An Afternoon with Gwen Harwood

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Gwen Harwood is one of Australia’s foremost poets. She has been publishing her work since the late forties and to date has five volumes, from 1963 to the present. Her latest is Bone Scan (Collins/Angus & Robertson), reviewed in Antipodes, Spring 1990. An updated issue of her Selected Poems has also appeared this year. Two new books on Harwood, a critical biography and a volume of her letters to Thomas Riddell, will appear in 1991 from Collins/Angus & Robertson.

T.G. Bishop visited Gwen Harwood at her home in Hobart, December of 1989.

For an image of myself
I’d have: a fine late season,
the last sweet apples holding
ripeness out on a limb.

It’s rather like drinking wine: if you don’t have
the palate for it no amount of fancy talk will help.

Gwen and Bill Harwood live halfway up a hill in Hobart, in an older red brick house secluded from the street by a narrow driveway. Both house and driveway are edged by trees and lined with flowers and shrubs. We park on the street and walk in towards the house, our coming heralded by a thrush that runs before us. The house is islanded by the variegated green of longish grass and clover, picked out with small, bright flowers. Across from the front door, past the fruit trees and over the fence, you can see down the hill and across the Derwent to the far side, where the city is now extending itself. Buds of plum and nectarine push out from the twigs. The air is cool and moist, even this December, with the tang of Antarctic salt.

My wife and I have driven from our hotel downtown—literally down, as Hobart climbs the slopes of Mt. Wellington and the rise is steep here. From Melbourne, intending to arrange a meeting, I had called to ask what afternoon would be best, but Gwen Harwood had promptly insisted, in a brisk and genial voice, that we both come for lunch. Another call from the hotel had confirmed arrangements. Did we like fish? Good, because it was abundant and delicious.

As indeed it is. The house is warm, with the cozy smell of a hot lunch on a damp afternoon. It is the kind of Australian house I love, where tea and baking are regular, where fires heat and dry the rooms. Gwen Harwood, a small energetic woman full of purposive activity, comes to the door and greets us, ushering us in. Her husband, Bill, is also there. Retired from his work in English linguistics at the university, he has become interested in modeling complex logical processes by computer. In a room off the hall, a blinking red light shows the current program at work. Bill tells us it has been running several days. Snugly ensconced, it seems to have all the time it needs.

We have lunch at the kitchen table, looking out over the hill at the birds coming and going. There are two kinds of fish: trevally, then perch. Both are fresh that morning. Potatoes, beans, and salad accompany, with glasses of wine. Mince-pies follow, and we discuss the trick of making them. The kitchen is hung with postcards from all over the world, and with the Christmas cards that have begun arriving. A new microwave, a recent gift from their children on the mainland, has become an important kitchen adjunct. As we drink our tea, the conversation turns to poetry. Gwen Harwood describes the hymns and songs of her childhood, tells how deeply their cadences remain. She quotes some verses. She asks me about an Elizabethan ballad, “Walsingham,” which, as it happens, I have recently also been thinking about. She springs up from the table and returns with a book containing the poem. We discuss its authorship, its popularity, its tune, its reappearance in her madness on Ophelia’s lips. We mention other mad songs, and the languages of madness. Wittgenstein’s ghost seeps into the conversation. We refill our tea, have another mince pie.

My wife and Bill leave us alone while they visit the garden. Gwen and I move into the living room, where there is an upright piano and a sofa. I had intended to record this part of the conversation on a small cassette player I have brought, but find now that I resist turning it on and thereby changing the nature of our conversation. I hesitate, and decide
not to. We both seem slightly relieved not to have to endure the eavesdropping of this unflinching, censorious box. I put away the untidy sheets of questions I had scribbled earlier and attempt to improvise.

I ask about her collaborative work with various composers, on opera, chorale, and song. She has been working lately with the Tasmanian composer Don Kay; their most recent completed piece is “Northward the Strait,” a choral suite for voices and wind band performed for the Bicentennial the previous year. It concerns the European conquest of Tasmania, and the tragic confrontation of the two cultures is rehearsed in an interplay of soloists and chorus. She brings me a program from the performance, and tells a story about a Tasmanian Aboriginal who helped her focus the libretto. It seems that one of the Aboriginal children of the relict population lodged on Flinders Island was asked by a well-meaning Victorian visitor whether he was getting a Christian education. He replied that he was, and quoted parts of a hymn from the Book of Common Prayer: “Let the Indian, let the Negro/ Let the rude barbarian see” and “O’er those gloomy hills of darkness/ Look my soul be still and gaze.” Gwen Harwood comments: “That was a
Christian education to him: Gloomy hills of darkness!” The piece is plangent, elegiac, full of visions and specters of voice.

I ask about Vin Buckley, a fellow poet and friend of many years. She tells me of the first time they met, when Buckley was visiting town on a lecture and rang her up wanting to see her: He had been reading the poetry she had begun to publish. “In two hours,” she says, “I learned more about poetry than I ever had before.” She mentions other poet friends, James McAuley for instance, at one time a neighbor of hers: how she can still see his figure, and especially, hear his voice. She quotes some lines of his in description of the call of a wattle-bird.

I ask her about poets she has never met, and at once she mentions Robert Penn Warren, whose work she has in its entirety, and sadly, there will be no more. She speaks rapidly, “I never met him, but the moment I read him I felt that I understood him entirely, that I felt just as he did and knew just what he meant. He was a great influence on me. Some lines of his had a very great impact.” She quotes a dozen or so lines. “I can’t think how to do that better.” She asks about my own recent reading, and I mention a volume of poems that performs a rather elaborate metrical feat: “That’s not hard,” she sounds scornful, “that’s easy. I could do that.” Thinking of her own poems, I mention an essay I have just read on English poems about cats, but she speaks instead of the various cats of her own past, and then of a collection of poems about dogs she has given me, but she rejects this too-much enthusiasm. Gwen Harwood seems aware of their movements, even close to them. She notes some individuals that are locals; in particular a notorious blackbird with a cry of “Video, video,” who keeps her on the lookout. The range of birds is less than it was at Oyster Cove, but still wide, and there are occasionally exotic or migrating visitors. (Down in the city we hear of a program where local households take in wildlife—wombats, wallabies, the occasional devil—until old enough for release. Hobart seems closer to its fauna than most cities—perhaps it is that brooding mountain.)

Clouds are beginning to move in from over the mountain as we go inside for a last cup of tea. Bill has been explaining the activities of the computer, which has ticked over another unit of its program that afternoon. We mention our lodging in town—a partly renovated pub with homely beds and creaking wardrobes—and Gwen and Bill laugh: It was their first housing when they arrived in Hobart from Brisbane forty-five years ago. Gwen asks if I would like a recent photograph of her in the garden, her favorite from a series taken for a publication, and finds me a copy. She also presents me with the program from “Northward the Strait,” and the latest copy of Island Magazine, which has nothing by her in it. I thank her awkwardly for all she has given me, but she rejects this too-much enthusiasm, and asks me, if I can, to send the postcards she loves to get. We leave them standing together at the door and head back to our car as the rain begins. Birds, sheltering in the trees of the drive, shift and chatter as we pass.