, lone sailor
 abandoning ship, stepping out for some
 greener grass again
 girding my head with promises
 to be better to myself this time, making plans
 of work, independence, individuality, morality,
 asking 'does my hair look okay?'
 an in-love-with-love teenager
 with an acne problem

only this time it's different
 'cause i've lost the passion
 for dancing with blonds.



so you think you're a poet, girlie

(to a dangerous minority, in their own words)

now listen 'ere, ya young spunk,
and I'll tell ya wot's rong wif yer pomes ...

have you met X?
she's going to be a great writer
- when she matures.

stick with me
and you're gonna be famous, darlin'.

well i'm sure we'll be able to publish your work
in the near future. you wouldn't consider
staying the night?

well I think the way women write about men is offensive!

you're just a woman with balls.
that's all you are, ya fuckin' bitch!

i loved your poem about the waterfall
but i'm not too sure about all the rest ...

(i mean, all that feminist crap - didn't you know
that went out of vogue in the sixties?)

(you know, I discovered her ...)

when you get to be my age sweetheart
you'll understand what i'm saying about your poems.
it's obviously quite beyond you at the moment ...

i wasn't groping you! just showing appreciation!

no upstart young WOMAN's gonna tell ME anything about poetry!

well
it's a jungle out there
but i don't want no tigers
in my own back yard.

gift of delusion

wondering
what you meant by
love you only in darkness now
light of day shows the flaws in both of us
i'm not as perfect as you
thought and you have gaps
in your teeth mind cavities
reeking eating brain and thought
all you said was poetry

now i only hear the mispronunciations.

wish
i could create the perfect page of figures
sum you up
nicely put you in a box
slam lid tie ribbon return to sender

but wrote a card and slit my lip

envelope red knife-edged.

an unsophisticated seduction poem

i love you i love you i love you!

having made this bold statement
poetic peers deem it right
that i should qualify
these thoughts and begin
to justify
the words and emotions
(as if i were some robotic specimen,
as if i should seek the approval of fools ...)

perhaps i should
just state
that love is a vague spirit
that flees when lacking nurture;
that my poetry has become cliched;
that my cynicism of stomach butterflies has totally

fluttered

away;

that those clouds are in my head
and my head is in them;
that my pelvis cramps
at the scent of you;
and what the fuck is the matter
with refusing to put love in your jack-in-the-box
to scare myself with
at rare intervals?

who cares for definition?
let's sunbake in its rays,
oiled and naked,
Baby.

chronic pain

you, master
run my life make all decisions
you're there, the cause of every growth
and every breath seeks permission to exist.

i see your red-hot flashes
knifing. you draw salt tears
from my skin and blood
from my mouth.

i spew
my bitterness
at all who cross me
can't help it no control
i'm controlled
by you.

my hate dries red on your face.
you laugh and grin
tell me it's okay ...
you've got it all worked out.

'friends' say
don't talk what can i
do anyway you should smile and dance
tell funny stories we don't need
your smile-blank face and hypochondria.

doctors write prescriptions
for lovely lovely pills
to punish pain destroy
my kidneys too, if i like,
that'd be fun to roll
hysterical on the floor
-uremia blanketing my woman scent.

i panic
cram all events
before the next bell rings
to knock me out.
at least i wouldn't feel it.
maybe could manage a good sub-arachnoid
if i fell hard enough end your reign
set trapped spirit free to dance
light-footed on the greenness of spring.

i will sleep now
harness jumbled jargon jigsaw thoughts
and deny your existence.

you can flicker all you like.

the attack of the paper dolls

a succession of openings
and closings this ragged series
of paper dolls can't weather another tug.
their arms are torn
with trying and the blue lines run
soaked in young tears.
hands once joined
now ripped apart (there's evil in my eye)
and paper dolls don't stand alone
can't find a balance sway with winds
open and close like an accordion when
you play the notes.
i shut my eyes blink back
with sharpest scissors try
another cut-out.

it's a children's game
that keeps us pasting and slicing
waiting for ways to keep days
apart while nights
pulsing through the heart
beat an arrhythmia charge
through the wires stop
arrest.



waking

wring the sheets
wake up from nightmare (though not
afraid) phone demands too early
get out sweat bed

always ...

six-thirty i compete with dawn
stand ghost mummy's bed shoulder
- here take those wet jarmies off -
pull over tousled head, sleep grit
in rubbed pink eyes
naked young skin clammy sterile
crawl in huddle strange bodies
i know so well you

made

me you

smell of morning

you don't

mind ...

boys lollop in passage hey how come she always
nice being smallest always first always
get the middle safe between bodies then don't feel
helpless or ashamed.

poem for lisa

or

waxing lyrical in a bent state

I

raven-haired women calling you in from flight
 like sirens with songs like angels, each with a spear
 to pierce your heart;
 they are standing on the gravestones
 like david hamilton nymphettes,
 peering through curtains of blackness,
 the vultures that flap around them.

they are smiling.

you saw them last night, in a dream you told
 in the darkness of afterglow
 when the velvet night wrapped itself around you
 and i couldn't see your deceit.
 you saw women, women with raven hair,
 dragged, unwillingly, by some rescuer
 hanging from a helicopter.
 the women pleaded, but black birds
 flapped around their faces
 and they were blinded, and succumbed ...

II

the rise of your chest in dark of stark streetlights
 there's booze on your breath, you exhale on my hands -
 i cup your perfect breasts in wonder, shiver
 at your violent beauty.

but i am no romantic poet.
 no clever words, no dazzling images describe
 the way you smile through a downward glance,
 touch of a man, and a mother
 and a lover. fickle as earth mother herself,
 there are hurricanes and storms,
 droughts and harvests,
 the seasonal coming togethers
 and partings.

III

you are coming. i know. to tell me.
 to tell me why. to tell me why
 you honour goodbye.
 you are coming to tell me that the flowers have faded,
 the summer has started, the heat is on
 and soon you'll be riding the dust-bound clouds
 of truck-wakes, thumbing and coming closer to the truth you seek.

you are coming with ribbons and buttons and bows,
 with smiles and secrets and the sweetness of apples.
 you are coming to look at the holes in your jeans,
 to pretend and to seem coy rather than fearful.
 you are coming to tell me that eighteen is young
 to be in a minority (the silent majority, you once called them)
 to say, 'i didn't think it would be this way', to be
 as seductive as a sea goddess, a singer of unfathomed songs,
 a mermaid who swims away in a flurry of red hair and seaweed,
 leaving a dull ache in the chests of old sailors
 and a sad, haunting melody
 you can never quite remember ...

IV

take on the spunk punk stereotyped look
 of the down-and-out, the twist-and-shout parents
 with the new brick home in the outer suburbs
 who don't understand you. stir in a squeeze
 of lemon-flavoured bitterness, a dash of honey, and a look
 that would melt the heart of the hardest
 stone-faced star-crossed lover.
 take a shirt with a black/white print
 - skeletons and macabre twisted faces
 staring in the face a death the trendies only dream about.

but oh how i loved you!
 your fierce little smile, the tiny feet
 that would stamp your petulance,
 were the pressures to be adult not so strong.
 the soft peach-skin face,
 rounded cheeks like over-ripe fruit,
 you ask if beauty is only skin-deep, are you only so
 in my eyes? i say the gentle pleasure smiles
 are their own reward. there is no need to pretend, no need
 to send letters of goodbye to lovers and mothers.
 i tell you it is you i love,
 not the colours and smells of beauty parlours,
 or the extra pound you announced the loss of
 this morning on the bathroom scales, dripping soapsuds
 all over the floor like early snow.

V

the blonde hairs of your soft belly
 will soon be sun-kissed, sparkling under the queensland sun,
 softer than your eyes under this neon.
 i would leave too
 leave this wintry changeable heartspace
 for warmer waters, less shark-infested.

the spring blossoms chastise me, settling in my hair
 then blowing at the first gust.
 they remind me of you.

raven-haired women call me in.

mansfield and missing you

that familiar cramp in the guts
 comes and goes
 like the soft smile on a madonna.
 we held back from those three words
 so laboured by poets
 so seldom meant
 so often desired.
 i think of you now,
 drive through country rain;
 misty hills, rain torrents, blue/pink sky
 hailing night, rebirth and spring,
 with the longing, the weightlessness in my chest
 just beginning to feel
 so constantly
 constant ...

to a man who stole
from his friends on the dole

should i wait quietly,
 smooth your hair, play mother,
 forget about your ripoffs?
 what's the payoff?

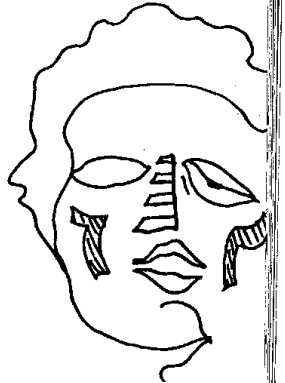
for how many have you pledged
 undying love, inexplicable too-rapid emotions
 balancing on the balance of a cheque book?

i have no excuses.
 blind women are nearly always vulnerable,
 too often gullible.

but now, this northern sun
 cacophany of smiles
 have illuminated your image
 in my mind

and you're past, babe, dead and gone,
 the feelings in decay
 like old unwashed linen, selfishly stained sheets,
 as past as childhood nightmares,
 fear of darkness,
 old diaries in drawers
 and half-written poems

but when you ask
 all i can tell you
 is how trust threw off foolishness
 wild freedom flower burned dangerous in your eyes
 how there's a time when love
 is just another word for masochism.



the ending

comes crashing down
like a big surf breaker
sun shines hot as ever
but there's an emptiness
a great devastated wilderness
torn up, rootless. it's no good
saying it's alright and let's be friends
as if the soil itself
had not been poisoned.

i know those words
for the lies they are.

until then
if then is ever not now
it's best to avoid blackbirds
and bakeries.

easy to forget
when you're struggling for an out.
so many small things defined us
- like the moment the bread smell
rose from the oven
or the sound of music in the next room
our friends laughing and smoking.

(you said
you wanted to go to more demonstrations.)

once before we almost
lost it to recklessness
but your skin always tasted good.

i'm a big girl now
do what my big friends say
say i don't need i'm
totally self-sufficient
not letting anyone
get too close.

but love, you've fooled me again:
sitting here, hopeless,
wanting to be with him.



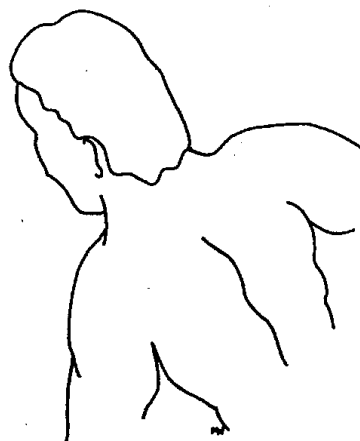
steal my fire

an absent
sun, shorter days become
only shadows of where the warm was.

those lonely splintered mirrors
desecrated with a look -
only a look to take the stilts from under
that matchstick model we made
of love.

no casing left to store our fire
no surface to strike, scattered desires
and wooden sticks uselessly
lie
of the lie we made.

I
stand alone
with a box full of Redheads.
You
always preferred
 brunettes ...

at the laundromat

a man at the laundromat surveys my folding
of frilled pillowslips, lacy underwear.
there's an old woman, warming her arse
on the dryer. She picks up my undies,
says a good deed always returns -
(i hope someone rescues her
from orthopaedic stockings).

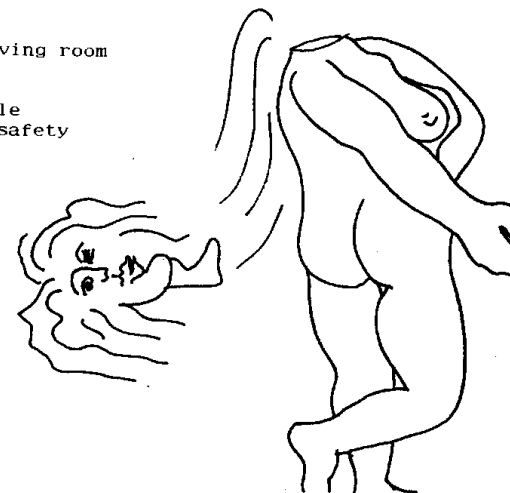
i sneak a look
at the man, who gives me an
'I wasn't staring' look,
then feigns interest in the talk
of skinny vietnamese boys
who don't speak english.

i'm folding and packing into green garbage bags
my sheets, purged of last night's sex
and underwear, no longer soft and scented,
but frayed, robbed of passion
by hot dryer blasts.

i leave the steam
the tepid conversation
pack the book i didn't read, the detergent
someone tried to 'borrow',
sling my sack like santa over shoulder
and walk the block to home

where the rain has stopped
and spring blossoms fleck the pavement
like frail confetti. where the wind
scents me with jasmine
and last-week's garbage

home to a fireside, a living room
filled with books
and clothes tagged
'hand wash only', a kettle
on the stove, security, safety
and love.

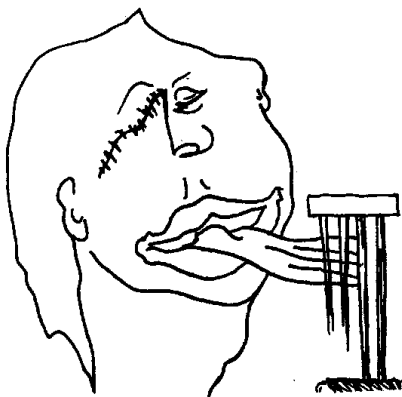


chemical warfare

dispensing emotions in cheap plastic bottles
 at measured
 intervals you're a cheap
 pharmacologist suspended from practice
 before you even started working
 against the law -
 the human law that keeps us all
 communicating.

my dosage is complex
 and ill-prescribed
 a hug four-hourly take a cap of dog-eyed
 remorse whenever you need it
 and don't resort to the illicit
 (it's uncovered by National Health Scheme listings
 and too expensive)
 you don't need
 dope or smack just have an attack
 of emotional catatonia: it feels just like serepax
 the cost
 is easy on your hip pocket
 a little harder on your heart ...

what did you expect? an instant
 replay video game that fucks and forgets
 and fucks
 again and never does
 remember
 that once
 you could buy your love
 (at a price even the poor could afford)
 over the counter.



tiny pinprint incense sticks
 dot this roomsky like stars
 covetous of moonshine.

our planets circle
 a cosmic dance
 to keep night wolves away.

from the safety of our bedship
 endlessness incites no fear
 only gentle black holes
 suck us in
 this orbit's
 regular breathing.

there will be
 no more
 asthmatic nights.

but wait!
 this rise and fall steeply slowly
 climbs the eyeless dark

and savage wolves forget themselves
 in feral roars and tearing hearts.
 the candle gutters
 stars cloud out
 this howling
 is my own.



section from work in progress

I've been here in the mountains for four days now, cleaning, chopping wood, dragging water up from the creek. No-one has really lived in this one-roomed shack. It's been used as a weekend place, or a place to stay until something else came up. I'm fonder of it than that. With a little work, it's starting to look like a home, a warm oasis from the freezing winter.

It sits at the bottom of a valley, and looks more like a tool shed than a dwelling for human beings. But I'm not civilized anyway. Maybe I belong here by virtue of the past. I came here to write about Shona, to try and make sense of what happened to her, to open her Pandora's box, to somehow put things right by recording the things I know she would want me to expose.

But that's as far as I've got. There's been too many other things to do - fixing the roof, and draining rainwater from the ceiling before it caves in and makes the place a blowhole. It's raining heavily now, and the last major thing to be done is to plank up the driveway so I can get the car out without getting bogged. Maybe the rain's a sign. The time has come to deal with the issues head on, no more stalling. Thinking about writing often produces more anxiety than actually doing it.

A flock of rosellas fly by the window, the exact same markings as the ones on tomato sauce bottles. They squawk and gather in the pine trees. The connection irritates me. I don't like advertising; it always reduces things to their basest level - though where money is involved, that's hardly surprising. Like Ansett, flashing two minutes of the Moonlight Sonata to sell more tickets to Europe. The great cultural whoredom. There should be a law against it.

I've been to the Falls at least once a day since I've been here. They're always different. The first time I saw them, about a month ago, they were sparkling, enticingly violent, that tail end of autumn when the sun catches the spray, making rainbows over the rocks. Craig brought me here with a few others; it's his place, though he rarely uses it. That was a magical few days; the gold-topped mushrooms offered themselves so chastely; our incessant giggling around the candlelit table made us conspirators in the half-light. Maree wore a red hat; her eyes shone with excitement and laughter. Mick, never able to sit still for more than ten minutes, clowned around, bouncing out of his chair like a Jack-in-the-box; Craig's eyes rolled back in his head like those of a warm corpse. And there was me, convinced I was the original Earth Mother, playing Wendy to Martin's Peter Pan. We walked to the Falls together, hardly talking, but somehow aware of each other's thoughts.

We stood on separate rocks and bathed in the spray. Martin spread his arms out like an ancient tribal warrior and a rainbow traversed his body. Later I tried to describe it to the others, but they didn't understand, accused me of being too 'cosmic'. "You some kind of hippy or something?"

Craig told a story about a woman he claimed came to visit him in the form of a cat when he was camping. I remembered this on my first night alone here, cuddled up with the huge grey animal I'd allowed in because its miaowing outside gave me the creeps. Not to mention its eyes, luminous green in the torchlight, rather too much in them for a simple domestic cat. Better the devil you know.

There are three footbridges to cross before you reach the Falls and Martin had a theory about them. It was just after we'd seen the fox, the rain blowing softly like light mist, making our clothes and hair glisten. It was huge, red, probably expecting to be shot at. We looked him in the eyes. He was frightened - we'd seen him first - and later we noticed him circling in the pine forest behind us, staking out his territory, just in case he needed to protect it. Afterwards, Martin insisted there were four bridges. I didn't argue because I wasn't quite sure. Now I know there are only three, but let's say there's four for the sake of neatness.

"The first bridge," he said, in the manner of Jesus teaching a disciple, "is the bridge of the emotions. You'll notice you can cross the creek via the bridge or you can slosh through the ford in your gumboots - the easy way or the hard way. Of course the hard way requires some dexterity; you've got to avoid the algae on the rocks or you'll end up arse over tit in the water."

The second bridge was, like the others, a felled tree with a step cut out at either end. It had a green railing but was slightly angled and you couldn't hold onto the rail without hunching your whole body over. Martin took it upright and gracefully, like the dancer he is. I followed, my knuckles whitening on the rail. The bridge of balance.

"The third bridge is the way of spirituality, the opening of your heart and senses to the spirits that speak through you, and to you, via nature. You can only cross this bridge when you have mastered the first two. Some people never get this far - their emotions and lack of balance hold them back." He looked at me intently. "You're still hovering between the second and third." I didn't answer. Maybe he was right, provided I accepted his system. And the fourth? "The fourth and last bridge is enlightenment, Nirvana, Mecca, Heaven, whatever you want to call it, the base of the Falls."

This week I've noticed other things about that walk. For one thing, someone has straightened up the second bridge, solving my problem of balance. And there's more to the third bridge than meets the eye too. You come to it via a path beside the creek, narrow and flanked by massive rocks covered in moss and tiny wet ferns, and huge tree ferns that form a kind of canopy, making the path into an eerie tunnel. It's a tourist spot, and some of the ferns have been cut back at the base to allow easier access. Though benevolent mosses and pale green lichen have blended the severed trunks into the landscape, they are incomplete and lacking in life-force, like great wounds, amputations in the name of tourism.

What does that say about human spirituality?

I have made frantic bids for independence. I wrote to Darren yesterday, tried to explain what it is that has made me confused and changeable - like he said, "One day you reckon you'll stay in Melbourne, the next you write about taking off, leaving it all behind." I wrote about questions of lifestyle, self-sufficiency, getting the hell out of the strangling system.

I guess the main thing is I don't want to define myself by men, by whether I can 'get one' or not, whether there's a man around to protect me. In the letter I told him my plans for the next year - my friends, a child, a lover maybe, but not dependence, nothing clingy, no trying to own someone else, no-one owning me. I've always believed in that old saying: "If you love someone, let them go. If they return to you, you truly have love".

Today was a warm sunny Saturday, few and far between at this time of year. I hadn't walked for a couple of days. I wanted to build up a sweat, a good healthy redness in my cheeks. Walking is like flying to me. I've got a bad leg, couldn't walk more than ten metres a year ago. I put on my hat and scarf, a loose, baggy sweater and headed off for the Falls.

The air was wonderful - cold, made me wheeze climbing up the steep part of the road. Rounding the bend near the second bridge were three parked cars, a red four-wheel drive van and a couple of sedans. The road's flooded by the second bridge. Wouldn't have risked driving my car through it. Two large, brightly coloured tents stood by the river. I heard voices, male voices, and the clank of thrown bottles ...

Men. Eight of them, at a rough guess. Not a woman in sight. A fat one sitting on an aluminium camping chair outside one of the tents, stubbie of beer in his hand, just past lunchtime. I walked quickly, hoping they wouldn't notice me.

"Hey, look! A woman! HEY YOU!" laughing, bellowing out. Ignore it, keep walking. They all turn and watch me walk over the bridge. I hear them muttering to one another; I think they're appraising me, my body. I feel angry, then frightened. Start up the path to the Falls, hoping no-one's following. Stop being paranoid. Probably harmless. But there's so many of them. Looks a bit risky.

I reach the Falls, hardly look at them. Already thinking I should cross the river and get home the back way, so I don't have to pass them again. No sense in tempting fate. Funny, I had this strong feeling I should have taken the back way to the top, almost an intuition, but I didn't heed it, wanted to see the water crashing down, wanted to be soaked by the spray. But now I'm here I'm too busy thinking how to cross the river. Remember there's a small steep path off the main one that takes you to the top on the same side. If I can find it, get to the top and cross over the rocks, I can bypass the campers.

Walk back quickly, leg starting to ache, limp becoming noticeable. If they were in the mood for it, I'm a prime target, obviously can't run too far. Don't panic. Deep breath. Retrace steps, look closely. Maybe the Ranger closed off the path - the one on the other side looked new.

Found it! Sigh of relief. First muddy steps can still be seen. Scale them quickly. Looking down the mountain I can see the smoke from their fire. I'm wearing dark colours; they won't be able to see me. Didn't seem too bright, just the usual types who think women are just cunts on legs. Start rehearsing short speech to get myself out of possible difficult situation - stop it, better to concentrate on crossing the river at the top. Arrive, puffing furiously. Gotta cut down on the fags. Get halfway across on the rocks just upstream from the Fall. Water rushing through a bottle-neck. If I can just get through there, I'll be at the end of the other path, and safe.

Put a gumboot in - glad I'm wearing them. Current very strong, one slip and I'll go over the Falls. Submerged rocks slippery, covered in brown and green algae. No way. Back to the bank, path has ended. Battle through bracken and ferns, watch out for the mud. Slip a few times, hang onto trees for support. My ankle aches. Breathing fast, frightened. Find another place further up. Rocks span three-quarters of the way across. Give it a try.

No go. Too deep, too slippery, nothing to hold onto. Back to the bank, down the hill slowly, conserve energy just in case I have to run.

Rehearse self-defense moves - thank god Julie taught me some the week before I left town. Hope I don't have to use them. Practise the movements, slouch after a grab from behind, hold one hand over fist, shove elbow back with as much force as possible - with the right arm it'll get the liver, with the left the spleen. The other move is a sharp blow to the throat with the side of the hand. Getting really frightened now, probably needlessly, angry that I'm frightened. Deep breaths, try to calm down. Arrive at the bridge, cross quickly, straight over the road and dart through the pines. Glance back over my shoulder as I run - they've seen me. The fat one in the hat is standing up, pointing. I keep running till I'm out of sight. Meet a few people on the road. The woman smiles. They won't follow me now. Relief.

Why am I so nervy, so ready to expect the worst? That's what they asked me back in the city, said it was all illogical victim shit, after I read them a story I was working on ...

A pub in Collingwood. The Union. The union of music, beer, fat bikies with tattoos and 'Harley Fucking Davidson' teeshirts, forty-five year old drunks celebrating or drowning over football results, young girls with big arses and too much lipstick. The union of friends, bonded by our love for Betsy, who will sing the blues tonight - the blues that weld us together, that take the ugliness and suffering and transform it into smiles. We are above the squalor, Betsy, Marl and I. We have two men with us, but don't rely on them. We are strong, independent, survivors. We dress how we please; we will be homely and engrossed in books, art, careers, lounging around our living rooms in dirty sweatshirts; we will be sexy when we want to be.

On the way to the bathroom, twelve dark heads above thickly muscled shoulders turn and watch, follow the movements of my arse like advertising cameras. I hold my head high, walk quickly, with dignity. Every stride moves the muscles back and forth, back and forth. Their eyes bore into the moving muscle till it grows, balloons out. My arse is huge; it takes up half the room; like a giant blimp it screams some message, sending a current through the arms lining the bar. I reach the door, push the metal strip and fall inside. There is no-one else in there. The locks on the cubicle doors have been twisted into strange shapes like tiny modern sculptures. I hold my foot against the door.

Come out via the bar, double gin-and-tonic, sit down and gulp anxiously. Marl comments on the fat-arsed girls, laughs at them, trying to dance in high heels, tight jeans, unwieldy bodies. I tell her I was fat at twenty, of the constant new clothes, plastering of

makeup, attempts to draw attention to the bits that looked okay. They are just victims of all this, I say, yet they smile and laugh together, dance in a group of three - while conventionally attractive women all around the room are looking angry, disinterested, unapproachable. Two main offenders circle the room, pressing their alcoholic faces close, breathing whisky into appalled nostrils, blurring out "hello love" and "howyagoindyawanna-dancebeeyooful?" My mouth sets into a hard thin line. I am on the accessible side of our round table. The harrowed faces keep coming back, pressing closer, closer. I ignore, look the other way, look through them like glass, say nothing but the one word: no. No. No. No.

Betsy is onstage. She is raunchy, tough, feline under the spotlight. Hendrix's 'Red House' blasts out from the speaker stack. A woman in a tight pink teeshirt and stretch jeans is dancing with one of the drunks. She is jumping around on stilettos, giggling and waving to her friends. Her breasts wobble. She doesn't seem to notice the hands of her partner, fat pink hands, moving closer, closer to the moving breasts. I feel sick. I hate this woman, for she is encouraging them, she is helping to ruin my night out, the night out, the one night a fortnight I've got enough money to go out and rage. I say to myself, over and over, she's a victim, just another victim, only a victim ... I try to smile as she walks by, to cleanse my conscience of the thoughts, the hate thoughts, angry vengeful hate thoughts that bring out the lines on my face. She doesn't notice my smile. She is oblivious to everything. She waits at the bar, hanging out for a drink. Perhaps she has no money. I try to make excuses for her.

The drunk with the hands is red in the face. He's almost expiring, getting into a quick couple of pots. His mate is loud, impatient, ready to move. "C'mon!" Fat Hands shakes his head. His loud friend moves closer to me. It is the eighth time tonight he has come full circle round the room. He stands with his hands on the back of my chair. I sit up straight, keep my back away from the back of the chair. "Oh god, not again," says Marl, tiredness cracking her voice. He starts to speak. I turn. My mouth is three inches from his. I think he thinks I'm going to let him kiss me. I can feel the acid churning in my stomach. I put my mouth to his ear. He is laughing, "Aww, yagonnadancewithmedarlin'?" I yell, as loud as I can, "GO AWAY! PISS OFF!" He reels back, holds a sloppy hand to his ear, staggers off to the next table. Fat Hands has recovered and moves towards his friend, but not before stopping by my chair. He starts to move closer. I don't look at him. Get away from me, get away from me, get away from me. I feel cold. I think he feels it too. He stands by his mate.

Betsy is getting into it. The song is winding up.

"... 'cause I know somethin' you don't know baby
if you don't love me
your best friend will."

Hands are clapping. Mr Harley Davidson is grinning and shouting. Betsy is laughing. I see her get down from the stage, black-stockinged legs. The crowd parts before her. This is her night. She owns it. They won't bother her. She has risen above them.

"I wanna go home," says Marl. Dark circles under her eyes. Her boyfriend is talking to one of the drunks, who are making headway with another two pots each. Fat Hands is shouting. Marl's eyes turn dark, the pupils dilate, she turns and says something to him. Fat Hands yells some more.

"No-one talks to me like that!" She gets up, goes to stand with Betsy, who is laughing and joking with the rest of the band. I follow. It seems the safe thing to do. "What did he say?" I ask.
"He said if I didn't shut up he'd punch my head in."
"Tell me when you're going. I don't want to be seen leaving alone."
"Yeah."

Chris, the sax player, comes over. "Great night, isn't it!"
"Yeah," I say, not wanting to bring him down. "Having a great time."
He looks at me strangely. I think I sounded sarcastic. "Drunks," I explain. He's young. Tells me about the first and only time he got stoned. I like his innocence, his country-town boyishness. He makes me smile. I can feel the hard angry lines around my mouth dissolving. I buy myself a beer. Marl rolls a joint in the corner. In a couple of minutes we don't care so much what's happening.

I've had too many beers, have to go to the bathroom. I wait till we finish the joint. I skull the last of my drink. I stand tall and walk like a zombie past the massive sea of eyes, some linked to minds that believe I'm there to meet them, that strip me, rape me with accusations, eyes that balloon out my body. Jesus! My arse had only just returned to normal. Now my breasts are growing. They're huge; I can hardly walk under the weight of them. The eyes are boring through the cotton of my shirt. I can feel the heat of them, the sores of sick desire boring into me. They're making me ugly, they're making me ugly. I'll make myself so ugly they'll leave me alone. I hate them. I'm afraid. I want to go home. Get into the cubicle, too defeated to bar the door, sit and hold my head, sit for ten minutes waiting for the breathing to slow, the rage to subside. I come out. I grab Marl and her friend. We leave.

The whole table was silent. The eight or ten people there sipped their beer. Betsy looked at me, hard, and said, "I think I'm a bit embarrassed."
"Sorry," I said. Then "Is it good embarrassment or does the message worry you?"
She blushed, gulped down her brandy. "I don't really know ..." she faltered.
"Well, ask Marl about it! That's the way it was. It's not fiction, it's fact."
I was getting annoyed. Why is it I have to justify myself? Every woman knows that fear, that bitter taste in the mouth, the frantic desire to become invisible. It's not just the fear of rape - it's the other stuff, the aggressive behaviour towards us that systematically dehumanizes, that makes rape and other acts of violence possible, even acceptable.

"Do you really think they were all looking at you?" growled Nick. Nick always growls. He has that gruff manner couched in teddy-bear scruffiness that helps him get away with murder. Everyone loves him, me included, but I'm angry now.
"Isn't it enough to state how I felt? You know this has nothing to do with how gorgeous you are - even eighty year old women are raped, and children, and young boys in prisons. I don't think casting dispersions on my attractiveness is a very constructive way of dealing with the issue." It was bullshit anyway. He'd fuck with me, given half the chance, and we both knew it.

I got myself another beer and went to the back of the bar to talk to someone else. No point in continuing the discussion. I think of my friends as 'enlightened'; they pride themselves on being 'free-thinkers' and 'anarchists'. But this was not something they wanted to think freely about.

The memories floated back. To another place, a unit in South Yarra where I lived with Karen. It seemed a lifetime ago, except for one incident, the memory that returns on dark, windy nights, that batters my senses every time I walk through a park alone, or down the street at night, when I get into my car and lock all the doors, every time I enter an empty house and fumble for the light switch.

The Canadian Karen invited home from some disco, the one who seemed so nice, the one who thought my consenting to a kiss meant everything else, meant the right to hit, hurt, violate. I'd thought I was safe in my own home, safe to go to bed and leave them there - Karen, the Canadian and his three friends, quietly munching popcorn, laughing, watching the all-night telecast of the Superbowl. The paralyzing fear, the hard cock shoved in my mouth till I gagged while he held my head tightly by the hair, punches, triumphant laughter and, when it was over, surprise that I hadn't 'enjoyed' it.

I remember I sat up in bed, holding the sheet tightly around me, spitting out the rage, rage stronger than I'd ever felt before.

"You're an ANIMAL! GET OUT!"

He just stood there, puzzled, staring at me. Maybe he thought I should have been grateful.

"Listen," he sneered. "Don't be such a stupid girl."

It was obvious you wanted it."

"That way? RAPE? No-one ever wants to be raped! It may be alright where you come from, but I'm calling the cops if you don't get out of here right now!"

I was crying. My eyes smarted and watered as if they were never going to stop, like an avalanche of inevitable suffering.

"Alright. Have it your way." He pulled on his jeans and walked out, slamming the door behind him.

I could hear the television commentators babbling away in the next room, and Karen's slow American drawl. I sat very still, staring at my reflection in the mirror, crying and crying and crying. They didn't leave the house. Obviously Karen was enjoying their company. She'd fuck one of them before the night was over, always did. I turned out the light and lay there, fearful he'd come in again. There was no point in calling the police, not when the guys had been invited into the house in the first place. No-one would believe me.

At about eleven in the morning, Dane arrived. He poked his head around the door. "Hi-i!" he sang cheerfully. Then "Hey, what's up?"

"Have those guys gone?"

"What guys? There's no-one here but Karen and me."

He came and sat on the bed, awkwardly putting his arms around me as the tears came again. He looked worried. Dane liked everything to be easy. He never looked comfortable when people around him needed things of the emotional kind.

I told him the story, letting the guy kiss me in the living room, taking off to bed an hour later, being followed ...

"Why didn't you scream out to Karen, for chrissakes?"

"I dunno. I just felt ... speechless, paralysed ..."

"Where's Karen? I'm gonna get Karen ..."

But Karen didn't want to know. She'd told me once about a man who broke into her apartment in California. Raped her at knifepoint while her two year old son lay sleeping beside her. It wasn't the kind of thing she talked about often. She was keeping right out of it. Finally I got so frustrated I attacked her.

"What's going on here? You don't even care."

I was despairing. She was my friend, my closest friend.

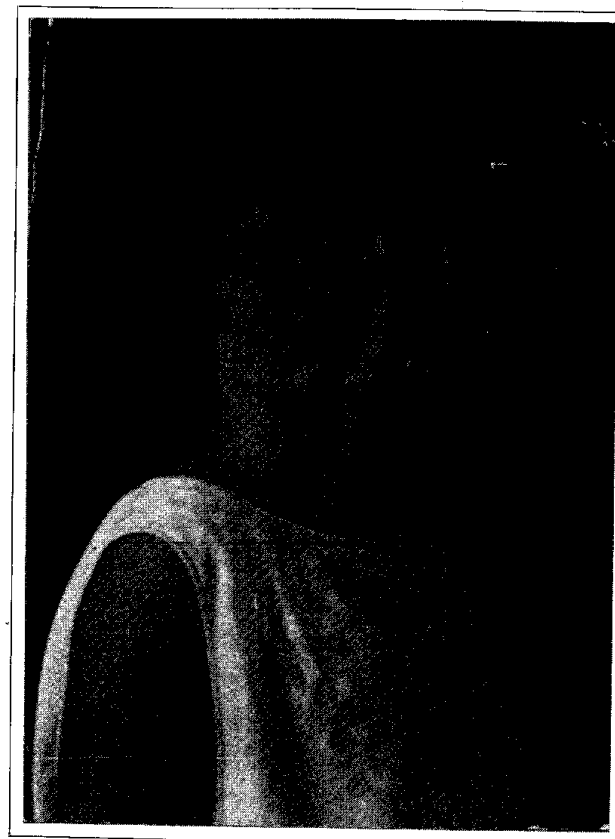
"You don't know what you're talking about," she said bitterly. "There are degrees of it. You did okay."

That was the end. The end of blind trust, the beginning of the end with Karen and I. It was competition for her: measure the degree of fear, the likelihood of death, and anything less harrowing than her experience didn't happen. Whether it was rape or not, friend or not, stranger or not.

I don't take things for granted anymore. I don't live alone, or only with women. I don't go out at night alone unless I know I can park right outside the place I'm going. I never walk the streets at night. Unless I'm with a man. And that makes me hostile, having to rely on men to protect me as an owner protects his property from a thief.

"I reckon you've got a persecution complex," Nick said to me. "Men are okay. It's not like that anymore. You don't know what you're talking about." I slid my arms into my coat, shrugged it onto my shoulders and walked out, the words in my head repeating over and over. "Not all men, Nick, not all men. It only takes one. And you don't even care."

So here I am, miles away from anyone, free to walk in the forest alone, run through the field of tall grass by the Falls, go braless without being self-conscious, enjoying the Earth that I, woman or not, was born from, will go to in the end, that is as much my heritage as anyone else's. And even here it follows me. Fear - dickheads and fear.



this one's for Mollie