



# WIRE DANCING

PATRICIA SYKES





Photo: Deb Lewis

Patricia Sykes is a poet and storyteller and is currently a non-performing member of the Women's Circus, Melbourne, for whom she co-edited *Women's Circus: Leaping Off The Edge* (Spinifex Press 1997). She has performed her poems and stories in concert, on radio, in cafés, pubs, libraries, bookshops, festivals and various other venues. One of her poems, 'river salvages', was awarded the FAW John Shaw Neilson Poetry Award for 1996. She lives in the Dandenongs. *wire dancing* is her first collection.

**Also by Patricia Sykes**

*Women's Circus: Leaping off the Edge* (co-editor, 1997)

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for my mother, Jo, who died too young  
and for my sisters Elaine, Anni and Robyn





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# food for the road

the theories of twist  
the turning shifts  
of a wire dance

how they walk the torsion  
like a spinal column stretches  
the limits of sinew

the reach of ancestry  
the cinemascope of hope

\*  
how much can she carry?  
what should she pack?

the wolf spider's silk bag  
has the gift of it

all those eggs slung in one sac

what woman to save  
herself a prolapse  
would not exchange  
two legs for eight?

it's the weight  
of the choice  
all that living

all those circus tricks

how can she lay  
any one of them aside?  
she is all or none

accumulation means nothing  
if it cannot bear its risks

\*

change is the rate  
at which she travels

all winter she excavates  
using mist as reason  
to journey the swag

her silk flag's yellow fires  
its narcotic pollens

refuse to stay behind  
as if otherwise  
she might fly conscripted lives

\*

every journey  
needs its bawd

her yeasty fingers  
her gleaming butters

turn pitchforks  
to the useful science  
of fire toast

the fool is her cure  
circus is her cryptic



out of the melting pot  
Pandora parades  
all things to glory

\*

the circus maximus  
flooded its colosseum  
to stage naval battles

the heart needs  
more than shoelaces  
to make it watertight  
against history's S bends

she's aiming for the last day

when only gypsies  
and cockroaches  
are left to walk the earth

singing like an insect  
dining like a gourmet

on thesauruses  
from A to Z they name  
and misname her

in Rome  
all actors were slaves

this far south  
the noisy heartbeats  
of a wire dance

acquit her  
for at least not mouthing  
the word *free*



# PAST LIVES



## audition

no words come to play  
on the grass of no distinction  
not one comes forward  
to speak its name  
to say what why or how  
or even to say because  
and all the while the sun  
watches and waits  
like a broody hen  
and the lilac anchoring the gate  
watches and listens  
imperative as an audience  
until the child breaks cover  
stands directly underneath  
to cast no shadow pretend  
no drama except her own  
holds out one hand two  
opens mouth to show teeth  
yes and a great swallow  
the words can disappear into  
can hide in can erupt from  
fierce as spat seeds  
to ripen on their backs  
and outstare the circle  
of empty chairs.

## **gathering decor for the merry-go-round**

shells so underside  
pink and impossibly  
delicate how they can  
rough it with the surf  
but fall to a collector's joy  
the quick ownership  
the souvenir death  
on edgy mirrors  
and tatty box lids  
that crosses  
some child's equator  
as the turquoise voice  
the streetwise life  
who'd give her  
a foretaste of salt water's  
sting in the deep gash  
its knowledge of tides  
its wirewalker's skill  
with horizons  
who'd be the thorn  
in her flesh  
and give her this—  
that her tongue  
releases the sound  
a shell makes  
when it sings

# changeling

you're supposed to be dead  
a relic safe between strata  
but here you are again  
brassier than an icon's  
art of reunion  
the teacher the cane  
the blackboard the chalk  
some girl's luscious boy  
with fuzz on his lip  
a soprano in his throat  
the klaxons of power  
overtaking his tongue

\*

she's born with eyes like cameras  
when they worship you  
I know she's a changeling

I shut her away  
between the covers of her book

a home-made biography of cut and paste  
a rescue in the absence of angels

around us street lights stand up  
and sing for auld lang syne

you'd woo her with sentimentals  
but you've reckoned without the hag  
the fighter with the hooked nose

she turns octopus  
in the way eight arms  
can embrace or strangle  
nurture or mercy kill

she'll dedicate to you  
she'll take centuries  
however long a hero  
takes operatically to die



# fishing the sea

## *1* *oysters*

the day you returned  
a carnivore  
is water marked  
on the door frame

a growth spurt indelible  
as your carpenter's pencil

there has been some advance  
a naming at least

you as house god  
home with his catch  
slicked with fish brines  
and motor bike fumes

performing  
the oyster death  
in a small kitchen

or was it just  
your pale child's horrors  
you holding  
the doorway's throat open

as if the sea had given  
you a cave's jaw?

doing it by kerosene lamp  
a slow wave swallow  
the flickering gullet  
of a man's right to his own

2  
*rock fishing*

fish dying  
in your tackle bag

the ocean's voice  
keeping me in line  
fiercer even than yours  
and prettier

all those refractions of light  
glittering like eyes  
missing nothing

a lesson stronger  
than circus horses  
a new whip hand

I've inherited  
your flourishes

your backyard googly  
could take the head  
off a thistle

the cancer  
that whipped you to death  
had no such finesse

its effects  
were all decayingly human

now I've turned grave robber  
to give you water burial

a rare tidal peace

you will not drown  
the sea has arms  
for her own

# nights without sleeping bag

*admiration or the knife  
which is the weapon?*

*rejection or the hamper  
which is the gift?*

the riddle's no language picnic  
more like a beauty myth

that refuses to be worn  
in comfort or in warmth

and so you come to this room  
as you would come to begin a life

shocked at the sudden air  
and the huge expectant space

enlarged around a heart  
fearless as an organ  
who lets in her age

with sag in the flesh  
with loose in the skin

a no-zip opening  
into body unsanctified

enter at your own risk  
or think of her

as music in the cupboard  
as collateral in the bed

# death, passionfruit & roses

*(for M. something like an epitaph)*

would death have got you going  
with its post mortem joke?

its flaunting of passionate fruit  
at your feet? purples

not to your taste  
& never your choice  
for a wake

I bear them home  
to the knife & the plate

to a slice of truth  
through the navel

\*

yellow bloods sun's blood  
that heat you loved

loaded with seeds  
to match the feast of rogue cells  
that devoured your lungs

their fictions their facts  
how they remember us

the surprise once of finding  
 you foetally asleep  
 in my car    your refuge

from a Saturday night's  
 punch-drunk fists

decoying the neighbours  
 with your kempt garden

its harmonious faces  
 its impeccable paths

\*

fear & survival—  
 your most constant roses

their arbors their arches  
 their weeping trees

& your gusto shovel  
 digging annual uproots  
 & replants

out of hate for thorns  
 out of need for lives

that pleased you  
 better than sex

*roses for a bridal*  
*roses for a death*  
 some passions keep faith

## divorce al fresco

so are we here to find  
an end to begin again  
I listen to your mouth  
watch for a clue among  
your voices but nothing  
separates nothing comes  
free the bundle  
of papers between us  
crackles like leaves  
an old story a seasonal  
complaint I watch  
the woman at the far table  
who uses her spoon  
like a shovel whole piles gone  
in a bite an immense dispatch  
but there's nothing  
to copy she's an original  
she does this it seems  
every day of her life  
this art of huge disposal  
no beginning no end  
just repetition the efficiency  
of a pattern that knows  
what it knows that disdains  
what it cannot consume



# bread & honey

## *remember the bedrooms:*

wake-up arenas  
our gums breaking  
into teeth  
on the cot rails  
the paint flaking lead  
into our bloods  
—how we sucked  
on our poisons—  
while the wind  
swung on the lights  
like an antidote

## *remember the passages:*

that split our timber  
houses churchwise  
down the middle  
altar rooms offside  
onside one mr one mrs  
one girl one boy litanies  
of his hers a census  
of adoration homes  
growing more nuclear  
by the century

***remember the yards:***

& their noisy gravels  
 (those good catholics)  
 feet & bicycles  
 expert at soft shoe  
 the liberation pill  
 hidden in our purses

ovulation  
 by science

evolution  
 by laboratory

guinea-pig rats  
 dancing freedom's sex  
 with our hind legs

***remember the roofs:***

nights of corrugated  
 iron & moon teeth  
 whittling the fat  
 from our adolescence  
 in rock music speech

*you southern cross  
 you starry nails  
 point us an exit  
 these rooms  
 have run their course!*

***remember the tents:***

life on the road  
 our leotards  
 full of holes

a break out  
into leopard spots

camouflage & rosin  
& a grip like claws

moveable rooms

*are they better?*  
*are they worse?*

O wind  
you bread & honey  
you usher  
you torch  
tell any audience  
we're appetites  
who pitch canvas  
in the dark

# legend as tourist attraction

*(O my rosy O...)*

sun rise or set?  
the forest can't pinpoint  
her coordinates

toll roads keep cutting in  
with tricky coin flash  
blindness with a message

no pay no play  
the economy of slick

should she play lipstick  
let the dollars tart her up  
as tourist attraction?

a glossy brochure deal  
hot from her own pulp  
a value added salvation

*(O my rosy O...)*

how to distinguish  
her own dementia  
from the woman  
face down in the creek

who came back  
hand in hand  
with schizophrenia

thinking sanity  
was where she left it

there's police tape  
around the body  
a faith in clues

the madwoman's bones  
are in the last riddling throes  
of millennium *who am I*  
*if not you?*

the forest also  
as family tree

*(O my rosy O...)*

trapezing her torch song  
at cockatoo pitch

a cremation of sorts  
a hymn of roots

*who are we*  
*if not yours?*

## changing the medication

someone is saying  
(someone always is saying)  
there's a new fix out there  
some trumpet blowing late  
onset delusions some volcano  
playing with fire  
learn the skills of a pelican's  
catch as catch can  
its gulpings more salt  
than it can chew  
but observe its drainage  
clever reservoir clever sieve  
*ad infinitum* (dead languages  
roll off its back like water)  
its runnels and funnels digest  
a sea beautifully bountiful

this itch can only envy  
can only backscratch  
between the barnacles  
the lifesavers have gone  
home with the flags  
but to take time out  
to sit here on this rock  
for a recurring eternal moment  
(call it  $\frac{1}{4}$   $\frac{1}{2}$  or  $\frac{3}{4}$  time  
not full that cardsharp

too fond of the ace)  
to sit here in the sun beside

the pelican beside the seaside  
in sun visors camouflage  
(you understand)  
for the grieving heart  
with stelazine in one hand  
and in the other olanzapine  
the new anti-psychotic  
reading directions  
on how to keep a son  
preferably and sanely human  
in the face of one sub-horizon  
to the next switchfooted  
between tightrope and tightrope

(wean your mouth from the nipple  
hold it under the tap  
of eternal drug-relief  
welfare the multinationals  
chemical the warfares  
of non and survival...)

this tide my son refuses  
to compete fish by fish  
this son I gave my hymen for  
is drowning outside my blood  
backtracking in a silver taxi  
through streets of dark water  
keeping his windows shut  
against circumlocutions of rain  
and the babbling tail lights  
of non sequiturs:

seagulls are stealing chips  
from English-people-  
on-holiday-by-the-seaside

whose summer of solutions  
is not to stop their post-luncheon  
handfeeding (but our birds—O  
so irresistibly cute when they  
let you think you have over them  
the power of food) no not to stop  
but to kill more eggs

to stop this tide my son  
would mean diving  
the fallopian tubes and wringing  
the possible neck of a pelican  
become instead his beached whale  
let him fiesta me  
with ramblings and seaweed  
in the end all water returns home  
and the scorpion sings as it stings  
*live me anyway I'm what you have*



# on leaving a sister's house

*(for Anni)*

we're perfecting our skills  
of arrival and goodbye  
2000 kilometres reduced  
to home ground

we've been working  
the dimensions for years

fighting the barbed wires  
the bluestone walls  
their high impossible bars  
their iron orphanages

obstacles make bad husbands  
we refuse to be wives

the women of our line  
rattle their deaths  
is it reproach? is it regret?

appetite and denial  
are our alternative children

choice is only chronic  
for the living

how we've practised it

we've grown reptilian  
lethal as Cleopatra's asp

old skins old nests  
make the heaviest suitcase

\*

the transparencies  
in our wardrobes  
what are they but phases  
of old python?

to slip one on again  
is to borrow the satin  
of an old wisdom

a tightrope solution  
for getting over  
the worst swamps

watch for me  
on the horizon  
of your blue tongues

I'll be the lizard  
hungriest for news  
and lavishings of sun

I'll take food from the hand  
but don't offer me crumbs

# narratives of a household rose

## *I*

### *from the white rose's mouth*

*suffer the children to survive  
their countries' vase waters*

i

the snow whites  
the rose pures  
inhumanly  
angel me

ii

I am used  
like holy water  
like baptism  
the white idea  
cannot tolerate  
the public sucklings

of mother's milk  
nor the young genitals

flowering  
their darker secretions

iii

it threatens me  
with fire

if I touch myself

when the season  
starts blooming roses

iv

these circumcisers who come  
to prune me with knives

are as regular as sunrise  
my terror makes them strong

I am cut and slashed  
to purify a husband  
who may want me

v

my small pieces  
are less than hors d'oeuvre  
for vultures

who'll croon lullabies  
over my labia majora  
my labia minora  
my clitoris?

vi

all my rose is gone  
they sew me up  
with thorns

how can my body sing  
through such a small hole?

vii  
 they refuse to list me  
 in the GDP

I am all debit  
 my lips must tally  
 their own audit

viii  
*mother! mother!*  
*you carried white roses*  
*as a bride*

how the years  
 browned them off

she did not intend  
 a tragedy

2

*the red rose's dilemma*

*a red rose cannot prove herself*  
*on a bed less than white*

i  
 did mary use the veil  
 or did the veil use mary?

playing mother of god  
 kept her white intact

took her hymen  
 straight into motherhood

ii

afterwards was all red

not even clean straw  
could keep her pure

the child had to come  
out between her legs

swimming her bodily fluids  
her scarlet tides

iii

did jesus  
ever reify his birth  
under his mother's  
bloody pubic crown?

iv

history hands me  
needle and thread  
to sew up my daughters

so husbands can tear  
their way in

v

to sew up my womb  
until my daughters  
turn to sons

vi

to sew up my eyes  
to sew up my mouth  
to sew up my ears

but never the vagina  
 that won't stop singing  
*life! life! life!*

## 3

*the black rose at the cross roads*

*show me the fairy tale  
 and I'll show you the life*

i  
 call me rickety kate  
 queen of spades  
 the wild card

the black panther  
 never questions  
 the heart

that beats  
 under its terrible coat

ii  
 if you think  
 I am thorns

a loss of libido

sexless  
 as a dry plain

then you must  
 also think

this aged skin  
is nothing

but cellophane

iii  
unwrap me  
rose by rose

I will pierce you  
with petals

do not ask me  
for evasions

for the seductions  
of an unchanging face

plastic surgery  
will not cure  
the mortalities

of a circus maximus

iv  
I was born  
breast-stroking  
and bald

this child I suckle  
continues me

her breath  
is sweet rose  
and dangerous



she will make life  
want her

she will make life  
want to try

again



# CIRCUS BEASTS



**iron**  
*(for J.)*

so it was re/definition  
you had on your mind  
a building of the body  
to a trapezist's swing  
and grip    blacksmith muscle  
for turning anger into sweat  
for balking the incest  
beast playing cattle dog  
at heel who whitehot  
and indescribably loyal  
as man's best  
barked its roundup song  
at your ankles

some things refuse  
to die    childhood  
as miscarriage finally  
denying your uterus  
a foetus of cure  
as if it could not bear  
any risk of repeat

your ghost train then  
as a deadly rails  
we could not shift

rushing headlong  
for your kiss

not the same old  
circus racketing  
through your blood  
but a performance  
of iron rocking  
into your arms  
*O baby baby*  
*hush-a-bye*  
*lullaby* a cradle  
at killing speeds  
that understood

# Opal's cow

*There are calf tracks by our front door.  
Elizabeth Barrett Browning waited yesterday...  
...I think she will grow up to be a lovely cow.*

*Opal Whitely<sup>1</sup>  
(Francoise D'Orleans)*

Is Opal genuine  
or was she Francoise?

tiptoeing among axes  
with cream on her tongue

caught conspiring  
with a calf a juicy veal  
a literary meat

---

1. Opal Whitely was born just before 1900 and has been described as a child prodigy. The story is that she lost her parents before she was five and was given to to the wife of an Oregon lumberman. The 'poems' I refer to were written when she was five and six. She wrote on any legible surface she could find: butcher's bags, wrapping paper, the backs of envelopes. The controversy about whether she altered her writings when she was a teenager, and whether she was Francoise D'Orleans as she claimed to be, can be found in *opal: the journal of an understanding heart* by Opal Whitely, adapted by Jane Boulton, Pan Macmillan (Aust) Pty Ltd, 1996.

accusation needs its fat

if she were pork  
you'd call the story  
a streaky bacon

how she supposedly  
larded in her teens  
to make more prodigious  
the poems she wrote  
at five and six

pull that teat  
and you'll get the hot oil

not from Elizabeth  
out among the clover  
singing her own cud

not from Opal/Francoise  
shovelling dung from the tent

but straight  
from the fire's mouth

the flaming hoop  
spares no animal

one burnt hair  
proves guilt

refusal to jump  
proves guilt

an inquisition's  
foolproof finale



the encore  
the tearing of her  
into jigsaw pieces

was it to make  
an improbable truth  
of a big-eyed daughter  
who milked the world  
with inks?

# wolf dam

how easy to grow fear  
in a square of brown water  
by giving it wolf teeth  
a mother gift to save us  
from drowning on a fenceless  
poverty farm her gutturals  
convincingly lupine  
the panic language  
of a near miss

the front windows grew  
such huge pre-school eyes  
after *what big eyes*  
*you have my dear*  
our new game of fright-fully  
imagined hurt extra fed  
by the dog's teeth crunching bone

where to give us outside cover  
were the usually ubiquitous  
pines? (our soon-to-be school  
lookouts for 'cops and robbers')  
the windbreaks that still try  
to shape the land European  
more suitable  
for imported beasts

not even the hot burn  
of bush fires could banish  
the wolf's reeking heat  
though the coconut stink  
of gorse sizzled for days

how we swung  
perilously  
on our ropes  
those small summers  
just far enough above  
the gaping mouth

claiming it in the end  
as one more scalp  
to walk away with  
falling into the trap  
of an old precedent—  
making a species extinct  
as a way of putting fear  
to death

# paddock bull

you might think of grass  
summer dry and yellow  
of abattoirs and clean steak  
of dirt abased with blood  
of primary resource politics  
spreading its arrival  
with cloven-hooved livestock  
in a drop of manure  
and sweet-breathed calves  
across country and culture  
their whiffy bellow of cattle yards  
annual shortages of pasture  
prickling as handfeeds of hay  
from the back of a ute

you might smell the cud  
and semen of beefy reproduction  
cows bailed up for the service  
a school yard grown ripe  
with scrotum for the annual bull  
its fifteen kids taking bets  
on the hereford in its home paddock  
caught at its hormonal peak  
between cloning and a farmer's  
pride in his breeding stock  
against a skinny kid in a girl's name

a thin shadow obsessed with distances  
that dance like horizons

beyond mateship mythologies  
so that she almost daydreams  
her way around the bull's breath  
on a sunshot fence  
a barbed wire touch  
that takes her past virginal  
and orgies of repeat

# catcher

she's here nightly  
with her catcher's vision  
and her front row seat

nothing puts her off  
not even the lion's  
bored incontinence

she's a seasonal ticket  
spider eye spider bait  
waiting on tragedy

it will come if it's called  
she knows it's a matter  
of timing and a trained eye

and who can work it  
better than she  
with her nocturnally  
rehearsed positioning?

when the drop comes  
all you catch is the effigy  
falling through your grip

the kewpie doll  
wearing your face

the too-little too-much  
break in the lifeline

one more death  
to sawdust  
unless you're willing  
to pick her up  
and take her place

## working the cats

*I do not like women... I prefer lionesses.*

*The lioness is so much better a mother than most women.*

*Would she leave her cubs for a damned musician?*

Haxby's Circus, Katherine Susannah Prichard

it's talk-back  
and the radio claims  
he knows a woman  
who dances with cats  
but it's not his music  
that gets you  
it's the no-nonsense  
pose of the woman  
anonymous in white  
neck-to-toe frilled  
and gracefully ruched  
lace so Edwardian  
and composed  
it pins up her hair  
against any stray claw

she could be ringed  
by hearth tabbies rather  
than the six leopards  
*eyes obediently front*  
and sheathed just fed  
perhaps and somnolent



the one at her feet  
 could be stuffed  
 at a pinch

a taxidermy fiction  
 but not the one  
 above her head  
 and the two either side  
 one good bite  
 if they chose  
 to exercise  
 their predatory  
 and you wonder  
 if she were there only  
 for the frame  
 the instant snapshot  
 of someone's idea  
 to pull a crowd  
 and then fake her  
 as indisposed  
 except she without  
 smelling salts has sat  
 there long enough  
 to convince the cats  
 that she like them  
 without whip could  
 take on the crowd

\*

solicitude though  
 how can six leopards  
 match Mary's 40 cubs  
 raised to *full-grown*  
*lionhood* and she *one*  
*of the best-natured*

*best-behaved lion*  
*mothers in the Wirth Bros.*  
 Zoo<sup>1</sup> who was fasted  
 each Sunday to prevent  
 distemper  
 the exposures of iron  
 cage after cage  
 ample with illusion  
 spacing their bars  
 to convince her  
 not to hide  
 her young or crush  
 them for protection  
 under her body  
 and not in the last  
 resort to eat them  
 to prove herself  
 the best of mothers

\*

and you'd have to cite Mabel  
 who left her nurse's cap  
 in 1911 to play  
 tigers without whip  
 and gun without  
 chair and prod  
 who put her face  
 in the tiger mouth

and her body  
 in roll-over  
 wrestling bouts  
 with devotion  
 to be mauled  
 and bitten numerously  
 a disarming

---

1. From Wirth's 'Official Souvenir Programme', Victorian Season 1925. Performing Arts Museum collection.

of the sceptics  
bent on fidelity  
or was it that she  
in justice took on  
the wild sixteen  
to the cage  
to show what cats  
in their jungle  
had never surrendered

## killing the galah

a screech to tear the sky apart  
via the head-on conflicts of travel  
how these collide at right angles  
with wings travelling as the crow flies  
how flocks learning to fear the engine  
kill thoughts of our being good at scenery  
& leaving as we found them the desert's mirages  
as if these were not blood but the red wash of sunset  
& killing wildlife on the bullbar is not our sport  
but how do you not see the landscape  
running the other way like an exodus  
& the whole stubborn family of galahs  
sticking to the bitumen to protect one sick bird  
until the instinct of wings makes them desert it  
& lifts them above motor heat & the horn blast  
that on the edge of a snuff world  
thinks it might save something until death  
is graphically pink & grey feathers  
grabbing a last quick flight on the windscreen  
what can you trust if not your own itinerary  
relief drivers we drive & are driven  
the broken white lines are gaps  
& silences in a myth of substance  
highway as an inroads a trip metre  
the silver city plays no witness  
it has burrowed too far in  
to want land to close itself off  
like wound becomes scar us too  
we're hooked on the bitumen knife  
the slash through the heart  
that means certain death to flight

# laundry animal

i

she's like foot odour  
a refusal to die  
a hybrid Noah overlooked

ii

her lineage could brag  
if it wanted honour  
to the imperials

iii

that gave birth  
to a queen's inheritance  
of wash days

iv

to a lesson in economics  
i.e. gross domestic  
product means

v

whatever the politics  
in crisis the nation  
must have its washing

vi

she's a miracle  
of metamorphosis  
from organic to machine

vii

a No. 7

a local laundromat

a *Speed Queen*

viii

classically she's a breakdown  
of modus operandi

a refusal to coins in the slot

ix

though she's white goods

enough in clown face

to keep gods out of the pits

x

(brimstone blackens

the imperial long suit

queens have died at the trough)

xi

don't look for her

among the blue bloods

the breeding chronicles

xii

track her dungs

her deliberate honeys

her sabotage with method

xiii

to the sheets of home

she's a signature

to defy bleach

xiv

it was never white roses

she hates (though give her colour)

it's the laundries of cover-up

## mutton bird new year's eve

two hours to midnight  
and the rookery's  
an alcohol in the blood  
wild dunes wild pulse  
the sky a convulsion  
of wings a purple vertigo  
tunes and trembles  
above the sea's cutthroat  
edge   adrenalin's

head for heights goes  
straight for the thermals  
uses wind as tongue  
to levitate the bones  
she has been reading  
a woman who writes  
of her own passivity  
how she cures it to survive

the Andes and her fatal  
tendency to fantasise  
how she names over  
and over the erotic absence  
of *apricots blackcurrants*  
*plums* to keep her veins  
alive enough to make  
herself a killer of birds

the companion vulture  
 first turned nemesis  
 turned jealous lover  
 its beak at her infant's throat  
 then the crippled eagle  
 morosely dying who comes  
 alive in her hands  
 to fight death-by-drowning

in the flight chambers  
 of the heart it is impossible  
 to surrender wings  
 to rigor mortis to kill  
 the bird is to be the bird  
 the blood on its breast  
 the blood in your hands  
 the spilled feather

drops adrenalin  
 down off the heights  
 leaves vulture and eagle  
 to soar in their altitudes  
 like after-image  
 like circus art

midnight's resuscitation  
 as *freak show*  
 as *tattooed lady*  
 who laughs in your face  
 she has your measure  
 your intoxication with heights  
 your disillusion with falls

her body devotes itself  
 each muscle flexes  
 a gaudy aerialist



a song and dance girl  
with fruit in her veins  
and behind her eyes birds  
picking off the years  
like calendars

# blood and kittens

*sometimes I use my creativity working out a way to kill*

*Alma Hajric, visual artist  
from her journal during the siege of Sarajevo<sup>1</sup>*

when your city  
bunkers down  
under a joke  
that makes light  
of amputations  
you know you are under  
siege's dark humour  
discovering  
as if it were already  
a plum in the hand  
that the *human body*  
*is very soft*  
*very unprotected*  
that your *last battery*  
*is the spirit*  
*and the brain*  
that when your heart  
craves to survive

---

1. Based on Alma Hajric's 1992 journals and drawings created during the siege of Sarajevo. A documentary based on these, *Black Kites*, was televised by SBS, 3 March 1998.

you'll promise it anything  
*life is beautiful*  
*I will bear a child*  
 meanwhile you live

an underground journal  
 in a time without sun  
 recording images  
 and words  
 under *the silence*  
*the darkness*  
*and the weight*  
*of five blankets*  
 grateful that like  
 the colour white  
 you cannot without  
 water and soap  
 expose yourself  
 to the killing test  
 that buries its dead  
 in the playgrounds  
 between the seesaws  
 and the slides  
 and so each day  
 of your cramped basement  
 you fly the black kites  
 of art    horrified  
 by your own talent  
 to plot death  
 beyond the fine tip  
 of a pen or a brush  
 while the earth  
 swims away from itself

towards some kind  
 of oblivion  
 and revulsion  
 measures itself

against the innocence  
of fur as two kittens  
lap at the blood  
of two children  
freshly killed

# FIRE FRONTS



# legend

that witch who camped  
on the edge of the forest  
is gone her green tent  
flaps in the wind  
like old years old tongues  
about how she hid there after  
the house cast her out after  
her children grew voices  
to accuse her she travelled  
the track to and from  
like an echidna with  
its undersides showing  
they say she stopped bathing  
when she threw her name away  
in the name of honesty  
even the fire arrows she liked  
to practice with roofs  
have run silent  
and a good thing too  
some say yes a good thing  
you mark our words she'll vanish  
off the face of the earth  
one of these days  
her kind always do

## **‘the goddess head’**

*(after an etching by Elaine d’Esterre)*

you’re coolly arrogant  
among violet dawns  
a goddess’s luck  
this safe return  
from the holy wars  
against the god woman  
you’ve opened  
the navel’s viewing room

like sunlight streams  
through stained glass

into how art died  
under the palette  
of something religious

no given name  
no patronymic  
you’re the wild anonymous

the sphinx the artemis  
the singing in the blood

it’s how I like you  
subtle oceanic  
a wine for the eyes  
a music for the tongue



# Medusa's lilies

they get to you at last  
the religious lilies

all those altars  
and stinking vase waters  
so much proximity

the coldness of their white  
and waxy skins their  
pollinating yellow tongues

even death's chilly sex  
is not this contagious

so many sacrifices  
by candle light  
on starched lace cloths

ritual priests devoutly  
drunk on blood wines  
offering the holy offerings  
*in the name of...*

girls chastely drunk  
on the heady offering  
of their lives  
*in the name of...*

the mothers drunk  
on their daughters'

pale purity  
*in the name of...*

younger sisters  
waiting in line  
with armfuls of lilies  
the radiance  
of devotion  
heating their faces  
*in the name of...*

the generations rising  
in roses of smoke  
before the icons  
*in the name of...*

Medusa with a chronic  
cough offering  
alternative lilies  
the calyxes of her breasts  
*in my own name...*

a true gorgon's vanity:  
*take me or leave me*  
*I'm no circus costume*

owning her tusks  
her petrifying eyes  
her hairy snakes  
would this make us  
more terrible  
than we are

# improvisation no. 1

the theatre arrives  
like a calendar

tick off its days  
its variable wardrobes

its smoke-fugged  
and tireless airports

grab the risk of travelling  
between the wars

too many lives  
are depleting the ashtrays

\*

kindergartens  
are pegging their small shadows  
to hobble big cat life

in the Bluebeard cells  
invisible wives  
are cursing like plovers

and if you're looking  
for clown alley  
it is furthest from the light

\*

it is time to exit  
the soul's glory box  
belly-down among the slugs

tracking their silvers  
through the burning dumps  
and the runway smogs

honour the gastropods  
with sweet lettuce

they are the slow patient ones  
the ones holding the curtain ajar

\*

you may stay if you wish  
and listen to the stage  
purring its ovaries

or your own pickled pair  
in the gynaecologist's jar

take them home again  
and relish them like grapes

they might burst through  
into something brilliant

like spotlight

# burning off with Joan of Arc

*run mad as often as you chuse but do not faint*

*Jane Austen*

Joan    your old roof  
this sky    is running  
out of height

arsonists haunt us  
like bad weather    neighbours

load each other  
with escape routes

we keep tabs  
on petrol and matches

every executioner is a flame

\*

it has taken years  
to scatter your ashes

and still the fuels gather  
into pyres

like the leaves and bark  
of a culture's hates

\*

to torch them  
is too much hazard

to water them  
takes too much tank

we hoard retardant  
and resistant  
like rations

\*

being prepared  
is a brittle house

last year I left you  
to burn like an icon  
on a doomed wall

you still walk its tightrope  
like a woman  
who dares infernos

\*

and there's this—  
two neighbour women  
run to earth by a firebug

incendiaries light no torch  
for mercy the same red tongues  
that sped your meltdown

consuming the memory  
of sky as cool blue honey

the rare things  
still going up in flames

\*

hour by hour the bulletins  
overwhelm with spectaculars

we stay or evacuate  
lives burn and burn

the forest fights back  
with combustion a promise  
to rise from its own ash

it remembers you  
as a hot spot

how once lavishly  
you inflamed with the beauty  
of 300 dancing girls<sup>1</sup>

only fools mistake  
them for fireflies

an escape night of the senses

watch them work the crowd!  
watch them trap arsonists!

\*

we stand either end  
of the heart's verandah

---

1. Joan of Arc was once staged by Ringling Bros, *circa* 1913 as a 1200 character spectacle that included 300 'beautiful' dancing girls. Performing Arts Museum collection.

this was to be the start  
of a new extension

a communal raising  
after the ash until Kosovo

killed our hammers (though East Timor  
dies closer) we have stopped

blessing the rain its puddles  
cruel as petrol pyromania

is alight in them  
something newly promethean

raping woman and girl  
with the ancient brutalities  
of unwanted sperm

\*

this new front  
how it races uphill

like Tito's  
imploded brotherhood

and how NATO calls  
on the overworked waters

of humanity  
and then answers  
with fire power

as if this were not  
a thing of home  
a thing of warmth



\*

it's never the same war  
even the phoenix changes

the practice annihilates us  
to the torch

you chose to rave not faint

you knew how each time  
sacrifice burns skin  
it is burning the last house

## contrary mary

**it takes neither dynamite  
nor earth quake  
the business of circus  
is its own upheaval  
in parenthetic intervals  
the muscles remember  
the clock as only  
so many years  
to be had from organzas  
a switch that has a past  
to convince against  
the speed of time's  
war and pornographies  
how these like rhymes  
leave scorch holes  
on a child's body  
how she must wean  
these off fire  
in burn-offs  
that take her  
from delicate to waratah**

*on the contrary  
mary's cartwheel overturns  
the personality  
waters under the rhyme  
its cockleshell centuries  
to unearth  
among the soul's acrobatics  
a passion for tightrope  
a departure from pretty  
maid dirts when push  
comes to shove  
history's full  
of x-rateds  
and mary's rudely  
on the wrong side of centenarian  
like chilli in the mouth  
is red as a flag  
waving its torch  
in a garden's turn  
of thirst  
from water to blood*

## improvisation no. 2

you'd call the space  
bare silent  
in the meaning of stark  
ice-hot as a border crossing  
between death  
and the imagination  
there's no going back  
shoes have left  
no directions  
for a return to feet  
her trapeze flies  
with the weight of you  
in her mouth  
you're intoxicated  
mewling like a cub  
the appalling chance  
to open your eyes again  
to first light

# the Firehair songs<sup>1</sup>

1

she came into the landscape  
deficient in melanin  
a red temper's deceit  
a particular passion  
unmarriageably  
refusing to smell  
like a bottle's  
tincture of amber  
tincture of violet  
her head hair's lustful  
her body hair's gross  
the sun's on to her  
she'll burn she'll fry  
she's cauldron born  
she's fanatically cursed  
she's mud in your eye  
a hagiography  
a joke in the pub  
a heroine so honed  
she's danger to the page

---

1. *Firehair* was a Pioneer Western Romance (Ranger Comics) comic in the late 1940s/early 1950s.

2

she came flaunting  
 the sexual  
 significance of hair  
 before abundant  
 became everything's  
 excuse for wanting  
 she was of the money  
 and they wanted her  
 the moguls the makers  
 she was their glamour  
 their starlet  
 their scarlet fantasy  
 a serial excitement  
 from the groin  
 of a pen

3

she came  
 before leather  
 turned erotic  
 she was celtic glory  
 bareback on a horse  
 she was paddock  
 turned prairie  
 she was bracken  
 made crimson  
 and waving  
 like beautiful grass  
 danger's humiliation  
 to cowboy fumbles  
 a girl's own wild  
 speedy and deathless  
 they had her  
 episodically  
 cornered on the page  
 trapped in the plot  
 a white girl

they'd Indianised  
with sex's reason  
for getting her back

4  
she died  
under the pen  
without innocence  
like a war virgin  
did they conquer her  
at last with the lasso  
of sexual revenge  
the trussed ankle  
the manacled wrist  
or did she burn through  
to the plotting desk  
to the dead wood  
like an arrow  
flies to the heart

# the hand-me-down-secrets of a red skirt

*adore my reds*

*they do not come free*

sacred prostitute

to sex goddess

to drag queen

to opportunity shop

the cotton field whips

stripping black skins

for my appalling crimsons

the family bible

numbering its decapitations

rolling heads

in the cottage industry

as easily as beads

call me a religion of blades!

call me a twirl of bias cuts!

call me a sign of the times!

the tiger economies

how long can they

keep a grip on the hems?

*O I'm dancing I'm dancing!*

I've cartwheeled

with circus beasts

across all the continents

how many flags I've flown  
 in support of ring masters  
 how many banners I've marched  
 in protest against them!  
     *my gorgeous revolutions!*  
     one of my lovers  
     used me to clean  
     his guerilla rifle

when he was killed  
 I shot the enemy myself  
     *who can gainsay*  
     *a daughter of the cloth?*

my mother stitched her finger  
 to the sewing machine  
 in the altering of me  
     it's the least of our bloods  
     now she is rheumatic  
     and in need of red flannel

so what if this  
 is an age of trousers?  
     I've found myself  
     an orphan in a storm

what might she become  
 with my mouth  
 around her waist?  
     you are not the first  
     I warn her  
     *you are not the first*



## improvisation no. 3

you were wire dancing  
before you knew it

to arrive at her door  
her facade's terra cotta

is to improvise  
as a life exiting its market forces

\*

she's raw this theatre  
a flyover  
above the history roads

I lie on her boards  
to relearn the ecstasy  
of breathing

\*

it's like prowling the dark  
in forgotten coats

I keep getting lost  
in the impatience  
of the pulse

\*

she's frighteningly marvellous  
the way she's here invisibly  
in all weather

she's not comatose  
a victim of applause  
she's a recurring verge

an invitation  
to break chain

# living in the palace of the queen of heaven

*R. 'Doc' Spalding built a circus on a barge and called it 'The Floating Palace'. It opened in 1852 and was an instant success, touring the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers annually until it burned to the water line in 1865. The acts mentioned here were not among its attractions.*

*(Source: Performing Arts Museum collection)*

1

this boating life  
this *rock rock rock*  
of glitter water  
living its history  
of dreams  
with \$42,000  
circa 1850  
and a vision  
of the standard  
42-foot circus ring  
afloat **queenly**  
on a barge

add multiplications  
of 2400 patrons **gorgeously**  
backdropped with velvet  
**lavishly** slippered  
with thick carpet

and always  
 touched **masterfully**  
 with a ticket box  
**ornately** carved

add a towboat's  
 engines to tug  
**royally** a palace's  
 mirrored enchantments  
 fire its 200 gas lights  
 warm it **charmingly**  
 with steam heat  
 and **copiously** hide  
 the workhorse smells  
 in the off-shore  
 menagerie

be the price  
 be the ticket  
**eternally eternally**  
 be the year of operations  
 that burns like hell  
 to the water line

2.

*Ringling Bros. Barnum & Bailey exhibited thirteen Ubangi women during the early 1930s. They were brought out of West Africa by Dr Ludwig Bergonnier. Their 'saucer lips' drew huge crowds.*

*(Source: Performing Arts Museum collection)*

did you think  
 it was some weird rite

that drew so many  
 small-lipped faces  
 through the circus gate

to stare at  
your Ubangi beauty?

were willing even  
to pay you dividends

for the privilege  
of calling you  
*foul smelling and savage*

and to marvel  
at your foodish way  
with raw fish

and unpeeled  
bananas

but not to wonder  
at their own decade  
how it could pay

so much coin  
as if it were a dowry  
to the European

who had you brought  
out of West Africa  
for his enrichment

3.

*In his early days as a circus entrepreneur Barnum acquired the 'Feejee Mermaid'. He planted stories, supposedly written by scientists, in newspapers and pamphlets to 'prove' she was authentic and began exhibiting her in 1842 with great financial success.*

*(Source: Performing Arts Museum collection)*

make me spectacular  
*a Feejee Mermaid*  
 cobble me a life  
 from a dead monkey's  
 torso and head

and a fish's body  
 keep the stitches sly  
 keep the stink low

keep the animals  
 robbed to the profit

liberty and sweet life  
 a tabloid prayer  
 of bogus science

and mocked truth  
 full of gullible  
 and riches

*(don't touch/my  
 nerve ends [wired  
 and strange they can't  
 recognise each other's]  
 only the breath  
 that breaks*

*like a phantom wave  
 against a seam's  
 hybrid navel  
 and calls itself pain)*

prove me mute  
 public me maul me  
 keep the dollars chinking  
 in the tills of heaven

4.

*In this age of ultrarealism the circus is a last frontier.*

*Wirth's circus programme, Melbourne  
season and tour 1940. (Source: Performing  
Arts Museum collection)*

the money fats  
devoured even Gargantua<sup>1</sup>

Herta<sup>2</sup>  
I'm holding you  
up to the light  
without giving  
you a bean

without paying  
you a cracker

would you call  
this theft?

would you say  
it's cashing in

on the freaks'  
hall of fame?

---

1. Gargantua was a 600lb gorilla. Acid was thrown in his face when he was small, giving it a fierce, twisted expression. He was billed as the 'World's Most Terrifying Creature'. A pageant featuring Frank (Bring 'em Back Alive) Buck was created in Gargantua's honour when he was first exhibited in 1938. Performing Arts Museum collection.

2. The Sarrasani Circus offered a prize of 50,000 marks (*circa* 1923) to anyone who could come up with a match for Herta's weight-for-age. She was 15 at the time and weighed 500lbs. Performing Arts Museum collection.

your lards  
 how they'd scatter publics

if you opened your mouth  
 and let fly with canaries

*the show's never over  
 until the fat lady sings*

fly the yellows Herta  
 don't be a cave bird<sup>3</sup>  
 for every poking finger

let the owners  
 keep their poisons

let their patrons  
 test the mines

5.

*I'd rather be a racehorse and last a minute than be a  
 plowhorse and last forever*

*Lillian Leitzel<sup>4</sup>*

if you can't kill  
 the romance use it

---

3. Canaries were traditionally sent into mines to test for poisonous gases. If a canary was overcome it was a sign the mine wasn't safe for humans.

4. Billed as the 'Star Of The Show' in Ringling Bros. Barnum & Bailey's *The Greatest Show On Earth* (circa 1919), Leitzel was famous for her swingovers on a rope twenty feet above ground. With her right hand anchored through a padded loop that was attached to a swivel she would throw her body over and over in a series of flips. Her record was 239. Each time she completed a plange her right shoulder became partly dislocated and snapped back into place. She was killed when her equipment failed during a performance at the Valencia Music Hall in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1931.



adrenalin and rope  
at trapeze height  
and its half held breath  
at Lillian Leitzel risk  
willing to semi  
dislocate its shoulder  
with each spin's eyes  
open to the fall  
that killed her

her calculated launch  
her displacement of bone  
and muscle fluid as wind  
and deliberately as headlong  
a white knuckle glamour  
to spotlight the flesh  
and make it look easy  
the reaction stretch  
is agony yours  
could change place  
with hers the body  
can get used to anything  
but what will you risk  
to keep this grip on hunger?



# INDIGENOUS ACTS



## ropes 2

upside down you're a  
circus gypsy a wanderer  
on a rope who swings  
and sings to herself  
the way an upturned world  
makes the proper sense

## taking you to the circus

*During a concert at the Gasworks, Albert Park, Victoria, 13 July 1997, Ruby Hunter, Aboriginal singer and songwriter, told how as a child she was taken from her family by white authorities who said they were taking her to the circus.*

she's singing for change  
on a bare stage  
into our bare faces

a song woman  
with a voice  
and a repertoire  
to keep  
her throat open

against ships of state  
their ten point plans  
their next wave uraniums

against empire  
from the high seas  
selling off land rights  
to the holy grab

against fleets  
mouthing 'savage savage'

as a way to takeover

the pearls  
 playing god  
 playing circus

coming to get her  
 taking her in hand  
 by the hand O she knows  
 she got the clowns

in whiteface in pompoms  
 creeping their hobbyahs  
 their pratfall etiquettes

\*

gloves prevent contamination: poison always travels to the heart (like the arsenics of memory) 'LUCKY KID LUCKY TICKET' when they came she was armed in black not satin but skin that live underwear to last her through the shows through the sell-offs through the street kid days through the hazy daze of alcohol it's a lesson in tracking it's a lesson in survival it's a lesson in what's culture and what's not

these up-front seats  
 this price we pay  
 for 200 years of family history  
 as close as body odour  
 as breath to breath

\*

her songs of the road  
 reading like advice  
 to the traveller

- travel light  
 uncrushables are best

- avoid laundries  
heaping their dark wash behind  
the great dividing dingo fence of race
- avoid soaps anthropologising  
down to the ash for proof primitive
- avoid the starches of assimilation  
'MAKE THEM OVER MAKE THEM LIKE US'

\*

*native all of us  
who were born here*

her black on white move  
in language force-fed  
by a white lexicon

a music to test  
the savagery

playing breast  
to our breast

bone to our bone

percussions  
to rock the heart

old silt old crocodiles  
versus the jackhammers  
screwing their agitations

somewhere  
between mea culpa  
and surface repair



in the end  
it's wear the same old roof  
or tear the canvas

the ticket and the price  
all here in concert  
as audience as lyric

choosing colonial turf  
or people's land

## the genocides in marmalade

these preserving jars panic  
at history sound effects  
in glass  
too narrow at the neck  
to contain the Bosnian  
woman's  
spectacular  
her leap for  
a food drop reduces  
them to fragilities of sand  
she's news  
they're post-witness  
their future considers  
its volume against her life running  
out  
through the holes of a sniper's  
bullets how it pours  
like a flagon's blood run  
past the UN troops the city's  
bunkers their camouflage  
for tracking the war  
gratis CNN

safe distance  
it's not always greedy  
these hectares of bush lemon glut  
bring her closer

to the mouth    the marmalade's  
fatal eruptions suspect the spoon  
how it stands up  
in the jam    like a neighbour  
masquerading    as cannon

the blood sugars of language  
in her living tongue  
congealing  
in the path of an ant  
make *human* more miniscule  
than it would like    the season's  
batch would doubly bury  
her among  
rinds and piths    inadequate  
breads

# eating tiger country

*Tiger country is out there...beyond the border...*

*Tiger Country by Andrea Lemon and Sarah Cathcart*

you were reared on it  
it got into your food chain  
like a Blake poem

mixed with  
the sawdust and dungs  
of a Wirth season

piss and saliva  
and the terrible fear  
that spits from its cage

how this taught you  
not to say *feline*  
in front of hunters

those nets tight as noose  
on something endangered

\*

at every first light  
a roaring in the hills  
sends guns prowling

for pug marks  
for the striped suns  
of camouflage

rewards line up in windows  
like hitler grants

legends stalk  
in whispers and innuendos

the yellow bite  
safe at no distance

from the imagination  
that traps it

\*

the orange dusts of summer  
how you breathe them  
to stay alive

coating your lungs  
with the ferocious coughs  
of an animal

driven out  
by a farming practice  
that uproots its bones

you wash your hair  
in its hot ochre smogs  
and consider migration

how it brought you  
here to this cull  
carnivorous and rare

\*

maps are exclusive  
to the known

you're stuck with invisibles  
the nuances of recognition

smell revives  
when the mind goes blank

all that sweat and fur  
european as fairy tale  
hairy as ogre

exorcism's about getting rid  
of the deadly ones

the tiger shoots  
the exotic medicines  
the trophy walls

\*

the tiger won't fight you  
none has ever tried  
to leap the killing ring

you've stolen her peace  
she's no gentle wattle  
she wants you off her tongue

she's handing you to country  
the cat o' nine couldn't tame

for the blood for the bones for the body

to come home  
to land beyond beast

who invites not pursuit  
but the absorption  
that filters sun lightly

like a tiger going home  
crosses borders

## choosing lettuce

*In November 1994, the Age carried a photo report on Luzmilla Zevallos, a Peruvian cultivator who, along with nine of her neighbours, buried herself up to her neck in a field of young lettuce, vowing she would die before losing her land.*

*your exposure  
as a wake-up call's  
morning item  
the clotted earth  
on your cheek  
as the passion  
and touch  
of live burial  
for whose loving  
ecstasy is  
the conception  
of home soil*

*beads of sweat  
on a grapefruit  
how this can  
evoke your skin  
its pores those  
mouths  
wide open  
and suffocating*



*how it can  
 imagine  
 a field  
 of ten heads*

*your naming  
 of land as flesh  
 as a ripeness  
 for the plucking*

*impact as seed  
 can it reach  
 deep enough  
 to touch the brokers  
 can it get past  
 that cold kiss  
 on your neck  
 speculation's  
 clever knife  
 its shifting  
 of the isobars  
 to profit versus  
 lettuce    subsist*

*and subside  
 how these mean lost  
 to your two year old  
 her tears  
 by your side  
 watering  
 the inheritance  
 you cultivate  
 her terror  
 that knows  
 land answers  
 according to use  
 this position  
 in a disputed*

*pelvis how  
holding nothing  
back takes  
body to its final  
succession  
its climax crop  
this is you  
this is us  
the same treasure  
the same pogrom  
dirt as mother  
to the mouth  
as daughter  
to the hands  
as refusal  
to come  
cheap*

# travels with boabs

*a boab in transit  
under the sky tracks  
strung like wire  
between gondwana  
and australia  
by the continental drift  
of exotics*

\*  
rock fall or land slide  
there are tremors here

and the settling  
of plot lines

she's a dark house  
wide as pregnancy's room

for the use of rejection  
or forgiveness

\*  
to get close  
is to hear the fruit bats

going noisily delirious  
on her night milks

is to measure  
the expansions of age

with the ludicrous  
limits of an armreach

a thin trunk  
cannot hold the half of it

500 years of navigation  
and memory 1100 litres  
of fibrous reservoir

taking what she needs  
from the wind's tongue  
storing it for the dry times

she is not alone  
most of the world's legs  
are out hunting for water

\*

*so what's in a name?*  
*what's in a clue?*

to the guided she says read your page/  
for **boab baobab** read dialect Africa/  
read two hot continents two hot racisms/  
read that in a dry climate the heart  
cannot cool itself without the communal travel  
of blood/for **bottle tree** read glass read  
transparent 'will you be my supermarket  
my honey my sauce all my preservatives in one?'  
/for **dead rat tree** read the imported sweet tooth  
gnawing at her roots/for **adansonia gregorii** read  
dead language/for **gadawon** read mother tongue

\*

she's a joke on confetti

*what's your language?*

*what did you marry?*

I married books

full of dead trees

the talking heads

the theory wars

the kind of wedlock

that means literate

fictional with gargoyles

of no small dialect

that noise in the head

I go nowhere

without

their weird beauty

their restless variations

\*

if I arrive with my cup

she will say don't be fooled

I'm sour gourd

if I go with my children

she will ask what have you taught them

if I go with my ancestry

she will say that's no excuse

if I go naked she will say  
yes but where is the rest

\*

*wheeling as the earth  
turns the boab  
throws curves  
around the quadrants  
can laugh even  
at the sun's insatiabes  
song of medicine  
song of shelter  
song of food  
fierce as a gift  
that expects me  
to take my share of water*

# reconciliation

the door opening into the trees  
you say is like walking into  
a forest whose breakfast  
among the quarrels  
of rosella and currawong  
means sitting down to eat  
with hard words  
like *territory* and *belonging*  
which also means  
getting past every country  
whose middle name is conflict  
afterwards it doesn't matter  
that the mosquitoes stab  
through each layer  
you've surrendered your face  
to the white-flowered belly  
of a shrub and come out  
shining like new pollen  
so that you're more  
than a day's food  
more than body could expect  
to know of lightness

# Erzulie<sup>1</sup> in the basil pot

you're my voodoo in a pot  
my blessing my curse

I can't get enough of you  
sweet and bitter  
in bed and kitchen

I'm learning your religion

how the blood of the plant  
means death in life  
and life in death

\*

slavery's still alive  
like a bloodhound

though puppified  
because you're popular  
a delicious culinary

a food's art beyond  
the question of race

when the restaurant

---

1. *Erzulie* is the ambivalent goddess, or *loa*, of love in the Voodoo pantheon of Haiti. Basil is the herb associated with her powers.



means everyone  
 it's harder to leave  
 when history arrives  
 with its land order  
 against appetites

who like your own  
 mean indigenous

\*

possession as 9/10ths  
 of a law how  
 this contracts you  
 to lean treasurings

I keep you potted  
 out of fear you'll run amok  
 and expose us

to weed killers  
 to plant control

forgive the cowardice  
 I own no property

\*

I've heard you  
 gnash and mourn  
 as Erzulie Ge-Rouge  
 when love goes wrong

and I've seen you weep  
 enough seeds to fruit  
 companion volatiles

and then bed down  
 so pungently  
 you take root

\*

Erzulie loa  
you're every woman  
who cannot return home

the cost is anything  
but neutral this  
is no green poultice

you're stuck  
with my address  
and your teacher's luck

the garden is growing braver  
but you'll promise it  
no remedy

# river salvages

(a conversation with Connie May Fowler's River of Hidden  
Dreams)

1

you purr through the door  
like a great cat a story tiger  
generations of river  
ancestors streaming  
from your back  
*we are the dispossessed*  
*remember us!*

your arrival makes me  
a night reader I take to my bed  
as soon as the sun goes down  
reconstructing your voice  
with the key you planted  
under the text to say  
nothing that grows flesh is objective  
this is a grand-daughter  
using no device but her art

page by page your story  
pours over the spread  
white ancestors  
drag yours off in chains  
your Seminole grandmothers dance  
their rage on my knee caps  
*such colonials! such bigheads!*

your Sadie Hunter  
 bulges my house  
 with wet fur  
 she's rank as sweat  
 a human animal with claws  
 a smasher of mirrors  
 a destroyer of images  
 of herself her tribe  
 as celluloid discards  
 on North America's  
 cutting-room floor

*you think the colonial edit's over?  
 look around you poor fool  
 look in your own back yard!*

2  
*this is no cinema  
 this is the everglades  
 and love is a dead-end bay  
 give me my Sparrow my boat  
 my bird and I'll teach you love  
 I'll tear your soul out!*

tourists line Hunter's rails  
 with blanched faces  
 having paid for sensation

she holds them captive  
 with her slavery tales  
 she's all cobra all venom

until the worm of civilisation  
 stares her down

not even the stars can  
 help her swing counterwise  
 and vomit the tourists up

for the 'gators that feast  
to ease the tick-tock of her hate

*under this cold sky  
there must be ice  
to cool the gauntlet of the heart!*

on dry land  
you offer her no hides  
only a dying heron  
its great blue body  
feathering the dust  
its yellow eye shocked to death  
by a speeding culture  
it had no instinct to read

the stones of the road  
bleed through her armpits  
wing stumps ride escort  
on her shoulders  
she has flown this cycle  
before how many times  
must the sacrificial bird  
die in the arms of a character  
before we are reborn?

3  
*in the land often thousand islands  
lie pools the sun never finds*

all your power is in her arms  
in those long fingers that tickle  
the symbol and float it loose  
a tiny coffin bearing a kinglet  
north? south? east? west?

*Ah Jesus! another saviour!*

all irony depends  
 on recognition  
 and isn't it her right  
 to second-guess the plot  
 to take the heron's wings  
 from the freezer  
 and tie them on with river grass  
*didn't I keep them just for this?*  
 wings not for flight  
 but for drowning  
 to make sure this child  
 will not rise and rise  
 in spirals of white  
 that racial air  
 that veil

hunter as priestess

*I give you death by water a second time  
 hush! my Sparrow will sing you to sleep*

it is all the novelist has  
 this symbolic art this sweet  
 revenge this taking  
 of death from our hands  
 and plunging us  
 to an optimistic depth  
 to breed yet another chance

4

the river tiger prowls its banks  
 its belly low-slung puckerd  
 around the red wound  
 where the knife  
 tried to cut out its tongue

*steal a people's language  
 and they forget who they are*

*leave only one word  
and something lives*

like *river*  
like *grand-daughter*

fed by ten thousand  
umbilicals islands  
of tiger milk

chain breakers

they're all ours now  
the ankle shackles

exhibits for our museums  
our hoarding houses  
our temples of rust

5  
Hunter hears stories  
breeding again  
among the mangroves

enough of them  
to give back your pen

she is all pilot  
under her  
the *Sparrow* rocks  
and croons

lifeboat as cradle  
river ink as lifeblood  
as compass

as tiger

who swims and swims  
trailing ripples  
of indelible words  
by the yellow lamp  
of a heron's eye

*We're taking back our life  
don't think it rests with you!*



# FEET ON THE GROUND



## a cappella

in this room week by week  
the walls wait for our feet  
our voices the windows look  
inwards rather than out  
and the door the door  
is ready for entry thinking  
we will return will come  
back with our hands  
and tongues full of music  
it has waited year  
by year has kept opening  
its dream of admittance  
loud in its hinges  
and now we arrive  
not knowing we were  
coming back not knowing  
we had ever been here  
and something is laughing  
something is friend  
in the voices in the names  
and the room settles  
endlessly like (of course) sand

## this noise

some acts grow overtired  
and betray themselves  
when the moon is dark  
they buy torches  
to window sit  
against catastrophe  
and demand you closer  
than the next bed  
so that your breath  
can punctuate  
their night sweats  
and order you radiant  
against storm and tempest  
and hedge you  
against cocktails  
iced with a snow leopard's  
quiet and deathly  
stalk this insistence  
to be moonly luminescent  
theirs to throw light  
like a clear white O  
on their incessant quakings  
they'd watertight you  
like contract  
even sue in the end  
to stop all  
and every travel  
that would lose them

## cure

in a room whose lingua is silence  
hers is the most  
she's lunar and remote  
inside cancer's white  
a blank name tag's distance  
between intimacy  
and breath

so that when they arrive  
you want to take  
the missionary out  
of the singers  
fanatically so earnest  
they enthuse  
like a rugby scrum's  
passion for the ball  
that life leather  
that bounce

and you want to cheer  
her pale obstinacy  
how it buries into wall  
like a print's withdrawal  
behind glass  
loathes the room it's hung in

these plums these raspberries  
to keep singing  
bowls of fruit  
is ridiculously nostalgia  
her retreat is an affair  
face-on and twisting  
with the mortality voice  
its coded love  
cupped like a lover's hands  
on her mastectomy  
the most noise  
she can take

# ancestries

materialise as dream if they must  
it's the one route  
you can't shut out or shut up  
like this remote bay's flesh  
and cliff blood and water  
bone and rock eloquently  
as if access were always open  
through memory to wild genes  
this shore curves  
like an arm holds you face to face  
with your own mutations  
wire dances so busy learning  
themselves they have forgotten  
how to feed

expose stick figures in the sand  
flow inside their crumbling edges  
like a river like a canal like a vein  
all revelation stirs its acids  
you'll catch something  
procrastination never taught  
tightrope to swim

watch the hunger  
who swaps land for ocean  
do it clothed  
as if stopping to undress

might risk the impulse  
watch the tethered pelican  
strain towards the swimmer  
with your own desire

a hard bird to catch  
even its feathers  
are stripped of muscle  
the bill that can inflict  
has been robbed of its fluency  
it knows it has been  
made pitiful it knows  
that I know

to take the thong from its neck  
is as easy and hard as balance  
the sun tilts the horizon  
towards pitiless and glare  
you're back-doored and buskerless  
wide open to some touch  
in waking code you would call  
an ecology of will  
a wind with a subtle mouth  
to lift the hairs on your arms  
and give the pelican  
back its flight



## north coast mulberries

these September hungers

mulberries so ripe  
they crave the mouth

blood fruit at blood heat  
they come with the job

this minding of a house  
annually with doors  
that open and shut

on passages so wide  
they split the heart

\*

each year is greedier  
for less distance  
less ringbark

the tree worries  
about orphans  
like a mother  
cut down too young

\*

the intimacies of the face  
how they die in the mask

you've been sucked  
through the eye pits  
of your own imprint  
to the other side  
of poinsettia

where being away  
means being absent  
from the roots

\*

Europe squandered you  
on cities and facades

workload is shrinking  
you towards reticent  
and withdrawn

what good is water  
in the outdoor bath  
if the tongues are gone?

\*

my tightrope  
has become a towrope  
for misadventures

handy you might think  
for the battered car

what drives our separation  
if not a passion for equal

before man  
before god  
before each other

## game of balance

**instructions are  
as absent as technique  
a vertigo for eyes  
strung to horizons  
in weather  
of their own making  
the wire's neuter  
the doubts  
are all slyly  
intestinal  
like pockets of gas  
a clumsiness of old acids  
learning fall by fall  
the ways of crossing  
like a clown's  
edit is humour  
without script  
without umbrella**

*the game doesn't come  
boxed each crossing  
has to make  
her own rules  
for the tightrope  
falling the first victory  
is to know feet  
are not the trip wires  
it's the eyes can't believe  
the point of balance  
is magnetic rehearsal  
the upside down version  
like monkey like prehensile  
is her best position  
for laughter  
a hunger's proof  
that the ends are tied  
in a game of balance*

# off-cuts

so you have chosen  
diamantes & black leather

something brilliant  
something cold

something to stand up  
to spotlights

& hard wear  
something appropriate

to stilts  
their steel shins

their glittering silvers

do not expect them  
to bend

do not expect them  
to bow

they have learnt  
to break myth

to see through  
butcher shop glass

& its blinding  
white trays

into the difference  
between lamb's fry

& your own liver  
is a practice called offal

& instructions  
to saute delicately

# performing the belly

*All you got to do if you want to make the crowd laugh is  
stick out your belly, and shake your backside at it.*

Haxby's Circus, Katherine Susannah Prichard

the winter of politics  
the need of a good laugh  
all those cold privatisations  
of heat water light life  
by the grace of capital

so shake your backside  
at the privateers  
they've been rehearsing  
takeovers long enough  
to have worked up to humour

it's better to be obscene  
than depressed  
to use the belly  
over rhetoric

*dice entre las piernas*  
says the Spanish  
*she speaks*  
*from between the legs*

pissing on politics  
that old talent  
the genitals of humour  
alive under the skirt

cut to Baubo  
out on the crossroads  
giving Zeus the finger  
making her audience laugh

a fire in the belly  
rubies in the navel  
hot coals hot comedy

snow-job seasons  
how they work the flesh



## road poem

no revs but the dust  
of a joker's feet in flight  
from a walled city  
before the gates lock  
& her eggs run out  
the only clowns  
left *inside* she says  
are millennium's  
& you need  
a credit card for that  
from ambition's  
brilliant chandelier  
like a roulette of light  
it can't wait  
to count down  
to No. 1 again  
towards some everest  
as if life's somewhere  
else she says  
not here not now  
& junk mail's  
all over the street  
in a party mood  
with bar codes of opportunity  
& the stock market's  
doing dividend drops  
down the santa chimney  
like a hallelujah chorus

& no moon's too high  
for the consumer horse  
to jump cart over  
    & that she's a skin of wine  
& will I join her the ant way  
    scavenging so close to the bone  
that food salivates  
    to be so wanted

## stories

*(after the reflections of a 110-year-old Welsh woman  
televised on Angry Earth, SBS, 25 February 1995)*

your last legs  
they're so Welsh  
throwing off old censorships  
the englands the empires  
the scold's bridles  
*remember the stories*  
and hope blood is  
listening in the veins  
of a grand-daughter  
while life wrinkles  
like aged cabbage  
because at 110  
you are old  
and the nursing home  
banishes your cases  
of personals downstairs  
to dark concrete  
because they're impediment  
to the aged care  
that banks its profits  
medicine glass by capsule

lay them out as you laid out  
your dead husband  
and open their bowels  
point them like mirrors  
at the english soldiers  
who raped your genitals  
and killed your desire  
include the receipts  
from the workers' hospital  
that failed to exist  
and the sanitorium  
your doctor placated  
with a rich woman

poison and cure  
the story's will  
its reading at the edge  
of the forest pit  
where your son  
and his gypsy lover  
trapped one  
of the rapists  
then threw life  
down to him  
in a hessian bag  
until he dies  
of snakebite

on tv's tourniquet  
its constriction  
of 110 years  
to a few time bytes  
you don't care about  
only these hours left  
to fight dust to dust

by the tongueful  
and inherit the ears  
of a grand-daughter:  
*remember the stories Gwen*  
*remember the stories*

## box office

between two rotting piers  
who reach out into the sea  
like arms rigid with loss

as if they petrified  
in a mad longing  
to possess water  
*trust us we are your eyes*

as if their crumbling  
feet must live on  
among the driven tides

among this woman  
reattaching her skin  
with sequins

& this man  
whose arthritis  
uncushions the sand

& this seahorse child  
cavorting among the syringes

watching them come  
up for air to face

& face the aesthetics  
of this beach fix

this strewn foreshore  
staring them between the eyes

as a choice

between two plastic bins  
one green one brown  
*trust us we are your eyes*

your gull gatherers  
your chameleon sockets  
gritty as this sand's melodramas  
between the toes

constant as andromedas  
pulling your oars of  
seaweed & wave towards  
some tanker

because oil is a deadly  
swimmer & the billboards  
are busily with turnover  
*trust us we are your eyes*

safe as goggles  
in the workplaces of change

we'll unhallow for you  
bolt by bolt  
or sing you tullamarine

riverlike as the traffic  
flows under its new pylons  
ultra with red ultra with yellow

p  
h  
e  
n  
o  
m  
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o

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g  
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c  
a  
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l  
y

almost an overhang's threat  
at the point of a sword  
as if the next millennial clock  
plans to start things off  
with a sky war

*trust us we are your eyes*

the soles of your feet<sup>1</sup>  
your circus  
for the season

via a script  
from the crow's nest  
of imagination

---

1. *The Soles of our Feet* was a circus season on the theme of reconciliation by the Women's Circus, Melbourne, 1998.



as if a women's art  
has the most to celebrate  
the most to revive

in sweating an audience  
ashore whose advantage  
is not to be vikings  
but to have hindsight

*trust us we are your eyes*

your rejuvenations  
of salt water  
your legends of belief

though something's up for sale  
something wants us gone

to pass us off as fun parks  
getting off on terror

we are nothing if not loyal

we can be any demolition's excuse  
to make way make room

we can be any view  
across the bay

we can be any glass face  
between the eye & the sea

# midnight on the tree of magnolia candles

midnight is her arrival  
as white silence  
on a night without luminary

to hear throats cracking  
under some foot  
to hear chains rattling  
in the convict cabins

split seconds  
crank a song out of her  
like a sad banjo

she wants the normality  
of an everyday night

the neighbour's dog  
coming in to spray  
pugnacious urine  
on the cat's territorials

the way it takes fright  
at the after-image  
of a cat's body dancing  
in parabolic ecstasy  
like a tiger's love of water

not this pale reach  
 of her candle flowers  
 that makes every link  
 in the fence a life gone  
 too soon

not these faces  
 coming like shadows lurch  
 along strung wire  
 in search of light

\*

they have come  
 with their ovulations  
 to her circus of repair  
 via the butterfly road

whose dead wings attach  
 like a second skin    mothers

to a new species  
 of disappeared  
 this is flight    the way they spread

their arms across the yard  
 as if they can block the genes  
 that put the weed killer in the crop

what is half a season's butterflies?

*more or less*  
*less or more*  
*this is a time of disposables*  
*our wombs are death ovens*

they have always known this

*continuity* is the faces strewn like petals in the night grass  
*continuity* is the virgin uterus they choose to future with

*continuity* is the hysterectomy who refuses to be a cure  
*continuity* is the digging stick and the water bowl the thesis the  
 microscope the wandering howl that crawls from its tent

arriving  
 in a rented yard  
 as white holes  
 in the wind  
 whose frost  
 is sometimes  
 the closest thing  
 to bread

\*

she refuses to light the barbecue and burn flesh  
*but she will use the dark fire the call and response voice the edgy*

but she is nothing if not communal  
*saw that cuts into the heart of what perverts*

she has cleared marriage out of the house to make room in the compass  
*tree to timber and shell use the bawd as the poker tongue the hot lick*

she has grown a resistance  
*to prod the mind*

to the tamed address  
 for those who come to dance face-to-face naked over midnight grass  
*and the body out of their useless despair you cannot call her an illusion she's a true example of her species'*

and bed themselves down in her translucent cups  
*luminosity or an ignis fatuus*

she would teach them as she taught bee and honeyeater to revive themselves in sips  
*to eyes that would keep their blinds drawn while trains stealth past*

but how can she choose a life above a life?  
*like stalkers carrying their nuclears their secret wastes*

*what is your disease? what is your war?*  
*towards some innocent dump — when she bruises it is purely climatic—*

the compassion trap the dilemma seed  
*and so far the next hour is always arriving as the unknown familiar*

there are never enough candles	<i>the warm breath of a mammal</i>
there are never enough cups	<i>rising like pale</i>
urgency's white need is always	<i>unreadable smoke the ash in the</i>
a float in the yards of the night	<i>urn the blood in the wine the</i>
	<i>shared bottle</i>
no angel's circus no chloroform	<i>and she'll drink it in her own</i>
she's every tree earning its dirt	<i>kind like all things deciduous</i>
among dim stars dim light	



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