

Surface Tension
Deb Westbury





by Michael Bishop

So many good poems...many strong in local feeling; others with nice mixtures of wit, sentiment and an edge of savagery.

Judith Rodriguez

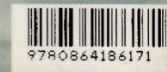
Deb Westbury is from Wollongong. The Illawarra coast, a mining and steelworks area, is basic to her unsentimental tone... her willingness to write culturally and politically grounded poetry is one of her strengths.

Pam Brown

She is well known and highly regarded by the Blue Mountains literary community, and her poetry often draws on the natural beauty of the region.

Lisa Jacobson

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of Wollongong 2522
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The poems from Surface Tension are in the order that they appear in the original 1998 publication.
In transcribing the poems, known publication information has been added as a footnote for each poem.

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Five Islands Press, 1998

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Beach Suite

*Spring Equinox
Port Kembla 1995*

I On the First Warm Day

There's a woman asleep
among the dunes; nestled on the sun-warm
body of the beach, as brilliant
and unexpected as jewellery
from a distant lover, who once

gave you a necklace of liquid silver
that flowed over your neck and breast
like tresses of water,
that gathered in the secret
curves and hollows of your bosom.

You cup it in your hands
and let it fall,
you wind it round your fingers
and press it to your lips.

Like an innocent strand of hair
or a filament of silver,
a woman sleeps on the cooling sand
curled around a dream of clouds.

*Scarp, 28, May 1996.
Surface Tension, 1998.*

II Fishing

The worker carefully rolls up his trouser legs
and leaves the footpath for the beach;
cool sand dries the boot-sweat
from his feet and, closer to water,

he takes something from his pocket.
It's a piece of maggoty meat on a string
that he begins dragging over the wet sand,
coaxing worms out of their holes
and into his bucket.

Later he's back with his fishing rod,
tackle and bait; the worms
he threads on hooks
and hurls into the surf;
then he stands in the swirling foam
and watches the face of each wave
for quicksilver shadows,
waits for that tug on the line
between breaking and backwash.

Further out, gannets fish the reef
for whiting and bream;
falling from nowhere
like sudden small gods.

When he looks up, some great
movement has shaken
the sky ultramarine. Clouds
like inflated bluebottles
trail indigo streamers
and the white sting of lightning.

Scarp, 28, May 1996.

Surface Tension, 1998.

The Road South, anthology of contemporary Australian poetry, 2006.

The View from Here, 2008.

III Real Enough

As if some giant hand
had turned a key
and set them racing until they unwound –
two grinning plastic jockeys,
two hard and shiny horses.

I stagger backwards into shallow water,
inhale their sudden passing heat,
and something knocks against my ribs.

Where their hooves fall
the sand explodes.
They leave two rows of craters
down the beach
and, at the other end,
small offerings.

Scarp No 28, May 1996.

Surface Tension, 1998.

IV Cuttlefish

A man follows the tideline of jetsam
with his eyes down;
carrying the plastic shopping bags
weightlessly,
as if his fists were full
of white balloons.

He stoops to gather another cuttlefish
as long as his forearm,
cradles an end in his palm
and peels off the rotting flesh
with a single hooked movement
of his blade.
It comes away easy as warm wax.

Scarp, 28, May 1996.

Surface Tension, 1998.

The View from Here, 2008.

V Bivalves

When the latest tide retreats
pippies rush to bury themselves;

with a parting small bubble
they mostly disappear.

Only the stranded,
with their one pink muscle,

frantically suck and squirt
in their immaculate shells,

or else succumb to breaks
and the urge to fling themselves apart;

still joined at the hinge
but empty.

Scarp, 28, May 1996.

Surface Tension, 1998.

VI Pelicans

Last night the sea, by stealth,
uncovered
the struts and wires
of a pelican
crashed against the dunes.

Yesterday she was buried
and will be invisible again;
her blood and breath
steeped long ago in sand.

I wait to see if she is still
moved by the wind,
and a long arrow of her sisters
glides down the beach towards me
a foot above the sand;
at the last moment parting
and tipping their great bodies away
as if I was visible
only to them.

Scarp, 28, May 1996.

Surface Tension, 1998.

The View from Here, 2008.

Wrapt

In winter the sea is warmer
than the shore
and remembrance
is the silver-darting fish
whose circling and returning
once wove the white sarong.

Now the fish is a shadow
she follows through the backwash
lifting the sarong from her ankles
to her mouth, inhaling the milk-sweet breath
of the son newly born

and lost,
before the circle on his crown
had closed with bone,
before he could know
the soul wound into his body
or the sound
of breathing alone.

She follows the unwinding
to the bright blue edge
and walks towards it,
uncertain and afraid of falling.
Her breasts have long been empty,
the white sarong
clings wetly to her legs.

Surface Tension, 1998.

Scarp, 34, June 1999.

The View from Here, 2008.

Blinded by the Light

Austinmer

i I am drowning
 a fallen star.
 No rosey sky at dusk, no element
 can save me.

 The fishing boat sharpens to black,
 turns a single lantern
 on the indigo light of your eyes.

 I am swimming out
 to meet you,
 your light my only goal.

ii Moonfire spreads like a burning
 slick across the water,
 igniting banksia silhouettes.

 The night music of waves and trains
 recedes.
 Your high beams
 on the crest of morning
 converge,

 and I am caught
 thrashing in the net.

Surface Tension 1998.

Surface Tension

I woke in the shallows
of a morning when nothing
sounded but your name
a gull's cry lapping
a shout in the distance

the ocean was still turquoise calm
and sunlit – I left a warm dream
to look for you
but following the birds
only led me deeper
and further away

the sky empties over Lake Eyre
and new bodies of water shiver
with the wings and feet
of urgent procreation

flocks of wild budgerigars
cosset their eggs under green eiderdowns
and sing

the mouths of hatchings
circumscribe a hunger
that's naked and foetal

I learn to sleep alone
stretching my sheepskin memories
from the centre to the edge
to catch whatever falls
between fecundity and loss

Spirit Markers

to the house on the hill
and the southern ocean

to the nests among sandhills
and troughs between waves

to the flat plains where she
waited for a sign

to the place where she made
fish and birds out of clay

to the lake where in the form
of a bird she lost her feathers

to the beach where she died
with her mouth wide open

Picador new writing 4, 1997.
Surface Tension, 1998.

*meditation with cloud and waterbird**

the sky's blank blue
except for a fat torpedo of cloud
floating over lighthouse hill

and you wish for the seamless
composure of clouds

their solid insubstantiality
like the thought you've watched
drifting across the empty screen
of your consciousness

of your resemblance
to a waterbird
bottomfeeder
shit sifter

the long neck uncoiling
from hunched shoulders
the lower body attenuating
to rudimentary feet

plumage the colour of dune shadow
eyes a mask of dappled light

you watch her elegant pacing
from a careful distance
wary of startling her
into flight

**White-faced heron*

Surface Tension, 1998.

One Body

(for Merlinda Bobis)

i

Picture a slow-motion loop
of two ageing women
running up a path
to the headland
and that still point
where they'll always be falling
into the memory of one body
into love for each other;
the idealist,
the habitually sad.

ii

Today a black dog
follows my loneliness
home from the graveyard.
Her right front leg
has been shaved for injection.
I too easily imagine the rest:
things that might have been
removed or sewn up,
who she belongs to.

lii

Merlin is returning
to the islands north
and her volcano.*
She dreamt last
night, of sleeping
on the floor, with black dogs
all around her still and silent body;
in the midnight fan of her hair,
across her chest, gently rising.
She struggled first to breathe
and then to wake,
throwing off the darkness
before she flew;
Merlin,
with the body of a bird
and the heart of a burning
mountain.

**Mt Mayon, Philippines*

Scarp, 27, October 1995.

Surface Tension, 1998.

The Night Before

It was a mistake
to go down to the sea
where every abandoned castle
is my lonely breast
and every smile
of every dreaming lover
lunges at my heart.

The headland has Isabel's profile,
her long nose
and forehead lifted skyward
from the stone.
Here she flew on her bicycle,
her eyes to the horizon,
her body broken then
on the rocky shelf below.

Because at twelve Isabel was sure
she was ugly,
that they loved her sisters
more,
she died as I was born.

There's a memorial here
(where the wheel last touched
her grassy brow)
a concrete chair
big enough to shield a family,
big
as a bunker.

I sit alone,
for the last time whole.
Seabirds rush past me in formation,
home to roost on other headlands,
to islands further south.

The last sandcastle
is demolished by a dog
racing for a stick.

Tomorrow night you'll call
and they'll tell you
I'm resting comfortably.

*Southerly, Vol 53/3, September 1993.
Surface Tension, 1998.*

Whalespotting at Wombarra

*"For as Jonah was
three days and three
nights in the belly of
the great fish so shall
the Son of Man be
three days and three
nights in the heart of
the earth."*

Matthew 12.40

Last night I rushed to the headland in my gown
and flung myself, like a stone angel,
to the ground;
waiting for the sickle fins
and spume of whales,
the curved blade of a new moon
laid across the water.

Today there were poppies on the grave
of 'Dear Little Alice',
dying quickly without water.
Their heads hung low upon their stems
so the bees dived
and hovered like hummingbirds
for the last of the nectar.

This headland is slowly breaking up,
is broken, like bread, for the sea's communion.
The graves are cracked and buckling
so that I imagine,
in the holy fierce wind,
the smell of death
escaping from the ground.

Every year the whales migrate
past here and through my dreams,
by these bloody nights turned
into monsters
who tear at their own flesh
and eat their newborn calves.

I see him less,
murderer, rapist, accuser;
a melon on the windowsill,

someone disappearing around a corner,
even the sea plays at 'statues'.

I look to the eggs I am breaking,
for the body has a mind of its own
and a purpose I do not recognise.

It is the cave
where I sit coaxing a tiny flame
against the darkness;
where I pray for a sleep without dreaming,
the miracle of redemption.

I have been swallowed by the whale of myself.

Imago, Vol 6/6 July 1994.

Surface Tension, 1998.

The View from Here, 2008.

Family Pictures – The Writing’s on the Wall A Scatology

I
What had the boy made of it,
her white brittle arms,
beneath the bandages
a sudden absence?
Did he return to his small boy’s bed
to dream of suckling
in nightmares the shocking face of pain”

They never speak of it

II
The author said, ‘I used to draw
on the walls with my mother’s lipstick’
(with our thoughts we light a candle
to Dorothy, passionate and wide,
her mouth the reddest thing)
and the poet replied, ‘Well,
I used to write with the shit
out of my own nappy.’
Someone overhearing said,

‘I might have known’

‘How you drive!
In the carpark that night
you only just missed us
(the author measures space with his fingers)
and the wall!’
She wanted to say
it had been fog or smoke.

Her tears had turned to milk

III
At two she built a tower of matchsticks
on grandma’s library carpet.
She watched their little red heads
explode.
She longed to see
what would happen then,
what it would be like,
the burning

and who would come

She saw them at the door
mother, grandmother,
both.
The flames leapt from her tiny fingers

higher than the blazing tower.
Legs, dress, fingers, hair alight,
she saw them burst
into haloes of flame.
The burning circle widened like a scream.
Windows, wall, roof and sky
the whole architecture of faith
was falling,
vertigo the last thing,
the abyss pitiless and black
voracious as fire.

Paperback romances
floated after
like apocalyptic doves.

She knew then
there was nobody nothing

to hold up the sky

IV
Once some high school boys
had secretly covered her windscreen
with semen
and handfuls of tissue.
Reaching for the ignition

she pretended not to notice.

Surface Tension, 1998.

Two-part Invention

for a girl her hands were big
she had him within her grasp
the reach but not the rhythm
for she played without breathing
Bach

and the cane was poised to cut her
if she stumbled

*

she pauses where it's muddy
for a snake that's threading legato
through the reed bed at her feet

where the path ends
the world expands

gulls like giant snowflakes
drift and whirl
before the black sea-cliff

and falling
merge with the white caps

dissolve
in the turquoise promise
of memory

two women swimming
one without a breast

Imago, Vol 6 No 1, March 1994.
Surface Tension, 1998.

No Name, The Doll

i

She was the kind of woman
who never made a sound,
who looked good
in everything,
her body smoothly pink,
her calm smile exceeding remoteness.
Insomnia made her rigid.

At 2am
she went outside
to the top of the front steps.
She would order that fucking dog
to SHUT UP!

When the screaming and slamming
started up,
she would come out on the stairs again
and yell
STOP THAT!

She had a secret voice for this.
It was the voice she kept coiled in her feet
that branched and uncurled
through her body like wire,
red-hot and humming.
When she opened her mouth
for the full-throated roar,
it came flying out of her
like a steel harpoon,
wrapping itself around the neck
of the incessant German Shepherd,
impaling the drunken bastard
across the road.

ii

She has a glass of water
and doesn't need to pee;
she feels like a magic-action doll,
and sleeps like an idol.

At daybreak she's woken, as usual,
by the frantic clop clop
of the same woman running down the street
in high heels.

Southerly, Vol 55/4, 1995-96.
Surface Tension, 1998.

Borderlines II

her arms and legs
wrapped around
a life-sized replica of you
she lay on the bed
her back naked
to the window the storm
came in periodic gusts
of cool breath fine needles of rain
strained by the flywire
relief after two hours of driving in
from the hot west her radio
crackles softly through sleep
news of Rwandans pouring over
another border being herded into or
out of another camp filling
the jungles with their disappearance
the camera overhead like a sniper
in a dream of bleeding feet they emerge
over brittle volcanic rock
and pause
she wakes to a sodden sky
and buries her face where the dummy's heart
should be according to the 7am news
the refugees are still moving, across
another border

summer '96-'97

Surface Tension, 1998.

A Virgin's Christmas

It's quiet.
The first car she sees is an ambulance,
its windows frosted with 'Santa Snow',
heading up Organs Road
to Bulli Hospital,
followed closely, slowly,
by a yellow sedan with its lights on.
She wonders
if they know something she doesn't.

There are others, looking singleminded,
their gazes blind and intense,
the air around them
still. Milk, bread,
cigarettes, aspros?
Whatever signs they follow
are a secret to her
but she suspects
they are lost –
unfamiliar in their new best clothes,
neutralised by sentiment and largesse.

She's cruising the suburbs
to see what's open at Christmas
and pregnancy makes her hungry.
She's after potatoes
to go with the lamb.
She plans to eat by herself,
to watch Bing Crosby again
'... dreaming of a white Christmas.'

Three suburbs later
she finds a Quickie-Mart,
an automatic teller machine.
She's been dying
to transact,
transmit.

She's seen Moses and Adam
on the Sistine ceiling,
their fingers touching
their bodies billowing away
from each other
like your sleeve

your hair out the window
going fast.
This could be what her body remembers
when the cash register sings
when the ATM lights up at her touch.
It's a charge, a relief.

After lunch and the movie
she's driving again,
on the lookout for a cheap motel.
With her free arm
she reaches behind
and strokes her luggage
for luck,
patting the side pocket
where her shoulder pads nestle.
She needs them in case she's called upon
to be real.

Southerly, Vol 55/4, 1995-96.
Surface Tension, 1998.

Two Tails

Hot dog Menu

Hot dog with sauce

Chilli dog

Cheese dog

Super dog

(with onion, cheese, sauce)

The cook

(muscles, crewcut, moustache)

wants to know

if we liked our pizza.

'Yes,' we say, 'Excellent!'

He bares some teeth

in a lopsided smile,

a small tremor of happiness

ripples under his skin

and he's off out the back

like a dog with two tails.

Imago: New Writing, Vol 7 No 3, Summer 1995.

Surface Tension, 1998.

The View from Here, 2008.

The Bride

The couple over the back fence
are childless.
He walks with a bowlegged limp.
They breed orchids and terriers.

Today I saw the woman
in immaculate bowling whites
with her arms full of orchids.
She has picked all the yellow.
There's only one spike left,
it's pink.

The man walks her to the gate.
The dogs trot after him
making a noise
like tearing out your throat.

He kisses her goodbye.

Surface Tension, 1998.

The View from Here, 2008.

Birdwatching at Coledale

i

Magpies, crows, currawongs;
black and white, and black without.

The miners have long retired
to bald embankments,
close-cut grass, and fibro cottages
that hunker down
and stare with narrowed eyes to the sea,
the coalface
that only seems to yield.
Between themselves they keep
a decent distance.

ii

The woman next door
is watching and waiting
for her new neighbours
(the women who kiss)
to go out or indoors.
Then she'll dash to the clothesline
in her fluffy pink dressing-gown
trolley-first,
the way some people
will cross the road,
thrusting pram and baby
into the traffic
before they follow safely.

iii

Once the women spied her
(the woman who washed)
as she crept out
from behind the flywire
and left, on the table by the door,
a strawberry and cream layercake
for the black and white birds.

Imago: New Writing, Vol 7/3, 1995.
Surface Tension, 1998.

Blue Angel

It was her last delight
to sit
quietly dissolving
a wafer on her tongue,
sipping at the wine
as if she wasn't
on a ship
going down.

Her windows were twin portholes
on the world of treetops and distant islands,
on the sea.
She watched for uncounted hours
until darkness,
the sky as it deepened and faded
in accordance with the light.

She'd waited till the deluge
forced a door,
and, drowning, knew
bliss was one ocean; layers
of green, touched on every
side by madder blue,
of terre-verte
embracing the azure;

tissue
of impossible life,
of fins and fur and wings.

Surface Tension 1998.

death in thirroul/the cleaner's story

sunday night the night before brett whiteley died
the cleaner dreamt he was there at headlands
after the fishing club barbecue *'not talkin' just
hangin' just there y'know'* she dreamt she had
fresh puncture marks the size of ringworms up
and down her arms she was horrified then
relieved to wake up and see they weren't there
next day she went to work and told the boss
about the dream she said *'all that talk about
harpo* the other day must've made me dream
about him y'know'* (they had a laugh about it
donna and nadia the bosswoman) *and she just
kept eating her breakfast you'd think she
would've said something wouldn't you about
finding him dead in room four that morning but
she didn't she just laughed when they found him
he'd been dead twenty-four hours they got
suspicious finally because the tv was on for so
long and there was a phone call he didn't take he
used to paint in his room he used to paint the
coast around here and the escarpment but he
stopped all that about a year ago now anyway
alex the bossbloke was just putting on his jumper
and didn't know what to say when they pointed
a camera in his face except that he was a good
customer and never bothered anyone so they left
him alone and anyway they didn't know
anything about him that the rest of the country
didn't already know there was a fresh deal when
they found him and pills and grog but there was
nothing for the photographers to see but the
crumpled bed and the table with cigarette butts
and orange juice there was nothing to see but
they took pictures of it every which way it was
on the front page of the mercury next day a
cheap and dismal seventies motel room *'makes
you wonder why they took all those different
pictures when they used the same one anyway
on all the news and there was me sneakin' along
the upstairs balcony piled up with washin' tryin'
to hide and there's a photographer panning right
along i told him to piss off i could lose the dole
y'know if they saw me on tv'* the day after we
saw the headline *'artist's tragic death'* thirroul was
naked in the wind the winter light mild and cruel*

i bought a newspaper and read it over a late
breakfast at the flying duck cafe there was no
traffic the radio was on and bette midler was
*singing some say love is like a hunger... an
endless aching need.*

- Brett Whiteley

[As printed in Surface Tension, pages 38, 39, there are no words in italics. In the copy of Surface Tension that Deb kept for herself she has underlined many lines and written ‘ please type underlined lines in italics – ta’.]

Scarp, 21, October 1992.

Anthology of the Illawarra, 1994.

Surface Tension, 1998.

The View from Here, 2008.

leaving

the smoke of silence
hovers here where you
have never been and I
return

you have let the orchids die
their tongues hang out
the velvet throats
are dry

Surface Tension, 1998.
The View from Here, 2008.

Homing

The nameless bird is dead, flimsy as a nest
fallen from a roadside tree;
a bundle of leaves and spiderweb,
of feathers tied to sinew.

Invisible, in silence,
other, microscopic
life
bristles with the half-formed
wings and claws
of dreams that want
to fly.

Some of these
unwrap themselves
like cellophane,
remembering the gift,
and join the secret flight paths
still locked in every cell.

What remains of the flesh
has already disappeared,
but if I lean forward
with my arms outstretched
I can see feathers
combing the wind,
flagging the spirit.

Surface Tension, 1998.

Bone Song

Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul
And sings the tune without the words
And never stops at all.

Emily Dickinson

i
To hope against such odds

might make me foolish
but I have lived so long on hope
I can't distinguish it from air,

nor from this hollow bone
I sit mouthing in the dust.

The herdsmen and their livestock
are murdered or have fled.
Our grandmothers' gardens
are buried in cold ash,
the children dead or led astray.
The women's breasts and eyes are empty
as the wells and riverbeds:

whatever was holy here
is hidden underground.

ii
The bone fits my mouth
where the teeth once grew
and they have worn a row of holes
along its brittle length:

now breath and bone
make music,
the air is tinged with blue,
the earth
with green,
and from somewhere in the distance
there comes an answering song.

Surface Tension, 1998.

The View from Here, 2008.

time lapse

morning and the leaves
of the pear tree
flicker like ecstatic tongues

the pink nipple fruit
of early spring
have swollen into fullness

late afternoon the mist
arrives in veils
(somewhere there is dry ice and a fan)

the illusion of smoke
enters trunk and branches
leaving in dissolve
a single white feather
like a slipper on a stair

Picador, new writing 4, 1997.

Surface Tension, 1998.

The Blue Mountains Poems 2005 (Handmade).

The View from Here, 2008.

Winter Fruit

The crab-apple tree reaches over the wall
and into the sunlit courtyard,
its naked arms slicked bronze
by a morning shower.

Its limbs bristle with tiny stems
each one ending in a bright berry
of rain
that glistens in the half light
like dew
on a sleeping animal.

Surface Tension, 1998.

The Blue Mountains Poems 2005 (Handmade).

Door

At the end of a long hallway
there was a square of yellow sunlight
and the black flickering of leaf shadow –
I walked into it, filling
the frame like an eclipse,

like someone late
to the movies –
taking up the whole screen
with the awkward angles,
the false solidity
of my body

which, they say, is no more
than water and stardust
held
in a pattern of light.

Picador new writing 4, 1997.

Varuna New Poetry 10, Summer 1997.

Surface Tension, 1998.

The Blue Mountains Poems, 2005 (Handmade).

The View from Here, 2008.

in a cold climate

is that the wind
or the sound of my breath rushing
to meet ours

are those the lines of laughter
creasing your eyes
or the limbs of eucalyptus oreades
driven by the wind

is the sky invading
only to take you from me

we are shaken awake by the snow
that comes with a flourish
and melts before it touches

Surface Tension, 1998.

shedding

how often have the painters
painted all but the eucalypt's skin
in the last light
hanging
like banners becalmed
sunburned skin
peeling
sheets of it down your back
late summer

how often have I leant towards you
my burning love
and you look away

HOBO, Issue 1 winter 1993.

Surface Tension, 1998.

The Blue Mountains Poems, 2005 (Handmade.)

Tequila Sunrise

She stripped off
all the old deaths
the past had knitted to her
tight
as another skin
and stepped out of it
shining
like tequila in the sun

Suddenly I was hot
and thirsty.
I put aside the knife,
bought her, sour salty
to my lips,
and dived in.
The heat just peeled away from me.
She was cool
as a blade.

Surface Tension, 1998.
Southerly Vol 59/1, Autumn 1999.

Oak

There is only this one hour of stillness
before dark
and the trunk of a great oak
taking up all the window,
standing
in the rain.

Once I wrapped it with my arms
and pressed an ear against it
listening hard;
to the sound of water
seeping through moss and ferns
gathering into cascades
and rivulets
singing over stones.

And all of this ascending,
as if the oak was a long well
from which the sky drew
music and water
to itself.

Varuna New Poetry 10, Summer 1997.

Surface Tension, 1998.

The Blue Mountains Poems 2005, (Handmade).

The View from Here, 2008.

Creative Connections, Blue Mountains Writers and Artists, 2009.

Poems in the Waiting Room, 2010.

Food

Pigeons sit in patient rows
on the courtyard eaves,
fluffing their dove-grey and charcoal
feathers, gathering the first weak sunlight
into bodies you know
are transparent
and slightly tremulous.

Startled they rise in a sigh,
fluttering out over the stones
and earthward through a drift of leaves –
settling around the boy's feet
like a wishing pool.

He throws them hot chips
that steam like manna
in the frozen morning.

Surface Tension, 1998.
The Blue Mountains Poems 2005 (Handmade).

The Smokers

They have come out of the lighted restaurant
onto the dark balcony
of the Carrington Bistro.

They have done this before –
a glance meeting
at the clock
at the door.

Their exits were stealthy and discreet.
They make a formal photograph;
still, as a postcard.

Even from here I can read
their black cashmere shoulders
touching,
white pointed collars
neck to neck, careful haircuts;
and know they smell of soap
and subtle lotions.

Arms folded across their hearts,
they exhale as one,
and dissolve, soft as sea-ice,
into the rising fog.

Surface Tension, 1998

Dinner at the Savoy

Desert lurid décor
and cactus lights in the window
could be Katoomba wishing
it was Santa Fe.
We have all come from somewhere else.

My neighbours here are almost old
and from deeper in the country:
a bleached whitewoman,
her sister and a husband.

They are seated close and opposite,
the table so small they almost touch.
As the sun lingers, to bless in passing
the glorious Carrington in rehab,
they stare past each other
and beyond,
blindly humming along with the radio –
“Dream lover, where are you...?”

I play with my fettucine
while I watch them order steaks.
We smile with mutual self-consciousness,
“Where are we anyway?”
The menu’s lentil patties
and Thai ‘this and that’
prepare none of us
for the mountains of bleeding rump
and scarce potatoes.

They tuck in gamely.

Southerly, 2, 1994.

Republica, 1, 1994.

Varuna New Poetry 10, Summer 1997.

The Blue Mountains Poems, 2005 (Handmade).

Surface Tension, 1998.

Snowflake at the Parakeet Café, Katoomba

This morning I've taken his corner
so he sits outside,
the man-in-the-magenta-raincoat,
filthy and threadbare,
his cat and his beard on a leash.

I stop to pass the time of day
and his blue sargasso eyes
rush towards me like an ocean.
He disagrees, he tells me,
with organ transplants
'murdering a dying dog
to keep alive another.'

His mother's just died,
he says, at eighty-three.
'What could they use...'
the question takes a long time
to reach me '...her corneas?'

By now we're eyeball to eyeball
and something slides between us,
a dish of oysters, slice of moon,
silver coin, shell,
a baby's tiny fingernail.

The white cat at his feet
sits up in her box
and speaks to me.
He disbelieves.
She's dumb, he says.

But he's cured them all of the flu now,
this one's the last;
he knows what to do,
won't let them die.

(They'll keep him warm
again this winter.)

He calls this cat 'Snowflake', he says,
because of the three black dots
on her back.

*Varuna New Poetry 10, Summer 1997.
Surface Tension, 1998.*

Slaughter

Heaven save me from the rawboned newlyweds.
Months after the wedding
they're still dressing up for each other.
She looks as cold, as bloodless,
as a sacrificial virgin.

Their rings are still shiny.
They have nothing to say.
Their embarrassment cattle-prods my heart.
I hope that they will eat,
because they have made me
hungry.

Surface Tension, 1998.

Notices in the Window

Saturday 4 pm

Medieval Jewish Commentators
Rashi on Genesis

Monday 4 pm

Sanskrit
Gita

Wednesday Midday

Classical Greek

Sunday 10 am

Biblical Hebrew
and LXX Greek

Tuesday 5 pm

Medieval Persian

Aims: 1. Grammar

2. Read Attars Textthirat
and other Sufi texts.

Starting Thursday 4 pm

Biblical Hebrew

Thursday 7.30 pm

Advanced Scrabble

Brian's Bookshop, Katoomba

HOBO, issue 1, December 1996.

Surface Tension, 1998.

Confucius at the Rock Sung Restaurant

The walls are turquoise,
the curtains of matching nylon
lace conceal nothing
but a row of false windows.

(the goldfish circle watchfully)

Jade green, the serviettes,
and the carpet red as the shrine
to Confucius
that's nailed over the kitchen door.

*(I'm possessed by the mingled smells
of a dozen standard sauces and the
laughter of skinny cooks in white singlets)*

There are gilt lanterns with tassels
hanging from a topaz ceiling
and chairs of sapphire vinyl.
Except for rococo vases
full of impossibly coloured flowers,
the tables are bare.

*(a waitress taps the counter
with lacquered nails as long
as her fingers –
a jealous moon waits outside)*

As I rush into the street
with my takeaway in one hand
and a free magic lantern in the other,
Confucius sings out something
I cannot hear.

*(a cloud of steam and sweat and
vaporious oil rolls between us)*

In a last effort
to get my attention,
he lets fall his banners
of crimson and gold
emblazoned with truths
or blessings I cannot read.

*(I would have been happy
with any three wishes,
including a lifetime's
supply of roast duck)*

*Surface Tension, 1998.
Wagtail 55 – Reading the Signs, 2006.*

Birthdays

Champagne corks could break windows
and dent the ceiling,
they could make a great noise
and come all over the carpet.

Now I hold the bottle
between my knees and make a face;
and gently ease it out
anticipating a small, discreet
explosion in my palm.

Scarp, 24, May 1994.

Surface Tension, 1998.

The Blue Mountains Poems 2005, (Handmade).

The View from Here, 2008.

Fat Currency

The woman in the gabardine coat
is on time,
her white crimplene hair
and chalk face, as usual,
set firm.

Her mouth is a gash
that smokes Marlboros without end,
and squeezes out a word, now and then,
for the two fat shopkeepers
who share with her each morning
the same table
the same familiar discomfort.

In exchange for her breakfast
she folds a day's worth of serviettes,
pale dunes of tissue that topple and slide,
covering the headlines.

The smell of coffee somnifies,
entrances.
Her hands are folding, smoothing,
her liquid eyes are dreaming.
The shopkeepers are sheiks
and she is Isabel,
Isabel Eberhardt,
L'aventurière.

There is too much bacon
so she'll wrap it up
in some newspaper
and stuff it in her inside pocket.
Sometimes she finds,
at the bottom of her handbag,
sausages wrapped in serviettes
like greasy rolls of currency.
She's saving this treasure
for a sandwich later, in front of the telly.
Plenty of salt, she thinks,
all washed down
with scalding tea.

At the boarded-up guesthouse
the room she returns to
is always dark

and the TV's intermittent explosions of light
flicker like tracer fire.

Her hands are folding, smoothing,
her liquid eyes are brimming.
The shopkeepers are soldiers
and she is Rima, a widow,
la réfugiée.

Picador new writing 4, 1997.

Surface Tension, 1998.

The Blue Mountains Poems, 2005 (Handmade).

The View from Here, 2008.

Lunchtime

A misery of smokers exiled
huddle like pyromanic pigeons
under leaky awnings and narrow dripping eaves.

Only they are fuming.
St Joan and Don Quixote
are busy with their trolleys,
the tourists with maps and agendas.

The locals are eyeless
with dreams of various utopias.
K-Mart is warm
and the payphone works.

The mad, as usual, are stoic in their joy.
They only drink, the righteous mad,
and chew on their moustaches.

The rest of us are holding hands
and looking at the clock.

Surface Tension, 1998.

The Blue Mountains Poems, 2005 (Handmade).

The Busker

It is cold,
the beggars talk to themselves
and the bad-tempered busker
is playing after dark.

I stop to look at the views,
turn off the ignition,
and can't tell
which noises are electric.

A whiskered crone
with shit on her shoes
calls me a masturbator
and moves on.

The preacher hitches up his kilt,
points his trolley-full of bibles
and his megaphone
towards home.

Busdrivers are sick of sights.
They like to park in town
and eat their hamburgers
in each other's buses.

The busker has just paid for his dinner
with small change and curses.
He's playing mouth-organ blues
down the empty tunnel of Main Street.

Surface Tension. 1998.

The Blue Mountains Poems 2005 (Handmade).

The View from Here, 2008.

Metropolis

L.f. Gk meter/mother
polis/city

Something very precise
had sawn her almost in two,
and she lay under the green sheet
like a fish half-gutted,

suspended in the amniotic sea
that pumped and pulsed
and breathed for her.

A single white line
measured her equilibrium;
the distance between heartbeats.

*

A monitor divides the metropolis
into meridians of light,

two lines of pulsating colour
built up around an obstacle;

a telegraph pole,
the wreckage of an ambulance
and the donor's heart
still vacuum-sealed
and packed in ice.

*

The white line falters
and she succumbs
to the blocked and loaded arteries of her heart
wondering, at the last
if this is what her mother meant
when she said,
'I'll kill you.'

Cordite Journal, Poetry & Politics Review, No4, 1998.
Surface Tension, 1998.

reasons before

on a crystalline mountain night
the screaming sirens of the highway
are instant and forever

the heart seizing
bone splintering
wrench of collision

the breaking of glass and voice
have been reasons before

memory and imagination
follow the sirens away
with the usual questions

Surface Tension, 1998.

Reading the Signs
for Luke

The morning's overcast with complicated dreams:
I rise from the sea with ice sliding off my back,
a fresh caught fish is spinning
at the end of a line,
catching the light like a wet-silver mirror
flashing yes/no/yes/no/life/death/life/death.

And I wonder when I gave up the fight
against talking about him in the past tense:
'He had
his father's big toes and thumbs
but all his little toes and fingers
were mine.
His hands were
beautiful, big and
soft as fresh tortillas.
He liked
chocolate, heavy metal
and always to have company.
He would have been
seventeen in May.
He was
reckless.

Here in the mountains
red and white toadstools
are pushing up magic circles
through vermilion leaf litter,
flakes of light
snow are spiralling through the late autumn sky
and the black cockatoos
are headed home to the tall trees on the ridgeline,
their voices hoarse with crying.

Scarp, 33, October 1998.
Surface Tension, 1998.
Wagtail 55 – Reading the Signs, 2006.
The View from Here, 2008.

History

Rosy bluffs, crowned with eucalypts
cradle the vast bowl of the valley,
darkening,
a scattering of low green hills
afloat in its depths.

And sometimes a solitary house
glows there, like a lantern.
Its keeper coming to the window,
looks out on twilight,
the cliff's encircling arms,
the familiar distance
and clouds rising like smoke
all around him.

He has not seen
the nimbus briefly parting,
radiance bursting over him
like fame,
the sky
laying down
great sediments of cloud
laying it down
like ash and mica
like memory
and forgetfulness.

from Hilda's Lookout

Scarp, 33, October 1998.

Surface Tension, 1998.

The Blue Mountains Poems, 2005 (Handmade).

The View from Here, 2008.