

The Lady's Not for Touching

"The mythology of self is considered by some to be her primary project ..."



DOROTYH HEWETT: A Performance Tribute
by **John Senczuk**

The Lady's Not for Touching was presented at the Wharf by Currency Press at the Sydney Writers' Festival, 2004. It was directed by Aarne Neeme with the following cast:

Mature Writer	Maggie Blinco
Writer	Linden Wilkenson
Young Writer	Amy Matthews
Young Man	Christopher Tomkinson

Biography

Dorothy Hewett was born in 1923 in Perth, Western Australia, and grew up on an isolated wheat farm at Wickopin. Much of her poetry was influenced by these early years. Her father, a convinced conservationist, strongly influenced her life, teaching her the names of the native birds, trees, plants and animals. For years he tried to influence the West Australian Agricultural Department to give the farmers free trees to plant and nurture in a plan for reforestation to contain the rising salt, but was met only with derision.

Dorothy was educated by correspondence, at Perth College and at the University of Western Australia. At the age of nineteen, she published her first poem and joined the Australian Communist Party, where she fought for women's rights. By the age of twenty-two she had won a drama competition and a national poetry competition, and attempted suicide after failed love affairs. She was established as a poet by the 1940s but before starting to write full-time, she worked as a mill hand, a journalist and an advertising copywriter.

She married lawyer, Lloyd Davies, but left for Sydney in 1949 leaving husband and child for a fellow communist, boilermaker Les Flood. Davies later sued her over a poem about his second wife and had the book in which it appeared banned from Western Australia. In Sydney, she entered the obsessive world of the Communist Party, bore three sons with Flood, was bashed, arrested, organised strikes and watched her lover go mad with schizoid paranoia.

She returned to Perth, completed her degree, taught English at the University of Western Australia and married, for the second time in 1960, a former merchant seaman, Merv Lilley, who fathered her two daughters and with her encouragement also became a writer.

Back in Sydney, she rejected Communism in 1968 - over the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia - and resumed writing. In her last years she and Lilley moved to Faulconbridge, in the Blue Mountains.

She is a long-time supporter of Aboriginal land rights, the greening of Australia and the importance of the Arts. She received a life time emeritus grant from the Australia Council, a Doc. Litt. from the University of Western Australia, and an AM for her work in Australian Literature.

Dorothy Hewett died peacefully in her sleep in August 2002, after a battle with breast cancer.

Dorothy was one of the most inspirational women I know. A great writer and poet with a lifelong commitment to her craft, she never lost her passion for social justice or her courage in supporting left-wing causes. Her sardonic irreverence, intellect, honesty, warm heart, her encyclopedic knowledge of Australian literature and history were some of the qualities that made her a formidable friend, a wonderfully talented writer and a great Australian.

Novelist, Rosie Scott

Australia's finest living writer as a playwright and a novelist ... [I admire] her nose-thumbing, her complete disregard for the mores that prevented others from saying things, and her political commitment.

Ian Syson, editor *Overland*

Cast

Mature Writer
Writer
Young Writer
A Young Man

Treatment

PROLOGUE

Nostalgia
Mythology

PART ONE

Family & Landscape
Youth

PART TWO

Political Years
Communism
Love & Loss

PART THREE

Children
Growing Old
Move to the Mountains

EPILOGUE

Resignation

Music

“Jarrabin”, *The Wire Fences of Jarrabin* – Terence Clarke
“The Mukinupin Carousel”, *The Man from Mukinupin* – Jim Cotter
“Around Every Corner”, *The Tatty Hollow Story* - Kate Lilley
“Bon-bons and Roses for Dolly”, *Bon-Bons and Roses for Dolly* – John Williamson
“She’s gone to be a Soldier”, *Joan* – Patrick Flynn
“Touch of the Tar’s Song”, *The Man from Mukinupin* – Jim Cotter
“Inside Fremantle Jail”, *The Man from Mukinupin* – Jim Cotter
“My Love on Whom the Good Sun Shone”, *The Chapel Perilous* - Frank Arndt
“On the Road to Nowhere”, *Nowhere* – Jim Cotter
“Do You Remember the Old Times?”, *The Man from Mukinupin* – Jim Cotter
“Fyshe’s lament”, *Song of the Seals* – Jim Cotter
“The Tatty Hollow Story”, *The Tatty Hollow Story* – Henry Szeps
“Shadows”, *Bon-bons and Roses for Dolly* – John Williamson
“Welcome Home”, *Bon-bons and Roses for Dolly* – John Williamson

PROLOGUE

Nostalgia

Song. Jarrabin

ALL *There was a place, there was a town called Jarrabin
The stars came out, the sun went down in Jarrabin.
Time took that town, and night and day
Dust covered it, it blew away in jarrabin.
The doorways silted up with sand,
The crow flew over empty land,
Listen what the black crow cries,
Sand sin sorrow and sore eyes
In Jarrabin in Jarrabin in Jarrabin.*

YOUNG MAN. Jesus loves me this I know
for the Bible tells me so

MATURE WRITER We never were christened
the parson couldn’t ride over
the flooded crossing

YOUNG WRITER. Godless on our 30000 acres
we ran like pagans
there were never enough pupils
to keep the school house open
then the school teacher fell pregnant
and borrowed my pony to abort it
jogging up and down
on the dusty roads
didn’t dislodge it
so she left they said

MATURE WRITER. under a cloud.

YOUNG WRITER. I imagined her riding away with the cloud on her back
bigger even than the belly she’d grown
free of God free of school
we galloped and swung and swaggered
in boys’ trousers and braces
swarming up a York gum
we surveyed our kingdom
at night like the Spartan children
to prove our courage
we went to bed
with a wolf cub
gnawing at our chest
God and the church were only
our grandmother lying out in the heat
in the iron-clad sleep-out

MATURE WRITER. keeping out error

YOUNG WRITER. with her Japanese eyes
tight shut and her mouth half open

she mumbled like a mantra
from Science and Health
with Key to Scriptures
by Mary Baker Eddy
two faded tickets from The Mikado
yellowed beside her
our grandfather on his hard-mouthed ginger horse
drunk as a lord
galloped home whispering Yum Yum

MATURE WRITER. if God existed
he lived on a cumulus cloud
enthroned in the sky
benevolent powerless possibly dead
resembling the sepia photograph
of my great-grandfather
with his white beard on his chest

YOUNG WRITER. my mother like a china doll
ringletted perched on his knee
as if butter wouldn't
melt in her mouth
like the little sea maid
in Hans Andersen's fairy tale
who bartered her soul for love
I faced my fate
to dissolve in foam
on the seashores of the world.

WRITER. Daughter, sister, lover, wife, mother, grandmother, domestic treasure, I will be suborned into all of these roles (except perhaps domestic treasure ... There I am always clumsy and half-hearted), but I have my vocation. It is outside sex, and yet my sex is part of it. It is already fixed, brutal, implacable, complete. There is nothing I can do about it, except to get better at it. It shakes me, seductive as love. Words fall out, I am possessed by them.

MATURE WRITER. ... I'd like to have one toe in the twenty-first [century]! ... And it should be a period of great excitement with a feeling of newness and innovation and doing new things, but it isn't! All it's about is the fucking games. It's like giving them circuses, like the Romans. Yep and, of course, the whole One Nation phenomenon is the result of all this because nothing like that could happen in a country that felt that it was alive and young and going somewhere. It's a looking backwards, because all those, particularly those farming communities that are backing Pauline Hanson - what they want back is the past - that long, golden, sleepy time. You know when there were tariffs to protect everything, when we were the white outpost in South East Asia. This is what they want back again and that sense of endless security that nothing will ever change. But it always was a dream you see. It was the ideal, the Australian ideal. That's how we lived and somehow someone came along and took it all off us.

Song: The Mukinupin Carousel

ALL. *Take a whirl on a carousel,
into the dark on a carousel,
deserts and stars have served us well,
so let's all ride on a carousel.*

YOUNG WRITER. *Skeletons, acid drops, tea in china,
dry the dishes, what could be finer,
counting the sheep going into the pen,
counting them over and over again.*

WRITER. *Fire and blood and sand and water,
the church bells toll for the storekeeper's daughter,
birth and magic and moth and rust,
close the curtain because we must.*

MATURE WRITER. *Love-in-the-mist and salvation jane,
down in the creekbed praying for rain,
ring a roses and round we go,
close the curtain and end the show.*

ALL. *Take a whirl on a carousel,
into the dark on a carousel,
desert and stars have served us well,
so let's all ride on a carousel.*

Mythology

WRITER. I think it is true that I've always been a maverick, that I've never been part of any mainstream and that's probably for lots of reasons. I think one of the original reasons was that I came from Western Australia and, you know, in those days it was like coming from another country and it's still a bit like that. I mean, I didn't take part in any of the great Australian literary movements that have taken place in my lifetime because I was stuck over in bloody Perth most of the time and when I wasn't stuck there I was in the Communist Party and it had its own agenda which didn't include all those very interesting modernist movements that were going on, which I actually would have loved to have been part of, but never was.

YOUNG MAN. (*Voice slurred*). Once there was a man who 'ad a princess in a far country. He kept promisn' to write to 'er, an' he meant to do it, I expec', but somehow time went by, an' went by, an' he never got round to it. She she felt neglected an' tired of waitin', an' gradually they grew so far apart they thought they'd made each other up. An' so they stopped bein' ... real to each other.

Song: Around Every Corner

YOUNG WRITER. *Oh this is the story,
Of sweet Tatty Hollow,
Wherever she beckons
Her lovers will follow.
Around every corner, around every corner,
Around every corner there's Tatty.*

*Under a street light,
Whisper her name,
Stiletto heels echo
In step to the rain.
Around every corner, around every corner,
Around every corner there's Tatty.*

WRITER. I believe strongly in the blood, the flesh, as being wiser than the intellect. We can go wrong in our minds, but what our blood feels and believes and says is always true. All I want is to answer to my blood direct.

MATURE WRITER. ... The imagination and books were our lives, as well as typical things like riding horses, naming everything in the creek ... We made this whole life, and looking back I realise that it was a very strange life in a way, because for me there'd never been a split (as I think there is for lots of people, for Australians) between the mythology of other countries and my own. In other words, reading Grimm's fairytales, and Hans Andersen's, I quite unselfconsciously transferred those myths into the Australian bush with no sense of strain ... So that the gum trees might become Grimm's giant.

YOUNG WRITER. So Alice invented Nim
(the sinister boy)
or thought she did
she heard the owl scream
& the cricket cry
like them he was her creature
& drunk with power said
Why I can make him live
or make him die.

In her secret garden
under the hump of the hill
she lives her magic life
with Ida Rentoul Outhwaite's
Elves and Fairies
sheep carcasses in calico
blood-spotted shroud the verandahs
where the timber blurs
Grimm's giant flexes his whirlwind biceps
dry paddocks darken into green
the flag above the creekbed island
bleaches yellow.

In the playroom the old dolls sit nodding
the mallee roots spin in their china eyeballs
a helmeted Apollo gleams on the pressed iron ceiling

but in the garden nothing alters
ladies' fingers ripen larkspurs put on bells
the puffballs stand at 4 o'clock
until Nim comes a shadow on the shivery grass
hanging between the sun & the round hill
a falcon on his wrist a white owl on his shoulder
she sees his doomed face waver at the bottom of the well
the sky darkens with locusts
the dry scratch of wings
& the jaws working
hand in hand they fly
Alice & Nim, the falcon & the white owl
from the blackened garden.

ALL. *(Whispered)*
Poor Sally she never made it,
No matter how hard she tried
She tried hard not to know it,
But she was a minor poet,
Until the day she died.

WRITER. I called myself 'the guru of failures' ...

YOUNG WRITER. 'the Princess of How to Fail Gracefully.'

MATURE WRITER. Who's that woman shushing? Me? Is she shushing me, Mate? Like her cheek. And I was keeping me voice down on purpose. too considerate. You get no thanks for it. Cheek! Might as well talk at the top of your lungs, and rustle the bon-bons flat out! (She does) Put that in your pipe and smoke it! (Music stops. Lights up) Quick, Mate, fasten your fly. Gawd, you're a dirty ol' man, but we're all human. We've got our finer feelings. We are all human aren't we, Mate? mate! (She leans over and shakes him.) I've never known him sleep this sound before. Mate! The picture's finished. Time to upsy daisy and home to beddy byes. (She shakes him harder, belting his head against the back of the seat. Then she stands frozen, staring wildly about her, gripping the back of the chair.) Mate, Mate, a terrible thing's happened. I've had a flooding. All ove me new white shantung. Oh! I've never been so humiliated. Never! Who'd be a woman! Who'd be a woman! What'll I do, Mate? Oh, it's all very fine for you, isn't it? All the fun and none of the responsibility. Well ... I'll just have to stay here till they've all gone. And the lights are out ... and it's very lonely, Mate, stuck here with blood all over the seat of me dress, right in the middle of the change, and I'll never get it out. Never get it out, not even in ice-cold water. Never get it out again.

WRITER. Recently I decided to write the second volume of my autobiography ... I've put it off, because - oh out of nervousness and self-protectiveness and all those things I suppose, and also because when you start writing right up to the present, it's very hard to remain objective, or as objective as possible. Also there's lots of people who may take terrible umbrage, because they're all still alive, whereas with that first volume a whole lot of people were dead, like my own family. Old boyfriends are particularly difficult, because men are all so supersensitive! About anyone saying

anything about them, it seems to me. They're a secretive lot of bastards. Some people of course are quite flattered if you write about them, but not very many. And it depends of course on what you say ... Men are able to get away with a whole lot more. I remember that somebody wrote about that *Wild Card* book I wrote, that if she was a man, her life would have been called Rabelaisian.

YOUNG MAN. We all dance to unseen music. We're all fumblers in the back stalls. Don't pretend to be superior. You do it too, and you'll get caught. We're all bisexual anyway. All those big Rugby footballers playing bump-your-arse on the oval. Don't kid me! All those lovely little boys with their apple arses, while Mrs Ought-to-be froze in the ticket box, and the glue ran out of her Latin eyes. ... Sometimes ... when the night comes down, it gets lonely. Y'know, when you're used to the crowds, it gets lonely. I take the old mong for a pee round the block, helps to pass the time, but there's not much to it really. Gets very lonely. (*Looking around, shivering.*) It's a palace, a fortress, a tomb. Nobody comes any more. But it'll come again. It's got to. The old times aren't done yet. Not while Shirley Temples still playing Little Miss Marker on the telly. (*Looking at his watch*) Time to open up. (*Music*) You haven't played anywhere till you've played the Palace. This is the end of Rainbow City, and the next scream you hear may be your own.

Song: *Bon-bons and Roses for Dolly*

YOUNG MAN. *Bon-bons and roses for Dolly,
She floats down the stair like a dream,
The people all rise, and when I close my eyes,
She's there in her green crepe-de-chine.*

*Her page-boy bob on her shoulders,
She's there making eyes at the men,
Silvery sequins aglitter
Circle and swish on her hem.*

*Shadows in the verdigris mirror,
Dissolve in the dust-laden air,
And I bow from the waist in the moonlight,
To the little green ghost on the stair.*

*The smoker's stand's full of the butt ends of days,
The foyer's sobbing with silence,
In the dark empty stalls, I hear the foot falls
disturbing mildew on the roses.*

PART ONE Family & Landscape

YOUNG WRITER. My father was a black-browed man who role like an Abo.

The neighbours gossiped, 'A touch of the tarbrush there'.
He built the farm with his sweat, it lay in the elbow
Of two creeks, thick with wattle and white ti-tree.
At night he blew on the cornet; once, long ago, he'd played
On the pleasure cruises that went up the Yarra on Saturday nights;
The lights bobbed in the muddy water, the girls in white muslin sang
'Tipperary'.

Now he played in the lonely sleepout, looking out over the flat,
With the smell of creekwater, and a curlew crying like a murdered gin,
Crying all night, till he went out with a shotgun and finished its
screaming,

But not his own ... he, the mendicant, who married the storekeeper's
daughter.

WRITER. My mother was a dark round girl in a country town,
With down on her lip, her white cambric blouse
Smelt of roses and starch, she was beautiful,
Warm, and frigid in a world of dried-up women,
Aborting themselves with knitting needles on farms.
She wept in the tin humpy at the back of the store,
For the mother who hated, the father who drank
And loved her; then, sadly, she fell in love
And kissed the young accountant who kept the books,
Behind the ledgers, the summer dust on the counters.
He was on the booze, broke all his promises,
Went off to the city and sang in an old spring cart,
'Bottle-oh, Bottle-oh' till his liver gave out
And he died; she married in arum lilies, satin, tulle,
Under the bell that tolled for the storekeeper's daughter.
Men shot themselves in the scrub on her wedding day.
My father brought her wildflowers, rode forty miles,
But he never kissed like the beautiful bottle-oh,
Boozing in the pub like a fly caught in its amber.

The roof of the hospital cracked like purgatory,
At sunset the birth blood dried on the sheets,
Nobody came to change them, the sun went down,
The pain fell on her body like a beast and mauled it.

She hated the farm, hated the line of wattles
Smudging the creek, kept her hands full of scones,
Boiled the copper, washing out sins in creek water,
Kept sex at bay like the black snake coiled in the garden,
Burning under the African daisies and bridal creeper,
Took her children to bed, he lay alone in the sleep-out,
With a headache and The Seven Pillars of Wisdom.
The girls in their picture hats came giggling and singing,
Trailing their hands like willows from the Yarra launches,
Till the dream was nightmare and all his life a regret,
Bought and gelded in an old grey house by a creek-bed.

MATURE WRITER. My father's spade
has the hollow sound of regret
Goodbye Dad but he doesn't look up
where the cannas once grew by the drain
sour and stubborn he keeps on digging.

The melancholy acres stretch away
behind him the trees already dying
a crow flaps crying
along the boundary fence where once
the timber stood

I have disappointed him once again
another dream gone west
I won't be here to listen to his plans
to rechannel the salty creek
replant the trees rejuvenate the farm
he will lease it out for a pittance
eventually selling it off for next to nothing
run down one sheep to the acre

but all the way back
driving across the Nullarbor
over the cattle grids
through the dog-proof fence
an empty drum on the boundary
WELCOME TO WESTERN AUSTRALIA
I will hear the sound of his spade
savagely breaking the clods
for a kitchen garden.

YOUNG WRITER. My mother pins a sign over my bed
I must not tell lies against my mother

I lie awake all night afraid to move
my eyes tight shut my knees clenched
sweating under two blankets
the curtains blow in and out
rustling in the sinister wind off the creek.

In High School the French mistress
makes me walk around for a week
with a sign pinned to my back
showing the declensions of a French verb
oh! the shame of it while I laugh aloud
sweating under my pleated tunic
cracking hardy.
How did they know

I would always wear a sign on my back
a scarlet letter like Hester Prynne
taken in adultery? I pray for a Jan Ridd
to ride into the valley of the Doones
and save me from the spite of the world.

Youth

YOUNG MAN. Alice turning eleven
watching the blood trickle
between her thighs onto the warm boards
the woodbugs investigated it
for touching myself on the woodheap
I must be going to die she thought
& rolled over staring at the golden light
between the boards until her eyes ached
waiting to die but Nim said
Alice that's wonderful
now we can have a baby

YOUNG WRITER. I am sixteen years old. I am a Gemini. I am pretty but I am
something more than that. All I want is to be a great actress and a great
writer. Sometimes I sing too and I spend a lot of time drawing women with
slanted eyes and long tousled hair. People do not approve of me but I
fascinate them. My teacher calls me a poseur and the girls think I'm
trying to be different. Some of them think I am a genius and so do I.

MATURE WRITER. People are very complex, particularly gifted people.
(Pause.)

There is a girl here in this school, a very gifted girl but a dangerous one,
dangerous to herself but particularly to other girls. I have to warn you. It
is my duty. Are you listening?

WRITER. I don't really understand what you mean.

MATURE WRITER. I think you do. I found this ... this ... diary in Sally's desk this
morning.

WRITER. You searched her desk? You spied on her?

MATURE WRITER. I found it necessary. I would like to read it to you.

WRITER. Don't read it to me.

MATURE WRITER. But you're going to hear it because it concerns you, it concerns
the rest of your lives. Listen ... listen, Judith.

YOUNG WRITER. I'm in love with a girl, a flat-chested, boyish-looking girl and
because it can have nothing but a tragic end I'm prepared to exhaust the
last scalding drop out of it. Whatever tricks I have to use, whatever
pretences I have to make, whatever frigidity I have to assume, I'll do
it. Nobody must know, not the sharp pricking eyes of the girls, not the
savage, hooded eyes of Sister Rosa, or ever the eyes of Judith herself.
Particularly it must be hidden from Judith herself, who could never face
such knowledge. She must be protected from all its implications.

(Pause.)

MATURE WRITER. I could have this girl expelled from the school.

WRITER. You're against Sally.

MATURE WRITER. I find Sally ... unwholesome, both precocious and evil. I really can bear that much individuality. It frightens me and it should frighten you.

YOUNG WRITER. (*Reciting*)

*The dark fires shall burn in many rooms.
Will you sometimes miss me with my tangled hair?
Still girls in dark uniforms
Crouching in winter with their cold hands trembling,
Still voices echoing as our voices echoed
And the faded, frumped-up form of a mistress teaching French.
Does she remember us or do we pass
Only like dreams of dark figures,
Some with different hair and deep voices,
Or merely countless hats hanging on pegs,
Countless columns of moving, massed black legs.
Our minds are sprawled on unforbidden lawns,
Our voices lie like queer leaves in the clipped grass,
As we have believed, so we shall pass.*

MATURE WRITER. It was such fun to be young ... and such misery. I discovered myself ... a charming self. Nobody else would ever take time to discover me. Me! Life was happy and serious, gay and sad, comprehensible and mysterious. I had all that love and tenderness to give, all of it ... unceasingly ... but nobody wanted to take it. Why was it so hard to give away?

WRITER. (*Looking up*) Such a strange little girl! I always thought she'd fill her pockets with stones, and walk out into the river when the tide was out. Very slowly. That would make it a good long walk. Those whom the gods love, die young, they say ...

MATURE WRITER. I hear the sea tonight
lulling the shore
The wind sighing
in the she-oak on the lawn
and I am back on the peninsula
the fire gusting in the hearth
a still-life ageing woman
reflected in the glass
reading under a lamp in a shadowy house

I stand outside
in the obliterating night
watching that woman
once careless young
and passionately proud
condemned by love
seeing her
in this house above the bay
alone illumined graying hair

and quiet forbearance
coals and darkness
burning at the back
and the fire leaps in the glass
as the weather changes.

WRITER. Because I've lived quite a long while now I've got a lot of stuff that I can refer to, backwards and forwards. I think that what happens as you get older – or old! – is that the past becomes remarkably clear. I didn't realise this would happen, but it does... Like seeing something, not in a glass darkly at all, but illuminated in the most extraordinary fashion. If you can take that and move it to now, you've got that patterning, self-referential sort of method which to me is what binds my poetry together. I've got to have a binding agency, and that to me is the central binding agency of what I do. So it becomes a pattern of the world, of life ... Time, in the sense of static time, doesn't really exist at all. It's like a tremendous game.

PART TWO Political Years

Song: *She's Gone to be a Soldier*

YOUNG MAN. The whole countryside is burning and these fire-raisers have got to be stopped.

ALL. *She's gone to be a soldier,
Gone to be a man
She won't spin or cook or marry,
The Devil is her dam.
No babe will tug her breast for her,
Her milk will never flow,
She'll never tend her children,
Or watch her belly grow.*

*She made her bed, she'll lie on it.
She's made her bed, she'll die in it.
Joan, we hear the Angelus bell,
Joan, you've set your feet towards hell.
You're free, Joan, and we hate you,
You're free, Joan, and we'll stake you,
We'll burn the Lark, Pucelle.*

YOUNG WRITER. It's part of the whole conservative backlash we're going through. You know it reminds me of the late awful Menzies years, only I think it's a bit worse if anything. At least they used to say Mr Menzies had a beautiful voice. They can't even say that about John Howard. And you know even when I go to universities, which I do occasionally, what I notice is how terribly conservative the students are. Quite frightening in fact. All they seem to be interested in is their economic situation and not any sort of global protest. When I was a young university student in 1941,

we were deeply involved, and particularly after the war ended, in what was going on and we saw ourselves as a sort of vanguard of thought and action. As you see in Indonesia or various other countries, but this doesn't seem to be happening. I mean you get the odd student march or protest, usually about having to pay more money to go to university or fees going up or whatever.

WRITER. Clancy and Dooley and Don McLeod

Walked by the wurlies when the wind was loud,
And their voice was new as the fresh sap running,
And we keep on fighting and we keep on coming.

Don McLeod beat at a mulga bush,
And a lot of queer things came out in a rush.
Like mongrel dogs with their flattened tail,
They sneaked him off to the Hedland jail.

The young men marched down the road like thunder,
Kicked up the dust and padded it under.
They marched into town like a whirlwind cloud;
OPEN UP THE JAIL AND LET OUT DON McLEOD.

The squatters are riding round in the night
Crying. 'Load up your guns and creep out quiet.
Let's teach these niggers that they can't rob
The big white bosses of thirty bob.'

Our young men are hunters our old men make songs,
And the words of our people are whiplashed with wrongs.
In the tribes of our country they sing, and are proud
Of the Pilbara men and the white man, McLeod.

Our voice is lighting all over the land,
And we clench up our fists on the sweat of our hands,
For the voice of the workers is thundering loud.
FIGHT WITH CLANCY AND DOOLEY AND DON McLEOD.

Clancy and Dooley and Don McLeod
Walked by the wurlies when the wind was loud,
And their voice was new as the fresh sap running,
And we keep on fighting and we keep on coming.

Don McLeod beat at a mulga bush,
And a lot of queer things came out in a rush.
Like mongrel dogs with their flattened tail,
They sneaked him off to the Hedland jail.

Song: Touch of the Tar's Song

YOUNG WRITER. *Lily Perkins is me name, the creek bed is me station,
It's no disgrace, 'cause me black face is the colour of the nation.
O boomeri an' mind her eye an' dance roun' in the bindi,
I got a boy in Mukerup an' one in Muckinbimbi.*

*Me daddy is as white as flour, me mam as black as coal,
An' then they comes, the caslik nuns, an' taught me 'bout me soul.
I wish'd they'd left me in the creek where me ol' people dies,
The liddle child they found who cried, among the bindieyes.*

*I 'ad a little dream that I might catch a fallin' star,
But they took me down to whitey town an' called me touch o' tar,
But when the wild duck cries at night it seems I gotta rise
With beatin' wings an' voice that sings out of the bindieyes.*

MATURE WRITER. There's a cold wind comin', I can hear it in the she-oaks by the river.

WRITER. What river?

MATURE WRITER. That was a great body of water once, Snow.

WRITER. So y' keep tellin' me.

MATURE WRITER. If Pig-iron Bob hadn't built the Snowy River Scheme to win the elections, drownin' the little towns, spendin' millions of the taxpayers money bringin' out all them poor bloody workers frum other countries – some of them are still lyin' out there, buried under tons of concrete. If we'd had the sense we was supposed to be born with and said no, 'stead of cheerin' our silly heads off, the Great Snowy'd still be racin' down through them mountains irrigatin' all the little farms instead of bein' just the muddy trickle it is today, and the same goes for the Torrent. And if them big greedy rice and tobaccer farmers out west hadn't grabbed most 'f what was left of the water, the Murray-Darlin' basin wouldn't be fucked now.

WRITER. If wishes was 'orses beggars 'ud ride.

MATURE WRITER. (*Getting excited*) But maybe it's not too late. If all uv us had the guts to ride inter the cities on 'orseback we still might save the Snowy, even maybe the Torrent.

WRITER. Only trouble is we 'aven't got an 'orse and I can't ride nothin' without a brake on it.

MATURE WRITER. Don't y' believe me?

WRITER. I don't know who to believe anymore. Me capacity for belief is sadly eroded.

MATURE WRITER. Y' gotta believe in something', Snow.

WRITER. Why?

MATURE WRITER. It's what keeps us human.

YOUNG MAN. What will you do, now?

YOUNG WRITER. Die. W could never go back to being a wench in a muddy apron. I'm addicted ... to adoration now. ... My comrades, my enemies and my Dauphin, I'm finished, I'm taken. Mourn for me. I can do nothing now till

the end of time but slump about the world's battlefields in my armour.
They're all running up the Paris road spiked and cut open. I gave them a few good clouts and knocks for you, Charlie. We were there, God and His Maid. It's a dirty business, war and politics and kingship.

YOUNG MAN. (*Weeping*). You're my victim, my victim.

YOUNG WRITER. I was born for it, Boy.

YOUNG MAN. And the Voices say it?

YOUNG WRITER. The Voices say it.

YOUNG MAN. It makes me sad ... you always obey the Voices?

YOUNG WRITER. By Christ, I do.

WRITER. Dear Editors, Ms [Helen] Van der Poorten's intelligent and stimulating article on my work "Look what they've made her do" has set me thinking. It is true, as she says, theatre professional Australian managements have not fallen over each other to produce my work, and in some cases they have been quite openly hostile. My plays have been notoriously 'difficult', they sometimes espouse an unpopular point of view, the central woman character has often been anathema to managements, and even audiences. For some years I felt pretty paranoid about this but I think I've come to terms with it. I have considered giving up writing plays, but not anymore. I believe in my work, otherwise I wouldn't do it, and I don't think I could be pressurized into a style for popular or commercial reasons, or even to be performed more easily.

Did I deliberately tailor *Mrs Portland* to fit the existing Australian theatre ... one set, eight characters, the well-made, realist play etc?

It is always difficult to unravel one's own deeper motivations, but, as far as I am aware, this was not a major consideration. Any playwright would of course be a stubborn fool not to take these questions into some account, because I don't write plays to be published only.

I would argue however that the play that took the existing economies of the theatre into consideration was *The Golden Oldies*, written before *Mrs Portland*. It was quite deliberately a one-set play for two characters and two effigies. I wanted to see if I could do that rather than a play with all the elephants from *Aida*. It's true of course the *The Golden Oldies* is also not realistic, but depends largely on poetic interior monologues.

However the style is 'quieter,' Plays do dictate their own form. ...

The tightness of [*Mrs Portland*] reflects the rigid lives, the rigid society. Terrible events break out of that ordered pattern, and create melodrama. Melodrama was beloved of the Victorians for obvious reasons. ...

The writing of the play was difficult, challenging, exercising all my ingenuity. Subtlety and intellectual control were lessons I needed to learn at this stage in my writing life. I found the play that dictated these qualities, and I had to grapple with them. This I think was unconscious motivation for writing *Mrs Portland*.

The plays I write in the future will I think all be 'different' plays. I learn something new each time, but I hope the lessons of *Mrs Portland* will always bear fruit. I needed them. And next time Helen, maybe, yes, bring on the dancing girls.

Communism

Song: *Inside Fremantle Jail*

YOUNG MAN. *The bloody stones they break your bones,
inside Fremantle yard;
and it's a curse there's nothin' worse
than doin' two year's hard.*

*I killed a sheep 'twould make you weep
for need of a coupla pence,
I kept the law and hung the fleece
out on the squatter's fence.*

*The squatter is a stingy man
for stealin' of his ewes,
inside the yard you'll do it hard,
kowitzin' to the screws.*

*The Judge will throw you in the can,
he will not grant no bail,
and you can rot till you're forgot
inside Fremantle jail.*

*When I came out then I had a nought,
not a pocketful of pence,
so now I kill and eat me fill,
hang nothin' on the fence.*

*Me boots are full of mud and blood,
me coat is still with pain,
I'll never shear the bloody sheep
out on the One Tree Plain.*

*But one dark night I'll start a fight,
I'll wake the silent town,
I'll give the law a little fright,
I'll shoot the bastards down.*

*I won't forget and they'll regret
they give me two years' hard,
to break me bones acrackin' stones
inside Fremantle yard.*

WRITER. I stand with the Party with all its imperfections, its mistakes, its bitterly human failings, because I believe that in this Part is lodged the hope of mankind – and the place I feel I can struggle best is in the field of literature.

YOUNG WRITER. Oh to live dangerously again,
meeting clandestinely in Moore Park
the underground funds tucked up between our bras,
the baby's pram stuffed with illegal lit.
We hung head down for slogans on the Bridge,
the flatbed in the shed ran ink at midnight.

Parked in the driveway, elaborately smoking,
the telltale cars, the cameras, the shorthand writers.
Plans for TAKING OVER ... 3 YRS. THE REVOLUTION.
The counter revs out gunning for the cadres.
ESCAPE along the sea shelf, wading through
Warm waters soft with blood.
WOW! WHAT A STORY! ... guerrilla fighters
wear cardigans and watch it on the Box,
lapsed Party cards, and Labor's in again.
Retired, Comrade X fishes Nambucca Heads,
& Mrs Petrov, shorthand typist,
hiding from reporters
brings home the weekly bacon.

But O O O to live
so dangerously again,
their stamina trousers pulling at the crutch

MATURE WRITER. Well, the Communist Party was full of respectability because
its roots were in the Trade Union movement and the Australian working
class, and no-one's more respectable than them -- except for the tearaways,
the ones the Communist Party used to call the lumpen proletariat, like
the girls in the spinning mill were who'd never been organized into
any sort of trade union. And then of course there were always a few
anarchists around, in the Communist Party. And I married two of them.
Or lived with one, Les Flood, and married Merv Lilley. 'Cause I was
always attracted to anarchists, you see ... I always found the respectable
working class, in their white singlets mowing the lawn on the weekends, a
bit boring. They would've said that was a sign of my middle-class
anarchism, which may be right ... I can remember when I was living in
Redfern, one of the jobs I was given was to organize women, so I thought,
oh well, the obvious people to start with are the wives of the Communist
Party activists, so I started calling on them all. And their husbands
were furious, absolutely furious! How dare she come and interrupt
our peaceful, domestic lives where the wife does everything and I go out to
my meetings ...

WRITER. They call, 'The Prince has come',
& I swan down in astrakhan & fur,
the lemon curtains blown against the light,
the scent of lilac on the balconies.
In the entrance hall

the Prince is standing
staring at my thighs.
He mounts, how cold the marble
underneath my buttocks.
As he rides he calls me
'whore' & 'princess'.
A platinum crooner, old as Alice Faye,
belts out bad ragtime in the empty ballroom.
The Prince, buttoning his fly,
is doing push-ups & demanding saunas.
Two Giant Ghanians smile & kiss my hand.

Snow piles like roses
up against the panes,
the waiter brings 'Ogonyok',
SINYAVSKY'S FLED & SOLZHENITSYN'S EXILED.
The lights all fail.
The electrician's pinching bulbs
from the chandeliers, shoving them
down his shirt front.
Outside in the dark at Lenin's tomb
they endlessly queue for weeping
at the waxworks.
The Prince is in the Conference Hall,
listening through headphones
to a speech in seven languages.
Handsome Yugoslav colonels
discreetly try my doorknobs.
Exhausted, we sleep among carved bears
with ashtrays in their paws,
he refuses, once again, to consummate our marriage.

Next day we catch the Trans-Siberian
to Peking; from the observation car
we watch two wolves pacing out the train,
the Prince throws pennies to Manchurian children.
On the Great Wall he lets the wind blow
through my hair, in the Forbidden City
we listen to the clockwork nightingale.

By Aeroflot we fly in to Berlin,
the Prince will not declare his Camels
At Checkpoint Charlie,
(An international incident is narrowly averted.)
In the country house of Hitler's wormy mistress
we row on a lake circled with tuber roses.
The Prince, a playboy in a boater hat,
is picking the plastic flowers

Off Heine's statue;
denouncing Nazis he pisses in the Weimar fountain,
rides with a chignoned spy
Down Karl Marx Allee.
Tiring of this,
We climb across the Wall,
the Vopos bow, goosestep & fire a round,
the bullets spurt,
we Show our elegant heels.
In West Berlin the Prince
calls for his breakfast, on TV
Brezhnev has cancer, enters the Mayo clinic.

The Prince leafs through his autographs,
Picasso, Gandhi, Garbo, Pasternak,
calls Nabokov long distance, mounts me,
yawns, the Brandenburg Gate whirls
& explodes in the pale autumn air.
Next morning he leaves,
taking all my roubles.

Suffering from migraine
I enter a Retreat
among the Alps I write him
endless letters.
The corridors are full of parasites,
consumptives haemorrhage in their sleety deckchairs,
in the white nights I masturbate my pillows.

An aerogramme arrives,
'The Prince is dead!'

I take up séances,
each night we couple,
circling the empty ballroom
To 'Moscow Nights'.
Cockroaches rustle, my thrombosed knee
reeks of its vodka bandage,
the dust settles from the chandelier
On his bald head ...

MATURE WRITER. (*Mumbling*) Edith, Edith, I've got something important to ask
y'. I should've asked y' years ago.

YOUNG WRITER. (*Becoming JOSH's memory of EDITH*) The comrades just
can't believe it, we all want to know why you've left us. After twenty-three
years it's unbelievable, and you've always been such a stalwart, always
has so much to contribute.

MATURE WRITER. I've made up me mind, Edith.

YOUNG WRITER. A branch meeting without you, well, it won't be the same at all.
MATURE WRITER. I'll soon be forgotten.

YOUNG WRITER. But that's where you're wrong. We need every comrade we've
got. Especially now when so many others are leaving, all them
intellectuals. But you're no intellectual, Joshua, you're a real worker,
you're the salt of the earth.

MATURE WRITER. I can't swallow it anymore, Edith – Stalin's crimes, the
Hungarian revolution. And now the Czechs, Dubchek called it 'Socialism
with a 'uman face', so they brought in the tanks and threw 'im outa office
– 'e'll probably be lucky not to finish up in front of a firin' squad. 'Socialism
with a 'uman face'. That's what I've always believed in, Edith.

YOUNG WRITER. Mistakes have been made.

MATURE WRITER. You bet they 'ave.

YOUNG WRITER. But the Soviet Union isn't Australia. We've got our own Party,
Joshua. We can't look back. Our new line is 'Fight Monopoly'.

MATURE WRITER. First we followed the Soviet line, and then the Chinese – and
they all turned out to be crooks. it's no good, Edith, I can't stomach any of
'em anymore. ...

(*Slowly and ironically.*)

The Worker's flag is deepest red,
It shrouded oft our martyred dead,
And ere our limbs grew stiff and cold,
Our 'eart's blood dyed its every fold.
So raise the scarlet banner 'igh,
Beneath its folds we'll live and die.
though cowards flinch and traitors sneer,
We'll keep the red flag flyin' 'ere.

YOUNG MAN. Order in the Court.

MATURE WRITER. Sally Banner, what would your parents think?

YOUNG MAN. Look out for number one, that's my advice.

WRITER. Sally Banner, you are charged that on the fourth day of the fifth month
at six o'clock in the afternoon –

YOUNG MAN. On June 5th, nineteen forty-nine, you met a man in a brown hat
carrying a black briefcase.

MATURE WRITER. I thought she had a rendezvous in the Botanic Gardens at six
o'clock on an afternoon in June under Governor Phillip's statue.

WRITER. No, no. It was on the sixteenth of the Friday evening at half past seven
she met at Queanbeyan in the vicinity of Young's Store at eight o'clock at
night. There's the receipt.

MATURE WRITER. Where's the receipt?

YOUNG MAN. She received two thousand five hundred pounds and regards from
Sadovnikov.

MATURE WRITER. And Pakmananov.

WRITER. She sold her soul for six bottles of brandy –

YOUNG MAN. And twenty quid.

YOUNG WRITER. I never.

MATURE WRITER. You never have?

YOUNG WRITER. No, never.

YOUNG MAN. Why not?
 MATURE WRITER. Answer the question.
 WRITER. Surely the Commission should have the support of all loyal Australians?
 YOUNG MAN. No reliance can be placed on her evidence.
 WRITER. She has violently opposed the Commission.
 MATURE WRITER. Do you remember the eighteenth of October?
 WRITER. The twentieth of December?
 MATURE WRITER. The second of January?
 YOUNG MAN. The first of August?
 WRITER. What day of the week was that?
 YOUNG WRITER. That would be Sunday.
 YOUNG MAN. And do you remember the preceding day?
 YOUNG WRITER. Yes, on the Saturday.
 MATURE WRITER. All day?
 YOUNG WRITER. All day.
 WRITER. On the sixteenth?
 YOUNG WRITER. (*Exasperated*) On the sixteenth on the Friday evening at half past seven –
 YOUNG MAN. Stop making speeches.
 MATURE WRITER. And answer the question.
 YOUNG MAN. An extraordinary exhibition of truculence, evasion and lying.
 ALL. Guilty ... guilty ... guilty ... guilty ...
 YOUNG MAN. Order in the Court. If there are more demonstrations of this nature I will be delighted.
 YOUNG WRITER. I object.
 WRITER. I object to you.
 YOUNG MAN. Objection sustained.
 YOUNG WRITER. There is no Justice.
 WRITER. This is not a court of Justice.
 MATURE WRITER. This is a court of Law.
 YOUNG MAN. I wish to cross-examine the prisoner.
 ALL. Cross-examine the prisoner.
 YOUNG MAN. Are you now or have you ever been a member of any political party?
 WRITER. Did you ever discuss Communism with your sister?
 MATURE WRITER. Do other members of your family share your political views?
 YOUNG MAN. Were you active in the Democratic Rights Council, a shareholder in the People's Publishing and Printing Association?
 WRITER. Did you in fact join the Australian Society for Scientific Research, the Legion of Christian Youth, the Australian Russian Society, the Christian Socialist Movement?
 MATURE WRITER. The Australia-China Society, The Council for Civil Liberties, The Housewives Association, The Australian Arts Council, Sheepskins for Russia, Soviet House, the Civil Rights Defence league, the Russian Social Club, to disseminate the Communist faith and propaganda?
 YOUNG MAN. Are you a member of the CP, are you sure? When did you cease to be, did you join the CP, in short you joined the CP.
 WRITER. This enquiry must not restrain or suppress freedom of thought.
 MATURE WRITER. This enquiry will not be used maliciously to smear any person's reputation ...

YOUNG MAN. Did you know of it, what did you know of it? Have you ever been to Marx House?

ALL. Guilty. Guilty. Guilty

YOUNG WRITER. Out of the night that covers me,
 Black as the pit from pole to pole,
 I thank whatever Gods may be,
 For my unconquerable soul.

WRITER. Apart from everything else I do feel that now I know what I'm doing in the theatre, what I want to achieve, and I won't be deflected from it. ... I like to risk and grow, I love solving new stylistic, technical and language problems. For me it's part of the fascination of the whole exercise. I don't feel like a failure or an outsider in the Australian theatre anymore, and for that I have to thank many audiences, directors, actors, publishers, friends and supporters, and yes, the groves of academe themselves. I will always be grateful for the interest and perceptions of the quite considerable number of tertiary students and lecturers who study and teach my plays ...
 But the biggest task of all is to work hard to become more accessible and thus more popular, without for one moment abdicating from my overall mythic vision of Australian theatre.

Love & Loss

YOUNG WRITER. The earth upon its axis turns,
 Season on season all delights renew,
 But still the sweet delight I find in you
 Is old as rain and fresh as morning dew,
 Because there is a loveliness that burns,
 That burns so tenderly between us two.
 Ours is a strong, an earthy loveliness,
 I see myself in you, yourself in me,
 We love and hate ourselves most tenderly;
 Lover to lover lost in fierce caress,
 Such contradictions mock mortality.

Song: *My Love on Whom the Good Sun Shone*

WRITER. *I passed my love on the street today,
 He looked through my head and he looked away.
 When I searched in the dust I could only find
 A man with his lips and his eyes gone blind,
 And all that we were, and all that we knew,
 Has gone with the wry, dry dust that blew.*

*O where has he gone, o where has he gone,
 My love on whom the good sun shone?
 With an ache in his mouth and a crack in his song,
 That golden boy to look upon.
 And he'll never come back I'll die alone,
 Flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone.*

YOUNG WRITER. Do you remember that awful party where we talked politics, anthrop and conservation? We'd all just read *The Naked Ape* and *The Greening of America*. The women plucked out my backbone and filleted me for supper. All our private hatreds were always aired in public.

How can we sit around talking small talk when we've loved and fucked and married each other? I put my hand out to Rod and I remember his fingers on my things. he said, "Take them off, you're not a stocking girl, Tatty Hollow." I stare at Ben and I feel his prick swelling against my arse in bed at night. Somebody says, "Remember Rube," and Rube is my first lover bending over me under the palms. I look across the room and there's Robin, flirting, drinking whisky, covering my body with kisses in Rome. I look up ... and there's Johnny by the window. (*She grows agitated now. ...*) And I'm spreadeagled moaning on a bed, dressed only in black net stockings and a suspender belt.

(*JOHNNY laughs and claps derisively.*)

Nothing of him that doth remain

But has suffered a sea change.

YOUNG MAN. Would you rather masturbate or fuck? Repeat, repeat.

CHORUS. (*Threatening*). Would you rather masturbate or fuck.

Song: On the Road to Nowhere

WRITER. *On the road to nowhere,*

What can we find there?

A dream, a space, an empty place,

A place to be alone.

When we've got to nowhere,

Can we call it 'ome?

YOUNG MAN. *No more weepin' no more creepin'*

through the nights of pain,

we will fall asleep there

To the sound of rain.

Live our lives in peace there,

Learn to love again.

WRITER. *We will find a place there,*

A place to be alone,

We will find a roof there,

A roof to call our own,

Dance the Missouri Waltz there

To the wind up gramophone.

BOTH. *Nowhere, Nowhere,*

We want to go to Nowhere,

We want to live our lives there,

Belonging somewhere again.

'Cause we been everywhere

And we don't want that again.

WRITER. I was all set to [go overseas] and the war broke out and then I got married. I seem to have made all the wrong choices at all the wrong times.

So that was part of the reason I think [why] I stopped writing for so long. You know I started off as this sort of enfant juvenile terror - winning a prize in *Meanjin* and winning an ABC poetry prize when no-one had heard of me and suddenly a silence fell, like death ... And then I surfaced again with *Bobbin Up* and people said "Who's she?" Because it was as if I kept on re-inventing myself. I discovered that literary critics are very, very suspicious of people who change genres. They think there is something suspect about it. Otherwise you are Jack-of-all-trades or Jill-of-all-trades and master or mistress of nothing. Whereas I've never found any difficulty in this really. It just seems natural to me. It's all writing, you know. But I never really consolidated what I was doing until I suppose fairly recently. So my daughter tells me that I'm very famous, but I honestly don't feel very famous ... (*Laugh.*) Dunno! If this is being very famous, it's a bit disappointing that's all I can say! I thought it'd be better than this! I thought you could get your trilogy of plays on! and ... So what's gone wrong?

PART THREE

Children

YOUNG WRITER. My mother nurses Clancy devotedly, her eyes ringed with lack of sleep, until he goes back into the Children's Hospital for more drugs and blood transfusions. When I visit him in the ward he lies delirious and burning up with fever.

That night I ring the specialist. "Clancy is very ill," I tell him. "I think he's dying of pneumonia."

"I'll be in to see him first thing in the morning," the specialist says, "and don't worry. Children often show these alarming symptoms. Of course he's very ill, we all know that, but I think he's holding his own."

Next day he is as emaciated as a skeleton. How can any child lose that much weight so quickly? His breath rasps as he throws himself from one end of the bed to the other. Great blue bruises disfigure his face and body. Silent tears drip down my face. He quietens down and takes my hand.

"Don't cry any more, Mummy," he whispers. "Don't be sad."

I watch him lapse into the last coma. He is scarcely breathing. "Die," I whisper. "Die now."

Only when I'm sure it is too late, I call the Charge Sister from her desk at the end of the ward. I have protected him. No more drugs, no more torture. "My little boy's dying," I say.

She takes one look and rushes to the phone. In a few seconds a young doctor runs into the ward and gives him a last hopeless injection. Too late. The specialist arrives. I stand out on the landing feeling a strange, dull triumph. I have defeated them. They are all to late.

A few minutes afterwards the specialist comes out to me. "I'm sorry," he says. "It's all over. You were right He was very ill. He died of pneumonia, but then it was always only a matter of time, wasn't it?"

That night I take two Valium, weep, and can't feed the baby.

"You're only crying for yourself," Les says. "He's past crying for."

But I keep on repeating over and over, "It's the waste I can't bear."

MATURE WRITER. I remember the small ones
 each one of them
 like a bud opened out
 lying there in the sunlight
 blinking eyes squeezed shut
 opening closing like anemones
 the smell of their warmth
 the tight curls sculptured
 wet on their scalps
 so many how could there have been
 so many rocked in the fluid warmth
 with the star-shaped fingers
 and toes the bulbous eyes
 wrenched out in a mess of blood
 the after birth shivering
 jelly-wet on the undersheet

and now each one of them
 have gone out
 treading the earth
 men and women
 taller than I am.

WRITER. Our daughter is fifteen she is beautiful she walks home
 through the dangerous streets at 3am ordering the flasher
 to put that thing away.

She used to line up her dolls for lectures dawdling home
 from school under the street trees she talked to a cast of
 imaginary characters.

When she was five she was the mascot at the school
 sports marching proudly in blue shorts & a halter top it
 was a cold day & she had an asthma attack.

AT twelve she was Mrs Pankhurst in O What a Lovely War
 under a big black picture hat like a mushroom she
 delivered inflammatory feminist speeches she made a
 giant green cardboard crocodile it lived in her attic
 laying its dreamy snout on the window sill it watched the
 traffic its long tail switching in the dust.

She came home when she left her lovers standing at the
 upstairs window aloof with tears her red bikini
 underpants stuffed in her raincoat pocket.

Our daughter got married in second-hand white organza
 with dozens of soiled covered buttons (she cleaned each

one with a toothbrush) it rained for days & the wedding
 dress hung sodden in the bathroom like a hanged bride
 it took my breath away with false silver fingernails &
 contact lenses frangipani in her lacquered hair-do she
 floated down through the park to the thin dark handsome bridegroom in
 his stovepipe trousers.

Our daughter is thirty-three she is visiting the Hong
 Kong Film Festival she has left her husband lost eight
 kilos & wears a mini-skirt when she gives a lecture at
 Macau University the Vice-Chancellor snickers pretty
 lady you got doctorate?

WRITER. But this is what I think. that every writer writes from their own
 experience because they haven't got anything else. I mean, how can you
 negate who you are and what has happened to you? Say oh well, I won't
 write a word about that. It just sounds ludicrous to me. But when it's
 transmuted into writing, it changes totally, and you only use what you
 want to, anyway. You leave out all the dross. So it's a kind of mixed bag
 I suppose, and I get material from everywhere, you know - I read a hell
 of a lot, I always have, and I get a lot of ideas from novels or poetry or
 plays or whatever, autobiographies of other people, biographies, I even get
 stuff from off the TV sometimes, anywhere, from conversations, or just
 somewhere out of your head, from god knows where. ...

Growing Old

WRITER. another year has passed
 nothing has changed
 I bring the same old griefs
 unlock the door
 on the same self
 grown older sadder
 wiser than before
 hearing the kestrel shrieking

YOUNG WRITER. She's survived
 to spend another winter
 in our house.

MATURE WRITER. Mukinupin, Mukinupin. Hasn't changed a jot in five long
 years; dust still as thick, silence still as deep, fly spots still as various. Ah!
 Max, Max.
(She sits, holding her head in her hands in a Victorian pose.)
 Your Mercy has fallen upon evil days.
(She pulls herself together, takes up writing paper and pen.)
 But *nil desperandum*, as the Greek philosopher says; Mercy Montebello
 can still make a silk purse out of a sow's ear.
(She gazes out front for inspiration, sucking her pen.)

Dearest Jack ... no, that won't do. Dear Jack – too formal. My dear Jack ... that's better ... My dear Jack, I arrived by train this morning and thought I might in remembrance of older and happier times ... just drop you this line ...

Underscore: *Do You remember the old times?*

(MERCY rises, essays a few graceful dance steps, as she speaks the following dialogue to music.)

Do you remember the old times?
I remember too well,
I've been waiting all morning
in a suite at the Royal Hotel.

I've come to Mucka by train, Jack,
Desdemona is free.
Max collapsed into the footlights
whilst he was strangling me.

Don't hope to see a beauty,
I'm just a faded rose,
But I'd like to take your hand, Jack,
Before I take my repose.

(MERCY sits for the last lines of her letter.)

I haven't any designs, dear,
Cross my heart, hope to die,
But I'll wear a hat with a feather,
And you wear a spotted tie.

I recall when we met, Jack,
the wheat was burnished yellow,
we were innocent, young, then;
love, Mercy Montebello.

(MERCY places the letter in an envelope and firmly licks the flap.)

That should bring him running.

WRITER. It was one of those still, bright autumn days, tender and melancholy. Now she could see Iris standing in the driveway, her back turned, talking earnestly to someone, a boy in ragged jeans slipped low on his hips; no, older, a young man. The slight, tense body was boyish, but the thickening of the shoulders and the neck muscles was mature and aggressive. He stood relaxed in the sunlight, Belle rubbing against his trouser legs, Hero rolling at his feet in admiration.

MATURE WRITER. How come he's so relaxed in my garden, with my animals [Esther thought]. I've never seen him before in my life, so much for Hero the famous watchdog.

WRITER. He looked up as if sensing her scrutiny. Their eyes met through the barrier of glass and he smiled an extraordinarily sweet, winning smile, so that she found herself smiling back at him. Then, without taking his eyes off her, he began to cross the lawn, Hero bouncing beside him, Belle draped around his neck, and Iris running after him plucking at his sleeve, arguing vehemently. He rapped on the glass and stood there with Iris sulking behind him until Esther, unlocking the French doors, let in the fresh cold wind off the river. Belle jumped off his shoulder and climbed onto Esther's lap.

YOUNG MAN. Hello [he said] I'm Bill Crowe.

WRITER. They breed like flies, she thought.

YOUNG MAN. You're Esther [he said] Esther Summerton. Y' write books, don't y'?

MATURE WRITER. Yes [she said]

WRITER. He crossed to the shelves, fingering the books curiously.

YOUNG MAN. I've never seen so many in me life. Could I borrow some of 'em?

MATURE WRITER. If you like [she said] as long as you bring them back again.

YOUNG MAN. Have y' read 'em all?

MATURE. More than once [she said drily].

WRITER. He looked at the empty grate.

YOUNG MAN. It's cold in 'ere. Y' need a fire. Where's the axe?

MATURE WRITER. Out in the woodshed, but there is plenty of wood chopped. It just needs bringing in.

WRITER. Iris glared at her.

YOUNG MAN. I'll get it then [Billy said]. We'll soon have us warm.

MATURE WRITER. I am the one
no longer beautiful
behind the melaleuca hedge
beside the bay
who sleeps and weeps
and sleeps again
calling to you
across the drift of time.

I hide in the silent garden
furred with frost
remote and still
where no one comes
where time itself is lost
and the bay runs
like watered silk
through a skein of hills

YOUNG WRITER. No one will burst
through the melaleuca hedge
no one will open the door
to the silent house
the dark rooms

of the unconscious wait
in a square of sunlight
circled by the sea

MATURE WRITER. The thorns grow higher
as the birds grow quiet.

Song: Fyshe's Lament

YOUNG MAN. *Give me the sea, full to the brim
With a bottom of silver to hide myself in.
Give me the darkness, the star on the wave,
I'll sleep in the wash of a lost coral cave.*

*Let me go to the waters, the wave and the storm
That made me and formed me before I was born.
Give me the sea full to the brim,
To a bottom of silver I'll dive and I'll swim.*

*To the end of the world where the lost ships are blown
I'll hide in the ocean and live there alone.
Let me go, let me dive, let be me, let me swim
To a bottom of silver ... give me back my skin.*

WRITER. Lying in bed, Esther could hear their raised voices quarrelling in the bedroom. Once she thought she heard the thump of flesh against the wall, and a wailing cry.

MATURE WRITER. They'll have to go [she thought] ...

WRITER. and her heart sank. She was their victim. She dare not stay here, alone on the river, and where would she find someone else, at such impossible notice. Then the springs began to creak rhythmically up and down next door and she buried her face in the pillow and hated them.

MATURE WRITER. Why did you ever come here? [she thought].

WRITER. For silence and solitude, for a kind of ghostly extinction, and at first she had welcomed this total abdication of the self, this drift to the edge of the known world. Littered with cuttlefish and the great crenellated winter shells tumbled up out of the depths of the ocean, marked with the arrowed feet of gulls, the place had its own validity. It stretched to the world's end, last landstop before the coast of Africa. She had her wish. She was immured in this sick and shabby country, surrounded by a coastline disappearing under the great wash of the Southern Ocean. The years had melted behind her like phosphorescence. Angrily, she began to masturbate, pulling at her nipples, stroking her clitoris until it throbbed and swelled. She grew wet, her legs fell open, and she moaned, her heels drumming on the mattress.

MATURE WRITER. I've done ... nothing. We've all done ... nothing. We were young, we were beautiful, and now we're middle-aged, almost finished, and so there's no glory left, no Utopias, no beliefs, no love, no beauty.

YOUNG WRITER. So our time's over, the young have got it all still.

MATURE WRITER. But how sad. We tried, we failed. They'll try, they'll fail. None of us ever learn anything, until the last, lonely screwed-up woman faces the last, lonely screwed-up man on this lonely fucked-up planet. What's it all for? Staring into a void, dancing on the head of a pin?

YOUNG WRITER. But you've lived ... such a full life?

MATURE WRITER. Full of shit, and it's not enough. We weren't happy. We were never happy, and what's so uplifting about all that suffering? It crippled us. I don't believe in suffering. Oh! Tell me I enjoyed being unhappy. I made a career out of it. I was the great survivor ... Look your last on all things lovely, every hour.

WRITER. It was annihilation. I could never accept annihilation. The shadow of it lay over everything I did. My whole life has been a struggle to be identified with someone, something, any thing that gave me even a brief sense of my own immortality. And yet I've always known, even when I struggled hardest, that annihilation was the end of it. Even when – no, especially when – I was wild with joy because I'd thought I'd found, even for a moment that immortal otherness at last.

WRITER. So what went wrong? Why didn't the playwright go from strength to strength, why aren't my plays being performed in venues throughout the country, and bringing me a modest living, and sometimes, the accolades of the press and the great GP?

If I was to accept what many of the critics say about me I would have to agree that I am 'soft in the head' (at least sometimes), that I can't write dialogue (and a playwright who can't write dialogue should surely take up some other profession), that my plays are all poorly constructed with no beginning, middle or end, that actors and actresses can't speak my lines because they are unspeakable (although poetic), and that I am only understood and supported by a handful of academics. Theatre critics call me a poet, poetry critics often refer to me as a playwright.

I see no contradiction in the two roles. In fact writing poetry has been one way to teach myself precision, economy, style, language and its multiple fascinations and web of correspondences. It has made me sensitive to the power of image and symbol and the cadence of the spoken word.

I am at present also embarked on a critical work on modern Romantic Australian Poetry, and I see no contradiction in this either. My academic training, and the critical writing I've done for years in the lit mags, the newspapers and, yes, Theatre Australia, has helped to develop my critical sense, and the language of criticism.

I find the multiple role of playwright, poet and critic marvelously challenging and satisfying, and although there have been periods when I thought, after particularly heartbreaking experiences and savage onslaughts, that I would dramatically 'give up the theatre', it was never really on, since I began to write plays seriously in about 1966/67. The theatre is of all writing the most brutal and the most exciting. Nothing else matches that confrontation in public between the playwright and the audience. Nothing else matches the heady excitement of having

actually created three dimensional people who move through a recognizable landscape of one's own imagining.
Nothing else for me matches the delight of working with other dedicated professionals in a co-operative enterprise. Sometimes this experience is magnificent, sometimes alarming, sometimes destructive, sometimes so-so, but it is never boring for one instant, and I always learn something new from it as both a writer and a human being.

I had, until recently, I now realize, accepted what seemed to be a fact; I would never have a really popular success in the Australian theatre, audiences and critics would always be sharply divided, and there would always be periods of extraordinary hostility and downright failure. It's true in the theatre that you are always only as good as your last play, and my last play had bombed rather spectacularly. It's not really much comfort to reflect that you could be appreciated as a geriatric or a corpse. Some still small voice keeps saying "How will you ever know?"

Move to the Mountains

MATURE WRITER. I lie in bed reading
the 541 letters of Elizabeth Bishop
my daughter brought me from New York
wading waist-deep in snow.

I get up at 6pm & shower
through the window
the winter garden's stripped of leaves
at night with the fire burning
sideways in the wind
I watch the news on SBS
a foreign film subtitled
or a doco at midnight
stooped with cold I stagger
back to bed the wind howls
ripping my poems to shreds
the paper lantern whirls

I listen to the semis
changing gear
to tackle the 40 Bends
in the tapestry chair
the cat snores loudly
will I live to a great old age?
there are lots of mad old women
in these mountains
shut up in their houses dying.

WRITER. (*Cheerfully*). We'll drown it all in the duckponds of memory, and I'll be a mad old woman, mad as a March hare, unshakable as mist. ...

(*Musing*) Everything's going to bone, the shapes of the sparrows, just like sad, freaky twigs on the poplar trees. Snow in the mountains, a white pure light bathes the terraces ... this black frost twists my bones. (*She hunkers down painfully, hugging herself and shivering ...*) Scrape the aphids off the roses. It'll all end happily, you'll see. We'll all be loonies together. (*She begins to hum and then softly sing.*)

Song: *The Tatty Hollow Story*

WRITER. *It's the Tatty Hollow story,
And she gave it all away,
Nothing in it, but a gag a minute,
And yet I want to say.
We talk about her,
And the world without her,
Is a neutral shade of grey.*
ALL. *It's raining in Sydney,
But don't let the tear-drops start,
It's raining in Sydney,
Like it's raining in my heart.*

MATURE WRITER. I have traveled a long way from my origins
Is there anything left of the child
with the wheaten hair who listened for owls
loved poetry and winter fires remembered
the strange moment in the dark fields
when the pet lambs grown into ewes and wethers
trotted along the fence lines bleating to be let in?

WRITER. You can never go back only onwards
into the world leaving behind
all the loved things

YOUNG WRITER. the grandfather
flying on his winged nag through the frosty paddocks
the handsome father haloed in sparks
roasting spuds in the ashes of the playroom fire.

WRITER. Where do you go from there concealed in darkness
glowing in the heat in the grass the hawk in the wood
the plovers spinning of spring in the front of the plough –

YOUNG WRITER. to the old woman watching from her bulbs to come up
the irises lining the path the white cockatoos
in a flurry of wings a visitation of angels.

MATURE WRITER. in the mornings freight trains
shake the garden peak hour
traffic white cockatoos
flicker like ghosts

clamouring on a dark sky
in the afternoons
ambulances howl doves
murmur the children
are let out of school

and suddenly it's evening
the fires are lit
nobody comes and we are
living in the mountains
with nothing left to say ...

EPILOGUE

Resignation

Song: *Shadows*

ALL. *We had a life
We dreamed it and are gone,
And now we're shadows
In a picture show.*

*The life we lived
Was on a flickering screen
the dream we had
Was just a fleeting dream.*

*You will forget us,
Time takes us away,
The shadow life we lived
Was over yesterday.*

*We come at midnight,
And at dawn we go,
We're only shadows
In the late late show.*

YOUNG MAN. Lovely evening, Lovely Evening.
Shadows In the verdigris mirror
Dissolve in the dust-laden air,
And I bow from the waist in the moonlight
To the little green ghost on the stair.

MATURE WRITER. Ortabee, it's cold out here. Bring me bon-bons and roses to warm me.

YOUNG MAN. Sweet dreams, Dolly.

WRITER. The cat wakes up in the tapestry chair
washing her face with her wet paws each morning

my husband makes up the fire
YOUNG WRITER. (husband and wife what strange words they are)
WRITER. the camellia pushes against the warm glass
It has been looking into this room for 150 years
last summer we bought a hearse from a funeral director
now we drive it sleek black shining
like death or America up and down the mountains
people stare as we pass and ask to look under the bonnet
what do they expect to find there
my son says it will come in handy
I imagine it stuffed with flowers
moving slowly taking us both to the cemetery
my son is driving his profile set
in an elaborate mask of unconcern
I have only one friend in the cemetery
I would like to be buried near him
under that straggle of sick stringy barks
sometimes I think what am I doing here
miles from the ocean or any landscape I recognize
the idea was to make a new start
but there are only so many new starts
in a lifetime in the end
running out of words like exile or re-location
you discover you can live without anybody
but after all these are still my people
pensioners single mothers dropouts
weirdos and superannuated hippies
the last of the folkies hunched in his St Vinnies' overcoat
plays bush ballads on his squeezebox in the village
as the black hearse passes drawn slowly up the mountain
dropping away in a cavalcade of loss.

MATURE WRITER. So is that all there is in the end, to accept oneself, to be finally and irrevocably responsible for oneself? I wanted to find in this dirty, scheming, contemptible world something, some kind of miraculous insight ... I had a tremendous world inside my head and more than three quarters of it will be buried with me.

YOUNG MAN. When they come to the grave, while the corpse is made ready to be laid in the earth, the priest and the clerks shall sing.

ALL. Woman that is born of woman hath but a short time to live and is full of misery. She cometh up and is cut down like a flower, she fleeth as it were a shadow and never continueth in one stay.

WRITER. now I can fold
my hands and lie
like one of those
stone effigies

those warrior queens
in pleated dresses
noses hacked off
as if they had
some sad perpetual pox ...

the air is moist and cold
with wavering circles
as you tiptoe in
some sick incumbent
in a faded soutane
shooting his cuffs
holds out his palm
for silver ...

your effigy
is neatly in its place
with folded arms
except some child
is poling heartsbane
up your crumbling nostrils

his mother calls
Come away dear

the lady's not for touching

FINALE

Song: *Welcome Home*

ALL. *Welcome home, Dolly Garden.*

All for you,

All for you,

Yes we made it and we created it

All for you.

All for you,

All for you,

Yes we made it and we created it

All for you.

WOMEN. A dream, a fable.

YOUNG MAN. All for you.

WOMEN. A fable, a dream.

YOUNG MAN. All for you.

WOMEN. A Crystal Palace

For a fairytale Alice.

YOUNG MAN. A dolly-bird in green.

ALL. A dream.

All for you,

All for you,

Yes we made it and we created it

All for you.

YOUNG WRITER. For me!

ALL. A-a-ll.

Plays

This Old Man Comes Rolling Home (1967)
Joan [1975/1984 Yackandandah]
Pandora's Cross [1978, Theatre Australia, September]
Miss Hewett's Shenanigans [1975]
Golden Valley [1981/85]
Mrs Porter and the Angel
The Chapel Perilous Or, The Perilous Adventures Of Sally Banner (Currency Press, 1972)
Bon-bons and Roses for Dolly (1972)
The Tatty Hollow Story (1974)
Christina's World [1983]
The Man From Mukinupin (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1979)
The knight of the long knives
Fields of Heaven [1982]
Susannah's Dreaming [Radio play]
The Golden Oldies (1976) [Currency, 1981]
The Raising of Pete Marsh (1988)
Nowhere (Currency, 2001)
Zoo [1991]
The Golden Valley
Song of The Seals
The Beautiful Miss Portland [Theatre Australia 1976]
Catspaw [1974]
The Jarabbin Trilogy
Rissie and Jules [Radio play]

Biography

Wild Card (McPhee Gribble)

Stories

A Baker's Dozen, (Penguin Books Australia, year?).
Australians have a word for it. short stories from down under [includes stories by Dorothy Hewett and Katharine Susannah Prichard], edited by Gertrude Gelbin. (Berlin. Seven Seas Publishers, 1964)

Novels

Bobbin Up 1959/(Melbourne. Vulgar Press, 1999)
Neap Tide (Penguin, 1999)
The Toucher (Ringwood. McPhee Gribble, 1993)

Books of Poems

What About the People, (with Merv Lilley), (self published/Roneo, 1962/Realist Writers, 1963)
Hidden Journey. (Newnham (Tas.). Wattle Grove P., 1967);
Late night bulletin [Illustrations by O. Novotny, W. Guy, and R. ennequel](Newnham, Tasmania. Wattle Grove Press, 1968)
Rapunzel in Suburbia (Prism, 1975)
Greenhouse [drawings by Hilary Burns](Sydney. Big-Smoke Books, 1979.)
Alice in Wormland (Paddington. Paper Bark Press, c1987)
Selected poems [editor. Edna Longley](Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1991)
Peninsula (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1994)
Collected Poems 1940-1995 (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1995);
Wheatlands, (poetry and prose with John Kinsella), (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2000)
Half-way Up the Mountain, (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2001)

