

WINTERING AT MOOLTUNYA: ORIGINAL POEMS  
AND A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

By

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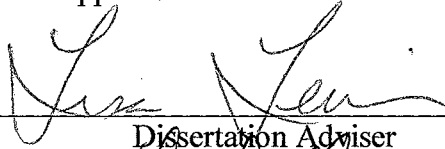
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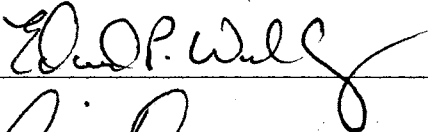
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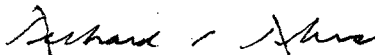
  
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For my parents, Jane and John.  
*Every artist is a cannibal; every poet is a thief.*  
—Bono

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## Introduction

*Poems are like dreams: in them you put what you don't know you know.*

My epigraph is from Adrienne Rich's essay, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision." Rich is describing looking back at her early poems and finding, under the carefully controlled, formal domestic poems, hints of the struggle she eventually tackled head-on in her thirties and later: the struggle to write as a woman, from a woman's experience, and in a way that was true to that experience. And although Rich had, at this point in her life, two books and three children under her belt, it is almost exactly the experience I have had in deciding how to write this introduction.

The poems in *Wintering at Mooltunya* are a record of both what it was I didn't know I knew and what it was I was gradually coming to understand about poetry and my way of writing it. And increasingly over the last few years, that understanding has been intertwined with my understanding of who I am—specifically, who I am as a woman. It is difficult, though, to separate out what I knew from experience, what I was learning from my exposure to writers like Rich, and what, as she says, I didn't know I knew. I have a feeling that it is likewise difficult to separate the parts of our personalities and lives we feel are innate, essential, or passed down from our parents, from the parts that we understand to be a result of society, of conditioning, or of training. This parallel is not incidental; it is rather, I believe, the nature of the experience of being a woman at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The difficulty I mention is, at present, magnified and manifested in the very endeavor of writing an introduction to these poems. If the poems themselves represent an attempt at self-definition (which I believe they do), then the introduction to them is inherently problematic. Sandra M. Gilbert has argued that the female poet

experiments with different propositions about her own nature, never cool or comfortable enough to be (like her male counterparts) an ironic sociologist; always, instead, a desperate Galileo, a passionate empiricist who sees herself founding a new science, rather than extending the techniques and discoveries of an old one. (119-120)

Thus the academic voice, relying as it does on the speaker's assurance and competency within the realm of textual analysis or theory (the techniques and discoveries of an existing science) is at loggerheads with the voice of the poems. More than that, it seems to require the very distance and objectivity that my particular poems question, challenge, subvert, and even in places deny. By saying this I do not mean to offer an apology for the introduction which follows. I do, however, mean to bring this issue up as a central one to women's poetry, and as one which is somewhat bizarrely illuminated in this particular project. As I write about my own writing, I do not have the "cool or comfortable" distance from it that is perhaps necessary to succeed in the task at hand. But before I even begin the attempt, I feel it is necessary to stress that this unease is not simply a *result* of my writing. On the contrary; it is its driving force, its reason, and its goal.

## Questions: 1992

Naïve. Like Olivia Newton-John's character in *Grease*. A Bachelor's degree in English from Oklahoma State University, exposure to the Romantics, the Moderns, the Confessionals, a vague pat on the back from Tess Gallagher and encouragement from far more men (Randy Phillis, Mark Cox, David St. John, Tom Lux), I arrived at Sarah Lawrence College in the fall of 1992 believing that poetry was a craft I had a pretty good handle on, and that it was a perfect, natural form in which to express my experience (whatever that was). I was writing poems about my mother, about becoming a wife, about travelling, and I did not consider myself a feminist. Nor did I consider that my experiences (the ones I was writing about) could be part of the same conversation that was taking place around me in workshop. The women in my workshops were writing hard, political poems about being women, but from very different experiences, and they made me uneasy. I couldn't see that the two could be one and the same, and I reacted by focussing more on what I saw as the "craft" of poetry, the sounds, rhythms, language, and rhetoric. And I looked forward to the spring semester, in which I was to take the required "Craft of Poetry" seminar with someone named Dana Gioia.

And not to sound prophetic, but the class was to be an object lesson, a turning point in my life—not just as a poet, but as a woman. In fact, one of these days I must thank Dana for helping me to see myself as a feminist. In his class I finally understood that far from being the "ideal" form of expression, poetry (its traditions, its heroes) was actually something I wasn't supposed to be doing. Oh, I could memorize forms and scan poems as fast as anyone. I could understand the thread of the bardic tradition, recognize



the caesura as an influence from Hebrew poetry, and agree that Pope's couplets did, in fact, *produce* an ironic tone. But when I tried to understand why both Elizabeth Bishop and Sylvia Plath moved me beyond words, I was informed that I was wrong. Bishop (with whom Dana had studied) could write; Plath could not. And no, we would not be charting the line of the Confessional Poets from Lowell to Sharon Olds or Louise Glück, because they were *bad* poets. We would instead chart the bardic line from Chaucer to Whitman to the new bards: rappers. When Dana said that about Olds, my friend Alice Anderson walked out of class.

My own political act against Dana was more subtle, and to be sure, he was ignorant of its rebellious nature. I turned in a sestina I had written as a sophomore—a poem I knew to be weak, full of cliché—and felt superior when he praised it to the class. The beautiful irony (in hindsight) was that in his evaluation, he lamented that he only felt like the “real” Jennifer revealed herself in that poem.

Five years later I decided to confront the loss of that naïve belief that in the poetry world, everyone got along and made their decisions about tradition and choices about form and content without fear of censure. I did this by exhaustively researching the New Formalist movement. This project was my own high noon with Dana, an attempt to square my shoulders and say “Right! If I’m going to do this then I’d better understand the rules of the game.” I had read *Can Poetry Matter?* and, while I thought he did bring up some interesting, valid questions (about the accessibility of contemporary poetry, the goals of MFA programs, and poetry’s contentious relationship with the publishing industry), the answers he offered were unacceptable. I was not going to write sonnets about the Beach Boys, nor ironic couplets about choosing wedding china, nor was I in

any way going to wash down my poems so that they were more palatable to the general public—either in form or in content. The poems the New Formalists were writing did not move me, they did not excite me, and they did not seem even to attempt to connect with me as a reader.

What became increasingly clear was that the crux of the issue was the use of the pronoun “I”. And the more clear it became that this was the crucial question, the more clearly I saw that this was a question with more ramifications, origins, and permutations than I would be able to sort out in a lifetime. The overwhelming sense I got from reading the manifestoes of the New Formalists (and this is in no way an academic assertion) was that they were squeamish. They were tired of the Confessionalists and their children forcing their readers to look so very closely at their intimate, ugly lives. This, they were sure, accounted for the “decline” in poetry’s popularity among the public. And while they made a good, solid case for the equal importance of a return to form (as a separate issue from this one of content) the poets and critics who answered them were quick to point out that the two were intertwined. Their squeamishness was alleviated by the asbestos gloves that form represented in the face of the predominantly free-verse, autobiographical poetry of the last four or five decades.

And what was the nature of this “I”? It was, I felt sure, simply a binary. The “private” poet versus the “public” poet. The Confessional poets were part of the lineage of the Romantics, of Whitman’s “I,” and of Keats’. But why did I write poems using it as a voice, rather than writing distanced, third-person poems? Was it a conscious choice? (As a craftswoman, I demanded that it be.) Was it honesty of some sort? Arrogance? And

why, if it was this which had turned contemporary Americans away from poetry, were they turning in droves to tell-all autobiographies and daytime talk shows?

### Further Questions

Harold Bloom begins his introduction to *The Best of the Best American Poetry 1988-1997* with an epigraph from Thucydides, spoken by the Spartan commander at Thermopylae: *They have the numbers; we, the heights*. This is a bold rhetorical move, begging the question on the part of the reader: which am I? Surely he is writing to me, the reader, the Dante to his Virgil, the pupil, the lover or writer of poetry? And if *I* am part of *we*, then who are *they*? The despisers of poetry, or the lovers of bad poetry, or the millions of Republicans who want to do away with the NEA?

No.

For Bloom, *they* are “the multiculturalists, the hordes of camp-followers afflicted by the French diseases, the mock-feminists, the commissars, the gender-and-power freaks, the hosts of new historicists and old materialists—” and *we* stand above them for a while longer, holding the heights, the “realm of aesthetic” (15). Bloom’s introduction to this compilation from *The Best American Poetry* series is primarily a justification, a defense, of his pointed omission of any poem from the 1996 volume, which was edited by Adrienne Rich.

Bloom is no New Formalist, of course. He is Bloom Brontosaurus. He is the arbiter of *The Western Canon*. And he is, to read his introduction, disappointed that

poetry is no longer our elite art, and that poets are no longer (quoting Emerson) the “liberating gods” they once were (25). Instead, he finds the scene of contemporary American poetry dominated by the “School of Resentment,” in which a poet’s gender, sexual orientation, and race are privileged above her aesthetic. And the Resenters, Bloom argues, have misappropriated Whitman as their grandfather. The problem Bloom identifies is that poetry should not be social in nature. It should not be political; it should not attempt to cause change or chronicle human civilization. And he maintains that Whitman, the seemingly accessible, (gay) poet of the masses, is actually elusive, difficult, and *onanistic*. In other words, in the eyes of one of the most eminent and respected critics of our time, the poetic impulse to self-define (i.e. the impulse of various writers of varying shades and shapes to express their own experience in the context of a world which is only now coming to terms with the way in which it has denied so many writers that very right) is in no way the same impulse as that which brought forth the *barbaric yawp* of the great Romantic writers.

So, then, is the issue really the poetic “I”? Or is it an issue of the connotations of isolation, community, privilege, and the power of language? What is the difference between a poet who is *onanistic* and one who is egotistical? One is a god, the other a woman. One recognizes his place on Olympus, and while he may (by virtue of his gift) express something of the human condition, it will be an aspect of it that mere humans may only barely have sensed, and he will in no way expect a reply from the masses. He does not care whether we get it or not. Art, in fact, is above us. The other, recognizing that the only way she can get up that mountain is as an objectified muse or goddess, writes the story of her own experience among the masses in a vain act of resentment.

## Two Poems About Inspiration

The great Romantic poet of the twentieth century is surely Wallace Stevens, and for many, many years my favorite poem was “The Idea of Order at Key West.” It was, I felt, the best expression of what pleased me most in the writing of poetry: the making of order within a context of unease, the idea of the mythmaker, the singer singing “beyond the genius of the sea.” I loved its layers, the two singers, the ordering within the ordering, the ghostly lights that are not quite stars, and the ghost of a man (“pale Ramon”) walking beside the poet, a philosopher with his own ideas of order. The woman in the poem is at once muse, object of the poem, and mirror of the male poet writing the poem. Stevens’ voice throughout is confident in its ability to understand her:

It was her voice that made  
The sky acutest at its vanishing.  
She measured to the hour its solitude.  
She was the single artificer of the world  
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,  
Whatever self it had, became the self  
That was her song, for she was the maker. (34-40)

And the more I loved the poem, the more I realized that the unease I enjoyed with it was not part of the poem itself; it was part of my response to the poem. Could I really identify with the poet? And which part of the singer was I? The muse? The object of the poem’s observation?

Men tell [the female poet] that she is a muse. Yet she knows that she is not a muse, she *has* a muse (and what is its sex?) . . . They tell her, echoing Archibald McLeish's definition of a poem, that she should not mean but be. Yet meanings delight her, along with seemings, games, plays, costumes, and ideas of order, as they delight male poets. But perhaps, she speculates, her rage for order is mistaken, presumptuous? (Gilbert 122)

The unease for me, when reading Stevens' poem, lies in recognizing his surety, and in recognizing that no matter what world the singer is making, *he* is making *her*. The world she sings and the self she creates are contained within his poem, within his observation of her walking along the water's edge. It is still one of my favorite poems, and I've addressed it directly in "Charting Hurricanes," but it is now clear that my response to it is tangled up in the problem of which poet in the poem has the real control over ordering his or her world.

The perfect foil to Stevens' poem is Rich's "Orion." Like Stevens, she is writing about her muse (the constellation Orion), but unlike him she struggles with the very real relationship, with the inability to give over to (or experience from the beginning?) the confident singing Stevens accepts as a given. Whereas Stevens objectifies his muse, Rich struggles with hers. She recognizes his affinity with the Western, male tradition into which she was born, sees him "staring / down from that simplified west / your breast open, your belt dragged down / by an oldfashioned thing, a sword / the last bravado you won't give over / though it weighs you down as you stride" (7-12). Like the "dimly-starred" and "ghostlier demarcations" (54, 56) of Stevens' singer, Orion's stars are "dim / and maybe have stopped burning" (13-14), but unlike Stevens, Rich does not have the

luxury of ending on that pseudo-wistful note. Her awareness of her muse's shortcomings comes in the middle of the poem, and lacking a more suitable muse, she is left to "throw back my head and take you in" (16). That she does this with a full understanding of the chaos this will bring to her domestic life underscores the desperation, the divided responsibilities and identities she feels as a poet and a woman.

### Projects

I have said that the poems in *Wintering at Mooltunya* are poems of self-definition; they are consciously autobiographical, they use the first-person voice exclusively, and to varying degrees they participate in the political discussion, the challenge to the neutrality of the reader, that I have just sketched. I have implied, too, that in their starts and stops, in the shifts they make between caution and confidence, passivity and aggression, and the known and not-known-that-it-is-known, they defy the idea that the self (particularly the female self) *can* be easily defined.

Within that larger project, though, they do of course fall into smaller ones. I have organized the manuscript, for example, somewhat loosely chronologically around the last big event in my life, my marriage of five years and its breakup. Conceiving of the work in the somewhat vague categories of before, during, and after ("Charting Hurricanes," "Archaeology," and "Wintering at Mooltunya,") allowed me both the perceived security of a sense of order and the necessary, resisting fluidity that the poems represent. Thus, while these are the categories, the poems were not written in this order, nor do their

impulses conform exactly with the assumed impulses of the time periods. Personalities, emotions, and events do not fall into such careful patterns.

The major themes of the poems are the body, relationships (romantic and familial), and place (geography, citizenship, and weather). These three form a triangle of self-definition; we define ourselves first by the physical boundaries of our body, then in relation to others, and finally in the context of our environment.

Increasingly, my impulse is to try to surprise myself and my reader. Poetry, as I indicated in my discussion of Wallace Stevens, initially attracted me because of that need to order, define, dissect the world around me. Thus my early experimentation with various forms and my attempt to imitate the confident, objective voice I admired in the (mostly male) poets I loved. This, perhaps, was an indication of youth as much as anything (although in my own students I've noticed an inclination towards rebellion I never quite felt). But the more I read and the older I got, the less satisfied I was with creating poems that exhibited such tight control. I also became more interested in the meaning created by figurative and uneasy language rather than in the meaning created by the careful telling of stories in poems. *Wintering at Mooltunya* does show this increasing impulse to push away from the easy and the safe (although very few, admittedly, could be seen as "risky.")

Formally, the poems are written in free verse, and tend towards being the same length (somewhere between one and two pages is the norm), although I have been working towards longer pieces, with "Charting Hurricanes" being the best example. I have chosen to write in free verse rather than in formal, metrical verse for the same reasons I write from personal experience and use the first-person narrator. Free verse



allows for a more conversational, personal tone, and while techniques like line length and enjambment produce very specific effects, they do not—for me at least—imply the absolute control that formal metrics do (especially metrical verse which is married to rhyme of some sort.) Denise Levertov has argued in “On the Function of the Line” that “contemporary, non-metrical poetry . . . incorporates and reveals the *process* of thinking/feeling, feeling/thinking, rather than focusing more exclusively on its *results*,” (265) and it is increasingly clear to me that this is perhaps the best reason to choose free verse over metrical verse.

### Conversations

My main literary influences thus far have been Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath, and Adrienne Rich. Much has been said about the theory of literary influence, and I would rather simply highlight the places in a few poems I feel that I am responding to poets I've read. At times this relationship is, indeed, anxiety-ridden. Whether we base our understanding of this anxiety on Bloom's Freudian theories of the family romance, or John Barth's of the postmodern literature of exhaustion, it remains true that the contemporary writer wrestles with his or her precursors in some way. And this is not to deny feminist theories about the positive, communal nature of such a relationship, either. I have, at times, felt the full spectrum of encouragement, inspiration, and competition with these three women as well as with other writers. The best metaphor, however, is that of an ongoing conversation. I say 'ongoing' because they have not simply had their say

before I've responded in my writing. As I return to their poems and writing again and again, they say new things that I, then, can respond to in turn.

If I had to, I would say that I love Bishop's eye, Plath's tongue and heart, and Rich's mind. But that would be reducing them to body parts. Could I say instead that I admire Bishop's way of seeing the world, Plath's use of language and her courage, and Rich's rhetoric? Is that any less reductive?

My conversation with Bishop has to do mainly with place. We are both travelers, we have both been expatriates, and we have felt implicated in the American imperialism of the twentieth century. An integral part of being a traveler—and especially a woman who is a traveler—is being an almost scientific observer of one's surroundings. Everything is different, but the degree to which a street in Brazil or Australia is different from a street in New England or Texas depends on a million different observations. A woman traveler is more aware of the way in which non-Western people (South American peasants or the Maori) are objectified and identified in relation to the natural world around them, and she is probably more aware that the self's own identification with place is complicated by the gendered imperative to create a home.

Having said that, I recognize that many of the specific references to Bishop in these poems have little to do with geography. I had her "In the Waiting Room" in mind, for example, while writing "Charting Hurricanes." My delight as a child in the women's names given to hurricanes, and my later recognition of the power given to the *namer* (and the problems associated with that power) are in conversation with Bishop's epiphany of being "an Elizabeth" and her sudden awareness of the link between her, her Aunt

Consuelo, and the women in the *National Geographic* with their “horrifying” breasts. Not immediately obvious in my poem (but included deliberately) is a similar awareness of my own first name, which means in Welsh “white water.”

Another poem in which I reply to Bishop—this time more playfully—is “Ode to the First Full Moon in May.” This is a response to her “Man-Moth,” in which the character is trying to climb his way up to the opening in the sky. The moon in my ode is deliberately not an opening, and I make a point of telling the moon that I will not climb the “branches / of that maple you are lighting / like a path.” And finally, I have exorcised my own irrational phobia about moths by reducing Bishop’s Man-Moth to the Atlas moths humming above the neighbor’s moon flowers.

My conversation with Plath began when I was a high school senior and attended the Oklahoma Summer Arts Institute. Our poetry instructor gave us several poems of hers to read, and while many of my female classmates were in love with her rage, I was in awe of her power and control. I memorized “Lady Lazarus” and would spend hours feeling the vowels swirl around my mouth like marbles; I desperately wanted to understand how she generated such seething emotion with this tightly controlled, ironic, arch tone. And more than that, I wanted the forward motion of the poem, the inevitability, the way the sounds of the words overcame inertia.

The closest I have come to a response are the occasional moments of music or motion, like the list of types of bras in “Ode to the Bra,” and in the poem “Hangi Feast: Rotorua, New Zealand.” In this poem, I am directly replying to Lady Lazarus’s fascination with her body, her reincarnation, and her final promise to arise and “eat men

like air.” My poem, although dealing with sexuality rather than suicide, does look at the notion of cannibalism in a similar light to Plath’s poem. In both poems, cannibalism is aggressive, based in impulse and emotion rather than in the ritualistic, spiritual way it is usually portrayed in anthropology. And I’ve tried to add my voice to Plath’s in the way this turns the tables on traditional gender roles. It may be a common male fantasy to have a woman—a stranger—so overwhelmed by his physical presence that she falls immediately into foreplay, but I doubt that the fantasy would extend to having chunks of his flesh bitten off and ingested. Similarly, Plath’s *Lady Lazarus* is aware of the god-complex of the men in her poem and their fantasies of rescuing her and bringing her back to life, but she wrests control of that fantasy back from them by turning on them, phoenix-like, once that rescue is complete.

Taking a similar subject allowed me to experiment with imitating Plath’s rhythms and use of sound as well. She is heavy-handed in her use of internal rhyme, assonance, and consonance, and I believe it is especially powerful in a poem like “*Lady Lazarus*” because of the subject matter. The sounds make it impossible for the reader to look away from the action of the poem (because the ear is tuned to catch the next echo; it expects it) and the subject of the poem underscores the ironic power of the sometimes nursery-rhyme sound play. Likewise, in “*Hangi Feast*,” I felt free to play with the heavy-handed long “e” sounds in “uncurling in the tree ferns, / the geothermal steam,” and to allow my speaker license to issue a challenging “yes” to this fog as it uncurls.

When I heard Adrienne Rich read at Sarah Lawrence, I had only read *An Atlas of the Difficult World*, and had not reached a point in my own life where I was ready to have

a conversation with her. This was probably a good thing, since she was all but mobbed after the reading and was in no position to listen to anything I would have said . . . but in the last few years her poems and her early essays have become, ironically, a sort of map for me. Poems like “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers,” “Planetarium,” “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law,” and “Orion” are showing me the things in my own writing that I did not know I knew (to come back to her thought about poems). I identify with her impulses as a young writer, her relationship with the poetic tradition, and her experience as a young wife trying to write in the face of (and about) an experience that did not allow for writing. Her rhetoric is more thoughtful and more conscious of the tension between feeling like a woman and writing like a man—to be almost heartbreakingly reductive—than either Bishop or Plath, and I have finally begun a conversation with her with an almost palpable sigh of relief, of recognition.

The specific responses to Rich that I find in my poems are stumbling ones; in “Charting Hurricanes” I’m responding to “Planetarium,” admitting to letting go of my childhood desire to be a scientist and agreeing with Rich’s condemnation of the way women are seen in the constellations/storms as “monsters.” I am also investigating the problems associated with innocently admiring these monsters, in participating in the patriarchy in this way. And in “Sign Language” I take a stab at working through the anger she warns we must go through (in “When We Dead Awaken”) to get to a better place in our writing. In general, though, this is a conversation that will have a much greater role in future poems, or in further revisions of the poems in *Wintering*.

## Body

Ostriker writes that “One subject that all women have in common to tell the truth about is anatomy” (315). It is a common, mutual place to begin to define ourselves. Not only is it the physical manifestation of the “self,” but it is also the field on which battles over control of that self have for centuries been fought. It is also the page on which definitions of the self by others have hitherto been written. And, as Bette Middler replied somewhat less theoretically when asked at a stand-up show why she was “always talking about her tits,” “My world; welcome to it.” And so we talk about them. Because my first experience with the clasps on a bra has radically different implications for my self identity than does a male poet’s first experience with the same clasps:

I have tried to explore several different ways that women know their bodies, define themselves in relation to their bodies, and are defined by their bodies by others. In “Archaeology” and “Stutter” I take the voice of a woman who passively allows a man to arrange her body, to trap hers with his own. In “First Kiss: Portuguese Man O’War,” I describe the disturbing similarities between the first sexual awakening a female body feels and the toxic, blistering sting of a jellyfish. And “Bath” and “Charting Hurricanes” provide twin impressions of two female bodies nestled in a maternal embrace of knees around hips.

In “Echo Point, Blue Mountains,” I address the eroticizing of the female body when it is seen as inseparable from a foreign, exotic place:

he thinks it is exotic

to be in this place where I used to live

to hear my voice fall back  
into the cadence of birds  
he loves it  
he says  
his mouth on my belly (1-7)

And at the same time I have tried to capture the problematic feeling (unique to women?) of being desired for what your body represents or echoes. The other woman in the poem, a schoolgirl who is wearing a uniform almost identical to the one I wore when I lived in Sydney, becomes for my husband in the poem a fetishized fantasy and for me an idealized doppelganger. Because of the way she is objectified by us both, she becomes an “echo between us / a lover we both want.”

## Relationships

Another way we define ourselves is by examining our relationships with others, and the strongest relationships are either familial or romantic/sexual. And although my mother and my sister do appear often in my poems, I am guilty of focusing primarily on my relationships with men (especially my father and my ex-husband). Rich, when looking back at her early poems, is startled by “glimpses of the split [she] even then experienced between the girl who wrote poems, who defined herself in writing poems, and the girl who was to define herself by her relationships with men” (352). It is this split that is at the heart of why I write about these relationships at all. Certainly I run the risk

of incurring a deluge of Freudian psychoanalysis if the poems fail to recognize what they are doing, and it is to avoid this that I insist on examining, within them, the problems inherent in defining myself by these relationships even as I am doing it. Thus, the private admission in “Wintering at Mooltunya” that if my father were any other man, I would accept the mantle of women-who-leave-men and leave him to his pain is countered with the understanding that because I have defined myself in the past as the daughter he didn’t need, I have no choice but to offer him support when he asks for it. It is this empowering aspect of self-analysis that I’m reaching for in the poems by focusing on a self-definition that begins with “woman.”

“Womanhood” and “Listening for Bell-Birds” address my desire as both child and adult child to please my father. Both poems question the way that my self-identity is tied to his, and loosely question our basic understandings of ourselves as individuals capable of determining our own talents and tastes. In the first, I tell the story of shooting my Barbie with the BB gun my father gave me for Christmas. My father was at the time an advertising executive for the company who managed Mattel’s campaign, and his reasoning for not allowing my sister and me to have Barbies was a good one: they didn’t represent real women. But encouraging his daughter to shoot the one she inadvertently acquires sends a bizarre message. And in “Listening for Bell-Birds,” I question whether my own love of photography is because of or incidental to my search for my father’s approval (which is withheld in the poem).

Most of the poems in “Archaeology” deal with my relationship with my ex-husband. Specifically, they address the way that identifying myself as his wife became increasingly difficult and problematic. “Storm Pattern” reflects feeling trapped under the



blankets of a marriage bed, with an impending spring storm outside the windows and a Navajo rug, with its built-in escape route of a corner tassel, offering the only solace.

## Place

As I indicated in my discussion of Elizabeth Bishop, notions of place (geography, citizenship or belonging to a place, and weather to name a few) are central to my poetry. My first experience of being “other” was not as a woman, but as an American in Australia. Thus my childhood and adolescence are sectioned into “Texas” and “Australia,” like pages in a passport. Even before moving around the world, we had moved all over Texas, living in ten assorted houses in as many years. Moving teaches you patterns: making friends, but making them casually; exploring as soon as you unpack, and doing so in an attempt to become part of your surroundings; observation and mimicry. It teaches you what does and doesn’t obey boundaries and borders (things like weather and language and memory). And it teaches you how to negotiate similarities and differences between places (the way the Gulf is and isn’t like the Pacific).

Perhaps what has interested me most in recent poems is the idea of returning to a place. Since leaving Australia in 1986, I’ve returned twice, and I’ve returned to Texas many more times. There is the strange familiarity, the behavior and language you’d forgotten that you knew, side-by-side with alienation. The place tells you that you don’t belong anymore (if indeed you ever did).

I began “Charting Hurricanes” after visiting the Gulf shore for the first time in over fifteen years, and although the occasion for the poem is not addressed directly in it, the feeling of loss, of nostalgia and alienation, is. The speaker remembers the last time she went out on the mile-long fishing pier at Port Aransas, and in hindsight sees a building hurricane just over the edge of the horizon as a metaphor for the future. Likewise, the girl in “First Kiss” turns to look out to sea at the first sting of the jellyfish as if the horizon held an answer to what she doesn’t yet know will be quite a bit of pain (from the sting and from desire). One horizon becomes another, one ocean another.

“Alamo Tableau” is a poem more explicitly about returning to Texas, and the frustration of not finding, and not being able to express, the images and memories from childhood. The things a fourth grader associates with Texas (“Mockingbird. Pecan. Bluebonnet.”) are inadequate and unavailable to express a remembered childhood. The speaker instead settles for pointing out a couple in a mariachi band to her companion, and it is this adult image which more closely approximates the experience of this afternoon. The place has changed, as has she.

The theme of returning to Australia is complicated by my relationship to two men: my father, who left my family in part because he wanted to stay in Australia, and my ex-husband, with whom I returned to Australia in something of a last-ditch effort to save our marriage. In the title poem of the collection, the lush environment of my father’s home becomes welcoming to me in a way that Texas had not in the poems mentioned above. His house becomes the site at which I attempt to release ten years of resentment towards him as his own life becomes a parody of mine and her mother’s. The distinctive Australian wildlife, the rosellas and the wallabies, become symbolic of my younger

siblings, and although I am resigned to remain with my father on the porch and listen to him talk, “I want nothing more than to walk out into the rainforest / and leave this man / who has aged gracefully without me”. Thus, in this poem the half-remembered place accepts and reflects the returning traveler.

One of the last poems in the manuscript, “Walkabout,” is the one that deals perhaps most directly with the simultaneous loss of familiarity with a place and the longing for it. The walkabout is an Aboriginal custom (and one which they generously encourage Westerners to do) and is the physical, human equivalent of the endless walking the gods of the Dreamtime did while they were creating the world. It is usually solitary, and is meant to accomplish the goal of learning oneself and one’s place in the universe. In this poem, I’ve brought the theme of searching for a place, for a sense of belonging, full circle. The walkabout in the poem emphasizes that it is not the place which imparts that feeling, but rather the speaker’s confidence that she is and can be “at home” anywhere—that this is something she carries with her rather than seeks out.

## Conclusion

I suppose I am less interested, in the final analysis, in whether or not the poems succeed in accomplishing this goal of self-definition as it applies to me. More than this goal, which is admittedly somewhat narcissistic, I would like my readers to see the poems as examples of this process, so that they might apply the same scrutiny, curiosity, and wonder to their own experiences. What thrills me about poetry is the way it illuminates

the startling and beautiful connections between the things that happen to us, the world around us, and the people we are in the process of becoming every day. In other words, I would hope that a reader—although she may never have had the experience of shooting a Barbie with her father, for example—would look at her own relationship with an important person in her life (or at her experiences with travel or with the physicality of her personality) and see similar truths and beauty as I did in examining those experiences.

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## WINTERING AT MOOLTUNYA

## Charting Hurricanes

*First Kiss: Portuguese Man O'War*

Twenty meters long and as light  
as my hair on the buoyant salt water,  
a thin blue line like a bracelet  
around my arm, heat on my thigh.  
I remember turning into the swell to look  
behind me, every hair standing straight up,  
but only the Pacific, a surfer, a gull.  
Then as my toes found sand  
the pain wrapped around me like a towel.  
I was fifteen and crimson from the sun  
and embarrassment, an awkward imbalance  
of hips and breasts. At the lifeguard station,  
I shivered while a man with tawny eyes and gold  
hair on his forearms poured gallons  
of chilled vinegar over my head. It washed  
behind my ears in waves and pooled in the hollow  
of my neck. *Close your eyes*, he said. *Jesus,*  
*didn't you see them on the beach?*  
I shook my head, mute, on the verge  
of understanding poison, the neurotoxins  
of desire. It should have been him; his hands

(cont., no break)



curling around my skin like a lover, teasing,  
barely scratching the surface of the woman  
I wanted to be. His fingernail against the back  
of my neck, a thin tracing of the blue vein  
on the inside of my arm, a tongue against  
the inside of my elbow, sand against my lips.

*Shooting Barbie*

She was beautiful, and I was eight. She was perfect,  
smooth, with flax hair and a jumpsuit even Charlie's Angels  
would have killed for. Miniature pink rollerskates,  
a tiny hairbrush, she was all I ever wanted  
to be. I'd drawn her number at the gift swap at school.  
I didn't think twice about bringing her home.

That Christmas Santa brought me a BB gun  
and a microscope for Bonnie and me to share.  
I had never wondered about fathers and daughters  
and what it meant to be a girl. The day after Christmas,  
while I was counting the shiny copper BBs from the milk  
carton into the palm of my hand, my father told me

he didn't think Barbie was as perfect as all that.  
Or perhaps, he thought, she was too perfect for a real  
girl like me. And he knew, he said, because I was his  
girl, I wouldn't want to be a part of that image,  
that materialism that Mattel projected onto women.  
And then he smiled at me and patted me on the knee

(cont., break)

and said he was proud of me. And we took Barbie,  
threw away the perfect, cellophane box, and set her carefully  
on the back fence, where no one would get caught  
in the crossfire. And we killed a few hours knocking her  
off, along with empty Dr. Pepper cans. God, she was beautiful,  
the sun glinting off that skin, cradled there between the sights.

*Listening For Bell-Birds*

My father cups a fungus the size of a child's head  
with his hands. He's kneeling by a strangler fig,  
the fingers of roots around the now-hollow center  
filtering light like lace across his back.

We are hunting mushrooms in the rainforest of northern  
New South Wales, cameras slung around our necks,  
the Hasselblad I hope to inherit one day around his,  
my Canon 35 SE fitted with a macro lens.

How did we come to this point of shutter  
speed and aperture? We move briefly into sunlight,  
a great hole in the canopy where a eucalyptus fell.  
He nudges the decaying bark and carpet of leaves  
with his boot and I wonder what is the equivalent  
exposure of a life? We've seen each other only  
three times in ten years, but today we've drunk tea  
from his thermos, consulted his dog-eared field guide,

and listened for the sparrow-sized sirens

(cont., no break)

we've sensed darting through the branches around us.

And it might be enough. I know now how quickly

he can load film. I know he's read Barthes,

and like him loves the mechanical whir and click

of a well-made German camera. And he's reassured himself

I'll slide down a mountain on my ass for a shot,

holding my camera high above the mud like a good girl.

I've waited all day for him to say *good one. You nailed it,*

but I know it'll take longer than we have time or light

this afternoon. He pulls a dead branch into our patch of sun,

angling the rays onto a rust-colored fan and I wander

down the trail, hoping to hear the elusive wind-chimes,

listening for the bellbirds, hoping I'll be so lucky.

*stringing beads with annie*

this amber one for the time you fell  
off the trampoline and skinned both knees  
the clear crystal pendant from the czech republic  
for the moment you understand how small we are  
in this warm dark universe

hard garnet spheres—one for every heart you'll break  
including mine

cloudy forest-green cylinders for your own heart's longings  
there will be men who blend in with the pine trees  
long-legged and whisper-soft  
and they'll lay their hands along your neck and pull you close  
but they won't mean it

one bright, peridot drop  
for your battle-cry on the soccer field

butter-beads, seed pearls  
for every right answer  
for every dance and kiss and speeding ticket

(cont., no break)

and you'll want these random silver spacers

for all the sights you'll never see

tiger-tail for the strength

to fight like a woman

and a silver clasp for the things you'll put aside

*My Parents' Old Acting Troupe, The Alpha Omega Players, Comes to Town*

Jimmy actually stood, stage left, and said  
*is there a doctor in the house? St. Joan is in labor.*

My mother, tangled in the rough brown robe,  
leaning against the wall in the middle of Act II,  
barely through the second trimester,  
had missed her cue.

We are legends in this rag-tag group,  
and the story grows each time it's told:  
my father running lights, my mother  
practicing her lines in front of the mirror.  
She was so good she even knew Joan's skin,  
would say later she knew what it felt like to burn.

And earlier that night, they say the whole troupe  
sat in the trailer and tried to name me over spaghetti  
and beer, blocked out my entrance and sketched  
a script for the young parents. They were somewhere  
in Pennsylvania, would hit Delaware the next night  
and open *Spoon River* in a graveyard.

(cont., break)



1. The first part of the document discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records.

2. It is essential to ensure that all data is entered correctly and that the system is regularly updated. This helps to prevent errors and ensures that the information is current and reliable.

3. The second part of the document outlines the various methods used to collect and analyze data. These methods include surveys, interviews, and focus groups, each of which has its own strengths and weaknesses.

4. Finally, the document concludes by emphasizing the need for transparency and accountability in the research process. This means that all data and findings should be clearly documented and made available to the relevant stakeholders.

But all the versions end at the ambulance doors,  
the house lights up in the small community theater,  
the worried smiles over the pregnant Joan of Arc.  
Only my mother remembers the encore,  
the doctors telling her I'd kill us both,  
begging her to sign a release form.  
I can only imagine my father's fear,  
my mother's fierce eyes,  
and the way she fell back into character with a sigh.

*Ode to the Bra*

At first only a scrap  
to cover the young nipple buds,  
an eye-patch,  
not even a mockery  
of what wasn't there:  
mom demanding in Sears,  
open the door—let me see  
how it looks.  
I thought I didn't need one,  
knew it would never look right,  
no matter what I filled  
it with: toilet paper,  
shoulder pads.  
It could never make me beautiful,  
would never make me fit myself.

I stood in front of the mirror  
and sneered,  
rolled my shoulders forward,  
pulled on a sweatshirt.

The bra said nothing;

(cont., no break)

lay crumpled on my bed,  
a blink of rose against the sheets.

But months later,  
after I called it useless,  
used it to slingshot  
doll heads across the room,  
when I could no longer hide  
from the eyes of boys,  
I found it under a shoebox.  
It was softer, somehow,  
light and pretty.

I stripped to the waist, felt  
the tiny eye hooks and smooth straps.  
They slipped so easily  
over my shoulder.  
And then first the left, then the right  
breast found a perfect place.

And after that first  
successful day,  
I learned the language

(cont., no break)

of numbers and letters.

I found a sports bra,

a padded bra,

a push-up and a demi-cup.

I learned of the strapless,

backless, see-through,

the front clasp, cross-your-heart,

the incredible edible bras,

and the glorious ones,

the black lace, second-skin satin,

the merry widow, the bustier,

the underwire,

and the miracle bra.

I learned the quick-flip,

through-the-sleeve release,

and finally

I learned to pull my shoulders back.

This is what you've taught me, bra:

that a breast should be held

safe and close to the body;

that there are things which frighten men,

(cont., no break)

secret wonderful things

like clasps and curve

and skin on skin.

You are not a torture device,

a straitjacket, nor

a way of subjugating women.

You, with your feminine smile

and arch

sense of good humor,

your practicality and your decadence,

I salute you with a shimmy

and take back every complaint I ever made.

You balance my life

and weigh each aspect of it

with the same,

deliberate care.

*Bath*

This past Halloween, the late afternoon light twisting low  
through the catalpa leaves, Red Riding Hood tripped  
along the sidewalk in front of her parents.

Her cape was too long, and I touched the glass

of the front door as she approached our house.

Her mother, in a witch's hat and college sweatshirt,  
reached for her daughter hidden somewhere  
beneath the cape, never missed a word

of whatever she was telling her husband, steadied Red  
and peaked her hood. Is this the rhythm of motherhood?

The careless swoop of a child's weight  
against a hip? Is this what we're taught from birth?

My niece is four and decides tonight, during a perfectly  
ordinary dinner, that I am lucky. Or perhaps pretty  
like her ballet teacher, or maybe that she likes the color  
of my sweater. For this I am chosen for her bath.

We have circled around each other her whole life,

(cont., no break)

and we finally meet with the careful etiquette of bath toys.

She trusts me with the shell pink of her scalp,  
the hollows of her body. I know that in a few moments,

we will negotiate the folds of a towel, our arms and legs  
tangling together, and that the press and release of her  
between my knees is something I should understand.

But I don't know if I was meant for these movements,

or if I had to practice on dolls, baby brothers: how to dry  
the paper-thin skin between shoulder blades,  
how many times a towel will wrap around a whole person,  
ending with the ends tucked under a small chin.

And as I comb her hair, my hands at the roots  
to keep from pulling, as I guide her feet through  
pajama legs, I am almost not myself. I am not a mother.

This is not my bathroom, not my damp,

pink daughter setting her hands on my shoulders.

When did I learn to lean into her weight, to kneel  
and balance for us both? Three nights ago, on Halloween,  
she was a ladybug in a black turtleneck

(cont., break)



and red wings, but tonight she is all flannel and warmth  
as she follows me out to the car as I leave. She knows something  
now, something about how our bodies have learned  
the same lessons. And I have passed a test: as I pull  
  
out of the driveway, she slips out of her dad's arms  
and runs across the darkening lawn towards me.  
She trips, goes into the tuck and roll she is learning,  
and rights herself in the dew-jeweled fescue.

*Charting Hurricanes*

*It was her voice that made  
The sky acutest at its vanishing.  
—Wallace Stevens  
from “The Idea of Order at Key West”*

*The National Center for Atmospheric Research, Boulder, Colorado*

I.M. Pei playing with blocks as a toddler, a surety  
in his choices that surprises a nearby adult.

(This is easy to imagine, although perhaps untrue.)

And later, his critical, dark eye scanning the Flatirons  
beyond the Boulder skyline, searching for the subtle spot  
where stone segued into wall-of-stone and then back

into the deepening green of juniper. Inside his building,  
which I’ve decided callously is too heavy, too earth-bound  
to house a bunch of meteorologists, I am reminded

that plush carpet can feel like sand between your toes.

I read a footnote behind plexiglass: *until 1979, all hurricanes  
and tropical storms were given women’s names only.*

And as I wander the displays, call up the archived

satellite photos of storms I thought I knew by name, (cont., no break)

this one sentence spins my own childhood memories counter-clockwise,

demands that I finally hear the unspoken connotations

of death, the way a father names a daughter,

the way a name can become a curse to be used

as crops disappear under mudslides, or condos crumble

into the Gulf. Here, in the thin air a mile above sea-level,

I feel the shame reserved for women who never question.

A man walks by as if he belongs here, in the research offices

behind the display walls. He wears a slight frown

and cradles an important-looking stack of folders

under his arm. I almost reach out to stop him,

to insist *it was always the same for me, too. The storms,*

*the naming of the clouds.* But I let him walk by.

Is this, then, how we release our earliest dreams?

Belatedly, a little embarrassed

at having been caught looking the other way?

I've begun what seems like the irrevocable season

of my life, the career, the school loans, the furniture,

(cont., break)

the point at which a passion becomes just a hobby.

If Pei were here, I'd tell him that when I was four

I wanted to be a hurricane, not a ballerina, teacher, or mother.

Mom told this story to each boyfriend I ever brought

home: *she'd spin*, she'd say, conjuring my long hair

lifting away from my head like the cirrus streamers

uncurling from the edge of a storm.

And she'd laugh that mother-showing-baby-pictures-laugh

as she described how finally, exhausted and dizzy,

I'd slam into the avocado Formica countertop

and collapse onto the matching linoleum floor.

\* \* \*

*Padre Island National Seashore*

Carla hooked me first, a vague memory of plywood

stacked against the house, my father's mouth full

of nails from the rust-bottomed Folger's can.

(cont., break)

Then Eloise, Dottie, and Belle,  
the names of movie stars or dancers, women with wind  
for hair and bodies as strong as the undertow of surf.

By my birthday in mid-summer the grocery bags at Kroger's  
were printed with maps of the Caribbean and the Gulf,  
grid-marked with longitude and latitude lines

(and still I say *latitude* with lips stretched wide to remind  
myself of its east-west direction.) Bonnie and I abandoned  
our coloring books for the maps and kept a careful key

of the storms we charted. From June 1 to November 30,  
we crisscrossed the ocean, giving each newly named  
storm a color of her own—flamboyant disco colors

or deep ocean hues—anything that would stand out  
against the grocery bag brown. Each night after dinner  
we'd meet over the transistor radio between our beds

and listen for the coordinates. Those letters and numbers  
were better than anything Electric Company could come  
up with, and we copied them down with innocent precision. (cont., break)

Bonnie, too young to plot, connected the dots I made  
for her, sketching improbable paths for the storms,  
strange constellations linking Ft. Lauderdale,

Havana, and Brownsville. It was usually the same male  
voice each night, calling their names and positions  
as if he knew their faces, as if he could bring them right

inside our bedroom and dance with them. I thought  
he meant he loved them; I thought their names said it all;  
it meant women could misbehave and still be beautiful.

And after the charting, and after checking the crab traps  
off the back porch one last time for the night, she  
and I would sit in the tub like two Vs nestled together,  
like tight lines of isobars on a weather map.

\* \* \*

When hurricane Bonnie crashed into South Carolina  
last year, I called her up in Chicago and demanded  
to know why she was causing so much trouble.

(cont., no break)

*Do you remember, she asked, the time we left Corpus  
ahead of Amelia? The taillights stretching over the causeway.  
You were so worried, Jen.*

*Was not, I said back. Was, too. She only remembered  
the adventure, the two of us piled into the station wagon  
under pillows and stuffed animals, not the last-minute  
frown on Mom's face, not Dad's nod, not the lines  
at the grocery store the day before, not the empty shelves.  
I knew it all meant that whoever had made her way*

*across the ocean and slipped past the tip of the Yucatan  
Peninsula was bigger than the crayon dots we'd drawn,  
pissed off and looking for a fight. And that night*

*at Uncle Glen's in Houston, I dreamt of water swirling  
past the pylons under our house, palm trees bent double  
at the knees ahead of a wind so real it lifted me from the bed.*

*And after that dash inland, I decided I'd learn it all,  
that knowledge, if not power,  
had something to do with being a woman. I knew the exact*

(cont., no break)

moment each storm passed 74 mph sustained winds,

memorized Haiti's coordinates, and whispered *Antilles*  
like a chant. The bulletins were music, like a salt breeze  
through sand dollar wind chimes:

*a low, vertical sheer in the troposphere . . . strong, mid-lateral*  
*westerly winds.* I learned to watch for the dip in the jet stream  
that might mean a change of course. But on those late

summer weekend days, when we'd wait for the Padre Island ferry  
to lock its ramp to the edge of the world, beach towels  
spread against the vinyl car seats, it seemed nothing could

ever pull the horizon down to where the ocean boiled.

We'd launch ourselves out of the car once the ferry pushed  
away and call to the porpoises that sailed beside.

They were the scouts we sent out into the Gulf,  
the endless pier at Port Aransas the watchpost of our fort.

It stretched out into the water like summer,

fishing twine and lead sinkers wrapped around the weathered (cont., no break)



gray posts like the dandelion chains we twisted for our ankles.

We thought we could walk all the way to Florida on it.

The last time I walked out the pier I was twelve and we  
were moving inland. Bonnie was safe on the shore behind  
me, building Tupperware-shaped sea walls in the cool,

wet sand you have to dig for. Ahead of me was the vanishing  
point of the pier, a fisherman cleaning a shark carcass,  
and the next storm gathering strength beyond the horizon.

*I can do this*, I remember thinking.

I could get close enough to clock wind speeds, graph  
the temperatures of currents, give a language to the atmospheric

pressure levels dropping like sheets of rain. It would take  
a woman to trace the path a seed pod took from Belize  
to New Orleans. I looked down the pier to the edge of white

seafoam, littered with debris from the last storm.

I could predict how many storms in any given season, and then,  
I was so innocently sure,

I could name each one as she spun herself into existence.

## Archaeology

*Storm Pattern*

Deep in the night I feel pinned  
by the dog curled on my feet,  
my husband at my back allowing only one way of lying,  
his hand burrowing against my stomach,  
pajama bottoms twisted like a skin too large  
for the muscles beneath it.

The down comforter is too hot for a night like this  
(wind from the south rattling the storm window).  
The dog shifts, somehow heavier in her slumber.

This is the pressure I feel these days,  
measured in blankets,  
layered under the weight of the Navajo rug  
hanging over our bed:  
lightning bolts stretching out from the storm center,  
a home for the wind at each corner.

And this is something he sleeps through,  
curling tighter around my back.

My pillow shifts, my arm is trapped somewhere beneath.  
Just once to sleep naked under the soft light blanket of sky,  
to roll and not feel the pressure of eggcrate, bed, dog,

(cont., no break)

the title “wife,”

the worry of *if I turn, I'll wake him.*

I push my leg to the edge of the bed, feeling each

layer part or catch, wrap around or yield,

some resistance, then a giving way to

the chilled air around us,

the atmosphere above clouds,

the cool layer that presses down on a warm mass,

which is in turn rising from the Gulf.

The wind outside shakes the redbud branches

(bare arms waving in the streetlight,

patterns like a current on the blanket).

My leg arches toward the floor, the same direction

as the tassel at the corner of the rug,

the same unfinished curl of wool,

the possibility of a way out.

*South on I-15*

I want to look back so badly,  
just one last glance at the neon and the buildings  
and the palm trees lining the strip like dancers.  
I want it to mean something that we can leave at all,  
that we are stronger than the people heading into town  
by the busloads. But it comes with us in the car,  
desert sand collecting under the floormats like salt.  
And a little while later, on the highway into California,  
the last casino looms like a natural rock formation,  
and I lie to you, tell you I have to pee.  
*Now, I say. There won't be a gas station for miles.*  
I have three quarters in my pocket,  
and I know that this is what it means to touch you  
desperately each night, to wonder if it's the last time,  
to see how high the bets will go.

*Ode to Warm Laundry*

Temporary nirvana,  
post-modern plethora of panties,  
towels, socks and fading t-shirts  
spilling from the mouth of the dryer,

the minutes before you cool  
are bliss. O! To be that toddler  
rolling his Tonka across the floor  
of the laundromat, to be that small,

to fit in this basket, to be covered  
by these piles of your warm, soft,  
wildflower- or spring garden-  
scented static freeness,

to burrow back into the comfort  
we all crave. I have seen men  
smell you on the sly and smile  
at their good fortune, the purity

of their motives bleached of sin,

(cont., no break)

washed clean and offered new  
to the coming work week.

Your brief redemption heals us,

reminds us to be optimistic,  
urges us to take care of missing buttons,  
the loose threads and loose change,  
the tactile, necessary generosity of touch.

*Alamo Tableau*

*for MTF*

I've seen it before, am long since over  
the surprise at how small the building,  
how centered it is in the city.

This I learned as a kid:  
remember Goliad,  
remember Travis and Bowie,  
be brave in the face of certain failure.

And I wait for him outside the Burger King.  
There's nothing amazing about the posters behind me,  
the Woolworth's on the corner,  
the Dillard's sharing a city block  
with the old mission.

There's nothing spiritual in our afternoon:  
two friends on a business trip, eating ice cream and shopping,  
him browsing for his wife,  
me for my husband.

We compare trinkets and postcards,  
touch the moss-covered stone wall,  
but there is nothing tender  
in the light sifting down through  
the live oak.

(cont., break)



Leaning against the wall I idly trace  
the Spanish curve over the entrance,  
and wonder how I should feel about this day  
in my home state which is not  
anymore. Mockingbird. Pecan. Bluebonnet.  
And how best to show him more  
than the shopping bags and street signs?  
Something from my childhood dreams,  
the hot summers, the cicadas,  
how cool the Brazos feels on your feet.

Across from me two mariachi players sit on the curb.

In their early twenties, one is a woman  
and at first this is all I notice,  
because her skirt is so beautiful and strange.  
But then the man lights a cigarette,  
the braid on his cuffs glinting,  
and before he passes it to her he leans in,  
like a bird lighting on a fountain,  
and kisses her.

This, then, is the best I can do:

to show him how right

(cont., no break)

these two are in the shade of the Alamo,  
the shade of the statue of Travis and his men,  
of the umbrella over the snow-cone vendor,  
and of my hand over my eyes.

*Bone Collector*

Last week on NOVA they showed hip replacement surgery  
up close, loud and splashy. My husband hollered  
to turn down the noise, but he was in the other room,

and couldn't see the ball-shaped drill easing into  
the woman's thigh, or hear each chip ping off the clamp.

And when I told him how white her bone was

against the red sponge, he didn't believe me.

I swear it was as white as paper, and all the next day

I heard her name whenever I brushed my knuckles

on a doorjamb: *Beth*. Last night I piled books around  
a stack of dishes, perched them on the edge of the kitchen  
table and tried to find quotes about bones

for a friend's birthday card. I found Count Ugolino  
grinding his teeth on the skulls of his children,  
forever replaying the meal,

how crazed he was, how satisfied. And Plath

(cont., no break)

sifting through ashes for hard sounds to chisel her poems.

I picked up a chicken bone, scraped it clean of tendons

and barbecue sauce, pressed my thumbnail into its porous end.

This, then, was a word. My husband walked past, reminded me  
not to give it to our dogs. *Betrayal? Breath?* What word

could be too fragile for dogs' teeth but stronger than  
mine? I looked up from my books, from Sexton's lover's  
raw-boned wrist, from Neruda's bones crumbling

in a foreign country, from the bones of horses littering  
Cormac McCarthy's Texas. On edge, then, unable to  
do the dishes, I called my sister in Chicago—

*remember the prehistoric house in the Field Museum?*

*Mammoth ribs arching toward the center like a teepee?*

*What was it I said in the doorway?*

*I looked at you funny, remember, and said something.*

*They were plaster, yes, but so smooth in places,*

*like they'd been touched repeatedly, rubbed*

(cont., break)

*and polished. And what was above the doorway?*

*It was something so terrible we smiled,*

*something we tried to reach.*

This morning it's an ache, like arthritis before a low pressure system moves in. I can't eat; I keep feeling my cheekbones, my elbow, the sharp point of my clavicle.

I postscript a line in my friend's card:

*I know what you mean now, why you collect bones.*

*Something's shifted in the way I hear words.*

I tell him to meet me at the junkyard between Santa Fe and Taos, under the billboard, where the old woman turns piles of cattle skulls and coyote legs,

bleaching them for tourists. *It's important,*

I say.

*I've got something to tell you.*

*After Seeing Anne Sexton's Checkbook in a Museum*

They never knew how honest  
you really were when you wrote.  
The exact date, the precise round zeroes.  
Quiet, thin book—not poems, but not simply ink on paper.  
More than that, the lies:  
picking up your husband's shirts,  
buying your daughters a bribe,  
or grabbing a few groceries for a lover's breakfast.

We are both women with checkbooks.  
This is only the smallest detail we share.

You left a sequence, pale gold slips of paper  
scattered behind you like New England leaves.  
Adulteress, you didn't choose to save  
this one book, of all things.

They placed it next to a black and white photograph  
of you, mid-thirties, looking tired. Mother. Daughter.  
Wife, pen in hand, scarf around your hair,  
dark glasses hiding the signs  
of last night's drinks.

(cont., break)

After the museum I stand in line  
at the grocery store, scribble on the back of my own  
checkbook: *after the rain the earth smells like a mouth.*

I make a mental note to pay the electric bill,  
confess I want to touch the neck  
of a man who is not my husband,  
check to make sure I picked up some olives.

And I think of you, not  
rushing into the night, but glancing  
in the rear-view mirror outside the A&P,  
re-touching your lipstick,  
following the line of a wrinkle with your little finger.

*Line of Vision*

A spider web stretches twenty feet,  
from a magnolia to a street lamp.

One strand, almost horizontal  
to the path twisting  
along the edge of a river.

Beside the lamp  
a park bench, soft green and sturdy.

A woman and her husband sit  
with the ease of fifty years together.

She knits something in a fine mohair yarn,

he reads aloud  
from a paper spread over his lap.

An astronaut,  
working outside the space station Mir;  
his suit attached to the ship by a long  
safety cable. The man thinks how tightly  
he would hold onto that thin metal rope,  
if it were him.

She checks on him when he stops reading,

(cont., no break)



unravels the bit of cloth in her hand,  
rolls it up into an egg-shaped ball.  
Almost a christening cap,  
or something to cover the phone table,  
the same one she stood by  
at eighteen, the one time  
he called her from San Francisco  
during the war.  
Her mother left her alone in the hall,  
twisting the cord around  
and around her finger,  
so tightly it turned blue.

He folds the paper,  
tells her of the time he went fishing in Idaho,  
when the pull on his line made him sink  
deeper into his waders  
and grip the sand bank  
with a will he's never felt since.

How clearly the nylon stood out  
against the water.

The sun on it was so bright  
it seemed like a solid thread

(cont., no break)

of light leading him downstream.

She rests her hand on his knee, recognizes the wool.

She's ready to go home.

As they stand to leave, he reaches  
for her knitting bag and sees a strand  
of her hair, long and silver,  
that has caught on the wooden bench.

It gleams softly in the dappled shadows  
of the leaves, and streams  
away from his hand,  
up and behind where she has been sitting,  
and he can't quite reach it.

## *Archaeology*

### I. Pompeii

Like gods casting bronze,  
they excavated space, looking for  
the molds: a protective arm  
in front of a child, a man's hollow  
chest shielding his wife or sister.

Not bones,

but the absence of bones,

shadows of bodies crouched  
at the ends of hallways,  
in the corners of houses.

The sudden, white heat powdered  
everything except the metals, the gold  
and copper they find soldered  
to the edge of the pockets,  
air bubbles the shape of a hand,  
outstretched against the ash.

### II. Love

I leave a thumbnail mark on your shoulder,  
shift your leg over my hip, anticipate

(cont., no break)

the archaeology of this one time  
we make love: the dip in the center  
of the bed, the pillow crease on my cheek,  
an earring back lost between the carpet  
and the wall. Our lives are impressions  
in the space around us, the things we displace,  
the shapes we create in the substance of the air.  
You lift my arm to the headboard,  
trace the curve of fingers into palm,  
say against my neck that you could arrange  
my body like this every night.

### III. Graffiti

At the edge of the Grand Canyon,  
feeling small, I found some graffiti  
on a cliff face: something unreadable  
in round black letters, then a *fuck* carved  
into the soft sandy layer, and then a thin  
red marker, near the ground  
where a child might reach: *James*.

We are obsessed with how fragile we are,  
comfortable examining our scars and broken

(cont., no break)

bones, but I wanted to find this boy, stand  
him at this rock and make him read the word  
he thought meant "me." I wanted to whisper  
that it doesn't, that the curve of his chin  
is stronger than any language,  
that he already knows this truth.

*Matched*

Steinbeck said the journey takes you,  
not the other way around. But, then, he was safe  
with a poodle. We are traveling to the south  
side of the planet, my home country which isn't,  
really, land of tumbling water and strange constellations,  
trees that burn and burn. And it might be the end  
of us, and we know this. Our marriage might rest  
on the details, the planning and brochures, packing lists,  
car rentals. Shopping for luggage, trying out sizes and wheels,  
you say *Hey. I could fit YOU in this one.*

The baggage becomes luggage. We lug. We bag.

The overblown sales lady at Foley's is too interested in the cosmetic  
case in one of the Samsonite models, the clever strap  
at the top of another to attach the wonderful companion  
pieces. We dodge each other around the floor displays,  
the mountains of suitcases and clouds of cardboard  
ads moving gently in the air conditioner's draft.

It is so easy here; each zipper smooth,  
each bag cavernous and welcoming. Even the small ones  
are perfect: careful compartments and deliberate  
purposes. Every woman will pack exactly three

(cont., no break)

hanging garments for her trip; each man will choose  
two pairs of shoes, no more and no less.

This one has Teflon-coated nylon fabric,  
this one boasts in-line skate technology on the wheels.

This model is on sale, this one has a twenty-dollar rebate.

This one black, this one khaki, and this one siren, sexy red.

We spin wheelies on the parquet walkway,  
pretend we are models ourselves, perfect complements

to our luggage. And there is so much stuff I want  
to pack, so much of myself I want to leave behind.

When we come home from this trip, will our house  
have changed? Will we unlayer our clothes from our one  
dresser? Will I take my suitcase and throw it back in the car,  
taking only what I can carry? We check the exchange policies  
and warranties, choose a color for the two we've chosen,  
look at each other and feel betrayed by the future.

*The perfect companion pieces*, I tell the woman  
clicking her nails on the register keyboard.

*Matched. Heavy pieces, you know*, I nod desperately.

*Gorillas and baggage handlers, freezing temperatures  
in cargo hulls, conveyor belts, customs officers  
with sticky hands, even bombs and exploding hair spray  
bottles. Pressure means nothing. Top of the line, we are. Guaranteed.*

*Desire*

It's only when I look around your flat  
I find the things I want.  
Not you, precisely, but  
the poster you tore off the tile wall  
in the Rome train station,  
the flush in your cheeks when the conductor  
shouted something, the feta  
crumbling later between your fingers,  
the chianti on your lips.

I want the flash of teeth you showed the children  
who followed you through the plaza in Barcelona,  
following your trail of pennies  
like pigeons.

I want the touch of your hand on my head,  
I want you to find something for me  
in your pocket.

And I'll need your notes from the café in Tangiers.

The smell of the market, the words  
the snake charmer used on you,

(cont., no break)



the couscous recipe from the hotel.

Tonight, I swear, if you do this for me,

I'll make you remember what it means to want.

## *Lemons*

*Spiral-cut six lemons, pack them in kosher salt, shake every few days until lemons are pickled (about a week). Layer olive oil, chicken breasts, calamata olives, and the pickled lemons. Bake at 350 degrees for one hour.*

if only it were that easy

leaving the dream of your mouth on mine

it never happened      let me remind you

but I can't eat a lemon without tasting your breath

you ran the wedge over your bottom lip

pulled the whole thing in like a kid with an orange

rind grin      eyes wide with the tart of it

fed me my own slice and we bit down hard

against the end of a perfect day

sunshine through the grape leaves

bread and olives on your spread-out shirt

your hands rushing down the length of me

it must have been greece or some island

the sky a mediterranean blue

I've never seen since

(cont., no break)

a white-washed building at the edge of the vineyard

paint around a window the perfect weightless yellow

of those rinds stripped now

of flesh we pressed them against our skin

like we were bleaching freckles

love      nothing in this recipe

makes me hungry for less

than all of it

these lemons tapping right into a limbic system

imprinted with your smell

sandalwood      bergamot      lemon

and in this tiny kitchen surrounded

by mason jars      the best olives I could find

I arch my body to the sun splashing through

a window      to the warm breeze off salt water

to a feast fit for a goddess

to arms      hands      jawline      mouth

*Murmur*

His ear on my heart,  
he asks about that sound:  
it's a small catch in the rhythm,  
a gentle backwash rushing  
into a tidal pool,  
a hollow scoop of stone  
collecting the very edge  
of a wave.

The mad swirl  
of white water that calms  
for a breath, the still sound  
of a name whispered  
after the valve has shut,  
a place for him to dip his feet.

Anemone, tiny sideways-  
moving spider, barnacle.

His cheek feels the next wave  
washing over my body.

A pause, a shiver,

(cont., no break)

the sound fills my ears  
like the ocean, and then he  
fills me like my own blood.

*Echo Point, Blue Mountains*

he thinks it is exotic  
to be in this place where I used to live  
to hear my voice fall back  
into the cadence of birds  
he loves it  
he says  
his mouth on my belly  
the eucalyptus oil heavy in the air  
bluing the cool mountain morning  
  
but it isn't my body he holds  
not my hips in his hands  
my legs are too long somehow  
my hair much too light  
  
and the girl I saw last night  
easing off the train at the Katoomba station  
in my old school uniform  
swish of a wool skirt against tights  
her hair tucked into the neck of a dark navy blazer  
walked right past us as if she knew the way

(cont, no break)

as I never did

she belongs here

in the way I don't

her echo between us a lover

we both want

I almost ran after her

would have begged her to tell me

where I'd been

since we last met

what she'd done to our hair

and how she had eased

into that body

that was no longer mine

*Leaving Sydney*

This morning, pressing my palm against the car window,  
I think: this is how I can't touch you now—hand  
flat on your heart, the tips of two fingers searching

for your collarbone. I'm driving south from Sydney, edging  
between the coast and jade pasture. This heavy fog  
has settled in the night, washing over everything

like a baptism. The diffused dawn light pushes  
through the water in the air at an angle and hits the ghost  
gum trees lining the highway. Their bark blazes whiter

than paper, whiter than sheets on a bed. Drowsy,  
I see a herd of kangaroos arching in and out of the cloud  
that clings to the earth like a blanket. They move parallel

to the road, easily faster than the car, and I turn to say  
*my god, do you see that?* And you're not there, not  
reaching for my camera or pulling your hair back

in your ballcap. Desire this morning is a thing seen

(cont., no break)



and then unseen between eucalyptus trunks: your lips  
at the corner of my eye, your hand at the base of my spine,

the silhouettes of these animals like red-brown muses  
from the Dreamtime. They would have turned toward me,  
leapt the road if I could have asked,

if I hadn't known that this is how I will remember  
losing you, disappearing and reappearing in the fog,  
the most beautiful thing I may ever see.

*Hangi Feast: Rotorua, New Zealand*

I want to believe that I was once a cannibal,

that this is something I would

remember: I am standing nose-to-nose

with a Maori man whose skin smells almost good enough to eat.

His pheromones, perhaps,

or the sulfur from nearby mud pools

or the food in the underground pit

or even my husband in line behind me

waiting his turn to greet this man,

curling the unfamiliar words we've been taught

around his own tongue. I have stepped into the space

around his stranger's body with a southern reserve,

leaned my head forward until my face met his,

and I am stunned by the skin

of his cheek against mine

the surprise of eyelash.

(cont., no break)

But he does this every night, coaxing tourists  
out of their shells at the Tamaki Village:

*Aotearoa*, he says, *land of the long white cloud*.

And I say *yes*, to the fog uncurling in the tree ferns,  
the geothermal steam rising over my ankles.

This is the connection we all crave,  
the absolute, the physical chemistry of touch,  
the solidity, the hollows of our bodies capable of anything.

I could inhale this man like a scent,  
hook my leg behind his knees and push him  
into the rough, volcanic dirt, take the first bite

at the tendon where neck meets shoulder.

I could follow my tongue along the crook  
of his arm, cupping his elbow to my mouth

like a drink. If this isn't hunger

it is the press of his nose against mine  
once more, and I taste the syllables

(cont., break)

he's about to exhale: *Kia ora. Welcome.* And then again,

*Kia ora.* And my mouth opens and I reply:

*Kia ora . . . Sustenance.*

And his eyes widen and his breath

meets mine

around that delicious, unexpected word.

## Wintering at Mooltunya

*Ode to the First Full Moon in May*

In the hour between one and two,  
I pull carefully from fragrant bedding,  
skirt the floor furnace's grate, brush  
past a chair, arrive half-asleep  
at the window sill and ask the moon:  
full of what? Really. Nothing but rock,  
as tethered to this earth as I am,  
wrapped in cold, sable space,  
reflecting the light of the sun  
with disappointing regularity.  
How many poets have sung you  
love-songs, Moon? How many  
have gone mad in the singing?

I step out onto the porch,  
hear the screen door catch behind me  
like a release. My neighbor's *ipomea alba*  
has climbed three feet up the lattice.  
Two ghost blooms open  
in the dark May air, an atlas moth  
hums above their perfect

(cont., no break)

funnels. Moonflowers, scent  
like the lemon from a dream.  
Is it this, Moon, that you are full of,  
the siren call of a half-remembered  
smell? I am not a moth circling up  
toward your light. I am not trapped  
here on this cooling concrete.  
You know, Moon, if I wanted to  
I would climb up into the branches  
of that maple you are lighting  
like a path. I have climbed many before.

But tonight you bathe my face  
in moon-milk, show me my own skin  
like new-polished silver,  
and I am grateful.

Moon, you are not an opening  
in the night sky. Not, after all, a reflector.  
You are full of light, Moon.  
Tonight, you are the Gatherer of Light,  
light spilling over the edges  
of your craters, light tumbling

(cont., no break)

over your shoulders like fresh-  
washed hair. You have pulled light  
from the dark places it hides:  
the corners under eaves where grackles  
nest, my lover's heart,  
the windshields of the parked cars  
lining the streets of my life.  
You hold it close to you, the way a woman  
holds a baby who isn't hers to hold,  
the heady way warm bread is held,  
the simple way we hold our own bodies  
late at night. All-seeing Moon,

you face full-forward with your light burden,  
neither turning half toward the west,  
nor in profile toward the seductive swath  
of the Milky Way. In your womanly pull,  
women everywhere call you Sister,  
Mother. And for your glory, Moon,  
entire oceans will raise their shoulders  
and genuflect.



*Stutter*

There was a time when the only thing keeping me  
from leaving my husband for another man, for Mexico,  
was the thought of having to split our books  
down the shelf, of sitting in an empty room  
choosing CDs one at a time, the weight  
of our accumulated memories enough to break  
the spine of my longing. Too much, I thought,  
invested in linens, paperwork with both our names  
layered over the remnants of desire  
like inappropriate clothing. At the time,  
I wanted warm sand, an end to the narcissistic  
feel of my own skin, and there  
in the shallow end of loneliness,  
I wanted a new body to trace with my tongue,  
a man who didn't look at me as if he knew  
exactly what I would say next, a man who said  
he had just found a perfect shell on the beach.  
And I never wanted to say  
that I could have done this to him,  
drunk on tequila and salt air and possibility.

(cont., break)

But that was two years ago, and to stop me, he pulled  
Neruda from the shelf, pulled me into his lap,  
and I thought maybe he was missing something  
too, an intensity of language  
in our everyday speech, the sweep of my hand  
against his back. He read first the "Ode to the Dictionary,"  
a warning against taking the solid,  
the always-there, for granted, but perhaps  
because of its weight, or because he felt his own  
Latin days stirring, he flipped impatiently past poem  
after poem. *Intoxicating roses . . . where  
are the damn roses?*

And tonight, the memory  
of losing him robbed the room of air.  
Not like the small absences, not the nights  
I turned away, or the ones he stayed awake  
and watched me sleep, not the children  
we will not have. But this:  
his frown as he searched for the perfect word,  
the dry rasp of pages against his fingertips.  
Perhaps I should have said *put it down, lover*.  
Forget about the roses. There's poetry

(cont., no break)

enough in memorizing a body, in knowing  
exactly how long the line of a scar is,  
how the lungs stutter when they fill with breath,  
in his arms balancing my shoulders,  
his knees locked under me.

*Sign Language*

One of the secrets we keep:  
when we cry, it isn't because you've hurt us,  
but because you've silenced us. When we cry,  
it is the sheer, toddler-on-the-floor-rage  
at not having the words to say fuck you.

You sigh, you shake your head, you lean on your doorframe  
as if to block out my anger, you all but shake  
my shoulders when I start to stumble through  
this foreign language I thought I knew from birth.

This is what they mean by *spittin' mad*.

Would you look at yourself, you say so logically,  
you're hysterical. Let's sleep on this and we can talk  
in the morning; honey, you're just too upset.

And I almost made it home, I almost followed the thin  
thread of my pride back to my own porch,  
but because I was hysterical

I forgot to turn on my headlights and the cop  
who pulled me over said, you're too upset to drive,  
honey. And I couldn't find the fucking words to say  
*no shit, Pig?* I really wanted to.

(cont., no break)

I really wanted to punch him in his concerned,  
baby-smooth face. But all that came out  
was a high, thin wail and those goddamned moans  
he took to mean Why doesn't he love me?  
Why is he even now brushing his teeth and smiling  
in the mirror? So he promised me you weren't.

*Thanks, Pig*, I thought.

He said you'd be up all night worrying about me,  
that I should head straight home and call you  
to let you know I'd made it, to let you know I was tucked  
into bed like a good girl. *Fuck you*, I thought.

So I didn't go home. I drove back over here, where  
I can sit in my car with the heater on low and the headlights  
still off and watch the lights in your house flicker  
when you move from room to room. The moon  
has lost her staring competition with the street lamp,  
and the one decent radio station has gone to canned crap.

This is the frustration of women: a new sign  
language in which me, sitting out here in my car  
at four in the morning signifies that I love you.

It's a sickness, this inexpressibility.

I worry at it, replay the vowels and syllables

(cont., no break)

until I start to see a pattern, finding my tongue  
about the time your lights go out.

*Wintering at Mooltunya*

This morning at five the wallabies thump up the porch  
wondering about breakfast.

I make the coffee in the french press with the broken handle,  
stoke the fire in the potbellied stove,  
slice some carrots for the animals  
and follow my father outside.

What do I say as he confides over a slice  
of toast that the woman he left my mother for  
is on the brink of leaving him?

If he were any other man  
I'd simply lay my hand over his and nod  
in the way of women:

*yes*

I'd say,

*we do this to men.*

But I was fourteen when my mother  
begged him to come back,  
leaned against the front door and slid down the wall.

She leaned on me—

(cont., no break)

put her head in my lap that night  
and moaned until dawn.

He gives me this wound  
like he offers me sugar for my coffee,  
and we move to the porch with carrots  
for the wallabies and seed for the crimson rosellas  
who scatter and fight like children.

In a week I have gone through five rolls of film  
on these birds:

flash of green under their wings  
thick black tongues darting over the seeds.

A low cloud sits on the hills  
lacing the gum trees;  
I want nothing more than to walk out into the rainforest  
and leave this man  
who has aged gracefully without me  
to find out for himself how empty a house is,  
how to quit eating and lose sleep,  
how small his body can feel.

But I know these things already and can tell him

(cont., no break)



he'll need a willing ear when he remembers  
how her mouth felt around him,  
how she tasted like clover honey.  
And that one day his pride will slip down the shower drain  
like a skin and he'll imagine her legs  
layered with another man's.

He rubs his eyes with the wrist of the hand  
holding his mug,  
spilling a little and not caring,  
and asks me why his best just leaves her cold.

A kookaburra howls in the forest like a monkey  
but I don't have an answer for him;  
I never found one in all these years  
and can only put my feet on the railing,  
stretch against the chill.

*You'll need someone,*  
I finally tell him,  
*to help with the little things.*

*Walkabout*

It has come to this returning:  
the light on the smooth bark  
skin of a eucalyptus,  
its whiteness like the bones of animals  
trailing across the outback.  
Rainbow snake swallowed me whole  
and vomited me up on the wrong side of the ocean.

I came searching for this light,  
this paper-bright afternoon on this slight  
hill in this upside-down place.  
I came tracing the witchetty grub channels  
of my own Dreaming,  
marking the map of my life like termite mounds  
mark the boundary of a forest.  
The high thin rustle of dry leaves  
called to me across the Pacific,  
the memory of the narcotic blue haze  
of eucalyptus oil in the air.  
It is the oldest place on earth.

(cont., break)

This very spot burned not two years ago,  
I would swear it,  
gumnuts snapping open like firecrackers,  
gulahs and spiders moving east toward water  
as if they had been shown the way.

I lived here for four years  
and have been gone for what seems like centuries,  
have forgotten that I ever called it home  
or knew what to do in case of snakebite.  
But I did this once: white girl, American,  
on a walkabout in the Ku-rin-gai bush.

The subterranean hum of insects  
beneath my feet,  
flocks of cockatoos in the canopy,  
the kangaroo herds beating time across cracked land  
sound like a didgeridoo  
and echo in the bones of my ears.

Rhythm sticks.

A bull-roarer's rush like water after a drought.

2

VITA

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