

FIVE ISLANDS PRESS

**MOUTH TO MOUTH**



**DEBBIE WESTBURY**

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## POETRY BY DEBBIE WESTBURY

*Mouth To Mouth* is Debbie Westbury's first collection of poems, most of which have appeared in leading literary magazines, both in Australia and overseas. They represent a sensitive appraisal of life in modern society — both its sensuous reality and the transcendent spirit that survives beneath its surface.

"*Mouth To Mouth* ... is a substantial collection, showing [the poet's] ability to work with a variety of poetic styles and forms, and across a wide range of subjects and themes ... [her poems] provide moving and sympathetic portraits of many members of [her home town's] multicultural population ... [others deal with] such personal and perennial themes as love and loss, ... [as well as offering] more satirical pictures of contemporary life ..."  
— Elizabeth Webby

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**fip**

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The poems from *Mouth to Mouth* are in the order that they appear in the original 1990 publication.  
In transcribing the poems, known publication information has been added as a footnote for each poem.

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*Change of Shifts / Bulli*

**i**

nestled in the dark green escarpment  
it looks like as asylum or veterans' home  
with lots of white paint  
established gardens and a view  
but it's a small public hospital  
catching the city's overflow  
where the young woman waits  
in sunlight and silence  
for her anaesthetic  
and the two small knots  
that will stop the interminable cycle  
of death and incarnation,  
surrounded by women with names  
like lilian grace and may  
whom age has relieved  
of these decisions  
and nearly all else but memories

**ii**

the sound of workers' shoes  
on the high lustre linoleum  
the whistling calling shift changes  
at the mines  
tell the time to those  
for whom the sound is the last sense  
in lives receding  
through the senses  
back to senselessness  
and knowing

**iii**

may's son comes after dayshift  
in the mine  
he is pink with scrubbing  
and middle-aged beefiness  
diffident and treading carefully  
love for his mother  
and fear of this place  
like eggshells under his feet

**iv**

unmoved by her son's presence  
may sits staring vacantly out to sea  
the fragrant hairiness of his arm  
laid aside hers on the bed  
the warm pulse of his hand on hers  
feels no answering pressure

**v**

his love and need for her  
burn holes in may's papery skin  
hurt like the biting of his first tooth  
on her nipples  
like the flailing fists  
of his infant tantrums  
hurt like giving birth  
and she's had enough

**vi**

he leaves her after the visiting hour  
with his head bowed  
and may raises hers  
at the sound of the trolley  
that will carry the young woman  
into the theatre

*Southerly, Vol 48 No 2, June 1988.*  
*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*

*Khanh*

**i**

in a white room  
pink carnations on the table  
and dresses on the floor  
we bared our veins  
and sailed away  
over a sea of clouds  
and into a white sky  
our legs entwined  
we discover more than  
one path to the abyss

**ii**

even at night  
on the windang bridge  
fishermen cast their lines  
and long shadows  
over the oily black waters  
of lake illawarra  
the orange lights of the bridge  
throw an incendiary glare over everything  
leaving some faces shellshocked  
reminding me of a protest  
in the days when we protested  
and were seen to be at war  
we lost ourselves  
in lust and terrorism ...

**iii**

anzac day dawned at the cenotaph  
pyre of flowers heaped at its feet  
a wreath of white carnations  
bearing the message 'lest we forget'  
suddenly exploded  
reducing to dust  
the silence of remembering

*Scarp, 8, May 1986.*

*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*

*The Drive Home*

drunk on homemade beer  
and the view from loves verandah  
glare on my glasses  
dust in the throat  
gravel banked up on the corners  
knuckles white on the wheel  
this long mountain road  
leads finally to home and the hearth

will you be waiting there  
will you remember  
to tend the fire  
you have made  
of sapling wood and seasoned  
branches taut with greenness  
and crumbling with rot

will you come sometimes  
to see what you have made  
changing shape in the flame

will you give it breath  
and bask sometimes in its warmth

the road widens  
and straightens out  
closer to home  
my head begins to ache

was there a fire  
are those ashes in the grate

*Fremantle Arts Review, Vol 4/2, March 1989.  
Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*

*Down Middle Ridge Road*

*for Dorothy Etta Swoope*

Riding inside the waves  
of gravel banked up  
on each bend of the road,  
bouncing off washboard ruts,  
sets up a rhythm  
that's thinking of us  
as we sat on your bed  
and wept  
over the sepia, beaded  
sapphire-encrusted  
keepsakes  
of your grandmothers,  
Dorothy and Etta.

The road now in shadow,  
a milk blue sky  
flowing from the breast of Pidgeon House,  
streams with late colours:  
the brooding monoliths,  
tender ridges  
and dark ferned ravines  
of the Budawangs.

*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*



*Meeting the Son of Pelias at Headlands Hotel*

three years after Remos first cries  
broke the frozen silence  
of an icelandic night  
he began a journey  
that would take him  
to the end of the earth  
where on his fifteenth birthday  
Remos father died a violent death  
his mother moved away  
as far as she could go  
without striking ice  
again  
his sister stayed at home  
going mad  
in the same strangled country town  
where Remos wife lives with someone else  
not waiting for him  
to come home drunk any more  
he wonders through the pain  
what sacrifice she will make  
of their children

he is, he tells me  
a roofer  
and an honest bloke  
his friends, having driven him here  
buy his drinks and look on

he hasn't driven  
since the last time  
he collided with a tree  
that rose up to meet him  
like a dragon in the dark  
his face scarred  
by nights like that and brawls along the way  
his body broken  
on the treacherous slopes of his fate

the roofs he builds  
burning in summer  
slippery in the winter frosts  
under the precarious sky  
he stumbles towards the bar  
on one bent thong

*Southerly, Vol 49 No 4, December 1989  
Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*

*Resist-dance*

I'm the rain,  
You the window  
closed against me.

You come between  
but I spit and dribble,  
pound and deafen,  
till, in the end, I loose my deluge  
and distort your vision  
of the outside.

You resist me  
but after each deluge  
the timber of your small frame warps  
and cracks widen  
between you and your walls  
and each small movement threatens  
the glass with breaking.

*Scarp, 9, October 1986.*

*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*

*The View from Here, 2008.*

*halleys comet*

when I was born  
they planted a cactus  
at my window  
after thirty-three years  
of wondering  
it dresses itself up  
for the first time  
like a bride  
the white blooms adorning  
its towering green limbs  
all turn to face the street lights

in the night sky  
a rainbow forms around the moon  
and the comet, heralding the birth  
of avatars and kings,  
carries in its blazing wake  
a billion weary souls  
praying for deliverance

disguised as light  
you come to me  
risking disbelief  
and discovery  
you come  
to illuminate  
the darkness of my passage  
with your late-blooming love

*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*

*Wagtail 55 – Reading the Signs, 2006.*

*these days*

we were making love  
or something  
when his name escaped  
from my mouth  
open against your throat

you chose to ignore it  
my love faltered  
but you never missed a beat  
that's the way we are  
these days

*Your Friendly Fascist, No 23, 1983.*

*That Moon-Filled Urge, January 1985.*

*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*

*Self Portrait in a Mirror*

There's a triangular green smudge  
on my self portrait.  
It's only a profile and some hair  
crouching beside a mirrored wardrobe.  
So no one could tell it was me  
pregnant and alone  
in that old house at Shellharbour,  
talking on the phone.

I worried on and off  
about that oily smudge  
on the subtle grey drawing.  
I considered camouflage and solvents  
but in the end I left it there,  
a sacred symbol in a secret picture,  
to remind me of the day  
the portrait was complete,

The day I stood on my toes  
and felt for it  
among the relics and rubbish  
on top of the wardrobe.  
As I pulled it free  
the darkness rained  
coloured crayons.

Green struck the portrait  
as it fell  
noisily  
in the sleep-quiet room,  
the only room I'd ever painted.  
It was yellow  
because I wished my son  
a world of light.  
Wisteria crowded purple at the window.  
Accidents happen.

*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*

*The Oxford Book of Australian Women's Verse, 1995.*

*Wagtail 55 – Reading the Signs, 2006.*

*Comforts Creature*

Sometimes I lay the rubber corrugations  
of a hot water bottle against my cheek,  
and when the temperature is just right,  
blood warm rubber soft,  
I slide it down from belly to thighs  
pretending  
it's your cheek or back  
or soft inner curves that I touch.

It's morning when you come,  
to smooth with your own warm palms  
my crumpled skin,  
to bring me comfort.

*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*

*Mouth to Mouth*  
*for the students of college place*

**i**

a year before evacuating ships and aircraft  
filled your harbours and your skies  
you started to convert your assets into gold  
and hoarded it against those last days  
when the end was written  
large enough for even the unwilling to see  
advancing in a tide of red  
and flashing metal  
incinerating your factory, house and car

for a price the fishing boats were waiting  
and the tide of red, the smoke  
and the flash of metal  
were things you saw  
over the heads of your children  
as you retreated over the south china sea  
where the pirates waited  
like jackals after the lion  
to take what was left  
your women, your children, your gold  
food, fuel and water

floating famine  
blood and sharks  
distance and the end  
of pain and the ocean  
still out of sight

on the other side  
was a beach  
so like the one you'd left  
that you thought you'd died  
in nightmare sleep  
and come home again in spirit

**ii**

the first sign of embodiment  
a strangers warm breath  
on your face  
feeding you coconut milk  
through a straw

coaxing you back to life  
on a philipino beach

but without the strength  
to wonder where it would end  
or in what form  
your gold would return to you  
now that your factory was burnt  
and your children drowned  
you sat in a refugee camp  
with thousands of your brothers and sisters  
awaiting sentence  
transportation, life  
to the vast refugee camp  
of the antipodes  
where the dispossessed  
struggle to acquire  
the secrets of the empire builders  
designing bridges and advancing technology  
towards their return to homelands  
which generations of their brothers  
died to keep  
and died losing

**iii**

aspiring computer scientists  
and engineers exercise  
in the parking lot outside  
since prison and the camps  
it's all the space they need  
they stay up all night studying  
they share their cooking pots and shoes  
and queue for their mail

in the ground level hive  
where they all live  
mine is the middle cell  
where i live alone  
distance is kept  
through shared walls  
i can hear their high atonal voices  
singing songs i don't know  
songs that move me  
to tears and aching  
songs that i wont ever know  
but they sound like freedom to me  
sweet as coconut milk  
clear as light.



*Scarp, 11, October 1987.*  
*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*  
*The Book of Poets on the Heath, 1993.*  
*The View from Here, 2008.*

*Local Anaesthetic*

(for Mr Christmas B.B.S.)

i

it's three years since  
a busload of senior students  
on a French excursion  
from the local high school  
drove off the road  
and down an embankment  
somewhere in French Polynesia

and the only life lost  
was the high school queen  
exceptional and well-loved  
the whole town mourned  
she was Mr Christmas' only daughter

three years since Anna was lost  
where the incoming tide  
brings with it  
the smell of the future  
in the air and on the sea  
where bombs shake the bedrock  
and the boats of peacemakers are rammed

ii

Mr Christmas was mainly pink and white  
kind and a bit nondescript  
like a chainstore santa claus  
with an air of quiet detachment  
that suggested he was a man  
who knew his god  
and suspected He was a dentist

as he lines up the x-ray machine  
on my face  
I ask if I can be spared  
unnecessary pain  
Mr Christmas says  
'we have no miracles here'

this time radioactivity doesn't lie  
the rot is entrenched  
and this ivory atoll must go

no pills no needles  
no gas  
as he adjusts his neat fingers  
firmly around the pliers  
for the penultimate pull  
I silently thank him  
for the gift of pain

*Scarp, May 1989.*  
*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*

*Albatross Road*

Since the big trees were all taken  
you can see into the colourless scrub  
through a scattering of skinny saplings  
where black men gather in the shadows  
smoking and drinking  
to remember with these rites  
their mute women  
their brothers in lock-ups  
their children in white schools.  
Smoke and murmurs  
rise from the sunless clearing  
where they sit on bunt-out logs  
watching the road.

Young sailors  
speed down this road from the base  
to town  
and back again  
raw country boys drunk  
and sweaty with the mystery of their bodies  
in uniform  
and the power  
of their machines  
so ready in this rushing of blood  
to forget, to kill, to die.  
The navy has erected  
a sign  
that keeps a toll  
of those injured and killed here  
and reminds them that their families  
and the navy  
need them.

Waiting for the bus,  
Koori girls bloom like hibiscus  
on the dusty shoulders  
of the road out of town.

*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*

*The Oxford Book of Australian Women's Verse, 1995.*

*The View From Here, 2008.*

*The Message*

i've got your number  
on a scrap of paper  
your number  
with the directions to your house  
it drifts around this room  
with the wadded tissues  
and the books  
i keep picking it up  
forgetting always  
what it is  
unfold  
recognise  
remember  
close my guilty fist  
and pause  
can't bring myself  
to throw it out  
that's going too far  
can't write it  
in my book  
that would be too much  
like owning it

i keep hoping  
that the message  
ignored and trodden under foot  
will sink  
quietly dispersing  
into the room's dusty corners

*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*

*you should have married a canary*

they're quite at home in cages  
their plumage rarely fades  
but fluffs up prettily, for  
your admiration, each time  
you enter the room –

she'll quickly learn to whistle  
all your favourite tunes  
hanging on every word  
alert for any gesture  
you might condescend to make  
in her direction.

each night when you close her cage in darkness  
she'll tuck herself away, under her wing  
making no demands  
for warmth or satisfaction  
until the morning  
when she'll wink lovingly  
for the sight of your face.

you needn't fear she'll leave you  
she'll be with you in good times, and  
at least 'til the air is no longer fit to breathe.

*That Moon-Filled Urge, 1985.*

*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*

*Australian satirical verse – the sting in the Wattle, 1993.*

*coffee and rain*

i can see a man  
in the building opposite  
standing at the window  
of his second floor office  
he stares wistful and distracted  
at the rain  
falling from a blue-metal sky  
he is eclipsed by a huge reflection  
of the public clock outside  
which, like a juggernaut, might crush him  
if he could see it

the labourers have put down their shovels  
and lean against shopfronts  
smoking and watching  
the holes they've dug  
filling up  
from a full sky

awed by this intrusion  
of the elemental  
into the tubular steel arches  
of the shopping mall  
pedestrians slow down  
and bend their necks  
in love and defiance  
to the rain

between the street and the rain  
coffee and contemplation  
turn slowly  
like a screw drawing substance to it  
threading loneliness to metal and glass  
holding down the grey spiralling day  
keeping out the rain

*Age Monthly Review, Nov 1988, page 5.*

*White Wall Review, 1989.*

*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*

*The View from Here, 2008.*

*TV News*

That the AIDS virus  
has been isolated in human tears  
was delivered with the same blank face  
and monotonous voice  
used to convey all news.

Gathered at the bedside of a dying man,  
technocrats, fully masked and gowned,  
describe for him the progress of disease  
through his wasting body,  
tell him sad stories,  
read to him  
from a list of transgressions  
he'd forgotten,  
mimic, with their eyes,  
the grief of others,  
and with gloved hands,  
the doors closing on his coffin  
as it travels down the conveyor belt  
into the crematorium's incinerator.  
Finally he shudders,  
his chin quivers,  
his lips tremble,  
he blinks.

Galvanised,  
they lean forward  
from their waists  
to catch his tears in test tubes,  
to place them in racks,  
in centrifuge,  
on slides,  
with the blood  
the semen  
the saliva  
of the men in adjoining rooms –  
who watch,  
as they wait,  
the news on TV.

*The Age Monthly Review, July 1989.*  
*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*



*Fraternoia*

I dread the night,  
the lying awake.

I dread the scalpel edge  
of your perception  
poised at my throat,

your ruthlessness stayed  
by the conventions of friendship.

But, somewhere else,  
in the company of strangers,  
your scalpel carves me open,  
takes out my yellow heart,  
leaves the room dark and bloody  
where sleep enters at last,  
disguised as a friend.

*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*

*The View from Here, 2008.*

*Other Voices*

other rooms  
and quilts that are patches  
of dresses never finished  
and clothes outgrown by children  
candles burned down all the way  
puddles of wax  
traceries of dust  
on peeling paint  
and thirsty woodwork  
boxes of playboys  
under the bed  
and ashes piling up  
in the grates  
things put up with pins  
and things put away and forgotten  
baby photos in the bottom drawer  
condoms in the top  
bourbon on your breath  
and ashtrays full of butts

hammer sits on your backdoor step  
polishing his boots in the fading light  
watching the city  
through grey slit eyes  
while ghosts of dead junkies  
gag in the long hallway  
that leads to the street

*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*

## *Visiting Writers*

Visiting writers  
Plumpp and Stern  
were reading in the blue room.  
On the floor overhead chairs dragged,  
from outside came the muffled thud of doors,  
the murmur of disconnected voices –  
but inside, the blue room was quiet,  
almost empty.  
Plumpp uncoiled his private pain  
from its disguise as rationalised black rage,  
between poems lectured us  
on the blues,  
chanting Bo Diddley, Muddy Waters,  
Champion Jack De Pre,  
in a voice so southern-soft  
so far away  
an assistant lecturer  
in the front row  
leaned further forward on her chair,  
straining to hear him  
to be noticed,  
turning whiter  
biting her tongue.

Stern perched on the lectern  
fragile and beaky  
as a starving eagle,  
read, in wistful half-notes,  
from his novel of love and politics,  
so satirical you wondered  
if you'd imagined it –  
afraid to laugh  
even though he might have wished for it  
to ease the brittle tension  
of the sinews  
that bound him.

Plumpp and Stern gave no sign  
of being distracted  
by anything outside the blue room,  
even when the rain rattled  
the plastic skirt along the bottom of the door.  
Time was somewhere else,  
waiting outside.

*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*

*Eduardo the Argentinian Studies Mathematics*

**i**

Islands are made  
when great masses of riverbank  
torn off by the flood waters  
of the Andes  
rush down the rivers  
of Chile, Peru and Equador  
to meld with the world's oceans  
under a huge equatorial sun.

Islands are made  
when the Earth's molten heart  
reaching for the sky  
explodes  
cooling its ardor in the sea.

On these pinnacles  
obscured by mists  
ancient tortoises dream  
of vegetation,  
recall the Beagle  
and plot the evolution of their shells.

When the Earth turns in her sleep  
her bones shift and subside  
making continents rise  
above the blue eiderdown of oceans.

**ii**

On such an island  
cast adrift,  
Eduardo at eighty,  
teacher of Esperanto  
and proud anachronist  
of the Spanish Empire,  
bends his leather-creased neck  
and the smooth brown dome of his head  
over the texts of basic mathematics  
to study the words we use  
to teach children  
the abstract science of quantity.

Explaining the contradictions  
he'd found,

I marooned myself  
with apologies for English  
while he tried to keep me there  
with the logic of a universal language.  
I broke away at last  
and, wary now, keep circulating  
among the women and girls  
who only come to talk  
and learn the words they'll need  
to write letters to the teachers  
of their children.

*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*

*Wagtail 55 – Reading the Signs, 2006.*

*Incendiary Night*

overhead the stars  
keep burning  
holes  
in the sleeping mask  
of incendiary night

it's late  
and the wooden house  
is still awake  
listening  
she vibrates with every footfall  
shudders with each cough and snore

the wooden house  
shrinks in the light  
and expands creakily at night  
becoming a galleon  
to carry dreamers  
past unchartered stars  
into the worlds of their dreaming  
and in wakefulness  
holds them  
earthbound  
hides them  
but cannot hide herself

huddled against the wind  
she breathes deeply  
the spark that will ignite her  
she burns with a fever  
and on her collapsing staircase  
love descends in a cloud of ash

*Scarp, 13, 1988.*

*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*

*Woman At The Bus Stop*

the woman is hanging  
from the kerb by her toes  
her eyes shut tight  
her face scanning skywards  
is tense with concentration  
her skin and clothes stretched  
over a corpulent body  
to maximise its surfaces  
making them streamlined  
and shiny as a satellite dish  
collecting the scattered signals  
of an unpredictable universe

sensing the bus' approach  
from two blocks away  
the woman extends her arms  
and white cane  
and vibrates with anticipation  
so that our walking past  
short circuits her receivers  
and almost sends her teetering  
into the path of the bus

*Scarp, 15, 1989.*

*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*

*The New Funeral Parlour*

In a city where buildings bloomed like hope  
in the boom before the bust,  
we noticed the Funeral Parlour expanding,  
leaving Hospital Hill;  
its forties facade,  
the cool bright touch  
of tiles and polished brass,  
the fabulous sleek silence of hearses  
backing out into traffic.

We saw it rise,  
block by block, and wondered:  
so many slabs  
of pre-cast concrete dangling from cranes,  
so many small interior walls,  
and deep windowless caverns  
waiting for the long black cars.

Now it shadows the embankment  
above the railway  
where an old peppercorn survives,  
encircled by dead lantana  
thrusting from the dirt at impossible angles  
like bones uncovered in a killing field.

I dream them alight,  
these hedgerows of our ancestors  
gone berserk,  
burning.  
A great blaze reflects on the mirrored surfaces  
of Parson's new funeral parlour,  
on the windows of departing trains.  
Ashes fall on bare earth  
and a garden is begun,  
roses,  
round the peppercorn tree.

*The Age Monthly Review, Vol 9 No 12, April 1990.  
Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*



*Somewhere Else*

**i**

at the animal park  
peacocks drag their feathers in the dust  
parrots shriek from the denuded trees  
of their enclosures  
lyrebirds mimic them  
from the rainforest

kangaroos soporific with handfeeding  
lounging in the shade  
of gas barbecues

ignoring outstretched hands  
thrust through wire  
the wombat walks tight circles  
in its solitary cage

**ii**

busloads of pensioners  
the steely haloes of their perms  
glinting in the pale winter sun  
allow themselves to be charmed  
by the young wildlife attendant  
in a tight khaki uniform

he leads them into the prefabricated barn  
for tea and damper  
before they board the bus  
that will take them home  
to the safe viewing  
of days of our lives  
and wildlife documentaries  
on the TVs of private units

**iii**

back from the sheltered workshop  
for the weekend  
our neighbour  
paces the long hours till monday  
in the orderly garden  
of his parents' home  
trying to look interested  
in what's going on  
past the fence  
more and faster  
than he could ever remember

*White Wall Review, 1990.*  
*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*

*The Last Amazon*

the afternoon sun  
casts a shadow  
through the high west window of the gym  
she's in training  
for the last days  
for the end

in dream or trance  
she looks down and sees  
herself  
lifting weights  
over a wasted Earth  
with rites for the dead,  
bullets for the dying;  
trafficking in hope to the survivors

she looks down and sees  
herself among the chosen  
boarding the last Ark  
for Atlantis.

coiled in her chair  
like a naga  
like a nautilus waiting for the end  
she holds up each memory of Earth  
like a lacy leaf to the light  
sees the leaf's skeleton  
where it's clean and bare  
and where the decay hangs on  
she knows now which memories will last

living in the shadows  
cast by the afternoon sun on the gym  
she thinks about Mother Theresa  
and looks lonely  
working out  
waiting for the end

*Scarp, 15, October 1989.*  
*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*  
*The View from Here, 2008.*

*The Scribe's Daughter*

*the oldest known book, a book of psalms, was found at  
al Mudil, Egypt, in 1984*

When his daughter's life  
flowed away from her  
in the rivers of her first blood  
the scribe of al Mudil  
waited for night  
and carried her body in secret  
beyond the oasis  
to a pauper's graveyard

The moon trembled in its fullness  
spilling light  
over a desert suspended in silence;  
he knelt to dig her grave  
working against the wind  
his hands stained  
with his life's work.  
Four hundred and ninety parchment pages  
sewn with leather and bound in wood  
made a pillow for her head, the ankh he'd carved from  
bone  
attached with leather threads  
mingled with her hair

Fixing her face in his memory  
the scribe of al Mudil  
closed her lips  
on the songs  
of prophecy, penitence and praise  
and followed Mark's footsteps  
across the desert

*Mouth to Mouth, 1990*

*target practice (the zen archer aims for himself)*

in the time it takes  
to travel past this place  
he has turned  
and taken a few steps away  
from the target  
raises his arm  
and takes aim

in the time it took  
for him to disappear from view  
the arrow has flown  
and stands quivering in its target

i picture his arm still raised  
his stare unflinching  
and wonder if he knows  
that the arrow was meant for him

*Verandah, Vol 5, 1990.*

*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*

*Out of the Blue*

from beyond  
the ever-present dark glasses,  
a dope-eyed stare

her hair smells of henna  
and her fingers freshly  
of other pleasures.

she watches the lone runner  
in a dark tracksuit  
coming up the beach  
he looks like a moving target.

the black-finned humps  
of giant mammals  
arch through the flare-lit water

huge white birds  
kamikaze out of a clear sky  
and into the blue

which rises to meet them  
on impact in shiny globules  
like mercury.

she leaves her dark glasses on  
but turns her stare inward  
just in time for the big  
flash.

*Handwritten and typed.*  
*Your Friendly Fascist, No 23, 1983.*  
*Matoid, 33 No.1, 1989.*  
*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*

*Kangaroo Valley*

a black cockatoo  
is flying straight  
its tail rigid  
and parallel  
to the green earth

a dog is running  
around the corner  
on three legs

a caterpillar consumes  
the leaf beneath its feet  
and falls to its next meal

in cloud dreams  
blind polar bears  
appear head first  
through the snow

wooden houses  
breathe with the wind

a baby cries  
something is broken

*Otis Rush, No 4, April 1989.*

*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*

*The View from Here, 2008.*

*after the deadline*

the middle room  
is a ruined acropolis  
abandoned by art  
and artist  
only the refuse  
of creation  
remains  
shining  
in the light of a moon  
that comes and goes  
unnoticed  
while the whole house  
sleeps  
and all-night radio  
is silent

*Verandah, Vol 5, 1990.*

*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*

*Eight-Eighty-89*

**i**

A shrinking of asphalt  
a slight tremor in blood and sap  
before the fall;  
in Sydney and San Francisco  
seabirds accommodating traffic  
in a fog of fumes and seaspray  
along crowded wharves,  
Chinatown's familiar foreign smells  
and the clash of utensils  
hang in the air  
like the saxophones of soloists  
practicing in empty bars.

**ii**

Cameramen in helicopters  
watch from the sky  
as the top deck of freeway eight eighty  
buckles and breaks  
leaving one woman stranded  
on the wrong side of her destination.

For her everything has stopped,  
the noise, the movement,  
the moment  
fast frozen.  
She's alone with a single thought.  
Ramming the little Corvette into reverse  
she revs the engine so hard  
you imagine you can hear it  
over the noise of the helicopter  
that's hovering there,  
twelve and a half hours away.

She closes her eyes  
puts her foot down all the way  
and surges forward;  
she flies over the wreckage-filled abyss,  
and falls short.

She wasn't an actress  
who could do her own stunts,  
but she knew where she was going.  
After the looting and the heroism



the bars fill up  
and everyone else  
takes the long way home.

*Bone & Flesh Aside, 5, 1990.*

*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*

*Second Degree Tampering, writing by women, 1992.*

*Dapto Dressing Up*

The sky at dusk  
over the escarpment  
is turquoise or peacock  
she wants to wear short skirts  
while her legs still look good  
the earth smells warm  
after the rain  
Dapto is beautiful tonight  
because the trees grow here too  
and the sky is turquoise  
with silver spangles  
the lights of the mines  
come on  
and the traffic  
winds slowly  
up and over  
the escarpment  
the colour of aubergines  
and deep bruising  
dusk is laid low  
and becomes night.

*Southerly, Vol 49 No 4, December 1989.*  
*The Antigonish Review, No.76, Winter 1989.*  
*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*  
*Anthology of the Illawarra, 1994.*  
*The View from Here, 2008.*

*remembering the beach*

out in a deck chair  
on St Andrews lawn  
an old woman  
slumps forward  
with her head in her hands  
muffling the sound  
of her grief

on my grandmother's street  
that runs down to the sea  
Lairds shop used to stand  
on the corner  
(for passionfruit ice-creams  
after the beach)  
till six blonde brick units  
grew out of the rubble  
a row of red gum trees  
concealing their balconies  
festooned  
with wetsuits  
beach towels and washing

on the spreading lawns  
and the lacy verandahs  
of St Andrews nursing home  
across the road  
the old and the dying  
are out in the sunshine  
and fresh air  
swathed in flannel  
and lap rugs  
remembering  
the beach  
and the sunbathers  
three blocks away

who must return to the suburbs  
this way  
past council workers  
loading the sawn-off trunks  
and limbs of the red gums  
into their trucks  
leaving behind them  
a litter of leaves

and a row of mute stumps  
I wished then  
for another road home  
that I hadn't come  
so close to believing  
that trees have feelings too  
and at certain frequencies  
might even be heard  
crying

*Scarp, 13, 1988.*

*Mouth to Mouth, 1990*

*Through the Garden*

Ravaged by honeyeaters,  
coral tree flowers fall  
under the red suede shoes  
of a young woman  
hurrying up the path,  
not seeing  
the overfed eels snapping at bread  
flung from the hands of children,  
fallen from the mouths of ducks;  
not seeing  
men astride lawn mowers;  
love blooming in arbors;  
cactuses in the hothouse.

She won't see them  
until she can reach the top of the hill,  
where the garden unfolds  
beneath her –  
and further out  
the city, ocean  
horizon and sky.

Over this, she spreads herself,  
and claims it,  
as the shrieking of honeyeaters  
bursts in her head.

*Redoubt, No 5, April 1989.*

*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*

*the prince*

*remembering Port Kembla and the fairy tales of The Little Prince, The Tin Soldier and The Happy Prince*

the dark suited forms  
    of latin fathers  
gather at the playground  
    after school  
to meet their knee-high children  
    and walk them home;  
you become responsible forever  
    for what you have tamed.  
so, his hands full of trusting fingers  
    he walks down the big hill  
into Steel City  
    his small acts of love unnoticed  
by the glinteyed army of shoppers;  
conceited men    admirers  
drunks            businessmen  
lamplighters        geographers  
all tuned in to matters of consequence,  
    humming along on their own asteroids.

with a long slow smile  
    he stoops to kiss them  
to tie a shoe, to listen  
oblivious in the metal cacophony  
    the sulphurous gloom  
far from the mediterranean sun  
    he still dreams  
he is still the prince  
    the ornamental figure  
on his own magic wedding cake  
    a multi-tiered miracle  
of fondant lace  
    and marzipan flowers

under the plastic arch he stands  
    with his fairytale love  
    his swallow  
    his rose  
    his ballerina  
his bright gaze embracing  
    the barren star surface  
the dark dirty sprawl of industria  
    where from the body of the great fish

he is delivered, scaleless and alone  
as the bridegroom  
on the night before his wedding

his cardboard castle cost him  
many a dreamless nightshift in the iron inferno  
and overlooks the lake;  
neither mirror-surfaced  
nor dotted with white waxen swans  
but oil-slicked and littered  
with the comic forms of pelicans.

women in black hover together at the shore  
their bird-like cries fluttering darkly in the alien sun  
their own wedding nights but a memory  
keepers of the sacred fish  
guardians of the mystery  
that is so overpowering one dare not disobey  
there is no mystery so great as misery

the prince weeps, for his rose  
his swallow  
his ballerina  
but the land of tears is a secret place  
where they have learned of the liberating  
power of death, and urge him  
to embrace it; frost  
loss  
the viper's bite  
the fire of love  
tomorrow he will take his ballerina  
and leap into the fire  
and when the great god fish reaches into his entrails  
to find what is most precious in this place  
he will find the prince's heart, unmelted and unfrozen  
in the bottom of the blast furnace  
or in some corner of the vast suburban desert  
or amongst the crumbs  
after the wedding guests have left.

but his heart still has its vision  
for it is only with the heart that one can see rightly  
what is essential here is invisible to the eye  
he still dreams  
he is still the prince  
his small acts of love remain unnoticed  
as he walks down the big hill with his children  
into Steel City.

*Scarp, Vol 8, May 1986.*

*Up From Below – Poems of the 1980s, 1987.*

*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*

*The View from Here, 2008.*



*Mrs Shea's Lingerie*

Like a child stealing secretly from her bed  
to look for fairies at the bottom of the garden,  
Mrs Shea's neighbour rises early on summer Sundays  
to watch , through a window  
on their untamed gardens,  
for the opalescent shimmer  
of her miraculous lingerie,  
the pale flower colours  
of a fairy bride's trousseau,  
in gossamer and lace,  
hand-washed and hung out to dry  
gently in the still, warm morning  
before the sun grows harsh  
and the wind comes  
to make them flap  
undignified and careless of her secrets.

Mrs Shea sits on her backdoor step,  
arms rising and falling  
in the rhythmic motion of brushing.  
Her hair flows in a curtain of white silk  
over the unflawed softness of her eighty years body.  
She waits for her washing to dry,  
becoming invisible  
in the day's increase.

*Fine line, No.6, December 1989.*

*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*

*shane's farewell (at gerringong)*

in this light  
it's only the white patches  
on the black and white  
dairy cows  
that stand out  
like cricketers  
fielding on the green

the retreating sun  
is caught in silver pink  
pools and rivulets  
bright threads  
on the continuous folds  
of summer pasture

dry grasses, distant music  
holiday lights  
on the darkening peninsula  
and the sky  
already merging  
with your eyes  
is taking you away.

*Sydney Morning Herald, 22 April 1989.*

*White Wall Review, 1989.*

*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*

*Overnight at Shellharbour Hotel*

Occasionally the fluorescent line  
of a wave breaking  
illuminates the shallow darkness  
of the harbour

In the carpark  
a skateboarder performs  
daring arabesques  
for his dog

At the end of the hallway  
that leads to my room  
there's a painting of a boat  
abandoned on a sand dune

Women basketballers shrill  
with victory and gin squashes  
hustle fishermen in the bar downstairs

My money's in the jukebox  
and Janis is singing  
'Take it, take another little  
piece of my heart  
now baby'

*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*

## *Rituals*

Yesterday I made the pilgrimage  
to your place on the mountain.  
I drove home late in the rain,  
waking this morning with my hair damp  
and smelling of woodsmoke.  
I'm glad you'll be the one with the hangover.  
'Catching up' we call it,  
in the bush cabin that's California Dreaming  
at Pigeon House, in the Budawangs,  
your hair in long braids  
candles, guitars and incense,  
Hunter S Thompson and Hesse  
watercolour mandalas  
and the circle in your garden  
where the lyrebird dances  
singing as he does  
currawongs, bellbirds and lorikeets  
to his loved one in the bracken.  
When the dance is over we notice our wet socks  
go back to the fire and wine.  
Our shared memories drift  
through the still grey afternoon  
like a song for many voices,  
the smoke of many fires.  
The dance of friendship  
that's adding song to song,  
new secrets to insights and confessions,  
takes longer to return across the clearings of memory.  
Outside the circle  
there are songs that can't be sung  
because they haven't yet been heard,  
things remembered that can't be spoken of  
even between friends.

*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*

*Matoid, 28, 1991.*

*shells*

**i**

on some beaches  
the shells collect  
in undulating tidelines  
across the sand  
on others they're coloured grit  
between the toes  
or piled up in midden mounds  
against the dunes

**ii**

as a child you explored  
the rock platforms  
at the far ends of those beaches  
ignoring the pain of feet lacerated  
by oyster shells and periwinkles  
you found each rock pool a miracle  
rock enfolding form  
shells enclosing life  
the infinite horizon of the sea  
and the wind that came from everywhere  
tugging at your buttons  
exposing you to all that

**iii**

grown up now and growing old  
investing what you have left  
in fibro aluminium and canvas  
the tide of your youthful dreams  
your working life  
carried you this far out  
one hundred miles from Sydney  
or as far as you could imagine  
and retreated  
leaving you to form colonies  
with the aging playmates  
of summers past  
clustered like limpets  
where the land ends  
and the sea begins

**iv**

at housie at cards  
at the club

at the everlasting barbecues  
dull drunken domestic  
bliss and the fishing  
the flapping of annexes  
loose in the wind  
cancers and cars  
corroding faster  
here

**v**  
sometimes night calls a truce  
and the elements abate  
in this silence  
you can hear the tide change  
the inlet emptying into the sea  
lying awake  
with your ear to the shell  
you can hear the echo  
of your own breath  
in the diminishing spiral chambers  
of your heart

*Scarp 8 May 1986 - (titled: shells/retiring down the coast).  
Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*

*the persistence of memory*

**i**

smoke grey sky alight  
with bursts of autumn foliage  
on the periphery of pain and sense  
the muffled thud of doors closing  
like heavy artillery  
in the distance  
i wondered what enemy  
would come this far  
the stomach wound stitched  
and bleeding still where new life was wrenched from me  
clutching and sucking at the void

**ii**

inge is old enough to be my mother  
she has come from germany  
her husband works in the mines  
on strike days they go down the coast  
to shoalhaven heads  
where waves drumming against the dunes  
accompany memories  
over distance and a time  
when the winter skies of europe  
on starless nights rained fire  
and the dreams  
of more than children  
turned to ashes

**iii**

when inge goes to bed  
she turns the radio on  
so as not to hear the waves  
all night  
in the wombish silence  
she's listening  
to the radio

*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*

*The View from Here, 2008.*

*Design for a Room*

*New Year's Day*

last month's sheets  
a mountain  
of books and poems  
finished or forgotten  
roaches and peachstones

the white suit  
and the low spiked shoes  
lie across the path  
to the bed

the smell of your  
body lingers in the sheets  
completing the pattern  
I'll leave unbroken  
until you pass through  
on your way home without stopping

or stay  
and we'll build on the pattern  
the bones  
of our bodies, word and faces

*That Moon-Filled Urge, 1985 (titled 'New Years').*

*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*

*Our Houses are Full of Smoke, 1994.*



*Borderlines*

Exhausted by the long dark  
cattle trucks of exile,  
and by holding for too long  
a faith in the imperfections  
of arbitrary borderlines,  
the brothers of Victor Gutarez sleep.  
In another room Victor peels the cover  
from the family photo album  
and tenderly removes  
the brittle 78 recording  
of his parents' last concert.  
Miming the cello  
with two lengths of wood  
he plays as he was played and dreamt of  
in the duet of his father's baritone  
and his mother's violin:  
he throws back his head and bows hard.  
Rising and falling with the rhythm of their music,  
he is transported  
from the packing-case warrens  
of the over-the-border-town.

In the great gilded concert hall  
the orchestra waits,  
tremulous and solemn,  
for the first step of the maestro  
upon the stage;  
and when he comes –  
his vast young body trapped  
in an ill-fitting suit –  
they bow and subside;  
Victor closes his eyes,  
enfolding with perfect grace  
the cello like a lover.  
He plays and she sings.

*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*

*Surface Tension, 1998.*

*The View from Here, 2008.*

*Another Year*

*(for Lea)*

I turn the key  
in a wall of boxes  
it's empty  
but I stand there for a long time  
to feel on my hot face  
the cool air  
rushing through  
from air-conditioned offices  
on the other side

in the late afternoon  
it rains at last  
with gusts of wind  
that scatter grass clippings  
over our neat pathways

intoxicated by the smell  
of rain on hot bitumen  
we rode our bikes  
to the park  
through an evening  
heavy with gardenia and frangipani  
stealing flowers  
to decorate our Christmas feast

as we slept  
the full moon appeared in the trees  
a huge lighted window  
on a distant mountain

we awoke to feasts  
and quiet streets  
at the end of those visits  
I closed my eyes  
and pressed you tightly to me  
imagining that I retained you  
the imprint of your body on mine  
your warmth and fragrance  
to last  
another year

*White wall Review, 1990.*

*Mouth to Mouth, 1990.*