

## Judith Wright

---

Judith Wright was born into a prominent pastoral family in Armidale, New South Wales, in 1915. Since her first collection of poems (*The Moving Image*, 1946), Wright's wide range of verse and prose writings has reflected her increasing interest in the landscape, conservation issues, and the civil and territorial rights of indigenous Australians. The works referred to in the essay following this selection of poems (with abbreviations used given in brackets after the full title) include: *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry (Preoccupations)*, 1965; *Because I Was Invited*, 1975; *Phantom Dwelling*, 1985; and *A Human Pattern (HP)*, 1990. A full list of Judith Wright's published works appears in the Select Bibliography.

---

## FOR NEW ENGLAND

Your trees, the homesick and the swarthy native,  
blow all one way to me, this southern weather  
that smells of early snow. And I remember  
the house closed in with sycamore and chestnut  
fighting the foreign wind.

Here I will stay, she said; be done with the black north,  
the harsh horizon rimmed with drought—  
planted the island there and drew it round her.  
Therefore I find in me the double tree.

And therefore I, deserted on the wharves,  
have watched the ships fan out their web of streamers  
(thinking of how the lookout at the Heads  
leaned out towards the dubious rims of sea  
to find a sail blown over like a message:

*you are not forgotten*);  
or followed through the tap-root of the poplar . . .  
But look, oh look, the Gothic tree's on fire  
with blown galahs, and fuming with wild wings.

The hard inquiring wind strikes to the bone  
and whines division. Many roads meet here  
in me, the traveller and the ways I travel.  
All the hills' gathered waters feed my seas  
who am the swimmer and the mountain river;  
and the long slopes' concurrence is my flesh  
who am the gazer and the land I stare on;  
and dogwood blooms within my winter blood,  
and orchards fruit in me and need no season.  
But sullenly the jealous bones recall  
what other earth is shaped and hoarded in them.

Where's home, Ulysses? Cuckolded by lewd time  
he never found again the girl he sailed from,  
but at his fireside met the islands waiting,  
and died there, twice a stranger.

Wind, blow through me,  
till the nostalgic candles of laburnum  
fuse with the dogwood in a single flame  
to touch alight these sapless memories.  
Then will my land turn sweetly from the plough  
and all my pastures rise as green as spring.

## NIGGER'S LEAP: NEW ENGLAND

The eastward spurs tip backward from the sun.  
Night runs an obscure tide round cape and bay  
and beats with boats of cloud up from the sea  
against this sheer and limelit granite head.  
Swallow the spine of range; be dark, O lonely air.  
Make a cold quilt across the bone and skull  
that screamed falling in flesh from the lipped cliff  
and then were silent, waiting for the flies.

Here is the symbol, and the climbing dark  
a time for synthesis. Night buoys no warning  
over the rocks that wait our keels; no bells  
sound for her mariners. Now must we measure  
our days by nights, our tropics by their poles,  
love by its end and all our speech by silence.  
See, in these gulfs, how small the light of home.

Did we not know their blood channelled our rivers,  
and the black dust our crops ate was their dust?  
O all men are one man at last. We should have known  
the night that tided up the cliffs and hid them  
had the same question on its tongue for us.  
And there they lie that were ourselves writ small.

Never from earth again the coolamon,  
or thin black children dancing like the shadows  
of saplings in the wind. Night lips the harsh  
scarp of the tableland and cools its granite.  
Night floods us suddenly as history,  
that has sunk many islands in its good time.

## TRAIN JOURNEY

Glassed with cold sleep and dazzled by the moon,  
out of the confused hammering dark of the train  
I looked and saw under the moon's cold sheet  
your delicate dry breasts, country that built my heart;

and the small trees on their uncoloured slope  
like poetry moved, articulate and sharp  
and purposeful under the great dry flight of air,  
under the crosswise currents of wind and star.

Clench down your strength, box-tree and ironbark.  
Break with your violent root the virgin rock.  
Draw from the flying dark its breath of dew  
till the unliving come to life in you.

Be over the blind rock a skin of sense,  
under the barren height a slender dance . . .

I woke and saw the dark small trees that burn  
suddenly into flowers more lovely than the white moon.

#### AUSTRALIA 1970

Die, wild country, like the eaglehawk,  
dangerous till the last breath's gone,  
clawing and striking. Die  
cursing your captor through a raging eye.

Die like the tigersnake  
that hisses such pure hatred from its pain  
as fills the killer's dreams  
with fear like suicide's invading stain.

Suffer, wild country, like the ironwood  
that gaps the dozer-blade.  
I see your living soil ebb with the tree  
to naked poverty.

Die like the soldier-ant  
mindless and faithful to your million years.  
Though we corrupt you with our torturing mind,  
stay obstinate; stay blind.

For we are conquerors and self-poisoners  
more than scorpion or snake  
and dying of the venoms that we make  
even while you die of us.

I praise the scoring drought, the flying dust,  
the drying creek, the furious animal,  
that they oppose us still;  
that we are ruined by the thing we kill.

#### TWO DREAMTIMES

*(For Kath Walker, now Oodgeroo Noonuccal)*

Kathy my sister with the torn heart,  
I don't know how to thank you  
for your dreamtime stories of joy and grief  
written on paperbark.

You were one of the dark children  
I wasn't allowed to play with—  
riverbank campers, the wrong colour  
(I couldn't turn you white.)

So it was late I met you,  
late I began to know  
they hadn't told me the land I loved  
was taken out of your hands.

Sitting all night at my kitchen table  
with a cry and a song in your voice,  
your eyes were full of the dying children,  
the blank-eyed taken women,

the sullen looks of the men who sold them  
for rum to forget the selling;  
the hard rational white faces  
with eyes that forget the past.

With a knifeblade flash in your black eyes  
that always long to be blacker,  
your Spanish-Koori face  
of a fighter and singer,

arms over your breast folding  
your sorrow in to hold it,  
you brought me to you some of the way  
and came the rest to meet me;

over the desert of red sand  
came from your lost country  
to where I stand with all my fathers,  
their guilt and righteousness.

Over the rum your voice sang  
the tales of an old people,  
their dreaming buried, the place forgotten . . .  
We too have lost our dreaming.

We the robbers, robbed in turn,  
selling this land on hire-purchase;  
what's stolen once is stolen again  
even before we know it.

If we are sisters, it's in this—  
our grief for a lost country,  
the place we dreamed in long ago,  
poisoned now and crumbling.

Let us go back to that far time,  
I riding the cleared hills,  
plucking blue leaves for their eucalypt scent,  
hearing the call of the plover,

in a land I thought was mine for life.  
I mourn it as you mourn  
the ripped length of the island beaches,  
the drained paperbark swamps.

The easy Eden-dreamtime then  
in a country of birds and trees  
made me your shadow-sister, child,  
dark girl I couldn't play with.

But we are grown to a changed world;  
over the drinks at night  
we can exchange our separate griefs,  
but yours and mine are different.

A knife's between us. My righteous kin  
still have cruel faces.  
Neither you nor I can win them,  
though we meet in secret kindness.

I am born of the conquerors,  
you of the persecuted.  
Raped by rum and an alien law,  
progress and economics,

are you and I and a once-loved land  
peopled by tribes and trees;  
doomed by traders and stock-exchanges,  
bought by faceless strangers.

And you and I are bought and sold,  
our songs and stories too,  
though quoted low in a falling market  
(publishers shake their heads at poets).

Time that we shared for a little while,  
telling sad tales of women  
(black or white at a different price)  
meant much and little to us.

My shadow-sister, I sing to you  
from my place with my righteous kin,  
to where you stand with the Koori dead,  
'Trust none—not even poets'.

The knife's between us. I turn it round,  
the handle to your side,  
the weapon made from your country's bones.  
I have no right to take it.

But both of us die as our dreamtime dies.  
I don't know what to give you  
for your gay stories, your sad eyes,  
but that, and a poem, sister.

## FALLS COUNTRY

*(For Peter Skryznecki)*

I had an aunt and an uncle  
brought up on the Eastern Fall.  
They spoke the tongue of the falls-country,  
sidelong, reluctant as leaves.  
Trees were their thoughts:  
peppermint gum, black-sally,  
white tea-tree hung over creeks.  
rustle of bracken.  
They spoke evasively,  
listened to evident silence,  
ran out on people.

She hid in her paintings,  
clothed, clouded in leaves;  
and her piano  
scattered glittering notes  
of leaves in sunlight,  
drummed with winter rains,  
opened green depths like gullies.

He took better to horses:  
the galloping storms of hoofs  
like eucalypts chattering  
or stones hopping on slopes.  
Enclosed in the dust of mobs  
or swinging and propping  
among those ribbony boles  
he was happy.  
His eyes were as wary  
as soft as a kangaroos.

Snow falling, the soft drizzle  
of easterly weather  
covers them, my old darlings.

What does the earth say?  
Nothing sharp-edged.  
Its gossip of lichen and leaf,  
its age-curved granites,  
its glitter of wetness  
enclose them.

Is the spring coming?  
 Are there hooded orchids?  
 That's what their bones breed  
 under the talk of magpies.

Listen. Listen,  
 latecomer to my country,  
 sharer in what I know,  
 eater of wild manna.

There is  
 there was  
 a country  
 that spoke in the language of leaves.

#### SNAKESKIN ON A GATE

Summer's long heats slowing at January's end  
 I found by the gate a snake-slough; its dry scales  
 of horn blew newly-cast in the hot wind  
 against the hedge, ripped between stem and thorn.  
 I took it, shivering, and hung it on the gate-rails—

thinking it emblem, if emblems had been needed,  
 of a time of life like January, double-faced month of change,  
 that looking backward sighs for the dedication's innocence,  
 then turns too many pages, to find the end of the book.  
 But its touch was closer than omens: dry, cold, strange.

Dry with life withdrawn; cold with a desert cold;  
 strange, between two realities, neither alive nor decayed,  
 the snakeskin blew in the wind on the closed gate;  
 and I went uneasily, watching, for my life's sake,  
 for a coil of poisonous dark in the pools of shade.

Then at last I saw him, stretching warm in the sun;  
 shining; his patterned length clean as a cut jewel.  
 Set free of its dim shell, his glinting eye  
 saw only movement and light and had no fear of me.  
 Like this from our change, my soul, let us drink renewal.

#### SPACE BETWEEN

Space between lip and lip  
 and space between  
 living and long-deal flesh  
 can sometimes seem the same.

We strive across, we strain  
 to those who breathe the air,  
 to those in memory;  
 but Here is never There.

What is the space between,  
 enclosing us in one  
 united person, yet  
 dividing each alone?

Frail bridges cross from eye  
 to eye, from flesh to flesh,  
 from word to world; the net  
 is gapped at every mesh;

and this each human knows:  
 however close our touch  
 or intimate our speech,  
 silences, spaces reach  
 most deep, and will not close.

#### HALF-DREAM

Half dreaming half awake  
 I felt the old boat rock at the lake shore;  
 small pulse of waves in the moon-road  
 slop, lip, withdraw;  
 pull and slack of the rope.  
 sigh in the trees.  
 Old boat  
 nibbles her rope, swings;  
 black swan stirs asleep.

Rise, fall of breath,  
 hesitant regular beat,  
 Tug on the wearing strand  
 all night long  
 sidling, slackening.

A peaceful dream. No sound  
 but leaf-talk, lip on sand,  
 shift of swan-wing.  
 Half-awake my heart  
 tested its moorings, turned  
 back to sleep.  
 Let the breath rise and fall,  
 the regular ripple and slack  
 fray at the strand.

## BLACK/WHITE

This time I shall recover  
 from my brief blowtorch fever.  
 The sweats of living  
 flood me; I wake again  
 pondering the moves of anti and of pro.  
 Back into play I go.

Had it been pro-biotics that they gave me  
 would I still live?  
 Antibiotics maybe snub the truth,  
 cheating the black king's move—  
 emptily save me,  
 a counter-ghost tricked from a rightful death.

But you can play on black squares or on white,  
 do without counters even; in theory  
 even the dead still influence what we do,  
 direct our strategy.  
 I'm none too sure exactly why I'm here,  
 which side I'm playing for—

but still, here's day, here's night,  
 the checkerboard of yes and no  
 and take and give.

Again I meet you face to face,  
 which in itself is unexpected grace.  
 To arms, my waiting opposite—  
 we live.

## WOMAN TO MAN

The eyeless labourer in the night,  
 the selfless, shapeless seed I hold,  
 builds for its resurrection day—  
 silent and swift and deep from sight  
 foresees the unimagined light.

This is no child with a child's face;  
 this has no name to name it by;  
 yet you and I have known it well.  
 This is our hunter and our chase,  
 the third who lay in our embrace.

This is the strength that your arm knows,  
 the arc of flesh that is my breast,  
 the precise crystals of our eyes.  
 This is the blood's wild tree that grows  
 the intricate and folded rose.

This is the maker and the made;  
 this is the question and reply;  
 the blind head butting at the dark,  
 the blaze of light along the blade.  
 Oh hold me, for I am afraid.

## GUM-TREES STRIPPING

Say the need's born within the tree,  
 and waits a trigger set for light;  
 say sap is tidal like the sea  
 and rises with the solstice-heat—  
 but wisdom shells the words away  
 to watch this fountain slowed in air  
 where sun joins earth—to watch the place  
 at which these silent rituals are.

Words are not meanings for a tree.  
 So it is truer not to say  
 'These rags look like humility,  
 or this year's wreck of last year's love,  
 or wounds ripped by the summer's claw.'  
 If it is possible to be wise  
 here, wisdom lies outside the word  
 in the earlier answer of the eyes.

Wisdom can see the red, the rose,  
 the stained and sculptured curve of grey,  
 the charcoal scars of fire, and see  
 around that living tower of tree  
 the hermit tatters of old bark  
 split down and strip to end the season;  
 and can be quiet and not look  
 for reasons past the edge of reason.

## DARK GIFT

The flower begins in the dark  
 where life is not.  
 Death has a word to speak  
 and the flower begins.

How small, how closely bound  
 in nothing's net  
 the word waits in the ground  
 for the cloak earth spins.