PLACES AND SPACES OF THE WRITING LIFE

DIANE MARY FAHEY

B.A., M.A. and DIP. ED. (University of Melbourne)

THESIS SUBMITTED IN TOTAL FULFILMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

SCHOOL OF COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA STUDIES
UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN SYDNEY, NEPEAN
MAY 1999
PLEASE NOTE

The greatest amount of care has been taken while scanning this thesis,

and the best possible result has been obtained.
PLACES AND SPACES OF THE WRITING LIFE

An Enquiry into the Relationship Between Place and Space, and the Writing Life, with Reference to Journals and Poetry Written by Diane Fahey, and to Works by Eavan Boland, Annie Dillard, and May Sarton.

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I would like to express my thanks to Dr Anna Gibbs for her work as a supervisor of this thesis. I would also like to thank Dr Peter Kirkpatrick for his comments on a section of this thesis.

I HAVE NOT SUBMITTED THIS WORK IN PART OR WHOLE TO ANY OTHER INSTITUTION FOR ANY OTHER DEGREE.

Signed

Name DIANE MARY FAHEY

Date 21.5.1999
This is the hour I love: the in-between
neither here-nor-there hour of evening.
The air is tea-coloured in the garden.
The briar rose is spilled crepe de Chine.

This is the time I do my work best,
going up the stairs in two minds,
in two worlds, carrying cloth or glass,
leaving something behind, bringing
something with me I should have left behind.

The hour of change, of metamorphosis,
of shape-shifting instabilities.
My time of sixth sense and second sight...

- from ‘The Women’ by Eavan Boland

The early summer, its covenant, its grace,
is everywhere: even shadows have leaves.

Somewhere you are writing or have written in
a room you came to as I come to this

room with honeyed corners, the interior sunless,
the windows shut but clear so I can see

the bay windbreak, the laburnum hang fire, feel
the ache of things ending in the jasmine darkening early.

- from ‘The Rooms of Other Women Poets’ by Eavan Boland
SYNOPSIS

Place and space in the writing lives of four women writers

In the present study I investigate and characterise the ways place and space occur in Eavan Boland’s Object Lessons, May Sarton’s Journal of a Solitude, Annie Dillard’s The Writing Life, and in a selection of journal material accompanied by poetry which serves as a form of documentation of my own life as a writer over several years.

My purpose in doing so is to gain insight into the creative processes of these writers and the nature of their engagement with the ongoing venture that Annie Dillard has termed ‘the writing life’. This phrase, while evoking a sense of duration and commitment as regards writing, also invites questions about how such a vocation takes shape within the life of a writer. On both these counts it carries an autobiographical dimension, and so inevitably acts as a particular focus of self-configuration. The phrase also points up the fact that the writer’s life and work together have a public aspect, existing - with whatever degrees of visibility or invisibility - in social, cultural and political space, thus raising questions of power and placement.

Both the terms ‘place’ and ‘space’ come trailing, comet-like, a brilliant multiplicity of meanings. Each may describe inner experiences - we speak of places, and spaces, in or of the mind and imagination - as well as pertaining to the realm of physical perception. Each is also a current focus of critique and contestation in various disciplines - for example, those of anthropology and geography - and by feminist thinkers. My introduction will refer to some of these revisionings, to which I’ll relate my own approach in pursuing this enquiry. In the body of this work, I will myself be in a process of exploration and review of the terms ‘space’ and ‘place’, and will summarise my findings in the conclusion.
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INTRODUCTION

1. INTRODUCTION TO THE THEMES OF THIS WORK

This study enquires into the writing lives of three women writers as revealed in three specific texts - Eavan Boland’s *Object Lessons*, May Sarton’s *Journal of a Solitude*, Annie Dillard’s *The Writing Life* - and in addition, the present writer’s account of the writing life, in order to gain insight into their ways of working with creative processes, and into how their pursuit of the writing life is variously supported, shaped by, or in tension with, the physical settings in which they work as writers.

In focusing upon the relationship with space and place in each writer’s work, I am partly taking inspiration from the powerful and resonant image of ‘a room of one’s own’ provided by Virginia Woolf,¹ and used by her to explore the interrelated issues of creative freedom, and personal and financial independence. Dillard’s phrase ‘the writing life’ provides a complementary emphasis in its sense of expansiveness, and of an unfolding through time.

The rooms of the women writers under discussion fulfil a number of purposes and symbolise many aspects of their lives as writers. They are variously - for each different writer, or the same writer at different times - images of the psyche, the inner life, creative processes. They are capsules, incubators, havens and bastions, places of torment, prisons. They can become symbiotic extensions of self, or of body. Their walls can be a membrane between self and other, between one part of daily life experience and another part. These rooms can help to define a role. They can be a matrix where the relationship between inner and outer worlds is forged, renegotiated or temporarily suspended. They are images of particular phases or moments in a life, or the whole curve of a life. And finally, yes, they are a trope for the writing life itself.

My attention has also been claimed by the larger environments and settings which are, when doors are opened, the encompassing contexts of these ‘rooms of one’s own’ - whether they are another kind of refuge, a support, or in turn an escape from the writing place itself. In the works in question these may be house and garden, seashore and wilderness, suburb or town, a university library. All are revealing and important counterbalances to, or extensions of, the room where the writing life has its centre. These settings and the way they are experienced and depicted by the women writers also have significant import for an understanding of these writers’ conscious and unconscious shaping of their writing lives in place and space.
2. REFLECTIONS ON PLACE, SPACE, AND TIME

Like Love or Imagination, place makes a poor abstraction. Separated from its materialisations, it has little meaning.\(^2\)

... place is never so powerful as when it is suffered in silence.\(^3\)

... the sense of place, and of the specificities of place, seems, however tense and darkened, barely diminished in the modern world.\(^4\)

In approaching the task of providing some landmarks as regards current debates about and discussions of the terms ‘place’ and ‘space’ - with, as might be expected, ‘time’ often an interrelated term, or a conceptual sparring partner - I am necessarily circumspect, because of the weight of historically accumulated complexity, not to mention intimations of the ineffable, attaching to these three words. The commentaries of the two thinkers whose work I cite below stand at interesting and provocative angles to each other. I will offer an overview of an essay by each of them, then add my own reflections.

In her *Space, Place and Gender*,\(^5\) the geographer Doreen Massey investigates the way that space has tended to be associated with stasis for many thinkers, while various others associate it with chaos. ‘Politics and Space/Time’, (chapter 11), refers to Ernesto Laclau’s *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*\(^6\) in which he opposes time, seen as the realm of dislocation and therefore of change, to space, which lacks real dynamism because it is, as Massey summarises, a ‘closed and self-determining system’(252). This leads Laclau to the claim, quoted by Massey(250), that ‘Politics and space are antinomic terms. Politics exist only insofar as the spatial eludes us.’\(^7\)

By contrast, Fredric Jameson,\(^8\) responding to what he sees as the increased importance of spatiality in postmodern times, speaks of (in Massey’s formulation) ‘an unnerving multiplicity: space is chaotic depthlessness.’(251) As Massey summarises his position, Jameson, ‘As do a whole line of authors before him’, relates transcendence to the temporal realm, and immanence to the spatial.(257) Subsequently, she alludes to the feminist critique of the distinction between transcendence (associated with ‘real change’ and linked with male actions) and immanence (associated with cyclicity in nature and linked with women).(260)

These polarisations lead Massey to place them with other dichotomies which attend the construction of gender. After noting how ‘Over and over again, time is defined by such things as change, movement, history, dynamism; while space, rather lamely by comparison, is simply the absence of these things’(256-7), she elaborates:

There is a whole set of dualisms whose terms are commonly aligned with time and space. With time are aligned History, Progress, Civilisation, Science, Politics and Reason, portentous things with gravitas and capital letters. With space on the other hand are aligned the other poles of these concepts: stasis, (‘simple’) reproduction, nostalgia, emotion, aesthetics, the body.(257)

Massey discusses the way these dualisms which ‘so easily map on to each other also map on to
the constructed dichotomy between female and male. ... space, in this system of interconnected
dualisms, is coded female.'(258) Thus her argument that 'the dichotomous characterisation of
time and space ... may both reflect and be part of the constitution of ... the masculinity and
femininity of the sexist society in which we live.'(259)
Massey now turns her attention to physics, noting that Laclau’s viewpoint of space
accords with the viewpoint of Newtonian physics in which 'both space and time exist in their
own right, as do objects. Space is a passive arena, the setting for objects and their
interaction.'(260-1) In twentieth-century physics, by contrast,

the identity of things is constituted through interactions. In modern physics, while velocity,
acceleration, and so forth are defined, the basic ontological categories, such as space and time, are
not.(261)

Massey cites a summary of Einstein’s theory wherein ‘space and time are not to be thought of
as separate entities existing in their own right - a three dimensional space and a four-
dimensional time. Rather, the underlying reality consists of a four-dimensional space-time.'
What follows from this is not a collapse of all differences between the spatial and temporal
realms, but rather the point that - in Massey’s words again - ‘space and time are inextricably
interwoven.'(261) Further, ‘definitions of both space and time must be constructed as the result
of interrelations. ... Space must not be consigned to the position of being conceptualised in
terms of absence or lack. It also means ... that there is no absolute dimension, space.'(261)

Turning to the social realm, Massey refers to recent developments in the discipline of
geography whereby ‘to the aphorisms of the 1970s - that space is socially constructed - was
added in the 1980s the other side of the coin: that the social is spatially constructed too.'(254)
She writes of ‘the simultaneous coexistence of social interrelations and interactions at all spatial
scales, from the most local level to the most global.'(264) Insofar as it is conceptualised ‘as
created out of social relations, space is by its very nature full of power and symbolism, a
complex web of relations of domination and subordination, of solidarity and co-
operation.'(265) This leads Massey to her conclusion that ‘the spatial is integral to the
production of history, and thus to the possibility of politics, just as the temporal is to
geography.'(269)

Writing in *Senses of Place*,10 a collection of essays by anthropologists, Edward S.
Casey has a very different agenda from Doreen Massey, as signalled by the title of his essay:
‘How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time’. His opening paragraph
alludes to the widely held understanding, which he will contest, that ‘human experience begins
with space and time and then proceeds to place. Are not space and time universal in scope, and
place merely particular? Can place do anything but specify what is already the case in space and
time?’(13) Casey goes on to quote two recent books in his discipline which ‘espouse the view
that place is something posterior to space, even made from space. By “space” is meant a
neutral, pre-given medium, a tabula rasa onto which the particularities of culture and history
come to be inscribed, with place as the presumed result.’(14)

For Casey, then, it is not the relationship between concepts of space and time which is
problematic but that between concepts of space and place. He proceeds to develop a rich and
complex argument regarding place, with his starting point and final conclusion being the Archytan Axiom that 'Place is the first of all things' (16). While Archytas and Aristo proclaimed that place is prior to space, a conviction embraced anew by Bachelard and Heidegger in this century, the insistence by Kant that 'General knowledge must always prece local knowledge' favours the foregrounding of space, which Casey sees as dominant in Western intellectual tradition. He comments: 'Space, being the most pervasive of cosm media, is considered that about which we must have general knowledge, whereas we posse merely local knowledge about place.' (16)

Casey's phenomenological approach, with its emphasis upon perception as primar leads him to challenge the view of space mentioned above by asking, 'But what if things are t other way round? What if the very idea of space is posterior to that of place, perhaps ev derived from it? What if local knowledge ... precedes knowledge of space? Could place be general and "space" particular?' (16-17) He comments,

There is no knowing or sensing a place except by being in that place, and to be in a place is to be in a position to perceive it. Knowledge of place is not, then, subsequent to perception ... but is an ingredient in perception itself. (18)

Further,

Given that we are never without perception ... we are never without emplaced experiences. It signifies as well that we are not only in places but of them. (19)

Thus,

... place, rather than being a mere product or portion of space, is as primary as the perception that gives access to it. (19)

Casey proceeds to focus on bodily experience of place, and speaks of a mutual integration occurring between what he calls 'the lived body' and place on various physical levels, and through motion. He differentiates the latter into three categories - staying in place, moving within a place, and moving between places.

At the very least, we can agree that the living-moving body is essential to the process of emplacement: lived bodies belong to places and help to constitute them. ... By the same token, however, places belong to lived bodies and depend on them. ... Bodies and places are connatural terms. They interanimate each other. (24)

Casey now considers the way places 'gather': 'Minimally, places gather things in their midst where "things" connote various animate and inanimate entities. Places also gather experiences and histories, even languages and thoughts.' (24)

Casey goes on to talk of place as 'more an event than a thing' to be assimilated to know categories. ... Stripping away cultural or linguistic accretions, we shall never find a pure place lying underneath - and still less an even purer Space or Time.' (26-7) He then argues his claim for place to be considered a universal, while speaking of a particular kind of universality: '
once concrete, relational, lateral, and regional.'(31) He ultimately arrives at the assertion that

... space and time come together in place. Indeed, they arise from the experience of place itself. ... Rather than being separate but equal cosmic parameters ... space and time are themselves coordinated and co-specified in the common matrix provided by place. We realize the essential posteriority of space and time whenever we catch ourselves apprehending spatial relations or temporal occurrences in a particular place. ... we experience space and time together in place - in the locus of a continuous 'space-time' that is proclaimed alike in twentieth century physics, philosophy, and anthropology. (36-7)

While this seems an appropriate point at which to create a link between the work of the two authors, it is clear that the relationship between their essays presents something of a conundrum. Doreen Massey argues against a view of space in which it is polarised in relation to time, linked with stasis or chaos, and in the process made part of a complex in which the feminine is devalued. Edward S. Casey is concerned with a re-evaluation of place, claiming it as prior to, not posterior to, time and space. The dramatic foregrounding of time and space by modern thinkers such as Newton, Descartes and Galileo, he says, left 'little space for place as a valid concept in its own right.'(20) So, while Massey's analysis problematises then reclaims the concept of space, Casey's problematises and reclaims the concept of place. Where they most critically differ is in the way they read the value given to space, and in the value they each give to it.

It may be that this difference has something to do with the fact that Casey is taking a long view of the Western intellectual tradition, while Massey focuses upon two contemporary writers. But the situation is complex because Casey makes the claim that 'place can be considered premodern or postmodern'(20) and, as above, centres his critique on the 'moderns' and their heightened focus upon space and time; yet Massey finds that Laclau's circumscribed concept of space derives from the physics of Newton. Her reference to Jameson's negative response to aspects of the postmodern (in his phrase, 'the disorientation of saturated space', cited by Massey(249)) raises the question for me of how the concept of place is faring in the contemporary world. I am certainly surprised by Casey's locating it in the postmodern; (as above, he also locates it in the premodern). There is surely a need for a much more developed and nuanced discussion than this of attitudes to the concept of place over such vast reaches of time.

Despite Casey's vibrant and persuasive account of the power of place, his account of such a protean and encompassing concept as space suffers from being put in competition with place. The question of which comes first seems to me not a viable or desirable one: it is inappropriately reductive, and in the end, a distraction from the, in both conceptual and perceptual terms, ultimately ungraspable interrelationship of space and place, as of space and time.

Massey's perceptions as a feminist alert her to other, negative levels of reaction to the concept of space in culture; these are not surprising given the pervasiveness of the term. In my reading of this issue, space may be an arena of outer exploration and conquest, and as such carries positive weight in patriarchal society. But it can also be associated with inner space, constellating feeling, spirituality, and nonrational reaches of mind, which may be seen as
uncongenial to patriarchal goals and shifted to, or perceived as located in, the feminine. The fact of the female body containing the potentially life-creating space of the womb can be readily seen as underlying the identification (whether conscious or unconscious) of woman with inner space in a broader sense. This identification may also be seen as underlying the frequently ambivalent or hostile reactions within patriarchal culture to women’s creativity in particular, and indeed to artistic creativity generally.

Turning to my own engagement in this present work with place and space (and time), I find it interesting that Virginia Woolf’s image of ‘a room of one’s own’ permits of concurrent associations with the specifically female body image, with personal autonomy and creativity, and with a space located in a cultural and political milieu with which it is linked while yet at a remove from. Such a room is both matrix and containing structure; it represents a fusion of physical space and place with each other, and with time; and it designates a place where interactions between, on the one hand, the inner spaces of mind and imagination, and on the other, the impingements, denials and constructive possibilities of power in the external world, are given form and shape.

There is a duality to place. There is the place which existed before you and will continue after you are gone. ... there is the place that happened and the place that happens to you. ... there are moments - in work, in perception, in experience - when [the latter] are hard to disentangle from each other. ... at such times, the inward adventure can become so enmeshed with the outward continuum that we live, not in one or the other, but at the point of intersection.11

In this passage from *Object Lessons*, Eavan Boland speaks of place as instinct with time, and also as an event. She captures that sense of a ‘point of intersection’ in time and place in the poem ‘The Women’ from which I have quoted at the beginning of this work. There she presents herself as poised between two places in her home, en route to her study. She is in a transitional space in another sense - ‘in two minds, / in two worlds’ - about to enter an interiority that will enable her to access the ‘shape-shifting instabilities’ of other modes of perception. In these lines, the domestic and the uncanny are held in tension as a subtly earthed awareness of physical milieu slowly blends with a state of prescience.

In the accompanying lines from ‘The Rooms of Other Women Poets’, there is a different kind of poise. It is a poise between creative solitude and connectedness - connectedness both to other women poets and to the outside world with its interplay of the natural and the humanly constructed: the windbreak of Dublin Bay, the laburnum and jasmine of her garden. As in ‘The Women’, an atmosphere of delicate sensuosity and heightened apprehension is established, with the womb-like description of her study with its ‘honeyed corners, the interior sunless’ indicating that the resources of creativity are to be accessed within. This is re-inforced and complemented by the ‘shut but clear’ windows - there is a process of sealing off, even while the purpose of this setting, and the act of writing, is to look outwards as well as inwards.

In both these excerpts from poems there is an intimate encounter with both the known
and the unknown - each evoked through the imagery of place. While various points I have made about them connect with some of Edward S. Casey’s comments on the experience of place, I diverge from him in that I believe it is important to stress the unknowability of place. His movement from: ‘... lived bodies belong to places and help to constitute them’ - with which I agree - to its apparent corollary: ‘... places belong to bodies and depend on them’(24) denies the reality of places as existing independently of human perception of them. Even the most humanised places share with those most remote and resistant to human beings, the fact that they cannot be fully known.

In my view there is always an otherness to place which positions the human perceiver between knowing and unknowing. This would seem to me most poignantly true where a mutual permeation of the perceiver with the perceived place has occurred. For places have the capacity to store the past - in Casey’s words, ‘Places also gather experiences and histories, even languages and thoughts.’(24) Thus they can hold a further kind of otherness: that of one’s own lived past.

I attempted to explore this process of gathering, and the otherness that exists in spite of this gathering - and also because of it - in my poem ‘Rooms’, (presented in full in chapter 1 of Section Two). It begins with an encounter with unknowability which transforms into an image of room, body and cosmos as infolded within each other:

Could one surprise a room,
fling open a door to discover
some unknown mood of silence,
or, in the air, a busyness
one could not quite read -

memories stored in brick flesh
seeping back into space
to be sparked by sunlight
into a sky of milling planets?

Thus ‘Rooms’ develops the idea of a room as a repository of not only memory, but of the life of the body itself. Its conclusion evokes a disquieting apprehension of stored experiences of body and consciousness being available, at particular moments of attuned perception, to be contemplated, and in a sense reclaimed.

the atmosphere of a room
re-entering your skin, your blood -

life recognising itself amidst
dissolution; as foundations stir;
when diamond-blades of light
pierce through and through
what one thought void, done with.
I have used my discussion of the above poems to signal some key points in my analysis of the treatment of place and space in the writing to be considered by Boland, Dillard, Sarton, and myself. In very different ways, each of these writers positions herself in a place of, as it were, consolidated solitude so as to pursue her writing life: a scenario in which that life can proceed with a continuous - though constantly challenged and changing - balance between apartness and connectedness. In these 'rooms of their own' they are liminal in a physical and social sense, yet may be said to be centred with respect to their work as writers partly by virtue of that liminality.

For this reason it is notable that while the writers under discussion find refuge and freedom in their chosen rooms and writing places, each of them consciously courts forms of contingency. By this I mean that in important ways each chooses to enter a further, testing vulnerability - so accentuating her positioning between placement and displacement, as also between empowerment and disempowerment.

Thus Annie Dillard's pursuit of the via negativa of Christian mysticism as part of the spiritual discipline of her writing life. May Sarton also consciously embraces ordeal as part of a search for self-truth which she sees as integral to her work as a writer, choosing to live in an isolation which will allow her to confront difficult memories and emotions. Eavan Boland leaves the assured creative space of her home to journey physically as well as psychically to places where she will contemplate some of the abyssal losses of Irish history. My own account of the writing life will be, in part, a story of serial displacement, invisibly bookended by a final leaving of my home in South Australia in 1992, and a decision, seven years later, to settle in another home of my own. This process will by turns stimulate and problematise my ability to access creative processes.

It is as though each writer, being already sensitised to the heightened perception made possible by liminal states and liminal positions of various kinds, seeks out the conditions of such perception. But more fundamentally, each writer places herself in threshold situations so as to shift the boundaries which define what is liminal. This has implications not only with regard to any visionary quality their writing may attain or aspire to, but also for the directly political dimension of their writing. In particular, as I will demonstrate in Section One, Boland and Sarton have effectively brought a feminist perspective to their writing, claiming cultural space for their own writings and those of other women.

When Doreen Massey, whose primary concern is with space in regard to social relations, speaks of such space as 'by its very nature full of power and symbolism, a complex web of relations of domination and subordination, of solidarity and co-operation.'(265) she conjures a world at some distance from these isolated women writers in their rooms - but not at a total remove from it. As I have suggested, such rooms may be temporarily sealed off from, but are never outside, the social and political process - sometimes they are sites of direct engagement with it.

I would suggest further that some of the most inner-directed work of these women writers is, on another level, important in contributing to 'the power and symbolism' of space that Massey speaks about. One of the defining moments of Eavan Boland's life as a writer is given in the following passage from Object Lessons: a moment of rich human empowerment in which the writer moves into an inner landscape then out again to a numinous sense of her
surroundings. Here, place and self are apprehended as mutually transforming.

But at night the outer landscape yielded to an inner one. Familiar items blanked out and were replaced by others. The streetlamp stood in for the whitebeam tree; the planet of rain around it displaced the rowanberries. And in those darkneses I lay down as conscious of love for my children as I would have been of a sudden and chartless fever. And conscious also of how that love spread out from the bed on which I lay, and out further to the poplar trees, to the orange plastic mug at one side of the hedge, to the glint of a bicycle wheel and the half-moon.

I understood then ... the difference between love and a love which is visionary. ... As I lay there, my mind went seeking well beyond the down-to-earth and practical meaning of daily love. The apple trees. The rustle and click of shadow leaves. The mysterious cycle of plants. In those darkneses it could seem to me that this was not a world in which my love happened but one whose phenomena occurred because of it.

Poetry is full of such moments of transformation. ¹²

Throughout the above discussion I have used the terms 'place' and 'space' interchangeably at times, while at others I have made distinctions between them. 'Place' certainly lends itself to the description of embodied presence more readily than 'space', while 'space' seems more naturally to accommodate notions of interiority. However, both terms are used in everyday speech to refer the mundane and the practical, just as both may be connected with the sacred. It follows that a measure of fluidity is possible and desirable with regard to such fundamental terms. It seems to me that the writers whose work I'll be discussing offer a surprisingly various range of relationships to space and place, with time an elusive third partner. And in their most powerfully resonant depictions of place, Sarton, Dillard and Boland draw on a heightened apprehension which integrates all three.

I have discussed how the image of 'a room of one's own' acts as an imaginative and political focal point in relation to the creativity of women. It suggests the possibility of a life centred on creativity - a creativity always in process yet with a principle of integration at work within it. This image also holds the promise - indeed the certainty - of difficult journeys into bodily and psychic places and spaces involving experiences of both stasis and chaos, along with experiences of productivity and creative fulfilment.

The experience of emplacement such rooms offer is at once spiritual and sensuous, boundied and open. As sites of the writing life, they act as ground and context - and at times, even a muse: A particular atmosphere and quality of light, a sense-world of creaking floors and distant traffic, dahlias in a green vase, a carpet of scattered papers...
3. OVERVIEW OF THE DESIGN OF THIS WORK

The design of this study is as follows.

Section One contains three sections which offer commentaries on the works by Boland, Sarton and Dillard, focusing in particular on a number of passages evoking settings. While my consideration of these works will centre on my two themes of creativity, and the spaces and places of the writing life, I will give as clear and comprehensive a picture as I can, within the economy of my present undertaking, of their ventures as a whole in constructing the works in question. These studies will be prefaced by an introduction, and followed by a commentary which draws out the implications of my analyses while also considering how the reception of each writer’s work affects her sense of her role.

I will then present, in Section Two, five chapters which each contain a selection of material from my own journals, accompanied by poems written during that particular phase of the journal. An introductory section in each chapter will do three things: establish context and offer the reader relevant facts and background information with respect to the journal material; give a commentary on some of the accompanying poems; and point up links between the journal material, poems, and the places in which they were written.

The journal selections have been edited from extensive journals kept between 1992 and 1996 for the purpose of recording the rhythms, conflicts and turning points of my own life as a writer. While I attempted to be as inclusive as possible when writing the journals, recording personal responses to a wide range of people and events, and tracking key developments in my own life and that of my family and friends, my venture here requires a specific focus on my own experience of myself as a woman writer, and the settings in which I pursued my life as a writer.

A sixth chapter in Section Two contains a large selection of poems preceded by an essay which offers some general perspectives on my poetry, particularly with respect to my work on fairy tales, then gives a commentary on individual poems.

In each of the six chapters, I have grouped my poems beneath the titles of the published collections in which they have appeared in the course of the seven years I’ve been engaged on this present study - these collections are: *The Body in Time* (1995) and *Listening to a Far Sea* (1998) - or of collections now in progress. The latter are: *The Sixth Swan* (a collection of poems based on Grimms’ fairy tales), *In Praise of Seahorses* (a collection based on sea creatures and the ocean environment), and a general volume of poems called *The Wing Collection*.

Following Section Two, my Conclusion will present a summing up of my investigation into the places and spaces of the writing life as lived by the four women writers in question. I will end by offering reflections on what general understandings I draw from my own journey as a poet and a writer of this study.

The Notes section is followed by six appendices and the Bibliography. The latter contains a general bibliography, followed by one which lists the books referred to in my journals. In the Appendices section, the first appendix contains a photograph of May Sarton.
The next four present visual material relating to my journals and poetry. In these I have included photographs and postcards of particular places, photographs of people, some photocopied excerpts from my original journals and a notebook I kept at Hawthornden Writers’ Centre, as well as some early drafts of poems. Some of the illustrations and visual material which influenced my writing - particularly my work on Grimms’ fairy tales - is also included.

The sixth appendix contains an article written by myself while I was writer in residence at the University of Adelaide in 1997. I include this because of its treatment of setting, its comments on creative writing, and partly to compensate for the lack of journal material in chapter 6 of Section Two. Some of the photographs included in Appendix 5 are also intended to fill the gap in personal record in that chapter. While I make a few direct references to some of the appendices in my text, I have mostly left it for the reader to consult the appendix for the relevant chapter, because of the large volume of material presented.

Throughout this work I have retained the different spelling conventions contained in various quotations, while taking the liberty of applying the convention of single quotation marks throughout, with double quotations for a quote within a quote. Within the chapters of Section Two, presenting my journals, commentaries and poetry, I have chosen not to footnote the many references to books, but have wherever possible included the details of these books in the second section of the Bibliography.
SECTION ONE
WITH ROOMS OF THEIR OWN: PLACES AND SPACES OF THE WRITING LIFE IN EAVAN BOLAND’S *OBJECT LESSONS*, ANNIE DILLARD’S *THE WRITING LIFE* AND MAY SARTON’S *JOURNAL OF A SOLITUDE*.

1. INTRODUCTION

One goes into the room - but the resources of the English language would be much put to the stretch ... before a woman could say what happens when she goes into a room. The rooms differ so completely; they are calm or thunderous; open on to the sea, or, on the contrary, give on to a prison yard; are hung with washing; or alive with opals and silks; are hard as horsehair or soft as feathers.¹

In *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf famously argues for greater material resources - ‘money and a room of one’s own’(106) - to facilitate the intellectual freedom and personal independence needed by women so as to develop their creativity. She also focuses on the image of a room in order to suggest the diversity and resilience of ‘women’s creative force’(87) while evoking the very different economic and personal circumstances (‘...hung with washing; or alive with opals and silks...’) in which, and through which, women have expressed this force. For Woolf, if the traditional displacement of women from power in the wider world has meant they have been unduly confined to rooms, it has also led to their setting the imprint of their creativity, of their selfhood, on the rooms in which they dwell - rooms which may be ‘calm or thunderous’, ‘hard’ or ‘soft’... Thus, these rooms have themselves become repositories and generators of creative energy:

For women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force, which has, indeed, so overcharged the capacity of bricks and mortar that it must needs harness itself to pens and brushes and business and politics.(87)

There is, accordingly, both a real and a symbolic dynamism in the relation of women to these rooms: they are places not only of exclusion from power, but of an empowerment which will help them to breach the perceptions and distinctions which have marginalised them. Further, these rooms are places from which women have perceived the realms of nature and social fact (some may ‘open on to the sea’ or ‘give on to a prison yard’). They are places of knowledge and of meditation, where perspectives on both the inner life and outer reality can be developed. And they are places of suffering, struggle, and integration.

It can be said at the outset that each of the three women writers under discussion in this chapter can stand as an example of the creative self-realisation Woolf achieved in her own writing, and set out to foster in other women in *A Room of One’s Own*. Sarton, Dillard, and Boland have produced original bodies of work and achieved recognition both in their own cultures, and further afield.
The three books by them which concern me here, centre on the creative lives of their authors, each adding her own distinctive insights and reflections about ‘the writing life’ to those of Virginia Woolf in A Room of One’s Own and A Writer’s Diary, the selection made from her diaries by Leonard Woolf after her death. Each writer gives accounts of the texture: and rhythms, the incidents and rituals, and the abiding themes, of such a life. Each also enjoy: - at least at the time of writing those books, and with whatever degree of precariousness - the resources of time, space, and freedom from poverty that Woolf stipulated.

But there are, of course, many differentiations to be made, many contrasts to be pointed out, many questions to be asked, about the particular terms and circumstances of creative achievement recorded by these three works. Certainly, each has its own story to tell about having ‘a room of one’s own’: a free space, an actual physical setting in which to proceed with the business of being a woman writer.

Journal of a Solitude (1973), The Writing Life (1989) and Object Lessons (1995), were all written by authors in mature life - while Sarton was in her late fifties, Dillard and Boland were in the second half of their forties, as was Virginia Woolf when she wrote the talks on which A Room of One’s Own is based - it was published a year later, in 1929. Seventy years have passed since that event.

Clearly, the three books I’m considering can be related in general terms to the great amplification of women’s literary creativity during the course of this century, with the women’s movement of recent decades a factor of key importance in this, as well as the influence of earlier figures such as Virginia Woolf, who was, as both writer and feminist, an exemplar and seed-planter.

Thus I will find it also of interest to consider, as part of this enquiry, the particular factors which are seen by Sarton, Dillard, and Boland, as either nourishing or problematising the inner and outer conditions of their writing lives. How does each of them respond to perceived limitations imposed - whether consciously or unconsciously - by a still predominantly male-oriented society? To what extent does having increased or relatively greater areas of freedom reveal or highlight deep-level problems intrinsic to their own individual processes as writers? In other words, what exactly happens when one does indeed have, with all that the phrase implies, a room of one’s own?
2. ON EAVAN BOLAND’S *OBJECT LESSONS*

I have put this book together not as a prose narrative is usually constructed but as a poem might be: in turnings and returnings. In parts which find and repeat themselves and restate the argument until it loses its reasonable edge and hopefully becomes a sort of cadence. Therefore the reader will come on the same room more than once: the same tablecloth with red-checked squares; the identical table by an open window. An ordinary suburb, drenched in winter rain, will show itself once, twice, then disappear and come back. The Dublin hills will change colour in the distance, and change once more. The same October day will happen, as it never can in real life, over and over again.²

*Object Lessons* presents itself physically under the deceptive guise of a book of essays but, however concerned it may be with astringently working through ideas with an elegance of form and language, this is a book that eludes categorization. One of the main reasons for this is that the writing and processes of thought in it are so textured and rhythmmed by imagery that the poetic joins the meditative joins the discursive. Soon after embarking on it, one is aware that this is a book one will have to dream, as well as think, one’s way into.

*Object Lessons* is in two parts - *Objects* and *Lessons* - each of which is comprised of five prose pieces. While Jody Allen-Randolph describes the contents of *Objects* as ‘autocritical essays’, and that of *Lessons* as ‘a series of position papers on the location of poetry and the poet in our time’,³ Ailbhe Smyth writes,

The eight [sic] pieces in the book aren’t easy to classify. They are not so much essays as autobiographical narratives and meditations, moving between recollections of particular people, places and moments in Boland’s life and reflections on the ‘visionary place’ she inhabits as a poet. As the stories, memories and arguments begin to unfold, we come to understand the importance of history and place in her work.⁴

*Object Lessons* offers many evocations of the places, and in particular, the rooms, which have been important or even decisive for Eavan Boland in her early life, her adult life in a Dublin suburb as a married woman with a growing family, and her journey as a poet. It is profoundly concerned with the intersections between these aspects of her self and life. It also explores other more painful intersections as Boland, in seeking to find a place for herself as a woman and a poet in contemporary Ireland, journeys into the silences and absences of Ireland’s history and literary tradition.

Boland spent much of her childhood outside Ireland, leaving when she was five and returning at fourteen. While absent from Ireland, she lived in London for seven years and then in New York, both moves dictated by her father’s role as a diplomat. In ‘A Fragment of Exile’, the second essay in *Object Lessons*, Boland recounts that first journey to London as a young child:
I left behind fractions of place and memory, images which would expose slowly. There was a lilac bush I had pulled at so often its musk stayed under my fingernails for days. I would remember the unkempt greenness of the canal where it divided Leeson Street. The lock was made of splintered wood, and boys dived from its narrow platform in summer. Fields, fragrances, an impression of light and informality - that was all. I held my mother’s hand, got into another car. I was in another country.

Hardly anything else that happened to me as a child was as important as this: that I left one country and came to another. That an ordinary displacement made an extraordinary distance between the word place and the word mine.(36)

In ‘In Search of a Nation’, Boland’s return to live in Ireland at age fourteen brings an intense awareness of her cultural displacement:

I returned to find that my vocabulary of belonging was missing. The street names, the meeting places - it was not just that I did not know them. It was something more. I had never known them. I had lost not only a place but the past that goes with it and, with it, the clues from which to construct a present self.(55-6)

As Boland learns ‘a new sensory idiom’(56) with which to interpret her newly reclaimed homeland, a heightened sensitivity to place comes into operation:

... the last unwanted gift of exile came to me. I began to watch places with an interest so exact it might have been memory. There was that street corner, with the small newsagent which sold copies of the Irish Independent and honeycomb toffee in summer. I could imagine myself there, a child of nine, buying peppermints and walking down by the canal, the lock brown and splintered as ever, and boys diving from it.

It became a powerful impulse, a slow and intense reconstruction of a childhood which had never happened. A fragrance or a trick of light was just enough.(56)

The estrangement from place has its counterpart in her relation to language:

Language. Ownership. My childhood had been tormented by those fractions. The absence of my own place had led to the drying up of my own language. The shorthand of possession, the inherited nicknames for a sweetshop or a dead tree or a public house on the site of a well - I understood now that they could not happen because the inheritance had not happened.(102)

But again Boland finds a way into reclamation. Describing her immersion as a young adult in the cityscape of Dublin, she writes:

After midnight the city was quiet. I wore high heels, tipped with steel. I could hear them clicking and ringing as I set out for home. ... It was not stone or water which moved me as I went along, nor light, nor even the combination of it all. It was the recurrences: the same granite rise of the bridge at Baggot Street, the same pear tree at the top of Waterloo Road. The same tree stump, waist-high, as you turned into Morehampton Road. A few more minutes and I came to the railed front gardens of the half street where I lived. My flat was at the top. I could see the window of my bedroom, the light I had forgotten to turn out, the shape of the roof which made the ceiling slope. By the time I reached the front door I would be fluent in street lamps and the color of iron under them. I would know that the copybook waited for me, and the pen. And I was full of the new knowledge that language can reclaim location.(102-3)
Addressing her lack of connection to the idea of Ireland as a national entity, Boland in her teenage years explores the concept of nation: ‘If I could not remember a country, I could at least imagine a nation.’(57) But this proves, as may be expected, problematic. ‘By imagining a nation, I was beginning the very process, awakening the very faculty which would bring me into conflict with it.’(57)

This conflict is explored in detail when Boland comes into her life as a woman poet, encountering and working through the various displacements and denials in Irish culture, past and present, that attach to that role. As she puts it in ‘Outside History’:

On the one hand, I knew that as a poet I could not easily do without the idea of a nation. Poetry in every time draws on that reserve. On the other, I could not as a woman accept the nation formulated for me by Irish poetry and its traditions. ... At the very least it seemed to me that I was likely to remain an outsider in my own national literature, cut off from its archive, at a distance from its energy. Unless, that is, I could repossess it.(128)

Boland proceeds to critique the way in which ‘the women of our past - the women of a long struggle and a terrible survival’(135) have been transformed by the ‘majority of Irish male poets’ into emblems of decorativeness and passivity. ‘This was especially true where the woman and the idea of the nation were mixed: where the nation became a woman and the woman took on a national posture.’(134)

For Boland, this influential aspect of the Irish tradition is another kind of dispossession of the past to be fought and countered. Again, resistance to erasure is central in her approach to defining her role as a woman poet in contemporary Ireland. Further, she writes of the climate of exclusion with respect to, not only women as poets, but the very subject matter of the lives lived by most women, in the Ireland of her youth:

I began to write in an enclosed, self-confident literary culture. The poet’s life stood in a burnished light in the Ireland of that time. Poets were still poor, had little sponsored work and could not depend on a sympathetic reaction to their poetry. But the idea of the poet was honoured. ...
A woman’s life was not honoured. At least no one I knew suggested that it was exemplary in the way a poet’s was.(ix-x)

I know now that I began writing in a country where the word woman and the word poet were almost magnetically opposed. One word was used to invoke collective nurture, the other to sketch out self-reflexive individualism. Both states were necessary - that much the culture conceded - but they were oil and water and could not be mixed. It became part of my working life, part of my discourse, to see these lives evade and simplify each other. I became used to the flawed space between them. In a certain sense, I found my poetic voice by shouting across that distance.(xi)

Boland is here preparing the ground for her re-engagement with the story she has lived out, of a creative life built in the face of cultural and political antipathy:

For the fact was, in my early twenties, as I bent to write poems in a copybook on a summer evening, I was entering upon a subtle and inescapable crisis. I could write lines on the page. I could type and revise them. I could read them over again and publish them. I could go through the motions and act out the role of every young poet. But I felt an estrangement. I had no words for it, and yet I felt it more and more. Put in the language of hindsight and rationalisation, the crisis was this: However much my powers of expression made my mind as a human being the subject of the
poem, my life as a woman remained obdurately the object of it. (28)

Object Lessons engages with great intensity with the very particular isolation Eavan Boland has experienced as an Irish woman poet - bereft of female forebears in her art and participating in a national poetry that has allowed little space for the truth of ordinary women’s lives: lives such as her own, lived in the Dublin suburbs with her family, and drawing part of her subject matter as a poet from this reality.

Her description of life in Dundrum records a process of setting down roots on a number of levels. The suburb she lives in, one of the newer ones of Dublin, grows around her as her young family grows, along with her work as a poet.

In every season the neighbourhood gathered around me and filled my immediate distance. At times it could be a shelter; it was never a cloister. Everywhere you looked there were reminders - a child’s bicycle thrown sideways on the grass, a single roller skate, a tree in its first April of blossom - that lives were not lived here in any sort of static pageant but that they thrived, waned, changed, began and ended here.

Inevitably this sense of growth could not remain just at the edge of things. Apart from anything else, time was passing. Roads were laid. Houses were finished. The builders moved out. Summers came and went, and trees began to define the road. Garden walls were put up, and soon enough the voices calling over them on long, bright evenings, the bicycle thrown on its side and the single roller skate belonged to my children. Somewhat to my surprise, I had done what most human beings have done. I had found a world, and I had populated it. In so doing, my imagination had been radically stirred and redirected. (166-7)

Not suddenly then, but definitely and gradually, a place I lived became a country of the mind. ... Looking out my window at familiar things, I could realize that there had always been something compromised in my own relation to places. They had never been permanent. Therefore, I had never developed a permanent perception about them.

Now here at last was permanence: An illusory permanence, of course, but enough stability to make me realize that the deepest sustenances are not in the new or surprising. (169)

This rootedness in the present inspires, rather than acting to foreclose, deeper explorations of rootedness in the past. Boland touches the perception that ‘place is never so powerful as when it is suffered in silence.’ (167) Thus it is that a significant part of Object Lessons is concerned with a psychic and imaginative journey into some of the silences of Irish history, particularly with respect to the experiences of women on both a personal and collective level.

First, Boland travels though time, re-enters the spaces of family history, to glimpse the lives and sufferings of particular forebears, in particular, her grandmother’s (in ‘Lava Cameo’). There is also, in ‘The Woman The Place The Poet’, a journey - and as in ‘Lava Cameo’, this is associated with an actual physical journey made by her in the present - towards the unknown and therefore imaginatively evoked life of a woman in a real nineteenth-century workhouse in Clonmel presided over by one of her male ancestors. The writer pits herself against the erasures of time, creates imaginative space in which unrecorded and unvalued lives can be - however tenuously - contemplated.

Thus Boland summons a world in which human absences and presences, unnameable losses and the evidences of human resilience embodied in the present, meet, become the
measure of each other. She enters the spaces of time to seek roots and source there, and to recognise connection, along with trauma and tragedy. At the end of ‘The Woman The Place The Poet’ she writes:

... the present tense, surely, is instructed by the past. ... I gradually came to know at what price my seasons - my suburb - had been bought. My underworld was a hundred miles southwest. ... the woman I imagined - if the statistics are anything to go by - must have lost her children in that underworld, just as I came to possess mine through the seasons of my neighbourhood. This account has been about how the past, those images, her compromised life came to find me in the midst of my incomparably easier one. And how I wanted to be found.(173-4)

Here, and in many places in Object Lessons, Eavan Boland insists on making herself vulnerable to the truth. She names the incursions of tradition on the freedom of the present creative moment. She engages in subtle negotiations with place and space - spiritual, personal, historical - so that these become the medium of forging and claiming her role and freedom as a woman poet.

Out of this process comes, in Jody Allen-Randolph’s phrase, ‘a woman’s account of a lived vocation in poetry.’ Boland shows how her writing life is embodied and embedded in the personal, and in the reality of time and place. In her work as poet and prose writer, physical and psychic space constantly meet and prove emblematic of each other. For her, places encode time and history, both lived human experience and creative potential.

It is a February night. The suburb is dark, and rain is spilling noisily from our gutter onto the garage roof. The garden is black and soaking. The streetlamps are on. My children are teenagers now. Their shoes, clothes, letters and diaries litter every room in the house.

That moment has come to me which was prophesied by another woman’s body in a summer twilight years ago. I am older, less hopeful, more acquainted with the craft, more instructed by my failures in it. And once again there is a notebook open on the table by the window. The window looks out to dark roofs and the dripping twigs of the laburnum and the shapes of the garden. If I stood in that garden and looked southwest, I would see the Dublin hills. If I looked east, I would see the suburbs that led to the city. And high in those hills is the river which had made the city: the Liffey, now being refilled by rain. Its source and mouth, its definition and loss seem to me at that moment close to the realizations and dissolutions my body has known in this very house. I walk to the table. I sit down and take up my pen. I begin to write about a river and a woman, about the destiny of water and my sense of growing older. The page fills easily and quickly.(238)

Boland writes on a rainy winter’s night in Dublin. She is taking her bearings at a particular moment of her journey as a woman and a writer. There is the knowledge of limitation as well as learning, and - as for the river Liffey, the life-source which has ‘made the city’ - of origins and endings. This too, for both the woman standing at the window and the river ‘now being refilled by rain’, is a moment of replenishment.

With a poet’s eye she contemplates the immediate scene of ‘dark roofs ... dripping twigs of the laburnum’ and meditates on the imaginary, profoundly known, topography of Dublin and its hills that she would see if standing in her now shadowy garden. The perceptions of the senses and of the mind work together to create a fusion of memory and conscious
attunement in the present, which will take her into a new creative moment. This passage holds together, as in one thought, past and present, fertility and mortality, inner and outer worlds.
3. ON MAY SARTON'S JOURNAL OF A SOLITUDE.

Journal of a Solitude was written partly to disrupt an impression of successful literary productivity and personal serenity that May Sarton believed many of her readers took away from Plant Dreaming Deep, published five years before it, in 1968. That work is a book-length memoir of Sarton's life in an eighteenth-century farmhouse on thirty acres of land in Nelson, New Hampshire, to which she moved in her forty-sixth year - the first house in her life she had owned. This house is also the setting of Journal of a Solitude.

While her buying of the house reflected a conscious desire to put down roots in American soil and find a sense of continuity with the American past, Sarton - Belgian-born, of English and Belgian descent - begins Plant Dreaming Deep with a portrait of two eighteenth-century ancestors, one Belgian, one English. Her opening paragraph describes the act of hanging a portrait of one of them on a wall:

I had lived my way into all this house is and holds for me for eight years before I brought 'the ancestor' home. As I stood on a stool and hammered in a hook strong enough to support the plain, heavy oak frame and the portrait itself, I knew I was performing a symbolic act.7

Beyond this imaging of familial connections, Sarton is here also declaring her roots in the European past and European culture. In the following passage from Conversations with May Sarton, she speaks of her uprooting from Europe in early childhood, and of her frequent return to it later in her life:

During the first two years of my life we lived in a small haven of a house at Wondelgem, Belgium. Then we were driven out by the war and went to England. In 1916, when I was four, we settled for good in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Even so, every seven years ... we all went to Europe. It took me until I was forty-five to become an American at heart. It was in 1958, after my parents were both dead, that I bought a house in Nelson, a small village in New Hampshire, and settled in for fifteen years and made roots.8

It seems that Sarton’s relationships with both Europe and America are cross-hatched by absence and presence. Her desire to heal such stressful ambivalence is expressed in the following passage from Plant Dreaming Deep:

I enjoy beginning this chronicle with an evocation of two ancestors because in this house all the threads I hold in my hands have at last been woven into a whole - the threads of the English and Belgian families from which I spring (Flanders and Suffolk), the threads of my own wanderings in Europe and the United States, and those shining threads, the values willed to me by two remarkable parents. Here they all weave their way into a single unfolding and unifying design.19

While Sarton’s move to Nelson is described by her as bringing deeper grounding and integration to her life in both Plant Dreaming Deep and Journal of a Solitude, she herself comes to contest the image of possessed wholeness in the above passage. She writes in Journal of a Solitude:
One reason I felt impelled to keep this journal for a year was because I think that *Plant Dreaming Deep* has created the myth of a false Paradise. I want to destroy that myth. In fact, I see my function as quietly destroying myths, even those of my own making, in order to come closer and closer to reality and to accepting reality. (176)

Besides, there was the problem of what to do with her father’s Belgian furniture after his death:

Would these great pieces of our lives now rot in that cellar, unloved, uncherished, like so much old lumber? After a year they began to haunt me as if they were animals kept underground and dying of neglect. How long would they stay alive? And how long would the life in me stay alive if I did not find new roots?9

My father had died, and there was all that old Belgian furniture rotting in a cellar. I think that partly made me feel that I must have a place for this furniture. I went to Nelson, partly to rebuild a life of my own.10

Balancing the desire for continuity with the past, the need to memorialise, there is a personal quest for deeper personal authenticity, a greater degree of interiority - and there is the future-oriented desire for a fresh beginning. Thus, in *Journal of a Solitude*, May Sarton seeks deeper roots in the self. In this, her immediate need to deal with depression, and a difficult personal relationship, are catalytic:

Keeping a journal helps you get in touch with your own feelings. I think that’s why I started the first one. I was in a depression when I began *Journal of a Solitude*; I was in the middle of a very unhappy love affair, and writing was my way of handling things.11

In choosing a more self-revelatory mode, Sarton opens up new territory for herself as a writer, and in so doing enters into a more direct and candid relationship with her readers:

[In *Plant Dreaming Deep* ... the] anguish of my life here - its rages - is hardly mentioned. Now I hope to break through into the rough rocky depths, to the matrix itself. There is violence there and anger never resolved. I live alone, perhaps for no good reason, for the reason that I am an impossible creature, set apart by temperament I have never learned to use as it could be used, thrown off by a word, a glance, a rainy day, or one drink too many. My need to be alone is balanced against my fear of what will happen when suddenly I enter the huge empty silence if I cannot find support there. I go up to Heaven and down to Hell in an hour, and keep alive only by imposing on myself inexorable routines.(12)

Apart from the potentially therapeutic value of naming and grappling with difficult emotions in language, the journal for Sarton provides a means of structuring her life in time, and a sense of stability, as does the house itself. Suzanne Owens comments, with reference to *Journal of a Solitude*:

[Sarton] writes ... of her need for structure in daily physical activity; but the journal is a structure too. Both hold together the emotional fragments the woman alone must face: ‘I have been thinking about the fact that, however terrible the storms may be, if one’s life has a sufficiently stable and fruitful structure, one is helped to withstand their devastating after-effects’(p. 84). Writing is at least a contrast to the physical demands of the house and grounds, and the journal is the best literary construct for that part of her life.12
Comparing *Journal of a Solitude* to *Plant Dreaming Deep*, Owens writes,

*Journal of a Solitude* (1973) is a brooding work, but as readers we should be aware that the daily and scrupulous recording of life through journal writing may be a much darker work than the memoir softened by memory.\(^{13}\)

In a 1990 interview, Sarton comments:

In the memoir you might have the advantage of something that took place five years ago, whereas with the journal, it's on the pulse; it's the moment. And that's what makes it fascinating. I made it a thing of pride in the journal; I never go back and finish what I began the day before because I didn't have time to finish it. It has to be then - what happened today.\(^{14}\)

A different emphasis, however, is made by Sarton in a 1976 interview, just before the completion of a second book of journal material, *A House by the Sea*:

Quite a large part of my journals is really short, very short, informal essays of two or three paragraphs. That’s just what they are. They give you a chance to examine experience and to relate it to universal experience. It is this reflection that *makes* a journal; it’s not just telling what happened today.\(^{15}\)

In regard to the issue these quotations raise of immediacy versus considered reflection, it is interesting to enquire into the mode of writing and editing by Sarton of her journals. In a 1982 interview, she speaks of the composition of her journals:

Carter: Do you also do manuscript first with the journals?
Sarton: No, I type them, and I do that first before I do anything else at my desk, because I am also writing books while I am keeping a journal. The journals are almost too easy, but I think about them a lot. I think about that in bed before I get up, what I’m going to say.\(^{16}\)

Sarton tells us that her journals were edited mainly to tidy them up stylistically, sometimes with the help of friends such as Carolyn Heilbrun.\(^{17}\) Heilbrun herself comments, contrasting *Journal of a Solitude* with Sarton’s subsequent journals, written after she had moved from Nelson to Maine:

The journals that record that new life belong to another genre: they catch life on the fly, and for all that Sarton’s journals are carefully edited, pruned, and arranged, their very form counters the completeness of the Nelson experience, catching instead something centrifugal and diffused, perhaps characteristic of successful women’s lives.\(^{18}\)

It would seem that Heilbrun finds *Journal of a Solitude* a more integrated work, more of a piece, than the later journal works. If this is a fair judgement, it may be that Sarton moved towards a more outer-directed stance with her audience more consciously in view, at the cost of some of the inwardness and sensuous immediacy of her first journal. The writer’s own comments illuminate this question. Speaking of *Journal of a Solitude*, she writes,
It's the best, I think, partly because it was the least conscious that there was an audience for it.
Now I'm very aware that people are waiting for the journals.

While Sarton comments in the same interview that *Journal of a Solitude* has 'helped so many people', it may be that her vision of the journals as providers of sustaining and nurturing truths - something in the manner of a commonplace-book - came to the fore as she has proceeded with subsequent journal books, partly to their detriment.

In *Journal of a Solitude*, Sarton stays close to her day by day experience, combining modes of contemplative attention to her physical environment of house and garden with a more wide ranging reflectiveness. She also journeys back into her personal past, and out into her neighbourhood, speaking of friends from her local community as well as from further afield.

Yet the core of the book is the record of Sarton's daily life as a writer and householder, a life both practical and inner-directed. As she often notes, her life is one of attempting to find a balance between relationships with neighbours, friends, readers, and her relationship with herself. But the latter remains primary, and the condition of aloneness is richly explored in its double aspect of solitude - with its potential for communion with self - and isolation.

There is no doubt that solitude is a challenge and to maintain balance within it a precarious business. But I must not forget that, for me, being with people or even one beloved person for any length of time without solitude is even worse. I lose my center. I feel dispersed, scattered, in pieces. I must have time alone in which to mull over any encounter, and to extract its juice, its essence, to understand what really happened to me as a consequence of it.

September 15th

Begin here. It is raining. I look out on the maple, where a few leaves have turned yellow, and listen to Punch, the parrot, talking to himself and to the rain ticking gently against the windows. I am here alone for the first time in weeks to take up my 'real' life again at last. That is what is strange - that friends, even passionate love, are not my real life unless there is time alone to explore and to discover what is happening or has happened. Without the interruptions, nourishing and maddening, this life would become arid. Yet I taste it fully only when I am alone here and 'the house and I resume old conversations'.

This, the opening paragraph of *Journal of a Solitude*, is at once immediate in its address to the moment and situation, and calmly circumspect. On the facing page, the writer is pictured at her free-standing desk in a spacious, comfortably furnished room with polished wood floors and light streaming in from two large windows behind her. There is an open fireplace. Three vases of the flowers so loved by Sarton are in evidence, with a flowering pot plant on a windowsill. (See Appendix 1)

This, it would seem, is a settled room in a settled life. Despite the friendships and professional commitments which sometimes take her away from home, this chosen solitude is her 'real' life - the site of the inner searching and self-confrontation which is inextricably bound up with her work as a writer. Her home is her centre, then, and she is earthed there, even while
the creative solitude she seeks makes her also vulnerable to isolation, and the lacerating tests of
the spiritual life. As she says soon after:

The ambience here is order and beauty. That is what frightens me when I am first alone again. I
feel inadequate. I have made an open place, a place for meditation. What if I cannot find myself in
it?(12)

While the texture of May Sarton’s journal entries have woven into them times of personal
desolation and crisis such as that last sentence might promise, the essential dynamic of her
narrative is that of a drama of continuance.

I woke in tears this morning. I wonder whether it is possible at nearly sixty to change oneself
radically. Can I learn to control resentment and hostility, the ambivalence, born somewhere far
below the conscious level? If I cannot, I shall lose the person I love. There is nothing to be done
but go ahead with life moment by moment and hour by hour - put out birdseed, tidy the rooms, try
to create order and peace around me even if I cannot achieve it inside me. Now at ten thirty there is
such radiant light outside that the house feels dark. I look through the hall into the cozy room, all
in darkness, right through to the window at the end, and a transparent sheaf of golden and green
leaves. And here in my study the sunlight is that autumn white, so clear, it calls for an inward act
to match it ... clarify, clarify.(33)

Sarton speaks as a person anguished by emotional conflicts and psychological dilemmas that
also threaten her personal relationships. One might even say that the demands of the moral life
are also registered in her opening words - her proneness to the fits of irrational anger begun in
early childhood21 weighs on her as if a deep-seated flaw of character.

Demons and daemon... The discipline of order she imposes on herself - creating peace
around her in the hope of finding it in herself - seems to bear fruit in this passage, as in other
places in Journal of a Solitude. The very act of attending to her environment creates a shift from
being at the mercy of her demons to experiencing a space wherein her creative energy might be
liberated: ‘... here in my study the sunlight is autumn white, so clear, it calls for an inward act
to match it ... clarify, clarify.’

Has it really happened at last? I feel released from the rack, set free, in touch with the deep source
that is only good, where poetry lives. We have waited long this year for the glory, but suddenly
the big maple is all gold and the beeches yellow with a touch of green that makes the yellow even
more intense. There are still nasturtiums to be picked, and now I must get seriously to work to get
the remaining bulbs in.

It has been stupidly difficult to let go, but that is what has been needed ... Letting go, I have
come back yesterday and today to a sense of my life here in all its riches, depth, freedom for soul-
making.(37)

In this passage, as throughout Journal of a Solitude, there is registered an attunement to the
continual changes of nature, particularly in regard to Sarton’s own garden. It seems that she is
not only finding a (perhaps partly causal) correspondence between inner moods and those of
nature, but that her physical movement out into the garden is an important part of her narrative.
The flowers she grows in it, and which she almost daily brings into the house, are emblematic
of a kind of symbiosis between house and garden, both providing images of her inner life.
... everything has become speeded up and overcrowded. So everything that slows us down and forces patience, everything that sets us back into the slow cycles of nature, is a help. Gardening is an instrument of grace.(123)

Plants ... humanise an interior because they can’t be controlled. ... I knew when I walked in here last Sunday that this house dies when there are no flowers. It felt desolate and I ended the day in tears, as if I had been abandoned by God. Now there are crimson tulips in one room, white and pink ones in another, and I can breathe, am full of joy and at home again.(123-4)

Sarton associates her passion for flowers with that of her English mother - a painter and a designer whose visual perceptiveness and appreciation of life she evokes in the following passage:

She savored life more than anyone I have ever known. It could be seen in the way she looked at everything with that quizzical, observant, total attention - a flower, a Chinese jar, our beautiful silver cat, Cloudy, or George Sarton when they sat opposite each other for a ritual cup of tea in the garden.(184)

Sarton also makes a connection between her Belgian ancestry and her particular appreciation of Flemish painting:

... the Flemish painters are in my blood. It is the combination of the restless skies and the homely interiors, the way light moves about in Dutch rooms, not only in Vermeer (Vermeer, of course!) but even in Pieter de Hooch that touches me deeply. A still life by Culp gave me a moment of absolute joy - a cut lemon, light on two wingglasses.(111)

Light and light-effects are dominant motifs throughout *Journal of a Solitude*. The following passage was written on a late winter day with a temperature of 10 degrees below zero:

I have only to imagine what it would be like were these very quiet days, under no immediate pressure, taken from me to realize how precious they are. Yesterday afternoon the light in the cosy room was beautiful, marbling the cupboard by the fireplace as I have seen it every year at this time, turning the hills across the meadow deep rose at sunset, making long shadows across the snow below every tree trunk. It was a tender light, gentler, no longer the relentless brilliance of January.(96)

Sarton’s responsiveness to the continual changes of light, weather and natural phenomena, and her capacity to experience moments of self-recognition and change through these, are counterbalanced by her emphasis, in her working life, on a spiritual and practical discipline which in turn can be a transformative force:

I have said elsewhere that we have to make myths of our lives, the point being that if we do, then every grief or inexplicable seizure by weather, woe, or work can - if we discipline ourselves and think hard enough - be turned to account, be made to yield further insight into what it is to be alive, to be a human being, what the hazards are of a fairly usual, everyday kind. We go up to Heaven and down to Hell a dozen times a day - at least, I do. And the discipline of work provides an exercise bar, so that the wild, irrational motions of the soul become formal and creative. It literally keeps one from falling on one’s face.(108-9)
In *Journal of a Solitude*, Sarton refers to notions of transformation as proposed by C. G. Jung and Teilhard de Chardin,22 but throughout the book her own moment by moment engagement with processes of change and becoming is recorded. Finally, her house which provides stability and connection with the past, also comes to stand for the evolving self and the creative life - even amidst apprehensions of unboundariedness and vulnerability:

I feel sometimes like a house with no walls. The mood is caught in a photo Mort Mace took of this house all lighted up one March evening. The effect is dazzling from the outside, just as my life seems dazzling to many people in its productivity, in what it communicates that is human and fulfilled, and hence fulfilling. But the truth is that whatever good effect my work may have comes, rather, from my own sense of isolation and vulnerability. The house is open in a way that no house where a family lives and interacts can be. My life, often frightfully lonely, interacts with a whole lot of people I do not know and will never know. ... It is poetry, then, that lights up the house, as in Mort’s photograph. I am a little sad now because, for the moment, poetry is not here.(114-5)

It would seem that in *Journal of a Solitude*, Sarton, by refusing the illusion of outer success and inner harmony created by *Plant Dreaming Deep*, is enabled to move deeper into her own process as a woman and a writer, to search for balance and illumination, while setting down the emotional facts of disappointment, rage and loneliness. Her direct recording of present experience, and of the larger cycles of personal and creative energy, enables her to document the moments and seasons, variously arid and fruitful, of her living of the writing life.

*January 8th*

Yesterday was a strange, hurried, uncentered day; yet I did not have to go out, the sun shone. Today I feel centered and time is a friend instead of the old enemy. It was zero this morning. I have a fire burning in my study, yellow roses and mimosa on my desk. There is an atmosphere of festival, of release, in the house. We are one, the house and I, and I am happy to be alone - time to think, time to be. This kind of open-ended time is the only luxury that really counts and I feel stupendously rich to have it. And for the moment I have a sense of fulfillment both about my life and about my work that I have rarely experienced until this year, or perhaps until these last weeks. I look to my left and the transparent blue sky behind a flame-coloured cyclamen, lifting about thirty winged flowers to the light, makes an impression of stained glass, light-flooded. I have put the vast box of unanswered letters at my feet, so I don’t see them. And now I am going to make one more try to get that poem right. The last line is still the problem.(81)
4. ON ANNIE DILLARD’S *THE WRITING LIFE*

*The Writing Life* is a novella-length work which happens to be about half the length of *Journal of a Solitude*, and considerably less than half that of *Object Lessons*. It is also more episodic than either of those texts, with its seven chapters divided into mainly short sections of a few pages, or sometimes a few paragraphs; the exception is Chapter Four, which is less than two pages long itself. Though there are a number of long narrative or descriptive passages, the main effect is of a free-ranging exploration by the author of her subject with many changes of tack and the use of a wide repertoire of approaches to her subject.

While *The Writing Life* is classified as a book of essays, its diversity pulls away from the more formal understanding of the essay, though in a quite different way from Boland’s combination of deployment and subversion in *Object Lessons*. But it similarly includes a wealth of storytelling and memoir, and draws strongly on past experience even while it is oriented to the immediate, often agonising pressures to do with arriving at, and shaping, new creative work.

There is much material in the way of imagery and direct comment that sheds light on the processes involved in launching into the act of writing, and in then negotiating the barriers and pitfalls which can frustrate the writer at every turn. Dillard is also exercised by the long term problems of sustaining the clarity of mind and commitment needed to carry through a complex writing project and structure the architectonics of a whole work.

Her choice of a title cues one to a work which is partly autobiographical yet also engages with the subject of writing with a degree of impersonality, generality and - at times questionable, I think - inclusiveness. Dillard moves to and fro along a spectrum between sometimes disarming or amusing self-revelation and a guru-like mode of imparting a difficult, often idiosyncratic, but provocative wisdom regarding the writing life.

Some of Annie Dillard’s key preoccupations in previous works can be encountered in *The Writing Life*. The close observation of, and passion for, nature which so powerfully informs *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and a number of essays in *Teaching a Stone to Talk* can be found in her description of the inchworm(7-8), the starfish(16-17), and the drowning moth(48); an already published essay on a moth burnt in a candle flame becomes the focus of her conversation with the children Brad and Brian(54-6). Several descriptions of sea and sky succeed in evoking the sense of awesome boundarilessness expressed in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.

Referring to her time living and writing in a cabin on an island on Haro Strait, in northern Puget Sound, Dillard writes,

> So that island haunts me. I was not in prison there, but instead loosed on a shore of vastness....

> Once I saw phosphorescent seas in a winter storm in front of the cabin; in the black night, black seas broke in wild lines to the horizon and spilled green foam that glowed when the wind’s pitch rose, so I went on the shore in fear.

> I lived on the beach with one foot in fatal salt water and one foot on a billion grains of sand. The brink of the infinite there was too like writing’s solitude. Each sentence hung over an abyssal ocean or sky which held all possibilities, as well as the possibilities of nothing. In June and July,
the twilight lingered till dawn. Our latitude was north of Nova Scotia; the sun never dropped low enough below the horizon to achieve what is called astronomical night. The wide days split life open like an ax. When I sketched or painted the island shore, even with the most literal intentions, the work twined into the infinite again and dissolved, or the infinite assulted the page again and again and required me to represent it. My pen piled the page with changing clouds, multiple suns, circles, spirals and rays. I used the pages at night to light fires.23

The mysticism expressed here in regard to nature is also related to the theological concerns which recur in her work and inform the biblical sonority of ‘... so I wept on the shore in fear’. The final paragraph of The Writing Life begins and ends with a quotation from Teilhard de Chardin: ‘Purity does not lie in separation from but in deeper penetration into the universe’; ‘The world is filled, and filled with the Absolute. ... To see this is to be made free.’(110-111) This mysticism is also part of Annie Dillard’s aesthetic:

Why are we reading if not in hope of beauty laid bare, life heightened and its deepest mystery probed?(72)

Dillard’s vision of art, and her pursuit of it, is predominantly Platonic24, Romantic, and religious. Does it follow that her view of the writing life shares in these qualities? In many ways The Writing Life, through its close attention to the difficulties of writing, subverts and problematises this vision. Sitting in ‘the actual rooms of time’(57) the writer is faced with the materiality of the page - in other words, the need to translate her vision into an embodied form. There is a never-ending gap between vision and realisation: ‘...the page is made of time and matter; the page always wins.’(57). And again, ‘Time and materials hound the work; the vision recedes even farther into the dim realms.’(58)

In The Writing Life, Dillard recounts and recreates the frustrations, both practical and metaphysical, of such a life as she has experienced it, reacting to the fact of limitation and struggle with a sometimes absurdist exasperation while at other times pressing against limits so as to break through them to that world of oceanic possibilities described above. While the image of ‘the line’ is one of the leitmotifs of the book - mostly representing the struggle with matter - the image of flying, or dwelling in unearthed space, is another. The tension between these two images, and the energies and states of being they represent, is a volatile one in this work, suggesting an ongoing psychic conflict within Dillard, as well as resonating with ancient antimonies.

When you write, you lay out a line of words. The line of words is a miner’s pick, a woodcarver’s gouge, a surgeon’s probe. You wield it, and it digs a path you follow. Soon you will find yourself deep in new territory. Is it a dead end, or have you located the real subject? You will know tomorrow, or this time next year.

You make the path boldly and follow it fearfully. You go where the path leads. At the end of the path, you find a box canyon. You hammer out reports, dispatch bulletins.

The writing has changed, in your hands, and in a twinkling, from an expression of your notions to an epistemological tool. The new place interests you because it is not clear. You attend. In your humility, you lay down the words carefully, watching all the angles. Now the earlier writing looks
soft and careless. Process is nothing; erase your tracks. The path is not the work. I hope the tracks have grown over; I hope the birds ate the crumbs; I hope you will toss it all and not look back.

The line of words is a hammer. You hammer against the walls of your house. You tap the walls lightly, everywhere. ...you know what to listen for. ... Unfortunately, it is often the bearing wall that has to go. It cannot be helped. There is only one solution, which appalls you, but there it is. Knock it out. Duck.(3-4)

There is in these opening paragraphs of *The Writing Life* a heightened, and at times a somewhat strained, intensity regarding the difficulty of the writer's task. The pressure of intention and will is expressed through the physical and instrumental images deployed: 'The line of words is a miner's pick, a woodcarver's gouge, a surgeon's probe. You wield it... .'

The accent is on penetrating matter: earth, wood, the body. The metaphors then become more spatial as pioneer and adventurer are evoked in the mention of new territory.

But this is, of course, inner territory and 'You go where the path leads' carries the accent of spiritual injunction. That one is being propelled along with a suspicion of the imperative mood, suggests that this is the grammar of necessity, that choices are at a premium, that a nerved courage is what is most in question.

These introductory moves indicate the enmeshed ardour of Dillard's quest for the grail of creative energy and vision, even while this is soon tempered by a Zen-like erasure, delivered in a throwaway manner ('Process is nothing; erase your tracks. The path is not the work.') Further, deliberate destruction is part of the process, structures are built only to be pulled down as a prelude to reconstruction.

Apart from the influence of Zen and the idea of self-surrender from Christian mysticism, Dillard's imagery is of digging, gouging, surgical probing; of territorial exploration and conquest; and selective demolition - images of traditionally masculine activities describing the penetration of materials, of unknown places and spaces, and the destruction of already materially structured spaces and places.

Chapter Two of *The Writing Life* opens with a description of where Dillard is writing it, and thereafter she returns to the sites where several of her past books were written or completed. What these settings have in common is a separation from her home, her personal and domestic situation and, most of the time, from her outside environment. There is something of the sense of a self-enclosed capsule about these writing places, and also a suggestion of a monk's cell. Her present study is, however technologically well-equipped, a place of renunciation, and however abundantly surrounded by trees and birds, a place of deliberate exclusion.

I write this in the most recent of my many studies - a pine shed on Cape Cod. The pine lumber is unfinished inside the study; the pines outside are finished trees. ... The study - sold as a prefabricated toolshed - is eight feet by ten feet. Like a plane's cockpit, it is crammed bulkhead to bulkhead with high-tech equipment. All it needs is an altimeter; I never quite know where I am. There is a computer, a printer, and a photocopying machine. ... There is an air conditioner, a heater, and an electric kettle. There is a low-tech bookshelf, a shelf of gull and whale bones, and a bed. ... The study affords ample room for one. One who is supposed to be writing books. You can read in the space of a coffin, and you can write in the space of a toolshed meant for mowers and
spades.
I walk up here from the house every morning. ... After I have warmed myself standing on the
crest of the dune, I return under the pines, enter the study, slam the door so that latch catches - and
then I cannot see. The green spot in front of my eyes outshines everything in the shade. I lie on
the bed and play with a bird bone until I can see it.(25-26)

While the paraphernalia of actual physical writing and daily physical survival are prodigious,
the accessing of creative vision arises from darkness, absence, isolation. In a way analogous to
the medieval monk in his cell with a skull before him, Dillard has the *memento mori* of gull and
whale bones near her - trace elements of those former frequenters of the heights and the depths.
Renouncing even the sensory awareness of sight, she touches a bird bone, seeking the stripped
clarity of spiritual insight, the elusive key to creative flight.

Annie Dillard evokes a very different kind of workspace when she recalls working on
the manuscript of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* in the library of Hollins College, Roanoke, Virginia.
But the principle of undermining and reversing the conditions of ordinary perception in order to
connect with less conscious modes of perception holds here as well:

This night, as on most nights, I entered the library at dusk. The building was locked and dark. I had
a key. Every night I let myself in, climbed the stairs, found my way between the tall stacks in the
dark, located and unlocked my study’s door, and turned on the light. I remembered how many stacks
I had to hit with my hand in the dark before I turned down the row to my study...

When I flicked on my carrel light, there it all was: the bare room with yellow cinder-block walls;
the big, flattened venetian blind and my drawing taped to it ... There was the long, blond desk with
its chair, and on the desk a dozen different coloured pens, some big index cards in careful, splayed
piles, and my messy yellow legal pads. As soon as I saw that desktop, I remembered the task: the
chapter, its problems, its phrases, its points.

This night I was concentrating on the chapter. The horizon of my consciousness was the
contracted circle of yellow light inside my study - the lone lamp in the enormous, dark library ... at
last, unthinkingly, I parted the venetian blind slats with my fingers, to look out.

And there were the fireworks, far away. It was the Fourth of July. I had forgotten. They were red
and yellow, blue and green and white; they blossomed high in the black sky many miles away. The
fireworks seemed as distant as the stars, but I could hear the late bursting their bursting made. The
sound, those bangs so muffled and out of sync, accompanied at random the silent, far sprays of
colour widening and raining down. It was the Fourth of July, and I had forgotten all of wide space
and all of historical time. I opened the blinds a crack like eyelids, and it all came exploding in on
me at once - oh yes, the world.(29-30)

Again, Dillard is in a small compass of physical space inside a vastness; the ambit of her
consciousness is imaged by a halo-like circle of yellow light. Her chosen and deliberately
constructed austerity precedes, is a condition of, the dramatically contrasting illumination
imaged by the fireworks.

In line with her philosophy of exclusion, Dillard has earlier made a drawing of the
outside scene, and substituted it for the real thing:

I shut the blinds one day for good. I lowered the venetian blinds and flattened the slats. Then, by
lamplight, I taped my drawing to the closed blind. There, on the drawing, was the window’s view:
cows, parking lot, hilltop, and sky.(29)

In the passage cited above, Dillard works by her lamp in ‘the enormous dark library’. The
arrival of an emissary from nature - a June bug knocking at her window - leads her to part the blinds. The surprise and revelation of Fourth of July fireworks is not the only example in The Writing Life of a dramatic movement from a contracted interiority working in extreme isolation to a dazzling constellation of light coming in upon the soul and the senses. Dillard, writing in her sequence of cells, is an once an ascetic and an ecstatic, and the double moment of release and engulfment is the moment she seeks, both spiritually and aesthetically:

I opened the blinds a crack like eyelids, and it all came exploding in on me at once - oh yes, the world.(31)

The latter part of The Writing Life contains accounts of two men whose actions represent further configurations of Dillard’s vision of creativity. The first is Ferrar Burn, a former inhabitant of Haro Island, now long dead. In a story within a story, Dillard’s friend, the artist Paul Glenn, tells her of Burn’s retrieval of a log of Alaska cedar floating out past Haro Island into the channel. At high tide, he rowed out to the log and attached it by a rope to his boat, but was then carried out by the turning tide.

Ferrar kept rowing toward Fishery Point. He might as well have tied onto a whale. He was rowing to the north and moving fast to the south. He travelled stern first. He wanted to be going home, so toward home he kept pulling.(87)

Ferrar Burn rows all night until the tide, turning again, brings him back.

He kept rowing north for home - only now the the log was with him. ... It started getting light about three o’clock, and he rowed back past this island’s southern tip. The sun came up, and he rowed all the length of the beach. The tide brought him back on home.(87)

The image of a lone individual unceasingly rowing homewards against the irresistible sweep of the tide, then with it, is a powerful one. Burn follows his path unceasingly, as if without doubt, despite the great odds against him: he is a small dot in the sea’s vastness, but an active one. In emphasising a movement against, and in the face of, natural forces, then charting its transformation - as if by some ineffable logic of its own - into a process of moving with nature, Dillard is enunciating one of her key themes concerning the writing life.

In the last and most successful chapter of The Writing Life, Dillard focuses upon Dave Rahm, who is a stunt pilot as well as a geologist. Rahm tells Dillard of how his desire to become an expert on mountains led him into the discipline of geography. But ‘Geography proved too pedestrian for Rahm, too concerned with “how many bushels of wheat an acre.”’(102) He had then moved to geology, and specialised in photographing geologic features from the air.

Dillard recounts watching a flying performance by Rahm, meeting him, then going up with him on a flight to view Mount Baker. He tells her,
‘I used to climb mountains. But you know, you can get a better feel for a mountain’s power flying around it, flying all around it, than you can from climbing it tied to its side like a flea.’(102)

In the course of Chapter Seven, Rahm becomes a image of the artist, a muse-figure, and his flying a parable of the nature of inspiration. The free and seemingly infinitely fluid patterning of his flying is related to the image of the line on the page, to the creative process, and ultimately to the writing life itself:

The black plane dropped spinning, and flattened out spinning the other way; it began to carve the air into forms that built wildly and musically on each other and never ended. Reluctantly, I started paying attention. Rahm drew high above the world an inexhaustibly glorious line; it piled over our heads in loops and arabesques. It was like a Saul Steinberg fantasy; the plane was the pen. Like Steinberg’s contracting and billowing pen line, the line Rahm spun moved to form new, punning shapes from the edges of the old. Like a Klee line, it smattered the sky with landscapes and systems.(95)

Rahm made beauty with his whole body; it was pure pattern, and you could watch it happen. The plane moved every way a line can move, and it controlled three dimensions, so the line carved massive and subtle slits in the air like sculptures. The plane looped the loop, seeming to arch its back like a gymnast; it stalled, dropped, and spun out of it climbing; it spiraled and knifed west on one side’s wings and back east on another; it turned cartwheels which must be physically impossible; it played with its own line like a cat with a yarn. How did the pilot know where in the air he was. If he got lost, the ground would swat him.(95-6)

The cost of creating such images of freedom from the materiality and finiteness of earth-bound life is excruciating pain, the danger of blackouts, and ultimately, for Rahm, death. During a flying performance in Jordan, he misjudges a dive and hits the ground.

Dillard’s extensive description of Rahm’s flying comes to have the aspect of a memorial, then, even while it serves as a correlative of her idea of working at extremes and against the grain, courting reversals and inversions, so as to experience, in creative freedom, an embrace of the infinite. The image of flying also constellates the Dionysian theme of ecstasy (from the Greek ekstasis, ‘standing outside oneself’) and death: apparent suspensions from the conditions of gravity and materiality and earthedness carry the danger of fall, of vanquishment by a denied opposite.

What holds Dillard’s attention most compellingly - with respect to Rahm, and throughout The Writing Life - is the visionary moment in which space and time are apprehended as limitless. Her final chapter is the fullest and most complex expression of this and as such represents a kind of resolution. Yet to the present writer it seems that an imbalance persists: flight is both a superbly realised image of creative energy, and an evasion of the conditions to be lived through for it to achieve expression. Both the following passages suggest the combination of abstraction and enthusiasm that can lead Dillard towards a kind of rhetorical extremism. However, while the first of them works with images of time in a manner so vague as to elude meaning, the second, working with images of space, represents a more imaginatively specific engagement with her subject, even while it too sounds a note of Romantic elevation.
His was pure energy and naked spirit. I have thought about it for years. Rahm’s line unrolled in
time. Like music, it split the bulging rim of the future along its seam. It pried out the present. (96)

In his open-cockpit, black plane, Rahm demonstrated curved space. He slid down ramps of air, he
vaulted and wheeled. He piled loops in heaps and praised height. He unrolled the scroll of the air,
extended it, and bent it into Möbius strips; he furtled line in a thousand new ways, as if he were
inventing a script and writing it in one infinitely recurving utterance until I thought the bounds of
beauty must break. (108-9)

Ultimately, Dillard’s creation of Rahm as an image of the artist acts as a mirror to aspects of
herself as writer. She and Rahm share the following: a sense of unboundaried play and
exploration; a selfless and costly surrender to a process which is the condition of hieratically
mediating the sacred; and a removed, sealed-off, intently concentrating consciousness engaged,
nevertheless, in a performance...

Rahm deliberately turned himself into a figure. Sitting invisible at the controls of a distant
airplane, he became the agent and the instrument of art and invention. He did not tell me how he
felt, when we spoke of his performance flying; he told me instead that he paid attention to how his
plane and its line looked to the audience against the lighted sky. If he had noticed how he felt, he
could not have done the work. Robed in his airplane, he was as featureless as a priest. (110)

_The Writing Life_ bears the marks of a spiritual recklessness deliberately pursued by Dillard,
bringing on the one hand, boldness and risk taking to her depiction of her life as a writer, and
on the other, intemperate or confused intervals. Her gifts as a storyteller and nature writer are
responsible for the work’s most focused and compelling passages, and act to stabilise the
narrative. Though sometimes caught in the crosscurrents of unresolved abstract formulations,
Dillard’s particular understanding of the writer’s life emerges with vivid clarity in such
passages.
5. COMMENTARY

Each of the three books I have discussed reveals, as one would expect from writers of personal and artistic maturity, an established pattern of work and life. In what follows, I will summarise and draw out the implications of my engagement with each of these works, while extending my discussion to encompass considerations of each writer’s relation to the cultural space which is, inevitably, a context and partial determinant of her relationship with her readers.

I lived in a world familiar to many women. I had a husband, young children and a home. I did the same things over and over again. At night I watched water sluice the milk bottles to a bluish gleam before I put them out on the step. By day I went to collect my children under whitebeam trees and in different weathers.

Yet merely by the act of going upstairs in a winter dusk, merely by starting to write a poem at a window that looked out on the Dublin hills, I was entering a place of force. Just by trying to record the life I lived in the poem I wrote, I had become a political poet.25

For Eavan Boland, who left Ireland at the age of five and returned ten years later, her life in the Dublin suburb of Dundrum has been a fresh growing of roots. In the course of Object Lessons she retraces three interrelated journeys, each of them ongoing: her development as a poet, her struggle to win a place and space for herself as a poet in the Irish literary world, and her embrace of painful aspects of Irish history on both a personal and a collective level.

It is interesting that, while Object Lessons contains a number of vivid evocations of rooms in which Boland’s writing in the past has taken place, there are few direct references to the physical details of the interior of her present home, which is her personal and creative centre. It is as though she is so personally and spiritually internalised within her home, and her home internalised within her, that it remains imaginatively implicit, as it were - much in contrast to May Sarton. The silence which attends this internalisation is not a question of erasure, but depth of presence.

This depth of presence would seem to be one of the enabling conditions of Boland’s journey as a poet, as well as the other journeys she makes into her cultural environment and its shaping past. Her home is a place in which she dwells, creates, and from which she looks outward to a web of connections which resonate with the known and unknown spaces and events of time. Her ability to travel through those spaces of time to explore her personal past and the historical past of Ireland - often tenuously held in nuances of remembered or imagined details - is remarkable, moving and compelling. And her confrontation of the male-oriented legacy of the literary culture of which she is a part is formidable.

The view provided by Jody Allen-Randolph of Boland’s engagement with, and eventual impact upon, the Irish literary scene is instructive. She writes, speaking of Boland’s poetic development:
After what is customarily, and I think wrongly, viewed as 'a brilliant false start' ... Boland moved with each successive volume farther away from the old intersection between poetry and maleness which comprised the mainstream of Irish poetry. Consequently, her work lost status and grew less visible to that mainstream ... during the years between 1975 and 1987. Moreover, despite the consistency of her themes and obsessions, finding her voice came slowly over the course of her first three volumes. Looking back now, those early volumes chart a course, remarkable for its risk, experiment, and individual conscience.26

Despite such prolonged marginalisation, Boland’s literary reputation in contemporary Ireland has been transformed; further, her work has been an agent of transformation of the literary scene itself:

It would be difficult to overestimate the influence and change Boland has brought both to perceptions of Irish poetry and to the practice of it over the last two decades. The life she has inscribed in poetry exists as a powerful challenge and corrective to tradition. The professional fraternities - literary and academic - who were so quick to assign her a marginal status must now accept that not only was she exploring a different register of experience, with a different audience, but that register and audience have become the mainstream.27

It is hard to think of an Irish poet whose work has, over the last two decades, shown as much growth and courage as Eavan Boland’s. Eight years ago the widespread establishment view in Ireland had branded her a technically gifted but minor poet. Today ... she is increasingly officialized as the feminine laureate, or simply, and more accurately, as a major poet.

The quick shifts in recent years of Boland’s status - from woman poet, to feminist poet, to leading woman poet, to major poet - reflect the stresses and turmoil in the Irish literary world as it struggles to come to terms with its own unwinding history of prejudice.28

Boland’s achievement as a poet and prose writer, then, has been one of opening out new spaces in poetry and in the Irish literary tradition. This has come about, not by any impulse of conquest, of equating cultural space with power and seeking to annex it, but through a profoundly personal quest, at once deeply inward and directed outward to her cultural environment. The ‘placement’ she has achieved in terms of her literary reputation has been to do with ground won for herself and other women to speak their own truth on their own terms from the places and spaces of their own lives.

Boland’s response to physical place is inextricably bound up with her journey of discovering and reclaiming her own country, and setting down fresh roots in it - first, in metropolitan Dublin then in Dundrum - itself a new growth on a place of ancient story. Throughout Object Lessons, the heightened sensory vividness with which the details of physical settings are evoked by Boland, is matched by her sensitivity to the changes of light, weather and season, and the complex, layered atmospheres of rooms, homes - even of whole topographies of street and city. By virtue of the distilled interiority of such evocations, it seems to me possible to speak of Boland creating a sense of physical place as imbued with, conserving, and disclosing the lived spaces of history as well as, in the present, being occasions and contexts for the inner spaces of personal and creative search, struggle and communion.
I woke to the meadow bright with silver frost, and brilliant sunlight through the yellow leaves over the barn. What would I do without this calming open space to rest my eyes on? It is the mystical opening of the whole place. It is what I come back to when I have been away, as to a deeper breath. Each time I am gone, even for a weekend, I have to recover the house and the garden; something dies with absence and must be reconstructed.  

For May Sarton, who is single and lives alone, it is as if her whole house, surrounded by its garden and acres of woodland, is apprehended by her as a symbiotic environment, a living context for her life, self and work. Sarton’s home is a kind of alembic in which the inner tensions to do with her role as writer - seen as part of a spiritual and psychological journey - as well as conflicts regarding other aspects of her life, are encountered and engaged with.

The central theme of Sarton’s life as it is recorded in *Journal of a Solitude*, is the quest to turn the fact of personal and existential isolation into a solitude that will yield the possibility of self-communion as well as a centred and generous engagement with the wider world of neighbours, friends, and the readers of her work. Inner reflection, the grounding and nurturing work of practical daily care for herself and her household and garden, as well as her writing, are the mainstays of her life and inner journey. Thus one might say that Sarton dwells as fully as possible in her own place, and in the spaces of her inner life, so as to create balance in herself and serve the creative energies and processes which inform her writing life.

Sarton places herself in her particular way of life in an open and realistic manner. After receiving a letter from a married woman who says, ‘I envy your solitude with all my heart, and our courage to live as you must’ (122), Sarton reflects with sympathy on the common experience of women in marriages in which they and their creativity are undervalued, then says,

But there is something wrong when solitude such as mine can be ‘envied’ by a happily married woman with children.

Mine is not, I feel sure, the best human solution. Nor have I ever thought it was. In my case it has perhaps made possible the creation of some works of art, but certainly it has done so at a high price in emotional maturity and in happiness. What I have is space around me and time around me. (122-3)

Beyond her immediate world of homeplace and nearby village, Sarton travels out to meet friends and give readings of her work from time to time. She also has friends who visit, and receives arranged or unexpected calls from literary admirers. Such events are usually experienced by her as both enriching and disruptive, and the relation between her own self-created world and the claims and challenges of outside involvements are a source of tension, even of traumatic conflict:
There has been a long hiatus in this journal because I have had no days here alone, no days when
time opened out before me. I find that when I have an appointment, even an afternoon one, it
changes the whole quality of time. I feel overcharged. There is no space for what wells up from the
subconscious: those dreams and images live in deep still water and simply submerge when the day
gets scattered.

But it is the critical reception of her work that is the greatest source of tension in Sarton's
situation as a writer, apart from the ongoing and expected crises of her creative life. I would
like to reflect here on the question of her critical reputation in order to create a context for
comment on the impact of Journal of a Solitude.

Journal of a Solitude was published in 1973, when Sarton was sixty-one. Sarton's long
and prolific literary career had encompassed early critical acclaim followed by what she
regarded as a prolonged snub by the critical establishment. While sufficient popular success
sustained her financially, she speaks of the writing of one book a year necessary to produce
this situation as ‘a rape of the psyche.'

Journal of a Solitude was to change this. It drew to Sarton a young audience, while
finding many new older readers drawn particularly to the spiritual dimension of her writing. Furthermore, Journal of a Solitude was to be the first of a number of volumes of journals that
would be regarded by many, (partly to Sarton’s chagrin), as the most valuable part of her
achievement. Thus it was a watershed in Sarton's life as a writer, gaining her a much wider
audience, greater and more assured financial success, and critical acclaim.

While Journal of a Solitude takes the form of the traditional journal and does not break
new ground in literary terms, it convincingly carries the imprint of May Sarton's voice and the
power and vulnerability of the story of her writing life. If the phrase 'almost too easy', used
later by Sarton in speaking of the writing of her journal books up to that point, alerts one to the
dangers of flatness and complacency - dangers not always sidestepped in Journal of a Solitude
- her frequent meeting with outer pressure and inner duress in it provides tension in her
narrative of creating and becoming. And her attention to nature inevitably involves her in an
outer world of change and transformation.

Apart from her descriptions of the rooms of her own house, Sarton, who met Virginia
Woolf on several occasions, provides two memorable examples of the room as reflector and
vessel of a woman’s selfhood and creativity that Woolf spoke of. Here she is visiting her
friend, the poet Louise Bogan, and remembering a woman whose friendship with her began
much earlier and was to last longer:

I shall not ever forget walking into the apartment at 137 East 168th Street for the first time, after
an all-night drive from Washington. I felt a sharp pang of nostalgia as I walked into that civilized
human room, filled with the light of a sensitized, bitter, lucid mind. The impact was so great
because not since I walked into Jean Dominique’s two rooms above the school in Brussels had I
felt so much at home in my inner self. In each instance the habitation reflected in a very special
way the tone, the hidden music, as it were, of a woman, and a woman living alone, the sense of a
deep loam of experience and taste expressed in the surroundings, the room a shell that reverberated
with oceans and tides and waves of the owner’s past, the essence of a human life as it had lived
itself into certain colors, objets d’art, and especially into many books.(129-30)
Appealing workplaces are to be avoided. One wants a room with no view, so imagination can meet memory in the dark. When I furnished this study seven years ago, I pushed the long desk against a blank wall, so I could not see from either window. Once, fifteen years ago, I wrote in a cinder-block cell over a parking lot. It overlooked a tar-and-gravel roof. This pine shed under trees is not quite so good as the cinder-block study was, but it will do.

‘The beginning of wisdom,’ according to a West African proverb, ‘is to get you a roof.’ (26-7)

Annie Dillard, who is married and has a daughter, excludes all mention of her personal life from *The Writing Life*, which contains detailed accounts of the writing spaces, present and past, she has sought out and set up - always outside her own home. In this she is very much in contrast to both May Sarton and Eavan Boland.

While *Object Lessons* includes some material about Boland’s children and family life, this mostly remains, not at a distance, but somehow implicit, as I have suggested above. She does frequently speak, though, of her roles as mother and housewife, having desired and achieved a way of being a poet which integrates such ‘ordinariness’. This is a further contrast with Dillard whose embarkation on the writing life involves a removal from the domestic holding and sustaining patterns in her life and a courting of extremes which will yield illuminations within the darkness of absence, unknowing, isolation. This is, in effect, a version of the *via negativa* which foregrounds a dramatically risky and difficult spiritual process.

But it may also be the case that, in choosing mostly sealed-off rooms or dwellings to write in, Dillard is acting out an isolation she feels in her role as a writer, despite the acclaim she has received (she received the Pulitzer Prize for *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* when she was thirty). Perhaps she is emphasising her independence in the face of that acclaim (along with the adverse criticisms she has received), by replicating the scenario of, as it were, a room without a view in which she cannot look out, while no-one else can look in.

The intensity all this implies is offset to some degree by Dillard’s wry humour and sense of scale, and the fact of her inhabiting writing spaces which, though all have elements of deprivation, are well-equipped for her task of writing and more or less in shout of, if not metaphysical help, then more practical forms of assistance.

Indeed the world of the places where Dillard writes is not an entirely unpeopled world, and anecdotes are recorded regarding a visit from two schoolboys (55-56), games of baseball with some boys on a music camp (29-9), and the incident of the mysterious chess game in Hollins College library, which turns on the nocturnal visits of a couple with a baby (35-6). In her conversation, and baseball playing, with the boys, Dillard is companionable and relaxed. By contrast, a conversation in her shed with the local ferryman founders in the gulfs of confusion when she attempts to convey something of her life as a writer (53-4).

Apart from her time spent in the library of Hollins College, Dillard describes herself writing in small shacks or sheds in an outdoor setting. While exclusion of the environments around her workplaces is often presented as an important part of her gaining the concentration and attunement needed for her writing, I presume that Dillard as a nature writer also takes regard of such environments, and situates herself in them for reasons beyond the isolation they
provide. There are few clues to this in The Writing Life, but Dillard’s commentary on her writing of Holy the Firm provides an example:

I began the book on one island and wrote most of it on another island; it took a long time. ... During some of the long, empty months at work on the book, I was living in a one-room log cabin on an empty beach. I had not yet borrowed the freezing cabin up the beach to use as a study; I did not yet know how foolish it was to plan days of solitary confinement in which my only activity was walking four or five feet from the bed to the desk. ... Nothing changed but the tides. Sometimes the empty beach was wide, and sometimes it was narrow. I could see it all from the bed, even on the darkest nights. The bed faced the beach and the water, and so did the desk; so did the table and so did the sink. The whole house was a ship’s rail. I turned to the work.(47-9)

Here, the exposure to a natural setting seems relentless rather than energising, reflecting the deadlocked process of writing the book at that stage. By contrast, the following fantasied description of writing situates the writer high in air - not flying but floating:

Every morning you climb several flights of stairs, enter your study, open the French doors, and slide your desk and chair out into the middle of the air. The desk and chair float thirty feet from the ground, between the crowns of maple trees. The furniture is in place; you go back for your thermos of coffee. Then, wincing, you step out again through the French doors and sit down on the chair and look over the desktop. You can see clear to the river from here in winter. You pour yourself a cup of coffee.

Birds fly under your chair. In spring, when the leaves open in the maples’ crowns, your view stops in the treetops just beyond the desk; yellow warblers hiss and whisper on the high twigs, and catch flies. Get to work. Your work is to keep cranking the flywheel that turns the gears that spin the belt in the engine of belief that keeps you and your desk in midair.(11)

The move away from earth recurs in a subsequent description of climbing a ladder, in which the frequent image of darkness is repeated. This time, the process of not only struggle but conclusion is imaged:

You climb a long ladder until you can see over the roof, or over the clouds. You are writing a book. ...Your feet feel the steep ladder’s balance; the long muscles in your thighs check its sway. You climb steadily, doing your job in the dark. The sun hits you. The bright wideness surprises you; you had forgotten there was an end. You look back at the ladder’s two feet on the distant grass, astonished.(19-20)

The Writing Life contains a number of descriptions of places that are physical, factual, incontrovertibly there... Mostly these tend to be associated with confinement, with lack of freedom - and they are chosen or designed for this. There are many counterbalancing images of flight, floating, moves up into and through air and space. Thus, for Dillard, the writing life would seem to be a mixture of constriction and struggle in particular earthbound places, and boundariless movement through space which, except for one actual experience of flight recorded by her, is symbolic flight through the space of an inner world. The metaphor of flight accumulates power in the course of the book, though it ends with the Icarus-like death of Dave Rahm.

It seems desirable, then, to turn to Dillard’s invocation of another male figure, the very grounded sky-gazer, John Constable, in a passage that inimitably combines contemplating
skies, beaches, computer screens, with the activities of writing, painting and rowing - both off the world’s edge and into the sky:

‘I have been doing some skyling,’ Constable wrote a friend. I have been doing some scrolling, here and elsewhere, scrolling up and down beaches and blank monitor screens scrying for signs: dipping pens into ink, dipping papers into vats of colour, dipping paddles into seas, and bearing God knows where. The green line of photons forms words at the shore of darkness. Darkness empties behind the screen in an illimitable cone. Shall we go rowing again? Shall we launch again into the deep and row up the skies?(90)
SECTION TWO
CHAPTER ONE

March 28th, 1993 - June 18th, 1993:
Barwon Heads; London; Hawthornden Castle, Midlothian; Colchester

1. COMMENTARY

The journal entries in this chapter begin at the home of my mother, in Barwon Heads, Victoria - I had recently left my own home in Port Noarlunga in Adelaide and travelled there. My journal then tracks my journeys to London and to Scotland, where I stayed at Hawthornden Castle International Retreat for Writers in Lasswade, Midlothian. My four-week sojourn there will be my main focus. The final entries are in Colchester, Essex, where I stayed at the home of my friend Angela, before returning to Australia.

Hawthornden Castle overlooks the valley of the River North Esk. It consists of a castle dating from the Middle Ages, with the next part of the building added in 1638. The dining-room, drawing-room, and additional bedrooms were built in the eighteenth century. The partly ruined medieval tower is now a library. The river runs two hundred feet below.

During my time there I was in company with four other poets - Paul, Vicki and Marion from England, and Danton (who is also a novelist) from the Philippines. My original journal records a lot about the group dynamic which developed. For me this was a mixture of pleasure and pain as, while I found each of my fellow writers personally congenial, I felt under considerable duress at times, and experienced a sense of constriction. This was partly to do with personalities, as one would expect in such a situation, though the contrasting approaches to sharing social space in operation may well have reflected cultural differences. So, like other residential fellowships I have experienced, Hawthornden Castle was an ambiguous idyll.

But an idyll it was. Removed from the sphere of daily personal responsibility, and the need to cook and manage the practicalities of life, I had freedom and space and time to develop my work as a writer. I was in a well-resourced environment - there was a large library - with a beautiful natural setting to explore, take refuge in, and - as is my custom - write about.

The room I was given (it was on the second floor, near a jutting section of the old keep wall) was small, with the desk at the end of the bed facing the window. However, it was virtually impossible to sit at this desk, because of insufficient space - I was allocated another space for working in a larger, rather cold room with a long wooden table. But in my room was a small fireplace, with a comfortable chair beside it. I often wrote there, working in the other room only when I needed to type up drafts of poems. In those days of mid-spring, the fires I lit were companionable, as well as being a wonderful image of, and spur to, creativity.

There was a rule at Hawthornden that resident writers were not to socialise during the day - after breakfast and until the evening meal, silence mostly prevailed except for when practical matters arose that needed to be dealt with. This was not a problem for me, and I think the other writers adapted to it well and found it helped concentration, as I did. Lunch - always a flask of soup with a sandwich - was left on a tray outside one's room, and afternoon tea was
placed on a table in a corridor at 5 o'clock. These arrangements had an austerity about them, but were sensible. A few injunctions from the administrator not to be going off to Edinburgh during the day were, however, intrusive, and seemed to be based on a rather draconian notion of the writer's life. As will become clear, my own way of working as a writer involves a lot of physical movement - both walking in natural settings and exploring new human environments - and as I will suggest below, this is for me an important way of balancing the inner and outer dimensions of life, as well as body and psyche.

As past experience led me to expect, there was a phase of adaptation to a new place and people, followed by resistance and turmoil as I geared myself to work. Then, after effort and endurance, the energies and ideas started to flow. The outcome was very productive for me, with a number of new poems I valued, and editing and reshaping of existing poems.

I had been suffering from an extreme depletion of energy for a long time before my visit to Hawthornden, and this prevailed during my stay there. I've left many references to my health and states of feeling in the account that follows, not to burden the reader, but because these states and conditions were challenges I had to work with to make progress with my writing. Further, it's a basic conviction of mine that the way one meets such bodily and psychic conditions is an essential part of the chemistry of creativity. In particular, I am interested in the way depression, and difficult states of mind and soul, can be turned round so that they become part of the fuel of creativity: a driving force rather than an impediment. Grappling with strong emotional and unconscious material brings force and depth to writing, and by giving shape to such material, one is also furthering self-understanding. Thus one's writing may act as a kind of mirror of the self at moments or phases of crisis and/or transformation.

The beauty of the environment at Hawthornden figures strongly in this section. Walking in natural settings has always been a great resource and pleasure to me, both personally, and in my working life as a writer. I habitually punctuate my day with walks, which are the occasion of connecting with a larger sense of the world, working through creative blockages and problems, and discovering new material and fresh images. While I possess little technical knowledge about biology and geology, I research subjects as and when I need to, and I have trained myself to observe details closely. It may be that the limits of my technical knowledge sometimes act as a spur to my taking imaginative leaps in finding new ways of describing plants and animals, and so on.

The reader of the poems I produced during this phase will see evidence of various kinds of engagement with challenging personal themes. In 'Lamprey', for instance, my state of exhaustion triggers a connection with a creature which sucks the very substance from its prey. 'Accident' records a past traumatic experience of a series of road accidents, and points up the precarious nature at times of one's conscious hold on one's direction in life - as, indeed, on survival itself. By contrast, 'In the House' is a portrait of enclosure, of a woman living in a state of self-displacement so extreme as to make her relation to her environment one of lacerating dissonance.
A further study of enclosure, 'Rooms', was written soon after, and similarly creates a sense of physical space as charged by intense emotional and psychic space. This poem also looks forward to a number of others (such as 'Primal Scene') where past experiences of loss and unfulfilment are held in consciousness, and a new integration of them attempted. The starting point of this poem was my interest in the ways lived human experience can be stored in the earth or air of a place; another influence was Emily Dickinson's 'There's a certain slant of light', in which the metaphysical nature of certain effects of light is powerfully conveyed.

But other tones and moods are present in these poems as there was also a reaction in myself against my own rather beseiged and sombre state, as well as a certain bleakness in the ethos of Hawthornnden. There were certainly moments when I connected with energies to do with breaking out of, or through, static or problematic situations, as in 'Flowers' with its lightly ironic tone, while 'At Hawthornnden Castle' is predominantly celebratory, with an energetic attentiveness to physical details within the castle ('Clock') as well as its environs. I now see that sequence as an act of earthing myself at Hawthornnden, as well as an offering in return for the residential fellowship which enabled me to go there.

It would seem that the life of the psyche and imagination can leaven and rebalance, as well as draw one into the depths, and this fact is also reflected in my four poems on sea creatures, with a strong sense of play in 'Starfish' (originally called 'In Search of Starfish') and 'In Defence of Dugongs', counterbalancing the adversarial tension of 'Wolf-Fish' and 'Lamprey'.

Looking back at this chapter, a number of themes come into focus. First, constriction versus spaciousness. While this tension was, as it were, part of the psychic baggage I took to Hawthornnden, it was played out socially too, as I have mentioned, and physically. My small room with its frequent, often rather guiltily lit fires, was a haven, but outside the castle, weather permitting, was a realm of discovery and - whether my mood allowed me to enjoy it or not! - freedom.

Exhaustion versus energy was a second theme. I contended with a deepening sense of personal, and even cultural, isolation at Hawthornnden. While the hospitality and shelter offered there were sustaining in a physical sense, I longed for the simple, mutually honest conversations I have with friends and which I find a source of nurture - the luxury of being able to name some part of my own truth to another person. At the same time, I was taken deeper into my own inner resources and was surprised by the energy and resilience of some of the poetry I wrote. The great drama being enacted outside the walls of Hawthornnden, of the transformation of bare branches into leafed ones, was occurring as I looked out at the valley from the rampart of the castle or walked among the trees. This image of the self-renewal of nature was certainly heartening to me, and I came to think of it as, at the very least, an inspiration helping me to connect with fresh creative energies.
2. JOURNAL

Sunday, March 28th: Barwon Heads

Unpacking. Sorting things. Day-dreaming. A walk in the cold wind to the sea. The particular fragrant scent which I call the smell of the sea enveloping me as I stand on the cliffs looking out at that dark blue expanse with scrolls of white across it.

My brother Paul is painting my mother's house. Late in the afternoon, I say, 'Let's have a launch!' - this will be the only launch I have for my new book as the publishers did not provide one. Paul opens champagne, I present him and my mother with copies of Mayflies in Amber. They drink and read, I taste champagne for the first time in six months.

A festive meal. After Paul has gone, my mother and I watch a documentary on working-class people who have lived in Port Melbourne through several generations. We lived next door to that suburb, in South Melbourne, and I grew up there. The people speak of a sense of belonging, of neighbourhood, of continuity.

Saturday, April 3rd

I remember finding, this morning, a dragonfly in the grass, observing it close up then touching it. Its black feet were clamped on to a grass blade - but it must have been near the end of its strength, to be so still and unresisting. The wings had a fine green line running along the front edge, then a few rows of little windows in line with that edge, breaking into a crazy-path swirl of glittering panes; the texture of the wings, halfway between clingwrap and cellophane. The body had subdued light browns and an olive colour tinged with lime: the colours of a camouflage battledress designed for a non-violent army - an army of peacekeepers wanting to blend in with the vegetation while they do their work of living. That, at least, is my fantasy.

So weary, but working as I can to prepare things for my trip. Sorting papers, leaving addresses etc. In the evening I watch TV with my mother to keep her company, since I'm off on my own most of the time, working in my study and in my head.

A lovely, totally ruffled, almost round bird on a power line today, with black eyes, beak hidden. Of all creatures, birds are my darlings.

Sunday, April 4th

Another promising day of light made up of honey and lemon and peach. My body and spirit want to walk through it ... and so they do at the end of the morning, after more sorting of papers and the last photocopying of journals and poems. Then an Easter lunch, a week early, with Kyle, my nephew, Paul and my mother. More working through till Paul returns at 9.30 p.m. As before, we are all subdued by fatigue - but relaxed and congenial, so our tiredness does not seem a problem. I go to bed almost ready for my journey in practical terms. I'll have space for inner thoughts at the airport tomorrow.
Monday, April 5th: London
London at 6 a.m. Before landing, traceries and constellations of amber lights with a pinkish tinge - all the size of pinpricks.

A walk with Maire in the Crystal Palace park for two hours: side by side, proceeding slowly, meditatively, receiving the glimpses of new life - chalices of red-tipped leaves on pruned bushes by the pond, bobbles of light green dotting vast dark trees, arcs of blossom, delicate dancing small willows.

Wednesday, April 7th
Awake before midnight, then a marathon of reading and loneliness. The Independent seems to have taken on a dreariness.

The birds that sing so piercingly, vivaciously, in the pre-dawn hours. Who are they? Where are they from? Perhaps they are jet-lagged too? It is the sound from the heart of the crystal.

Tuesday, April 13th: Hawthornden Castle, Lasswade, Midlothian
Catch a train from Angela's home in Colchester to central London, the tube, a bus to Edinburgh at 9 a.m. I arrive at 5 p.m. My luggage is too heavy. Exhausted and stressed, I am obsessed with fantasies of illness on the bus.

A taxi driver gets me to Hawthornden Castle before dark and it’s a good welcome there - friendly, down-to-earth people. I meet my fellow writers, all poets, who also seem very down-to-earth people - I wonder what declensions of relationship, what changes in perception of each other, lie ahead of us in the next four weeks.

I have the smallest room. On the outside of it is printed the names of those who have stayed there before me, including the only two Australians who’ve been here - Vera Newsom and Les Murray. So this is where the Australians are put! Most of the other names I don’t know. There is no wardrobe, a real fireplace, a desk stuck between the bed and the window overlooking a drop of hillside, starkly bare trees, a stone outcrop of castle.

Wednesday, April 14th
After a night of much waking and deep sleeping, a morning walk - mud and keenly fresh air. Later, sorting out papers and energies, giving myself space to arrive here, recuperate from many-layered exhaustion.

Late afternoon, up the track to the town of Bonnyrigg: past girls on ponies (the loam of the track crisscrossed with horseshoe marks); the back of a place where dogs are kept (large dogs in wire cells with concrete floors, barking loudly and desperately); dark trees that are a labyrinth of buds. And somewhere along the way, a bumble bee, seeming like a small furry animal.

From Bonnyrigg, a taxi back after shopping - walking up the driveway I stop to look at buds, green and pink, and close my mouth over one so that my tongue can circle it - very
interesting... I reflect on the fact that poetry is a very physical thing - one is plunged into the curiosity of the senses. I remember gearing myself to write a poem on a grandfather clock ('Longcase Clock', included in *Voices from the Honeycomb*) - in Devon, years ago - waiting till everyone had left the room before opening the case and taking the pendulum chain out, weighing it in my hands, then feeling the texture of the wood and putting my arms around the clock. I knew it in a different way after that.

*Thursday, April 15th*

At 7 a.m. I walk down a track that circles the castle, allows a good view of the river. Filigree patterns of frost on leaf and plant. It’s important to start typing *something*, so I revise poems from *The Body in Time* - this gives some sense of achievement while I wait for new poems. It’s too early to expect them yet.

Another excursion to Bonnyrigg where there’s an open air market - people with strong but world-used (used-by-the-world) faces. This is a housing estate area with a culture which reflects the fact. Things are a bit run down at the shopping centre, there are no airs and graces. I take out two books on fish from the library, then catch a taxi again. Back at the long table, typing...

Finding myself overwhelmed by some of my fellow writers’ dominance of the conversation, I don’t socialise before or after dinner but concentrate on conserving strength by retiring early. By my bed, Chekhov’s notebooks. I cull items as I read.

Dinner at the ‘Continental’ to commemorate the great reform [the abolition of serfdom in 1861].
Tedious and incongruous. To dine, drink champagne, make a racket, and deliver speeches about national consciousness, the conscience of the people, freedom, and such things, while slaves in tail-coats are running round your tables, veritable serfs, and your coachmen wait outside in the street, in the bitter cold - that is lying to the Holy Ghost.

* The dog walked in the street and was ashamed of its crooked legs.
* Those who are more stupid and more dirty than we are called the people. The administration classifies the population into taxpayers and non-taxpayers. But neither classification will do; we are all the people and all the best we are doing is the people’s work.

* A bedroom. The light of the moon shines so brightly through the window that even the buttons on his night shirt are visible.
* But perhaps the universe is suspended on the tooth of some monster.
* I cannot bear the crying of children, but when my child cries, I do not hear.

* His income is twenty-five to fifty thousand, and yet out of poverty he shoots himself.

*Friday, April 16th*

Broken sleep, a blurred waking, but alert enough when I get going. I punctuate the day with a lot of typing up and revision of poems from *The Body in Time*, three walks ... and eating and being hungry. In the evening, the rings under my eyes tell me I’ve put in a full day. At dinner I’m open to what happens - what happens is by now the usual - the same voices, no space. I
try to go with it, having dealt with my alienation and desire to withdraw.

I had walked out to Rosewell in the early afternoon - a dour town indeed; and the light pervasive rain induces in me a contracted state of mind, closing in vision. But on the way back I stopped again and again to look at buds and unfolding leaves. The buds like candles, emergent leaves full of green tips. I will try to write about this.

*Sunday, April 18th*

Spend the morning at the computer.

Read *Human Wishes* by Robert Hass. The best poems cinematic, emblematic, resonant, but elsewhere the reader is being made captive to over-involved inner processes, a baroque solipsism. A feeling that words are an opulent resource being squandered.

Out walking on the road - somewhere the sound of drums and bagpipes - but where? It’s a bit unlikely, even ghostly, on this bleak rainy afternoon. The idea of writing a poem on car accidents, since I’ve had so many, pops into my mind.

More work then another walk in the rain with an umbrella.

A feast in the special dining room; candles inside curved glass holders with painted designs. Alec, the shy young chef, has excelled himself. He serves and takes away the plates in such a self-effacing manner.

*Monday, April 19th*

5 a.m. waking.

A 7 a.m. walk in the rain, under an umbrella. At breakfast, everyone is very impressed with my early walks, so I think I’ll keep on doing them. The conversation is nicely balanced and humorous - I enjoy it despite feeling like a dead mackerel.

I light a fire in my room to keep me company. I ask how I will nurture myself so I can sustain the efforts I am making without getting exhausted, or looking to alcohol to give me a lift.

I sit writing my journal. At 1 p.m., rushing to get the bus - this, on top of my exhaustion, makes me disoriented for the whole afternoon I spend in Edinburgh. The only thing to do is wander round and get the feel of the place, but I am on edge, can’t enjoy doing this - even though exploring new places is one of my favourite pastimes.

*Tuesday, April 20th*

Awake at 2 a.m. for a long time - how long? - one can never measure. A dream about two women, two faces - a social one and a real one?

A white sky, the cawing of crows, rain in the air yet it’s not quite raining. There are small primroses dotting the grass beside the drive. I’ve been seeing some very large earthworms, but today this long thin one - a ripple of flesh on asphalt...

Walks and typing in the afternoon.

*Wednesday, April 21st*

Popping into the keep library to do research on cuttlefish, squid, starfish (forget to look up
dugong, which has been on my mind since Danton spoke of a friend writing of one to describe her sense of her own oddity).

Forging on with *The Body in Time* on the computer.

*Thursday, April 22nd*

Typing and revising on the computer - I'm into the rhythm of it now.

A long afternoon walk.

*Friday, April 23rd*

Feeling down, in the grip of loneliness, I try to work through it and stay at the computer all morning. *The Body in Time* is coming together - the main thing left to revise and type is the poem on my father's death, 'In Memory' - I'm not in a state to face that today.

I start typing the poems that will belong to *In Praise of Seahorses*, my book on sea creatures - if the gods so wish it, that is. I've had doubts about my ability to sustain a whole book on this theme - though it is true that the ocean is a rather large place.

On the bus to Edinburgh at 1.30 p.m. - a change of environment is called for. I don't feel so well when I get there but, on impulse, take a bus tour of the city, sitting on the upper deck in piercing winds. A splendid, fascinating city - I'd love to explore some of those areas in the old town on foot. Then a brief taste of the National Art Gallery, to which I'll return - I've never been in a more welcoming art museum.

Walking along Princes Street, popping into shops, mainly Waterstones - a virtual palace of books: they've even got one of mine. At one point I stumble against a table of books, knocking *Assert Yourself*, which in turn dislodges *Managing Anger* and *Your Erroneous Zones*, which tumble to the floor.

Retiring early, I read poems by Wislawa Szymborska (*People on a Bridge*, Forest Books) with deep interest - a refreshing, passionately questioning, calmly subversive poet - she brings some rather different qualities as a woman to what I think of, too simplistically, as the Eastern European style of poetry. But she is a very individual Polish poet.

*Saturday, April 24th*

I wake from a sequence of dreams - and the fact that I'm having a lot of dreams now leads me to hope I might be moving into writing some new work. One takes me into a new space, reversing what I normally do - but what was it?

After breakfast, Irene, the administrator at Hawthornden, shows us the caves under the castle - there is a dovecote with square holes, large enough for nests, carved out of the wall - a large honeycomb. I look down the well - white sky, a fringe of trees, my head, and the walls of the well reflected in that far depth. There are many nooks and some wonderfully worn steps - soft sculptured curves in the reddish stone. We all chat amiably outside about flowers and trees and many things, then go off in different directions.

I sit in my chair with my feet up and open the expensive pad of blank white paper, and take my fountain pen. I have looked forward to this great luxury of writing with such materials, which I've saved up for when I started to originate new work. I begin a sequence on the castle
and its environment, with a forget-me-not, a tiny daisy, a wild garlic flower, and a downy feather, all by me on the desk.

I sketch out one poem which starts from the moment I walked out of the castle at 7.30 this morning - the sunlight fell directly on a long thick verge of grass steeped in dew, with a radiant effect. I write about a birch tree with a wonderfully stained bark that I have been looking at for some days. I think I would like to write about the well and the caves and ... we'll see. In all this the problem of starting from description is much in the foreground - particularly when I throw some images together about the daisy, now open, the dying forget-me-not etc. A poem is not an aggregation of details, it needs to be a process and to connect with a deeper level of perception. Yet careful attention to detail is usually an essential part of one's way into this process, and can act as a trigger for other levels of engagement. Well, I'll see how all these ideas for poems work out...

Later, at dusk, working in my second-storey room, I see two bumble bees fly at my window; one returns as if it wants to come in.

Monday, April 26th
The computer is in trouble so I hire the typewriter, type up sections from my Hawthornden poem, a dugong poem - sketched today - and shape up poems from earlier notes on starfish and sea-anemone. I remember my idea of doing a poem, or part of one, about carbuncles on whales.

A pleasant meal as we are all getting along swimmingly. Tonight we talk about soap operas, as well as Sylvanía Waters - now being shown on television here and being sneered at in the papers. In the drawing room, at last light looking out from this high place towards the tops of great trees rising from the valley. It is like being in a Caspar David Friedrich painting.

Wednesday, April 28th
Leaving by the back door for a walk before breakfast, I see a squirrel quite close by, on the strong creeper climbing the castle wall. Its coat is that lovely mixture of grey and light brown, its eye large and bright. When it sees me it scampers down the creeper - somehow! - and I see it at rest further below.

The morning is a struggle to work because of a difficult emotional state. I revise my new typed poems. For some reason, my attention turns to lampreys, with their horrible jawless mouths, and I sketch some ideas for a poem.

Thursday, April 29th
A dream seems to encompass me as I wake up, but I do not keep any of it. At breakfast I realise how depressed I am. People talk of dreams - Marion and Vicki of flying dreams. (Among all the many dreams I've recorded over the years, there have been none in which I am flying, though there was one which showed a host of butterflies flying above Hiroshima). There is a photograph of the five of us taken the previous week - I look ghost-like, worn, cancelled out.

I reflect on the poems I have been writing: first the dugong, because Danton mentioned
a woman he knew had written about one, expressing her own sense of ungainliness through it. Then the lampreys, which drain the life-blood out of things.

Now I open the book on fish at a large picture of a wolf-fish, which wears an expression of malevolent sourness. No, I don’t want to write about that, I think. I decide I am not fit for work this morning, so plan to do the walk people have been talking of, following the river to Roslin Chapel. I borrow Irene’s wellingtons and set out.

I walk slowly over the mud and negotiate various hazards along the way, parting branches, climbing over and under great mossed trunks. There are many fallen and dead trees. But I stop again and again to look out at the valley, and down at the steep drop to the river. I feel a lot of buds, surprised at how soft the thin, silken bronze ones are. I also taste a few in my mouth, mainly choosing ones breaking into leaf - which are even more interesting.

All is quiet, except when a pheasant flies up and off; I see a large fox in the distance, and not a few rabbits. I cling on to nettles once, when slipping; at other times, dead branches that move. Because I know I could easily end up in the mud, or with a sprained ankle, I curb my impatience and impetuosity. Step by step...

Later, I decide I will write about the wolf-fish, using it to explore the feeling of ugliness - of physical and spiritual ugliness. I reflect that this impulse is part of the whole drift of my work now - taking on the difficult and unknown sides of myself, and of human experience generally.

That settled, I move on to further adventures in the mud, glad to get away from the deep drop below this lookout - the guard rail is missing. Inside my head, vertigo ripples out as from a stone dropped into water.

Eventually, true to form, I run out of track - it’s clear I have lost my way...

As I sit writing my journal in the afternoon, window open to the sunlit day, a bumble bee comes to visit, landing in a corner of the sill. Many ablations and exercises follow, whose meaning I cannot gauge, but it’s all very busy. Then the bee rests. After an hour, it has gone. I remember the ones I saw today, tufts of yellow and black carpet, manoeuvring themselves among plants and undergrowth. They seem to throw themselves into things while having charmed lives, always arriving where they want to, or hovering over some particular spot, making last minute decisions.

It’s 4 p.m. now, a coolness coming in, the day dimming. After tea, I stare down at my fate for the rest of the afternoon - my goodness, he’s horrible! I find another drawing which shows the wolf-fish open-mouthed - its fang-like teeth, which regrow every year, certainly justify its name. The plot thickens...

In the event, the poem I sketch is about hatred, and will become this:

WOLF-FISH

The mouth a seal of sour violence
clamped down on what refusals?

An armoury of fangs - each year,
a new crop grown - needs only
the knowledge culled by the eye
afloat in its celluloid bubble.

Once harvested, beheaded in
the name of happy marketing

lest shoppers be unnerved by
an odious look, or suddenly falter -
teeth tearing into flesh built
from sea urchins - remembering

pressure's slow fuse, sight
a shadowy filter, the grinding

of stone into dust to reach
smudged tears of meat.

Hate feeds on such small morsels.

**Friday, April 30th**

At 6.30 a.m. I'm propped up in bed, looking at the thick mist. Part of the ruins of the castle keep is on the left, the branches of a huge, seemingly bare tree on the right. Beyond, a steep green rise. Bird sounds; water moving through the pipes.

I feel great on my early morning walk in the mist then very downcast at breakfast - this sets the tone of the day. It is again a struggle to work. I think of the walk yesterday, when I proceeded so guardedly - wobbling and squelching through deep mud, hanging on to whatever was there - sometimes nothing much - but going on...

I rest on the floor for a long time in the middle of the day, light a fire to cheer myself, write postcards after abandoning plans to work - staring at lines on wolf-fishes and lampreys to no good effect. On a walk this morning the idea of writing on lobsters came to me - lobsters in human culture; lobsters being confused with telephones; lobsters dancing in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* - and I was also drawn by a picture of a lantern fish, dotted with lights. I do some research on the latter, but leave it for another, more mentally alert time, to research bioluminescence with regard to the lantern fish. Lights beneath the sea... (The latter image will be present in a poem written much later - 'Birds at Sunset'.)

Some thunder after 4 o'clock, which adds to the attraction of going out to get some air. I walk to Rosewell and back, finding that I am overdressed - the day has been warm.

**Saturday, May 1st**

A walk is planned for the afternoon; I set myself to work for the morning. I've brought a dead bumble bee back from my walk in a white tissue, and sketch out a poem on it - the energy is there in spite of my difficult state of mind. Then I begin a poem on buds: after three weeks of looking at and touching them, only now can I begin to find any words for them. Several hours on the computer, typing up my new sea creature poems: starfish, dugongs, lamprey - and the wolf-fish, still unformed.
At 2 o'clock we drive to the Pentland hills - Vicki, Paul, Marion and myself, (Danton is resting) - and walk until 4.30. The day continues sunny, with some sombre patches. Lambs tugging at their mothers' dugs, wagging their tails and being licked as they do so. One sheep moves further away, not wanting to be looked at by me as she gives milk. The hills are smooth green, with dry patches linking up like a belt, or another image which I lose... The trails are faint lines, the bullocks small ciphers; distant walkers are ants.

Returning, we see in the distance a hare so large that at first I think it's a small deer. A few of the stones on the dirt road are mauve or dark blue. We are high up, the day is clear and cold, the line of the hills against the sky is sharp.

At the evening meal, we discuss food and poems. Anecdotes about breaking plates; talk of cooking a marmalade pudding like the one we are eating, to attract a lover; recipes - I suggest this as an idea for a poem, along with breaking plates. Vicki suggests a poem concerned with doing something practical or physical, and says this is a good creative writing exercise.

**Sunday, May 2nd**

Still tired but slowly mending. Walk before and after breakfast, at which I'm downcast. Sitting in my chair, the fire going, the best thing to do is write this journal. Later in the morning, an attempt at some poems...

I break my rules, and have a drink of the whisky I bought two days ago, before lunch, and instead of eating my soup eat three 'Mint Montanas' which I bought with the whisky. This childish rebellion results in a strong and rather salty poem, 'In the House', which looks back to a previous incarnation of mine as a housewife.

I can see in it some remote influence from Marion's poems, which I was reading last night, and the end is perhaps influenced by Vicki's 'Marigolds' which I am very struck by, but the main thing that triggers it is the dinner conversation from the night before - about marital unhappiness, breaking plates, and 'doing' poems.

I want to record the earth smell of two weeks ago, when I was out walking in the rain. Thinking of the smell of water in flower vases (which Vicki's poem on marigolds has put in my mind) has brought it back.

At 6.30, another quick walk - mountains in a crystal mist through an opening in the trees. Out on the road, I can see rain in the far distance - a charcoal dust sifting down on phosphorescent islands of cloud. I have forgotten to note the small holes already riddling so many of the new leaves - life beginning to be over as it starts. And the shiny compact flies on the small silver birch I've written about - the other day there was a cluster of them at work on the trunk's green mould. Tonight its leaves looked lovely - so delicate, and beautifully arranged in air.

I stopped to look over the valley and saw the slant of rain (remembering Emily Dickinson's 'certain slant of light') veiling the many layers and rhythmic lines of trees - under its cupped horizon, the valley is filling up with green. I wondered, while walking in the Pentland hills the other day, if there are more shades of green in the world than any other? But I suppose that is a meaningless speculation, given the mystery and infinite variability of colour.
Monday, May 3rd

Typing up yesterday's poems on the computer - 'In the House' and 'Bumble Bee' and 'Buds' - as well as my morning walk poem, which is unfinished. I'm pleased that the poems have started to come. Back in my bedroom for lunch, I start a poem on 'Talk', which becomes a poem on 'Words' - eventually, 'The Spoken Word' - which is triggered by my sense of being bombarded by words on many social occasions here. And I begin to develop ideas for a poem on my three car accidents last year. (All of these were due to brake failure - a fact which by now I've come to read as a lesson about the headlong pace of my energy, which is often spurred on by stoic attitudes about following my isolated trajectory, no matter what, and a desire to compensate for recurrent fatigue.)

A headache and the sunlight call me out - a long walk past the British Coal site, with many levels and bands of different coloured soils, and one coal-rich drop, exposed to view. A nature trail takes me to a bridge. I walk up and see the view of Roslin and Roslin chapel in the distance. By the road is a lot of wild garlic, and the word 'joists' activates in my mind as I look at the four lemon-coloured segments at the top. The word 'brocade' similarly lit up in my mind some days ago and is now in my 'Buds' poem.

I look again at the dead bumble bee in my room and see that its thighs are like patent leather - I decide to put this in my poem if I can, though it felt complete, or nearly so, this morning. Perhaps I should put 'sumptuous tact of velvet', rather than 'sumptuous discretion of velvet', so as to reduce the number of syllables? On second thoughts, no, that would be altogether too studied. And simply wouldn't work.

Wednesday, May 5th

Up and out early, feeling balanced again on a deep level.

The massive release of green energy out in the valley has its microcosmic counterpart in my own creative life. New ideas for poems flood in, while I can see what I have achieved in recent days gathering momentum, becoming substantial. I write down subjects for poems I would like to write - on travel, feathers, forgiveness (thinking of an article on the disgraced Christa Wolf in the papers, the Sunday before last), and obsession.

On my afternoon walk I collect feathers, planning a substantial poem on the subject to replace the desultory, rather off-centre little poem that, at the moment, forms part of my sequence 'At Hawthornden Castle'. The other sections, now complete, are 'First Walk' and 'Birch'. But I decide I will not have the poem in numbered sections, but instead do a loosely grouped sequence, so that I will then be able to include 'Bumble Bee' and 'Buds' (shaping up well), along with 'Feathers'.

Other poems I have completed are 'Accident' and 'In the House', which represent new developments in their psychological/physical fusing of detail, and please me well. My sketched sea creature poems are in a pile to the side at the moment, but I began to retype 'In Search of Starfish' this morning, trying out the suggestion made unanimously at the workshop that I begin at stanza four. (An early unedited version of this poem is included in Appendix 2.) The dugongs, lampreys and wolf-fish wait in the wings for now.

I can't stand wearing the same clothes, day in, day out.
It’s 5.30, and I’m having a slight whisky, on the pretext that writing at such great length in this journal today is wearing me out. As indeed it is.
On my afternoon walk I watched the colony of crows near the front gate, seeing them as mobiles wheeling above me. Such an aggressively absolute blackness!
My experience of trees becomes more compelling each day - outside the fence, a vast oak, the upper side of its branches lichen-covered, as if sprinkled with dark green dust. I don’t know how to write about this, but such presences seep into one. Given the paper I gave on poetry and trees earlier in the year, I certainly feel drawn towards, and challenged by, trees as a subject for poetry. Stopping at the small birch tree that I’ve written about, I can see it very clearly as a (partial) self-image.

BIRCH

Always the driven, frustrated maker
I remember shantungs I sewed when young,
the oil paints I failed to teach myself to use:
half-mixed tints drenching the blond wood.

Slubbed and burnished, this trunk
is stained the colours of tea and rose hips,
amber, linseed oil, rust.
Flies feast on green eroding its silver.

Here, at the turn of the drive, all decay
and triumph, this tree draws my hand
and eye more strongly than any other.

I will ultimately opt for shorter lines with this poem, making it more edgy.

Friday, May 7th
Awake and up and out early, but feel quite muffled at breakfast - slightly confused, low in energy and mood. In one of my allergic-to-voices moods. Yet I find such warmth in the others, and Danton is like a tropical flower, quietly there, then suddenly radiating an understanding vibrancy.

Idea for a poem: Keys. (Connect this with: Bluebeard. The Past.) In the little notebook I lost on my walk yesterday, I’d recorded how the feathers on the path were like directions planted there, as in a children’s game. Sown into the path. Or planted on it... One goes on from feather to feather, finding one’s way...

I get the key to my room and trace it. (See Appendix 2) Then I think of the much larger key to the sitting room - its lock is like a labyrinth. What is to be unlocked? A Freudian question...

Talking with Vicki at breakfast about the fairy story called ‘The Girl With No Hands’ - she has written a poem about it. I have an old connection with it and feel I would like to work with the story myself in my writing, but don’t want to encroach on what Vicki has done. Perhaps I could return to looking at other fairy stories, with a view of writing about some of them?
One delivers oneself to Bluebeard, to be unlocked, but he is full of hidden keys and murderous secrets...

From a walk before lunch, this line:

The conifer climbing itself with branches.

It’s a wonderworld of leaves out there, with veils of sunlight cutting the shadiness. Seeing a young rabbit on the lawn outside the castle reminds me of the squirrel on my walk yesterday. It stopped and appraised me as I stood out-squirrelling it, not moving a muscle - then leapt up the fallen tree it had alighted on, in spasms of tearaway wildness punctuated with circumspection. Hying to a lofty refuge, it flew up the trunk and onto a branch, looking back with its tail upright.

Not so well, needing to get out again, but I decide to read quietly after lunch and open Robert Pinsky’s History of My Heart (disgraceful title) and soon get to a poem called 'Flowers'. It seems to me not a good poem, but puts me in mind of writing one myself.

I start and things take off. For one thing, I decide to talk about how I really respond to flowers - when I buy them I ignore them and waste them. I tap into this and, of course, come up against quite deep things in myself. Good. I end up focusing on marigolds, and the poem I produce is utterly in contrast to Vicki’s fine poem, and that contrast reflects the different lives we have lived, our different personalities.

The early drafts are not far from the final version, which I will get to in mid-November.

FLOWERS

You are always not noticing them,
and buy them as if they might save you from this -
drawn into lit scented space
by a bunch you think you can get along with -
of marigolds, say -
not too glorious or exotic;
still youthful; just a little thickset.

Green sticks inside glass; orange discs.
You walk away, though what you want
is to be let into their long moment;
more secretly still, you want them
to heal and sustain you. And perhaps they do...
But there they go, drooping and dying again
before you’ve stopped to contemplate,
given them time to touch you.

Now you come into your own - it’s too late,
you’ve missed the best of things, so you hang on,
letting them scatter in pieces, turn to slime.
Hands on hollow stems and muck, the plunge
into plastic with fastidious tired guilt;
for days the vase soaks on the sink.
Yes; you'd rather analyse yourself, 
labour at poems like this, than consider 
a flower. Here is a marigold... 
Ordinary and luminous; earth-bound, 
though Mary the Virgin's gold. 
*Calendula officinalis*: absolver of wounds; 
to 'strengthen and comfort the hart...'; 
for bee stings, apply fresh petals directly.

That third last line will eventually go, and in its stead I will put two new lines:

Once sold by the barrel, showered in 
brroths and stews: to fend off pestilence, 
'strengthen and comfort the hart'. 
For bee stings, apply fresh petals directly.

But I also want to write about the flowers that are here, so take two walks in the late 
afternoon collecting bluebells, forget-me-nots, centuary and wild violets for a poem exploring 
flowers that are pink or mauve. (This, like the feathers project, never comes to pass - I am 
unable to find a focus that will bring all the observed details together.) At this stage, phrases 
come fairly easily about each flower, but I wonder how the poem will add up in the end - 
whether it will suffer under the yoke of so much description. It's bound to. I'll have to find 
some other kind of dynamic - yet to be discovered.

The five of us are having our last dinner together in the special dining room with the 
candles inside painted glass, and it is sumptuous.

At one point I struggle to say something about the nature of time that struck me today, 
but perhaps this sounds banal to my companions. Be that as it may, my reflections will 
eventually become part of a poem about the huge clock on the wall of this room. I talk about 
linear time and dream time, and how particular moments have a further life in other moments...

The general mood is good, we see Marion off after dinner, and retire to the sitting room 
to drink herb tea.

The last thing I remember about that evening is wanting to write about the clock in the 
dining room. In the next two days I do this, sitting and taking notes as it chimes the hour - I 
time the reverberations which last for twenty seconds after the sound has gone; and I run my 
fingers carefully over its face which I think is hide, very smoke-stained. It is huge, like a 
railway station clock. (Later I learn I'm wrong about the clock face, which is enamel. So I 
change the poem.) 'Clock' will be shaped up in the next few days and eventually take on a 
more elegant form than the following. Indeed, my struggle with the sense of unwieldiness of 
this poem takes two years to resolve.
CLOCK

The dining room clock picks its teeth as we eat.
Above our talk of poetry it chants, Ink blot! Ink blot!
Huge as a railway station dial, it snipes, Be worried.
It's almost too late. How can you just sit there?
Defiantly, we raise glasses to lips which sip
the present moment again and again, insist that
time well passed lives in later time.

When the hour chimes, that silver echo holds
through twenty seconds. The tick is one large drop,
one small, falling from branch to lily pond.
I see a woman with a limp climbing stairs -
a persistence inside the wavering, her mind
poised between each new step and the last.

The clock face is cracked enamel, smoke-blackened
by a century. It knows what is unsaid, listens to
the sound of itself thinking. Sometimes, silences
before it remembers to beat - heart pauses,
a circumspection before the fact of time.

Sunday, May 9th
I'm here in bed, sketching out 'Clock' with a new take on it which was there in my mind when
I woke this morning. I work on 'Flowers' and track through other new poems written here -
yes, almost all can be shaped up or finished off without too many difficulties.

I've written up the sequence 'At Hawthornden' which now includes 'First Walk',
'Birch', 'Buds', 'Bumble Bee', and will include 'Clock' and perhaps a poem on pink and
mauve flowers. The different poem on flowers is coming along, also 'Accident', 'In the
House' and some new sea creatures: 'Wolf-fish', 'In Defence of Dugongs', a sketch of
lampreys...

I've gone well below the Plimsoll line of my energy because of my exertions yesterday,
and a difficult emotional state, so walk at midday to enliven myself. The air is sharp again, I
don't try to do too much. I note the extraordinary rectangles of yellow in the distance - fields of
rape.

I can't resist a last fire and work by that, spending a lot of time on my journal again.
Out again at 5.30; the sun has been strong for a few hours. A dappled walk.

Sunday, May 30th: Colchester, Essex
It's early. I'm in bed, enjoying the quiet life, or so I think, and looking at my poems when
Angela knocks and energetically announces her desire for another walk - soon. This time Alan
drives the three of us to Marks Tey, we take a train to Sudbury, and we're off again, heading
for Bures.

The wind is in a pummelling mood today, and the sun in and out of clouds which
gradually take over the sky. So the walk is more difficult as well as longer than yesterday, and
my pace slows Alan and Angela a little. But the sense of immersion in the landscape is even greater, and there is so much to rejoice in.

I am in the middle of a great field of wheat in tumult, the light both sombre and sharp. At one point, passing on a track in another wheatfield, I glimpse a figure lying among the stalks. I think of both a dead body and a scarecrow, but closer inspection reveals it is Angela. I try it myself, looking up at the brilliant grey clouds, inside a fringe of green ears and leaves.

Later, there is a hillside covered with wild poppies - from a distance they are like red lights with a globe of darker red inside them. (I will recall this image and write of it in January, 1994, in my poem 'Poppies'.) Then fields sprinkled with white daisies, and further on, similar flowers which are yellow - maybe marsh sow-thistles, so Angela and I think later, after consulting a book on wild flowers.

The idyll is disturbed by cars and the gigantic structures carrying electric cables across hills and valleys. We rest on a public footpath, and hear the sound as of a strangled voice trying to sing; the fierce wind in nearby trees produces another, much more mysterious sound. The trees I can see before me are in the muted greens I think of as Corot-green - a light and cold silvery green, seeming less organic somehow, many leaves flowing in and out of a metallic dazzle.

Thursday, June 17th

I'm slow today. Catch up with my journal, work for a while at the computer, editing my sea poems, trying to solve the problems in 'In Search of Starfish' now I've removed the first four stanzas. But the state of my head prevents me from continuing for long.

Back in the bustling centre of Colchester I see a sign which says 'Clock Museum' - the very thing for someone who is writing a book called The Body in Time! En route there I discover an exhibition of paintings and graphics called The Body in Question which seems relevant, too. All are nudes - only two of men (back view), but most of the women are front view. Some are well drafted, and a few are good, but there are a lot more bodies than questions.

The clock museum is a joy. It's in a 500-year-old house with a 500-year-old mulberry tree in its garden. I feel this is the tree I've been looking for - some kind of key to writing about trees. Its trunk has huge round growths on it, like carbuncles, with small green leaves and tiny shoots protruding from their dry swirling knottiness. Above, healthy green leaves the size of hearts or hands. It is stoutly, freshly alive - the museum attendant tells me it will bear mulberries in August.

Inside the museum, a paradise of longcase clocks - polished grainy wood, japanning, gold and silver faces. Ingenuity, charm - somehow they are never imposing, most of them simply there, doing an essentially simple job with dignity and constancy. Then there are the mantle clocks, the wall bracket clocks, the pocket watches - each a beautiful shape produced from the human impulse to track and measure time, have it speak to us, exist in visual form, be a presence in our homes, grace our persons.

I smooth a crumpled piece of paper and cram it with words and phrases. It has taught me times on the back. It's a delight to have found the possibility of a new poem - I feel it starting to
kick inside me. This is what it becomes.

CLOCK MUSEUM

Long case clocks line ancient walls;
transformed trees; survivors proving time’s
errant constancy. One strikes seven at four o’clock
with the certainty of tone that poets crave:
words dissolving in a sea of resonance.

Seismograph of oak; split Rorschach of walnut;
the honeyed shine of elm, crudely planed...
In leaf shapes, black traceries
track shadows over silver, point to
three straight cyphers that translate all hours.

Old clockmakers wished time to be
present to us, stand in drawing room or hall
breathing the air of our dramas - lofty yet
patient companions, benevolent totems,
whose faces can hold our gaze, take our measure.

The sombre ticking off of lives... As these
shapers of it knew, time works on weight -
gravitas of flesh and wood and metal,
all culled from earth to be embraced by light,
fall towards the darkness of new origins.

Friday, June 18th
I’ve resolved to rest because I’m unwell and feeling eaten. I get 'The Clock Museum' underway, and have a good first draft by midday. But it’s a lot of energy writing it and I’m worn out. A depression has taken hold, and I feel overwhelmed by all there is to do. I get up and walk around the recreation ground doing my exercises then return to sort papers.
3. POEMS

STARFISH

Some loll in corners,
in recovery from
louche lifestyles;

others, draped on stones,
image a higher relaxation,
a wise passivity -

body, along with mind,
reshaped by it.
Half-merged with sand,

full-scale mystics
practise the art
of stillness,

ponder the enigma,
'As above, so below'.
More secularly,

arms peep from
ledges, or frankly
overlay one another.

In the most intimate
embrace of all,
gourmets cloak

kelp or hairweed,
each back a sensuously
rippled sea.

Travellers move with
a ghost-like glide
on swirling tubes.
Those failed by
time or instinct,
become blue jelly

on the rockface
which stretches out
from my gaze,

pocked by a maze
of water-gardens
inlaid with starfish.

IN DEFENCE OF DUGONGS

Seen as slothful, unprepossessing -
yet their credentials are impeccable.

Harmless and herbivorous,
they nibble algae, marine grasses.

But rest is strenuous - a balancing
on tails, with noses barely above water...

Mates share the gift of constancy:
mirrors for a slow lifetime.

Though spare of imagination,
they are the cause of it in others -

evoked women for sea-drunk sailors,
as they basked in fluid poses,

gazed at lust from warm beast eyes:
edowed with pudgy forked fin

rather than legs to be parted;
whiskers on dewlaps, not gold hair

to be combed; and multiple bulges,
ever the breasts' neat mystery...
They meant well, but how could they help
a species trapped inside their heads,
otherwise in their purses -
endless cullers of meat, oil, hides...

As numbers dwindle, dugongs keep busy,
dive through the film that swathes
the earth - refreshed by it,
losing their weight in it, at play
in its veiled light, its shadowed purity.

WOLF-FISH

The mouth a seal of sour violence
clamped down on what refusals?

An armoury of fangs - each year,
a new crop grown - needs only

the knowledge culled by the eye
afloat in its celluloid bubble.

Once harvested, beheaded in
the name of happy marketing

lest shoppers be unnerved by
an odious look, or suddenly falter -
tooth tearing into flesh built
from sea urchins - remembering

pressure's slow fuse, sight
a shadowy filter, the grinding

of stone into dust to reach
smudged tears of meat.

Hate feeds on such small morsels.
LAMPREY

What is it in your soul,
any soul, that would clamp

on to another's life
and drain its sap:

the mouth - so much more
ancient than the eye -

a toothed instrument
of suction, a laboratory

which treats the wound
so it dissolves in blood?

The lamprey dwells far
from moral questions,

its body a muscled strand
with flute-row gills,

a mandala of fangs...
Joined to cod or trout

or blenny, it streamers
along in sea and river:

at home forever
in the first communion.

IN THE HOUSE

Fingers stumble against plates;
a duster flicks ornaments
from their humdrum lives
to splinter on ash-stained hearth;
pot plants noticed too often, die.
Her hand clamps an island
of steak near where she hacks it
as if the flesh of an enemy
newly killed, beyond thought already.

In the end, forks in the drawer
attack her, egg stains return
to scrubbed pans, a whirring bowl
seams a spiral of blood
into creamy blandness.

This is the nemesis sent to one
who does nothing with ease -
the reward for services
rendered in love’s absence.

Though it clamours still
for food, the body cries, *All this
is so beside the point!*

but how can she hear it,
bent to the vacuum’s whine
exact its pound of dust
from shagpile; then that silence

ringing in her ears as
creeper curls through sill
and she imagines the whole house
held in the garden’s forced embrace...

Her eyes shift to smudges that
censor her face superimposed on
glass figures by a lake;
a moonlit sea-storm; sunflowers

bursting from the frame of
their petals, from molten centres,
each tip a wanton flame
draining the air she breathes.
ACCIDENT

It could happen like this.  
You turn the corner of another  
night, wake foot to the floor  
as the car around you  
slides down a mountain.

Today, a journey to be made...  
You sit stunned in early light  
then clutch the keys, persuaded  
the dream relives past crashes -  
you’ve had a string of them.

The odds are longer, now,  
you think; in fact, they’re shorter.

Out from the city, headed for  
shifting white distance...  
As if you were someone else  
you pass through exhaustion,  
fear, throat-holds of panic.

Near dusk, it’s hunger and  
loneliness that propel you,  
are the fuel you burn. Then  
the mountains weaving you  
into their folds, the sudden turn

towards glass and chrome  
stopped on asphalt... A whirr  
of reflexes as despair bursts  
inside you. Foot to the floor,  
an endless skid on gravel.

The car has become a body  
aching with miles, a mind  
fraught with intentions.
Once more, a lesson; mercifully,  
no injury to persons, only  
brute metal: the mudguard is  
turned back like a skin flap  
from a wound - fine carving.

You pray for eyes  
that will see levelly.

ROOMS

Could one surprise a room,  
fling open a door to discover  
some unknown mood of silence,  
or, in the air, a busyness  
one could not quite read -  

memories stored in brick flesh  
seeping back into space  
to be sparked by sunlight  
into a sky of milling planets?

Cells shed from tired skin  
settle in lesions, joins,  
enter wood's susceptibility,  

so that body and mind, both,  
leave their trace, in a chemistry  
that brings tremulous pain  
and the brute years, to a stillness.

Even when we breathe elsewhere,  
the work is being done,  
our elements sift into solidity,  
are resurrected as masonry  
shifts and white clouds rise  
and you cannot see for looking:

the atmosphere of a room  
re-entering your skin, your blood -
life recognising itself amidst
dissolution; as foundations stir;
when diamond-blades of light
pierce through and through
what one thought void, done with.

FLOWERS

You are always not noticing them,
and buy them as if they might save you from this,
drawn into lit scented space
by a bunch you think you can get along with -
of marigolds, say -
not too glorious or exotic;
still youthful; just a little thickset.

Green sticks inside glass; orange discs.
You walk away, though what you want
is to be let into their long moment;
more secretly still, you want them
to heal and sustain you. Perhaps they do...
But there they go, drooping and dying again
before you’ve stopped to contemplate,
given them time to reach you.

Now you come into your own - it’s too late,
you’ve missed the best of things, so you hang on,
letting them scatter in pieces, turn to slime.
Hands on hollow stems and muck,
you plunge them into plastic
with fastidious tired guilt;
for days the vase soaks on the sink.

Yes: you’d rather analyse yourself,
labour at poems like this, than consider
a flower. Here is a marigold...
Ordinary and luminous; earth-bound,
though Mary the Virgin’s gold.
Once sold by the barrel, showered in broths and stews: to fend off pestilence, ‘strengthen and comfort the hart’.
For bee stings, apply fresh petals directly.

AT HAWTHORNDEN CASTLE

*FIRST WALK*

Sooner or later, the world comes to meet you: as the keep gate opens, green turns to white - the verge a train of seed-pearls in early sun.

On the drive you are back in dusk, tree shapes striping the gravel; then the road where warmth has a purchase on the day,

your breath no longer a tease of vapour.

Glass bubbles bend grass tips; crows slice air with serrated wings, voices.

*BIRCH*

Always the driven, frustrated maker, I remember shantungs I sewed when young, the oil paints I failed to teach myself to use: half-mixed tints drenching the blond wood.

Slubbed and burnished, this trunk is stained the colours of tea and rose hips, amber, linseed oil, rust. Flies feast on the green eroding its silver.
Here, at the drive’s turn,
all decay and triumph,
this tree draws hand and eye
more strongly than any other.

_BUDS_

A reddishness
    like a faint hum
    in far trees.
Close up, spurs
    sheathed in
    bronze silk.
Others are suavely
    gloved claws,
    breasts cupped by
brocade - in black,
    musky cyclamen,
    milk-green.
Soon, frothy handkerchiefs
    will drop
    as from a wrist,
cascades
    as from an ear,
    the taste of them
no longer
    a layered smoothness
    in your mouth
as they answer back
    with scalloped
    edges of softness.
Then the valley
    studded with
    tiny antennae
will become
    a sea of
    uncountable greens -
with mists
    and waterfalls
    and bowers of it
deepening
    inside your eye.
BUMBLE BEE

Revealing the unity
of all things,
touching a daffodil here,
a forget-me-not there,
lost in a rabbit hole
then zooming from blade to tree top-

a bird/beast,
weightless and hairily cumbersome,
a carpeted feather
struggling to ride on air,
forge out a fresh route
to the desired.

From pause to pause
it moves like thought,
the appraised left quickly
for the pristine,

with sudden aerial swerves
or close-to-the-ground

surveillance of detail...
Attired in the sumptuous
discretion of velvet,
it alights from nothingness
to gather tiny fruits of knowledge -
busy and meditative,

its voice a soft black hum
banded with gold.
CLOCK

The dining room clock picks its teeth
as we eat. Above our talk of poetry
it chants, *Ink blot! Ink blot!*

Huge as a railway station dial, it snipes,
*Be worried. It's almost too late.*
*How can you just sit there?*

Defiantly, we raise glasses to lips which sip
the present moment again and again,
insist that time well passed

lives in later time. When the hour chimes,
that silver echo holds through
twenty seconds. The tick is

one large drop, one small, falling from
branch to lily pond. I see a woman
with a limp climbing stairs -

a persistence inside the wavering,
her mind poised between each
new step and the last.

The clock face is cracked enamel,
smoke-blackened by a century.
It knows what is unsaid,

listens to the sound of itself thinking.
Sometimes, silences before it
remembers to beat -

heart-pauses,
a circumspection before
the fact of time.
CLOCK MUSEUM

Long-case clocks line ancient walls:
transformed trees; survivors proving time's
errant constancy. One strikes seven at four o'clock
with the certainty of tone that poets crave:
words dissolving in a sea of resonance.

Seismograph of oak; split Rorschach of walnut;
the honeyed shine of elm, crudely planed...
In leaf shapes, black traceries
track shadows over silver, point to
three straight cyphers that translate all hours.

Old clockmakers wished time to be
present to us, stand in drawing room or hall
breathing the air of our dramas - lofty yet
patient companions, benevolent totems,
whose faces can hold our gaze, take our measure.

The sombre ticking off of lives... As these
shapers of it knew, time works on weight -
gravitas of flesh and wood and metal,
all culled from earth to be embraced by light,
fall towards the darkness of new origins.
CHAPTER TWO

August 25th, 1993 - January 28th, 1994:
Barwon Heads; Ormond College, Melbourne

1. COMMENTARY

After returning to Australia from Britain, I moved to Ormond College at the University of Melbourne, to be writer in residence there. But my weekends were mostly spent at my family home at Barwon Heads.

My flat on the fifth floor of a hexagonal concrete tower block afforded me an immediate view of busy roads and the Melbourne General Cemetery. Beyond lay a vast plain of suburbs stretching towards the mountains. That expanse was a sea of star-like white and orange lights at night.

My flat was capacious and light-filled. There was a desk in the bedroom, facing a wall with a bookcase set into it, and with large windows each side. I also worked at a round table in the living room. Sometimes I prepared meals for myself but mostly, to make life simple, went to the main building for the College evening meal. The - to me - absurd and outdated ritual of high table was still in operation and I often suffered this, but eventually stopped going to it. I both admired and disliked the high-ceilinged, Gothically-impressive hall.

The great complex of buildings that constitutes Melbourne University, and the swimming pool, lay in the opposite direction from the view framed by my windows. Looking back, I see that swimming in the university pool led to one of the most important developments for me on a personal level during this period because I taught myself to breathe properly rather than holding my head out of the water, so had a stronger sense of being immersed in the watery element. I found this very healing.

After many walks through it, I wrote about the cemetery - a place of many fascinations, many stories, but contra-indicated for a person with melancholy tendencies, so I eventually chose to walk in the nearby parklands instead.

My move to Ormond College was occasioned by a desire for a context and milieu in which to pursue my work on this present undertaking in particular, and my poetry in general. In the past, the combination of living alone and trying to sustain what is a very isolated role in this society, had been burdensome to the point of leading to illness. I did not expect Ormond College to provide a deep experience of community (it didn’t), but I hoped that there would be contact and interchange and conversation with a wide range of individuals - as there was.

In the end, the question of sustainability was, once again, the most telling for me - that is, could I sustain my life and role in that setting in a life-giving manner for myself and others? Though I lived at Ormond for almost a year, I have to say that it was not a personally sustaining environment for me; but I value the goodwill and generosity of many people I met there. As Chapter Three will record, I was to leave - long after I believe I should have left -
because of my mother’s serious illness.

My time at Ormond saw a descent into clinical depression - something I had not experienced for many years, despite often living with a degree of what would be called low-grade depression. The flat I lived in became a kind of shell - the space it provided was a refuge in one way, yet I felt sealed off inside it. At times, living there felt like being in a capsule poised high in air. I continued to make efforts to connect and to contribute to college life, as I could, but I felt totally unsupported. I simply did not belong in a traditional, predominantly patriarchal institution such as Ormond College.

Most of the poems I’ve included from this period were written at Barwon Heads, not Ormond College. But the scene I viewed daily from Ormond was the setting for ‘At the Melbourne General Cemetery’ which confronts both the fact of death, and the reality of inner death: ‘By now I know death as states of suffering / not to be endured, yet endured ...’ In so doing, this poem attempts to find a way through the intolerable, to be rooted in the reality of place, to see life as a constant choice: ‘The day’s air a cool pressure / to be accepted or denied.’

In January of 1994 I wrote several new poems which are personally important to me, and which represent further engagements with my dilemma. On New Year’s day I was working on a draft of ‘The Handless Maiden’, a poem which focuses on the same double process of accepting death (in its various guises) and choosing life (‘What to do but go on imagining / these hands till she could grasp / on to life, and not let go / before life failed her...’)

This may have acted as a springboard for the poem I wrote the following day, my birthday, on ‘Despair’, which travels further and deeper into what might be called the death instinct. As I see it, in serious depression it as though one’s whole organism is at war with itself - and one’s power and range of choices is drastically reduced. Being as clear-eyed as possible, and attempting to access the source of the suffering involved, can help to break the hold of this condition. Hence my conviction that poetry, by giving a conscious shape to a difficult inner state, can be a means of integration and healing.

A powerful inner shift had occurred by the next day when I wrote ‘Wind’. To me, the wind represents an energy which is transformative; composed of air which keeps us in life, it can also be an image of ‘inspiration’ (from the Latin inspirare - ‘to breathe in’. This poem seems to me to be very much about the life-force which contains, is much greater than, the pull towards death. The poem describes the everyday act of putting a sheet out to dry on a line. The sheet has held the dreaming body, is associated with both dying and love making (it is ‘an erotic shroud’). It interacts with the body pegging it out and becomes a kind of mirror of its life, while also stirring new perspectives and possibilities - so it finally represents the transformative energies of spirituality and of creativity. The sheet, so often ‘drowned then resurrected’, is associated with the principle of rebirth within life.

Begun on January 24th, ‘Primal Scene’ is a poem which contains elements of irony and a burlesque treatment of the English country house murder genre, using these to explore a deep-rooted sense of loss and self-displacement. It is as though there is, on one level, a further
lightening of the imaginative energies in play in ‘Wind’, while the large perspective opened up on the past brings with it a sense of both weight and absence. A female detective is called to the country to solve a murder: ‘Suddenly, / she’s staring down at a vacant space, shaped like a body. // No proof of crime yet, but where has this life disappeared to?’ She summons the inmates of the house (‘the whole jittery cast’) for questioning - they are in fact all images of past selves. At the denouement, the third person narration changes to the first person - the poet confronts her past selves, claims her persona within the poem - and in the process, owns her story:

if there’s to be a revelation it must come now... I turn,
meet each pair of eyes - all blue-green, like my own.
After a tortuous silence, an unexpected voice begins to speak.

As in much of my work as a poet on Greek myths and fairy tales, here a known story-pattern is revisited while another, more personal story, is told in a fashion at once transparent and masked. Thus, emotionally charged subject matter can be probed, with distance being a condition of depth.

In writing ‘The Metal Detective’, I was motivated by a sense of irritation at what I saw as the futility and blandness - the lack of depth - in this very harmless activity. The person sweeping a metal detector over sand wants to find gold without digging for it - so one might see it as a kind of false alchemy imaging something of the empty obsessiveness regarding wealth in present-day society. The poem is also about perception - the man with the metal detector is cut off from the wider scene through which other riches are being offered.

So far so good... However, the force of my annoyance as I worked on this poem made me think there might be something of my own inner drama being played out here too - and in one way or another, I often find that the poems I write begin or end in some insight into my life and self. It seems to me now that ‘The Metal Detective’ may be partly about my frustration during an unproductive work phase when my efforts to connect with material of creative value seemed bankrupt:

Now his scanner is dumb, he cannot open his eyes
or fight the tide that will strand him gasping
in striped pyjamas, on a pillowed shore.

While this poem did indeed herald in a very long period during which few poems were written, it also points up the extent to which the ocean is a kind of muse to me. Again and again, I have been gifted with poems from and about the sea. But of my relationship with the sea - image of the protean nature of creativity, of the unconscious, sustainer of myriad life and bringer of death - much more will follow.

During this period I was living, in effect, in two places.

Ormond College in Melbourne offered many amenities which supported me in my
working life but, as I have noted, its institutional structure was somewhat oppressive to me. My flat provided me with physical shelter and a spacious setting, a grand view and proximity to many resources. I valued the liberal and pluralistic components of the college culture, and the goodwill of many people I met there. But ultimately I felt there was no real space for a person such as myself to exist there. I needed a less ritually socialised human situation in which there could be the possibility of honest mutual exchanges and personal support if I were ill. As it was, a three-month virus and the serious depression into which I fell, saw me spending long periods of time alone in my flat, struggling to rest and find a way through.

Two of the poems I wrote while at Ormond - ‘At the Melbourne General Cemetery’ and (in the next chapter) ‘Winter Solstice, 1994’ - reflect a profound effort to deal with inner crisis partly by attention to the details of the physical setting. In both poems there is an attempt to humanise a prevailing starkness, to find a thread of renewal.

My life at Barwon Heads, at my mother’s home, was restorative and nurturing. The support I received from, and gave to, my mother was of great importance in my life. And the environment with its rich vegetation, river and sea, was as ever a delight, offering to me fresh and fertile perspectives, both outer and inner, on my many walks.

It was in this situation that I began to journey more consciously into my depression with the poem ‘Despair’, then could connect with the vision of resilience and regeneration present in ‘Wind’. ‘Primal Scene’ - continuing the search into the root cause of the depression while allowing a play of perspectives - followed soon after. This suggests to me that, though this was a difficult personal phase, my life at Barwon Heads provided both the stability and a free-ranging sense of physical and imaginative space to enable me to creatively engage with psychic conflicts, and access new possibilities.
2. JOURNAL

Thursday, August 25th, 1993: Ormond College, University of Melbourne
I spend the morning sorting out my poems and papers into folders. I do final corrections on my sequence, ‘In Memory’. In the afternoon I rest then do some shopping. The depression has settled into my nerves and my belly.

It’s touch and go whether I can get myself to the art class at the College in the evening, but I do, and work for several hours drawing, and painting in oils. Then, rather more settled, I read one of the tales of E. T. A. Hoffmann in bed. It is the story of Dr Coppelia, in fact - the most frightening depiction of madness in literature that I know of.

Friday, August 26th

Disturbing dreams again.

I’m losing bits and pieces of what I want to put in my journal by not keeping it up on a day to day basis.

A memory of a huge fat man sitting at a table, and framed by a large window, with a three-wheeled car parked outside the house ... in Essex, about four months ago. Did I put it down in my journal? - I was struck by the visual impact of that configuration.

The journey to Barwon Heads for the weekend.

A geriatrically early night.

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Saturday, August 27th: Barwon Heads

Slow. I do the ocean walk in the morning. Then read the papers. A companionable time in the evening with my mother.

Asleep by 9.30.

But what did I do today? Squeezed against the sides of my own being by depression, I wrote a poem in the afternoon - starting from jottings I’d made for my journal on a piece of paper. The opening lines are as follows.

Spring days at the end of winter:
never have I felt so far from this world,
so absent from its devices...

This eventually becomes a poem so lacking in light that I will consign it to the limbo of a folder forever.

Late afternoon. Paul drives me to Geelong station. Earlier, he had talked about a programme on dinosaurs, in which one theory that a meteor caused their extinction was seemingly validated by a fine white line in a rock face containing chemicals not known on earth. I talk of such white lines layered into one’s own evolution as a person. This will later
influence an image in my poem, 'At the Melbourne General Cemetery':

black lakes and seas rowed over
are now a sediment layering the body.

These lines are also influenced by the following image in 'Rainforest Ferns' (included in my book, The Body in Time):

Along the rockface, ferns trace the curve
of vanished seas.

The journey back to Melbourne through many moods of light as evening descends. I sit quietly in the flat, listening in the half-dark to a literary programme on the radio, not much impressed. My neighbour, a child psychiatrist, invites me for a cup of tea when I go to put out the rubbish. It's very pleasant in her flat.

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Monday, August 29th: Melbourne

Another spring-like day. Correspondence and bills. A need to arrange my papers in folders and methodically label them and put them on the shelves in the living room - a very obsessive performance. Perhaps my psyche is clearing a space so I can eventually let go and connect with new material - this sort of thing has happened before.

At the lecture on Greek mythology earlier in the afternoon. I leave knowing I want to continue in this field for some years, because it holds things of great import for me and for my creativity.

Tuesday, August 30th

An early swim but I feel wretched and unwell, and resting seems not to help. But hearing music on the radio does.

When I help the cleaning lady to put new sheets on the bed, she tells me of the strain on her back from so much bed-making over the years. When there are conferences here, she makes as many as two hundred beds a day.

A walk in the cemetery. In the memorial to Elvis, there's something new - a guitar made of artificial flowers. Yes, I must write about this place - the topic will no doubt sit well in The Body in Time.

Sheet lightning in the night. I watch its evanescent flaring from my bed, try but fail to read Annie Dillard's poetry. Consciousness flickering on and off in the drift to oblivion.

Wednesday, August 31st

Will I or won't I? Yes, an early swim.

The wind whistling in the cracks as midday strikes and I sit catching up with this journal, trying to set things right - another piece of tidying up, sorting out.
Thursday, September 1st
I have a great resistance to writing this journal now, have lost things I wanted, and meant, to record.

It’s now Tuesday 6th, and I can’t remember last Thursday. Not at all.

Friday, December 24th
I continue the work of cleaning and preparing to leave the flat - so many levels of my life to be considered: what poems, papers, books, will I take, what clothes? I set out at noon and reach my mother’s home by mid-afternoon.

I’ll be able to rest here. Paul comes in the evening, and we all sit talking, but something in my brain feels pressured, precarious - I am afraid to exert myself or become too involved in case I become disoriented or unstuck. I am carrying too much around inside me, apart from all the luggage I have brought.

Days later I remember that, before the train I was on pulled out of Spencer Street station, another train came in: it had a dead galah pinned by long wipers to the driver’s windscreen - crumpled white with a flourish of sulphur.

Saturday, December 25th: Barwon Heads
A rainy, blustery day. I spend most of the morning in bed, either reading, or locked in despair.

After writing a poem in an attempt to exorcise that despair, a poem that obviously has no future, I feel the need to get physically moving. I get myself together and do the cliff walk: the streets are nearly empty as most people would be inside having their Christmas dinner.

Sunday, December 26th
What a terrible day! Early waking again, a long slow morning reading and suffering again. Despair is like a time warp ... suddenly, it’s 1 o’clock. Up, and attempting to walk in the battering wind, with rain thickening around me, coming in rhythms through chill air. I give up and go home. As an antidote to my inner state, I start work on ordering my tax documents. This does indeed focus the mind, though not wonderfully.

I remember seeing the severed head of a rat on a pavement this morning - a furry isosceles triangle with matt black eyes suggesting its seeing, circumscribed consciousness when alive - acute yet myopic: the condition of all creaturely life, including humans.

On the beach later that afternoon, my eyes tracking the wondrous swallows, moving with free curves such as dolphins and seals might trace in water. (This connection between bird and dolphin is one that will later appear in my poem ‘Birds at Sunset’.) Creativity happening at the edge of possibility, at the limit, on the very blade of an intractable wind. At a certain moment, one swallow was like a rag.
Monday, December 27th
More rain and wind and staying in bed. Opening the first page of Ondaatje’s *Billy the Kid*, I have thought of writing a poem about an old-style picture projector. What were they called? I don’t even know.

Later, walking in the fierce wind on the Ocean Grove beach, trying to wear out some force inside myself and become physically weary - like taking a dog for a walk! A boy’s voice over the speakers in the Lifesaving Club wishes the girl in the orange coat, walking near me, Happy Birthday. In a formal, authoritarian tone, it requests her attendance at the Club. She and her friend giggle, and re-direct their steps.

It’s bracing here, I’m almost tired when I leave. Good.

Tuesday, December 28th
Another orgy of tea and chocolates and reading and sad thoughts. Paul rings after noon, saying he’s finished Raymond Carver’s *Fires*, which I gave him, and finds Carver’s story as a man and a writer, his meeting of difficulties and trials, awesome. I certainly admire Carver’s astringency and plainness, his insight into ordinary human feelings at seemingly random moments, in the midst of miasma or struggle...

After a very long beach walk, calmer. The sparrowhawks negotiate stillness in the wind that keeps all surfers away - I almost never see this beach without surfers in its waves.

Back with my mother, feeling earthed, eating salmon sandwiches while John Ogden plays Brahms... Only in awareness of the present moment can be found the reassurance of survival, I tell myself, walking into my room.

Wednesday, December 29th
Reading from an early hour, late getting up. Restless, driven, devoured by fantasies. On the beach, walking it all out, the sea tumbling in the wind.

Friday, December 31st
5 o’clock waking, then tea and torpor, and too much thinking.

It’s a sunny day, the waves darkly green and shiny. Later in the afternoon, wanting to achieve something, I draft a parody of a translation of a Catullus poem by Peter Rose. Writing parodies has become a frequent diversion - or should I regard it as a vice?

Saturday, January 1st, 1994
Kyle, staying over, sleeps in till almost 11. I pursue literary matters in bed, surrounded by books and papers. Then we watch TV programmes on Australian native animals, and on gardening. Paul returns in the early afternoon after a hard night out - we all sit round and eat sandwiches and chat.

Later in the afternoon I walk on the ocean beach, then rest for a long time, drawing strength from the sun and sand. Many people are in the water, on the beach - conditions are perfect. The sky is a powdery, smoky blue above the slippery green broken by reefs of snow - why am I thinking of snow today? I imagine birds’ claw tracks over snow - there are no such
traces over the sea.

On the shore, there are two delicate dark seabirds in turbulent heaps, and what may have been a snapper, with its body stiffly curved up, its mouth hugely open. Inside that mouth is what looks like a dark red tongue but is obviously a foreign body and the likely cause of its death. Too horrible to investigate.

Snow-waves; that terrible O-shape - an image from a Bosch painting... Otherwise, harmony, people enjoying a respite from the (un)seasonal Christmas weather.

Later, I type up a version of ‘The Handless Maiden’ from my handwritten draft so as to contemplate its problems more clearly. The line arrangements cause me a lot of trouble - but I’m starting to follow instinct more, opt for surprise and risk more than elegance. The poem ends up as follows:

THE HANDLESS MAIDEN

One opened, cradling itself:
   a bowl of dyadic pink offered
   mainland with promontories,
   a chaos of rivulets.

   There were shallow sharp grooves
   as if scratched by nib or quill;
   others, etched with a deeper intent -
   runes, not-to-be-translated.

   Behind knuckles, needlework threads:
   cobalt-purple as the tracery
   on thumbs. At the wrist,
   lightning strike of lavender
   and almost-aquamarine.

   The other stretched out flat
   on her lap: five moons about to set
   or rising; brown rain staining
   earth-flesh. As it turned, light on
   ruched silk, river-ripples.

   They met, began to
   reshape each other, learn
   each other, dance...

   What to do but go on imagining
   these hands till she could grasp
   on to life, and not let go
   before life failed her,

   while the poem cupped by
   the fingers’ cage, sings to soothe
   Death, allay its worst fears,
   coax it into a painless
   light sleep.
Afterwards, in a desultory manner, I search for something to do a parody of. I’ve both borrowed and bought books by Jennifer Maiden for this purpose. I sketch out some lines, leaving further work till I’ve attended more carefully to her poems.

As I’m drifting towards sleep, some phrases come to me for a poem on despair: ‘the body is only time-lapse plasticine’, ‘despair is an active lack of expectation’ and - what will provide the first line of the poem, something I did earlier today - ‘Cover the left side of your face with your hand...’ I keep thinking of new lines and switching the lamp on so as to write them down - otherwise I’ll lose them.

Sunday, January 2nd
The beginning of my fiftieth year. I wake from a dream which has a lot to tell me, but I do not put a net around it and, fish or butterfly or tiger, it goes. I stay in bed writing my poem on despair, in a happy-enough frame of mind - otherwise how could I do it? But it taps into a deep repository of experience - another piece of inner work. Will it help to release me from the state it describes - net the essence of that experience so it can be contemplated then set free? I remember the black pansy on the TV gardening show yesterday ... it had all the power of the denied opposite. But it was a real flower, growing, part of the world.

DESPAIR

Cover the left side of your face, and see it:
an unwilled bitterness in flesh and feature.
Call it an active lack of expectation -
it replaces fear as your ruling passion,
will be lived with equal single-mindedness:
the killing logic that’s your version of piety.

There’s defencelessness in it, too -
as of an unquilled porcupine huddling
in your lap: a once bristly reality become
this shapeless, alive, no-being,
utterly at odds with its future.

What to do? Rearrange that face for a start.
Easy: the body is only time-lapse plasticine,
 isn’t it? Remove all sign of what blocks out
the sorrows of friends, meets the new
with boredom, is in a continental drift
away from wherever now is.

And there’s no short-circuiting despair
with cheer or compromise; it will not
be got to the bottom of, or written out in poems.

This has been sent to you/has arisen from
what you are: a ticking bomb to be defused,
a Trojan horse to outwit. Walk round it slowly.
Deal with it or be diminished, become a self
shivering in your own helpless hands
that can make no offering, will damage all gifts.
Is my despair poem a piece of homeopathy - will it help my system to fight the disease it’s a small, controlled sample of? We’ll see. Today, hard hot winds blow, I feel well in myself - I’ll occupy myself with pen and paper till the wind abates, and I can walk without being harassed.

A long beach walk. I bring back a prize - a sea-dragon which was waiting on a clump of seaweed for me.

Monday, January 3rd
The gods are generous and send me another poem, ‘Wind’. Its seeds are in a writing workshop I did with Aileen Kelly at Montsalvat in November: she asked us to describe putting out some washing. This is a subject I’ve written on before, and I can remember having read a few poems on this subject that I really liked, especially one by Selima Hill. I stay in bed writing up the poem, get up and take myself out into the reality that constitutes its subject. Again, a long walk beside crashing, disorderly waves - it’s cold on the beach, warm away from it.

WIND

Drag on shoulders and back as you heave this huge muscle coming apart in your hands, spilling away from you, rush it out among leaves in flux, colliding whispers.

One hoist clumps it over the tightrope: a humped shape flapping absurdist wings. Next, the pull into smoothness as tears roll down arm-veins, fuse skin and wool.

Damp gathers in vortex of navel, the belly moulded, like breasts and limbs, by an erotic shroud. You uncling it to a straight fall, remove the template,

but again and again the wind rehearses those shapes, invents variations, or erases the body’s planes to conjure ghosts behind curtains, unhuman masks.

Your hair a cubist halo, clothes harlequined by water, you peg the sheet that knows your impress so well, has held the sweat of your dreams. It releases into,

now a wildness, now a sedate swaying, forked by sleep-creases... Half-sighs, an austere rustling: this impersonal fabric has its voices, too.

They tell you to live with your hands on the world, to wring and uncoil its bundled knots. Your body itself is a subtle knot silhouetted by pure air, its heat

transfiguring cool envelopes you enter, white planes blankly receiving imprint, a few trace elements, till whisked away to be drowned then resurrected:
a sail for the winds of heaven to rest against,
curved as cheek or hollow of palm; resisting
and surrendering; teased to life by the merest touch.

The afternoon is typing up versions of the poems written in the last few weeks - this
enables the editing process to move on. As always, my back hates the business of typing, and
so do I. But I think it’s good not to have my computer here, because the development of these
poems through different versions will be under my hand, as it were, something I can trace
backwards, have a historical record of.

A quick walk at 5 o’clock but it’s cold and then rains. Circulation restored, but chilled
to the bone, I retire soon after dinner, reading inside a womb-like heap of blankets. A part of
me longs to be held in sleep, another part of me is over-stimulated by work, by all these images
inhabiting and passing through my being.

Wednesday, January 5th
Awake soon after 3, I hear a bird singing in the dark. Tea and poems and thinking until 8. I
knew I could not return to sleep as I’d been having the kind of dreams from which
consciousness is a refuge. So, though tired, I’m glad to be inside this image of consciousness -
a brightly lit room.

I walk by the sea and out along a long pier at Queenscliff, wondering why that
experience so attracts me when it’s as cold and windy as this: walking above the sea, in a
straight line, on solid planks, to the end from which people can take off to cross or plumb the
deeps in boat or diving gear. At present only the thin nylon line of a fisherman attempts any
connection. But I love unclaimed space and want to be alone here.

At the local gift shop I change the dolphin earrings my brother gave me - because I
already have some. After a long search I find some bronze earrings - three small butterflies
hanging down in a line.

This morning, reading The Illustrated Language of Flowers - a joyous book. How I’d
love to write poems about flowers - oh dear, not another idea for a book, stop! I looked up the
associations given for marigolds: despair (west); honour (east). I’ve just written a poem about
despair, and ‘honour’ comes into another recent poem. I love the meaning of the word
‘columbine’ - ‘it is derived from the Latin word columbinus, “dove-like”, reflecting its
perceived resemblance to a flight of doves’.

After a long day of fitful weather - almost like a tantrum - it’s evening and sunny.
American voices in the next room where my mother is watching TV. I’m writing this diary
neatly, so I won’t have to fix it up before Fiona types it - hopefully, some time in the near
future. I can’t see myself finding the stamina to do much of it. Anyway, I’m very busy being a
poem-factory - if that process takes me to the limit of my energy, it also helps to bring me back
from difficult thresholds, give me a kind of record of meaning as I work at some unlocatable
and unmappable part of the labyrinth.

Friday, January 7th
I now remember the image I wanted to record before I went to sleep last night - the half moon
of a few nights ago that looked as though it had been cut by a blunt knife. There were many marks on the pilot whales’ bodies in the film last night - some caused by having barnacles on them when young, some caused by pressing and moving against each other. Their tails were unusually distinctive, and some had irregular edges because of barnacles and other damage.

In the shower, three drops of water round my right nipple: I think of barnacles. Dew and barnacles... I remember the huge barnacles on the whales in the whale book I looked at quite a while ago - I wanted to write about them because of the feelings of revulsion they aroused in me. Some were like high tablelands in the desert, in miniature; some were like fossils.

Bodies swivelling and turning in water; the young riding in slipstreams beneath their mothers; some whales curving along each other’s flanks in play; and the great procession of squid, deep down, that are the pilot whales’ food. The light coming down through the water, a luminous green room. In the heavy silence of water, the sound-signals given out by the whales. The stillborn baby carried by its mother, in her mouth, as she rides along accompanied by other whales.

The last image I remember is the lines of breath-bubbles rising: each breath seeming a conscious/deliberate act, the bubbles a form of speech. Crystal configurations drifting towards the surface, expanding, unravelling, catching the light and holding it in those tiny globes of trapped air.

Barnacles and bubbles - yes, two sections of a sequence I would like to write on whales.

Out into a blowy day.

I can see four large waves in a row as I descend to the beach - each in a different stage of undress. Above the one furthest out, a high white shadow which falls to blend with the lush and substantial white beneath.

Feelings of annoyance at the man with a metal detector on the beach. Why? It seems so anal-retentive an activity in this literally oceanic setting: a total failure of larger perspectives, I feel - such fossickers just want to find out what is tucked away from sight in it, and not to look at what is in plain view.

Anyway, being so annoyed and stirred up (and thinking, is this really worth a poem?) I start writing a poem about this metal detector business to see what will emerge. (Not surprisingly it's called 'The Metal Detective' and I will work on it in that same spirit of irritation for several years, eventually reaching a kind of pact of tolerance with its subject.)

Thinking of underwater scenes, I remember Sessor’s

Deep and dissolving verticals of light
Ferry the falls of moonshine down...

Saturday, January 8th
A sand-stinging walk; reading the Saturday papers; working on the new poems.

Towards evening, I have a sudden strong feeling that none of them is any good. Also the feeling that this run of poetic energy is over - I'm almost relieved at this, as I have 'promises to keep': other commitments to fulfil. Both of those feelings - the sinking near-
revulsion, the half-relieved recognition that a cycle has completed itself - are ones I’ve felt before, and I put them in perspective.

**Sunday, January 9th**
Earlier today I looked at my new poems and saw that most of them were OK, with ‘Wind’ being promising and ‘The Metal Detector’ being problematic.

**Monday, January 10th: Melbourne**
Waking early, then too tired to get ready to leave. But the tiredness lifts. On the train, eating egg sandwiches, wanting the journey to be over... Back at Ormond, trying to correct my journal on my computer, but getting feelings of stress and deep fatigue - it occurs to me I probably am suffering from some deep burn-out, but I’ve mostly been very tired through my life so I don’t see the point of making too much of this.

At 5, I go to see *Like Water for Chocolate*, a wonderful South American film. My energy is high when I leave, and I feel restored.

Eating, then quietly collecting my thoughts, as the summer evening settles down.

**Wednesday, January 12th**
This day and the next and the next, a cocktail of despair, depression, and exhaustion. I rest most of the day, a very hot one. Apart from that, a midday swim, and doing what work I can.

**Saturday, January 15th: Barwon Heads**
Out for some sea air, then back in bed, reading Antonia Byatt’s *Angels and Insects*. Inside the bedspread’s white cocoon, scattered with library books, I taste with relish her descriptions of butterflies, ants, and bees, and her application of this imagery to the human story she tells. Though the narrative is ultimately weakened by the incursions of other narratives - which variously over-intellectualise things, or dilute the power of insect images - she is a commanding writer. Perhaps, like this bed, she is a little too book-strewn.

**Monday, January 17th**
For the second morning, my eyes are hungover from watching television and too much reading. Revising *The Body in Time* in bed all morning and now, after writing the journal, it’s 3 o’clock! Dear me! I’ve made a mental note to research crystals and porcupines, both with reference to images in my poems.

In ‘Despair’, I have an image of a plucked porcupine. But in what sense is this a possibility, and ... what would be left? Yes, more research!
Tuesday, January 18th
While Paul plays golf, Kyle and I go to the Marine Discovery Centre at Queenscliff where he spends over an hour at the ‘touch pool’ with its starfish and crabs. I mostly watch a television programme: I see the births of seals, and of weedy sea-dragons (wondrous transparent concoctions, and, having written about them, I think, ‘Yes, I know you’.) I watch the mating dance of pipefish. (I’ve written on this creature too, but based my description on a picture - this film gives me quite a different understanding.) There are many other wonders - I feel very connected to all these images.

Elsewhere in the centre is a tank with seahorses, including babies. Almost too delicate and subtle to exist. Both exquisite and charmingly quizzical.

Wednesday, January 19th
To the library: finding and taking out books on porcupines and crystals, and many other things, such as time, and sacred places.

Work and fatigue. Living in my own silence. Walking in the wind as the sea crashes.

Thursday, January 20th
I spend the morning in bed working at my computer - I type out various parodies and edit other poems. I make a lot of typing mistakes because I’m dead tired.

In the afternoon, my body aching, I do correspondence and bills - force myself. A late afternoon walk in the warm rainy air does wonders for me, and I exercise the cramps out of my muscles. The beach is almost empty, as most holidayers have gone home.

In bed from 8, stupified with fatigue, writing my journal.

Friday, January 21st
Typing up parodies. I’ve got almost a book-length collection of them now. I look at a library book on living fossils because I have decided I am one. I would like to write about the coelacanth sometime, but need more information, more imaginative purchase on it.

Jan Owen rings late afternoon to tell me I’ve been short-listed in the poetry section of the Adelaide Festival Awards. I’m depressed so can’t respond positively to this, but it’s certainly good news. When I return to my computer, there is a parody of one of Jan’s poems on it. Oh dear!

Sunday, January 23rd
Today is hot and I walk from Barwon Heads to Ocean Grove and back along the beach. A seagull walks above its perfect reflection in wet sand; there is a rippled glass effect as a thin wave comes in. At one point the bird’s head is perfectly reflected above a blurred body. Its shadow is a concentrated boat or fish shape, cast towards the sea.

Watch Ghostbusters in the evening. A hoot.

Monday, January 24th
Was it today I saw surfers bouncing along waves, descending through bubbling whiteness, as
if in a lift, following the surge in towards the shore, keeping with that line of energy as it metamorphoses? Yesterday, the waves finally became crystal wafers with four even ripples, like wrinkles in flesh, at the edge. Translucent wrinkles.

Tuesday, January 25th
The bedclothes were so heavy when I woke on this hot day - like a cone twisted around me.

Today I continue with the poem I’ll eventually abandon on longing - for what can be said about that subject? - and start to draw some earlier notes and new thoughts together for a poem on flowers.

Is this what the skin of the resurrected would be like -
a papery lushness rocked by a wind out of time?

As I develop the poem it turns towards poppies as its main subject. I have jottings about poppies - about touching and tasting them at Montsalvat last year. But I need to do more research so will take the poem more slowly. I remember a field of wild poppies in England early last year, and look it up in my journal:

A hillside covered with wild poppies - from a distance like red lights with a globe of darker red inside them. (May 30th, 1993)

Perhaps that will be in the poem? I write it in and try it out.

It was on Monday that I wrote the first drafts of ‘Primal Scene’, which I continue to develop. A feminist detective is called to the scene of a crime. But the body is missing. She stands in the outlined space, and ponders. I can relate the poem to the fact that I feel at times that I have missed life, or life has missed me, in some fundamental way. Also that, driven to my limit by recent depression, I’ll be (reluctantly) starting some psychoanalysis in a few weeks. Returning to the scene of the crime. Life as a Freudian detective story.

PRIMAL SCENE

The summons comes at a late hour - so inconvenient:
she’s propped against pillows, glass of port to hand, reading The Case of the Disappearing Doppelgänger...

A night journey. Soon after eight, she trudges up the drive, refuses tea, strides to the summerhouse. Suddenly, she’s staring down at a vacant space, shaped like a body.

No proof of crime yet, but where has this life disappeared to?
By nine, they’ve assembled - the whole jittery cast:
over dark crescent moons, stunned eyes avoid each other.

She paces the room, tests each angle and point of view:
that tired woman on the sofa, her hair blurred by sunlight -
where’s she in all this? And, near the door, looking forlorn,
the girl with bitten nails. By the aspidistra, duster in hand, the spruce maid. (That costume’s clearly a façade...). She herself is in drag on this occasion - crossed boundaries can disconcert, help cut to the truth; besides, the best thinking’s done in a collar and tie - or so they say... Using her watch as an aide-mémoire, she starts the questions.

Later, strolling the garden - how all those faces seem like flowers! - she notes a sundial fringed by daisies: shadowy asterisks halo that unequivocal triangle.

Life as a Freudian detective story! - what can’t or won’t they remember about what did her in, made her just fade away? Who holds the key? Will any clues be found?

At one point a child had run across the room - plump, with dark curls, an unfurilled dress. Whom did she run to, look away from? Quick, write it down before it’s lost!

The time has come for her to stand in that void outlined on the floor, stare everyone hard in the eye, say something eccentric, and leave... Return to Start:

it’s a real board game getting back to where she came from, but, at the other end, the book lies open on the table, the port glints. They’re assembled in the summerhouse.

It’s Sunday, the air outside balmy - a trampoline for bees. Inside, humidity. They watch me circle then enter that mummy-shaped form. This is the optimum moment.

If there’s to be a revelation it must come now... I turn, meet each pair of eyes - all blue-green, like my own. After a tortuous silence, an unexpected voice begins to speak.

I take up ‘The Handless Maiden’ again... Such a very potent image of powerlessness. My early collection, Metamorphoses, began with the story of Philomela, whose tongue was cut out, and who weaves a tapestry in her prison that tells the story of her rape and mutilation. My book is similarly the tapestry that tells the story of the damage. Speech and the power to write I’ve been given in my life. And now agency is the challenge - the work of the hands. Accepting life. Taking hold of it.

My first swim in the sea today. I have to walk for ages to get to any depth. I settle for three feet and baptise myself in the healing salt water. The wind is up but I walk out slowly. The clear sky is now sealed over. What looks like a mist - but must be condensation - was rolling in from the sea as I walked in, and now covers the sand, is all around the estuary.

**Wednesday, January 26th**

Very depressed. Stay in bed working during the morning - correcting a typescript of journal material, developing poems - yes, like photographs. I type some parodies onto my computer to lighten my mood.
It's hot, and I feel I'll miss the best of the day if I dally, so find myself walking into the water around midday. After ten minutes of paradise, sure enough, there is a seriously cold wind on my face - it has suddenly come on the scene and taken over.

Then walking in shallow water wrapped in a towel, and leaving because of the wind blowing sand so keenly into everything. But I remember trying to describe to myself how the water looked as it moved towards me - a mixture of gunmetal and aventurine (I must check up on all these gemstone colours I love using...). They swirl together like the effect on a soldier's camouflage uniform, are very shiny and oily.

And I remember two sisters of about eight and ten, taking their baby sister into the waves - how strong the legs of young children just learning to walk are - all the force of their being concentrated in those steps which seem more courageous than certain, but call gravity's bluff again and again.

In the evening, back working in bed, I register very clearly the strange fact that I can work so well while contending with depression (always incapacitating in the past).

_Thursday, January 27th_
Restless and afflicted. Attempt a late morning walk by the ocean - go for twenty minutes or so. I pass a dead penguin on the beach, his eyes gone, but the brilliant white of his breast still unchanged. I look at his feet and flippers.

In the evening I sketch several new poems. One of them is about depression, using deep sea imagery, so I hope it might be something for my sea creatures book. It starts:

- You live with the pressure
- and what it has made of you:
- no memory of light here,
- no fishhook tides...

_Friday, January 28th_
Depression is like fading into myself - like being a photograph and fading.

A long walk on the beach at Ocean Grove. The highlight is the jellyfish strewn beyond the water line. One is bluish, and has a long airbubble - I wonder if it could be a Portugese man-of-war (but this is small - my impression was that they were large). True or false?
3. POEMS

AT THE MELBOURNE GENERAL CEMETERY

Some interesting angels.
At this time of year, cowslips -
watery sculpture of lemon-meets-yellow.
Lichen-crested, old gravestones cluster
near untried slabs, grey scripted with gold.

I walk here to come back to myself...
Today, unhappy beyond knowing much else,
I am grounded by simple acts
of subtraction: contemplate again
how many children have died young;
those thirty-year widowhoods;
a life begun in Canton a long century ago.

There are a few light touches:
a guitar of paper blooms for Elvis,
red bordering white; in veinless marble,
the billiard balls and cue of Walter Lindrum.
Epitaphs graced by kitsch seem fair enough -
death the ultimate test of words.
And of flowers...lily, carnation, marigold
so rarely fresh here, except for those
heaped over the newly dead; brought with
weekly care till the grave is re-opened.

A little fine rain is chastening enough -
I need not to be shriven by fear of endings,
or so I tell myself: with a childhood shadowed by
crucifixes, skulls stared at by mad saints...
By now I know death as states of suffering
not to be endured, yet endured:
black lakes and seas rowed over
are now a sediment layering the body.

Why blame death if I made a bad bargain with life?
Survivor and witness, I walk the often-turned earth of this place where cypress and eucalypt spring up as they can, or will, against horizons of glass-skinned skyscrapers, lobelia dream-folds of mountain.

The day's air a cool pressure to be accepted or denied.

DESPAIR

Cover the left side of your face, and see it: an unwilled bitterness in flesh and feature. Call it an active lack of expectation - it replaces fear as your ruling passion, will be lived with equal single-mindedness: the killing logic that's your version of piety.

There's defencelessness in it, too - as of an unquilled porcupine huddling in your lap: a once bristly reality become this shapeless, alive, no-being, utterly at odds with its future.

What to do? Rearrange that face for a start. Easy: the body is only time-lapse plasticine, isn't it? Remove all sign of what blocks out the sorrows of friends, meets the new with boredom, is in a continental drift away from wherever now is.

And there's no short-circuiting despair with cheer or compromise; it will not be got to the bottom of, or written out in poems.

This has been sent to you, has arisen from what you are: a ticking bomb to be defused, a Trojan horse to outwit. Walk round it slowly. Deal with it or be diminished, become a self shivering in your own helpless hands that can make no offering, will damage all gifts.
WIND

Drag on shoulders and back as you heave this huge muscle coming apart in your hands, spilling away from you, rush it out among leaves in flux, colliding whispers.

One hoist clumps it over the tightrope: a humped shape flapping absurdist wings. Next, the pull into smoothness as tears roll down arm-veins, fuse skin and wool.

Damp gathers in vortex of navel, the belly moulded, like breasts and limbs, by an erotic shroud. You unclasp it to a straight fall, remove the template,

but again and again the wind rehearses those shapes, invents variations, or erases the body’s planes to conjure ghosts behind curtains, unhuman masks.

Your hair a cubist halo, clothes harlequined by water, you peg the sheet that knows your impress so well, has held the sweat of your dreams. It releases into,

now a wildness, now a sedate swaying, forked by sleep-creases... Half-sighs, an austere rustling: this impersonal fabric has its voices, too.

They tell you to live with your hands on the world, to wring and uncoil its bundled knots. Your body itself is a subtle knot silhouetted by pure air, its heat

transfiguring cool envelopes you enter, white planes blankly receiving imprint, a few trace elements, till whisked away to be drowned then resurrected:

a sail for the winds of heaven to rest against, curved as cheek or hollow of palm; resisting and surrendering; teased to life by the merest touch.
PRIMAL SCENE

The summons comes at a late hour - so inconvenient: she’s propped against pillows, glass of port to hand, reading The Case of the Disappearing Doppelgänger...

A night journey. Soon after eight, she trudges up the drive, refuses tea, strides to the summerhouse. Suddenly, she’s staring down at a vacant space, shaped like a body.

No proof of crime yet, but where has this life disappeared to? By nine, they’ve assembled - the whole jittery cast: over dark crescent moons, stunned eyes avoid each other.

She paces the room, tests each angle and point of view: that tired woman on the sofa, her hair blurred by sunlight - where’s she in all this? And, near the door, looking forlorn, the girl with bitten nails. By the aspidistra, duster in hand, the spruce maid. (That costume’s clearly a façade.) She herself is in drag on this occasion - crossed boundaries can disconcert, help cut to the truth; besides, the best thinking’s done in a collar and tie - or so they say...

Using her watch as an aide-mémoire, she starts the questions.

Later, strolling the garden - how all those faces seem like flowers! - she notes a sundial fringed by daisies: a dance of asterisks shadows that unequivocal triangle.

Life as a Freudian detective story! - what can’t or won’t they remember about what did her in, made her just fade away? Who holds the key? Will any clues be found?

At one point a child had run across the room - plump, with dark curls, an unfrilled dress. Whom did she run to, look away from? Quick, write it down before it’s lost!

The time has come for her to stand in that void outlined on the floor, stare everyone hard in the eye, say something eccentric, and leave... Return to Start:
it’s a real board game getting back to where she came from,
but, at the other end, the book lies open on the table,
the port glints. They’re assembled in the summerhouse.

It’s Sunday, the air outside balmy - a trampoline for bees.
Inside, humidity. They watch me circle then enter
that mummy-shaped form. This is the optimum moment.

If there’s to be a revelation it must come now... I turn,
meet each pair of eyes - all blue-green, like my own.
After a tortuous silence, an unexpected voice begins to speak.

THE HANDLESS MAIDEN

One opened, cradling itself:
a bowl of dyadic pink offered
mainland with promontories,
a chaos of rivulets.

There were shallow sharp grooves
as if scratched by nib or quill;
others, etched with deeper intent -
runes, not-to-be-translated.

Behind knuckles, needlework threads:
cobalt-purple as the tracery
on thumbs. At the wrist,
lightning strike of lavender
and almost-aquamarine.

The other stretched out flat
on her lap: five moons about to set
or rising; brown rain staining
earth-flesh. As it turned, light on
ruched silk, river-ripples.

They met, began to
reshape each other, learn
each other, dance...
What to do but go on imagining
these hands till she could
grasp on to life and not let go
before life failed her,

while the poem cupped by
the fingers’ cage sings to soothe
Death, allay its worst fears,
coax it into a painless
light sleep.

POPPIES

Is this what the flesh of the resurrected would be like -
a papery lushness touched by winds out of time,
the body’s garment freed at last from all stories?

Against your tongue, petals tough as a membrane.
In shriven light, their chaste silence answers back:
impress of lip-textured silk on whorl of fingertip.

Paten and chalice in these hands, the sacrament
they yield is respite from pain. Then oblivion,
bringer of dreams vivid as blood.

Brightness seeds itself memory... In high summer,
I climb a hillside crimsoned by rocking lights -
each cradling a jet-black globe.

Red in its plainest guise, star-white, utter orange -
poppies live with self-vanquishing suddenness,
proliferate among corn, deserts of crosses.

THE METAL DETECTIVE

He’s at it again, with his sticky-beak cap,
muffered ears, flying saucer-cum-stethoscope,
in search of an El Dorado whisper.
His eyes, fixed three feet ahead, ignore curios:
sea dragon served on a mound of seaweed;
shells, each a story of damaged perfection.

He'd winnow the whole beach, leave it pocked
with open questions - just for a rusty nail,
loose change, shards from a sunken craft.

Life as a treasure hunt for well-dressed
beachcombers! - the lure of something for nothing
as day after day gurgles down holes in sand.

At home, he unrolls his boyish bounty - unaware
the voice that led him was not gold ticking
but the sonic echo of the whale in his ear.

Dreams draw him through shipwrecks where
chests rusty with coral flaunt beards of pearls,
kelp swirls through emeralds, rubies choke clams.

Now his scanner is dumb, he cannot open his eyes
or fight the tide that will strand him gasping
in striped pyjamas, on a pillowed shore.
CHAPTER THREE

June 8th, 1994 - March 2nd, 1995:
Barwon Heads; Ormond College, Melbourne

1. COMMENTARY

The journal entries included here begin with moments and impressions from June, 1994, my last month at Ormond College, after which I went to live at Barwon Heads with my mother, Patricia, who was seriously ill. I've omitted all entries from the three months I looked after her, and have started again at October.

In this section of my journal, my attention to the natural environment around Barwon Heads increases - it will emerge still more strongly in my final chapter. Apart from this, I've included material on the shifting currents of my creative energy and creative thinking - often enmeshed with a sense of chaos, when one is more than usually captive to the perils of suggestibility.

In particular, the long process by which I will eventually track down Bluebeard (in order to write my version of his story - or, as it turns out, that of his seventh wife) has begun - a journey with many false leads and false starts. At first I think of writing a whole book about Bluebeard, then recoil from the violence at the heart of the story. How will I deal with this, personally and artistically? In the next chapter, there is further commentary on this dilemma, and I discuss the development of the sequence I eventually write, and the strategies I evolve to distance the violence.

In the poetry written during this time, themes of violence, anger, acceptance, and creativity are explored through poems centering on a range of male figures: Dracula, Frankenstein's monster and Rumpelstiltskin. While a sense of despairing isolation is expressed in my poem on the latter, and in 'Snow', there is a kind of burlesque energy at work in 'Walpurgisnacht' (on a Dracula-figure), and in 'Assemblage' which, like 'Snow', centres on Frankenstein's monster.

These poems are interactions with their source images, and offer readings of masculine energies in contemporary culture, while also acting as a focus for my own inner processes. Various poems explore personal experience in a more direct way: 'New Year's Day' and 'Winter Solstice, 1994' deal with the theme of exhaustion, and are concerned with finding a way through it to renewal; 'World Weary Poem' broaches the same problem with irony.
Rereading the journal material included in this chapter, I have a sense of a play of many moods and energies, in contrast to the predominantly depressive note of the previous chapter. And I am struck by the way the processes involved in creative work continue on, whether sporadically, or in a sustained way - processes of disciplined observation of nature, of reading and research, of receptiveness to new possibilities, and thinking through ideas till they gain momentum, find a shape in images.

There is, somehow, a constant learning and discovery process in train, both in the inner life, and in response to the outer world of human events, and of nature. One of the central themes which emerges for me, in reading all the chapters on my journals, is the attempt to find a balance between these inner and outer worlds - between the deeply interior attempt to shape and crystallise images which hold something of my personal truth, and the desire to resonate with, and witness to, webs of connectedness in the human and natural worlds. In this particular chapter, both an imbalance, and a real development towards an integration of outer and inner worlds, as I have described them, are recorded.

But the poems included in this chapter would seem to tell another story. They are mostly embattled, seeking a way through fatigue, isolation, and duress. However, my recourse to various powerful cultural images proves, in my view, to some extent energising - as though such imaginal exploration allows of much more dynamism at this time than the engagement with difficult day-to-day processes of change reflected in a poem such as 'New Year's Day'.

I note that 'Seaweed' is the only poem that could be considered a nature poem from this time, despite my deepening involvement in the natural environment of Barwon Heads as recorded in my journal. While drawing on particular observations of seaweed, this poem is one in which I consciously set out to express something about grappling with the intractable material of the psyche. It is a poem I will in fact change and work on for years, and it will play a role in a future episode in which I am carried out by a rip after wading though a passage in a large expanse of seaweed. Remembering my attempt to overcome my revulsion through writing the poem, thinking that now is the moment to face my fear, I will plunge into an area of seaweed so as to reach clear water but be carried out into an experience of near-drowning which is recorded in the poem 'Rip' in Chapter Six.
2. JOURNAL

Wednesday, June 8th: Ormond College
Sunlight across my left hand, holding the cover of this journal, as I write. During the last few days, I have felt as though I were plummeting into new spaces of fatigue and stress, my body painfully knotted despite all the resting I do. But my spirit is not resting.

One of my recent dreams was set in a prison, but I’ve mostly not been holding dreams - they float away like balloons.

Thursday, June 9th
I had marigolds in this room, all last week, and, as in my poem ‘Flowers’, I ignored them. Now I have poppies which I should be studying so as to make my poem about poppies a goer. But no - I’m basically ignoring them! As Annie Dillard says somewhere, looking is an act of devotion, and requires deep energy.

Friday, June 10th
Sunrise. A band of peach behind the branches of a eucalypt, the sky stacked with grey cloud above, but luminous in the breaks between clouds. Promising. The noise of trucks and of shrill, cheeky birds.

Monday, June 13th
A sweet sunny day. As I write at the table, a bird shadow on the curtains drawn across the windows. The not-so-distant swish of traffic. I do the washing, sort this and that out.

Monday, June 20th: Barwon Heads
At some stage over the weekend, I decide I would one day like to write a book on the sky - this is a great time for accessible books on the newest understandings of astronomy and cosmology. I also think about what is stored in the air of a place, producing a distinctive atmosphere - just as I’ve pondered on what is stored in the flesh of the earth.

Wednesday, June 22nd: Ormond College
I wade from the treacle of dreams - which evaporate once I try to hold them! - into a cold, windy, sunlit day. Up early: exercises, twice around the oval, breakfast, catching up with this journal. There is an oblique band of light across this page, coming down from the top right corner. My pen and hand are sharply outlined shadows as I write. Traffic, eucalyptus boughs bouncing and swaying, bird cheeps; no silence.

My mind has been rather unfocused for a few days - I would be relieved to think the
full moon has something to do with this!

A walk in Carlton in the late afternoon, then the early dinner - ghastly - in the hall. Waiting out the hour before dinner, (fighting the temptation to simply go to bed), I surprise myself by beginning a poem on the winter solstice. It has been triggered by Lois mentioning this morning that yesterday was the solstice, and by the full moon I can see as I sit at the table, my curtains drawn back from the wall of glass on my right. And a large part of the city of Melbourne is before me... Recent reflections on what is stored in the air of a place enter the poem.

I work on it till 10.30, going through five or so drafts. I'm thankful to have this poem. I remember saying, rather melodramatically perhaps, to a friend last night, 'Oh, I don't write poems now!' But I was obviously overheard. Truly, nothing is certain.

WINTER SOLSTICE, 1994

The moon is whole -
definitive inside a disc of haze
on starless indigo.

My lamp is its twin in the glass -
a halo of glued rice paper;
the globe of uncratered warmth

I write by... Down there,
a black swathe studded with
street lights and gold windows.

Eucalypts fork through them,
nest the sky:
horizons were made to be broken.

Night-gusts will sweep this city,
winnow what has been held in air,
(tinged on skin, in the eye's memory) -
cold darkness will erase
stories unfinished or untold
till they rise again

like steam from pavements,
unravel crippled determined roots,
press through grass and garbage.

Meanwhile the molten moon
drains and renews the world's waters,
rhythms of brain and blood.

Sun-fertilised, it is a cell
hooked to the wall of night.
I draw curtains but cannot
switch it off: the moon’s
unanswerable,
dying and growing, light.

The final image derives from a documentary I saw on television recently, showing an ovum being released within a woman’s body. What mysteries we can now contemplate visually. One might try using such words as: beautiful, delicate, and uncanny; but it is beyond words.

One more thing I remember: opening my car boot and seeing a small green shoot growing from the dirt in the groove around the boot... That also triggered an image in the poem (‘unravel crippled determined roots’).

Wednesday, June 29th
The sunrise is plum and cochineal, then peach and Barbara Cartland pink.

What a day! After a swim, I plunge into work: type annual PhD report; submission for conference grant; submission for a Victorian Arts project grant. I’m walking a fine line with time (the latter submission must be posted off today) while, in other respects, treading water, when the phone rings - a fellow tutor in tears - would I mind her baby while she and her husband pack for the removalists? So I sing lullabies to Liam, then desperately finalise my work on the computer. With an aching back, I walk with an express envelope to the post box, get there after 6 p.m., but hear the sound of my letter falling on other letters, so...

Thursday, June 30th
Walking round the oval, my hands in my pockets because of the cold. There are huge swathes of frost on the grass of the oval; the patches on the asphalt track around it are like ashen quartz. I walk back and forth in the half circle lit by the sun. I pick up a brown plane leaf that has swirls and tufts of frost on it, thick as a pelt. There are rhythms of frost on the grass outside the playing field - looking bluish in the light.

Wednesday, October 5th: Barwon Heads
I’ve been through various stages of emotional separation from my journal - continuing it has simply been impossible, so a natural lapse of connection has occurred, without guilt or second thoughts.

I’m having the latter now, though, because I think to myself I am missing each day’s birds and sunsets, the small revelatory details that may seed images in poems - such as the lovely convergence of two formations of birds the other evening, one mysterious configuration overlaying or penetrating the other. Then parting? I could not see. But I always feel as if a rune or sign is formed by such large patterns of subtly shifting winged energy.

Perhaps connected - there was a moment last week, in a taxi on the way to Brisbane airport (I was returning from participating in the Warana Festival), when I glanced out at a very complicated knot on the side of an empty transport truck. I thought of exploring knots as a
symbol, then remembered R. D. Laing’s *Knots*, and *The Shipping News*...

(Some of the above images of knots and runes and birds will find a place in my later poem, 'Birds at Sunset'.)

**Friday, October 21st**

These are random thoughts which I have jotted down over the past two weeks.

Two Thursdays ago, on the beach, watching sand martins... They lift up from sand and fly between visibility and invisibility, between light and darkness, as their bodies turn. This is an image which causes me to reflect on the idea of polarities - there are real polarities in nature, but everywhere there is constant movement between them, so that they become, in effect, part of a subtle continuum.

(I remember also reading of new astrological discoveries in the newspaper, concerning haloes round planets etc. and thinking there is a whole new imaginal level of understanding the relationship between light and darkness here.)

The dugong on the beach - I could have passed it thinking it was a great curved reef of seaweed. In the composure of death, its lips sealed and seemingly at peace - or, rather, *in* peace - its nature is revealed in this final state, as it was in its living reality. The slow substantial curve of its body. On a piece of paper, I have referred to this as the day of the dead dugong.

There was another day - the day of the double rainbow. At last I had got myself to the Ocean Grove beach, striding out in the direction of Point Lonsdale, when I saw that great perfect proscenium, then its more faintly coloured echo. Behind me, the sun going down through cloud cast an intense light which stayed trapped inside the inner arch - outside the shadow-arch, the sky was much greyer. This was a very striking and puzzling effect.

I also want to record seeing in Melbourne the Renoir exhibition and the Canadian Opera’s *Bluebeard* - I entered into both of these experiences very fully. Flesh as burnished silk in Renoir. The date of Bartok’s prescient, blood-drenched opera is 1911.

**Wednesday, November 9th**

At the library today I got out two Dracula books. This is because I started to write a Dracula poem in bed on Tuesday morning - it’s strange I forgot to record that. (It will be called ‘Walpurgisnacht’, which is, according to the Oxford Dictionary, ‘the eve of 1 May, on which, according to German legend, a witches’ sabbath took place on the Brocken in the Harz mountains. It is named after St Walburga ... one of her feast days coincided with the ancient pagan feast with rites intended to give protection from witchcraft’.)

I had that old feeling of happiness in the work as I penned the images that clustered in my mind. I rewrote the poem several times, then let it go, feeling it would need time. And research! - hence the books. What triggered the poem? An article on ‘blood culture’ which discusses the Dracula film by Coppola, in the latest *Ormond Papers*.

**Thursday, November 10th**

I wake from a terrible dream, cold, and in a sweat of fear. A woman who is a rapist is sexually harassing me. I escape from her in the house where we are.
I lie for a long time in deep unhappiness. The image that forms in my mind is of a pool of dirty water lying on top of my heart. (I will consciously cull this image for the sixth section of my poem 'Ashpuzzle' four years later.)

Then up and doing. I've been feeling a strange queasiness all week, which continues. In the morning I arrange papers, then take my mother to Point Lonsdale for a rehabilitation class. While she is there I drive to Port Arlington and swim in the pool there for the first time - the water has salt in it, there is a calm, restful atmosphere. I recover from the intense heat of the day.

**Friday, November 11th**
Up and walking on the beach - it's superb. Misty light, muted colours, the long sweep of the coast. I'm starting to feel well and energetic again. During the day I organise a lot of letters to poetry editors, working with swift energy.

In bed that evening, I finish reading Susan Geason's *Shaved Fish*. Splendid.

**Saturday, November 12th**
I wasn't sure I'd get off to sleep again at 1 o'clock last night. But here I am waking at 8 to a promising day. I eat muesli with gusto and break a tooth.

The day is: going to the dentist; driving to Geelong for a mammogram; then to Deakin to look at books of poetry from the U.K. so as to get a feel for what's happening in publishing (in the event, not so fruitful because not very up-to-date). *Then* the pool, the spa, and the steam room at a nearby leisure centre. Strange, sitting in a steam sauna for the first time - but the experience does something for me. Driving home, I know I have recovered from my driving phobia - I feel almost bouncily confident behind the wheel. True, there's a near miss due to an aggressive male driver who won't let me in to the right-turning lane - accelerates to prevent it - but I swerve away in time.

Almost too much energy to sleep so I read Sue Grafton's *'B' is for Burglar* - too much description; I don't persevere.

**Sunday, November 13th**
I feel again (as yesterday) that my spirit and my attention are moving downwards, inwards. I want calm and silence. A long walk on the beach to Ocean Grove: perfect.

I type up my new Frankenstein poem ('Assemblage') - it's weird, but interesting (to me, at least).

Paul and Kyle come - a very nice lunch - chatting, and silence too...

A late afternoon walk repeating the morning's route - great stuff. The sea is an incontrovertible presence, even though I'm still churning over thoughts, not noticing it. But I'm starting to calm down, to let go.

**Saturday, November 19th**
After the deadlock heat, so still and heavy, rain... Sitting out in the garden, chewing the fat with Paul this afternoon - a slow, calm, sometimes grave, conversation. Dracula-lightning
outside, as I write this, lying on my bed at 8 p.m. And the walk on the beach today - no coolness from the sea, just the pressure from seemingly airless warm winds.

Well, I've read the papers, and considered things. I've let go of the intense attempt to organise my poems to send to the U.K. - I'll finish it tomorrow - I've been at it for quite a few days.

It's been a fraught week, with a long root canal treatment on Friday. One thing follows another... I continue on, and how fortunate I am to be able to do so.

**Thursday, November 24th**
At Port Arlington in the afternoon, looking up and seeing a large insect in the air, then a bird flying down from a roof - a long arc to the right then a shorter one to the left - and the insect had disappeared. Nice work.

Then I'm in the salt water pool, swimming past where the warmer water jets in - delicious. It's a hot and cold sort of day too, generally oppressive. The far line of blue mountains reminds me of the background landscapes - hazy yet sinuous rock, a pale hyacinth colour - in some early Italian paintings.

That night, the sky is as full of stars as I have ever seen it. At 11, the air is light and balmy.

I told Paul that yesterday was the most beautiful day I've ever been aware of living through - because of the clear, warm, radiant light.

**Friday, November 26th**
Late afternoon. I meet a ladybird on the beach.

The softly green-blue sea rolling, the day bright and warm, with a touch of mistiness. Everything very satisfactory, and in order.

Earlier, over an hour in the dentist's chair, then shopping at Ocean Grove. Before that a busy morning at my desk. And at the end of it all, I ache with fatigue. But I resolved on the beach to rest each day, allow more inner space and quietness in my life.

The twittering of young birds - very high pitched. The image of scissors returns to me - little embroidery scissors snipping the air, flashing with light...

**Tuesday, November 29th**
Images I want to record from the last few days. On Sunday, what seemed an archipelago of small black islands on the water ... then the hooks appearing from time to time - a large group of swans feeding. Yesterday, I watched a pelican on Lake Connewarre - the eyes so small above that beak as pink as baby's flesh; a nest of black feathers at its rear. A difficult challenge to write about, although I do have the beginning of a pelican poem somewhere from years ago. And the small black diving bird - so sleek and graceful and nifty.

On Sunday night, watching a documentary on Frankenstein and his monster - earlier, I'd happened to turn on the Science Show on the radio and it was on the same theme. Fairly happy with my new poem 'Assemblage', but it's a big subject, to be explored further.
Monday, December 12th
38 degree heat today. I’ve worked well because of having a fan - I’m retyping poems from earlier collections for a Selected Poems. The sonnets from Turning the Hourglass I’m re-lining - it lets more space into them, lets the images speak more clearly, it’s more contemplative.

Also, Eavan Boland is some kind of influence in this, as I’m very struck by her approach to form - well, her approach is very various. But there’s astringency and surprise as well as the natural fall of a line or image. Yes, one should respond to each poem freshly - go for the look and feel of the image on a line, or for some unusual effect. I’ve been remembering, too, Galway Kinnell’s sonnet sequence ‘When one has lived a long time alone’ - I must look it up; I like it a lot.

Could form be like sand running through your fingers? I’m an Australian woman poet; I believe that in the arts, we will mould/discover new declensions of form here. We have so much space - there’s a lot of choice about what will be highlighted and emphasised, and how that will be set inside silence and whiteness. White noise? No. White silence. We’ll see...

Friday, December 16th
I have used my poetry, as well, to carry my personal story, and render aspects of the individuation process - I wanted it to act as a personal memory and witness to change and survival. In preparing a Selected Poems, I’ve reviewed my work, and know I must let go of both these intentions - they can burden poems, and the poetry in general. Yes, too many intentions. Let memory go, in that particular sense of it. And perhaps, then, one can become freer to delve into more communal kinds of memory.

At the end of the day, sinking down through unhappiness like layers of black cotton wool, sinking down, sinking down...

A memory today, while walking the beach, of the small dead penguin washed up on the shore last week. Wonderful creatures, with soft neat little feet, their fur white with a blue tinge.

Sunday, December 18th
A calmly hot day. I dredge myself up from the bedclothes - I’ve done three hours on my laptop computer, revising poems for my Selected, starting at 6. I’ve been having thoughts - inevitably heavy ones - about the place of unhappiness and suffering in the evolutionary drama. Without the spur of situations beyond our mending or transcending - the insufferable, that which sets the organism at war with itself - we do not progress to further solution-seeking. So the meaning of longing and desire, is that mostly we experience life as absence and incompleteness which makes us seek further, try to unlock more things from life as a process, and from ourselves.

Tuesday, December 27th
At 6 p.m., getting out of the shower, I think of making a link between creativity and the damaged ego/unfulfilled self in my critical studies of women writers. The link is certainly there for me, and it may be almost a general condition for the woman writer. Compensation.

These have been difficult days: of backache, sadness, fatigue, depression. But
Christmas Day, on Saturday, passed well.

I’ve spent quite a bit of time in the last few days typing: mainly already published poems to be included in my Selected Poems. I want to have this task finished by my fiftieth birthday, next week: a kind of ritual. I’ve been working on my perhaps rather provocative poem on Jonathan Harker (the protagonist of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*), called 'Walpurgisnacht'. I’m pleased with the form I’ve found to do the poem in. I’m not sure of the ultimate value of this poem, but it has amused me deeply to write it, and that’s worth gold at the moment. I continue to read Eavan Boland’s poetry collection, *Outside History*, which, with all its gentleness and subtlety, challenges me - it is so refined yet so fiercely evocative.

Questions of the self in poetry, and of form, continue to preoccupy me. I’ve recast a number of my early poems quite successfully, I believe, for the Selected. Form is sometimes something one needs to step out of, be liberated from. I have tried many approaches to form in my poetry, and will search out more. The role of the computer in searching for new possibilities is not inconsiderable.

*Sunday, January 1st, 1995*

After some difficult days dogged by backache and stress, I feel more content. I wrote a poem called 'New Year’s Day' during the day, it’s shaping up O.K. It’s about getting an edge on despair; and about starting anew.

Yesterday was a slog at first, then turned out to be delightful. Paul, whose birthday it was, and Kyle, came for dinner, and we were all very happy and making jokes. A sense of harmony, of being at home together.

I also printed out a lot of poems for my Selected, which I have finished typing on to my computer as I’d hoped to do by this.

I realised in the shower tonight, I must start to let go of many stresses, and learn to trust and enter the present moment again.

*Tuesday, January 3rd*

Subdued, yes, but sane and going on. Working in bed on my computer. I finally resolve the question of form for my poem 'Winter Washday' - I’ve recast it so many times recently - by borrowing from the form used by Richard Wilbur for his wonderful poem, ‘The Undead’. I have also recast, yet again, ‘In Conversation’ and ‘Longcase Clock’, both of which are improved by this, and by a slight piece of editing. The mystery of form.

I do lots of washing. To the beach at 12 but it’s windy there, clouds passing across the hot sun. I walk and rest, then return home. More rest, more work. Watching the waves and reading Eavan Boland, I thought of the phrase ‘the sea bolstering towards the shore’. Well, at least it’s new, though perhaps not so wonderful. (The word 'bolster' will surface in the poem on seaweed that I’ll soon write.)

*Wednesday, January 4th*

Stepping into the experience of summer today - it’s like an awakening, letting the cool salt sea support me, lying flat under the sun’s touch. Wonderful seaweed - coral lace blent with brown;
bright ferny green tails; and blood-stained white lace; kelp the colour of a dirty lion, but with glints of gold - it has the smooth glossy toughness of materials which humans have invented this century.

I watch the children with delight - most so absorbed with sand and spade, building and hollowing out small worlds. True seriousness and true joy.

As I walk I begin to think up a new poem on the traditional detective theme - since I seem to enjoy writing these period pieces. They divert me and lift my spirits. An important discovery - just as my writing the parodies has been therapeutic. A balancing of mood...

Later, sore back, sore feet; working on a new poem which is not so promising. But so what - about all of those things. I’d forgotten to type ‘Winter Solstice, 1994’ for my Selected. So I do that, then throw in the towel. The air has cooled, its almost 9 o’clock.

Saturday, January 7th
Slothful and sad after a bad night, so get myself up and out. At the Hall there’s a fair - I buy some books and a lot of sea shells (research for my sea creatures).

A bit sore (back) and sorry (not sleeping well) but life goes on. Well advanced now with the business of putting my Selected Poems together - I’ve realised this is my rite of passage for turning fifty. I’ve tried the title Driving Home, but it seemed a bit ordinary. How about Night Driving? Maybe. But I’d like something more arresting and more resonant.

So tired after lunch that I abandoned my attempts to clean up, and decided to write a poem. So I got down The Practice of Poetry and opened it at random - I’m now indebted to Roland Flint and his entry entitled ‘The Short Narrative Poem’ for a new poem on Frankenstein and his creature, in the snow scene. I seem to be in a phase where ideas or thoughts I’ve had some time ago are germinating fast. I remember discussing that scene with Paul a few weeks ago.

The detective poem I started on a few days ago does not look promising. Thought of a new angle this morning: The death of the author. Aha! who would be investigating that one?

Wednesday, January 11th
Is it Wednesday already? Two excellent days at the beach. There’s been a lot of seaweed in the sea and on the shore, so I started a poem on it this evening - could be a goer. Working on my computer for several hours each morning, getting things done little by little. How driven I am, always thinking of work. Being on the beach slows me: I think all my mainly rubbishy thoughts then I start to look, to be... And moving inside the water is like returning to a beginning, just as meditation is. But I think of the immobility of body involved in some kinds of meditation - that I don’t want.

This morning, recasting ‘At Least There Were Candles’ - not so cumbersome now, quite elegant. My new detective poem is now called ‘Death of an Author’ and I’m reading Barthes’ essay on that subject, for my sins.

When the clouds came up and canopied things yesterday, a few big drops of rain, then none; the wind rising. In the distance, a gathered curtain of charcoal sift veiling bright blue as the rain came down in another direction, a wider column descending, equally filmy.
How my relationship to this journal has changed.

Wednesday, January 26th
Tired and unable to face the task of clarifying my study environment. So I decide to embrace chaos and try to write something. Pam’s book, *All-Steel Traveller*, has arrived from England, looking very fine indeed, and I have that by me as a resource in the muse department.

Suddenly, threads of association are pulling me towards Rumpelstiltskin! I can’t remember the story fully but sketch a poem, for which I will do more homework.

The Frankenstein poem I drafted last week, called ‘Last Scene’ (a pun intended) proves an example of being caught out by inadequate knowledge. Reading the final part of Mary Shelley’s book now I see I’ve got a problem - but there’s real substance there, so I’ll redraft it.

Against habit, I had a beer for lunch to provoke the muse - I’m leadenly tired later because of the fatigue I started off with, the writing, and the beer. But I’m pleased to be on the track of a new poem again - very pleased.

I drive out to the cliffs late afternoon for my second beach walk, with paper and pen in my pocket. I want to clear my head, but also continue the mood of connectedness to images if that can be done. I stand in view of the sea, feeling grateful - for all before me, and the poems I sometimes produce out of my struggle with chaos and the feeling of living against the grain of life.

The clouds are the most powder puff-like clouds I can remember seeing, and the contrast with the meticulously fracturing surf is extreme. I gather various small treasures - lacy seaweed, white and dull mauve; gunmetal cone shell the size of a fingernail; a white stone that makes me want to look up the word ‘chrysoprase’ (which I do later: it is ‘an apple-green variety of chalcedony containing nickel and used as a gem’). I smell that wonderful sea smell again, an incense-like fragrance. I put down that it is like smelling a rainbow, but I don’t think that’s any good at all. Other jottings:

- a wave offers an x-ray of itself (seaweed inside the wave)
- diamante flecks on sand
- clouds like white ink on blue botting paper
- contrast with protean surf, constantly changing, changing

I also remember the marks on wet sand I saw the other day - left by worms? - like an attempt to invent an alphabet. An alphabet of what?

On my walk this morning I felt terrible anger over my position as a woman poet in the male-dominated Australian literary scene. I think this is what started me feeling I must ignore everything else - to deal with the anger. And the theme of my anger certainly informed the poem I drafted this morning too. Rumpelstiltskin anger...

It’s heady weather again, the heat returning. What else do I want to record about today? Earlier, I worked on my seaweed poem, and the poem I’m writing in response to a painting - while also revising problem poems from my *Selected*. This was on the computer while I was propped up in bed. At the library this afternoon I looked for ‘Rumpelstiltskin’ (on order) and got books on the sea out (to research seaweed) and *Through the Microscope; Forensic*
Detection (from the children's section). This last might help me write another detective poem.

I realise I could also do a ghost poem, and perhaps some other mystery poem - these last two thoughts prompted by my re-reading of Francesca Duranti's The House on Moon Lake. It's rare for me to return to a novel. I remember Francesca Duranti at the Adelaide Festival some years ago - a flower of a woman, but one with a wonderfully intricate and perceptive mind. Her portrait of Fabrizio has echoes in my personal experience of several men: he is a man who is possessed by a fear of giving, and this fear co-exists with a blind need to be the recipient of generosity. But this is a portrait which also speaks of larger current questions about patriarchy and the state it's in; especially relevant to Italy at the moment, as it happens - a team of bankers and professors have had to take over for there to be any real order it seems, but what dangers will spring from them, and from that new situation?

Contemplating images as a path to creativity - could I learn from some of the approaches of Tantric Buddhism in this matter?

Reading a newsletter on matters Jungian, I stumble on a reference to Bluebeard's Castle, and a bell goes off. Yes, I've wanted to pursue this since seeing Bartok's opera months ago.

My back is O.K. again.

The thought I had about In Praise of Seahorses - that I could include 'The Metal Detective' and perhaps some other more general beach poems. Maybe. And I could look out for the Picador anthology on the beach while I think on this.

Thursday, January 27th

Getting into the shower tonight I want to find some lost lines that were the beginning of a poem to my mother when she was ill. I think of how we can now exchange clothes, like twins in a pantomime.

A day of gin and work - and fatigue.

Wanted to record that I'd read - and been very impressed with - Cal by Bernard MacLaverty, and enjoyed my stroll through Richard Ellmann's gossipy Four Dubliners (Yeats, Wilde, Joyce, Beckett).

Friday, January 28th


Saturday, January 29th

Work hard in the morning sorting papers, then doing the shopping until 2. Rather tremulous because I've been awake since 3.30 when there was an extraordinary thunderstorm - the weather has been very volatile indeed, with the cat terrified, first with prescience, then because of the actuality of thunder and lightning. I go to the library and get carried away taking out fairy story books. Of which more later.

To the beach. The clouds a mixture of Constable and Turner, though nudging towards
Nolde later on... Into the seaweedy water after a paddling sort of walk. Yes, I'm a little more at home with the seaweed after writing a poem on that subject in the last week or two. The storm had stirred it all up, a lot of it was broken etc.

Paul and Kyle drop in. We're all quiet but cheery.

At seven, in bed checking out the story 'Rumpelstiltskin' - hadn't been able to recall it properly when I drafted my poem on it a few days ago. Rumpelstiltskin is associated with the devil ('The Devil told you that') while a gnome-like dweller on the fringes ('where fox meets hare'). He's associated with fire. And he wants the queen's baby. At the end he tears himself in two. So he's some deep unconscious twisted rage that will take away the miller's daughter's connection with her child, her nurturing power, her creativity. His greed is a deeper one than that of the king. But the fact of naming him gives the queen power over him.

Well, I 'fix up' the poem, most of which can stand. I include a reference to the queen's child, take out the line, 'She is alone, and knows it!', which sums up the meaning of the whole poem. This is a poem that describes the state of 'winter in the soul'.

I also read Perrault's 'Bluebeard' again. My thoughts start to crystallise towards a sequence on that theme, then I imagine a book of sequences and single poems based on fairy stories. Yes, I do like that idea. I want to do it. I realise the material on Jack the Ripper is connected with Bluebeard. Bluebeard in modern dress. Or what about Bluebeard moving through centuries?

And Celtic myths too, for this book? And Hans Anderson? What about the Seal Woman?

I must check out the lady and the unicorn (on cover of this journal).

Images of jellyfish from today - Scandinavian glassware, aeroplane glue.

\textit{Sunday, January 30th}

The music of a Russian composer on the radio (the tragic Kalinykoff). Two notes alternating beautifully, falling raindrop sounds - a kind of answer to the police siren sounds which so violently woke me up this morning.

But that was not my first waking. At 4.30 I woke and the connections were there and spinning - for a book on Bluebeard. I wrote down my thoughts as fast as I could, switched my light off then switched it on again to write down a fresh idea or phrase or theme. This energy feels very positive - as if I'm meant to write this book. But it will partly be about the fact that I can't write it. As one becomes the images one contemplates, how can one enter into images of violence without being contaminated? But this violence, its roots, must be faced and held in consciousness.

Such a book would come out of an almost opposite set of impulses to that of \textit{The Monkey’s Mask}.

The sense - though it's 11 a.m. and I'm still in bed surrounded by papers and books, with Khatchaturian's violin concerto on the radio - that I must get down everything I can at this time, that the images are around me, around my body and psyche, waiting and available.

Spiritual and imaginal contemplation - purifying. The entry into the passions - transforming them from within, consciousness and feeling working with them. Jungian and
Buddhist approaches. Art as purifying.

In a way I’m not surprised that this eruption of ideas is coming to me now, because that sometimes happens after a difficult phase. And in the transformative chemistry of summer. And out of the struggle with my particular chaos.

We are all amateurs. There is always so much we don’t know.

How will I look after myself when writing Bluebeard? Question.

It’s sometimes partly illusory when one has this kind of experience - of connecting with something new that is big and challenging. But it also feels real. I’ll go ahead with it.

Important - underlined by recent experience - to get the research right first - where research is in question.

Walking on the beach at 1 p.m., a piece of paper in my pocket. A lovely blue clear warm day. These are my thoughts. That I could include dreams in my Bluebeard. That I feel sufficiently grounded to take on such a violent subject. That I’d like to write a poem about keys - this idea first came to me at Hawthornden, and there’s an outline of a huge key in an earlier journal.

The artificial glamour (I look up the etymology of that word which proves fascinating indeed: '18th c.: original sense 'magic, enchantment', variant of GRAMMAR, with reference to the occult practices associated with learning in the Middle Ages') that can attach to murder and sexual violence now. Murder as power? On a psychoanalytical level, the relief of someone else being murdered, not oneself? The suppressed desire to kill acted out at one remove - a horrid surrogate satisfaction while one is oneself doubly safe: neither victim and murderer. (I must look up Auden’s essay on the detective story.)

Idea for depiction of character of Bluebeard via a card in the tarot pack.

The jigsaw of a cross section of an apartment house (American) that one of my uncles gave me when I was a child.


Zen. Being true to your own impulse, energy, sense of rightness and truth, from moment to moment. So each moment is a letting go, an entering anew into life. Each moment a death and rebirth. As an artist, one can connect with and serve the unconscious (and consciousness) through this path - because one is open.

One is creating a process, and the right space in which to look at extreme things.

The film maker Quentin Tarantino. He is recording - and perhaps, serving - a metamorphosis occurring at the deepest level in respect to violence. In his film True Romance, the drug dealer sitting in his kingdom of death.

Sunday, February 12th

I am following my shadow as I walk into the waves, their surface fractured by the hot wind. My shadow is dense and blurry in outline and is surrounded by intense light: a net of fluid gold constantly changing.

And heaven it is to be out on this strange, raw day - reefs of black clouds above mixed in with lighter colours and textures. Standing in the water I see rain, fine grey flour through a sieve, sifting down over to my right, then my left - far out across the waves. Then the rain
moves further right, above the town of Barwon Heads. It is like being in an amphitheatre.

Free in the water, then falling through layers of weariness on the beach, lying there as the sun bears down, and constant changes are happening in the sky. Slowly dragging myself out of that relaxation, to re-enter the waves, and slide around in them and body-surf - carried along like a bullet until each wave breaks. I feel that old thirst for the summer - it's still being awakened when I decide to leave, hoping for a further immersion tomorrow. Lurid light, thunderclaps ... on my perfectly timed return home, the first soft drops fall ... but they are not serious. There will be more heat tomorrow.

*Tuesday, February 14th*

Awake at 4. The last few days have been hard work on correspondence but with long stretches at the beach - it's been 34 degrees or so. Some images press upon me, wanting to be recorded.

Lying on the beach I look over towards the headland, its buff flesh reflected in a long stretch of water across the estuary; my arm, which is beneath that image, is the same colour.

Yesterday, a deep green sea, but then a pale mauve border between it and the sky - the sea on the horizon.

As I walked in the shallows the water was rippled in a way that closely resembled a honeycomb, flowing over the ridged sand - a pattern of cedillas.

On television last night, the handless maiden - a lovely nine-year-old girl whose special computer has been stolen from her school - both her arms end above where her elbows should be.

*Wednesday, February 15th*

Images from the past few days on the beach.

Like having a vacuum cleaner going all around you while you sit in an armchair, or a lawnmower while you sit in a garden chair - the man brutally romping through the waves on his surf-skiing machine - I was aware of the petrol smell first as I walked into the waves, then the sound - close to that of an old-fashioned dentist's drill.

Always, the snake in paradise. How angry I was.

Back to the sea. Today, it was clear olive near the shore, the intense green was clear? bright? glistening? - all of those. And near the horizon, the sea was lavender. If you swim near Raft's Beach, near the estuary at Barwon Heads - as I mostly do - the waves turn towards the estuary rather than the shore at a certain point. But the warmish strong wind made the waves go in many directions today. I swam up and down them, let foam break over my head - interesting, to be between where a wave is breaking and where it is still a shining green peak.

The sea and I were equally matched today, and I rose from waves with bare breasts because the top of my bathing suit had been pulled off, and had my bottom roundly slapped by one wave - so perfectly timed it seemed intentional. It was lovely to see the blue texture of the green waves reflecting the sky.

The clouds were feathery. Thistledown was on the move again, and while I swam one touched my nose.

Some serene great seabirds with brown speckled feathers, puffin-like beaks. So self-
contained and at ease as they nested in the shallows.

Tiny tots in those new brightly coloured costumes to prevent sun-damage - how cute they look.

I did some shadow study yesterday, noting my shadow on the surface of the water, then deeper down, and on the bottom, with a play of refractions going down to it. So, yes, it is surrounded by more light as it descends, and those refractions shimmer because seen through ripples. Interesting.

Leaving the water for the last time today, I saw a gathering of brilliant fragments: the sun's reflection. A wave came and I watched the process again - a circular mass of what could have been gleaming small metal cogs, or confetti, before the sun's distorted singleness could be imaged. The intense looking caused me to see patches of sulphur powder on the sand, and then huge transparent discs of the same colour above the horizon.

On my walk to Ocean Grove, I see a great patch of seaweed in the shallows, with bits sticking up - black water, tyre shreds, camel-coloured tripe ... a cluster of such images came to me. They may help me with my poem on seaweed.

Now I'm back at my desk as magpies warble and the light fades. My bed has been covered all today, as for the last five days, with letters and papers. But I'm making headway - did a terrific post-off of poems to editors yesterday. I worked hard this morning, then went to the beach at 1 o'clock - I felt so strong and fulfilled there, could feel myself coming together, coming out of all the stress and emotional pain accumulated in my body over these last months, these last years - well, a glimpse of something, and a respite. I am a sea-woman. And I am thankful for that water, this present calmness and strength.

Tonight, I watch TV because a Frankenstein movie is on. But it's both terrible and horrible so we change channels. The film opened with the snow scene of my poem, but very artificially done.

**Thursday, March 2nd**

I had wanted to record the full moon two weeks ago - its strong and strange light entering my sleep and waking me before 4, and my mother's sleep also - and, she learnt next day, that of many of her friends.

Since then there has been a passage of intense heat, during which I immersed myself in the sea, turned golden brown.
3. POEMS

SNOW

...sometimes he himself, who feared that if I lost track of him I should despair and die, left some mark to guide me. The snows descended on my head, and I saw the print of his huge step on the white plain.

- Frankenstein

Always, at the back of my eyes,
I saw my pursuer. An intemperate peak showed wild gashes tracked by toothprints - small clean bites of them, till they meshed with a new rhythm, flailing towards chaos: the death of a mind, its every device and delusion an embellishment on snow.

At last, alone. Even in that unbounded place I felt in myself a vastness, imagined whale inside iceburg, as I staggered towards sea-line, thirsting for a frozen magnificence, to be preserved inside a tower that could travel oceans, slice ships, buckle ice floes - an island where no tern lands.

WALPURGISNACHT

"Walpurgisnacht doesn’t concern Englishmen."

- Jonathan Harker

After we drove through the peasants with their clogs and alpine teeth and eerie whisperings (‘Walpurgisnacht!’) the coachman’s eyes were bubbles, as if his sucked-in cheeks had forced breath into them. The sound he uttered was voiceless, a ghost of a sound: ‘Wal-purg-is-nacht!’ I rolled the word round in my mouth, tasted the vertiginous brandy of it, sank back amongst velvet cushions - I do enjoy my travel.
Our coach was hurtling down the profile of a mountain, the valley steaming like pitch, a sky devoid of gold or silver...

Increasingly at ease, I tried to chat with the driver - now almost incoherent, his English quite gone. My German, on the other hand, was fast improving. 'Walpurgisnacht!' - that fall of syllables so pleased me, I imagined a Hotel Walpurgisnacht, even a restaurant of that name. (What would it serve?)

By this we had entered the valley's labyrinth, night totally upon us, the horses emitting high-pitched squeals - the driver also... I took a nap. When I woke, much refreshed, the rattling wheels, creaking sway of the carriage, and the squeals already mentioned, were my only points of sensory reference. I settled deeper into burgundy plush, lit up a cigar - its molten tip the one visible spark in creation.

Various untoward events then occurred and I found myself, accordingly, on my mettle.

It seemed that, the carriage having overturned, I’d been extracted from it by a huge wolf-like being which had mauled me somewhat intrusively, had even undone my necktie, and...

However, at that very moment, a troop of soldiers arrived and doughtily fought off the creature which slunk back into the woods or graveyard or wherever it had come from - perhaps that odd-looking inn over there? Under a heaven of lanterns, fear-glazed eyes trawled my neck, found it pristine. Though shaken, I was still in good spirits and richly enjoying the atmosphere of the place, drinking it in for future use: branches thrashing and breaking, unholy cries, stigmata-rain...

They asked me, when I got back, to lecture at the Royal Whatsit Society but, though I’ve always been one for dispelling myths about foreign places, I declined. For you see, the writing bug had bitten, and I was in a mad rush to get it all down. This was, let me tell you, the happy beginning of my long, prolific (and, dare I say, prestigious?) career as a Gothic novelist.
At my desk, words have flowed seamlessly, there have been no real disturbances, except for that incident with a paper knife. Fortunately, my powers of self-healing are remarkable, I’m never troubled by scars. Oh yes, I’ve got the temperament for the writing game. Quill into ink - the neat, sharp beauty of it! For me, a deeply gratifying way of life.

‘Red ink?’ squealed my publisher (porky fellow) when he saw my first manuscript. ‘For God’s sake, Clive,’ I said, ‘allow me one eccentricity.’ Beyond that, I’ve never explained, couldn’t be sure he’d understand... Well, all in all, plenty of colour in my life! Every few weeks it’s up to Town - dinner at the Club, cards, a stroll in Pall Mall, Piccadilly - that sort of thing:

I keep in touch... I never leave home when it’s full moon, though - I so love the look of the garden lying drenched in a carnage of silver blood as I wander the grounds, hover in nooks and shady bowers, or stand at a high window, in formal evening dress, commanding the whole scene - my monocle flashing, my lips in a thorny smile.

NEW YEAR’S DAY

My mother sweeps leaves: a scalloped swish along borders, scratchily brisk on concrete - a kind of speech, yes, creating the fiction of order.

Through garlanded lace, its lapse and casual flaring, I see her face, calmly inward, her back’s curve the witness to a lifetime of such tasks.
My clock drips seconds:
drops of sweat, of heartsblood...
When all exits are sealed
there is this bending to clear
a space in the soul’s weather,

hands tending, setting right,
as eyes scan closer and further
fields of vision - so that
in time, one is shaped by
the work, and cannot mind

when torrent or gust disrupts
and fragments of poems
sheer off like shreds of paper -
scarred leaves spiralling
to where trunk meets earth,

as if they would merge
and travel down to make
a compact with roots: to learn,
after however long,
the act of starting again.

WORLD WEARY POEM

The mirror-map warns,
‘Look away. I’m stained
with time. I’ll scar you.’

‘I don’t believe glass photographs,’ I say.
Here the clock chimes in

with a prophetic tinkling.
Hard to read...I’ll try
again in an hour.

Tea leaves and Tarot help
a lot with the past: Hanged Man,
Queen of Wands, Earl Grey.
They predict how good it is
that it’s over, remember
how much better

everything will be.
I’ll go to bed now with
a pill, a tumbler of water,
some old book - there are
a few still worth a look...
Consciousness winks out -
a self-snuffing candle.
Then there are dreams
and dreams I will have to

wake from to forget,
as another day’s light
pearls my fist’s smooth skin.

ASSEMBLAGE

I wake, re-position my head
carefully back on my shoulders,
revolve the bolt.

Dents in the teapot on my breakfast tray
evoke the dimples, oily
with light, I’ll dive into

at the pool - a liquid bowling green
draining through shark gills.
I wear a twenties costume -

black wool, knee to neck -
but anyone can see my skin’s
rough patchwork; that my joints
have metal accessories.
I am what I appear to be -
a walking industrial accident.

Though large of stature
I'm less endowed than the life guard
smirking up from his sleek strut.

Thirsty for reassurance, I lope to
the spa - the circle widens with
distant looks, its temperature rises.

'O! that this too too solid...'
But no! Resolute fingers clamp
bubbling thighs, I check my toes.

Sans suit, a businessman rises up -
his body hair that of a new-born ape,
cramped jowls close-shaven.

Back in the change room, I fiddle
with scar cremes, anti-rust spray,
busy as a drag queen.

A half-fogged mirror shows
two eyes, almost level, almost
equally blue, in this

botched transparent face
that will never tan.
I'm an artefact, I know,

yet some kind of human -
I can think with halting fluency,
admire sunsets, want love...

At home, the mirror is edged
with cloud stains -
a fin-de-siecle lithograph.
Diving through deep-sea eyes
I ask, *How much is retrievable,*
*how much yet unborn?*

then turn away - terminally bemused,
of course, but also, I confess,
quickened, scenting an animal peace.

**WINTER SOLSTICE, 1994**

The moon is whole -
definitive inside a disc of haze
on starless indigo.

My lamp is its twin in the glass -
a halo of glued rice paper;
the globe of uncratered warmth

I write by... Down there,
a black swathe studded with
street lights and gold windows.

Eucalypts fork through them,
nest the sky:
horizons were made to be broken.

Night-gusts will sweep this city,
winnow what has been held in air,
(tinged on skin, in the eye’s memory) -

cold darkness will erase
stories unfinished or untold
till they rise again

like steam from pavements,
unravel crippled determined roots,
press through grass and garbage.

Meanwhile the molten moon
drains and renews the world’s waters,
rhythms of brain and blood.
Sun-fertilised, it is a cell
hooked to the wall of night.
I draw curtains but cannot

switch it off: the moon's
unanswerable,
dying and growing, light.

RUMPELSTILTSKIN

Brought undone by mindless glee,
by announcing himself to the universe
just a little too loudly.

Name-riddle-self-
she's tipping it out the window now
with slops the pigs will change to bacon.

In the cellar, in the tower,
he goes on singing his song of self:
too mad to be lonely,
captive of a broken spell.

A survivor of deadlocked nights,
she's become a singer herself,
spins gold back into straw
to feed the creatures who companion her.

Her hair's gold has turned to white;
in a silver net she wreathes the cradle;
no one else is there.

This is not a fairy story.
She steps through the doorway
to stroke sinews of couch grass,
touch winter air.
SEAWEED

Still frightened of them, are you:
those clumps of swaying darkness
beneath summer’s mirror -

even after years of unclamming dreams
to find that fluted proscenium
rimmed by seed-pearls

with, at centre stage, unblinking eye
or crusted globe weeping light?
Through crystal

a pine-green foxtail flurries by,
staghorns sway near bushes alive
with underwater finches.

You weave on, seeking unshadowed
space in which to play the dolphin,
practise not breathing.

A handkerchief of sea-lettuce waves;
your ankles are braceletted by
Neptune’s necklace.

Then, at your wrist, that white ruffle
bordered with blood. You slough it off,
pluck strands of mauve,

milky beige: shades you could
paint a room in, sit calming
your nerves – life

a fantasy of interior decoration -
dust sculpturing shells on
doiled walnut.

You wade through black water -
past serpents in Gordian knots,
stray holdfasts.
Except for a blunt scalpel’s swish,
polystyrene’s slimy nudge,
    none makes claim on you.

Bolsters of surf roll you in on wrinkled
jade sheets; in warm pools you lie-
    luxuriant, many-fronded.
CHAPTER FOUR

March 26th, 1995 - August 21st, 1995
Kuala Lumpur; Colchester; Newbliss; Barwon Heads; Melbourne

1. COMMENTARY

This section records a lot of travel to new places, both outer and inner.

First, a brief visit to Kuala Lumpur - the creative fruit of which is my poem 'Macaws' - then sojourns at Colchester, in several places in Ireland including the Tyrone Guthrie Writers' Centre at Annaghmakerrig, Newbliss, County Monaghan, and once more at Colchester before I return to Australia to put down roots here again.

In all, this was a very productive time for my poetry, and marks the beginning of my conscious hope and intention - one by this time fulfilled - to write a book of poems based on some of the fairy and folk tales collected (and often recast) by the Grimm brothers. This collection is now called The Sixth Swan.

The greater level of psychic energy flowing into my poetry during this period in 1995 is reflected also in the more lively and forceful writing of the journal where there is also a lot of movement between sombre or entrapped states, and an upbeat, more buoyant approach to life and work.

The rapidly developing momentum of my work on fairy tales is the key event in my creative life during this period. I make some particular comments on various poems in the journal entries for this chapter, and will here offer reflections in addition to those. An explanatory general discussion of the views and convictions which inform my work with fairy tales, as well as with myths, is contained in the Commentary to Chapter Six.

The central themes in the fairy tale poems included in the present chapter are the abiding ones for me of empowerment and disempowerment, self-liberation and the escape from oppression, and the transformation of suffering. The theme of storytelling itself emerges in 'The Robber Bridegroom', 'Mother Holle' and 'The Gold Key'.

From my personal point of view, the most important poem written during this time was 'The Sixth Swan'. The protagonist of 'The Sixth Swan' has survived, along with his five brothers, the interesting but grief-inducing experience of being turned into a swan. However, the transformation back into human form is not complete in his case, and he has a swan's wing in place of one of his arms.

While this may be read as suggesting that the progress through a particular psychological complex (as represented by the bewitchment) is never complete - a vestigial wing remains - the image has a power beyond this interpretation. The wing, even while it is linked
with imprisonment in a non-human state, suggests the potential for transcendence. Thus it dramatises a divided condition, a pull between different natures, for the protagonist who is both afflicted and gifted by the presence of the swan’s wing. Further, as he evolves in my own interpretation, the subject may be said to act as a muse figure (and indeed, to capture something even more deeply written into the human condition) by representing a painful but fertile constellation around self-displacement, longing, and creativity.

‘The Twelve Dancing Princesses’ is based on another story close to my heart. The princesses escape to ecstasy each night, but are tracked down by the old soldier who reports to the king of their wild dancing in the arms of princes in a castle across a lake. Their journey is thus to a perfect world of delight and fantasy - in the common phrase, a fairy tale world - while there is also an unmistakable suggestion of sexual transport. The king, in league with an old soldier - the highest and lowest rungs of male power working together - defeat the princesses and circumscribe their joy. Though my own interpretation strikes an elegaic note, I would see the story as memorialising the enchanted but subversive eros of its protagonists who sparkle with vivacity on their midnight quest.

As indicated above, my travels - particularly those in Ireland - helped to create a lot of movement in my creative life, so that I was also travelling downwards, as it were, into new psychic energies and depths. Rereading this chapter, I have a sense of a whole new area of creativity being opened up, while at the same time - despite the lack of continuity in my physical circumstances - there is a contemplative process at work.

My poem on the macaws - a creature I present as vibrant with cultural accretions as well as mysteriously (and poignantly, because of its removal from its habitat) part of the natural world - seems to me, at this distance, rather like another kind of muse heralding in a new phase with some lighter, quirkier energies at work, as well as the recognition of unknowability. While the poet is contemplating the macaw, or the princess in her tower, each of them is looking back at her...

Poetry as a dialogue and transaction with the images of nature and culture, then: connection and retrieval, glimpsed insights, and finally the knowledge that one has created a very small silver shape on the surface of a great revolving globe faceted with fragments of a mirror...
2. JOURNAL

Sunday, March 26th: Colchester

'Sky of crystal, sky of smoke!' Those were the words I wrote after looking at the early morning sky in Kuala Lumpur nearly three weeks ago. They are the only words I have written for my journal during this time of travelling and adapting to new situations, new weathers, new skies...

The six days I spent in Kuala Lumpur were mainly about rest - recovery from the flight there and the intense work of preparing, and leaving things in order, beforehand. I loved visiting the Bird Park and the Butterfly House. I saw a leaf-winged butterfly slowly straightening its wings in a glass case full of chrysalises. There were a few mature butterflies in the glass case, too - not yet released. Opulent butterflies of imposing size flew above my head, often too fast for me to see them properly, though I did watch one on a leaf for a long time. It had a kind of frilly skirt effect built into its wings, reminding me of an apron.

At the Butterfly House were also turtles, rabbits, a cobra, and an amazing large lizard with silky chain-mail skin. And the scorpions - yes! Huge and slippery black, clumped in piles under a rock, or alone.

I went to the Bird Park twice - the first time it was raining and we all - Margaret and her sons and myself - walked round with black plastic garbage bags on our shoulders or heads. This was somehow very freeing and we enjoyed the situation all the more.

I loved it so much - especially the macaws - that I went again in the heat, two days later. I sat for a long time watching the macaws and being watched by them, though sometimes they - consciously, insolently, so it seemed - closed their eyes, preferring their own private reality. I felt connected with them in a deep way, as if I were carrying their image inside my own, and knew I would write about them. So I began the notes and jottings then, and these continued welling up for a few days. I've started to give them a shape but the poem has not reached its final form yet.

Leaving the Bird Park (after a rapid look at the lovely orchid garden opposite), I took a taxi back to Margaret's home with a driver who turned out to have passion for nature, loved nature programs on TV, and had thought deeply about ecological matters. So it was a delight to meet him and talk with him, share his enthusiasm.

Wednesday, March 29th

Yesterday, almost serious snow - reading-the-London-Review-of-Books snow - which whitened lawns and pavements for a few hours. I was feeling terrible, and went to bed for a while in the afternoon. Later, Angela and I walked into the town, went to the library, then I did some shopping alone. Yes, it made one feel so much better to be out and about, breathing the cleansed, slightly rainy air.

I've made some jottings about the frogs which have been mating in the pond at the end
of Angela's garden for the last week, with some continuing today, though they now seem a lot less lively; many look wrinkled and must have lost body weight. Yes, such a stillness about them now.

Some are toads, in pale ochre and watermelon colours. Their eyes are flat black almost-ovals, rimmed with a fine line of washed-out gold - an inlaid effect. I love watching them swim - some movements are like pedalling - and the flexible postures they assume, arranging themselves so as to be propped by grass roots, sometimes with their heads out of water - taking the air (and the sun?).

Because I have been thinking about fairy stories - I reread 'The Frog Prince' a few months ago - I'm particularly interested in and connected to these frogs and toads - I've never observed them close-up before. There are whole Atlantises of frog spawn, and long strings of toad spawn, like ticker-tape.

This experience is what triggers my poem, 'The Frog Prince' - its opening based on what I witnessed as I stared down with fascinated horror into the pond in Angela's garden.

**THE FROG PRINCE**

She looked down into secret water:
beneath archipelagos of lily pads,
males clamped on doormat backs;
a frenetic globe of them vying
for the female at their centre.

As March became April, they wrinkled
into exhaustion, posing wide-legged
beside Atlantises of spawn...
One day, an errant threw stranded
her golden ball on dankness.

A stone spoke from the grass
with squat authority, his words
swimmingly fluent but for those
belches of marsh gas: he offered
help. A concertina-dive through

rotting weeds nudged the ball
back to her feet on frilled ripples.
His gaze swivelled: he ventured to
hope he might *burble glug gulch*
call on her? *Noblesse oblige*...

An endless white damask cloth,
towers of brimming tallow.
In her goblet's shadow, he was
slime. Her tongue slid over silver
inlaid with ivory - no comfort there:
his bottom-of-the-pond eyes
drank her in. The others - worse
if anything - gaped like gargoyles,
snorting and fingering beards
behind greasy napkins...

A bilious attack first, the vapours,
hysterics - she'd let them have it!
After, she lay in her locked room:
her tears neither wet nor dry;
a seething emptiness

A chance look found him poised
on her slipper, his obsidian eyes
with pale gold rims... Her toes
curled, her heart contracted;
she felt murderously afraid -

so flung him, a warty arrow,
into the heart of the chandelier!
Those frozen forms were shattering,
melting, as she stood among
tears of crystal and wept light.

There were no smooth arms
to hold her, though from somewhere
a princely voice, pellucid as
spring water, was offering,
was offering - she leant closer -

what was it offering?

So it is that I gaze at frogs, those ancient symbols of fertility, and of crossing between the two
worlds of earth and water, of consciousness and the unconscious - and write my way through
deep complexes of emotional imprisonment, of an instilled fear of life. But there is much more
to this poem, and the story, than that.

Monday, April 10th: Dingle Peninsula, Ireland
At a guest house out of Dingle. In the two mornings I have woken here, I could look out at
Dingle Bay, and the trees and the far-off girls' school reflected in the water, the mountains
beyond with the mist overlaying their sharp outlines, draining away their density.

In my few days here in Ireland, I've seen conjunctions of mist and light quite new to
me. Once, near Killarney, the light at sunset seemed to pour down into the mist above a far
mountain, igniting it in a brilliant way, both concentrated and diffuse (I think of Thomas
Nashe's 'Brightnesse falls from the ayre'.)

Friday, April 14th: Waterville
Angela and I stayed here last night - after almost staying at Ballingskellig, a wild, bleak fishing
village where I felt challenged by the desolation, and also afraid. Afraid of dead space. Of
many things. So we'd pushed on to Waterville - an old seaside resort full of cramped, smelly
hotels and a few luxury ones. No good. After a while spent looking round, we got to 'The Smugglers' Inn' towards 9 o'clock. It's out of the town, by a golf course, but more importantly, near beach and bay, the blue mist-shrouded bulk of mountains enfolding luminous water.

The last of the day, a nearly full moon - we settle into the hotel then walk on the beach. Those shapes move deeper into mist, the silhouettes disappear. At the far end of the beach I glimpse mist pulsating elusively beyond the immediate folds of land. A blue wavering.

On the beach we'd seen, first, sandfleas, then seaweed covered with moving thickets of them - macabre, leading to thoughts of Baudelaire, whom we discuss.

On Thursday, there had been another, very long, walk on a beach, in the early afternoon. At Inch. I made myself keep thinking Angela would want a long walk, because going on and on seemed too much for me, and then I was glad. It was so like a good Australian beach - a wide strand of fine sand. The bright water kept almost silently breaking and running in low waves.

And there were the hills of the Dingle and Iveragh peninsulas in sight. Very lovely. Angela watched the patterns on the sand as we walked, finding damask; I found herringbone; then we both found feathers, whole wings, wing patterns, and so on.

Saturday, April 15th
Angela and I have discussed whether we'll go to the Skellig islands - I'm worried about seasickness, Angela is keen. Neither of us has understood that the Skelligs are far out, cannot be seen from the coast. Today, we drive to where we can catch the boat.

Though a bright dry day - the conditions seem perfect - I'm upset by the hour-and-a-half boat trip out into the Atlantic. When we reach the three rocky islands that comprise the Skelligs, the falsely, I believe - promised landing on Skellig Michael does not take place. I'm relieved.

The boat first goes round the great gannetry - the steep black planes of rock white with gannets in places, and the air filled with other gannets, circling. (En route, we had seen birds with what looked like seaweed in their beaks, heading for the island - these were the subject of swift chases, and they often had most of the nest material pirated from them.)

I am moved to tears by this sight of abundant life building on so intractable an environment in this measureless arena of ocean. And moved again, in a way comparable but different, by the smaller Skellig Michael with its gradually ascending path, with the wall on the outside of the path built into rock. A further, improbably path winds up to the top. We sail round the island: the huddle of buildings that is the monastery, or what remains of it, is visible.

I reflect on the extraordinary vision of oceanic possibility and utter austerity which brought those monks to this place. And in the same thought I see an image of the Viking marauders throwing the monks from that eminence to the rocks and sea below - as they did, many centuries ago. What impossible things we are driven to create; and with what wretched, perverse violence human beings have destroyed such marvels as that community - perhaps because it was something so courageously envisaged and wrought. The monks brought what little they needed to this place like the gannets carrying twigs and weed in their beaks.
Sitting as still as I can on the boat, the balance in my inner ear unsettled, I watch those two sculptured rocks for as long as I can. Holy islands. Two images to carry inside myself.

Angela has also been shaken by the boat ride. Back at Waterville, we eat, then walk again on the beach near 'The Smugglers' Inn'. I need to calm and ground myself before the drive ahead. On the sand we see a large white seabird with its neck looped in death. It looks as though it has been impaled - there is a round hole in its chest. A thick green rope is entangled with its wings. A human-created death.

In counterpoint, I remember the dolphins we saw on leaving Skellig Michael. The appearance of dolphins can so often seem like a sign: it was certainly so on that occasion.

Those two images, apparitions, embody the choice we have.

Tuesday, April 18th
The journey alone to the Tyrone Guthrie Centre at Annaghmakerrig in Newbliss, County Monaghan: a bus from Dublin at 9 a.m., then a taxi from the bus station in the town of Monaghan after a long wait in the chill air. Rain, then hail. On the drive to Annaghmakerrig, while happily chatting to the driver, Billy, I see the road turn white with hailstones.

Arrival, a makeshift induction, then settling in. I feel all kinds of things now and in the next few days - including delight in the place, diffidence, and admiration for the Irish writers here (for their quick witty words and their personal warmth - the confidence and depth of this reflecting the fact of living, still, in a close-to-traditional culture where people look after each other). Sometimes I feel excluded, and can’t understand what is said, or keep up with the pace of the conversation.

Annaghmakerrig is a special place but what most attracts me is the large lake visible from the house. There are many pines and spruces on the far shore with, to the right, a large hill of lush green grass. The gardens of the house are delicately spare yet varied and delightful - daffodils and jonquils, small tulips, some small light pink roses, hibiscus.

Wednesday, April 19th
Reflexes of hail and sunlight, each bursting into ascendancy at unbidden points during the day. Coldness.

As is my way, I punctuate the day with various walks, drinking in this place. On the previous night I’d mapped out the territory around the house, tired as I was. I’m getting my bearings. Now I go further afield, and in the afternoon go round the further side of the lake, negotiating the unknown, getting through or over mud, barbed wire, a stream.

At one point I stand in a clearing, feeling the silence and space. I think of the spruce branches as patterned like snowflakes. Where their branches are upturned, they have a bluish look. From a distance, this becomes like snow, too - snow fallen on the tips of the branches.

The lake draws me like a magnet and when I walk to it again later in the day, various thoughts and impulses come to me. I’ve been thinking of my Rapunzel poem - the one I want to write, that is - and decide I will put this lake in it. The question I formulate about Rapunzel is: What can she see from her window? A further question is about how the light of the sun coming into her tower would look - an image of a gold lozenge of light moving down from her
hair to her belly. On which it is like a keyhole? I'll explore these possibilities...

All the Norman towers, round or square, I have been seeing are present in my mind, too. I remember a description recorded by a visitor in medieval times (this was at the exhibition I visited in Cahir). He spoke of the darkness because of the narrowness of those rectangular slits - and so few of them.

The following notes and jottings are from my three days sojourn at Annaghmakerig. (Some will become part of 'Rapunzel'.)

- moss on trees: monster-pelt
- shadow of far trees on the lake - a meniscus effect
- the landscape of cloud
- the new leaves, like soft small ears
- the spruce: snow crystal pattern of branches, the blue of upturning ends of branches (another snow effect)
- the mysteriousness of the lake, its texture like a mirror, or like material - a nap of silver velvet (or gun-metal)
- a tide of dark minnows sliding along a mirror - roiling with minnows - teeming ripples
- Sean's very Irish remark that, at its centre, the lake has no bottom
- moss and gun-metal colours of lake - stone-coloured lake
- changing colours beneath its silver (what colour beneath its silver?)
- diaphanous - sequined
- the lake flecked with the colour of the trees (the darkness inside the pines)
- remembering the hedges (growing from stone walls) in Dingle (primroses and celandines, dandelions)
- also at Dingle, the three larks ascending to sing their song.

Thursday, April 20th

I have a sense of peace and wholeness for much of this day, and moments of delight. Also, I work hard, making headway with 'Rapunzel'. It is not far from this final version before I leave, the next day.

RAPUNZEL

Far below her, the lake:
beyond depth at its centre.

At dawn, her stone-framed face;
hair spread out in darkness.

Gold fumes above misted pines,
scrolls over the lake, finds her.

All morning, bronze enters her hair,
her cheeks grow amaryllis apples;

the forest's shadow is a meniscus
round that great brimming tear.

As she steps from noon's glare
a keyplate of light slides down her,
from brow to belly.
Now, dusk’s glittering shroud...

Pines fill the lake, their darknesses
masked by green crystal.

She sits weaving her strength
into a braid, thinking:

*Whatever has happened, or will happen,
the lake is there, and the tower
dwells in me, and I within it:
a key hidden inside a lock.*

She watches the wind’s fingers
trawl a nap on silver velvet,

unsettle then recompose
the snow-blue spruces.

In a conversation, Michael Poynder talks of visiting a very small island off the west coast of Ireland where a wren perched on his friend’s head, and the other birds, too, knew not human beings, and were so wild as to be tame.

I love sitting at the round table in the kitchen, chatting. There is a befriending process at work, I feel a kind of balm.

In the evening, a long meal with much wit and vivacity. We sit on and on... Then, a reading is decided upon for 10.30, and a fire lit ceremoniously in the drawing room.

Mark Roberson reads first - a man of the English North, setting the solaces of family life against the greyness and blackness now and to come. I read from *Mayflies in Amber* somewhat tentatively at first, but with increasing focus. They really listen to every word here in Ireland.

* * *

**Monday, April 24th: Colchester**

By 6 o’clock, awake and bright and wanting to walk, which I did - down past the great pond, gazing at the trees. Then a stuck and very difficult day - despair and stasis.

Eventually, a breakthrough. I write drafts of poems on ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes’ and ‘Third Son’ - having found that first story and ‘The Golden Goose’ (which is the starting point for ‘Third Son’) in *A Treasury of Bedtime Stories* which Angela has bought to read to her grandson.

Late in the afternoon, I go into the town and buy a complete collection of Grimms’ Fairy Tales, but before that, the sense of a new phase beginning, energy and hope. I feel confirmed in my desire to write a collection of poems on fairy tales, can begin to imagine it. That ‘hunting the snark’ feeling!

The two poems I originate today are rather light and knockabout. I would like to have a
collection full of all kinds of moods and accents, with a panorama of figures. It will not be written from a single-lens feminism.

The Emperor’s New Clothes’ makes great reference to clothes and textiles. Influences behind this are Eavan Boland’s beautiful use of textile imagery, and the opening pages of Buddenbrooks, which I read last night: it was like observing a huge domestic interior with brilliantly and incisively painted figures in it, with everywhere costume and texture highlighted. I think of Velasquez, certainly (as befits Mann’s partly Spanish ethnic inheritance); but there is - most centrally, of course - that specifically German bourgeois solidity, too - ironised so subtly and provocatively by Mann.

I have the Thesaurus open at textiles - very delightful.

Tuesday, April 25th

While I’m in the bath, some images come to me concerning Bluebeard. (I’ve read one paragraph of the article I have on that story this morning - have held off from reading it all, because I want to develop my own ideas first.)

Charcoal. I see crude charcoal images on a wall. That’s the first thing. Then I think of a shadow-puppet play. (The story has the crudity of a Punch and Judy show, in a way).

Blue. Investigate the associations of this colour. (I remember the Polish-French film of that name, which I love.)

Bluebeard is both grotesque and secretive. (Are there links, as regards grotesqueness and violence, with ‘Hans My Hedgehog’, which I reread last night? No, that’s not worth pursuing.). I must read ‘The Robber Bridegroom’ which also has a murderer in it.

Later in the morning, screams from Angela - there are tadpoles in the pond - she’d thought them all eaten and the frogs gone. She has been intending to clear the pond on the coming weekend. (I’d been happily propounding the value for creativity of getting down into the mud and mess of the psyche by means of such pursuits, until she had invited me to join in!)

The pond ... where there is now a great jellied cloud of spawn, a teeming mass, seething like maggots, ticking like fleas. My first thought on seeing it is of the brown pods of boronia - but these tadpoles have oval, not round, bodies. But that colour is right. Is ‘pullulating’ the word? - yes.

Their tails are ribbon-like so the comparison with sperm does not hold. The whole mass of them is hemmed in by bright stagnating green.

Then I discover three frogs - heads poking out of the water - with a start, as I am now the observed. They are surrounded by the pink and green petal-weed (so I call it, lacking further knowledge). They are like guardians and witnesses in a way, except that the expression - if it can be called such - on their faces is so insensible, as if they are becoming slime.

What will I do with all these images? Another incidental image I would like to record: the cat, Polly, on the garden seat, her nose touching that of the crouched stone cat, her mirror image.

I read of a new theory about cancer - emphasising the problem of cells not dying (wanting immortality?). So not endless proliferation as such, which has been the prevailing
image of cancer. Letting go of the past, letting things die ... this is in there, at the heart of it. This bears much thinking about. Certainly, letting go of the past seems to me more and more important. As does memory! How to work with the tension between these two things? - a challenge, certainly.

The cat sits on the ledge above the window sill, and her jaws snap at the birds she sees outside the window.

Cleaning my glasses, I see the cobweb effect in the glass because it has been compressed.

Wednesday, April 26th
Looking back, a week later, I can’t remember this day, but probably drafted ‘The Prince (and the Princess)’ about this time.

Friday, April 28th
I’m still lying on the couch, looking at the light, in Angela’s sitting room. I reflect on what the last week has brought - I feel set out on a new path of writing a book on fairy tales. The sense of connection I have with the material is strong, and I’ve been able to get a lot of ideas down and some drafts written very fluently and fluidly. It has been half an eruption, and half an awakening. Because the energy and connectedness are there, I feel this book is meant to be.

The poems I have sketched are ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes’, ‘The Third Son’ and ‘The Prince (and the Princess)’. Each promises to be lively but a lot more thought and work are needed of course. But, yes, I believe I can - if the gods smile - produce a book on all this; and I foresee it will be absorbing, personally rewarding, and perhaps liberating, to do so.

Saturday, April 29th
With my energies in disarray - yet I write, with great enthusiasm, poems based on ‘Mother Holle’ and ‘The Golden Key’. The first will begin the collection and will honour the muse and - in my designation - this earth mother figure (with complications!). The second will conclude the collection. So, book-ends! And perhaps ‘The Golden Key’ would make a good title for the collection?

I also write down the following thoughts on the figure of Bluebeard. He creates a situation where coming into consciousness/knowledge equals setting the seal on one’s own death. This is the revenge on Pandora. He creates an image of the womb as torture chamber and slaughterhouse. He writes a scenario in which his absence is used to control. The locked room is a womb inside a patriarchal fortress - a stage set. He creates the story. Marriage and murder. Compare ‘The Robber Bridegroom’ - which is perhaps an answer to the Bluebeard story?

Sunday, April 30th
I’ve reread ‘The Robber Bridegroom’, which is fascinating because of the clarity with which the young woman pursues her investigations, and the elegance of her revelation of the Bridegroom’s guilt - through telling a story. But if I want to make the poem my own, I need to
bring a particular perspective to it, to add something - this is quite a challenge. The draft I write
emphasises her use of consciousness to meet the perils of the unconscious. The story is much
more than a wish fulfilment - in it, male violence is discovered, escaped from, confronted,
punished. That sequence is, after all, a very substantial agenda.

The heroine is a feminist detective, entering and surviving great danger, then staging
her wonderfully cool exposure on her own ground, the setting of her own family and
community. This story speaks to me of what I believe needs to be done about old and new
forms of male violence now.

The domestic event of today is Angela cleaning out the pond with help from Nigel and
his water pump. She's now in gum boots and old clothes capturing frogs and putting them in a
bucket - temporarily. Some frogs remain till the water is almost gone - one can see them
swimming under the surface of the watery mud. There are quite a few newts, and two fish have
secretly survived a heron's banquet that took all their fellows a year ago. There is the bloated
frog (diseased) that Angela puts on the compost (though it finds its way back and has to be
removed the next day from the refilled pond!). (I remember two male frogs clutching a dead
and bloated red frog during the mating season.)

At the bottom of the pool is what looks like black loam - much of it, fish excrement.
Tadpoles 'twinkle' in small pools, many are victims of the pond cleaning. Alan puts some of
the very black pond earth around the ornamental cherry.

The water lilies ... a small city of them. Angela finds it hard work to uproot one to give
to Nigel.

**Monday, May 1st**

An early start. To the doctor's to have the lump in my right breast checked out. A fairly
reassuring response from the doctor, but she says it will need to be taken out eventually.

I do a lot of things, too many, in the next six hours - buy second-hand books (one - a
little gem - on alchemy) and a copy of Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (bought with
reluctance as I find her too bombarding a writer, too extreme, but necessary because of my

I seem to have a compulsion to get things done, and to get things right, on this day and
the two that follow - perhaps I am clearing a space for my creative work while also running
away from it. Some of the washing and cooking I do is done with displaced energy - what I
need to 'cook' is poems, but I'm too tired to do so.

**Tuesday, May 2nd**

Do three loads of washing, hang them out. A hot sunny day. My stomach trouble continues.
Read 'The White Snake' and 'The Three Snake Leaves' - wonderful stories. I begin to think
about them, and have a take on them, but what I write down is not very promising - best to let
the images germinate in my psyche.

I'm so tired, and so driven.
**Wednesday, May 3rd**

Wretchedly tired. Hay fever. It’s hard to work, and walk, and cook, but I do all of those during the day.

Reading seems a wise option; later I read fairy stories and poetry.

**Thursday, May 4th**

Tired, after a deep sleep, then clear and energetic. I work on 'The Emperor’s New Clothes', typing and revising it. Noting the confidence in complex syntax of other writers I’ve been reading lately (e.g. Auden), I’ve decided I worry too much about keeping my poetry cogently communicable at all times.

This morning, a fox in the garden (not a thought-fox!) - first crossing it, then returning. How to describe it? Scraggily compact, tautly relaxed, nimbly deliberate? It had a parched ginger coat. A flagrant survivor.

In the late afternoon I start reading Carol Ann Duffy’s poetry, but decide what I really want to do is write a poem of my own. I read 'The Juniper Tree' (a strong story, and notable for its treatment of extreme suffering - perhaps, in this, a counterpart to 'The Handless Maiden'? - no, not really...). I write some lines, a sketch, which represent a connection with the story, then disengage. I do not want to rush towards this poem; I must listen to, and live with, the story first.

I eat my dinner and do various things I must, then retire to bed for what turns out to be a bad night - dark thoughts and wine, not a good combination for me.

**Saturday, May 13th**

The David Hockney exhibition on six Grimms fairy stories - brilliant - I later read the three stories I don’t know ('The Little Sea Hare', ‘Fundevoigler’, and ‘Old Rinkrank’), then plunge into a poem on the latter. But I’d like to do something on all of them. I’ve already developed poems on ‘Rapunzel’ and ‘Rumplestiltskin’, and will look again at ‘The Boy Who left Home to Learn Fear’.

The small booklet I buy relates that Hockney '...chose Old Rinkrank, not because it was an interesting story, but because it started with the words 'A king built a glass mountain'.'

(David Hockney, *Grimms’ Fairy Tales.*)

By contrast I am interested in the whole story which I see as an intricate template of my own father complex.

**Friday, May 26th**

Yesterday, I drafted a new poem on hanging out the washing. I’d seen the small rotary lines near the caravans of the circus people on the Recreation Ground. And I now have a photo of some washing in a monastery - socks and handkerchiefs only! - and postcards of washing in Venice, and Ireland. So, I wrote down, ‘washing as signature’ and that started me off - on what looks like a promising, but difficult-to-write poem. (I also think of the wonderful rotary line scene in *Strictly Ballroom* and the backyard scene near the end of *Muriel’s Wedding.*)

Since I’ve been thinking about stories, that theme is in the poem too. Well, we’ll see
what happens.

In the evening I dip into Ann Sexton’s *Transformations* - still revising my opinions about it. Some poems are very good. ‘The Twelve Dancing Princesses’ is good. I look it up (it’s 'The Shoes that were Danced to Pieces’ in my Grimms collection) and find it powerful and delightful. About the intoxication of wish fulfilment; about romance and sexuality; and about the reality principle. Standing for the latter (and serving the ends of patriarchy) on this occasion is a wounded soldier who brings about the end of the ecstatic nights - he is the one who knows how to resist intoxication.

I also read ‘One-Eye, Two-Eyes, Three-Eyes’ by Sexton, as well as the story it’s based on. But it doesn’t appeal to me at the moment. And ‘The Wonderful Musician’ by Sexton (the story is called ‘The Strange Musician’ in my book) is unpleasant - the traditional helpful animals who so want to be musicians are treated cruelly. Shades of Marsyas and Apollo, perhaps?

*Saturday, May 27th*

One day spent rather resplendently, as I enjoy writing my own version of ‘The Twelve Dancing Princesses’. I begin some notes on ‘The Little Sea Hare’ too, but that story poses a deep puzzle and needs more time.

Looking back, though, I remember a slow, difficult morning, and the final organising and posting of my poems to three editors.

And all through the day - underneath the writing of the poem - a bleakness and hopelessness. I’m aware this is to some extent provoked by my writing of this particular poem on vanquished princesses.

*Sunday, May 28th*

In the considerable amount of work on poems I’ve been doing recently, I’ve been using - as ever - some new exploratory forms, and have been conscious in a new way of how the interaction with form, its possibilities and limitations, helps one to order the rhythm and also helps the voice to become fully shaped.

In the afternoon, a visit to Bourne Mill, nearby. I’ve been going for walks to the large pond by it recently, trying to resolve problems with some of the lake imagery in ‘Rapunzel’. Today, there are two swans on the pond, with silvery grey-brown signets who swim in their wake and replicate in miniature all their neck movements as they feed and groom.

*Thursday, June 1st*

An adverse day. Do correspondence, bits and pieces, whatever I can. Then to the swimming pool mid-afternoon - to ‘fix myself up’.

It works! I catch the bus home, and attack 'Old Rinkrank'. After some editing in the second half, the poem is looking decidedly workable.

Angela back late with Alan - they’ve been for a swim. We’re all in good spirits - somewhat resolutely in my case. But how lovely it is to be here, with Angela, in her home. I wish I had more contemplative calm - I feel I am missing things by not gazing at them and
valuing them - Angela’s garden, for instance, which I walk around from time to time. Trellises laden with pink and yellow roses, the wild poppies now, pansies of many colours crowding great wooden tubs - small nations of them - white viburnum and yellow wisteria - many treasures.

In the days following, some hard work on the fairy tale poems ... moving them forward.

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**Sunday, June 18th: Barwon Heads**

It is my mother’s 74th birthday.

I returned to her home a week ago, and have settled back in, sleeping a lot (at odd hours, of course), but more to the point, resting. I’ve enjoyed lying propped up in bed in the small hours, doing the final work on *The Body in Time* (my deadline: next Tuesday!).

It has often been bitterly cold, and the electric power has gone off three times - last night it stopped around 3 o’clock and stayed off until 8. Beset by darkness! As on previous occasions I typed on my laptop computer until the battery gave out - and the lit screen was a help when steering myself to the bathroom!

I tried to use the time to reflect last night - lying there, waiting for my bed light to come back on, wanting to work. I remembered the safe journey home (the least fraught flight I’ve ever done); the last days at Angela’s when I became exhausted and a bit disoriented: no doubt, the prospect of my uprooting fed this to some extent.

**Thursday, July 20th**

So cold again. I make headway with ‘Jorinda and Joringel’, my new poem. I felt so delighted when it came to me in the last few days, the images slowly crystallising. I have a Gothic approach to the witch, she is a kind of bat-lady - I feel there is a deep energy in this figure, trying to get out, as well as the despair. Hence the off-beat last section, which I’m tempted to punctuate à la Emily Dickinson. Perhaps I could incorporate a few more parody elements into these poems?

I’m grateful for this poem. Last night, reading the opening of *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, I felt myself recognising a new turning, perhaps a central future direction, because I felt myself to be a storyteller. Looking back at *Metamorphoses*, that’s certainly what I was up to there. And the storytelling I will do will be through poetry. And I will draw on fairy stories and legends and myths. Yes, this is what I want - as well as being what has already happened. It’s something I feel a kind of joy about.

**Sunday, August 6th**

Some sunlight early, then the wearing cold again. Winter takes one down to one’s worst, deepest, and most vulnerable places. My mother has been away for a few days and I find in myself a great taste for silence and isolation, even while I have been living with her in a creative harmony. At the same time, tirednesses and desairs have surfaced - and I have intensified
them by drinking too much alcohol. I realise how immensely tired I am - more and more I see it: a distortion of vision is involved when the pressure of work and too many tasks goes on for too long.

Yesterday, I listened - restlessly - to a relaxation tape by Ian Gawler. I will try this way of doing something about my exhaustion in the coming days.

Many dreams in the last week or so - deep and vivid, most of them. I must record some of them here, however sketchily, or they will be lost. Then I will note some things about my recent work on 'Jorinda and Joringel', or that will also be lost. Water into sand.

The dream I had two nights ago is connected with the poem. While a David Attenborough programme which showed vampire bats a few weeks ago sparked a number of things in the poem, some images from a later programme to do with mating rituals also became an influence. Walking into the lounge room I saw on the television screen two white birds in paired flight, each trailing what seemed a long white streamer. An ultimate gracefulness. Later, male birds dancing so as to attract a mate - they spend a lot of their lives practising this.

In the dream, a large polluted lake has been drained and the earth beneath it purified. An audience is sitting on chairs in the middle of this expanse. I rise up and dance high in the air. I have no wings. I stay mainly in one place and dance with my whole body very freely.

I had wanted to re-arrange the sections in 'Jorinda and Joringel' so that the narrative by Joringel opens the poem, and also to write a section on Jorinda as a bird in her cage. After having the dream, I sketched this section which I had not really felt able to write before - I had no way in.

Writing this sequence is bringing me a quiet joy - I think it is about some deep process of balancing. Also, the crackling energy of the witch is a new departure - an exultant thrashing around. There's a Gothic excess, an enthralling bitchiness - and also a pathos there. Ugliness and encrustation and an inner entrapment that she acts out by caging all those maidens.

Perhaps I should also add that I was reading some books on birds and bats on Friday evening. Many birds, I learnt, have an astonishing number of feathers but, according to Roger Tory Peterson's *The Birds*, 'Songbirds may have as many as 1,100 feathers'. Most birds are social creatures. Much bird song is to do with males threatening each other, and defending territory. Male meadow larks need a territory of 22 acres to support a family. Most songbirds can mate before their first birthday. Note the difference between songs and calls...

A singing male is nearly always supreme within his own domain. Experiments have shown this to be so: a European robin, caged within his own territory, was able to frighten off intruders merely by singing. Similarly, a caged song sparrow was once placed within the territory of a neighbouring sparrow. The confined bird went wild with fear. When the sparrow outside grabbed the caged sparrow's wing tip, the poor captive had a heart attack and fell dead.

One more look back at the bats before I move on. Attenborough's programme recorded how vampire bats feed each other - if one has been unsuccessful in its nightly attempt to gain blood, a companion will give it some of the blood it has ingested, back home in the cave. If a bat does not feed each day, it dies.

Nurturing and vampirism - the great complexes around these seem almost too powerful
to contemplate. The witch is thwarted in her ability to nurture herself and be nurtured by others; therefore she acts out her destructive side by imprisoning the maidens - all images of her former self.

A memory of a television snippet about a woman who did paintings of bats, related to them deeply. Her calm, pale, but composed face...

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*Friday, August 8th: North Carlton*

A wondrously balmy and warm day to follow yesterday's opening gambit for spring. I had woken at 3 p.m. (too much wine), and got up at 4.30 to start work on the final corrections on my ms of *The Body in Time*. The previous few days had been ones of despairing exhaustion and blockage - I'd realised my resistance to finishing and surrendering my book. So I worked through to almost 3 p.m. yesterday, and delivered the ms to Michelle and Susan. The terrible strain of it all - I felt the need to make a great effort so as to connect with people when at Spinifex.

After, I go to see the photographs at Arts Victoria that Susan has told me about - yes, one of them seems to me possible for the cover - an upraised arm, palm facing outwards, in a bluish tint merging into the background black.

*Monday, August 21th*

Increasingly, spaces and silences in this journal - much left out that I wanted to include - some of it on ragged bits of paper. Perhaps I'll sift through them soon, to see what can be retrieved...

The weather over the weekend was not only lovely in its warmth and freshness, it was luminous, inviting spiritual awakenings. Yet in me there has been profound sadness, anxiety, distress. Perhaps I find in this house an image of my own possible destiny - to be alone and unaccompanied for the rest of my life. If so, what would I try to create in the way of a lifestyle, an environment, that would express my creative and spiritual being, my sense of beauty - and desire for simplicity. Something different from what the woman who has lent me this house has created, without doubt, but something that would equally, I hope, express my own integrity and my decision to choose life.
3. POEMS

MACAWS

So this is what parrots become
when they let themselves go,
allow excess to roost in their souls -

breasts in sunglasses-strength saffron;
blue wings an un tidy archive of
noon to first star; old-jewelry-box

tarnish on ragged wedding train...
Huddled in nit-picking love
they touch beak-coloured tongues;

drape swathes of plumage against
each other; in amplified propinquity,
air pinions touchy as radar.

Jesters more than saints, yet
at times a piercing probity,
the hint of immutable intentions

as heartbeats rock long-dead branches.
Near dusk, a royal progress from perch
to sequestered cage - mobile bric-a-brac

colonising a Victorian parlour
with shrieks that could wake the dead,
or scold them back to sleep:

this gorgeous waddling into the dark,
the light on their feathers undressed by it,
zebra-lidded eyes noting you,

the exotic, without condescension;
wisely adapted, fantastically sane,
lacking only a rainforest.
THE SIXTH SWAN

The six shirts were finished, except for the one that still lacked its left sleeve... The moment the shirts touched them, their swan skins fell off, and there stood her brothers, strong and handsome. Only the youngest lacked his left arm and had a swan’s wing in place of it.

A waterfall of feathers spills from his left shoulder. He’s tempted to tilt his body sideways, limp, convulse his features, but finds with practice a measured stride, an expression - half-open, half-closed - that will meet the situation.

Wealthy enough to hire a tailor of genius, leisured enough to choose a life of letters, he slides a brocaded cuff across vellum, trailing feuilletons, odd gnomic poems: monocles to quiz moonlight, seed unearthly fires.

Above sloped fingers, his quill embroiders air; stops; moves resolutely on... He has picked up the dropped stitch of his first lost life. There will be lapses, eccentricities, of course. For one, he frequents the highest tower to see flocks pinwheel the sunset, fracture in storm or swim through cloud-surf, breasting noon’s topaz. At such times his eyes become dangerous jewels that fade to dulness when someone is sent to guard him: ‘My, but that spectacle is ravishing’ (eyes subtly turned), ‘they reach such heights!’ ‘Yes,’ he rejoins wearily, ‘it is a long way down.’ But he’s not tempted. If he feels a tremour of that winged life pass through him, his whole body unnerved, displaced from itself, as a great white shadow twitches and tingles - athirst to be silvered by sunlight, to arrow through cobalt space above miles of conifers - well, that is all so much rhetoric...

His wing settles into his side like moulded parchment.
It is only having two arms again would break him.
And had he two wings it would sadden - he'd be
a homunculus-bird, a lard-wrapped angel...
He climbs the steps of the tower. It's midnight.
The sky is a page of stars he can't write on,
a compendium of invincible memories.

RAPUNZEL

Far below her, the lake:
beyond depth at its centre.

At dawn, her stone-framed face;
hair spread out in darkness.

Gold fumes above misted pines,
scrolls over the lake, finds her.

All morning, bronze enters her hair,
her cheeks grow amaryllis apples;

the forest's shadow is a meniscus
round that great brimming tear.

As she steps from noon's glare
a keyplate of light slides down her,

from brow to belly.
Now, dusk's glittering shroud...

Pines fill the lake, their darkesses
masked by green crystal.

She sits weaving her strength
into a braid, thinking:

Whatever has happened, or will happen,
the lake is there, and the tower
dwell in me, and I within it:
a key hidden inside a lock.

She watches the wind’s fingers
trawl a nap on silver velvet,

unsettle then recompose
the snow-blue spruces.

OLD RINKRANK’S MAID

Once there was a king with an only daughter, and he had a glass mountain built and said that whoever could cross it without falling should have the daughter for his wife. There was a young man who loved the princess... The king’s daughter said she’d go with him and help him if he was going to fall. They started out together, and when they were halfway up, the king’s daughter slipped and fell, and the glass mountain opened and shut her up inside... An old fellow with a long grey beard came up to her and said that if she’d be his maid and do everything he told her, he’d let her live and if she didn’t he’d kill her. So she did everything he told her.

- Old Rinkrank

They live in an aerial iceburg:
his palace, her prison.
He is ageless; crouched inside
a lesion in time, not a muscle
moves, his ice-heart ticks.

For her, day upon day of blunt
refraction: her youth the frozen
wake of a ship trapped in an Arctic
of white seconds... Much too late,
she ups and leaves: jams his beard

under a window, takes the ladder
from his pocket and climbs, rung by
rung out, chipping at chrysolite blocks.
His screams are forked lightning round her,
fracturing glass now turning gold.

Warm air flows to meet her, starts to
dissolve her cataract stare: and she is
back among the living - her pristine
lover, her father with his vitreous
eyes (Old Rinkrank’s eyes) -
he who built the glass mountain.
There too, at odd angles of light,
her once hopeful self - intact,
irretrievable - weaving ghost-like
through walls and smiles. When she speaks of

that diamond distorting the heavens,
her words are split paradoxes, shards
that make her mind bleed; her sight
fills with eerily magnified
faces rippling inside moonstone.

As, step by step, she labours towards
the present, her long silences say:
How unwritten the end is...
Now she curves beneath sea-waves,
looks up at quivering sun

and molten moon, at birds ferrying
twigs to island-mountains shrouded
by a mist of circling gannets.
Surf crests into ice-peaks, splinters
then melts as she walks the gritty shore,

sees skies of clouded blue, plainly.

THE TWELVE DANCING PRINCESSES

In later life, none could recapture
that long season of dancing nights -
the enchanted risk of them:

at twelve, the flight down steps;
silk dresses rustling through groves
of gold, diamond, and silver
to the boat trip on moon-filmed water,
the lake sighing and whispering its secrets
as their perfect princes rowed them
towards the underground castle
then danced the soles out of their shoes
and plied them with wine
and were impeccable
as they rowed them home
silent with ecstasy
over the pear-shaped lake -
princesses with dancing eyes
returning to their locked room.
Only the soldier who’d shadowed them,
who’d stepped on the hem of the youngest
(her half-lit face half-turned)
brought back mementos -
three precious twigs and
one of the goblets he’d emptied
while partnering each princess
invisibly, in his magic cloak.
Then the exposé, the opulent evidence...
The eldest was forced to marry him,
the others became royal wives
in far kingdoms where they had
balls and ballgowns to order.
They glittered with riches
and smiled convincingly
but never again would they
dance their slippers through.
Strange jewellery they had made -
gold leaves veined with diamonds
and tiny silver twigs that they wore
like open secrets. Often, too,
they remembered the lantern
that sung across the lake
as if a star were caged in it.
In the cellar of the first castle
were heaped all the dancing shoes
full of centipedes and mice
and ropes of dust and mouldering
wine from a leaky cask
and old newspapers, sere
as parchment, and a book
with a rusty lock, containing
stories that sometimes ended,
‘and the mouth of the last person
who told this story is still warm’.
THE FROG PRINCE

She looked down into secret water:
beneath archipelagos of lily pads,
males clamped on doormat backs;
a frenetic globe of them vying
for the female at their centre.

March became April. They wrinkled
into exhaustion, posing wide-legged
beside Atlantises of spawn...
One day, an errant throw stranded
her golden ball on dankness.

A stone spoke from the grass
with squat authority, his words
swimmingly fluent but for those
belches of marsh gas: he offered
help. A concertina-dive through

rotting weeds nudged the ball
back to her feet on frilled ripples.
His gaze swivelled: he ventured to
hope he might burble glug gulch
call on her? Noblesse oblige...

An endless white damask cloth,
towers of brimming tallow.
In her goblet’s shadow, he was
slime. Her tongue slid over silver
inlaid with ivory - no comfort there:

his bottom-of-the-pond eyes
drank her in. The others - worse
if anything - gaped like gargoyles,
snorting and fingering beards
behind greasy napkins...
A bilious attack first, the vapours, hysteries - she’d let them have it! After, she lay in her locked room: her tears neither wet nor dry; a seething emptiness.

A chance look found him poised on her slipper: obsidian eyes with pale gold rims... Her toes curled, her heart contracted; she felt murderously afraid -

so flung him, a warty arrow, into the heart of the chandelier! Those frozen forms were shattering, melting, as she stood among tears of crystal and wept light.

There were no smooth arms to hold her, though from somewhere a princely voice, pellucid as spring water, was offering, was offering - she leant closer -

what was it offering?

THE ROBBER BRIDEGROOM

The caged bird in my head sang

How we don’t know what we know!

How we know what we don’t know!

as I followed the ash trail that led to the deepest part of the forest where I came to a house made of shifting walls and shadows, and around were dead trees full of ravens.

If this is a dream, it’s one that might kill you!

sang the bird
as I crossed the threshold to
drift through rooms echoing with
ghost-voices, where silvery rats
eyed me - sentinels standing
their ground.

*Hide! Flee! Save yourself!
Save me!*

an old woman’s voice
cried inside my head, just as
my bridegroom came in with men
bearing a maiden they forced
to drink yellow wine, green, then
black wine until her heart burst.

So they became festive as
they sliced her on the table,
her ring-finger flying into
my lap, near my own ringed
finger, where I crouched in dust
behind ripped, blood-stained curtains.

As if everything I saw
there, I had already seen,
my face stayed calm and unchanged,
and when the crone said to leave
I stepped out over dead-drunk
bodies and walked the seed trail
I had sown to lead me home.

My wedding day. I welcomed
my bridegroom and when the time
came for the toast, raised my glass
high and spoke of a house lost
in the forest, and a maiden
unvoiced by fear and pain as

(‘*But my darling,*

*it was only a dream...’*)

she drank down glass after glass,
her lips stained green and yellow
and black, and of how red wine
spilled from her limbs as they cut
and were festive, severing
the ring-finger from her hand.

‘But my darling,
it was only a dream...’

Now all my guests were smiling
and pointing their ring-fingers
at him. I held my hand out,
pointing her finger straight at him
while smiling into his eyes:

‘My darling...only a dream.’

And he shrank into himself
and tried to unmake himself.
Only his heart did not burst.
Then he came out of his dream
and contemplated the day
he chose to be ruled by it.

The wine on the table was
the crimson of blood and pain.
I drank deep then broke the glass
on the hearth, ready to choose
peace, to have done with all this,
to follow rumours of joy.

JORINDA AND JORINGEL

FOREST WALK

Once inside the forest we went deep
then deeper on tranced footsteps till -
by what twilight mood entramelled? -

we became locked in melancholy

and stood beneath frozen pines
as if time had forsaken us...

Jorinda forced herself to sing

and so freed us - we ran wildly on
till we came to thick walls
alive with tentacles of creeper.
    Her song changed, mid-flight,
into bird sound, her body
a fluttering shape, first swiped at,
then shrouded by, batwing folds.

WITCH

In her castle of cages
the continual trilling
of songbirds...

No need to prick eyes -
they sing so piercingly
of what they lack,

must draw on memory,
inner oracle, to lift into
vibrato flights.

Each maiden sees
her image multiplied
a thousand times.

Dirty claws sprinkle
song-seeds, place pearls
in bowls of water:

trembling moonstones
slake peerless throats.
At midnight, bats whizz

from tower and turret -
inside-out birds
encoding space with

glass notes: a pitchless
descant above the music
that never stops.
JORINDA’S SONG

Nightingale calls to
robin calls to
lark...

Our voices throb
in this airless
dusk,

defy our fear of being
trapped here
forever.

Sunlight slants in:
wicker bars
stripe us,

we sing our inexhaustible
hymn, open wings to
distant warmth.

BATS

They fly from her dusty black clothes,
halo that plague of warts, her face.

She runs to watch them cancel stars,
cut shapes from radioactive paper,

dive earthwards for blood: tube-tongues
slide in above hoof, at neck vein.

Back home they’ll cling, gothic bunions,
to vaults draped with varicose webs.

 Favorites sleep clamped to her cloak or
cradle her breasts, snug as infants.
JORINGEL

I woke in some other place.
My quest to find her led me
up avalanches of time,
through treadmill circuits.

In defeat, I listened for
the moment that would show
where grew the amaryllis
with its flesh of rubies,

its dewdrop a diamond eye
guiding me back to the castle
where gate after gate sprang open,
the portal of every cage...

The maidens’ wings fell away.
They re-entered their bodies,
singing with reborn voices
as they streamed into the day...

All but one...
   Her hand on a sill,
Jorinda turned to me, her eyes
undimmed by eclipse, sunlight
wreathing her unbound hair.

JORINDA

Beyond the forest was a field
of buttercups silvered by rain.

I stayed wordless, resting my throat.
When the lark flew skywards to sing

inside the day moon, my gaze traced
its path, hovered - as did my hand,

(the other on Joringel’s arm).
Tides of cold light, of the fragile
green beneath our feet, ebbed away
then flowed back as the lark - pivot

of starred hill and pearl sky - flew down,
a feathered minim, to his nest.

_IN THE CASTLE_

My sorrowing eyes fill with
row upon row of empty cages.

Somewhere behind me, a door
slams, then another, another...

There is always a further room
to breathe dead space in,

and so die by surviving.
*
But away with all that!
I'd like to fly up near the moon,

have it silhouette my head
then turn left and surprise it -

dive into a crater of hot lead
and have a bath! Sing my lungs out!
*
Here in this chamber,
my bats are fruit ripening
on splintery beams,
shopping bags on chandeliers...

I pluck them at will
and hold their pug faces
to my breast, singing my song
that no one can hear.
*
Today, I'll make the sun
go down early,
start a fire.
Tinderbox and kettle.
Burnt toast, tin whistle.
And brandy - lots!

I will leave my toes
unwashed until they
grow a thistle.

THE JUNIPER TREE

There is a place beneath the world's tree
where the deepest griefs and wrongs go -

kept alive by those who will not forget:
so that in time a bird hatches from

the roots and rises to sing the tale
of what happened - to sing and sing

until the wrong is set right, the death
undone, and all who suffered receive balm.

(But this is only a story...)

So the murdered boy returned home
to live out what remained of childhood

with a charmed vulnerability.
After, his chances were as for the rest -

save that, having passed beyond death,
he met with life more freely than most;

and, being so steeped in suffering,
found present pain could often be healed

by memory... Knowing so well the end
of all stories, did he become

a teller of them - a tranced presence
beside hearths, nourisher of
firelit faces - unfolding the path
through ordeal with confidence,

with a serene air speaking of death,
and revealing at last, the seed of hope,

as if holding a resin bead up
to catch the burning light, then passing it -

with the body of a small moth inside -
passing it unharmed through

the candle’s liquid gold tongue?

MOTHER HOLLE

Sometimes she appears as the beautiful White Woman, floating or hovering above the surface of her pond. At other times, however, she is invisible. Then one hears only the pealing of her bells and other dark rumblings from deep beneath the surface.

- ‘Mother Holle’s Pond’

Whenever it snowed in the olden days, people in Hessia used to say Mother Holle is making her bed.

- Grimms’ note to ‘Mother Holle’

Mother Holle decides when snow will fall, when bread will rise in the oven, when the story will find itself written. She has her difficult side,

as is well-known - you have to work
your insides out and be content with lack,
knowing there’s never an end to it.
One day, she comes and gives sharp orders,

but there is blossom in her hands...
You take up the task and it is arduous - no surprise in that,
and no deliverance either -
setting down all these stories.
But after a while, the feeling of
blossom in your throat as if
the flawless, almost colourless

petals that fill the garden below
your window, were each a tongue
helping you to write these
yet-to-be-spoken tales,

then lick the afterbirth away...
You are shaking a feather mattress
out over the world, remaking
that world as snow melts into it:

Snow falls. Petals fall. The bread rises.
Stories are made that will be told.

THE GOLD KEY

One winter’s day, when the ground lay deep in snow, a poor boy
was sent to the forest with a sled to bring back wood...

So perilously cold was he,
and so far from home, he must use
some of the wood he’d gathered, to make
himself a fire, or never return.

As he dug through snow to clear
a space, he found a tiny gold key
and deeper still, a keyhole set in earth.
His fingers being almost frozen,

he made his whole aching body
circle the lock, like an ox circling
a millstone. Then he was in a cavern
lit by small fires, and gradually -
which is the best way - he grew warm.
Above him were stalactites
full of images and stories,
all slowly melting...

Was the boy
dreaming this as he lay merging
with snow, or was he far beneath earth
in a haven where ice and fire meet?
Or did he in fact light a snow-fire

and crouch by it, his tranced eyes
gazing up at white needles shrouding
fir trees, imagining the heat he felt
touch each of them, so that those
great pagodas ran with silver light?
Did he make it home with the wood
to sit by the hearth with his people,
and drink soup till his toes curled,

watching snow whirl like feathers
shaken from a feather quilt?
And was there a gold key printed
on his palm as he sat listening
to the stories while silently
remembering; or did he decide
to tell about the cave full of
stories shining through ice -

all imperceptibly melting:
millenia of stories melting,
and he, with flame-bright eyes,
catching the drops upon his tongue?
CHAPTER FIVE

November 10th, 1995, to January 22nd, 1996
Barwon Heads

1. COMMENTARY

The final section of my journal begins with the threat of a flood and ends in high summer, two months later. It concentrates very strongly on setting, evoking the rooms (bedroom and adjoining study) where I work, and the seascapes and other features of the natural environment at Barwon Heads where I was living at this time.

I show the way nature is a resource to me in my creative life, providing an arena of space and light, and oceanic perspectives which variously inform and trigger creative ideas, and also act as a restorative realm - fostering a needed distance on the dramas and lacunae of the writing life.

As I reread and revisited this material while editing it, I felt that the setting was such a strong presence that it had almost become the main focus of the journal by this stage. I see this further shift from an inward-turned dynamic to attention to the natural world as salutary after the necessary, but often grinding or stressful, working with inner challenges and dilemmas in much of the earlier material in my journal.

This section of my journal indicates some important resolutions of earlier problems in my personal and professional engagement with my writing, many of them to do with energy. The writing here is for the most part energetic, flexible and focused. I've made the decision to leave several very long entries virtually unchanged, as they present a sequence of thoughts, observations, connections - these give a sense of an exchange of energy, of creativity as a transaction between inner and outer worlds.

All the poems I've selected from this phase come from Listening to a Far Sea. Two of them - 'Orpheus' and 'Teiresias' - I had wished to write for a long time beforehand but had waited for a particular take on each that would enable me to interpret these powerful mythic figures in a new way.

'Orpheus' was a poem I set out to treat as - a recurrent theme in my work - a tribute to the muse, while wanting to express some particular aspect of the creative process in it. The poem emphasises the way art can arise from grief and longing. I chose to use formal stanzas and a rhyme scheme so as to give the poem a sense of both astringency and ceremoniousness. The image of the moonflower suggests to me the mysterious way art - reflecting life as the moon reflects the sun - can possess nevertheless the power to transform death into life within human experience.

I discuss in my journal the genesis of 'Teiresias' in my reflections on Quentin Crisp
playing Elizabeth the First in the film, Orlando. This poem is a very contrasting treatment to that given in ‘Orpheus’ of the separation between man and woman, masculine and feminine, and the attempt to unify them: while Orpheus is a widower, Teiresias is a drag queen. This poem is saltily contemporary while also tapping into my preoccupation with wisdom-figures, offering a male example to complement my sequence on the Delphic oracle, called ‘Oracle’, in Listening to a Far Sea.

When writing ‘Sisyphus in Prison’ I also wanted to mine contemporary life so as to create a different setting for another myth with very wide cultural currency. The key influences on this poem were: a visit I made to Pentridge Prison long ago, my brother Paul’s experience of teaching in Barwon Prison, and two German films presenting the despair of imprisonment. I consciously set out to make a statement about the inhuman aspects of prison life in this society now, as well as saying something about the theme of imprisonment as a state of soul.

The other poems presented in this chapter represent further workings through of my engagement with the unbalanced nature of patriarchal society with respect to war and to women. ‘Flute Music’ is an anti-war poem which manages a lightly ironic perspective on its subject. Both ‘Hero and Leander’ and ‘Medusa’ critique the representation of female figures in works by male artists. Again, a leavening irony is to the fore.

Not included in the poems section, but referred to in the journal, is my sequence on Bluebeard and his wife, which is being gradually evolved. The finished poem appears in Chapter Six. Here, I discuss using the convex mirror from Jan Van Eyck’s The Arnolfini Marriage in one section of the poem. This is an approach taken to help provide imaginative distance from, and perspective on, the horror associated with Bluebeard. Another painting used (in ‘The Fourth Day’) is Vermeer’s Woman Reading a Letter. In the locked chamber opened by Bluebeard’s wife in ‘The Fifth Day’, the image of a trompe l’oeil wall creates an hallucinatory effect before the actual bodies of the dead wives are revealed. There are also references to Quattrocento paintings, ‘arrases with hunting scenes’ (‘The First Night’), and the sewing of the wife’s story into a tapestry (‘The Third Day’).

In general it can be said that some of the poems in this chapter continue the work of critiquing male violence while others evoke various male figures who constellate powerful images of creativity, wisdom, or suffering. Mostly, a light or ironic tone characterises the former - suggestive of a more detached view of a subject I have written many poems about during my working life as a poet; the latter set of poems engage with their subjects with considerable depth and passion.

It is surprising to me that I did not produce poems that depict the natural world at this time of enhanced connection with it. The exception is ‘Spoonbills’, which is included in the journal and arises out of careful observation of those birds in the estuary of the Barwon river. But it may be that my immersion in the environment at Barwon Heads during this period acted mainly as a counterbalance to the mostly deep-level work with Greek myths and the Bluebeard story that was in train. Over-work was perhaps also a factor, as most of my poems about nature arise
in circumstances of greater inner freedom and space, and after a long reflective period of attunement to a particular place. That kind of attunement was not possible at this time.

At the end of writing the journal entries in this chapter, I made the decision to stop keeping a journal because I felt I could no longer sustain the commitment of my energy to it. Much of my journal material had been written in a kind of battle with adverse conditions such as exhaustion and ill health, and I was also aware it had taken a lot of the creative energy I wanted to channel into poetry.

But I saw that writing the journal had often brought insight, and had been a catalyst for change on a personal level at times. It had been a rich learning experience for me as a writer, and I particularly valued my experience of capturing both the small details and large vistas of the natural settings I love, as well as various creatures belonging to those settings.

Keeping a journal proved an invaluable resource to me in my writing of poetry. It stored particular thoughts or observations I could retrieve and develop, and gave me a more conscious purchase on the processes of creativity at work through time, and on the themes and challenges I’ve chosen to embrace as a writer. One example of a recurrent interest which is explored in my journals and can be seen to inform a poem, is my fascination with flying birds. I have noted in several places in these journal entries some of the images and perceptions about birds which will become part of ‘Birds at Sunset’ (which is presented in Chapter Six).

I would say that my journal writing - of which the material presented here is only a small part - sometimes became an extension of my poetry in its use of imagery to evoke settings and witness to the subtle presences of memory and dream embodied in place and space.
2. JOURNAL

*Sunday, September 23rd: Barwon Heads*
A long stretch of absence from this journal. Many kinds of weariness eating me - the nature of the fatigue keeps changing - it's like a river moving through new moods and textures as it winds along...

An overcast, windy and difficult day, but what a relief to be catching up with this journal. Can one be faithful in retrospect, after having virtually abandoned a relationship? Well, in this case, perhaps - my writing hand is certainly applying itself, and my back is sore and my head is heavy with the effort - what more could this journal ask for? And, in these kinds of relationships, total recall is completely out of the question (unless one wants to spend one's whole life writing, and that would be self-defeating as one would hardly be living). Yes, highly selective memory is a sensible course in the circumstances...

A miniaturist - perhaps that is what I could become when writing my book(s) on mythic and symbolic creatures, and on living creatures ... presenting distillations of these living and imagined energy-shapes into emblems.

Yesterday's ocean - let me record that. The weather had turned rainy soon after I set out on my walk, but I just kept on, as I so needed the exercise. At the cliffs, I saw a milky, misty sea, ruffled and churning, yet the waves still quite decorous in their flowering.

*Wednesday, October 25th*
On Monday I wake, hearing the sounds of birds and sea blended together. I am so tired after four days in Melbourne at the Writers' Festival.

I decide self-conservation must be high on the menu for now.

On Tuesday I cannot break through the tiredness. I do washing, and decide I have no energy for the many tasks waiting on my desk. Should I write a poem? I make a few notes for a poem on 'The Twelve Brothers', but I'm not ready yet for this work. I read Marie-Louise von Franz on that story and two cognate ones - 'The Seven Ravens' and 'The Six Swans' (which I've already written about). Perhaps I'll draw on elements from each of these stories?

At 5 o'clock I go to bed and am diverted and charmed by Ann Tyler's *Breathing Lessons* - what a joy she is.

*Saturday, November 4th*
Such a long passage of time again before resuming this journal! Perhaps I could not face sorting out all these little pieces of paper with thoughts, dreams and happenings scribbled on them. They cover this large, light grey desk.

I've still got my big toe dipped in the world of fairy stories. I've been rewriting 'Jorinda and Joringel' - having used syllable counting to determine the lines (it was a great help in editing the poem) I've let that go, and become freer and more various with the forms used for each section.

My attention has connected with 'Many-Fur' (also titled 'All Fur' and 'Thousand
Furs’). I read an illustrated version in the children's section of the library, and got out Sendak’s selection of fairy stories. This is one I’ll need a lot of time to cogitate on - but how wonderfully simple the different parts of the story, how amazingly direct the incest theme, how magical the three dresses in walnut shells - the story itself is a walnut shell - and how fascinating the coat made of fur from a thousand animals.

But why must Many-Fur continue to deny her own identity? It’s the redemptive silence of 'The Six Swans' - time must pass, rituals be gone through, before the next conscious step can be taken. Hair shirt/fur coat ... wildness - much to explore.

Today I watched Cocteau's Beauty and the Beast on television - the magical effects were wondrous: arms holding candelabras protruded from walls, statues had living eyes... Long white filmy curtains billowed inside the castle’s stone gallery. And the Beast himself, ears enlarged by the sound of deer in the underbrush; later, his fur covered with blood ... or steaming in the presence of Beauty.

Thursday, November 9th

5.30 a.m.: the first bird song. My mother and I have been up since 2.30, ready to leave if the river breaks through the levy. Several days of immensely heavy rain have brought the Barwon river to within .2 metres of record height. There were floods here over forty years ago.

Possible emergencies have their moments - neighbours out chatting in the middle of the street, in the middle of the night... My mother and I have lifted things like the CV player off the floor, and as I got a bag ready for my computer and journals, I imagined the latter swirling away ... with all the tax documents I've put on a chair, and the folder with possible jobs in it...

Along with the awful mess one would have to clean up, a cleansing ... things that have weighed on one, lost, gone... How wonderful!

My thoughts go to Marilynne Robinson's Housekeeping:

Lucille and I pulled on our boots and went downstairs. The parlour was full of light. Our walking from the stairs to the door had set off an intricate system of small currents which rolled against the floorboards. Glyphs of crimped and plaited light swung across the wall and the ceiling. The couch and armchairs were oddly dark. The stuffing in their backs had slid, and the cushions had shallow craters in the middles of them. Water seeped out when we touched them. In the course of days the flood had made a sort of tea of hemp and horsehair and rag paper in that room, a smell which always afterward clung to it and which I remember precisely at this minute, though I have never encountered its like.

Sylvie came down the hall in a pair of my grandmother's boots and looked in at us from the door. 'Should we start dinner?' she asked.

Friday, November 10th

The river has not broken through the levy, but still might...

Life goes on. I drive my mother and two of her friends to Ocean Grove to shop; and glimpse, as we return, the vast half-circle of the ocean. At first I think there is cloud shadow over much of the water - but the storm has so stirred the sea that it is dark: a clear darkness. A brown band further out, then a turquoise band on the horizon - far above the sea-bed.

Later I see that the river, and the sea for a long way out, are brown - the brown of water in which potatoes have been washed. Potato water.
There are different birds by the river - some spoonbills, which I have never had a chance to observe before. Dressed in pure white, with black accessories. They have wispy white feathers down the backs of their necks - I think of a horse's mane.

Six of them walk along the edge of the river near the bridge, moving their beaks like metal detectors, searching the sand beneath the water. An even, regular quadrant - and quite fast: I imagine how giddy I would be. Such smooth, ultra-efficient sweeps.

All their movements are brisk and, with the strong wind, one of them is almost trotting at one point. Then they pause at various angles to each other, as if making up their collective mind; and turn back over the territory just covered. When some of them decide to fly over the river, I watch their wide wings, the curve of their bodies - flight seems to metamorphose them into another kind of creature. Those winged bodies - such fine instruments of purpose, while so intricately graceful.

Energy-shapes.

I would like to write about them. And I would like to write a whole book about birds. I will, I hope.

Walking home, I see some dry beach sand corrugated evenly by the wind. Sea and sand are the same colour now.

From my notes that day, I will produce the following poem - one which has remained unfinished, stayed waiting in the limbo of my folders, because it neither sweeps the depths, nor climbs the heights of sunlight, as does its subject. Perhaps I was fearing the traps of too-direct description - my opening gambit certainly took a quirky turn.

**SPOONBILLS**

If they were five times larger
and could obey instructions

ey they could mine-sweep for us,
spend untold hours preparing fields for tillage,

do service in affluent households
as backscratchers, drain unblockers,

chef's assistants. Their beaks could carry
secret letters to lovers, political friends,

at parties bear trays of canapés, champagne.
Some could stand decoratively in

ferny corners: enigmatic feathery statues.
But who would wish any of that on them?

They've chosen this simpler version
of reality: moving in a group of five -

each connected, each independent -
along this late summer shore,
ignored by straggling pleasure seekers.
They patrol the estuary shallows,

with busy randomness scan
up to the bridge and back, engaged in

a walking and feeding meditation
on the nature of mud - or more strictly,
on the life that dwells between sand grains
melded by centuries of tides.

There's a rhythm to their work,
and to their angling of bodies

in relation to one another -
a white company with graceful headdresses

stirring up an invisible harvest,
casting watery rings over a slow afternoon.

Saturday, November 11th
The threat of a flood - Yes, I think, it's almost a relief to know how vulnerable we are.
In my dreams, it's as though the mud of the psyche has been stirred up.
Twenty years since the Dismissal.

Monday, November 13th
On the beach I watch a formation of black swans constantly transformed by the high winds they fly in tension with. I think of them as an alphabet. The image of a rune returns, but I also see them as a ribbon with a knot tied at the end. Is this all work? Flying as work - yes, but they are so strong. They change direction, and I see them as those helicopter-like seeds that are propelled from sycamore trees. The wind keeps them changing their body-angles as well as direction, so I see them as constantly different from each other. (These musings, along with past reflections on flying birds in earlier entries, will influence my poem, 'Birds at Sunset'.)
The waves are liquified sand, the froth as they fall a kind of slavering.
Later, from a higher vantage point, I see a patch of brimming flatness (frothy underneath) on the ocean - amid the breakages, and dark flecks moving across the vast surface like migrations.

Tuesday, November 14th
It's a serious sea I glance out at as I walk in fine rain on the Ocean Grove beach - more aware of the Point Lonsdale lighthouse after reading Beverley Farmer's A Body of Water again. The water is now a blended battledress colour, recovering from brown, aspiring to a clear, true green.

Friday, November 17th
The sky yesterday - a mixture of white film and curdles and dense nuclei.
Found on a bookmark and meant for this journal a few weeks ago:

- birds like flung pepper in the sky
- 4.30 Sunday. The sea a cloak of sound.

*Monday, November 20th*
The other day, the formation of birds riding high currents - like a ball, then a star... Like a mind pausing, ruminating.

*Tuesday, November 21st*
Awake at 4 a.m. The sense of pressure about my work. I read one of my journals from last year with a sinking feeling, and listen to the radio, and have four cups of tea.

At 9, a walk by the sea, trudging the soft sand, the waves rolling noisily in. It will be a day of heat and pollen.

*Wednesday, November 22nd*
A day of very hard work - forging ahead with the journals, sending one off to be typed. It was madness to leave this so long, but I’ve been somewhat in the keep of failing energy - and also of the muse. Over these past few years, I’ve had to continue as I could, for much of the time.

Some very bad patches, like yesterday, but I worked through them. It’s as if I’d been thrown back to a less formed self, as if things still unintegrated had been stirred up.

*Tuesday, November 28th*
Waking at dawn this morning, my first thought is, on hearing the birds:

the day opens its wings

The other day, a young magpie standing on the grass in the street, the black line of its throat literally rippling as it sang.

*Friday, December 8th*
_The Body in Time_ will be launched this evening at the Writers’ Centre in Melbourne.

It promises to be a lovely day, there is an oblique band of sunlight on the open door that leads into my study. I sit here in bed. The lace curtains on the study window pattern the light - a shimmering weave. I remember my poem ‘New Year’s Day’ in which that scalloped lace is mentioned.

Yesterday, a bird beside the river airing its black wings (its body white - a heron-like bird), moving them in the breeze so subtly - yes, that was like a shimmering, too. Or a shimmying! And that image of open wings - power, vulnerability, majesty.

The light on the white door is like river ripples - and a cluster of blurry leaf-shadow in the right top corner dips and bows in the rhythm of the wind.

These last few days, to cheer myself I’ve turned to poetry. Notes made long ago on Teiresias have triggered a poem very different from the direction they suggested, which was
rather explanatory and prosaic.

The notion of crossing between sexes is very much in the spotlight in these times. So, a contemporary flavour to the poem. But I also wanted to register how a person who has been through such an experience (or, indeed, any massively difficult sequence of experiences during their life-time) wears that experience. In my thoughts as I wrote the poem, was the extraordinary performance by Quentin Crisp as Elizabeth the First in the film, *Orlando*. The figure of the seer compels me - as in my sequence, ‘Oracle’ in *Listening to a Far Sea* - but this time I have created a male version.

As well, I wrote up from a sketch my poem ‘Flute Music’ - about the Sybarite’s horses which, trained to dance to flute music, were sometimes an embarrassment in battle. But I’m damned if I can find the original quote that triggered the poem - I need it as an epigraph.

*Thursday, December 14th*
In the last few days I’ve made space for writing poetry, as my soul wished for and needed this. I’d long intended to try to write a poem on Orpheus for *Listening to a Far Sea* - this arrived: a very different kind of poem from what I imagined I would write. Orpheus as widower. But the poem is mainly a study of the muse, of the inner seasons and laws of poetic energy.

And I have the makings of another small poem to add to the section, ‘The Monsters Talk Back’, in my book - it’s called ‘Medusa’ and is about Cellini’s *Perseus*. I’ve long wanted to take revenge on him for that supreme piece of bastardry, glorious though it is. But I need to get hold of his autobiography, and also check out the particular techniques involved in making that sculpture, before I can develop the poem.

*Sunday, December 24th*
Time to catch up. I continue to be exhausted on the deepest level, yet I am also more settled in my life. I had this thought a few weeks ago: my demons are leaving. I am very interested in the relationship between demons and daemon.

I’ve returned to poetry in recent weeks, needing to make contact with it, restore myself through it. Two fresh poems that I value - ‘Orpheus’ and ‘Teiresias’. Perhaps these poems express some new level of connection between the feminine and masculine aspects of myself; though if so, that connection is embedded in loss and absence - as the poems explore.

I’ve started to cook up a poem on Cellini’s *Perseus*, and now have his autobiography - all very fascinating and meaty, with a lot of material to draw on. I’ve done a few sketches but will wait until I’ve read the relevant parts of Cellini.

A dream about Pisanello’s *The Vision of Saint Eustace* prompted me to get out my postcard of that painting. So calm and beautiful. Years ago, I began to make notes for a poem about it, but had difficulty researching the subject. I feel it may be time for another try - when there is time.

Reading the painting as an image of the artist, it shows a contemplative among creatures which, however lithely or springily poised in a series of standing and moving postures, are incomparably still. A thirst for stillness... And how to write about it without using the word ‘still’ - one I’ve used too often in the past.
These thoughts, plus looking at my poem on Rubens’ *Hero and Leander* again - and seeing it can be fairly simply edited to make it stand up quite well - make me think of the possibility of a collection of poems on paintings - an idea posed to me by my Dangaroo publisher years ago.

On Pisanello’s painting, the phrase that came to me last week was

Nature’s gold and heaven’s darkness

and I thought of

Animals leaved into the landscape

The consolation and the exposure of that state of being ‘under the aspect of eternity’. And the knight’s extraordinary blue turban-like head-dress... To be further explored.

I remember from a film about film making on TV the other night, a South American film maker showing the changing light and shadow around three small stones - which could have been mountains - by moving a desk lamp around them. He said that, for him, film making was about light. And movement.

Some memories of seas and skies... The other week I stood on the cliffs and saw that, to my right, the ocean was green and, to my left, blue. Also, the very different colours, intensities, translucencies, of blue in the sky one day - though the point of transformation from one shade to another was quite elusive.

A few days ago, walking on the beach from Barwon Heads to Ocean Grove, my first thought was: a busy sea. The waves seemed like shredding lace, first, then I thought of grasping fingernails. Some surfers at Ocean Grove: I felt so surprised to see (after such a long time of not seeing) someone standing then skating on dourly green water.

In an Australian nature documentary, I see the huge white belly of a male seahorse. And the birth of some sea-dragons - transparent in their already multi-leaved bodies, their bulging eyes not comic because these creatures are too wondrous to be comic; those eyes carry just the right amount of conscious awareness for them to be what they are. (But of course.)

In Cellini’s machiavellian anecdote about the pearls, he expresses his own opinion: ‘Pearls are just fish bones’. I do not agree and his comment is an irritant to me and provokes the desire to write a poem on pearls. I’m interested, for one, in irritation as a spur to creativity (Cellini at work may well be a prime example?). I’ve certainly had moments when the screaming difficulty of certain states of soul or even the grind of ordinary everyday tasks, drove me to poetry - some strange foreign body forming itself in the darkness, with the potential to find a discrete moon-like form and radiate warm light.

Looking back to the 21st of December, a note tells me the day began at 4 a.m. - as far as I was concerned. I’d left the curtains open and I woke to a pattern of murky light just discernible on the ceiling - which slid away - I supposed it had been trees shifting in the wind - there must have been some moonlight.

At 6 a.m. I thought, ‘I want the sun to burn into my bones.’ This hasn’t happened yet
this summer, as the weather has plunged back into cold, but when the heat does come - yes, I think it will fix me up.

Looking at the skin on my hand in a certain light on one of these many tired days, I think, 'Yes - crepe. Beverley Farmer was right.'

I'm remembering the two German films - both very black in mood - that were influences on 'Sisyphus in Prison', which I'm finally getting right. I think one was by Fassbinder - in one scene, the prisoner repeatedly crashes his body against the wall of his cell. The other was from a television series, about a man who goes to prison for a crime he does not commit, and suicides not long after his release. Prisons and the collective unconscious. And prisons in the unconscious.

Heard twice on the A.B.C. in the early morning - 'My Sweet Death' - a song by a Belgian composer, Nicholas Lens. Its florid but eerie decadence is perhaps an influence on 'Orpheus', my new poem - the end of it; slightly...

To nature again, and the memory of a young magpie standing on the earth with its head fetchingly tilted to one side - for a long time it stood there, as if contemplating some part of the bush in front of it. This might have been comical if it had not been endearing - that transparent quizzical gaze lavished on the bush just because it was there - no survival issue anywhere on the horizon. Then it walked away, over the path I was standing on, its head still tilted.

Also, the magpie that seemed to be limping as it climbed up a slope. Another walking in haste, almost trotting.

My strange life. I'm not reconciled, but suppose that will come. I've done much inner work. The setting right, then the setting free.

As I struggle to sort out old clothes and deal with dust beneath my bed and crumpled folders and crackling telephone lines (due to creeper on the side of the house growing into the line, I find out later) - as I struggle with these things, a space is being cleared, a new scenario is being prepared for. Or so I imagine and envision.

Tuesday, December 26th

Yesterday was busy and pleasant and merry - after I finally got up at one o'clock. Until then, I'd lain there trying to build up strength, and eventually did so.

My mother and Paul and Kyle and myself shared an evening meal. We had let go of a lot of the pressures about social and family scenarios at Christmas, and kept things simple and straight. A good night.

I wake after a terrible dream. Feel frazzled.

Wednesday, December 27th

On my walk today, I think of the sky as a kind of mistscape - all clouds diffused into a steamy membrane, though of varying density.

The crowds are here for the holidays. I don't mind. People walk round as if they'd come to a special spot. And so they have.
Thursday, December 28th
Another sunny, windy day. Again a long morning in bed, mainly working on the computer. I’m driven to carry certain tasks through, so as to make a clear space for my PhD work.

By my bed, a postcard of *The Vision of St Eustace*, and the detail of the convex mirror from Jan Van Eyck’s *The Arnolfini Marriage*. The latter has given me an idea for my Bluebeard project: I could write each sequence of the poem using a scene in a glass or lens or reflecting surface. This would make for all kinds of effects and distortions - as in a painting by Richard Dadd. Possibilities: telescope; security peephole in door; camera; globe; round curved glass - as in the Van Eyck. What about jewellery? And those mirror sunglasses in turquoise, red etc. Monocle and lorgnette. Floors. Gold fish bowl. Eyes. Shiny floors. And the blood? Frozen? These are the notes I make:

His shoebox of a castle.
A tawdry stage set.
Mr and Mrs Mouse.

An oddly lit stage set -
for what kind of drama?
She’s his Mrs Mouse the Fifth.
He nibbles at the cheeseboard
and smiles like Pavarotti
but his eyes are of some animal
left out of a paradisal
quattrocento painting
and ever after, rancid with grief -
no hope of paradise.

Saturday, December 29th
The sound of a kite the other day - like a subtle tearing of some fabric. What kind of fabric?

Different opinions on moonflowers: in the Concise Oxford, they are ox-eyed daisies; in the Collins Dictionary, they are Mexican flowers with small white petals (also called ‘angel’s tears’ in another place in the Collins). Moonflowers feature in ‘Orpheus’, now virtually arrived at its destination: a rather formal poem, perhaps seemingly conventional - but not so.

George the galah - our next door neighbours brought him down from Melbourne - a craftily, uncannily accurate mimic. So much rancid knowledge of the world in that insinuating voice.

My thought a few days ago to go ahead with a book on birds. A smallish, illustrated book.

I’ve been terribly tired and not able to do the critical study I set myself to do on Eavan Boland - so I’m working on poems and correspondence. Two days ago I drafted ‘The First Day’ in what will be my Bluebeard sequence. It’s important to go for the grotesque and burlesque - the material too heavy otherwise - but also to blend the burlesque with other tones, bring in various leitmotifs.

Bluebeard and his wife will be a match for each other - it will be a psychological chess game. It’s important to believe, in telling and hearing a story, that the end is not pre-ordained. And it isn’t.
Monday, January 1st, 1996
Since writing the above words, I’ve drafted a Bluebeard sequence. Yes, I’ve changed the plot. And the story will be open-ended. There will be leitmotifs to do with famous paintings - a progression of them through time - one in each sequence.

Sounds... George, this morning, his low screech like a creaking door to a dungeon, slowly opening ... letting the new year in. The aerial spatter and fizz of fireworks last night before I slept - they were contending with rain. A dampened brilliance. Also, the vivacious birds this morning - and the radio announcer saying that Australian birds have more stunning songs than European birds.

On my walk two days ago, the sea’s fragrant smell again, and the breakers unrolling long carpets, trains and bedspreads of white. The wading birds in the mud of the estuary - theirs is a special vocation, so I decide. They cause me to remember how I hate the word ‘gingerly’ - totally inappropriate for them. Their movements are all of a piece.

Late on New Year’s Day. I’m in bed after a lot of work on Bluebeard, a big printout, depression, a walk in the rain. A bird outside - a kind of muffled clacking. How we waste creation, by not valuing the life around us.

I’m sad, but feel better after doing all that work.

Friday, January 5th
I needed to move, to travel, this morning, so walked to Ocean Grove along the beach. After the strange mixture of cold, rain and wind we’ve had over Christmas and New Year, we are finally breaking through into summer.

The sea was so clear and sparkling, all the colours fresh. Many surfers and swimmers contending with low, but sporting and vigorous, waves. The lovely arcing and weaving movement of the successful surfers - the carrying through of a line, looping and swaying through its logic. Like a signature, a line in a poem. And the sense of an ending - relinquishing the remaining energy so as to start again. A clean finish.

I’m reminded of those birds - willy wagtails? I must discover their names - little black birds with white trimmings and almost transparent wings. Well, I watched their wonderfully graceful flight from tree to fence yesterday, full of flourishes, all kinds of half-circles built in - so the surfers bring to mind those ever-new yet formalised patterns. A repertoire of choreographic possibilities.

I’ve been very tired and driven - not like the birds and the surfers - for many days, finishing poems then preparing them to send out to editors. I posted a huge batch yesterday. Killing work. I felt I had to make myself do it.

Thursday, January 11th
In the last few days I have finally broken through into the energy I needed to begin writing on the three women writers in my PhD. I was under immense pressure - both outer and inner - to begin. As with my poetry, it was a case of going where my energy is connected. And getting the process right.
In the evening, a slight wind which may stave off the numerous small mosquitoes, so we sit in the garden. I gaze at the pudding cloth on the line, stained with puddings of successive Christmases, and think of the Shroud of Turin. I don’t have much to say. I’m tired in a way that makes certain efforts just that - effort. No need to labour. Silence and circumspection.

*Friday, January 12th*

Calming down, covering the ground of tasks I must fulfil, contending with my inner dilemmas...

Returning Alice Munro’s *The Progress of Love* to the library today - surely she’s one of the finest prose writers writing now. But not acknowledged as such, despite the recognition she’s received - not really. The sometimes deadly implications of honesty, and a searching perceptiveness that does not set itself limits - heads straight for every boundary. I certainly can’t begin to properly value such a book with only one reading.

A breezy, bird-voiced day. The real summer is coming.

*Sunday, January 14th*

The heat has begun. I got partly burnt yesterday, lying by the river in the afternoon, having forgotten to take suncream.

Thoughts of the last few days... I’ve seen another small bird worrying at a much larger bird, and have supposed that it must be a territorial drama - or farce. This one gave up - the magpie in question was intractable.

While walking I remembered my desire, long ago in Venice, to write about the lacemaker - there was an exhibition poster of a picture from, I think, a Swiss art museum of a girl on a seashore working at making lace. Eavan Boland’s poem ‘Lace’ comes to mind, as does Judith Beveridge’s sea poem involving lace imagery...

The other day, looking up ‘bridegroom’ in the dictionary (I don’t recall why), I saw that ‘bride’ can describe a line of lace in a design.

Poetry as lace-making.

In Venice, I also wanted to write about the glassmakers I saw at work there, and at Murano.

My mother came in just now and said, ‘I found two very large, ripe figs at the bottom of the garden’. We will have one each.

Thinking ahead to the talk on fairy stories I will give in June, I decide I want to begin with an image of story as a lake. The light-filled surface and the fathomless depth. One enters into the story and it is like diving into a lake, swimming in it. And when one leaves, the surface becomes serene again, sealed over the depths.

Two further images of birds. First, the mudlark (a small magpie-like bird) that has kept diving at my window these past few days.

Then, the blackbird outside the living room - returning again and again to the fence, with her high-pitched mewing sound. Such distress - speaking, no doubt, of loss. What happens to such a bird after losing her young? Presumably, she recovers. Otherwise, she
would wear herself out with grief.

Well, the fig experience. It was so large my fingers could not close round it. I walked down through the garden and contemplated it as I ate it. To begin with the thought I tried to repress, one thing the curved white spears of inner flesh made me think of was white grubs. But these were packed in together, perfectly still, though pliable in my hands. They were also like bean shoots. In accord with that association, a surprisingly dry, almost crisp quality as one eats them. And - another unsettling thought - the crimson pulp they are encased in seemed to me like nothing so much as menstrual blood, and the syrup around the white shoots was like other bodily fluids. So no wonder the fig is an image of fertility.

When I had eaten into the fig, I thought of those pieces of stone which break open to reveal an inner cave of purple crystals.

The bright lurid green of the fig’s casing - travelling down to such soft subtle browns around the belly.

Inverted, the shape of a cartoon bubble - that’s what I thought of the fig, after dismissing the ideas of hand grenade and question mark.

*Monday, January 15th*

More and more attuned to my work now. I read small sections of *The Writing Life* and absorb them. Some final work on ‘Jorinda and Joringel’ too - on the back burner.

Yesterday, a sojourn on the beach - more crowded than I can remember it being - in perfect conditions. The gift of the sea. I felt transformed by the time I left to walk home. The alchemy of the body - the elements of one’s being brought into a new relationship, it seems. I walked along by the water, watching another kind of alchemy - that of sand and water used in the fashioning of moats and castles, anthill shapes.

Today, the wind was up when I set out at 3 p.m. But it was warm inside the waves which crashed through me, unlocking energy.

Sitting on the beach I watched the ocean - mostly forest green, but with stretches of moss green. The breaking waves far out seemed like chunks of snow floating in the direction of the Point Lonsdale lighthouse.

My eyes followed the curve of the beach round to the large huddle of buildings and trees at Ocean Grove, then on and round to Point Lonsdale - high dunes topped with marram grass all the way.

Another memory from last Friday. The great cloud-feather arching across blue, leaving an amorphous but interesting train of whiteness trailing from its tip. In a symbol-making mood, I thought of it as the writer’s quill trailing behind it her creations. I thought, too, of the famous painting of Dickens at his desk, quill in hand, with many of his famous characters thronging in the air around him.

There was a half-moon that day - the outside line so definite, the inside moodily textured, like the thin clouds prevailing. Had the moon been upsidedown, I would have thought of it as a cup of cloud.
Thursday, January 18th
I’d spent the morning reading *Journal of a Solitude* in bed, calmly and soberly, finding much to relate to, especially about solitude itself: Sarton speaks of her belief that ‘solitude is one of the ways toward communion’(103).

The call to naturalness... After so much putting up and shutting up, I want a quiet way of being myself, and giving out to others from myself. And I will go on learning how to nourish myself.

These last few days have been even-toned and productive. I try less and achieve more.

Days of sunlight, of breezes with an edge of coolness to them ... lovely days. I did not swim yesterday, but lay exhausted on the sand near the estuary, and was restored. The blue sky was clear but seemed to have a film of white moving across it. And its intensity modulated from a whiter blue above the horizon to an azure density high up - I imagined myself looking through those sunglasses which are untinted at the bottom, then gradually darken towards the top of the frame. People walking over the revealed rocks, playing cricket on the beach - lots of adults and children tasting the jubilant harmony of summer.

In recent times, I’ve been well and in touch with my strength. The pattern of work then rest I’m evolving seems just right. And there’s a lot less strain in my shoulders and neck and back.

Images from the last few days: Spirals. Lighthouses. The spiral stairs inside a lighthouse.

Monday, January 22nd
Some memories from the last few days. One of them, last Friday, a hot day. I sat by the river for a time on my way home from the beach, and saw the rectangular glints on the water as being like the effects of an invisible rain pocking the surface - white diamond rain.

On Saturday, there was a storm which started with wide-apart, thick drops. The storm was bracing at first, then stirred a dissonance in me, as if the winds buffetting the garden and moving in all directions were operating on my soul as well.

On Sunday, I saw the black whale weathervane on my walk, and noted the dense cluster of green between the golf course and the thin line of sea above it, as I was approaching the cliffs. I must find out more about the vegetation I so often look at.

First thing Sunday morning, I had finished E. L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime*, which I thought a close to flawless performance - wild and dazzling and original, but entirely without knowingness. Doctorow seems to have a genius for avoiding the obvious.

A couple of the many bits I remember... The young boy and girl burying each other in sand, and shaping an adult body above; and the night spent by Piermont Morgan in a pyramid where ‘...he saw on his blanket the unmistakable pincered bedbug, in community.’ I liked that last phrase.

It was beautiful on Friday to walk on the sea’s mirror- verge again, ahead of me the sun’s glinting disc, like a piece of gold half-embedded in the sand. Also reflected there was the green vegetation on the dunes, clouds, blueness.
This journal and my journal keeping end on this day, early in 1996. Over these years of journaling I have written from my own depths at times when I had no strength, or sense of personal hope. I have also written of my joy in the natural world, in birds and seascapes. I have written in times when I experienced creativity as an absence, and at other times when images surrounded me, seemed to be coming off my skin, waiting to be transmitted to paper.

An image that comes to me now - thinking back through some of the disabling difficulties of recent years - is of a pair of cupped hands full of ashes. Then the image changes and I see those ashes blowing away. The presence of creativity is one of the things that have brought an experience of fulfilment to me during these years.

So a counter-image forms as I write this: of empty hands now holding a book - this present study - which has been wrested from struggle, exhaustion, and a belief in creative possibility.

But let me offer another image from my journal on this particular day, to end with:

*Friday's clouds ... several times I saw Ireland in those clouds.*
*In recent days, so many memories of places seeming to be fired from pinpoints around my body.*
*Time to travel?*
3. POEMS

FLUTE MUSIC

The Sybarites taught some of their horses to dance to flute music. This sometimes led to embarrassment on the battlefield.

More than the bracelet of massed shields, it was the light on the flanks of prancing horses that mesmerised the enemy... In pricked ears, the dulcet breath of wind in high trees as a blushing warrior broke rank, sashayed on his light-footed beast towards them, rupturing their line, their faces immobilised as they waited with clutched spears and ambivalent-ly poised hooves, watching man and horse frisk, whirl, go through their paces - disarmed by that errant sight as if by a centaur waltzing.

ORPHEUS

Moonflower:
a Mexican plant, known for its white night-blooming flowers;
also called ‘angels’ tears’.

As for the widower, so the poet.
You journey down among shades, untangle from Death’s dragnet a formal radiance that fades
as you draw near. It takes all your 
haunted eloquence to lure 
her back towards this sapphire 
and emerald world - a pure

shape who covets now only 
refinement, the grace of loss. 
How to coax so silent a soliloquy 
into voice, the almost gross

project of loving, body to body? 
You need more than courage to turn, 
welcome her veiled gaze - as she 
falters (so tenuous a bond), spurns 
your aching incompleteness: 
which you must now bring home...
Hunger for even a witness 
and you will find that answering 

absence behind your shoulders - 
compassionate at moments, 
pleading for nurture at others, 
or craving terminal rest.

You circle the earth of her grave, 
tracing her unlived life, lay sprigs 
of heliotrope from sunless groves. 
Blooms grow there - gleaming,
pock-marked moonflowers. 
Under starlight, bloodstone 
petals mingle with angel’s tears 
to weave a wreath, a sign.

TEIRESIAS

Drag queen (retired) 
back in a suit and sober tie - 
almost convincing
but for face-flesh sagging
under the memory of
too much make-up;

lashes burdened
at fluttering moments
by blue ghosts of mascara;

mouth a little too wrinkled
even for your wide
slipstream of years.

You re-entered woman
in the only way you could,
mimed her movements

till finally a birth into
this new/old self,
this serviceable enigma.

What to do but be
philosophical, though
it’s difficult to rest

inside a body that knows
almost everything
about what it’s not.

These days, you give advice
from unpursed lips,
point up plain truths

deviously/directly
- as is de rigueur
for prophets.

The envious and the curious
only pretend to believe
while they drink in
as if it were nectar
the atmosphere around you,
scan unseeing eyes for

signs - for swords of light
carving that shining
grey dusk like lasers...

When they go - sometimes,
this fusion, this dissolving,
as shadows slide back

beneath skin, and
all that you have lived,
you become.

**SISYPHUS IN PRISON**

No tension, nothing to press against.
Only the body’s strength defeating itself;
the grey smell that inhabits breath, clothes;
a leaden weight in loins and belly.

Towers of stone; coloured television
showing the world out there - big as
my toe-nail... So what do I see?
*Politics as grand larceny.*

*Secret plans for mass slaughter
handled like religious texts.*
*Poisons leak into the unborn,
claiming an eye, a heart.*

They tell us we are the poison
and must be locked up here -
would bury or incinerate us
were we not lost in their unconscious.
In the middle of the night, pain
raw and insistent as a kidney stone
keeps me awake. Time
lays over me its smothering blanket.

Nemesis is a sour sexual fantasy
played over and over,
her body nebulous, her smile
vacuous, framing sharp teeth.

HERO AND LEANDER DYING
After Rubens' 'Hero and Leander'

[In] Hero and Leander ... the lesson is extremely clear: man has disobeyed the laws of male society, he has allowed passion for a woman to rule him, and the gods have punished him.
- Edwin Mullins

It is an athletic drowning,
an erotic drowning,
a theatrical drowning.
Leander postures centre-ocean,
beset by waves brimful
of foaming nymphs:
he could have had his pick,
or all of them at once.
Instead, he's dying for love -
of the agonised, Romantic kind.
Naturally, he is unaware
of Hero diving into the drink
down the side of the picture.
Did she jump, or was she
pushed by the painter?
It's so murky, there are no
strobe lights on her torso.
She falls in a tumult of
amaryllis satin as befits
a priestess of Aphrodite
whose motto is:
Live passionately;
die resplendently.
Now the tides switch them-
selves off, the lovers float
on slowing currents past
shipwrecks, curlicues of coral,
sunken islands of bull kelp -
all the sea's great stageprops.

MEDUSA

I went to work on casting Medusa, the woman twisted in a heap at the feet of Perseus.
- Benvenuto Cellini

First, the filigree work.
In two weeks, a wax model
swaggers above his hands.
The Duke slavers.

Next the noisy opera
of money, mess, intrigue,
till the casting is in train -
up from his sick bed

to meld invincible Perseus
who'll pin Medusa down,
hold her severed head aloft,
to point the lesson:

better her topped
and squashed by bronze,
than him and his likes
stared into stone...

So sentient his hands,
he'd worked on as air
changed from quicksilver
to treacle, coiling that

tensile root system as if
his fingertips had eyes,
and he needed no company
in all the world

but the deft blade
of his whistling.
CHAPTER SIX

January 23rd, 1996 - May, 1990:
Barwon Heads; Colchester; Geelong

1. COMMENTARY

Most of the poems written during the period of time covered by this chapter are from my unpublished collection, The Sixth Swan, based on Grimm's fairy tales. My work in this area is a continuation and development of my work on Greek myths, being similarly informed by two main concerns: psychology, and the history of power. At this point I would like to speak in more detail regarding the understandings and convictions involved for me in this work.

To read myths and fairy stories psychologically is to find in them dramatisations of, and problem-solving engagements with, developmental processes and/or inner complexes. In this I take the Jungian view that such processes and complexes may operate on a collective as well as a personal level - that is, they may speak of unconscious patterns at work in a whole society as well as within an individual. I also support C. G. Jung's view that an individual, by working towards a more balanced psychological and spiritual state, (in his term, the individuation process), may gain the capacity to fund change not only in themselves but also in the collective.

For me, the role of dialogue and interaction with images - through dream interpretation and through fashioning and meditating upon art - is a central part of the process of discovering or retrieving, then giving a conscious shape to, contents from the unconscious. It is thus an important resource in the search for greater balance and integration both in the individual and in human culture. Clearly, my work as a poet connects me with this particular approach to change and transformation in self and society. The experience of writing journals over a number of years has served as an extension of my work as a poet in this regard by enhancing my conscious understanding of the process by which images are developed and shaped, and also being an arena in which my own journey into a fuller apprehension of self, culture and nature, and their interrelationships, might be more amply recorded.

Among the poems collected in this chapter are four sequences which deal with the problems of violence and oppression - each in a different manner. They are 'All Fur', 'Ashputtle', 'The Trial' and 'Bluebeard's Bride'. As with all my work on this topic, I seek to address the problem of the victim-self created by oppression in such a manner as to analyse the source-conditions of this state and to seek transformation of it. In this I am motivated by the understanding that to consciously re-enter into trauma and suffering within a containing and supporting structure is to be placed so as to be able to integrate and transform it.

Very often the opening of a fairy tale gives the psychological situation which the tale
will deal with, and in ‘All Fur’ the problem set out at the beginning concerns a daughter whose father has decided to marry her (finding in her the closest image of her dead mother). For this reason, though it has some elements in common with versions of the Cinderella tale, I do not regard it as a variant of Cinderella (as is ‘Ashputtle’), but as one whose overt concern with incest takes it in another direction.

Like the protagonist of ‘The Handless Maiden’, the princess in ‘All Fur’ undergoes a descent into suffering and isolation in her flight from the possessive father who would appropriate her sexually, or - as in the case of ‘The Handless Maiden’, in what is perhaps a psychological displacement of this - sacrifice her bodily integrity by cutting off her hands. The princess’s long and complex ordeal is similarly ritualised by the tale, and her eventual emergence described.

There is a key question to be asked here as to whether the shapers and/or developers of successive versions of the tale have deliberately accentuated the sufferings of the female protagonist out of a desire to intensify her isolation and grief. This is a claim Ruth Bottegheimer makes in regard to Wilhelm Grimm in her study, Grimm’s Bad Girls and Bold Boys, analysing the way his deployment of language in his version of tales such as ‘Rapunzel’ further accentuates Rapunzel’s isolation in the forest.

A contrary yet not mutually exclusive view - as many voices and many points of view may be concerned in the versions of the tales which survive - is that stories such as ‘All Fur’ and ‘The Handless Maiden’ are encodings of the vulnerability, suffering and potential for emergence into strength of women within patriarchy. This view would make of these tales initiations into the mystery of survival rather than invitations to masochistic complicity in excessive suffering. While the latter has tainted some versions of ‘The Handless Maiden’, as retold by Wilhelm Grimm and others, stronger and purer versions of the tale survive to give the lie to such loaded revisionings.

Certainly, the tales ‘All Fur’, ‘Ashputtle’ and ‘Snow White’ (on which ‘The Trial’ is based) attain great power and authority in portraying inner states and processes which have been, and are, experienced by many women, and their journey through them. In doing so, such tales have the capacity to speak beyond the plight of women in patriarchy to express encounters with oppression, ordeal and healing on a universally inclusive level.

In writing ‘All Fur’ I interpreted the coat of a thousand kinds of fur as giving the princess power from all the animals whose fur composes it, and so putting her in touch with the deepest instinctive level of her being as well as with the depths of the sacred known by shamans who may wear cloaks made from the fur or feathers of creatures. I dramatised her archetypal journey through the forest, and portrayed settings within her father’s castle and that of the new kingdom she comes to, evoking particular atmospheres and surrounding characters.

In ‘Ashputtle’, by contrast, I wanted to take the whole drama further into the psyche of the protagonist, pointing up the way all the components of the situation need to be dealt with on a psychic level as well as in the world of outer relationships. For this reason, I moved away from naming the particular characters so that they would become a sequence of voices within the psyche - voices that are variously implanted or innate, differentiated yet forming part of a larger complex. This strategy had the effect of making me freer to enter into experiences of
primal rage and hatred such as are expressed by Ashputtle's father and stepmother. I felt it was important to do this as such emotions are often locked into the underpinning of a complex, and need to be faced and named as part as the work of depotentiating the complex.

'The Trial' retells the story of 'Snow White' in a contemporary setting, using the device of a legal trial so often used in film and television drama, to give this classical story a new setting. For the same reason, elements of irony and burlesque are included, with the stepmother a somewhat Joan Collins-like soap opera femme fatale, and a later cameo appearance by an internationally-known Australian media magnate.

This is an ancient tale thought to be connected with a more woman-oriented culture; certainly its central drama deals with the cycle of birth, death and rebirth more openly recognised in cultures which honour the feminine. Thus it can be read as carrying a similar resonance to the story of Demeter and Persephone. 'Snow White' focuses on the relationship between mother and daughter with psychological depth, concentrating on the problem of the archetypal negative or devouring mother whose power Snow White must escape from and overturn to win her own freedom.

Snow White is, in my particular version, the feminist heroine journeying back from damage and a prolonged death-in-life to claim her own life and to become a woman who firmly knows her own wishes and point of view. The geese clustering round her in the final scene are both her dwarf-friends in another guise, and the geese associated with the mythical Aphrodite and hence symbolic of eros.

I deal with the theme of the tainting of eros in patriarchy in 'Forest Meeting', which acts out a prolonged scenario of fear, paranoia, then eventual self-deliverance. The end has an ambivalent edge, leaving it open - or rather, simply unresolved - as to whether the protagonists's final knowledge of what I will term the Freudian secret is an appalled hilarity or a more darkly tinged laughter. Again, faced with a story as time-hallowed yet pliable as 'Little Red Riding Hood', I decided to introduce modern elements, in this case references to the technology of surveillance, in the hope of bringing a new perspective to the essence of the tale. I also hoped my version would read as an internalised fantasy as well as an external narrative.

My most far-reaching attempt to deal with the theme of eros in patriarchy is 'Bluebeard's Bride'. As already noted in the present text, this poem was the result of a long and initially rather nervous journey. If my approach to 'Ashputtle' was to involve an attempt to get inside a constellation of voices constituting an oppressive and damaging situation, here my venture was to try to depotentiate the complex by creating a confrontation with the outer marauder who has become an inner figure.

By choosing to distance Bluebeard's past murderousness, I was able to concentrate on the interplay between him and his wife. While the latter does not triumph, neither does she lose the contest, and she is empowered by the use of her intelligence and courage to meet the challenge before her. In the course of the battle of wits with her husband, Bluebeard's wife finds a point of inviolability inside herself to counter the imaginative and personal violation with which his violence is enmeshed. Thus my version of the story is in strong contrast to Angela Carter's treatment of it in 'The Bloody Chamber', where the heroine, by plumbing a complex of meshed violence and sexuality in herself, becomes both free of Bluebeard and, it
seems to me, complicit with him.

‘Bluebeard’ is a tale most famously told by Charles Perrault, but a lame version of it, which censors out much of Bluebeard’s violence, exists in an early edition of Grimms’ *Children’s and Household Tales*. This was omitted by the Grimms in later editions, but has been restored in the recent two-volume translation of their tales by Jack Zipes.

My poem ‘Awakening’ adopts a light tone in presenting its version of ‘The Sleeping Beauty’, with various silhouette illustrations by Arthur Rackam (see Appendix 5) being an inspiration for my attempt to catch in words that frozen moment lasting one hundred years. I also played references to several nursery rhymes into my description of the king and queen, caricaturing them as examples of childish self-absorption, once again in the service of a compensating lightness.

The meeting between the princess and prince eschews realism in the interests of a suggestion of a meeting of soul-counterparts who mirror each other, as do the colour of their eyes. The latter strategy was an artistic risk because of the danger of vagueness, but I wanted to take that risk so as to avoid the trope of the mindlessly happy ending.

Various tales retold by the Grimm brothers record the fact that princesses do not always, on a literal level at least, wish for union with a perfect prince. My treatment of ‘The Mongoose’ (also known as ‘The Sea-Hare’ and ‘The Little Hampster Across the Water’) in ‘The Hundredth Suitor’ describes the attempt by a male protagonist with very modest worldly credentials to brook and then reverse the active hostility of such a princess.

This particular princess can see, from her high tower, everything in the world, and will only marry a man who can successfully hide from her gaze. Here, I was attracted by the theme of perception as a controlling and distancing device, and was engaged by the figure of an empowered and intelligent woman who uses her power of insight to distance suitors. I chose to treat this tale as a battle of wits and a comedy of resistance, attempting to capture the tensions of a particular kind of relationship in which only a slight flaw in the ‘all-seeing’ one gives a complementary role to the other who can find and fill that gap with his own knowledge.

The Princess in ‘The Mongoose’ is another kind of contemporary feminist figure, then, with the power of the insight she has gained making relationship with a male companion rather less probable than it might otherwise be - unless of course he can convince her that he holds a key she might otherwise not possess. In this he is the obverse of Bluebeard, and is motivated to participate in a precariously balanced but rarely dull relationship.

In the selection of fairy tale poems in this chapter, I deal with several male figures which represent contrary pathways, and stand at odd angles to the hero myth.

My desire to depict some non-violent male figures informs my choice of tales such as ‘Bearskin’ and ‘The Devil with the Three Golden Hairs’. Bearskin makes an acutely unwise
pact with the devil, but is redeemed from the worst consequences of it by his good heart and by keeping a connection with prayer - albeit at a remove, by paying poor people to say prayers for him.

In ‘The Devil with the Three Golden Hairs’, the modest hero finds himself in a situation where he must solve various problems, such as why a fountain no longer yields water. I chose to read this story as a parable about psychic depletion and the means by which it is overcome, so found that writing about it enabled me to give full expression to a theme I’ve long been preoccupied with.

In conclusion, I would like to comment on the last poem in my selection, ‘Frog’. This poem, which derives from the tale, ‘The Three Feathers’, is one I consciously set out to write as a tribute to the muse - the principle of creative energy - to begin my collection, The Sixth Swan. In the tale, the benighted third son follows a feather which leads him to a trapdoor beneath which lives a frog and her many offspring. On his three visits to her dwelling, the young man receives gifts from the frog of a wondrous carpet and a ring, as well as having a beautiful bride provided for him.

It seemed to me that whatever trammels of the writing life I have contended with in the past, it was of the greatest importance to acknowledge the gifts received in the way of poems and other creative work that I have set down. And whatever mirrors to my own creative path and energies are provided by such figures as the protagonist of ‘The Sixth Swan’, it is that small earth mother figure - living in the depths of the earth while possessing and bestowing the riches of culture - who images for me the primary inner resource and support of the writing life.
2. POEMS

THE WING COLLECTION

Angel Wings, $89.95 plus shipping and handling from The Pyramid Collection, Altid Park, P.O. Box 3333, Chelmsford, Massachusetts, 01824
- International Herald Tribune. 12.12.97

I sat there imagining (we were flying over India just then and I needed to kill some time) an executive opening his wardrobe after a wearisome day.

Would it be the turkey-feathered pair? - the most convincing after all, while 'mysteriously uplifting, possessed of shamanic power': so read the label.

Or these, made from polythene discs, with their seraphic glitter? As he adjusts the lighting, water lily pads of indigo, rose, chalcedony, float over the ceiling...

But for old-fashioned comfort, why not the Greenbacks, made to order from dollar bills? How reassuringly they rustle as he flaps his arms: ideal for when the market was rocky. The small Eros Wings next - their feathers synthetic, yes, but expertly copied from a Titian painting; a set of arrows accompanied.

He yawns, moves past the Leonardos (too contrived). Yet the Dream of Icarus stops him. All the more authentic, claimed his Guide at the Wing Salon,

for being spliced with wax and a specially recreated ancient glue. The feathers? - Wedge-tailed eagle. As he'd spent profusely, they'd thrown in a free pair:

Garden Wings, made from autumn leaves microwaved to remove all moisture and insect life. They dazzled in their demise - paper-thin skins of apricot, plum, guava -
each grafted into a sycamore branch. Ecologically sound, these wings can be recycled: draped over compost, they'll revert to earth, roots, leaves, can therefore become more Garden Wings. In theory, admirable...
But tonight, sporting red silk pyjamas, what he wants is the Nightclub Special. Hoisting black leather pinions onto his back, he grasps the matching whip. If he dims the lights, he can watch, as if a voyeur, that Mephistophelian shadow trying to stare him down.

Whistling, too, like some football hooligan... No class at all! Anyway, what's the joke? He flicks the lash - a silver snake ripples the mirror. The harness is heavy but he's strong, will stand waiting that phantom out till he has won, can let those studded wings crash to the floor, lie amongst them in dreamless sleep.

**BIRDS AT SUNSET**

To be so far out, and at home, on a journey where purpose is fuelled by freedom...

Intimate with spray, the shape-shifting line writes itself across a humped vastness darkening beneath magnesium-blue.

A conversation is unfolding between the elements of a figure - nucleus, sketch of an eye or mouth, vertiginous kite-tail...

Could the path so inscribed be traced in phosphorous, one might contemplate as it fades the mysteries of knots and numbers, of embroidery, of divination, looping and loosening as if in answer to a dolphin's weave of arcs through pearling grey.
Mined with fathomless lights,
split sea, camellia sky, are now
black glass cracked by stars, breakers.

SUMMER

A northwesterly holds sway on this hottest day for years,
sand ghosting the damp verge, a stinging coat on oiled skin
as I look out past shirred crystal to leaf-green, cerulean.

Later I will learn houses were burning under that cloud
growing along the horizon: white, ash-grey, white again...
Caught merely in the crosswinds of unwelcome thoughts.

I wade in, wanting to be braced by chill pressures,
till the breakers I stand beyond arch back - sudden
 tears from parched blue. Salt slaps into my eyes

as I swim where waves begin their turn towards
the estuary. Nothing for it but to lie in
these few liquid inches as if earthed in water,

the sun dangerous on eyelids, my weight erasing
sand ripples. There I stay, wanting memories
to evaporate, thirsting for fresh beginnings.

RIP

It was a day whose warm clearness drew me seawards.
Through the town, over the bridge to that line of coast
swerving round to the Heads, the lighthouse. Close to shore,
islands of weed pulsed, shifted. I walked in through
a channel awash with ochre strands, and oxblood bracken
such as I'd shaken the day before into a cloud of sea-lice.
Tentacles of light speared turbid green where I
rolled in shallow surf - feeling tamed, reluctantly
safe. And so, dreaming of crabs and jellyfish,
I drifted till suddenly closer to the horizon,
seeking a path back over that paddock of ribbed fronds.
If I swam across, swam towards the lighthouse, I’d reach
clear water, could wade shorewards with unstung legs,
a steady heart. Next, the minutes I cannot give shape to,
as I was taken out beyond my depth, my strength -
sideswiped by the sea - to become a detail in stretched crystal.
A struggle amidst lift, fracturing swirl, to reach
dazed knowledge and recognise panic - then the gap
before I called out, could find the will to want to be saved:
my mouth a cave of salt, my body losing form -
too embroiled in crosscurrents to wave at figures
on broken lace. Now I know what it is like
to look in at a shore I will not walk on again.
But there was the journey in, slipping from a board
towed by a girl paddling us both through jagged swells.
Was it the king tides, or the westerlies, creating
that iron pull? Next day, I would hear of them,
and later, of the six drownings here, this summer.
When I’d stood for a long time, looking out at unstoppable
waves, the unanswering sea, I turned home.

ALL FUR

INTROIT

Only now can I voice my story.
Time’s slow beneficence
has filled the room of my life
with warm spring light,
intimations of ending...
What garment shall I wear
to tell the tale? None of those
three magical dresses -
burnished as sunlight, blue
as the stars, moon-silver -
folded inside a walnut
grooved with dust.

This plain shift
I'll wear, wrapped in my
cloak of many furs.

KING

His queen is lost, his mirror-self.
Each looking glass must be reversed.
He looks inward as if into a well
fed by a stream darker than earth.

A fragment lodges in his mind,
a glass thorn deep as a tap root:
he'll stop, and reverse, time - mis-take
his daughter for her dead mother.

His counsellors cite texts, intone
prophecies. In gilded galleries
they form knots of desperate
whispering... Straw in the wind.

PRINCESS

His daughter lives beneath
a pall of silence, immured
by blank faces. Each day
she is dressed and undressed
by servants, as if a doll.

Will she hide in fissures
in the walls, under floorboards,
behind tapestries stitched
with heraldic battles, the blood
of serfs? Her wits prompt her
to tell delaying lies,
demand a cloak of every
fur, gowns radiant as
galaxies. Should that fail,
the wild card of escape lurks
up her satin sleeve.

NEW WARDROBE

1
She orders impossible-to-make dresses
and they appear. She swims with fishes
in lakes on the moon; with salamanders
she dives through sunfire; and flutters
around stars in a cloud of Silver-Wings...

her small share of heaven, in a nutshell.

2
Bloody scraps of pelt - snow, sallow gold,
pearl, ebony, rust - are patchworked
into a shaman's cloak: a sealed world
to fend off harm, a warming shroud
to help her burrow through earth's cold.

Forest martin, wolf and squirrel,
deer and otter, dormouse, bear, mole,
teach her when to be swift or still,
lend that ancient trick of survival -
patience... From her miniature cull,

trace elements of animal soul.
FLIGHT

From fathomless sleep in a tree’s womb
she is plucked by a king’s hunters.
With her smudged face and mangy cloak,
she’s sent downstairs to clean boots
and have them thrown at her at will.
In skullery and cellar she dwells,
an invisible, slaving, no-thing -

a situation with only this benefit:
of allowing much time to pass until
misery felt in the mind, in the body’s
every cell, can be contemplated with
clear eyes, as if it were water scooped
from a churning slipstream, to be held
in cupped hands, entered by light.

COOK

The cook has his own problems.
Pragmatic, a taskmaster without sentiment,
he calls her Furry Creature.

But for half an hour she may slip upstairs
to view the ball - why not?
On this one night he’ll let her glimpse

what she can’t have: the chandelied hall
dizzy with circling dancers,
the hummingbird hover of violins.

He sees her in small dim places.
How could he know her sleep-closet
resounds each night with dreams of music?

BALL

Her face scrubbed free of grime,
she has opened the walnut,
plucked the gossamer sun-gown.
She's ready to join the dance -
circumspectly, but with style:
in a film of gold, with a black mask,

shoes sparkling with diamentes.
As she enters, the musicians' breath
shapes richer and brighter notes.

The king will dance only with her,
but after half an hour, he clasps
chill air, a taunting phantom.

BREAD SOUP

Chicken stock boiled down
to nectar; yesterday's bread.
The herbs: parsley (of course),
dill, a pinch of thyme.

When the soup is ladelled,
she throws into the bowl
a small gold ring; mist
rises as from a lake.

The king's after-the-ball
supper... He marvels at
the taste then finds the ring
no one has put there.

This night of mysteries
will be repeated twice
till she has danced in
the dresses of moon and stars.

and watched her golden
spindle and reel disappear
beneath vapor... A king
satisfied, but hungry.
Finally, there's no time left
to translate herself back
into sooty fur-ball:
at the table, the king spies

a parian finger wearing
the ring he slipped on it.
With all dues paid to
the story she was trapped in,

the new Queen can reclaim
her hidden self, grow
from lost roots, fashion
a life she has chosen.

ENVOI

Let me draw my cloak across this story
 like a wing.

I ran myself to ground, into the ground,
 to escape darkness.

In animal earth I was nurtured until
reborn from it.

I am the hunted and the hunter,
the drudge in gown of cosmic splendour,
the lowly cook brought to sit at the banquet.
I am the silenced one, the teller.
ASHPUTTLE

WHITE BIRD

Her rose silk dress is stripped from her back,
her pearl hair ornament plucked out,
her bracelet of water sapphires ripped off.
Her light-filled room and snowy bed are denied her.

She wears a stained smock, wooden shoes.
In cold ashes by the hearth, she toils and sleeps.
But from the hazel twig she plants, strong roots
wind down; in time, a canopy of leaves

shades her mother’s grave. Beneath it, each day
she mourns and dreams. The white bird who comes
to sing on the highest branch will grant
any wish she might choose to name.

RAVEN

Bad mothered, doubly unfathered,
we too have known lack: it sits in our hearts
like a starving raven, holds us ransom
as we hold others ransom. We’ll never relent.

She - that one over there, Miss Misery,
laughable in her rags - is our suffering.
We’ll have none of her, make things worse
for her each day. Let her eat charcoal.

Life’s riches - we mean to have them all.
Beautiful to start with, we make ourselves
more so by soft living, the latest treatments
we hear of - acid peel, dermalift.

And we are shoppers with a vengeance!
All this so as to be bait for princes -
who are, quite simply, wealth and power on legs.
They’re improved versions of fathers
that you can twist like a wedding ring
round a slim white finger. We want one each.
Remember: we are what's happening.
We will have our moment and make it

stretch to a lifetime. We say: If the shoe fits,
wear it; if it doesn't, start cutting.
What's a little cosmetic surgery?
Who would not hobble through the years
to fulfil their every fantasy? We're rich now
and will become richer with each breath
when we get who and what we want.
We'll inherit the earth. Nothing can stop us.

*CHALICE*

This zero of a man, so afraid of grief and desire:
I hold both in my hands like a chalice of ashes.

He thinks I make him safe: I build structures -
patterns of indulgence; small rituals of cruelty -

whatever it takes to keep on and use up
and delay. I have my way with the powerless,

and tease and lie and thwart for the hell of it.
Whatever it takes to make time pass...

But I will never let go of this stranglehold
I have on life. Death in his melodramatic

black robe will have to force back, and break,
my clutching bony fingers, one by one,

if he would take the husk of me, when I am done.
DOVECOT AND PEAR TREE

I will not be alone and I will not be beholden.
I refuse ever to be bested.

She thinks of me as malleable, needy,
but I'm intractable. Always.

If one I pursue - no matter for what reason,
for what reason I know not -

hides in dovecot or pear tree, I'll cut down
that dovecot, that pear tree,

crush pigeons, doves, and the phantom-girl
crouched among them - if need be,

if it suits me... I'll crush the image of my loss,
the veiled icon of my desire -

my foot will grind still fluttering wings
as I consume, like a sacrament,

the wine of perfidy, the bread of ruin.
You just watch me. I'll do it.

SHOE

I will have a bride. I will have a ball
to find a bride. If the one I choose
eludes me, I'll put pitch on the palace stairs.

The shoe unstuck from the pitch will try
the foot of each maiden in my kingdom
until it touches she who captured me,

fled so intriguingly away... Abroad,
rumours of a list long as a baptismal robe,
names ticked off, one by one - and tales
of my gilt carriage racketing over cobbles,
squeezed down tilted lanes where none has ever
glimpsed it, so that it seems a ghost carriage.

But I am inside - a living prince on this
royally upholstered quest. The foot I seek
will be the least likely one, no doubt -

belonging to an unkempt servant girl with
the same oceanic eyes I swam through...
She's before me now. Her foot enters the shoe.

She draws its mate from her pocket, slips it on,
walztes in slow circles around the room.
Not waiting for second thoughts, I join her.

TIME

The white bird blessed my tears
but when the moment came,
gowned me in midnight sunlight,
had me driven to the ball...

The white bird told me to live
remembering, to advance
backwards - but when hope
knelt before me, to let

my wooden shoe fall to earth,
my grey foot enter the shoe
of fur or glass or gold -
the special shoe that would

alter the shape of my life...
In morning light, I dance with
my companion. Present joy,
all splendours to come,

have been paid for by years
of drab sorrow, by time
that lay like a pool of
dirty water on my heart.
I know I will have to
relearn, again and again,
this moment of freedom.
Signs mark a terrain

now broken up, now
settling a hair’s breadth
nearer to earth’s centre.
I make maps; I burn them.

THE TRIAL

STEPMOTHER

She’s climbing the granite steps of the courthouse
in black stiletto heels. Mid-way, she totters,
leans heavily on her ‘chauffeur’, looks up
vulnerable and dazed and triumphant:

cameras click, roll. She wears cyclamen lipstick;
midnight-blue mascara. Her lashes are mink
to match her coat: she blinks furiously -
working to keep those eyes wide-open.

At the top, a pause to catch her breath, seize
a last photo-opportunity - supernovas halo
that wicked smile. On one of her cheeks,
confused with rouge, a beauty mark;

she carries, of course, a crocodile handbag:
the mirror inside it has long been silent...
She’d be embarrassed if she knew that
a scarlet finial has broken through

the index finger of her left black glove: as she turns
to make a V-sign, five networks catch it in
close-up. A sudden gust uncurls a strand
of grey partly disguised as auburn.
She clutches the skins of fifty minks and blurrily surveys the scene - she has her point of view, her lawyers. After the acquittal, she'll sue the hell out of them all, make a million.

**THE GIRL WITH GLASS EYES**

Alone in the witness stand, as blank and mute as if she were the culprit, she wishes for a cubicle of bullet-proof glass to keep those prying looks at bay as the defence throws a case-history at her: '...this runaway

with persecution mania, this walking textbook of hysterical symptoms - illusory
constriction of belly and womb, delusions regarding (I ask you!) 'poisoned hair',
that phantom blockage in the throat...'

She stands there

unmercifully thin, with clumps out of her hair,
a concave posture. Is she still beautiful?
Clearly, her counsel thinks so. He listens intently as she tells her tale, lets no-one speak till she's finished. The counsel for the defence

jumps up again: '...her evidence is all circumstantial, her lack of guile suggests to him a need to mask impure motives - besides, if her story were true, she's been a little fool...'

The court clock insists

on its version of time, the judge's eyebrows descend, as she steps down, refusing the hand of her lawyer. She is starting to breathe freely, her spine to regain its upright curve. The jury wear her story on their faces.
THE KOBOLDS

Will they tip the scales -
seven almost-identical men
with identical stories?

True, none of them witnessed the crimes,
but each looks stricken as he speaks
of the aftermath: her alabaster body found
slumped on the floor; three frantic attempts
to give her breath; their final grief.
Then, after what seemed years, a miraculous
cloud frosting the lid of the coffin...

They address each member of the jury,
going over each detail, re-enacting the trauma
till exhaustion sets in, they must be
helped from the stand, gazing with brimming
eyes at the pale girl in sunglasses:
they’d do anything for dear Ms White...
Their testimony takes days, the court held
captive by their nuggety koans, cryptic saws:
each unearthing a hoard of word-jewels
then breaking the tension with a joke...
The court record spills from a machine:
an endless print-laden white tongue - hypnotic!
And they’re a media sensation! Everyone loves
these characters with their collarless workingmen’s shirts.

their silver-stained fingernails, their trick smiles.
At press conferences, in interviews, they talk
on and on - refining the story until
it reaches a classic shape:

The brute
shock of it! - their angel-housekeeper lifeless
on the floor; the coffin they fashioned
so as to worship her beauty always...
From a hilltop, its mirror-lid reflected 
clouds and thistledown, swallows and flying leaves. 
Now the prince in his magnificent puce 
 costume riding out from the forest, across 
the slowly greening landscape, ascending to where 
the seven kobolds circled her frozen form...

When, finally, they gave him the coffin, 
the prince stumbled on a root, dislodged 
the sliver - Snow White could breathe again! 
And wanted justice! So here they were...

Audiences went wild. Later, there would be 
documentaries on kobolds, studies of mining conditions 
in their region, a movie, a mini-series.

All very well, but by the end 
they itch to be back home in 
their squat cottage - and even more, underground: 
trekking through caves of slippery pointed beards, 
slow-motion tears, to probe dark tributaries 
that will yield the deepest, most dazzling 
blue of oceans they have never seen.

JUDGE

The old judge with his wig askew, his teeth 
worn into a crooked line, tilting 
the contrary way to his sardonic smile,

and the eyes of a superannuated bassett-hound, 
dewrapped by tedium and due process - 
even he will be sad to see the kobolds go.

He wishes he had a few round the house - 
they'd come in handy: fixing things up, 
keeping the place bright, breakfast with a song...

But they belong in their native habitat - 
even he can see that. Besides, 
he's already got one in the garden.
At the end he nods, beams, quite unlike himself, shakes each of them by the hand as if the world were, for those few moments, a more wholesome place. In his dreams that night he is playing a piano-accordion made of dwarfs. The sound is dreadful.

An odd business! This no doubt means he needs more cognac in his milo.

VERDICT

Found guilty, yes, but suspected insane, so put on a good behaviour bond - forever.

Drat! What to do but enjoy the brief limelight that gathers round a fallen star? She poses beside a crumbling griffin, her hand grasping his gargantuan claw... All she can think of now is court costs - they'll zero her assets, she'll go down in the world, end as the ragged crone she once dressed up as... Nothing left but to outstare those lenses winking in the sun like heliographs - each one filled with multiple, devouring faces - thinking, as she so radiantly smiles,

anyone for poisoned toffee apples? She staggers alone down the steps till brought to a stunned halt: that limousine drawing up is so much longer than hers! A door opens.

He gets out - the Great Media Magnate himself! Their eyes meet. She knows what he wants.
His grooved cheeks furrow into a grin:
the old puritan playboy has come to claim her...

Yes, she’s got a life to sell - she’ll make that million.

**RIVER AT SUNSET**

Snow White stops at the statue of Blind Justice,
looks west to a mirror glistening with old gold sun,

ivory sky on copper clouds, and flame-bright
houses billowing from reedy banks.

She’s said goodbye to her seven friends, thinking:
*No more perfect little plates and cups and beds!*

*No more mole stew!* As she skips down the steps,
a battered Valiant brakes with a clunking thud:

her lawyer. She recalls his tough words in court
(voice softened to question her), his cheeks veined

with burgundy - and knows he’d forsake even
his favourite wine bar for her. She waves, turns left,

making for that alchemical shimmer.
Birds wheel through honeyed air, glide on water-light.

Her eyes drink in the whiteness of heron and pelican.
She has resurrected herself once again...

Some bread she throws is caught by hovering gulls,
some by geese waddling up from the river bank

to where she stands, barefoot on springy grass.
They gather in a circle around her.
FOREST MEETING

He’s got a credit card for the deadlock,
sports a porkpie hat, Hawaiian tie;
in his pocket, the salt and pepper.

One last glance! That smile multiplies
on cracked quicksilver; in blood-flecked
ivory, carnations bloom from his lapel.

Even as he stands, framed by ebony,
he’s tracking her through the twilight
of the camera obscura inside his head.

At this moment, he in turn is being
watched - through a telescope in the attic
of a house on the forest’s edge.

The watcher homes in on that rope of
anticipatory drivel; a protruding
yellow tooth star-winks, as in a cartoon.

Elsewhere, the girl is about to leave.
She’s refused to wear red, says her hair,
heart, lips are red - isn’t that enough?

The mad wardrobe-lady had visions
of a cocktail dress alive with sequins,
menstrual-red; garnet earrings;

a gash of foxy lipstick. Last thing,
the girl accepts the scarf (“Red rag
to a bull, darling!”), slips it in her purse.

Now she’s beyond the clearing, among
high trees. Soon she’s lost radio contact,
the memorised map has dissolved.

Good! She’ll make her own way through...
The moon is lost in a thicket of cloud.
She thinks: even if this were being
filmed by ultra violet from
a helicopter - a shimmer of green
on TV screens across the nation -

she’d still be invisible, as would he...
Fear has just switched on its heat lamp;
her body feels strangely bright, her skin

bubbles - a sensation she half-likes...
The path is carved by tooth-shadows -
as are her thoughts. It’s been put to her

that what she wants is to be raped,
to kill her mother/grandmother at
one remove: to buy a bloody freedom.

She’s not convinced but, by the end,
at least she’ll know. Naive perhaps, yet...
could he, she wonders, be drawn to her

as a person? And what does he look like?
They say this one’s been around for
centuries. He’s got human genitals,

a human brain. The wind gives a louche
whistle, fondles leaves. She’s far from
the beaten track, and getting hungry.

In her basket, the vintage port,
black forest cake... She must go on!
Suddenly, her legs are skittering -

thorns rend cloth, the scarf yanked from
her purse hangs impaled on a branch.
Snap of twigs just ahead...or over there?

The moon silhouettes him propped against
a tree, ready to tempt with suave words,
a cigarette, the aphrodisiac of trust.
They'll chat above an undertow of sex:
she'll seem to make a pact then run for it -
oh yes she will, he knows she will -

leaving a puff of mace, a maze
of tacks, the map in her head working
again, flashing pinpoints of light

like the one in view now - that must be
Grandmother's porch! Yes, she's safe,
is scrambling up the dear rickety steps,

can hear the rockingchair rocking,
the shutters creaking their homely code...
None of the camera crew is here yet -

it's all happened so fast - but she's
ahead of the game, the door's open,
and there's Granny propped up in bed,

reading a book on lycanthropy.
A falsetto greeting. Star-wink on
yellow teeth. That animal smell...

'Grandma, I'm so relieved,' she gasps.
'I've been so scared...a close shave...whew!'
She'll keep on talking, that's what she'll do,

surely the team will arrive soon...
Most of all she wants to outwit him,
scissor the double bind clean through

then see him humiliated - taped and
trussed in images, that fulsome smile
excruciating under arc lights.

She even brought her own small camera
to take a shot at the crucial moment.
Hope they come soon... Sudden lightning! -
a storm’s brewing up! A gusty howl
corkscrews the chimney, the fire’s hair
stands on end. She pours some port:

‘An aperitif?’ - her bluff’s as good as his.
She sips, telling the story of her walk,
her mind aspin with tabloid headlines:

Transvestite werewolf takes
matriarchand virgin in quaint cottage.

Even if they’re too late, she can be

(re)constructed in front of the cameras
live - brought forth from that slit belly
while he lies haemorrhaging, screaming,

the cottage an operating theatre,
a TV studio... As if copied
from an illustration, grey tufts

halo his broderie anglaise bedcap.
She tries to mirror that winning smile.
The wind knocks boldly at the door,

a star is caught in lace curtains.
It’s midnight. He’s getting out of bed,
sated yet eager to enfold her -

a python sidling towards a lamb.
But he looks like a pantomime dame.
She turns the lamp off. Flames fill

her eyes. Her laughter drains the air.
She crackles. She burns. She knows.
BLUEBEARD'S BRIDE

THE FIRST DAY

1
This shoe-box of a castle -
perfect for the disowned son
of a squire; cousin three times
removed from a duke - perhaps.

By trade, he’s a failed pirate;
a stash of doubloons inside
a sock gambled him up wealth,
coat of arms, a lineage...

Right now each lordly eye holds
a small circumflex of flames:
he’s lit, like so many fat
cigars, the candelabra’s

bounty, set it down by his
Mrs Mousquette the Seventh.
If she had whiskers, they’d be
quivering by this, he thinks,

thrusting the cheese-board towards
her, yellow crumbs like pollen
along his sleeve. He grins with
the huge Latinate whiteness

of a Pavarotti - and this
is an opera! He’s written
a libretto of nuanced
screams and had rehearsals: six.

But, at this point, it’s her move.
2

*His shiny flat brown eyes, she’s thinking, belong to some creature left out of a Quattrocento dream of Eden, and rancid with grief ever after...

*

That grief peers from its cage: He’d so like

things to change - if only they could stay the same! Failing that, one rule holds sway, always: ‘When in doubt, take hostages’.

*

A sigh... Perhaps the little she knows is too much for this part? But she has chosen; and besides, she’s curious.

THE FIRST NIGHT

Red plush drapes enwombed the bed.
A body’s width from the walls, arrases with hunting scenes...

Whose the humiliation, whose the triumph? He had lain paralysed with loathing then

rolled over to pin her down as if holding a baby underwater;

she would not

close her eyes, or look at him: both hollowed to dried out wells by an intimacy that

never can be repeated.
THE SECOND DAY

But it's day-time again - noon! -
they're back in costume, and this is luncheon.

He rises from the long table, strolls
over to unlock the linnet's gold cage,

throw in a charred piece of pheasant:
'Wings,' he laughs, 'for the wingèd!'

The scene shrinks and bulges around
a convex mirror that shows the stains on

his velvet jacket, crescents of green
beneath her collar's guipure. The single

candle flame is a diamond needle
flickering inside each eye. It wavers

now towards him, now towards him.

THE THIRD DAY

(The dead spaces between them
thickening through the night as
he'd walked the gallery while
she sat in her room, sewing
story into tapestry...)

At dawn's first watery flare
he'd clumped in, thrown the circle
of keys onto her lap. Yes,
he'd be absent for a while -
business, a trip to the coast,

specialist doctors for his
old war wounds - something like that...
In short, a sojourn nearby
with a prostitute he ran -
refuge from this old deadlock
of winning and not winning.  
He’ll go and literally  
walk all over her and take  
her gold. Better than sea air.  
Her name is Esmeralda.  

‘But this key...’ (does he really  
want her to know? - it’s too late,  
even now he’s fingering  
its mordant gleam) ‘this key here,  
don’t use it, on pain of death.’  

It’s reddish bronze, covers her  
life-line.  

Outside, the fountain  
bursts through blocked valves, spills rusty  
water over a frieze of  
broken chrysolite dolphins.  

**THE FOURTH DAY**  

A day of restraint. She finds  
her way down coiled staircases  
that lead her to storerooms of  
priceless plate; brocades and  
silks; dust-mantled madieras.  

Back at ground level, she slants  
her perfect profile down - light  
on her brow, her satined breasts,  
hers hands - to read themissive  
he has laboured at so long  

to make look casually  
refined - lots of loops, no blots.  

*The wide ocean is before  
  him as he writes. His next shipment  
  is due at any moment.*
Doctor X has applied his
genuine potion — with
what salubrious results...
(The trouble is, with this Mouse,
Hawk can’t guess what she’ll do next...)

Behind her head, a map of
unknown territory, each
river a lightning strike on
scorched parchment. Tendril-fingers
brush chill stalks of metal, wait.

THE FIFTH DAY

I
All day the sepia ghost
of a harvest moon speeding
through nimbus.

She has searched from
tower to vault — nowhere the clue
she needs to enter his mind,
unlock its secret chamber.

The key burns against her palm;
the stones grow colder. Her lamp
bores through the tunnel’s damp air.
She can imagine his covert
return, that he’s stalking her
now, watching as the lock clicks,
the door swings wide. She enters...

A floor shinily crimson
as if blood had been frozen
over it. Trompe l’œil walls
show painted doors with glinting
keys. One door unseals itself
to show a crucible of
knife-worked faces, butchered limbs.
And does she wish now - hearing
the door behind her slam, his
footfall, his slurred breathing - does
she wish now to untell this
story, create another
ending?

Her arms are raised in
the strength and powerlessness
of grief, making her careless
of death, wild to live.

The key
imprinting her flesh begins
to bleed: crimson tears run down
the soft green folds of her gown.

2

He has wound in narrowing
circles back to her - distance,
he always finds, makes the heart
doubt itself - first the relief,
then the fear: he who controls
by absence suddenly foiled,
the puppetmaster jerked back.
Now he'll penetrate her soul
in the only way he can...

His mole's bulk steers itself through
old passages in his brain
to where blood drips from her hem
as she stands, offering back
his key - with eyes that will not
be held to account, or fill
with terror; with a sealed mouth
that will not explain, or plead,
or ask for time, or mercy.

His gaze moves beyond her to
the room of murdered women,
finding nowhere what he seeks -
helpless soft body frantic
in the web of guilt he's spun.
How he longs for the cliché of discovery, of eyes beginning to read the book of their future. His breath slows; his voice, his spittle, dry up.

CODA

Never any real end to this. Can she triumph by moral force, turn the tables and reshape this castle so it’s full of dead ends - all tunnels staunched by brick walls; gallery, bedchambers, hall swept by unadulterated light? And no long-memoried key to gush like a severed artery?

Or will she simply walk out from the gates and keep on walking - a mother-of-pearl moon her guide through a forest where owls caress darkness with magician’s-cloak wings.

Whatever she may choose, he will always be there: pretend sovereign, legs planted wide on the top step; or phantom waiting in the wings; or dog crouching to lick her heels while slipping eyes mask other dreams.

*Confront, withdraw, or head for that rustling dark. At some point, turn to gaze at that castle built on sand, its ragged turrets, moat of blood.*

*The moon is lost in trammelling cloud, breaks clear - divesting itself of pearl, letting the darkness eat into its substance so it can reach nothingness, begin again.*
AWAKENING

From the tilted jug, water began to flow
so that the page could slake his long-held thirst,
the cook sluice onion-grief from her eyes
then slice the trout kept moistly gleaming
in time’s aspic. At last, the kettle boiled.

As if to upstage a century of silence,
peacocks screamed theatrically against
their fern backdrops starred with violet
on sapphire on bronze - all ferried with disdain
across the ordinariness of lawns.

Instantly, the garden was recolonised
by larks and butterflies, blackbirds, wasps;
fresh seeds floated abroad. The pond’s gilt carp
sent messages bubbling through silver-green:
Carpe diem... Water lilies sucked slime.

The last of the steam rose from a hoof gripped
by the blacksmith’s leg-of-mutton hand,
the instruments round the forge wobbly,
phantasmagoric, as the horse knew what
heat was again, snorted as iron struck earth.

After her long moment of lese-majesty,
the queen contemplated, over multiple
chin-folds, the lattice of honey snarled in
the lace on her mauve silk bodice - a final
filament looping from her crust-filled mouth.

Bent at an uncomfortable angle floorwards,
the king picked the gold piece from the parquet -
alive, as never before, to its resonant chill -
so that his heart was a flower in early summer.
Then, first checking the door was locked,
he smiled broadly around at all his bags full -
his precious children, most loyal subjects,
the twinkle-twinkle in his royal blue sky.
The peacocks’ stabbing cries drifted in as,
dreamily, he caressed the pain in his lower back.

In the topmost room of the highest tower,
the princess was recalling - hazily at first,
then sharply - that impulsive finger-prick.
Blue-green eyes opened above a crimson tear
welling from a fingertip. She bound it with

a kerchief of cherries embroidered on snow.
Her lips felt strange - as if only now
could they know their softness. But her flesh
was cold - that presence blocking the light!
When he bowed, she saw - like a question mark

above his head - that feathered spire. Beneath,
aquamarine eyes looked back at her
as if her own. She stirred upwards, wanting to
glimpse her secret garden by the palace wall,
those far kingdoms crowding the window’s map...

Between, a nightmare wall of briars woven
with bony hands. She screamed! - would cut it down,
make a bonfire! Turning to her companion:
‘Tea? - or perhaps, wine?’ He’d come a long way -
those princely garments torn, earth-stained.

So they spiralled down into the heart of
the castle with its hum and clatter. Time later
to savour new silences, plumb the mystery of
bodies flushed, then cooling, in an alchemy
of sweat, a radiance of propinquity.
THE HUNDREDTH SUITOR

She was very proud; she wanted to rule all by herself and not take orders from anyone, so she made it known she would accept no man as her husband unless he could hide so well she couldn’t find him and, moreover, that if anyone tried and she found him, his head would be cut off and mounted on a pole.

- The Mongoose

STATEROOM

Ushered through bronze doors,
he sees an avenue of
chandeliers: each cobwebbed
with loops of brilliance.

Robed in glass silk, the princess
glitters like a mirage.
Her crystal tiara breaks
light into colour:

peach, ocean blue, citrine.
As he walks towards her,
she peers through binoculars,
a lorgnette, a monocle...

The suitor tries to keep
his nerve. He bows, makes
small talk about weather,
the latest ship in port.

His favourite pastimes? -
gambling and shooting,
Favourite colour? - mauve.
He’s a Capricorn - alas!

He chats without pause - as if
his life depended on it,
smiles into the frozen
teardrops of her eyes.
OBSERVATORY

They climb a playing card deck
of steps to an eyrie of glass
filled with optical equipment

and mirrors she angles carefully
before (‘Don’t breathe,’ she orders)
taking his photograph.

He stares at a two-dimensional
man in serial shards.
His eyes walk round himself...

‘I do holograms as well,’
she adds, ‘but that takes time...’
Quickly she records fingerprints,
charts green-flecked irises.
Now she knows everything
about him but who he is...

‘I felt it was only fair,’
she says, ‘to show you
all this.’ Her smile is,

for the first time, rueful:
there’s no denying he’s
attractive - for a loser.

To better his odds he wants
a day to think, and three
chances rather than one.

She views him as a life-loving
non-conformist, with lots of
space in the top storey...

Before he leaves, they tour
her twelve windows - the first,
preternaturally clear
then each more probing
than the last, with the twelfth
able to probe the depths of

earth and ocean, the snowy
whirl of galaxies:
atomic dust in comet tails;

plumbing problems in kinked
root hairs; amoebas' lunches...
He tries to keep his nerve.

FOREST SOJOURN

A day for thought, during which -
almost unthinkingly - he helps
a fish, a raven and a fox:

by having them in his sights
then letting each talk him out of
shooting: the sporting sportsman.

The raven suggests a camouflage:
the Princess raids the nest,
cracks the egg in question.

The flounder will carry him in
its belly: she hooks the fish
and slits the case wide open.

And the fox? He has a plan
involving a magic stream,
shape-changing, a trip to town...

He tap-dances as he explains.
His eyes are sublimely tricky.
He'll fill the details in later.
MARKETPLACE

A pedlar is making a stir
with his mongoose; the townfolk
shape the charmed circle

in which the creature, nimble
as a dust mite, frolics,
runs up his master's sleeve

(orange velveteen
and none too clean) faster
than wide eyes can follow.

Before you can blink,
the princess needles through
gaps in the crowd - to gaze

intently, offer a price
no self-respecting fox
could possibly refuse.

He pockets new-minted gold,
whispers advice to his now
circumspect mongoose.

MOMENT OF TRUTH

The mongoose is in the Observatory,
scampering about, waiting his moment.

The Princess is tracking the suitor down
through her spyglasses. The mongoose

scurries to nest in her nut-brown braids -
by so invading her, evading her...

Now his deadline has become hers,
the skeleton clock strikes - PING! PING! PING!
A tumultuous shattering - her scream
breaks every window in the palace!

‘OUT OF MY SIGHT!’ - she feels the mongoose
in her braids and flings it to oblivion.

He flees to the magic spring, his own body...
Soon, he’s looking sharp in a new
ultramarine suit, and ready for a third visit -
this time to claim his fuming prize.

He’ll act modest, with a hint of apology...
But above all, he’ll keep his nerve.

MARRIAGE

After so many years, it still
infuriates! - never to have learnt
the true story of her defeat;
to live with imperfect knowledge.

When, in spite of herself, she asks -
on rainy afternoons, for instance -
her husband makes himself scarce.
Later, he brings a tray of tea.

And when, in the normal course
of life, they have an argument,
and it’s looking dangerous -
with furniture and body parts at risk -

suddenly he’ll start nodding,
as if at something she can’t see -
just ahead of him, in the air...
maddening! But what can she do?

Much later, he brings champagne.
Each night, in their chamber, he’s waiting
to undo her braids. It’s a ritual.
So soothing ... he has a flair for it,
she says. He finds it soothing, too.

Now that there are no mirrors,
she simply shuts her eyes and dreams.
The only glass left in the palace
is in the spectacles she wears.

Mostly, life is peaceful: each knows
that the fact she doesn’t know
something he does know, is what
makes their co-existence possible.

And it can go on for a lifetime.
All he has to do is keep his nerve.

BEARSKIN

The soldier had nothing but his gun. He slung it over his shoulder and
started out. Soon he came to a great heath, where all he could see was a
circle of trees. Feeling very sad, he sat down under the trees and thought
about his dismal fate. ‘I have no money,’ he said to himself. ‘The only
trade I’ve ever learned is soldiering,
and now that peace has been made they don’t need me any more. I can see
I’m going to starve. Suddenly, he heard a rustling...

The devil wears a green coat
and drives a hard bargain.

We met and made our pact
in a circle of trees on a heath.

For seven years I went unwashed,
my hair grew thick as felt -

clotted with grease and dust;
my hands became claws

and I said never a word of prayer.
In exchange, I wore the green coat
with its deep pocket that bred
ducats like fleas - and my cloak

and my bed was the skin of the bear
I had killed to prove my courage:

a second skin, a second self,
morning and night, year after year.

At first I lived high off the hog -
who wouldn’t? - went travelling

in plush coaches: not minded
to let stricken faces stop me...

I was a wealthy beast,
and had the devil’s own energy.

But came the day no mirror
could decipher me; grass poked

from my green collar; my bear-skin
made humans and small creatures

run from me in terror...
Yet through those seven years

I bought the prayers of the poor,
my heart stayed a warm hearth.

There was an old man I found
huddled in tears, at a dingy inn.

I’d been sent to a dark back room
and heard him through the wall.

My gold saved him from despair.
In gratitude, his daughter

offered to be my bride.
I broke my ring, gave her half
then vanished - till the moment
came when I could stand in

that circle of gnarled trees,
ready to return the green coat

and force the devil to scrub
each grain of dirt from me,

and cut my hair and nails,
converting me to the person

I had been before my exile.
That done, the half-rings could be

linked, and a joyous peace reign.
Thus it was I learnt

other ways of life than war,
my body's courage took root

in my soul, and never again
did the devil touch me.

THE DEVIL WITH THE THREE GOLDEN HAIRS

Since the grandmother had now torn out the three golden hairs and the three questions had been answered, she let the old snake rest peacefully and sleep until daybreak. Thereupon the devil departed, and the old woman took the ant from the fold in her skirt and restored fortune's favourite to his human form.

1
This is how tired I am:
as tired as the fountain in the square
that becomes a trickle, a mere
gurgle of its former self,
then is spent, silent.
The townpeople take jars
and pails away empty.
Flowerbeds blend to brown.
The town itself begins to
wilt. Laments are heard.

2
This is how tired I am:
as tired as the tree that grew
apples of gold, but can
no longer blossom. The last
lustreless globe falls.

Heroes on quests to win
kings' daughters jubilant
in their indifference, go home,
become clerks, languish on
linoleum in twilight rooms.

3
This is how tired I am:
as tired as a ferryman
who must row between
lush river banks, linking
fresh-eyed travellers

with whatever the further
shore offers - until
his back is crippled, his life
used up, and he is flotsam
beside a drifting boat.

4
I'll go down to the Underworld
and take counsel with the devil's
grandmother. He is the lout
who dreams my dreams before I do,
so that they squat on my chest
like succubi, drinking my deepest strength. I will ask her to cradle the devil’s head in her arms and pluck three golden hairs, as she probes his mind for answers to my questions. Armed with those answers, gold hairs, I’ll slip from my disguise as an ant and hurry back to broad daylight.

5
There I’ll set things to rights with fountain and tree. Pits will be dug to trap the toad at the fountainhead, the mouse supping on roots.

I’ll tell the ferryman how to swap fates with the king who cheated me: by placing the pole in his hands on reaching shore - then leaping to freedom!

6
The tarnished gold leaf of fatigue clamped to the backs of my eyes has peeled away, dissolved. Fountain and apple tree shine. I have inherited my kingdom, and walk with my promised bride through summer air. The sun’s warmth upon us, crowning our heads, will ever be sovereignty enough.
FROG

Blockhead sat down. He was very sad. Suddenly he caught sight of a trap door not far from the feather... The door opened and there sat a big fat toad, surrounded by a crowd of little toads... The young toad brought the box, the fat toad opened it, took out a carpet so fine that nothing like it could have been woven on the earth above, and gave it to Blockhead.

- The Three Feathers

Blockhead, who can only tell
which way the wind is blowing if there's
a feather in it, has been down to
her house three times. He's made welcome

and given presents. She is 'generous
to a virtue' - to quote from one of
his more courtly and brilliant speeches,
her latest gift in hand... Her home

seems a veritable warehouse
of jewellery and fine furnishings.
She has a genius for curation,
and is also what you might call

an underground poet - who rocks
sideways and grows larger, shinier,
greener, as she chants (always
in exact rhyme) blessings and

invocations which - no doubt
about it! - make things happen...
In a word, she has championed him.
With her help, he's passed all tests,

won the day, and now has a wife
who'd jump through hoops for him,
and a huge rambling kingdom.
But you always want something more,

don't you? With him, it's poetry.
Each day, he slips out early from
the Council of Governance, plucks
a fresh quill from a goose kept for
just that purpose in his book-tiered
study, sharpens it, and he’s away.
A further eccentricity - squid ink
tinged with buried waves of cobalt
glows and rills on cambric, flattens
to matt, as painstakingly
he inscribes his most soulful thoughts.
Why then, this feeling of piquant lack?

Granted, he’s not a patch on her -
though sometimes her rhythms echo
beneath his - as if she were a muse.
Well, he’ll be a contented dabbler.

As he sits and thinks, and sits,
his feet rest on her carpet of
burgundy, rose, and blood,
with its gold configurations

a source of measureless wonder.
On a blue-stained finger, the frog’s
special ring: a pearl and two plain
moonstones set in smooth silver.

He’d think it was magic - if he
believed in any such thing. But no...
All he has is good intentions
and a lot of unusual ink...

And an expensive chair - if you’ve
got it, flaunt it, as he tells his
lovely wife when a new dress
arrives to hourglass her perfect but

endlessly surprising body.
Enough of that - he’s here to work!
This morning, the light is promising,
the page inviting. Who knows? -
that's what he always says,
squaring up a virgin ream, touching
quill to gryphon-shaped inkpot
and eyeing the goose. *Who knows?*
CONCLUSION
CONCLUSION

Monday, October 25th (First day of winter time)
Why is life so tragic; so like a little strip of pavement over an abyss. I look down; I feel giddy; I wonder how I am ever to walk to the end. But why do I feel this? Now that I say it I don't feel it. The fire burns; we are going to hear The Beggar's Opera. Only it lies about me; I can't keep my eyes shut. It's a feeling of impotence; of cutting no ice. Here I sit at Richmond, and like a lantern stood in the middle of a field my light goes up in darkness. Melancholy diminishes as I write.1

Monday, September 13th, perhaps
A disgraceful fact - I am writing this at 10 in the morning in bed in the little room looking into the garden, the sun beaming steady, the vine leaves transparent green, and the leaves of the apple tree so brilliant that, as I had my breakfast, I invented a little story about a man who wrote a poem, I think, comparing them with diamonds, and the spiders' webs, (which glance and disappear astonishingly) with something or other else ... I am writing this partly to test my poor bunch of nerves at the back of my neck - will they hold or give again, as they have done so often? - for I'm amphibious still, in bed and out of it; partly to glut my itch ('glut' and 'itch') for writing. It is the great solace and scourge.2

Here in this room I can hear water falling outside, see moisture on the ground in the garden, feel the dampness in the air and in a certain heaviness of mind that overtakes me in the rain. Yet this is not how I have been trained to see thought. I was taught to think of the mind as independent from place. ... When I rise and walk under the trees in my neighbourhood, the russet colour of their leaves burnishes my mind. Even turning in my chair, opening the window, feeling a cold wind against my face, my mind is joined, taken up, educated.3

I began this study with an exploration of the ways Eavan Boland, May Sarton and Annie Dillard have positioned themselves as women writers through their relationship with place and space. I have shown that each creates a centering writing place which will sustain and symbolise her endeavour as a writer. This may be seen partly as an act of claiming space in the face of a measure of culturally imposed liminality, but more fundamentally is an expression of the self and its deepest intentions. At the same time, each consciously walks an edge of liminality in pursuing visionary perceptions and - with the exception of Annie Dillard - political engagements. I have suggested that a visionary spirituality and the political impulse may be deeply interconnected, and are strongly so in the case of Eavan Boland.

In the epigraphs I have chosen for this section, drawn from the works of Virginia Woolf and Susan Griffin, are to be found many of the elements and themes I have identified in my readings of Dillard, Sarton and Boland. There is the awareness of writing as an agent of emotional and psychic transformation, as well as an ordeal ('solace and scourge'). There is the inventive play of mind embracing its own freedom, yielding intensely focused images of nature ('the spider webs (which glance and disappear astonishingly)') as well as overarching life-perspectives ('a little strip of pavement over an abyss.') There is an acknowledgement of circumscribed power ('It's a feeling of impotence; of cutting no ice') which co-exists with an dauntless emphasis on self-truth.

In each of the above passages there is a dynamic interplay between inner and outer awarenesses which is expressive of a spirituality at once earthed and expansive - one which refuses the polarising pull between the concepts of transcendence and immanence. And -
associated with this - there is a heightened awareness of the immediate moment of perception, in which place, space and time may be apprehended as both infolded with each other and possessed of infinite resonance.

In my commentaries on Dillard, Sarton and Boland, I have addressed the themes of placement and displacement (the latter closely allied, of course, to the experience of liminality). It may be the case that Boland and Sarton, who both left their first homes and homelands in early childhood, seek to redress those experiences of displacement (along with the fact of marginalisation or devaluing in their present cultural contexts) by being grounded in their own homeplaces and locating their writing lives in the places and spaces of their homes and surrounding environments.

Dillard may be said by contrast to engage in an act of self-displacement by seeking writing places outside her home. Her motivation in this is to disrupt ordinary frameworks of perception so as to experience certain kinds of mystical awareness and create the conditions in which her creative energy can function. Like Sarton, she constructs a solitude so as to precipitate spiritual insight, but hers is a temporary one and defines her working life as a writer, while Sarton’s is the basic condition of her ongoing life.

Personal isolation is not registered as an issue by Boland, but isolation within Irish culture as a woman and a poet is. She addresses this situation, critiquing the exclusion of women from the literary tradition, while also seeking connection with the Irish past by exploring real and imagined figures within it.

Thus, in their portrayals of the writing life, Boland, Sarton and Dillard each confront areas of inner adversity and challenge with very different strategies and styles, but have in common an emphasis upon physical place. Connection with the latter is one of the enabling conditions of their accessing inner spaces of feeling, creativity and spirituality: these in turn become resources for meeting their particular underworlds of ordeal and resistance as they shape their vision of life and self through their writing.

It seems to me that the fact of certain kinds of devaluing experienced by women (as by other groups and individuals) in patriarchal society, has to some extent had the effect of eliciting the evocations and dramatisations of the writing life by the writers under consideration here, as by various other women writers. Place is both foundational and consolidating: it acts to physicalise and imaginatively locate role, presence and voice, with the woman writer at once independent yet living in a web of relationships with other people, near or distant, and with the natural world.

Place is at once distinct from and inseparable from space in physical terms. I have characterised the ways Dillard, Boland and Sarton situate themselves in place and space in this literal sense, showing the different kinds of apartness, connectedness and originality of perspective contingent upon place and space for each writer. Both terms can also be used in rich and complex ways as metaphors for aspects of the inner life. It is not surprising, given the sustained intensity of engagement shown by the three writers, that the places and spaces of the
writing life in physical terms resonate so powerfully with those of the inner life in the works
under consideration. By this means, ‘the writing life’ emerges as an invitingly open but also, I
believe, a convincingly realised focal image from my study of these otherwise very contrasting
and highly differentiated works - an image answering to, while being a further development of,
Virginia Woolf’s inspiring phrase.

Well, it’s 9 o’clock on delivery day for this article. I started drawing images and threads of
thought together at 5 a.m. and am still here, propped up in bed with my powerbook before me.
I’ve partly closed the curtains as bright sunlight was bouncing back at me from the top right hand
corner of the screen, which tells me it’s 1.05 a.m. One has many experiences of being in a time-
warp with computers...

The faceted crystal ball hanging in the window is again casting rainbowed ovals on the wall -
each about the size of an eye in a peacock’s tail. The other morning, as I read poetry in bed, one of
those refractions slowly moved across the page - a floating island of words. And I’ve scrutinised the
tributaries, creeks, and minute streams on my palm in that brilliant thumbprint. Violet seems the
most indeterminate, yet the deepest colour of all, and beckons most to me.

I’ll get up, catch the bus down to the city, catching glimpses of that vast plateau and the sea
beyond, curving towards and away from steep hillsides with starkly vertical trees.4

In this passage from an article by myself on creative writing, sunlight illuminates a computer
screen and coloured refractions from a faceted glass ball against a window move across a wall,
an open poetry book, the palm of my hand. Time is perceived through these changing light
effects, and the differing testimonies of clock and computer screen.

The place is a house in the Adelaide hills at which I’m temporarily staying, alone. It’s
winter. I’m sitting propped up on a mattress on the floor, exhausted, writing to a deadline. Yet
I’m led to set down the way I read my immediate environment, and become energised by the
play of light and colour over walls, bed, computer, hands, poems. Then, from a initially driven
but finally fascinated state of watchful interiority, I’m propelled outward into the day with its
offer of new and at times vertiginously large perspectives...

This passage captures an occasion when exhaustion is allayed then dispersed by a
creativity drawn forth by my immediate physical world. I wrote it during a sojourn as writer in
residence at Adelaide University. I had packed boxes of manuscripts of poems, of books and
notes related to this study, to work on during my three-month stay. But they were never
opened; I wrote no new poems. But the boxes moved around - as I did. I lived in three
different houses, and my stack of boxes moved when the department I was in shifted to new
premises. During this period, my task was to give all my energy and attention to my role as
writer in residence, which I did, and the experience was of real value to me. But the task of
adaptation to so many new environments was costly and draining, and when I left it seemed to
me a concentrated image of the dominant pattern of my life as regards place: a search for
placement which is propelled by, and enmeshed with, a feeling of displacement.
But there is also a strong positive side to this pattern of frequent change and adaptation. The story of my writing life as it emerges from my journals involves many physical journeys which are, for part of the time, a quest for physical spaces in which to pursue my work as a writer. The travelling I did from Australia to Europe, and to various places in Australia, often energised my life as a writer, providing new environments which acted as a fresh imaginative stimulus. The act of dislocation itself typically had the effect of shuffling up prevalent patterns of thought and perceptions, and precipitating new ideas and images: thus it was often conducive to creativity which is itself about stepping out of existing modes of perception and frameworks of meaning into new ones.

In the years covered in my journal, and indeed from the time I embarked on this study up until the present, I was also without a permanent home of my own, and was on a quest for, if not a homeplace, then a place I could dwell in with a sense of personal freedom and belonging. The latter was certainly my experience during the time spent living in my mother’s home at Barwon Heads, but the issue of finding a setting in which to express my personal and artistic independence remained unresolved until I moved to a flat in Geelong in the latter part of 1998 for six months. It was there that I was able to complete, first, a book of poems on Grimms’ fairy tales, then this present work.

Problems around financial matters motivated many decisions I made, were often a source of enormous stress and anxiety, and involved living in some situations which were detrimental to my work as a writer. Thus the pattern of displacement - during the writing of this study I have lived for periods of one or several months in the Blue Mountains, Paddington in Sydney, two places in Melbourne, three places in Adelaide, and in Colchester, Essex, as well as Hawthornden; longer stretches of time were spent at Ormond College, Barwon Heads and Geelong - was fruitful for creativity in some respects, but costly and damaging in others.

In the course of writing my journals and commentaries I have attempted to characterise the tensions and correspondences between outer context and the journeys and landscapes of the inner life, seeing the relation between them as essentially constitutive of the writing life. It seems paradoxical that my journey through thousands of miles of space to spend four weeks at Hawthornden Castle led to an experience of profound personal and social constriction, but I have traced how the distress and psychic conflict I contended with yielded to a process of creative resurgence. The natural world, representing to me openness of perspective, the cycle of birth, death and rebirth, and a place in which to move physically and - when necessary - literally come to my senses, was of cardinal value to me in that situation, as throughout my journals.

It was only when revisiting my journals so as to edit them, that I thought to include a description of the room in which I stayed at Hawthornden Castle. There was an awkwardness and ambivalence about this room from the first, with its desk I could not sit at, and its lack of a wardrobe. However, this cramped, unamenable room was to become something of a haven and, when its small hearth was filled with the protean warmth of a fire, was a temporary image of home and heaven. And, waking early, I could often sit in bed and watch leaves emerging from mist to define the shape of a tree as the dawn light took hold.

A very contrasting image of a room occurs in Chapter Five of my journals, evoking a
space both matrix-like and patterned by light, moving lace curtains, and leaf-shadows. It is a bedroom connected to a study, the door always open between them, and both rooms with windows onto a garden. Those two rooms together are the place where I have written most of the creative work I have produced since 1992. They are within my mother’s home, which is in the town of Barwon Heads, situated on the estuary of the Barwon river. This encompassing environment comes to have increasing importance in the course of my journals, and exemplifies the earthing aspect of the natural world, along with its vistas of infinity offered by seascape and skyscape. Barwon Heads is thus, in its constantly transforming particularity of tree and scrub, river and ocean, a place of spiritual expansion and creative exploration.

The contrasting rooms I have characterised here carry some of the contrasts that Europe and Australia as physical and cultural entities hold for me. Europe, burdened with history and often experienced by me as physically constricting, is yet spiritually charged - offering living perspectives on the cultural traditions to which I am connected as a European Australian. Australia has its own burden of tragic history, but does not, except to its Aboriginal people, readily offer the depth of the past. The challenge of relating conceptually and experientially to its vast geography is overwhelming. Yet the human desire to find and belong to a particular place which one will grown into knowledge of, and in which one will be known - a desire I now find exists strongly within myself - is a way of avoiding being swallowed up by contemplation of such vastness, in a continent which offers extraordinary choices regarding place and space.

The two rooms I have described may also stand as images of rooms in the psyche. A struggle with states of compressed and recurrent suffering and blockages is highlighted in the circumscribed ambience I encounter at Hawthornden Castle. The slow but ultimately dramatic progress of spring provides, however, an objective correlative of the way psychic processes may turn, bringing a tide of new energy.

My room in my mother’s house at Barwon Heads is also a site of inner resistance to creative work, and personal suffering, in the course of my journal, but is eventually imaged as light-filled and patterned by the outside flux of the natural world - a sustaining and containing space associated with freedom and fertility. Set apart from but continuous with the environment of garden, river and ocean, it is an arena of vibrant energy, of subtle and at times abundant growth, as well a space to contemplate absences and endings.

In the room in which I now write, a brilliant autumn day patterns the discoloured net curtains rippling across large windows with cylinders and hollows of light. If I look through the windows of this second-storey flat and over to the right, I see a view of Corio bay interrupted by various trees - willow and eucalyptus among them - and the red-painted swimming enclosure whose semicircle of wooden planks I sometimes walk, always glad of the sheen and wash of shadow on often seemingly still water. So I have come for the moment to a more pacified version of the sea that I love, with the swimming enclosure a failsafe against my fear of being carried out by sudden powerful sinews of tide: a domesticated half-moon of relatively calm but always moon-pulled salt water to swim in and stroll above.

But the water, the view of the bay, and this room and flat are, as it were, transitional spaces that I will leave in five days, after having completed this study; I will travel soon after to stay for six weeks at the Tyrone Guthrie Writers’ Centre in Ireland - a place I already know to
be the least ambiguous idyll I can imagine...

In the months I have spent here I have also come to an understanding of where I would hope to find a future home. So this work concludes with another displacement - one softened by intimations of a homeplace in which to pursue the writing life - and another journey. I'm therefore led to return to the words that end my last journal entry on Monday, January 22nd, 1996:

Friday's clouds ... several times I saw Ireland in those clouds.
In recent days, so many memories of places seeming to be fired from pinpoints around my body.
Time to travel?
NOTES
NOTES

INTRODUCTION

4. Geertz, ibid., 261.
7. Laclau, ibid., 41.
12. ibid., 17-18.

SECTION ONE

5. Boland’s estimation of the traditional exclusion of women from Irish poetry is forcefully supported by the Irish language poet Nuala ní Dhomhnaill, also one of contemporary Ireland’s foremost poets, when she says ‘Make no mistake about it, women poets in Irish were always highly discriminated against, and still are. ... Nowhere in the Irish tradition can I find anything but confirmation of Eavan Boland’s claim that women have been anything else but ... “fictive queens and national sibyls”’. P. N. Review, May/June 1993, 35.
6. Allen-Randolph, ibid., 16.
CONCLUSION

2. Ibid., 111.
PLEASE NOTE

The greatest amount of care has been taken while scanning the following pages. The best possible results have been obtained.
APPENDIX 1
APPENDIX 2
Barwon Heads, Victoria

Hawthornden Castle, Midlothian
(postcard)
The Visit of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert to Hawthornden
14 September 1842 (detail) painted 1844
Sir William Allen (1782-1850)
Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh

Diane Fahey at Hawthornden in 1993
with Vicki Feaver, Danton Remoto, Paul Farley and Marion Lomax
A page from Diane Fahey’s journal.

**Friday, May 7th**

Awake and up early, but feel quite muffled at breakfast—slightly confused, down in energy. I feel I’m losing some of my ability to voice sticking and mood. Yet I find such warmth in the others, and Danton is like a tropical flower, quietly there, then suddenly radiating on understanding.

Idea for a poem: Keys, (Bluebeard, The Past). In the little notebook I lost on my walk yesterday, I’d recorded how the feathers on the path were like directions planted there, as in a children’s game. Down into the path. Or maybe one... from feather to feather, finding one’s way... I get the key to this room and trace it here:
A dugong, a marine mammal, lives in the sea. They feed on sea grasses and have a long, snout-like head. The skin is grayish-black, and the back is slightly humpbacked. Dugongs are known for their unique tail, which is, in fact, a large fin used for swimming. They are often seen near coasts and in shallow waters. A dugong is related to the manatee and the whale. These animals are important to their ecosystem as they help maintain the health of seagrass beds. They can grow to be over 3 meters long and weigh up to 3,000 kilograms.
Starfish

Barbroid stars
with plump bodies,
arms expressively curved.
Many painted animals
made of enameled sky.
Inlaying (rock) pools, degree
now dissolving ink blots
concentric splashes of indigo, royal blue
as they roll toward corners,
Slek clock sand, draped stones
mixed creation because
exemplars of relaxation,
a wide purity,
body reshaped by it
along with mind.

Wilson Peterborough

Sedan chair back
Roman

Centered hand
Pseudocentury

Silver frog, no resonant
Faded out...
APPENDIX 3
View of Ormond College,
University of Melbourne

The Vision of S. Eustace (?)
Pisanello (living 1395, died 1455 ?)
The National Gallery, London
Diane Fahey at Ormond College, 1995
(photograph by Jan Owen)

Diane Fahey and her mother Patricia Brotheridge in 1994
(photograph by Paul Brotheridge)
Parrots in Kuala Lumpur Bird Park (postcard)

Small Skellig, seven miles from the mainland, is a geologial
island, having a summit of 350 feet above the sea.

THE SKELLIGS
The Tyrone Guthrie Centre
Annaghmakerrig, Newbliss, Co. Monaghan, Ireland
(View of house and lake)
Far below, the lake: beyond depth at its centre.

At dawn, her stone-framed face, hair spread behind her in the darkness. Gold fumes above backlit pines, rolls over the lake, finds her. All morning bronze enters her hair, her cheeks grow marjoram apples. At noon the pines' shadow is a meniscus gleamed with rims, mirrors, round brimming silver. A gold lozenge slides down her body, until it reaches her belly — a door imprinted with a lock.

By dusk the lake has filled with pines, the darknesses inside a thin saw-edged, between them masked by green. She sits weaving her strength into a braid, thinking: whatever has happened, will happen, there in the lake is life, and the tower is inside her and she inside it, like a key lost in a lock.
The princesses being rowed to the castle.
Arthur Rackham, 1900

'The Twelve Dancing Princesses'
Illustration by Arthur Rackham
The Sleeping Beauty (Page 103)
Illustration by Arthur Rackham
You either have it

or you don’t

Those who appreciate quality enjoy it responsibly.
The Sleeping Beauty (Page 95)
Illustration by Arthur Rackham
Illustration by Maurice Sendak
'The Little Feathers'
We see the profile of a young woman against a map which features frequently in Vermeer’s interiors. She is completely absorbed in reading the letter she holds in both hands. The gradual reduction in brightness across the room, and the shadows on the wall, suggest that the source of light is a window on the left. At the front, on the left, is a table covered by a dark blue cloth, and this contrasts sharply with the white background of the wall and the shiny, light blue jacket that the woman is wearing. Looking more closely at the table, one can make out a further page of the letter, an open box and a string of pearls. The latter is of key importance in the overall meaning of several of Vermeer’s paintings, and represents vanity (luxuria) in the women portrayed: though they were trapped in a golden cage with domesticity, they developed yearnings for the outside world and, in the absence of their husbands, made themselves look pretty for their lovers. The motif of love letters ties in with this. It is doubtful whether the woman is indeed pregnant, as is claimed from time to time (an allegation that would give rise to all manner of speculations). She is wearing a crinoline-type bell-shaped hoop skirt, which was fashionable at the time. It was even worn by young girls.

A Woman in Blue Reading a Letter
c. 1662-64

Vermeer
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum
Diane Fahey while writer in residence at Adelaide University, 1997
(photograph by Miriel Lenore)

Diane Fahey at the Adelaide Writers Festival, 1998,
with Margaret Allen.
(photograph by Kay Schuffer)
View of the headland at Barwon Heads.
(postcard)

View of the Swimming Enclosure at Geelong.
(postcard)
APPENDIX 6
Of Salamanders, Crystal Balls, and Walnuts:
Reflections on Creative Writing

by
Diane Fahey
Writer in Residence

Summertown, mid-August. I’m sitting by the fire trying not to think of the deadline for this as yet unwritten article—two days away! But I want to do is enjoy watching the fire—each night a new city built and demolished, slowly blackening above incandescent cata-
combs. If flames are compared with tongues, as they often are, what creature might those tongues belong to? A salamander, perhaps. Through a glass screen, I watch a small hot box full of salamander tongues in tumultuous conference.

But I’m still not writing the article. And there’s my Creative Writing seminar tomorrow—I need an idea for it. As I add wood to the fire, sparks fly out into the room like swift, vivid insects. I imagine a page covered with a scatter of randomly chosen words; a flying spark lands on a word here, a word there, like a bee visiting flowers. Out of that conglomeration, nine words are selected in this haphazard way, then must be put into a six-line poem.

Next day we all try the Flying Spark exercise—challenging but engrossing. It combines two elements which I return to again and again as a teacher of creative writing. First, a gathering of material—words, ideas, associations—through a form of play that has the effect of shortcircuiting the activity of the rational mind and so enabling one to tap into dream images, the flotsam and jetsam of the unconscious. Then, a shaping of both conscious and unconscious material, with form acting as a container, a pressure cooker, an encounter with limitation which can also generate new possibilities.

But let me illustrate the process, taking myself as the guinea pig on this occasion, as poems were still in progress when we finished the class. As a starting point for the whole exercise, I wrote words suggested by people in the seminar on the board, and let my own flying spark jump from word to word. The words chosen were: chair, bell, peach, words, reign, taste, glowing, dogs, slug. Some headaches there! The resulting poem is certainly not one of my best numbers, but I quote it to illustrate the ability to create pattern, as well as surpris-
Then there is the personal exploration aspect of writing. Somewhere or other, somehow or other, you are in the picture. Unavoidably. However distant from your experience a topic of writing might be, you are finding a point of entry into it through what you know or feel. So, writing is about discovering connections, opening up possibilities, realising how many choices you have, and shaping something out of that whole searching process. Creative writing is a constant learning experience, on many fronts.

Most writing begins as self-expression. For some people that’s where it ends. That’s fine. That’s a choice. But for most people, there is the desire to reach a wider audience. That’s where what I call the discipline of communication comes in—getting feedback on how and to what degree your work communicates with others... a translation, if you like, of often very interior and elusive experiences and reflections on to a more public screen. Ultimately, I believe, that further process serves the impulse to self-expression extremely well, for there is a further crystallisation of what you want to say: you get closer to what you really meant, as it were.

I expect that, as many readers are reading my words now, the kinds of processes I’m talking about in relation to the sparking and evolution and personal interests and hobbies, and finding a new insight to help take one through a difficult experience or phase of life.

On that score I do believe that imaginative writing, along with all the other creative arts, can have a healing and integrating function, along with their capacity to shuffle up our perceptions of the texture of everyday life, of entrenched power structures, of the way we see ourselves and others. And so bring more consciousness, and more choice, into our engagement with life.

Let me return to the subject of limitation. With writing, after the generating of the raw material and then the development of it, there is the business of finding a form—in poetry, what I would call a ‘rhythmic shape’—and this tends to be enmeshed with the editing process. Shaping ideas, feelings, memories, fantasies, into a form involves amplification at times, but most often a cutting away, a surrendering of all kinds of bits and pieces you feel attached to—an instructive process!

It’s now 9am on delivery day for this article. I started drawing images and threads of thought together at 5am and am still here, propped up in bed with my powerbook before me. I’ve partly closed the curtains as bright sunlight was bouncing back at me from the underwater green of a corner of the rainbowed ovals on the wall—each about the size of an eye in a peacock’s tail. The other morning, as I read poetry in bed, one of those refractions slowly moved across the page—a floating island of words. And I’ve scrutinised the tributaries, creeks, and minute streams on my palm by the light of that brilliant thumbnail. So I’ll get up now, catch the bus down to the city, catching glimpses of that vast plateau and the sea beyond as I’m pulled towards and away from steep hillsides with starkly vertical trees.

And the walnuts? This article has been a kind of walnut—a summing up of many of the key things I’ve learnt about writing over several decades in a very compact space. There are two crates of walnuts in the house where I’m staying. I haven’t really had time to open one—a definition, perhaps, of being really busy, as I have been. But I might open up one of those walnuts before I leave. For one thing it would be research, because the last poem I want to write for my collection of poems on Grimms’ fairy stories is ‘All Fur’, a version of the Cinderella story.

All Fur (wearing a coat made of fur from all the animals in her father’s kingdom), flees to a new kingdom, taking with her three walnuts. In due course, she is able to transform herself from a scullery maid to the belle of the ball by opening one walnut on each of three nights—the first contains a dress... As a writer, I’ve often searched for the hidden resource that would turn things around. Initially, I was motivated and driven by the pressure of prolonged depression—a maze that I needed to find a thread of meaning in, so as to find my way out. This, over many years, slowly happened. Poetry in particular, but other forms of creative writing too, have been illuminating, have taught me something about the alchemy of transformation.

But one proceeds word by word. It’s often a laborious and difficult process. Because of this, I’m given to saying in creative writing workshops, that resistance and blankness—the desert experience—are part of the creative process. They are built in to it, not suspensions of it. Resistance is a closed door—which means to me that there’s something behind it, so the question becomes how to use one’s wits to get access to that locked away material. Blankness can be either a natural fatigue after creative work already achieved, or a fertile emptiness, a fallowness leading up to a new phase of creativity. One is working with processes and energies that, like Glendower’s spirits in the vasty deep, do not always come when you do call for them. But that’s one of the things that makes it all so interesting.

—Diane Fahey
ADELAIDIAN, AUGUST 25, 1987
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