

The Lost Boys

Alice searched for the lost boys
& found them
we are looking for the lion
they told her
she didn't hesitate
the ship was ready anchored in the harbour
so they set sail
it was a bad trip
the wind lashed in the rigging
the albatross swayed on the topmast
its feathers parted

Don't shoot she warned them
but they wouldn't listen
its blood stained the cedar decks for days
icebergs big as cities loomed
& cracked like shot above them
in the arctic nights huge stars
spun up & glowed & circled

Landfall cried the boy in the crowsnest
(a cormorant in his eyrie)
but it was nothing
a cloud a wave a bough
a bird's nest floating
the boys weak with scurvy wrung their hands
two died & lashed in canvas slid away
Man overboard they whimpered.

A lighthouse swung its beams
& steered them westward
sometimes they sang in the night
as they turned the wheel
some said they heard surf
breaking on the reefs
& the hope revived them
In the sixth month the seas grew calmer

Alice put the telescope to her blind eye
& saw the island growing
half way between sea & sky
floating
sweetened with spice & palm trees
the lion crouched in the shallows
licking its golden paws
its mane in shadow
the boys cheered & flung their caps
the population waved seductively
Look Alice it is really Wonderland.

but the lion refused them
once the anchor dragged on coral
Cast off the lion thundered
the boys swarmed like sparrows
soaking their sailor suits
weeping for home & mother
Alice felt for their cold wet faces
we all set out to be lost she told them.

— DOROTHY HEWETT

Early One Morning

by Dorothy Hewett

The cat is dead and the black rabbit
but the fox is still free
to leap through the kitchen window
at midnight clattering the pans

early one morning we found him
hidden behind the sofa
lifting his muzzle in a snarl

but sitting there in first light
your hands hanging loose on your thighs
you questioned him in the language
you always use for the animals
backwards and forwards you went
in a friendly conversation
he copying every intonation
in his foxy whine till you told him
well I think it's time you went

as if you had given him permission
he sidled out through the door
pausing and taking his time
looking back once and testing the air

with his red brush tail trailing behind him
he loped away through the orchard
making for his own wild bush
on the other side of the railway line

Tapestry

by Dorothy Hewett

There is a lady in the forest
with a pointed headdress
on a carpet of leaves
between the lion and the unicorn
and the emblematic trees
What meaning has she (if any)
Something to do with a perpetual
virginity forever untried
something to do
with the calm and gentle
lives of women
between the lion and the unicorn
one to devour one to love

Generations

by Dorothy Hewett

Four generations sat here yesterday

while I felt strangely distant
as if I had already taken an indefinite departure.
the child on the floor crawling and crowing
is Tomas the child in the chair is Rachael
it has taken her nine years to kiss me goodbye
the tall young man with the long legs
stretched out and the exotic wife is Daniel
Neil is the sweet-tempered man
my youngest daughter married
the other two are Tom and Rose
the children of my blood and close to me...

children grandchildren and one great-grandchild

how did I who never thought I'd live
past thirty-five become so old and so prolific?
The generations that descend from me
they pull me down am I responsible
for anything on this wintry afternoon
warmed by pale sunlight
through the leafless trees?

I have nothing wise to say to them
nothing profound I've never believed
that old age has a corner on inherited wisdom

(rather the reverse) I lie here
on the leather sofa smiling agreeable
while Tomas crawls and Rachael sits composed
and Daniel talks about computer graphics
my husband pours the wine
my children cut the sacrificial cake.

Tasmanian Magpies

by AD Hope

Ethiopia! They used to say,
Fluting at dawn through pure, clear rills of sound,
The magpies of that earlier day,
Ethiopia! Ethiopia! From all around.
Dulcimer of no Abyssinian maid
Was ever so plangent or so doucely played.
Ethiopia, Ethiopia!
Echoes went through me of Mount Abora.

Another country, another age! I still
Hear them at early morning in the trees;
The same pure grace notes, the same exquisite trill,
The lilt, the liquid ease,
But not the enchantment of that warbled name;
The magpie dialect here is not the same;
The magic syllables have gone
That brought me full awake and roused the sun.

Lost Ethiopia. Is that loss in me?
Monaro magpies bursting into song
Soar through new cadences, fresh jubilee;
But in an unknown tongue
Rejoice. Can it perhaps be true
That I have lost those languages I knew
In boyhood, when each bird,
Stone, cloud and every tree that grew
Spoke and I had by heart all that I heard?

Crossing the Frontier

by AD Hope

Crossing the frontier they were stopped in time,
Told, quite politely, they would have to wait:
Passports in order, nothing to declare
And surely holding hands was not a crime
Until they saw how, ranged across the gate,
All their most formidable friends were there.

Wearing his conscience like a crucifix,
Her father, rampant, nursed the Family Shame;
And, armed with their old-fashioned dinner-gong,
His aunt, who even when they both were six,
Had just to glance towards a childish game
To make them feel that they were doing wrong.

And both their mothers, simply weeping floods,
Her head-mistress, his boss, the parish priest,
And the bank manager who cashed their cheques;
The man who sold him his first rubber-goods;
Dog Fido, from whose love-life, shameless beast,
She first observed the basic facts of sex.

They looked as though they had stood there for hours;
For years - perhaps for ever. In the trees
Two furtive birds stopped courting and flew off;
While in the grass beside the road the flowers
Kept up their guilty traffic with the bees.
Nobody stirred. Nobody risked a cough.

Nobody spoke. The minutes ticked away;
The dog scratched idly. Then, as parson bent
And whispered to a guard who hurried in,
The customs-house loudspeakers with a bray
Of raucous and triumphant argument
Broke out the wedding march from Lohengrin.

He switched the engine off: "We must turn back."
She heard his voice break, though he had to shout
Against a din that made their senses reel,
And felt his hand, so tense in hers, go slack.
But suddenly she laughed and said: "Get out!
Change seats! Be quick!" and slid behind the wheel.

And drove the car straight at them with a harsh,
Dry crunch that showered both with scraps and chips,
Drove through them; barriers rising let them pass
Drove through and on and on, with Dad's moustache
Beside her twitching still round waxen lips
And Mother's tears still streaming down the glass.

Imperial Adam

AD Hope

Imperial Adam, naked in the dew,
Felt his brown flanks and found the rib was gone
Puzzled he turned and saw where, two by two,
The mighty spoor of Jahweh marked the lawn.

Then he remembered the mysterious sleep,
The surgeon fingers probing at the bone,
The voice so far away, so rich and deep:
"It is not good for him to live alone."

Turing once more, he found Man's counterpart
In tender parody breathing at his side.
He knew her at first sight, he knew by heart
Her allegory of sense unsatisfied.

The pawpaw drooped its golden breasts above
Less generous than the honey of her flesh;
The innocent sunlight showed the place of love;
The dew on its dark hairs winked crisp and fresh.

This plump gourd severed from his virile root
She promised on the turf of Paradise
Delicious pulp of the forbidden fruit;
Sly as the snake she loosed her sinuous thighs,

And waking, smiled up at him from the grass;
Her breasts rose softly and he heard her sigh.
From all the beasts whose pleasant task it was
In Eden to increase and multiply

Adam had learned the jolly deed of kind:
Her took her in his arms and there and then,
Like the clean beasts, embracing from behind,
Began in joy to found the breed of men.

Then from the spurt of seed within her broke
Her terrible and triumphant female cry,
Split upward by the sexual lightning stroke.
It was the beasts now who stood watching by:

The gravid elephant, the calving hind,
The breeding bitch, the she-ape big with young
Were the first gentle midwives of mankind;
The teeming lioness rasped her with her tongue;

The proud vicuna nuzzled her as she slept
Lax on the grass; and Adam watching too
Saw how her dumb breasts at their ripening wept,
The great pod of her belly swelled and grew,

And saw its water break, and saw, in fear,
Its quaking muscles in the act of birth,
Between her legs a pigmy face appear,
And the first murderer lay upon the earth.

The play dogel from the old stories.
Re-Union

"All other lovers being estranged or dead"—YEATS

Snared in the suburban drawing room
With my husband, my ex-husband and my ex-lover,
I sit alone Rapunzel, ah! Rapunzel let down your hair.
The eyes of my ex-husband's wife knife me miserably
For the past she can never share, except by proxy,
The eyes of my ex-lover's wife skin me alive.
(I rejoice at their private hatreds aired in public,
and shake at her revelations of domesticity.)
My husband's eyes regard me with irony.

My husband, my ex-husband and my ex-lover
Down their beers like men,
Talk politics, anthropology, conservation.
I sit naked at their feet,
The eyes of their women
Deliberately pluck out my backbone.

Under the sound of the reticulation system
Pouring against the glass, I hear his voice:
"Rapunzel how beautiful you are."
He claims me with his hand.
"No-one can hear us, no-one is listening."
My ex-husband bends to catch the murmured words,
Cuckolded once again.
A giant beast comes out of the garden
And settles at my side, the storm of water on the glass
Reflects my face, the sadness of menopause, the faltering body.
No-one can hear us, no-one is listening.

Protected by this room, he sits and smiles,
Aloud he says: "I've grown conservative,
A simple man, don't wish to be disturbed,
Content enough, my job, my wife, my children."
My husband's eyes regard me with irony.

We stalk the circle of ourselves, outside the women
Clamour to be let in: this is a private hell,
No place for ladies, only for wild sad girls
Who lie down under hedges with their legs apart
Crying for love, the privet in their hair.

The jungle of umbrella trees and tree fern
Presses the plate glass windows till they bulge and crack.
The bottle smashes on the carpet, the beer stain spreads,
Lapping at the feet of my ex-husband's wife.
She stands, islanded in grief, justice tipping her scales.

Under one roof you gather up my life
And rend it with your murderous paws.
My husband takes my arm, I exit in disgrace.
Rapunzel, ah! Rapunzel let down your hair.