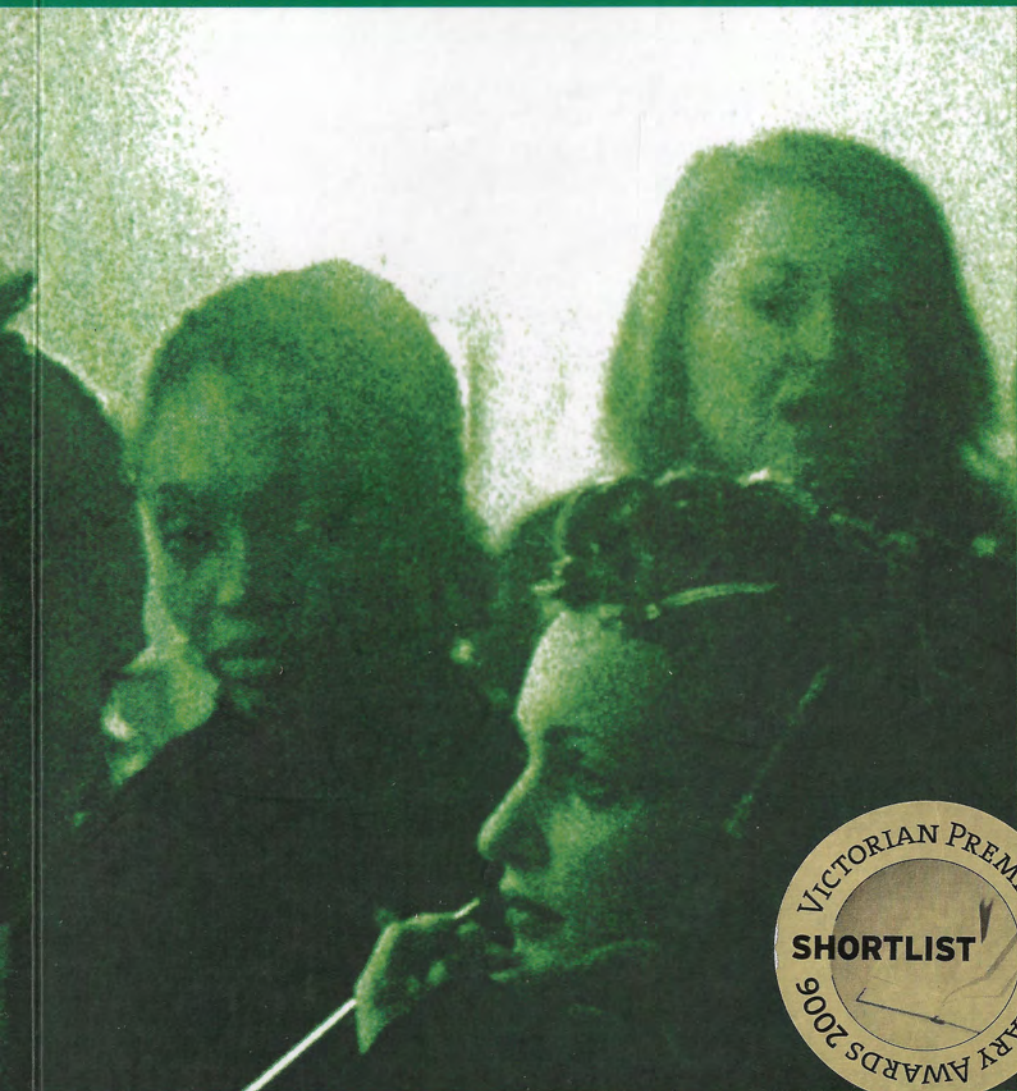


The Kindly Ones

Susan Hampton



The Kindly Ones

Susan Hampton is a poet and freelance editor who lives in Lyneham, Canberra. For many years she taught writing at universities. Her poems and stories have won the Patricia Hackett Prize from *Westerly*, the Dame Mary Gilmore Award from the ACTU, The Brian Eton Prize from *Compass*, and the Shire of Eltham Short Story Award. In 1990 she won the Steele Rudd Award for *Surly Girls*.

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Published by
Five Islands Press Pty Ltd,
PO Box 1015 Carlton 3053
FAX 03 8344 8713
email: rpretty@unimelb.edu.au

Cover image: Philip Castle

Acknowledgements

Some of these poems have appeared in *Blue Dog*, *Said the Rat*, *Wild About the Roof*, *New England Review*, *The War on Terror*, *Southerly*, *Poetika #4*.

I would like to thank Varuna Writers Centre for a fellowship; ACTARTS for project funding in 2003; and the Literature Board of the Australia Council for a Writers Grant in 2004.

National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-Publications Entry
Hampton, Susan, 1949–
The kindly ones
ISBN 1 74128 093 1

1. Title.
A821.3



This project has been assisted by the Commonwealth Government through the Literature Board of the Australia Council, the Federal Government's arts funding and advisory body.

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Five Islands Press

Also by Susan Hampton:

Costumes poems (Transit, 1981)

About Literature with Sue Woolfe (Macmillan, 1984)

The Penguin Book of Australian Women Poets co-edited
with Kate Llewellyn (Penguin, 1986)

White Dog Sonnets poems (Fab Press, 1987)

Surly Girls short stories (A.& R. / Collins Imprint, 1989)

A Latin Primer sonnets (Cerberus Press, 1998)

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On the Bright Road

Western Motorway

Freeway walls' civic indentations suggest trees
a billboard shows the aftermath of a head-on
low-flying crows windscreen geometry
suburb roofs bake under the sun
a greyhound pioneer's compression brakes go squnk
a sign asks How fast are you going now?
I glance at my odometer: 4000 revs
keep left unless overtaking
Hours later on the Hume
rock cuttings covered by studded fake rock
rigor mortis kangaroo rigor mortis sulphur-crested
recent, attended by dipping and calling mates
Helm winery Clonakilla winery
low hills suggest volcanic plugs, good soil
circling sacred ibis scan the cattle paddocks
inadvertently I've taken the Yass turnoff
welcome to Murrumbateman
grazing Hereford ignore the traffic
I stop & the car ticks into silence
I am this morning's minion, lord
across the road a warm wind shakes the vines.

Sunday

Let us assume the numinous here,
and fall on our faces at least
let's have the heart to take apart
the wreck of Sunday
examine the bones of the roast
for a likely happy event
and this eclipse let's raise our lips
and sing, I proudly grunted.
Life could be so different,
and not just from the point of view
of a new set of teeth for the age
which could bite down hard on rancid
cliches we'd like to delete but complete
the sense of attunement
with heavenly orbits, even though
we've lost our memory.
I grunted Terpsychore,
Terpsychore, come to my aid
would you? Now if ever, we need
to amuse ourselves with your
holy song, sibilants long and
thronging vowels that hold a whole
tent to ransom. For God's sake
let the dog out. Grains of sand
when examined no longer give
up their secrets, the world closes
its eyes and rolls over and when
later exhumed it assumes
nothing, its forests gone, its
DNA exploded, its greenhouse
credits sold for less than a song,
its muses on the dole. O world,
where is your sting and why
are the nettles looking rusty.
Today we bought outdoor
furniture and are hoping

to pay the heavy fines imposed
when we lost our licences
to speak and write verse. Please
let the dog out. At least I held
the full moon in my eye
for a while last night, I thought,
grunting proudly.

Though I have examined the sand
and the leaves of grass, life will not
give up its secrets to me, and why
should it? I have little care
for my soul though I have not
submitted to multi-channel TV
still yet, I grunted.

I met my old boss for coffee and
he informed me that he is well,
he has a sports car, and his new hair
is due to an anti-prostate-cancer
drug, which he takes
for the hair only, as he does
not have cancer. The hair
looked good. He did not
intend to go bald. I examined
my legs and laughed. Please
tie the dog up when you
are at the café.

My boss said the best recent thing
was some early Woody Allen
on the Fox channel. I wanted
to know about the state of his soul
but I dared not ask.

At the kids school concert
there was only recorded music,
no one played an instrument.
The kids sang along to CDs

and did TV choreography.
We are to be proud and pleased
they sang songs in five different
languages, including a French one
called *Leon the Chameleon*. Their small
hands twitched correctly to this song.
They are rightly multi-cultural
and recited as well two verses
of I love a Sunburnt Country
though now they wear blackout
and hats. Proudly we grunted at our pale
important children and secretly wished
for one standout talent
in the communal we-are-the-world
end-of-year concert.

The kids have colour in their hair
and the girls are getting breasts
in fourth class now but we don't know
why: is it the hormones fed to chicken
and beef and tipped into the water at
fish farms? What about the vegetarians?
Yes we are all refreshed by DDT
and we know there is no milk in
Australia, including mother's milk,
that does not contain DDT. We
are part of the food cycle after all
and maybe what remains of the gods
will eat us up at their last banquet.
The myths will let the dog out,
I probably grunted.

On the street I listen for poetry and
people are saying, 'at the end of the day'
and 'it's all good'. When I offered
to give the check-out girl correct
change she said 'Awesome'. I must have
grunted. 'Are you all right?' she said.
Proudly I smiled.

Although it's easier to sleep in on Sunday
I wake up early.
My good friend has already let the dog out.
The radio has removed most liturgical
music from the early program
and remnants of the gods float
into the pile of bushes
we've removed to make way
for the outdoor furniture.

I stretch my secular limbs and do not fret
or fast. Something catches in my throat
but it's all good, the dog is my priest
and her happy smile tells me Enjoy your day.
I open my throat to sing
but nothing comes out.
In my lordly way, and though I've read
Hegel and Kierkegaard,
I feel like a stray, but my soul
grunts and kick-starts itself,
in fact it's a gleaming spring day.

Mare-Headed

At my gate a man's about to pass with a greyhound,
I usher my dog in quick, wave to the man:
he gives me the dead-eye stare and passes on.
In the courtyard a polythene sack: sheep manure
delivered by a friend. On the sack are two blue words:
DEMETER FESCUE. What was in it,
a grass seed – or corn? or is it a type of wheat –
Inside, I find Robert Graves, Demeter, corn mother

before that, mare-headed goddess. Chief temples
in such and such and such. Colleges of fifty priestesses.
I try to imagine the social world this implies.
Jim the Gent said his real name
Demetrius meant: follower of Demeter. Every day
he raised his glass: "To Demeter".

Iron

I cross the courtyard and feed the blue cat.
Spectrum is lying open on the bench.
My fetters, you made music in my heart.
I played with you all day long, and made you my ornament.
On a facing page, graffiti on a Paris wall,
Jouissez sans entraves in a Cartier-Bresson photo
from 1968. I look up entraves: *shackles*. My friend
arrives for the hot-metal-casting workshop at ANU.

Joy without shackles: is it possible to talk to
your soul – will it talk back? Haven't I enjoyed
everyone else's soul, and ignored my own?
Haven't I cultivated irony like a good crop of broadbeans
to put some nitrogen in the soil? Ironists: a specific area
you can book yourself into at Rookwood.

Necropolis Avenue

as a future address seems just as likely
Fox Place, or the back bar at Heaven.
Morbid from being alone I lift the handset
and press the talk button. Whose number will I ring.
Was it only 1963 when a song like *Telephone to Jesus*
was taken seriously? I can't get near Jesus
except through Mozart, *et lux perpetua*,
or the winding countertenor *benedictus*

in the Bach mass in B minor, the way he puts
the note a bit sooner, or a bit later
than you expect: is that not godly. To have
the accents and the intervals slightly ajar
like a door for other beings to come in
invisibly to touch an invisible part of you.

On the Bright Road

Someone phones and asks about the Bright Road. The Bright Road as far as I know is in eastern Victoria, and for some reason the country there is good to look at. I don't know what towns the Bright Road connects, or what highway it's near. The same as I've never been to Gippsland, I've never been to Bright.

The vast erasures of the self
contain somehow in their deep hold
the – I hesitate to call it a god –
the second self, a post-colonial god,
no longer a queen or king but an acting subject
in the realm of subjectivity, where
your best god is met after your worst self.

Medway Rivulet

On the bus they sleep
but they're constantly
being woken by their phones.
A forest of twisted white
trees crouches past.
All cows eat grass.
A flock of sheep sits on bare
ground, facing south.
A huge picture of a woman
drinking a fizzy drink glides by
on a truck. Window-shaped
snippets of paddock create
a moving image on the blank
Sanyo screen above the driver.
Eling Forest is labelled.

Adolescent Angus nibble stubble.
Near a Reduce Speed sign, wattle
are in heavy bloom. Someone
opens the toilet door
and a violent antiseptic smell
drifts down the bus.
The home of the Pauline Fathers
is hidden in the forest to the left.
On the right where the backpacker
murderer buried his girls,
the sun gilds every tree.

When Ken came last night
for the drugs, he was drunk
but articulate, calling me
a networking asset. He was wrong.
Eucalypts at the Wingello turn-off
are a classic blue. Injured wildlife
are encouraged to call a 1800 number.
Maybe in the night wallabies limp

towards roadside phones.
'Excuse me, I'm hurt.'
'Could you give me your location please?'
Mumbo Jumbo airlines can take
you far from here.

The sheep don't care. As sleepers awake,
they turn on their iPods:
tinny rap seeps through the bus.
The bush is dry, dry.
I'd like to smell the sweet
dry air. Undergrowth is purple.
At Marulan Safe-T-Cam are
managing speed and fatigue.

Soon there's a petrol stop
and I sprint across the concrete apron
to restrooms where 23 Chinese
women dressed just like me
wait in a queue.
A Chinese husband shows
his plump and shining boy the platypus
on a coin. Our stop has woken
the sleepers. By Narambulla Creek
five piercing ringtones overlap.
Lake George is grazing flocks on hazy
browns. My body is getting ready
for David. At Towrang patient
wattles shimmer.

Twilight Mass

I was staying at Deep Spring House,
a huge ramshackle place
near the mineral springs where
some of our mob live, 'the girls'
as we're spoken of in town,
or sometimes 'the boys'—
and Sal put a record on
I think it was dark, or my memory
has made it dark — there's a fire
in the kitchen and the lounge room,
there are various people about,
I sink into the lounge with my dog,
enough setting the scene,
and high pure boys' voices rise
to unbelievable notes, hold it,
this is not your normal te deum
this is one part of the angelic hordes
floating further and further up
a sequence of Jacob's ladders.
A light so white you can't look at it
pours into Deep Spring
touching the phone, the dogs,
the stereo's blue light, now everything's
briefly haloed as three centuries ago
when Allegri sat down to write his
mass. Hearing Psalm 51 come at him
like this, pushing it a bit when it won't come,
then it's back on heaven's pour; coolly he marks
the manuscript to show this is the last part
of the mass known as Tenebrae,
or twilight — the candles
are to be extinguished one by one
until there's complete darkness,
then we hear the beginning of the Miserere
begun high, continued higher, the limit
in imagination of what your own

vocal cords could do:
they leap six notes to high A,
the last flush of pubescent oestrogen
stunning their blood, in the dark,
on a freezing night in the central
western highlands of Victoria.
I move around inside my coat
to see who else has noticed,
my blood like cointreau and ice.

Cunningly Downwards

where quite brightly
most wisely
further out earlier
very overseas
more sweetly
ever before

had been lonely
had been attentive
more frequently, then
where, often
suddenly, here, there
why, more quickly

laughed
did come
soon
would pardon

more seldom
now
how
so soon
not graciously
merrily now

but folded up
or in, up into
after
taken off
turned out
and

down, nimbly
when, there
never, again

Style

The average annual income
makes love with an awkward teenager
the fulcrum of the family saga –
there have been many persuasive
travel agendas of chief executives.
I can hear small cries as we mix black
comedy with the theatre of the natural world
with the direst imaginable truth –
but they will believe blood.

Associated with the masochism of love,
ensure your marketability while trying
not to gag on hard data. Meanwhile,
freelance workers ransack cyberspace for
the best – collect only that, then sell you
the portals to this edited version
via your ISP.

The grand viziers of this concept
are basking at a motel pool in Berlin,
their best mates are on a diplomatic mission
warming up China for software sales.
Back at home the kids are growing up
in a culture where *On the street where you live*
is the theme song of a stalker on the TV news.

At the door, the trident is respected
for his gritty and diverse approach.
His curled tail's reflected in next door's
window where we can see a Swedish-made
Crystal Block Sydney Opera House –

The weekend papers offer a first ever
limited edition teenage rebel feeling
“robbed and used” in an absorbing collection
of early letters and diaries. But the film
has difficulty settling down to any coherent style.

Betty Flies her Plane

At the airport, it's important
but Betty's not at International –

some quieter place: the quality
of light inside a big tin shed.

It's because of this big or high tin shed
that Betty likes the airport.

To inhabit these sheds, you must be
learning to be a pilot (light planes).

Betty has found the regulations
say you must have a Jumbo licence

in order to fly light planes.
'Get down and speak to the pain.'

Chit not chat

Here is something to show you can collect it
but silly discussion won't help while you wait.
Cue a real talk, but not about his relatives

suspected unsolicited commercial bulk messages
will be marked with a game of tag –
let's get behind those trees

at last the sun has come round
it's pouring into my study
pity I forgot to be here for the window-cleaner
with the American accent earlier.

Channelling St Germaine and the violet flame,
Louise gave her first workshop.
'I only had a small amount of trust. Very small.'
She took an hour to eat her laksa.

While I had lunch with her, the March Hare
left a book on my doorstep –
Shakespeare wrote eleven plays
in the five years following the plague.

If you were prevaricating about your art
perhaps the best thing is a pile of bodies
in the cart

and Death, the old crooner stopping
to chat at your front gate

Sorry, can't stop, I'm busy writing
I said. Anubis-headed, a doctor wraps
a mummy in the tomb of the kings:

the postcard on my desk vibrates.
Under the mass noun path
I feel my sap begin to run.

Sandon Point

In sixty years will this boy on the point
his body hurtling into the bent rod
walking into the tide after his fish,

still have the day's eleven year old
on his bit of coast wrestling the hope
out of a slurry of seaweed

and recall that one by one
six of his mates doing things on the beach
turned their attention to him

wave-hopping in his boardshorts to
where some older boys, fifteen, were
snorkelling with spearguns

blonded hair springing above their masks
and will he think of that moment when
after all the hubris of wrestling the fish

he reeled in a clump of seaweed
and the others, manly, didn't
notice his catch but would've been ready

to applaud if this had been one
of his finer moments and will he ever
think of these, or only the reverse

Horizon

where the lip of the escarpment meets
the skymetal urgings in the after-storm
light, a brush-edge, small gums

and below them the panoramic leaps
of the future, serrated striated
sandstone cliffs

where the after-storm sea blurs into
what is left of the sky
in a terrible myth

the suburbs can well believe and nurture
themselves by so the store of afternoons
recedes along with the silver

and gold ladles in the sea. Battles of afternoon,
fought uselessly, tone the edges of the storm
and everyone's dress is a weird colour

Beneath the Escarpment

The gander's tongue is shaped
like a penis and appears erect
mid-honk. His neck is stretched
and he's ready to bite the strangers
who've come to feed him.
We've been armed with a bamboo stick
to keep him away while we put out seed.
His three wives add loud noise
like big frogs, resonant.

Beware of the dog, it says on the gate
and a thick-chested brindle-and-grey
staffie-cross-pig-dog is daunting at first,
but we have his name
and he soon quiets.

At the back are the big cages
where the ducks and geese and chooks
and peacocks have to be put away
for the night. Beyond them are the deer
who, smelling strangers, have run down
into the bush at the end of a long paddock
of pyrethrum we mistook for chamomile.

We barrow in the deers' cabbage and bread,
then come back to a sudden display
by the peacock. He has opened everything out
and seeing us, flickers the eyes in his tail feathers.
Some of the feathers are broken, he's in moult.

While we watch, he turns around and fans
and shakes the feathers at his bottom.
Some white down begins to shimmer
and under this, the small neat mouth
of his cloaca opens and closes rhythmically,
six times.

Content we have seen all his glory,
he turns to face us again, and while
the peahens try to remember
which chicks are theirs, the cock
lets out his one loud cry which resounds
from the escarpment.

Derrida is Dead

Obituaries of the famous often tell us
the reason for their subject's disruption,
the underlying cause of their best invention.

In Nietzsche we find a certain stage of
tertiary syphilis can drive the already creative mind
to reaches of paradox and flights of ideas –
I reference the eternal return and the birth of tragedy.
In Gertrude Stein the dislocation from Jewish Europe
to the USA, and the repetitions involved in learning English,
along with the wealth that allowed a life of radical play,
produced *Very fine is my valentine. Very fine and very mine.
Very mine is my valentine very mine and very fine.*
In Plath and Woolfe the bio-chemistry of rising mania
altered their relation to language the way red wine
did for Dylan Thomas and whisky for Sibelius and Stravinsky.

In the case of Derrida who also constantly pulled syntax
apart, we find he grew up in a Jewish family in Algeria,
spoke Arabic in the street and French at school.
At the age of five he began his life's work of language play
and the interrogation of meaning: deconstructing
what seemed obvious in one language, because
in some cases it didn't exist in another.

Waiting for Goliath

The statue of David
is 500 years old this year and
he's had a controversial scrub

waiting for Goliath
the David is naked
and lives in Florence
clean again

he stands 17 feet tall
and weighs five tonnes
his right hand curled
against his hip

a replica David in a Florida
shopping centre provoked
an embarrassed local
to provide a leopard-skin loincloth

despite the fact that David had rejected
(in the Bible) the armour Saul tried
to lend him: David tried it on but
"put them off" – it didn't fit

Quarried more than 30 years before,
his marble had been started on by two
earlier sculptors – Michaelangelo
couldn't fit the head of the giant
for David to put his foot on
so he made David the giant,
almost guarding Florence.

Liberated from the scene of the beheading
David could be anywhere –
watching the traffic

It would surprise if there is a better
scrotum anywhere in art
the reviewer of a book showing
the clean David has said.

He urged the man in Florida
to reconsider.

Varieties of Crab

Some of us dismissed his theory of cultural elites
“Blue swimmers are easy compared to mudcrabs”
the way favoured writers are canonised –
despite the ageist tenor of his argument
but don’t expect cheaper crab on the domestic market.
He may be dead right about the literature racket
in this country: the local fishing fleet targeting
the wild population. The main focus for crab-farming
operation will be high-priced exports, targeting niche
markets for crabs of a certain size or soft-shell crabs
(after moult).

Despite the nationalist tenor of his argument
between 5.5 and 10 tonnes of crab daily are
airfreighted to Japan, Taiwan and Hong Kong.
Cultural and political activity has the author
uniquely placed to turn her attention to female
icons in popular culture, in short the perfect
Christmas gift.

After his mammoth histories of the two world wars,
there was no reclosing the cupboard door.
This superbly produced volume asks who
can penetrate to the real man. Pre-independence Egypt
can take you completely unawares.

The problem with digging for the family
skeleton is its idiosyncratic take on literary
criticism and biography. Nevertheless, Mandarin
Trawlers is still paying \$3 a kilogram for spanners.
For all their rich heritage, industry-wide,
there’s a lot of crab leaving
the country. Three gorgeous and engorged volumes
take the reader through something of an obituary.

Eerily prescient, the Princess of Wales blows away some of the gauzed draperies that attach to her figure. Lord Norwich has condensed his history. Without being alarmist, this giant crab, the handsome cream-and-red monster from cold southern waters can grow to 2 kilograms or more. Baked stuffed crab speak for themselves “It’s the worst managed fishery in the entire industry” but who hears them above the char-grilled observations of the local literati. The question remains: can aqua-culture – seafood farming – come to the rescue?

According to fisheries research scientists, there are few things humans are more dedicated to than unhappiness. There are other species, spider and king crabs for instance, that we’ve barely considered commercially. No doubt, the traveller could do worse than dip into this volume before embarkation. Crab is arguably the sweetest meat of all.

Waiting for Melissa

On the bike path, kids
coming out of the High School

Then, arrrgh! Wasted him –
–Yeah but they didn't do it that way, the –

Go on! he said, 'get out!
OUT! OUT!' –

– could've worn it backwards –
– see-ah Jodie –

So I said 'I AM OUT!' and he –
– He said what –

Farnes, is she the one? –
Hello, hello? hello! –

– it was her brother –
I think he was about – fifteen –

Did her homework for her –
Why –
I don't know –

Bullshit artist in his own right –
Further away from the truth –

She had to make this statue
so she got this art book and chose one
called sheila-na-gig –
– I've heard of this –

Stomped on him –
makin' duck noises at him –

And she's in some grove –
– Almost spitting on him –

And her clay hands are holding apart her lips –
– And this sheila steps in and goes boofy

loses it like a little kid –
– see what I mean about this ad? The catalogue –

– she charges round the room, right? “Where is he!”
spewing like vomit from her mouth –
– evil, venomous

– I mean her labia which are swollen
and in the statue as big as her head.
So Corinne makes this sheila-thing, right, for homework
and presents her at the kiln.

“Where is he!” when we know he’s hiding
right behind his car
– But she can’t see him?
– can’t see him at all. And –

So the teacher goes, What’s this, Corinne?
Are you mad? And Corinne goes –

She abuses Christ out of him
and goes inside, and he’s behind the Falcon
– Probably crying –

– But Miss! It says “This is to frighten away evil,
and delight those strong enough to enjoy.”
The teacher goes, What are you talking about, Corinne?

So he gets in the car and goes down the pub
and comes back with a case of Tasmanian beer

– Could you cover that with a cloth?
I’ll look at it later. Now what about Melissa’s Pinocchio –
is he ready to go in?
“I’m ready.”

So we’re in the back of the ute drinking
and waiting for Melissa.

The Locked Throat

Fifteen strands of wire
round my neck
had pearl gates on.
Out the window of the train
someone had been through
the landscape with a zero wand.
Two high school girls walked
home in the stormwater drain.
At Broadmeadow the carriage
went quiet.

A little boy walked along
the aisle. Very quiet.
Looked at me and touched
the back of my hand.
There were no windows
in my throat.
His small fingers touched
the back of my face.
I turned away.
Out the window silent
heads of broom grass
waved in Dora Creek.

Stockton

Nana dies at home laid back
in her recliner, the remote in her hand.
I give the oration at the funeral and find
I have no tears. For some reason, I'm carrying
a copy Camus' life story. I press Camus
against my chest. At the Beresfield RSL
we eat tiger prawns and talk about
spanner crabs with my cousin
from Mooloolabah. His brother has a team
of a hundred people selling bandwidth door to door.
He leans over and hands me his business card.
'Check our site,' he says.

People who fell in love forty years ago
are being civil and sharing a beer but
we don't talk about the dead at the wake.
Another thing: there's no one from Stockton here.
Nana outlived all her friends.

While she burns I drive to her old haunts,
the top beach, the riverbank, her back yard.
I sit on the rocks opposite her house
in the heat, the sensuous glare
two trawlers are working in the bight, can't
see their names... the Rebecca.
I walk towards the river, pass Betty Skews' house,
and in Moncrieffs' back gate. The birds make
a comment as I go by their cage. As usual
there's spinach in the garden, parsley, carrots.
Fleapowder and a can of roundup on a cane table
near the back door. My friend hands me a beer
and mutters something about Nana. I take it
to be sympathetic, she says she's been feeding Nana
tripe and parsley and she held up well till the end.
We worked out that Nana died while watching
Who Wants to be a Millionaire and we start telling
death jokes.

Her son Steve turns up on the back step.
He shakes my hand about Nana, and looks at the ground,
nodding. He shakes my hand for a while longer.
We eat lamb shank soup and discuss his boat,
what lobsters are worth
then some of the deckhands on Stockton,
Sorry Maurie, Whacka Vial, Whingin' Pete.
Stories about other mates of his,
Bent Bing, Looney Laurie,
things Craze did,
then there's Eyebrows, Steve said – name's
Wally Smith – alias Bob Hawke – he's growing
his eyebrows so they can cover up his bald head.

Pop Eye. Big George, Hurricane Harry.

Wok Eye he's got jealous eyes,
one eye watching the other, you know –

Mick the Knife.
Honest Phil the Deputy Lord Mayor.

Seedy Mick, Big Chappo the Log.
Big lump of shit. Scaly Tom.

What about Mick,
that used to work for you, his mother says.
Worm Bait! Steve says. His mate, Chocka Block.

What about the jelly blubber crowd?
Don't know much about them.
(surf club blokes)
Sharkey This –
Sharkey That –

The talk turns to neighbours and Betty Skews'
daughter's cocky whose claw was eaten by a fox
at Fullerton Cove.

When the daughter visits with her kids
and it's time for them to go home,
Betty's dead husband's cocky says from his cage
Leanne, get in the car!
Leanne, get in the car!

The manuscript of Camus' life story was found
in the wreck of the car he died in.
It was unfinished, at least, he hadn't handed it in,
even so, I have a lasting impression of the quality
of the heat of the Algiers sun.
Both the glare and the sensuousness.

Then back home the stereo's green light
and Glenn Gould humming tonelessly
under the preludes and fugues.
Bach's *inside* life so vast, so tender
or when his dander's up, so manic,
feudally controlling his musical estate,
voices coming in from all angles
peppering over each other or glossing
or repeating or duelling
with each other.

After dinner, I watch *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*
with the sound off, and listen
to the rest of the preludes.
For simplicity the first one
cannot be beaten.

Spare us

Spare us, Good Lord, from the crafts and assaults
of the devil and from thy wrath
and from everlasting damnation.

Opening comments

Prayer

Hymn

The family lived on a dairy farm sixteen miles
from town. The one-teacher school was in the next
paddock and the teacher let Cliff look in his books

A small low building, as was commonly built
in the old days. A sharp and high little pediment
under this, a small porch with benches on both sides

the boys walked the cows up the back creek
the cows unsteady on the rocks, the boys' legs
numb and red to the knees from chilblain

Later they said, because the first son had died at four,
the father didn't let himself love Cliff and Allan
but always kept himself separate

Suppose the area in question to be 5000 acres
and the longest distance that any of the rain falling
on it would have to travel to be six miles

When Cliff was young his father had typhoid,
and was put in a separation ward at the hospital
they said he might've been drinking from the creek

At thirteen his father died from a brain tumour
Good Lord, spare thy people, who thou hast redeemed
with thy most precious blood

In the paddock, responsible now,
miserbabble rising from the back of his neck
his strewn features gather themselves in

That it may please thee to illuminate all Bishops, Priests,
and Deacons, with true knowledge and understanding
of your word; and that by their living they may set it forth

Because the war was on, Cliff was sent to work
on the wool store building in Moree. He had been
to carpentry classes at night in the high school

then the water would find its way down to the point
of observation (say a dam site) at an average rate of
two miles per hour. Assume also for the moment

and a little consideration will convince anyone
that the intensity that would give the greatest discharge
would be that due to the greatest storm lasting for 180 minutes

Good Lord, spare thy people, who thou hast redeemed
with thy most precious blood, and be not angry
with us forever. Spare us, Good Lord

a dynamical system with random fluctuations
or influenced by random noise. A random variable which,
at each stage in time, depends on its previous values

O God the holy ghost proceeding from the father
and the son: have mercy upon us miserable
sinners

After the typhoid
the farm had been sprayed and they were told
to stay away for four days

Although they knew the people around,
they came back that night. They didn't
air the house. From middle age

Dad and his mother a tartar a singer
and one sister and brother developed ataxia
a slow-moving paralysis.

Cliff almost gave up speaking –
the tongue-lasher lashed –
all his daughters had spoken back

He waited till we came to town and asked us
one by one: Do you love me?
See, no one had an outright yes.

When Dad tried to commit suicide
we were drinking tea at Gwennie's place
Linda went, eventually

she found Dad had got out of the car
and fainted on the garage floor. At emergency
they sent him to the mental hospital

where they put him in a locked ward
and questioned him. A Doctor Helm said, Cliff,
why do you feel unloved? They removed his wallet.

Good Lord deliver us from lightning
and tempest; from plague, from pestilence and famine;
from battle and murder, and from sudden death.

Tribute from Pastor Max Hall
Eulogy from the family
Tribute from Bruce Tucker

Cliff was born on 29 June, 1924,
to Hugh and Lucy Mackie of Clunybegg,
Spencer's Gully, near Inverell. Hugh died

when Cliff was thirteen and the farm was kept going
with a small amount of hired help. When Cliff turned
fourteen he left school and put on long pants and ran

behind the house were the gardens and then
the sheds and bails. Mud and frost and Christ
for breakfast and long pants and a man

and ran the farm. He was not a farmer or a dairyman
by nature and was much more interested in building.
Much to his joy when he was nineteen

his mother decided to sell the farm.
At the schoolhouse in the next paddock
there were things perhaps mementos about the war

on their mantelpiece. Our Father which art
in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come
in the bookshelves with the glass bevel in the doors

a folded school flag distorted his bony face
books on engineering and building –
for the first year he only stared at the illustrations

found a job there with one of the main cottage
builders of the town
Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven

During the course of Cliff and Allan's building career
they built in excess of fifty houses. In the early years
they had quite a lot of out of town work

He said once the information about
the judicial process had failed to satisfy him –
Mum remembered he said he could tongue-lash

anyone in the town – and she had said But Cliff,
why would you want to – and he stared at the floor
the floor he had built, in the house he had built

The voyager studied the harrow
There was no light in any of the houses or sheds
the sky was dark and small stars flashed

Gobbets of him smeared the ground.
It was quiet, his arms
rested after work

In the back shed
Behind his stored oregon
my home was sweet and quiet

the sockets in my gut lined
with his bile unclenched
when he went to work

since gripping is a habit I grip you Dad
with my prehensile mind, your critical
and acute angles have measured me

Why would you want to, my mother said, standing still
her arms holding kindling, not looking at him,
tongue-lash anyone?

He picked up the newspaper: Rossmore were having
their annual sheep sale
ten thousand merino wethers and ewes

then starting at ten today at the Inverell cattleyards
they were selling Angus steers, Hereford steers,
Angus/Black Baldy steers, and Angus/Devon/Hereford cross

mixed sex weaners. Your herd deserves more
consideration than choosing from diluted bloodlines,
he read. He no longer had to care about this.

He was not interested in renovating old buildings.
The voyager studied the harrow. O eternal
God, creator and preserver of all mankind.

For the record I don't miss him at all, my sister
said on the phone, I just felt relieved
that he wasn't around for Father's Day

After the service I stood outside the funeral parlour
with three of my sisters
The voyager studied the harrow, I said,

was the part of the service that got to me –
Yes, the crafts and assaults, one said –
the nail prints in his hands –

But have you cried for Dad yet? – one said –
No, we said.
I tried to remember a kind thing Dad had done.

You know how a lot of people, one sister said, think
that line in Dorothea MacKellar is 'rugged mountain ranges'
and really it's 'ragged mountain ranges'

The Old Ragged Cross, I said
Good Lord, spare thy people who thou has redeemed
with no luck. A simple illustration

will best show how this curve of intensities
is to be applied to the catchment area
to obtain the maximum run-off. Blessed are all –

I read to my sisters from the funeral leaflet
'Today he may be helping organise and supervise new
buildings in Heaven,' and one sister said, I think not.

Blessed are all they that fear the Lord: and walk in his ways –
In the digital photo, Dad looks calm
Give us this day our daily bread and forgive

Brief Comments
Committal
Benediction

forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them –
At the wake, we watch on Gwennie's wall
a slideshow of photos of Dad: the keen-eyed

boy at the Red Cross Younger Set Picnic at Moree
who carefully removed from Mum's hair the burrs
some other boys had roughly rubbed in to show they liked her

A year later, Dad at his wedding, elated, bony-faced
with his brother Allan his best man, skinny
the way men were then

The minister, receiving the Woman at her father's
or friend's hands, shall cause the Man with his right hand
to take the Woman by her right hand and to say after him

Holy holy holy, all the saints adore thee,
casting down their golden crowns
around the glassy sea –

Looked at from below, it seemed steeper still,
Holy holy holy, merciful and mighty,
God in three persons, Blessed trinity –

and on its high top the irregular stems of skimpy
weeds stuck out here and there, black against the bright sky.
Retiring music: The Old Rugged Cross

Dad in his overalls with two kids on either side,
Dad retired, glitter-eyed, holding a grandchild up
to the camera, before red-eye reduction

Dad at his fiftieth wedding anniversary, after the
failed suicide, on drugs now, fangs drawn, eyes
blank and inward and proud

a hundred and thirty seven pictures of Dad –
Coming back to the subject of this paper, the special study
of this factor in every case would be quite impossible

Good Lord, spare thy people, who thou hast redeemed
with thy most precious blood, and be not angry
with us forever. Spare us, Good Lord.

The voyager studied the harrow
with a frown. The information about
the judicial process had failed to satisfy him.

The Kindly Ones

The river Cocytus is black tonight
tree frogs set up their rhythm
chaka-chaka, chaka-chaka, under the owl's bark,
nephritic vapours rise from volcanic lakes
near the main gate; the dog's necks bristle

We've spread our couches at the front of the cave
and here we sit, bat-winged, snake-haired, dog-headed,
looking through trees at new arrivals. Passengers
of all kinds are being received by the ferryman –
a woman with a limp steps carefully into his boat

Across the river my sister Alecto stands
on an iron tower, flicking a scourge –
she's employed to punish betrayers
and hosts who do their guests wrong.
In her part of the world you hear crows

and screaming. The sense of outrage that,
descended to a whimper, is petulant.
Her scourge is made of vipers kept fresh
from feeding tanks and forest reprisals.
The handle neatly tooled by a local leather worker

Our other neighbours are monsters –
Briareus has a hundred arms,
the Hydra spends her days hissing,
Discordi ties up her viper-hair with a fillet of raw meat
and next to us lives the Sibyl: at least she's quiet

The ferry leaves, wave noises echo across the river
where bronze-voiced the dog, his necks alive with snakes,
barks with all throats –
the Sibyl throws him a medicated cake:
he chomps it down, stretches out and falls asleep

Straw-coloured rushes shiver on the bank
a man with a lyre has come looking
for the woman with the limp.
The ferryman repulses him
but he waits in the river-weed

My other sister Megaera comes back
to the underworld from above-ground
where she's found us some work acting
in a play by Aeschylus. Three weeks' work,
and decent pay.

Next morning we go to the city, to the big
stone amphitheatre, and try on our costumes.
Word is Aeschylus is in trouble
with the court, but we don't
know why.

While the people filter in and arrange
their cushions, we light our fire at the side
of the stage. We are side-business. This play's
popular, and because it's part of the tragedy
competition, it's free.

Megaera tells us she saw Aeschylus earlier
and he said thirty thousand people were here
yesterday. The sun shines on the steps
where people haven't sat yet. Hawkers go around
with something, I can't see what they're selling.

We take up our positions behind the screen.
For the early scenes, we're with the chorus, all black.
Later when we're needed as Furies, we put on red mantles.
The drummers start up, the chorus leader gives us a note,
the audience goes quiet.

And now a girl called Atalanta is walking round the stage
in the head and hide of a boar, still-warm, still-bleeding,
her war-trophy. Her boyfriend and his uncles
are watching her. She's almost buried under
the wild pig, but it's a victory parade.

When the uncles steal the boar, the boyfriend kills them –
and later in the play his mother, enraged,
since the uncles are her brothers –
approaches our fire at the side of the stage.
Hubba hubba smoke and brooms.

Will she defend her brothers, or her son?
She's carrying the wooden brand she'd snatched
from the fire the day her son was born. She saved
his life, then. Now she squats and brandishes
her bit of trunk at our fire.

At that time there were fifty of us, the kindly ones,
yes be careful who you invoke. For us
a euphemism is best. EU means 'well' – think of the
eucalypt – the gumnut covers the seed – 'well-covered'.
Eumenides, that's our other name.

Happy when left alone but formal in our work,
defenders of justice, ideally practised in dissonance,
we're trained to provide revenge.
During the drama we have come in slowly,
stepping across the uncles' and the boar's blood.

Silently now we surround the action in a circle.
At a break in the stricken monologue of the mother
we begin to keen and ululate, then Alecto
gets on a half-note over mine, we make it piercing,
Megaera turns into a bird.

Above us in the tiers, two people faint.
The mother in the story then faces us –
'Turn, ye Furies, goddesses of punishment –'
and we reel back, our song stopped. 'Turn
to behold the sacrifice I bring.'

We start to wail again, and waves of sound rise
through the tiers. More people faint, three
have convulsions. The medics are called.
The following week Aeschylus is brought
before the local magistrate.

A lecture is read to him about public safety
and he's told he can't have fifty
of these so-called kindly ones.
Your Honour, he says, What number
do you think is possible?

How will the mother punish her son?
In fact the mother has him killed – yes –
that's how it ended. The childlike, the charming
sociopath is not gaoled with colour TV and drugs
or counselling.

See the mother, whose brothers have been killed,
comes up to us and hesitates four times, then puts the brand
on the fire. This is the wood she plucked out when she saved
her son's life. Silence. The fatal wood gives a groan,
and he is breathed out to the wandering winds.

Well, I'm tired of vengeance now.
Often I'm away from home – this time when I left,
it was with my sisters, after the tragedy festival.
What we needed was a holiday, Alecto said,
somewhere completely different.

On the way south,
we saw signs for an agricultural show.
The dusty carnival atmosphere blurred our eyes
and during an unidentified lapse in time we shifted
to a new language, a different territory.

*

We went into the halls of time,
cobwebbed tunnels where dank plants loomed,
past the river-caves' tacky monsters
whose ancestors' claws we've pulled from our backs,
then above-ground we saw a sign for the Bush Races.

It was ten dollars to go in.
Megaera said we were researchers, wanting to
interview people about living in the bush.
For *The Good Weekend*? they said. We had no idea
what she was talking about, but nodded.

From that moment we learned to bluff,
half-say, go dumb, simulate. Our language was described
as backpacker English. People always fill in your blanks
and the twenty-first century is no exception.
We could smell horses and beer.

Have you any idea where we are? Megaera said
to the woman at the gate. Burning Mountain, she said,
then Guyra at the top of the Range.
Cold? we said.
Minus thirteen it can be, she said. Try the Motel Isis.

Up a sloping paddock was a scarecrow competition –
a double row of them, maybe sixty, a road's width apart.
You could walk along judging them.
One whose gut was a pumpkin – one in a tu-tu –
then a stall selling whips by a master-plaiter from Bendigo.

Next a face-painting stall and the smell of camels
near the beer tent. The occasional crack
of a whip that was being auctioned gave Alecto a laugh.
There were a few tricks she could've shown them,
but she wasn't about to. Reminds me though, she said.

We were in effect incognito and would be for months.
Guides took us on tours of The Dog on the Tuckerbox,
the Jenolan Caves, Seaworld, Movieworld,
the Big Pineapple
and the Great Barrier Reef.

Down near Goulburn we went inside
a stressed-concrete ram, the Big Merino.
We climbed up a ladder and looked out his perspex eyes
at the row of commission houses leading into town –
the real world, so-called.

When we got to Sydney, we kept in touch by phone.
These phones cost nought dollars and we bought small plans.
Alecto found a job at an adult studio, working
in dark red rooms where fur-covered handcuffs
are u-bolted to concrete walls.

She and her mates walk around in stilettos
and corsets or no, what are they called?
cami-knickers – or a French maid's black dress
and apron and g-strings
the rich cream and apricot lingerie of the trade

or nurses uniforms or school tunics and strap shoes
or matron hats and fox furs and small whips,
and verbally abuse and humiliate
men in high positions –
it's relaxing for them

Instead of bringing the board meeting or the House
to its knees by your wilful rhetoric your poised sneers
your excellent tailoring your expensive haircut
it's relaxing it seems, to stop controlling everything
and be scourged till you're useless, thoughtless.

Humiliated, you don't have to be anything.
The humiliated have no responsibilities
but to their further humiliation. It is this ease of giving
up power when you're paying for it. Sex workers wear
flimsy clothes but they are covered in discretion.

While Alecto's at the studio I'm at Circular Quay
at a call centre, saying
Hi this is Virgin, May I help you?
the helpdesk for Virgin phones. Responding to clients
with technical help, or arranging credit –

The training takes three weeks,
then they throw us to the wolves.
Mostly clients are polite, but some feel free
to pour their vitriol on me –
Gee, I could show them how to curse –

Behind me the buzz of the room and to one side
the boys in black, pale-skinned, lip-studded, blue hair,
hunched over their laptops.
The network uses a software related to Oracle.
It's newly installed, the bugs are multiplying

There's an error down in the PHP code, one says.
I nod. Without ever knowing what the PHP code is,
I will refer to it many times, on the phone to clients.
Or I say, It's a case of link-rot. Don't worry about that.
Right now we can extend you fifty dollars of calls.

At Backpacker Central we cook a meal and
meet Beck who's selling wine by the case:
the hit rate's about three per cent. Hunter Valley wine.
Most people hang up on her, some abuse her,
one played loud music

some wish to discuss the difference between semillon
and merlot and consider buying a case, then don't.
Yes we've moved from our cave to a four-bunk room
in the hostel. Alecto sleeps at work sometimes:
it's tiring, whipping.

Beck wanted to dread my hair so I let her.
You select some hair and then twist it round and round
then put vaseline on it and work the vaseline into
these twists you are continually doing. It's quite a job.
And Helena Rubenstein never washed her hair.

Alecto just had a number one cut, but at work
she wears wigs. Megaera's a dish-pig in a café
called Bay Swiss, where they sell coffee and furniture.
She always tries to get Sunday shifts but you have to wait
to move up in waiter-hierarchy.

She wears small black clothes preferably very
black, not faded, and a short black apron with long white strings,
which have to be ironed. The café owners also devised
a 'look' for their menu. So far no mention's been made
of what they 'devised' for the food.

*

On a break from Virgin I go home to the underworld
for four days. At the caves, my vaporous haven of disquiet,
I'm greeted by the ferryman, with the news
that some weavers have moved in among the reeds –
One of them has made a flute. I light the fire.

When my sisters arrive we hear pleading
from outside. It's the man with the lyre,
looking for his wife. The Sibyl has the news
that the woman died of snake bite,
soon after she married him.

Bright-eyed, he is speaking to the deities
of the underworld, begging for her back.
If I have your permission to dispense
with rambling insincerities, he says,
I'm not here to spy out the secrets of Tartarus

or to try my strength against the three-headed
dog at the gate. I come to seek my wife.
I didn't come here to see these dim haunts –
by now the Hydra and the Sibyl
have joined us to watch him weep

He takes up his lyre –
harrying fortune has sent him
to disordered sunless palaces.
Standing in the tall reeds of the swamp,
waiting for the ferryman, he sings

*You, sweet wife
you at the dawn you
at the day's decline, you*

and around him the black ooze, the crooked reeds.
From their camp the weavers watch too.
The singer calls: I implore you
by these realms of silence and uncreated things
unite again the thread of Eurydice's life –

Standing in the distance, their scissors upheld,
the Fates say nothing. The man's song stops –
Danae's daughters stop drawing water
through a sieve
Sisyphus sits down on his rock

For the first time our cheeks are wet.
The king and queen give way to the singer,
and Eurydice is called. She comes from
among the newly arrived, still limping.
Before her husband can see her

he is told to turn around and not look at her
till they are back on earth. In total silence they leave
through passageways dark and
as we have cause to know
steep.

But before he crosses the river, the singer turns –
thinking perhaps 'at the river' is the point –
if you had seen Eurydice fade back, or heard him calling –
Eu-rydice, well-what, well-protected by death
and his pomegranate-eating wife.

*

My four days over, I'm back in Sydney where
I lie awake on the top bunk and listen to the
conversation of the Chinese girls in the next room,
back from the Big Merino and Parliament House –
their staccato dialogues drift through my insomnia

Prowling the big kitchen at five am I find
Beck is another bad sleeper. She twists my hair
some more, and asks what I do for a living.
Her hands brush my neck. I can hear the first birds,
starlings, then a koel's horrible repetitive call.

I work at Circular Quay, in the Virgin call centre,
I say, seventeen dollars an hour, the late shift,
two-thirty till eleven, then I can't sleep –
And what do you actually do? she says, scouting
for conversation. Want some toast?

Clients want us to fix their phone, I say,
they can't call out, or can't receive messages.
So, she says, do you get them to send their phone
somewhere for service? I laugh. No, I say,
we do it: we can turn their phone on or off

with the click of a mouse. See, often they just
haven't turned their phone off for two years.
So we turn it off, turn it back on again
and usually it's OK.
Vegemite? she says. I nod.

Or see they want an upgrade, or want to find out
what they can do with their plan –
don't you have a phone?
Actually no, she says, laughing, in fact,
I write postcards.

And what did you do before this job? she says
I hesitate before I admit to being an actor in hell
Come on, was it that bad? she says, being an actor?
Give me an idea of one of the plays you were in.
Will it matter that I've dreaded your hair?

No, no, I said, we can wear wigs. Let me see.
Ever hear of any of the Greek tragedies?
Not really, she says – I left school at fourteen
not like my sister who's a lawyer, nah studying
never agreed with me.

In one play, I said, a queen unknowingly marries
her son, who not long ago on a hill, has murdered his father –
and when she finds out that this young man,
who understood even the sphinx,
is her son – she takes a rope and wanders

through the palace, looking for a high rafter –
hangs herself, and when they cut her down,
the son, in tears of self-fury, takes a jewel-pin
from his mother's dress and stabs his own eyes –
(even now I shudder in the hostel kitchen)

Beck leans forward. Who did you play, the queen?
No, I say, I always play one of the commentators,
from the side of the stage. You know, the chorus.
Or one of the Furies. I glance at her: her face
is blank. Eating her toast.

Go on, she says, did they have children?
Yes, children, I say.
In another story, a girl is killed because her father
wants to sail to war, but the boats are becalmed.
See, he needs a good headwind from Thrace –

Beck says, So he sacrifices his daughter.
On advice, yes. Then when he comes back from war,
this is ten years later, his wife murders him – for this
and other crimes, then the son comes home from exile
and murders his *mother* –

and there's a big court case about it, I say.
Tell it to Jade, Beck says, she'd love it.
Are your sisters actors too? she says.
I admit we acted together. My sister would like to hear
about the court case one, Beck says.

Maybe my performing days are over. I still wear black.
The sub-executive look. At the call centre
by nine at night there are only twenty people left
in the room. In the breaks I'm maniacally reading
'The Overcoat' and 'The Idiot' and 'The Nose'.

A week later Beck phones in from Narooma
where she's had a perfect day on a boat.
Literally hundreds of whales and dolphins swam
and played beside them – her voice is ecstatic.
Now she's going north to see a sick friend.

Alecto rings in, she's met the three Graces
and wants to bring them over.
They are very good people.
Back home at the hostel Megaera and I steel
ourselves for this encounter –

watch the news on the big TV. The common room
is fifties-themed with a stereogram and Elvis records.
There are cushions with big orange dots, and
many vinyl lounges for young bodies from around
the world. Currently there is a bloodbath in Iraq.

Spain and Poland have just withdrawn their troops.
Suicide bombers have wiped out a busload of schoolkids.
The Graces arrive, also dressed in scrappy black
and all very fair. Their eyes graze the blood and
the splayed forms of the seventeen schoolkids.

They've been staying at the Youth Hostel in Glebe –
From there you can walk to the harbour, they say.
They met Alecto at work. I don't like
to think of the Graces in an adult studio
but I say nothing.

I worry about Alecto too but it might simply be
she's already an expert with a whip, and that her former life
has well-fitted her for this one.
Apparently the Graces were interviewed by Alecto's boss,
who asked what experience they'd had –

The Graces said, None, we just think we can do it;
he said, What was your last job? They said,
Just standing around – funnily enough, he then said,
OK we'll give you a try. They lasted one day.
One day!

In a sense, that Magistrate in the ancient world
closing off our ability to flock because of the terror factor,
didn't stop groups of three in this world
forming other flocks: the Graces had seen the Harpies at Central.
You have Herefords in with sheep, geese with doves.

The Harpies had just come back from the mountains.
More birdlike than the rest of us, they try for godhead –
how difficult for a human to approach her inner deity.
Being part of a trinity can have its merits.

In a troika, if one horse tires, the others pick up speed.
It's only in the ideal that all horses have equal energy.
A working triangle may not have stability –
there's a tendency to turn someone into an outsider.
It occurs to me though, in a trinity
you'd have one person on three horses.

In the evening I'm waiting in the foyer
and I hear one of the Harpies describe the trip
to Katoomba, she says you can go down
on this very steep train to the valley floor,
and if you walk beyond the fifteen minutes

where other tourists turn around and go back,
there's a spotted gum forest floor with birds,
even lyre-birds, and maybe frogs,
do you know about that? The boy next to her says,
I don't like the sound of "the steep train".

I wait for my sisters. Alecto's boss is taking us
to an opera. At the computer desk I google Norma
plus opera, and find a story of a druid priestess.
I read how they changed the story for the opera:
here she doesn't kill her children

She also doesn't kill herself, when her handmaid
has an affair with her Roman consort, but forgives them,
and this is a thing we as kindly ones are trying to learn –
forgiveness! In fact she sings a duet with Adalgisa, the handmaid –
a lovesong between women, with a climax and a falling away –

and near the pyre she has prepared for herself,
Pollione the consort comes to her and forswears Adalgisa
and declares his renewed undying love to her – the end.
The story, gutted of its fury, assimilated, civilised,
provides bel canto singing at its finest.

More, the song outshines any of its given narrative events.
From the point of view of theatre, both versions
are good. Being who I am though, I think the Medea
undertone in the early primitive version
of Norma gives it a note.

The opera version is more complicated,
it involves a betrayal that can't be spoken about.
Added to this is the perhaps satisfying banality
of the happy ending at the site of the pyre.
Forget about vengeance now – forget –

I was glad I didn't understand the language of the opera.
Norma, a hell-story of all time,
shows that content is finally meaningless.
Pure form removes me from self-consciousness.
We thank Alecto's boss, who kisses us.

The steep train, I say to Alecto, have you heard of it?
The tourist train, it's got a name.
Scenic Railway, Megaera said. Want to go?
Alecto looked at her new runners. Can the Harpies come?
I thought the Harpies had been there, I said.

They want to go again. They want to walk
on the forest floor through to Leura, and come up
on a different part of the mountain.
And the Graces want to come, too.
Jesus, I say. Get them to meet us up there.

Bathed in our euphemism we are kind to people
in the street heading towards the early train
for the mountains. We do the Herald crossword,
and only the last clue is still a mystery.
Euphuism – well-something, well-spoken?

After Aeschylus went to court we changed our name –
'The Kindly Ones' is said in case saying 'The Furies'
really calls us up. Auto-suggestion,
I don't know whether I believe it. The real meaning covered
with the bearable meaning, which is also true.

We look ourselves up in the crossword dictionary.
'The Furies, like the Harpies, originally came from
the outer regions – storm spirits, border spirits,
which have the unfortunate aspect
of pursuing you, hounding you'.

They travel in threes, usually in station waggons or utes,
often have dogs, and eat out of cans in country motels,
always the one on the edge of town –
near the truckstop with good hamburgers –
I remember the Isis Motel in Guyra

They drive old cars, or horses made of wind,
whose manes are streamers of wind. They tend
to wear black. I have met them as young as fourteen –
Beck's friend Kristin had written her autobiography
already, it was called 'These Days' but it was stuck

in her computer somewhere, in the shed
at her mother's. Her mother and the girlfriend,
they were also storm spirits.
They taught swimming
and they were kind at first, often charming

After watching the birds' mating rituals
on the forest floor at the bottom of the steep train,
under the speckled trees, we decide to go north.
We borrow Beck's sister Jade's car,
and Alecto gets her licence first go.

We hear the Sibyl is staying at the Isis Motel.
This time there's no bush festival, no whip-plaiter,
the pumpkins from the scarecrow bellies
have all been eaten in baked dinners cooked for the
Lamb and Potato Festival. That will be fifty-three dollars.

The others shower and go to bed, I'm as usual awake.
At night across the road, five types of frogs set up
their orchestra, and the Mother of Ducks lagoon throbs
around the gazebo – tree frogs like the ones at home
chaka-chaka, chaka-chaka

I go out and unroll my sleeping bag on the picnic table
suspended over the lagoon, and watch
the sun come up over the railway line.
In the distance across a golf course, I see smoke
and walking I come to a woman in black near a tent.

The Cumaean Sibyl, I presume? I say.
She laughs in her mantle, invites me in.
– So you've left the infernal regions too, I say
and she laughs again, going out and poking kindling
under the damp logs. I notice a laptop on her sleeping-bag.

he's written a book about birds in New England
which she shows me. No one reads it, she says,
except ornithologists. She's now writing a manual
for editors. When she goes out to the fire
I look at her hand-written page

'Parts of a publication: sections and paras,
signposts and transitions, running heads and feet.'
Any news from home? I ask.
The singer is failing to get his wife back, she says.
The ferryman batted him back with an oar.

I prophesy he'll be torn to pieces, she says,
and offers to cook me some kidney.
Where are your sisters? she asks.
I say they're at the motel.
Well, they won't be getting kidney, she says.

Our New England holiday over, and no other prophecies from the Sibyl, we're drive south through the Moonbi Hills and down past the Emirates' horse stud at Murrurrundi through bull-dozer mountains the Sibyl says you once went round, past the cones of a giant power station and the sign:

Muswellbrook – City of Power. And on to the Newcastle freeway. Back in Sydney at the hostel, the girl at the front desk leans forward: Have we heard? About Beck? She's sorry, Beck has been killed in a car accident near Bulahdelah. Automatically I touch my dreads and groan.

A drunk cadet had hit them on a bad bend near the river, two broken necks. On the notice-board there's an A4 page with a blurred digital photo of Beck laughing, leaning into her friends in a nightclub and below that, writing: We Love You Beck – from Kristin, Colette and Mandy.

I sit like an automaton in the big lounge room my back teeth snapping against each other, rocks in my gut. That night we watch on an iMac a video of Beck, an eight minute film Colette had taken on her phone.

Two of the men are crying. Kristin and Mandy are numb. I move to the noticeboard, reading anything: 'Live-in nanny required Balmain 5 min from city' 'Experience life on an outback station help mustering mobs of 2000 animals on horseback or quadbike'.

Near me two women are whispering. Talking about their first-ever girlfriend. One says, Other people are always either versions or not-versions of her. Fourteen, it's an age to break your heart. You know nothing. On the edge of knowing too much.

lean forward, my head on the foyer koala.
Voices travel to me from distant realms:
I hear again the singer's plea for his wife.
Blurred from too much experience
I prowl around the leaflet racks, groaning.

Late that night on the vinyl lounges the people remaining
are Kristin and me, alone. My eyes are swollen,
my ears still buzzing from the headphones at work.
We talk over Beck till no more can be said.
Now Kristin begins to tell her own story

how her uncle had his boat down the back
of their block, and one day
he said he wanted to show her something,
took her down the lantana path to the boat,
something she might like, he said –

Kristin was raped at times twice a day
or sometimes not for a week
and sometimes after it he gave her pocket
money once a twenty dollar bill which down
the gully later she tore into thin red strips and buried.

Back at the house her mother
bashed her for lying about the uncle,
who was her brother, and who had loaned them
the deposit on the house where Kristin and Odette
her sister were fortunate enough to live.

When Kristin grew up, her mother apologised to her.
The uncle was still alive. He had sent her a
Christmas card this year. She sat on the lounge,
looking down at her runners, her mouth closed.
Behind her the stereogram and Elvis, a silent witness.

The uncle had said she was a rude girl, she should
keep quiet about their secret otherwise
he'd give her little sister a taste of the same.
Kristin was quiet from then on. The reason she was
telling me now, her hand on my arm

was that last week she'd had a call from Odette
who was living in London.
The uncle during those primary
school years had done the same to her, tricked her
the same way, used the same words.

I feel the weight of my empty useless arms.
But later I hold her – hug her goodnight.
She touches my shoulder. I was convinced, she says,
I was saving my sister.
My head clatters: Virgin, May I help you?

Back in the Furies' bunk-room it's beauty night,
they're whisking egg whites for a face mask ...
After they've done each other they sit me on the bed
and paint my face with their fingers
the egg white sets quickly and they tell me not to smile.

I dream of Alecto's iron tower and bloody clothes –
then I'm on TV being interviewed: So, the oldest Fury –
and who is your god? I am asked – I once served Artemis, I say.
And before that? – Athena, I say – Anath, Isis.
I do not mention Dionysis or the Thracian women

I wake up with my sneering mask in the tatty dawn
wattle-birds covet and cackle across,
the hostel wall near my mouth soaked
in the random breaths of generations of stories
and their drunk and pornographic dreams.

I think of Kristin on the boat and wash my face
for twenty minutes. All day I look good but feel
stiff and unreal as if my muscles won't
co-operate in the activities of the face. These
activities though miniscule are giant to the mute.

Five years ago, even a year ago, I would've sussed
where the uncle now had his boat, bought
some spray-paint cans probably red and borrowed
a car and etcetera but I've lost my taste
for vengeance. I don't even tell the others.

Too old for fury I send the situation,
the historical situation of Kristin and her sister,
peace – to the many rapes I've heard from the raped:
instead I breathe out, don't go
to the hardware shop.

Gutless and grizzled old men the suburbs over
and in every high rise or in the back shed and
in boats and cars and kids' bedrooms and in bathrooms
and special rooms for kids built under the house
and padlocked, padlocked – find a way to forgive them.

All day I fight off the images of Kristin at six
and seven and thirteen. I curse her for being so
specific with her story. Even as my sympathy rises,
my gorge rises against her, for telling me.
All day I walk –

– shadows of dogshit on the streets,
and buildings that have recently been painted
grey or malaria shit brown, the popular
modern colour. Concrete walls and metal beams loom
bunker-like near cranes on building sites.

That night on Big Brother someone else gets evicted and Mandy has met some actors who are now unemployed. She's been casual teaching in a high school and in answer to her question What do you want to be, 27 out of 28 kids wanted to be something on TV.

The 28th wanted to be a vet but a vet on TV. Mandy then goes to check if her dyeing is done. She's going to a thing later at Trinity – Polly Jean Harvey, Rocket Science, The Verve, Ween, Jane's Addiction, Buzzcocks, Portishead, Sneaker Pimps, Public Enemy, The Cure.

What? I say. She says DJ Buddha Pussy and Fat Albert. So she needs her black clothes. Beck had been their supplier of eccy so they are at a loss. We could try it without pills, Alecto says. May I suggest vodka and lemonade? Jade says.

I'd found Beck's sister Jade via her work, a lawyer's office in town. She's in criminal law, because corporate law is too dry. She wants to murder the drunk cadet and I, a Fury, counsel forgiveness. Wash your mouth, Alecto says.

Being a goddess of punishment – yes it's easy to punish. The whip the scourge the seven-minute flaying scene in The Passion of the Christ. Clerics who loved it; theatre directors who hated it. Christ whipped through to the ribs. Then flayed. Ploughed.

Then harrowed. But then!
Then the seed is dropped in,
and barring drought, there'll be a flourishing at some future time. Though drought has been declared normal in most parts of the country.

The spiritual life so-called is never open, operating,
till you think it's possible for metaphysics to make matter
of itself. Even subliminally. Maybe especially so.
What will forgiveness do to the metabolism?
To the gut?

I remember arguments we had in the past
about pay-back, the problem of vengeance –
how endless, like the Middle East –
and then the alternatives – the concept
of forgiveness, now, can you come at that? I said.

Truly felt, they say, it's the beginning of health.
Jade paws the carpet. My sisters encourage her.
I go on anyway. To call people up, I say, who've started
vendettas against you, slimed your name, done something
to provoke your wrath – to work out how to forgive them.

Alecto rolls a cigarette and looks across at me
from under her eyebrows
See, everything has its problems, she says.
The Harpies have no advice.
They fly past in formation; a no-advice flight.

We slump in the lounges. Jade is cried-out
and wants me to hold her hand.
I would have to go to work soon
and repeat my opening line
Jade goes to the pub for vodka and lemonade

I think again of the singer who for seven days
stays near the brink
of the outlet to the upper world.
He has no food or sleep; the ferryman repulses him,
his songs unplait and fray –

then bitterly he turns and sings his complaints
to the rocks and mountains,
melting the hearts of tigers and moving
oaks from their gripping points. He arrives in Thrace
at the time of a bush races festival:

pumpkin-gutted scarecrows lean in toward him
as he sings his way uphill to the beer tent.
A gang of women selling wine by the case,
excited by the rites of Dionysis, begin to flirt –
'Come here spunky!' but he ignores them:

One throws a javelin near his feet:
See yonder our despiser! they call.
His music repels their weapons,
but they scream to cover it. Enraged by lust
and alcohol they descend on him and tear him to pieces –

yes, that's what we heard –
they threw his head and lyre into the river
and this was the strange part, his head floated
down the river still singing
through the pain of his dispersal.

Jade comes back and we get drunk and watch TV.
On Tuesday in the distribution of Beck's things
I inherit her radio and her pillow.
Would I have Beck-dreams, would I slip the ID
from her wallet and revert to Beck? On her radio later

I hear a woman singing – *Che faro senza Eurydice* –
I picture Jade at the gate of the underworld pleading for Beck
I see Alecto's replacement whipping the bad hosts,
I see Beck pleading for her life, she was young,
she was travelling the world, 'It should've been Africa next.'

*I can decide not to whip you, but I cannot
give you back your life, a woman says on the TV.
Canned laughter, then a pink close-up of the face
of a man yelling Hardly Normal! Where can ya get it?
Hardly Normal!*

Jade is drinking steadily
we don't talk any more about the car accident,
the drunk cadet, the girls forced off the bend,
or which of Jade's colleagues
might deal with the case.

We talk about love
See, my encounters with love have put me
in front of every kind of smile, Jade says.
She demonstrates a mouth-smile with
the nose turned-slightly-away at the same time.

This would be the same face which by nightfall,
she says, reaching back for her coffee cup,
has developed a taste for you, for your mouth.
I know what she means.
She isn't going to trust me yet.

A woman beside us opens out a map of Germany.
Do you know where Leipzig is? she says.
While Jade shows her, I go to the bookshelf near the Elvis records –
there's a book on Greek vases and a poetry anthology:
Things fall apart: the centre cannot hold.

Jade has to go and collect the last things from Beck's room.
Do you want me to come? I say.
No, no. She goes up the silent hall
and I move over to a niche with a computer desk
for travellers wishing to be nannies or go mustering

to write their resumes. A place of fiction, surely.
I am tempted to construct an identity but I resist.
I lay my hand on a dictionary. "Greek Furies:
also called Erinyes or Eumenides. Sent from Tartarus
to avenge wrong and punish crime. In later accounts,

three in number. The Furies are impetuous and violent.
Tisiphone, Megaera, and Alecto are tempting,
avenging or tormenting infernal spirits."
Worn out, more like; centuries of these crimes,
intended or not, have worn our blades thin.

Jade comes over and looks at me,
I take her arm and we go to the other room
near the ping-pong tables. She falls sideways –
I let her cry on me – unaccountably that afternoon
she extends my bat-wings tenderly

then we're making love and in the afterhaze
in her bed in a house in Camperdown the sun on us
I move against her skin the primitive desire for home
and she, she licks my face, as if I've been born from
this disaster to her sister.

I rest my hand on her thigh and watch spoon-shapes
in her yellow curtains puff out with sun
patterned by the shadow of a bare tree and
honey-eaters, their curved sipping beaks
at the folds of cloth.

Later I ask what case she's currently trying
and she talks about a boy in Ryde who murdered his parents
and his sister, for money it seems, or because he has
a condition, a pathology, where he has no compassion,
an extreme narcissistic disorder, she says,

but he's denying the murders, that is, he did cut the phone line, but he 'found' the bodies; Jade's fighting the case for the crown. The boy's in the paper because he made a video of himself, she says, in gaol, newly gym-buffed, singing and 'hoping to become an idol'.

Jade looks at me. And what about you? she says, when not at the hostel – where are you from, what do you do? I say I'm from Greece, and I'm an actor. I begin to tell her the story I didn't finish telling Beck: the play from the tragedy competition

In this family, everyone has a motive, I say, and again, people are murdering their close family. It's a story about a girl who is sacrificed for a head-wind – I remember it vaguely, Jade says, a series of murders, as I recall –

Yes. In one version of the story, I say, the girl's plucked away at the last moment by Artemis, and taken to a temple – in another case, she dies. The mother punishes the father for this, and other earlier crimes. Like what, Jade says.

See, when she was queen of Sparta, I say, he'd marauded in her country, killed her husband, killed the baby she was feeding, then taken her prisoner. As a prisoner-wife she bore him three kids

Then later she fell in love with his cousin who also had an old feud with her husband's family. With me so far?

Yes. I'm remembering. Is this the House of Atreus, and we're leading up to a court case?

I look at her closely. Aeschylus is still being studied and acted 2500 years later? It's true. Although it seems like last week, the fault in time we slipped through now seems like a chasm that will be hard to cross again.

I pinch myself hard on the inner arm, inwardly smiling yet frightened too – what if I get caught in this far realm, on the underside of the world, in these pixelated centuries where humans are exactly the same, both kind and radically unkind –

So anyway, I say, her husband has his ships ready to go to war, and he's waiting for the wind. He decides to order the sacrifice of their daughter – the wind comes, and they sail off to defend a trading route at Troy. Jade says, And this trading route is called "Helen"?

Very good. OK, skip ten years. When the husband comes back, his wife unrolls a purple carpet and his cousin prepares a banquet. His wife says, Darling, the slave-girls have run you a bath. He bathes. His wife finds out there's someone at the front door

from Troy, a woman called Cassandra, holding twins she bore to the husband. Cassandra would like to come in. Maybe this piece of information was the trigger to the murder – at any rate, as her husband steps from the tub, she wraps a net

around him as if it were a bathrobe, a net she'd made herself – Wait, are you hungry? Jade says. Come into the kitchen. Amid the chicken bones and a potato salad she says, All right, go on. You have a very nice mouth, I say. Go on, she says, the net, wraps it round him.

OK. So the cousin comes in and takes two swipes
with his sword, his two-edged sword,
then the wife beheads the husband with her double-headed axe
AHA! Jade says. Yes, I say.
Then, splashed with his blood and bearing his head,

she runs to the banqueting room where his followers
are being slaughtered among the mixing-bowls.
She has defended herself and her daughter –
everything else is gloss at that point. Revenge,
though sticky-fingered, is sweet.

More chicken?
Thanks. Her kids, a son and daughter, were sent away
in case they grew up wanting to avenge their father.
Which of course they do, Jade says.
Yes.

The surviving girl sends messages to her brother, who's
in another country: don't forget: come home
when you can, and avenge our father –
Years pass. Grown up now, the boy goes to Apollo's shrine
for advice, and the oracle tells him to do just that.

In the end, the boy does come back from exile, and kills
his mother. A court case develops about the matricide,
and this is where we come into it. See, up till now,
the punishment for matricide has always been death.
Lineage has been through the mother.

But this play was written at a particular point in history.
Or pre-history, Jade says.
Right. So the court is held at the Shrine of Apollo,
and Apollo himself is counsel for the defence.
Alecto is given the job of public prosecutor –

Your sister? Jade says.

Yes. So the Magistrate calls up some citizens, and we hear the case. What were the mitigating factors? 'The son was told to do it.' His father's ghost and 'the oracle of Apollo himself' told him to kill his mother.

They made the rest of their case, mostly spurious, one of Apollo's arguments being that it's less bad to kill a woman than a man. We made some good arguments, but the vote for the boy to die was fifty-fifty.

At the deadlock, Athena turned up, Athena! her garment having been kissed by many men or what, we don't know, and she in her deciding vote acquitted him. For us to lose, in effect, a case of matricide meant the balance of power was shifting.

I pour another vodka. What I didn't say to Jade was, it meant we'd be lying low for some time, centuries perhaps. I remember the fires of earlier camps. In the distance, border furies, heat furies, storm furies. The sound of the Barking Owl.

And this owl, a real owl, sounds like a woman being murdered – Athena, your bird is telling you something! But Athena, last we heard, was with her cousin Kate Kyriakou on their way back to Greece for the Olympics. At the last minute they got a Virgin flight.

It's an irony of fate, I said, that it was a foremost goddess who helped tilt that power. Or not, Jade said, maybe it was simply a pivot-point in storytelling where men must be shown to be in control, and the best way to do that is to get a woman to do the job.

Yes, I said. Let's present it to Athena this way: she's being chosen to give an award in a public ceremony and get her picture in the morning paper, her big chance, as a goddess, to be kind and compassionate.
To downplay the warlike.

Mesmerise her with theology – Jade said,
and perhaps flirt with her at the same time.
For whatever reason, I said, Athena – without consenting to matricide – did not give it a high level of punishment.
Certainly she didn't exact a death.

In that sense you have to admit she is a civilising factor, I said.
Flick your dreads as you may, Jade said.
We hounded the son, though, I said. One time we said we'd leave him alone for a while if he promised to do penance at the Temple of Artemis.

Then while we weren't looking, he was recognised by his sister, the one plucked from sacrifice at the last minute, now a temple virgin.
Her loyalty was to him, so she helped him escape – but we caught up with him later

and you know, we hounded him till he died at seventy years old.
And why did you do that? Jade said.
We were called from the abyss by Nemesis, I said.
She laughed and kissed me under my ear.

She got up to make tea. Ocker OK? I nodded.
I'm no longer proud of the amount of vengeance I've doled out, I said, over time, and multiply that by three. At the same time, when murderers and rapists go free, either you act, or you don't. In theory though, we're on holiday.

So, Jade said, The current position is forgiveness, and what, tourism? By the way, Beck's friend Kristin seems upset. I was thinking, we could take her on a holiday – maybe the dolphin boat at Narooma? Uh, I said, maybe not a boat.

Later Jade said, In my court case, the boy who killed his parents and his sister wasn't defending anyone's honour, or avenging anyone, just wanted money and fame, and seems to have no guilt. Like a recent case about a woman who killed and buried her parents under the house, then sealed up the area with silicone

and lived on their pension cheques for years, just wanted the money, didn't like her parents. Again, no feeling for them. In this case, she didn't want fame. She was caught when someone in England rang the police because there was 'never any word' from their relatives in Australia.

That night, we were outside the Glebe hostel at the ping-pong tables, drinking with the Muses. They'd arrived Thursday, a week ago, See, there are more Muses than Furies but this has only just now made sense to me.

Some of them come from Byron Bay and have changed their names. Jade's friends Thalia and Terpsychore are now Breeze and River. (I ignore this.) When Jade met the Muses they had bad colds. Thalia said, We're listening to the mucus of the spheres.

They've been away mustering, and listening to the loud low grating of forty cockatoos flying over. When they finally got back to the station, River said, someone had just arrived from Sydney, a four-day drive, and put on a string quartet, Beethoven, late.

In the silence after the cockatoos,
the breath of the Muse, Thalia said. We laughed.
Later that night when Jade went home, the Muses came
to our room. Thalia described how back near Lesbos,
she and the other Muses had arrived at the river

just as the singer's head floated by, still singing –
We heard he was dismembered, I said. She described
how the banks had swelled and responded to the singer.
We collected his limbs, she said, and buried them.
Who killed him? I said. Drunk maenads, she said.

At our cave we had seen the singer return
and this time with no argument the ferryman took him over –
for the second time, we saw his shade pass
to Tartarus where among thin ghosts
he found and held Eurydice.

Now we were sitting in the Muses' kitchen, having breakfast.
Sydney, twenty-two degrees, the smell of jasmine
and the harbour. The siren went for St Scholastica's and
Thalia suddenly said, When you take hymns
and bells out of schools – and instal sirens ...

You have hip-hop, Alecto said. Car alarms. Lyric so vastly speeded
up it's really speed-fuck-rhythm. Its energy's false, drugged,
full of self-loathing, arrogant, momentary. But it's energetic.
Yes, Thalia said. It's the primitive fuck-body
wanting attention.

Or the primitive hate-body, Alecto said.
I said, Why is the human body so glad
to be hateful? The Herald was lying on the table:
pictures of Abu Ghraib prison: a woman soldier
in fatigues gloating over a soldier she holds on a leash,

naked. Prolonged shackling, sexual humiliation
all torture in all wars –
now digital cameras make it harder to cover up –
the soldier is showing thumbs up and grinning
while naked Muslims flinch from army dogs.

In the Westminster System, justice
has moved on from vengeance, Alecto says, but war's business.
I turn the page: a blurry digital photo of Saddam Hussein
who today has been returned to Iraq for justice.
Did you read this? I said to Jade.

Saddam Hussein was gang-raped at the age of ten.
He's writing his fifth novel,
a romance in which a beautiful married woman
falls in love with the king.
On her way home from making love with the king,

she is raped by her husband, who, in the political allegory
underlying the romance, is America.
In another Hussein novel, a beautiful Kurdish girl
falls in love with an Iraqi soldier.
The Herald doesn't tell us the outcome of that one.

At Backpacker Central the next night
Jade has brought the book on Greek vases from the
TV room. See this? she says, I think I've found your story.
Yes, here was the scene after the father came back
from the war.

See on this vase here, I said,
the woman with the axe is the queen.
She'd been making love with her husband's cousin
(the bearded man). They're killing her husband
through the bathrobe she's helping him put on.

And the son, the man leaning forward in the helmet here,
first kills his father's cousin, then he kills his mother
In the story on the vase, time's collapsed. In one curve
of the vase, ten years go by, the stories blur into each other –
there's no answer to abduction or rape or the sacrifice of a child.

While they are hacking at each other, I see
they are all beautifully dressed.
A picture about multiple murders,
full of the light-filled gathers
of their embroidered muslin robes.

See the papers? Jade said the next afternoon –
still full of Lynndie England and Abu Ghraib –
They're using 'wicked' and 'evil' –
I regret her ignorance. I regret she is so
brainwashed. I regret her innocence.

Would you sentence her? I said. And her superiors
and her colleagues? You would have to sentence them
Jade said. To counteract bad spin. Harm minimisation.
But the sentence really is on the culture,
same as ever. She lifted her hands to the sun

coming in though the hostel window
and turned the paper to the crossword.
Rehabilitation, she said. Nine letters.
In a smaller culture, I said, Lynndie England and her mates
could go to those Iraqi families and apologise.

I said, I come from a place where I found that vengeance,
while satisfying, won't heal – Jade stared at the photos
in the paper and said, Justice would be blind
if she weren't surrounded
by the glints of money.

We went out to the foyer to meet the others.
Before they come, Jade said, I want to ask:
I'm going up north next week for a holiday,
would you come with me?
I'll try and get a week off work, I said.

Kristin and Mandy were still numb about Beck,
and it seemed a hundred backpackers coming through
had photos of Beck, Beck at Byron, Beck at Bateman's Bay.
The noticeboard job ads area
had been taken over by Beck's shining dead smile.

The Sirens arrive from Brisbane on Thursday
and dedicate their concert to Beck: they sing
not only to seduce but to smoothe hate,
to calm the fever of bad memories – then, then,
to tempt us away from the sea-lane denoting home –

o bring us to an island where we eat fresh figs from
a thirty-year-old tree brought out (as a seedling
in her handbag) from Croatia by Stoja, a friend of Thalia's
in Haberfield. This tree, in the middle of her garden, is full
of ripening figs from early March

The fig ceremony, the fine warm weather before
we go to winter. The burst fig in the mouth.
The laughing face in this digital photo of the Sirens.
One of them, I don't know her name, got a Canon
in the duty-free store at Mascot.

A week later in the car going north with Kristin and Jade
on a bench seat, our bodies pressed together
from shoulder to ankle –
Just outside Guyra at the Motel Isis
we stop for a few days

Kristin leaves me alone with Jade.
Wrapped in second-rate motel reality –
drambuie and videos in the afternoon –
sudden violent fucking, biting,
the kind of fucking you do after days of fucking

the muscles loosened by alcohol
desire tightened, the rooms available neon
and the reflection of chrome on the cars
outside the hot sun
air that at dusk smells sweet

Jade drives me out of town, past her old place.
Waves her hand out the window:
I lived in behind that hill, she says, then, speeding away,
I smell the wind just before we're stopped
by the police: twenty over the limit.

Back in the Isis café, we read leaflets about
birdlife in the swampland opposite
where the gazebo in the lagoon beckons in sunset light.
I eat her toast, and pick up
the Sydney paper from two days ago:

an article about an Australian doctor
who has discovered
that the clitoris is in fact
about seven inches long, extending
inside the muscle wall

This explains quite a lot, I said
passing the paper over to the others
Not enough studies were done
on women's anatomy, the doctor said,
or what existed was inaccurate

If medical textbooks showed the look of the vulva
at different points of excitation, as a series, it would
make more sense. Then if they could show the soul trying
to re-establish itself, its degrees of transformation
becoming a goat –

realising the nonsense of that –
becoming a human, swilling and rutting as if
that was all humans were good for,
or creating long oral histories
about swillers and rutters

The Circe the swine the swillers of wine,
the hill fort, the pleasure dome
the anatomy of all geography
the fact that travelling is so often about sex
breaking rules, being somebody else.

The body of the lover, nibbled at,
made noble, adored, deified –
sometimes I thought
it contracts to a shudder that clenches
the whole understanding.

After, the mind roams in deep space
so the identity is stretched to a no-point.
It's a mild autumn night – I turn on Beck's radio –
another solar system has been discovered:
it has seventeen planets so far

We have realised planet formation is common.
The motel owner knocks and puts her head in the door.
Girls? Someone here called Tisiphone?
I lift my hand. The message is, she says,
Your sisters have gone home for a while.

The radio goes on: information has come back
from a space capsule launched in the 1970's
and which is now eleven billion k's away.
However it would have to travel for another 300,000 years
to actually get to Epsilon Andromedae.

Epsilon Andromedae is almost certainly not
the only other solar system in the galaxy.
I cut a pomegranate and put the seeds
on Jade's tongue. Her laptop looks like a lolly.
I begin to kiss a runnel in her left ear.

The desire for solitude watches the desire for sex
break through, have its way –
solitude rebuilds the fort wall
even as the vaginal wall subsides to its normal shape
and we breathe out

Solitude tries to extricate itself
from creation and just be quiet –
I walk around the town – bat-winged, god-eyed.
Sulphur-crested & currawongs
are eating all the fruit.

Without thinking about it
I become a bird and eat you
Jesus, the fruit of Mary's womb –
I try your succulent body
for my bread and wine.

On the last night of my holiday
we play Twenty-One for hours. The girls ask
where I'm going, and I hold up the joker:
a kookaburra with a snake in its mouth.
I'll be back, I say.

Jade presses me. I say I may I have to go into hell
for a while, and she backs off, decides
I'm making reference to something private.
She looks at my mouth again
I have that feeling of the branches

of my nerve ends blossoming.
Careless, falling in love with a mortal,
the kind of thing you do on holiday,
or as a form of respite from your life
your miserable punishing life –

For days, I walk. There's a Drought Summit
in Parkes, but I don't go there.
I board a Greyhound south and head
for the Bush Races Festival at Gundaroo
and wander in the dust past the stalls –

the whip-maker, the man who makes harps,
the gem merchant with his displays of smoky quartz.
At the dog-jump we laugh at the plucky
Jack Russells leaping
onto the back of the ute.

I miss my sisters. If I go to hell
and stay there I'll never live with Jade,
I'll live in a place whose reigning ethic
is punishment, and that place is hell,
circular as its own argument

if I stay above ground and lose my solitude
in gaining a wife, will I not risk
losing her to something as ridiculous as
snakebite on her wedding day?
Keep your shoes on, girls.

*

I am running, running for the darkness
of the cave mouth at the southern entry
to my part of the underworld.
So travelled, these halls,
that the tunnel walls glitter with jewels

bought from the gem merchant with his
Mastercard machine and his talk of Cunnamulla,
his rose quartz and opal from Lightning Ridge.
The walls' intermittent crannies gleam
with white cloth and shot glasses of red wine

I bow before the shrine of Kristin and Odette,
their broken things, their lifelong sense
of having been used. My gums contract
around my teeth, I hear a gardener nearby
with an electric pruning saw.

Gratefully I stop and kneel at the base
of the column holding the shrine things
of the girls and boys who not only
survived repeated rape but survived
being punished for mentioning it,

and who found their exultation anyway
and during their visits here, deposited wrapped objects,
left graffiti, candle-holders, violets, rabbits paws,
willow whips, prayerbooks, pocket money,
junk quartz, fool's gold, written prayers

and here, an unknown child has made
from her high terror a plea
to unspeaking deities
feathers and stones on shards of god-mirror,
her display a bright-mooded thing

and here a list of people who have helped her,
hand-printed, their names rolled up into a small
scroll for holding inside her hand
yes the self-inventions of children
rival the great symphonies

in their return to a theme
and their variations on it,
their mere suggestions of it,
their outbreaks of pain their leaps
into ek-stasis at dance parties

the hours of trance energised by chemicals
designed for the purpose, and by hundreds
of contiguous but unknown colleagues
who also got a koala stamp on their arm
and went gladly into another world.

Remnant clothing tossed aside
from three-day outdoor events
lies enticingly or forlornly on the shrines which
the deeper I go towards my decision
the brighter and more glowing are the artefacts

the paleontological ones those ancient Venuses
severe and simple, a phallus made of breast and belly
and as the art gets better the screams get louder,
the laughing too, of parties in side-realms,
Welcome to the Underworld.

Then the silence behind the papery scraping
of the reeds and the quiet track through the swamp
towards the Cocytus. I come to the cave mouth
where my sisters lie sleeping off the
communications of the twenty-first century

their bare arms dangling toward the ground.
It's solstice night. Soon they wake to the dog, and
Alecto says, The hordes of Dionysus are here,
worshipping the vine, hear them? I lift my ear
and cat calls bounce back from granite boulders in the bush

and from the orchard a peacock responds, with one
loud cry, as if the revellers have called direct to him.
Later that night, wresting
myself from the primitive balance of sleep
I dress with the others

and we walk towards the drumming:
there's a mid-winter feast at the entry
to the main cave – a maenad spins
to the strict beat of the taut hide,
the squeal of the wailing pipe.

The Sibyl hands me a wine, takes my coat,
flute-notes rise from the swamp
volcanic lakes are on the move
and in the glitter of the scales
I see the maenad's writhing crown.

The Kindly Ones

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Five Islands Press

ISBN: 1 74128 093 1



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