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OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

Kunapipi

Volume 10 | Issue 3

Article 4

1988

Poems

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Recommended Citation

Owen, Jan, Poems, *Kunapipi*, 10(3), 1988.

Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol10/iss3/4>

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Poems

Abstract

Loquats, Nightfall, Dividend, Day Trip, Piano

Loquats

They flourished
beside the clothes line
or the tank
in dry backyards,
still shade the dunnies
on deserted farms.

This sweetness between the leathery skin
and the glossy stones –
remember the slow smiles of the men,
the sunburnt arms of the women
near Goyder's Line,
pioneers, laconic survivors
lit up by fruit or rain.

Dour trees
of Grandma's time
they claimed the possums, birds,
and neighbourhood kids
plunging up half-light
to suck the pale flesh,
spit slippery pips
and clang them on next-door's tin.
Drained skins
the colour of summer
lit the ground.

On Great aunt's lacquerware box
a stream, a bridge, a tree –
luh kwat: Chinese rush orange.
Under the lid,
a puff of dark,
a topaz brooch, seed pearls, a ruby ring,
down the hall footsteps coming.
Click shut quick.
A wet finger swirl
on the dusty top
leaves the green cowlicks gleaming.

Nightfall

'No!' said Papa and went. It wasn't for eggs.
Nan caught two chooks in a flurry and held their legs.
Chop. Something zigzagged horribly off.
Chop. Another on crazy legs went for its life
down our safe garden, off its head.
'Silly beggars,' breathed Nan, shocked at the word.
Pulling the feathers out was better – we looked
as soon as they kept still, prepared to be cooked.
Before dark fell we came inside
but fidgeted and would not stay in bed
so Papa told us tales of giants and ghosts,
of pirates and mermaids and fabulous beasts
and how the elves stole treasure from the gnomes.
'Tom,' clicked Nan, 'You'll give those children dreams.'

Dividend

Saturday, late morning, the fever began:
the short phone calls to the little man
that Aunty Bubbles knew, the form and weight
and starting price. They're lined up at the gate
for the fourth at Victoria Park. The nasal voice
of the wireless galloped us fast as the winning horse.
'It's Valiant Boy by a short half-head.'
'Oh pooh,' our mother said, 'another dud.'

But when she wore her lucky hat to the races
once, her Uncle Clarry's grey, Sir Croesus,
came home on the rails at fifty to one.
He gave a pound note each to me and John,
and a taste for risk; we learned to back long shots,
dark horses, elderly relatives, and red hats.

Day Trip

The carriage shudders and rolls; no getting off
the illusion of stasis, of safety.

From the window seat a woman smiles:
she's nursing a baby from Vietnam
with a harelip like her own.

The baby will not smile but stares
from eyes like two dark seas
till rocked to sleep. The angel hovering
in the corner there knows nothing of this,
trapped in perfection with so much to learn –
blood, war, healing, how to hold a child.
Here in second class we're sure of less and less.
Forgetting as the train rocks on,
we watch the dust motes circling in the sun.

Piano

Over the gravel and grass and road, barefoot,
with tuppence each to spend at the corner shop,
quick as skinks on the asphalt soft with heat
and the short-cut stubbly straw of St Joseph's Prep,

across Tutt Avenue, not a car in sight,
to Mr Mellor's Store, the high stone step,
the creaky door and the cool dim light
we skipped. The smell of tea and soap,

vanilla and biscuits, welcomed us in to choose
two ice-blocks – peach and banana were best.
Going back, the stubble whirred up at our eyes
and over the convent wall as we came past,

piano music floated and was lost
to the air: grasshoppers turning back to grass.