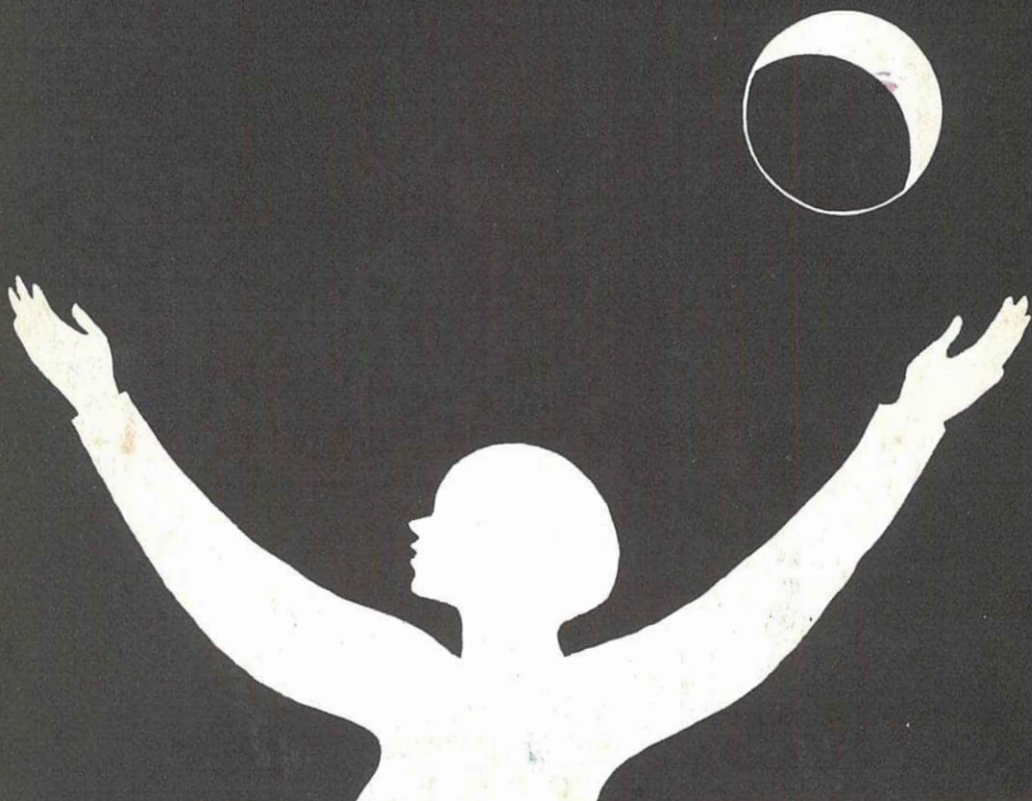


A figurehead: a face

Heather McPherson



A figurehead-, a face

Heather McPherson

Spiral
Wellington
1982

SPIRAL will continue to publish a feminist literary and arts journal. The current collective will also be publishing books of poetry, fiction and ideas. We welcome suggestions and manuscripts.

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Seven years ago when as a writer with a fairly traditional style I changed my political commitment and lifestyle, I felt initially stranded in a kind of “poetic homelessness”. On the one hand I wanted to make a new start, to clear out the “patriarchy in the head”; on the other hand I wanted to redefine such emotionally charged concepts as “woman” and “lesbian” with their pejorative accretions.

I began experimenting with word disassociation, using words without regard to their meaning. It was dissatisfying. In studying the work of Gertrude Stein I sensed, and later-read commentators confirmed that one pressure for her language experiments was to obscure a content that was, and still can be, unacceptable outside the Women’s Liberation Movement.

Eventually seeing that not language but its political misuse and limitation was at fault, with likeminded women I turned to research the theoretical basis of sexism, the process by which we had been saddled with male needs, male values - and male deities.

From this research, with friends (and thousands of women worldwide) I became convinced that as there had been an original great Goddess, her manifestations differing from culture to culture, and since all deities are human-made, and knowable through human intelligence and aspiration, then our culture too could give rebirth to a Goddess. With qualities we could revere, identify with, and find a creative source and resource.

These poems touch part of the process of coming to terms with an identity and experience that run counter to half a lifetime of conditioning.

And they are dedicated to the friends and foremothers who have shared a similar process.

Reading : **The Greek Myths**, Robert Graves, Penguin ‘55; **The First Sex**, Elizabeth Gould Davis, Penguin ‘79; **Mothers & Amazons**, Helen Diner, Anchor ‘74; **Woman’s Mysteries**, M. Esther Harding, Harper ‘76; **On Lies Secrets and Silence**, Adrienne Rich, Norton ‘79; **Not in God’s Image: Women in History**, edited by Julia O’Faolain and Lauro Martinez, Virago ‘79.

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Close-up

A woman inside an enormous sunhat
scrapes at a hillside. Below her a string road
winds round the corner and out of sight. Above
her, a storm mass creeps across the sky.

She tussles, she tugs at the earth.
White hairy roots lie crumpled at her feet.
Overhanging tussock cuts her hands.

She is clearing a space to paint on.

After a formula

Simply let go a while a while

Let words flow though they don't though they cross
cut and scatter and skirt into underneath hide.

Ride, ride. Into the word tops that sit in the centre
of half what they mean Into the broil the boil the bloat
of a bunch crop with rents and alone

A stilt craft a fly path the animate by-blast
of oughts and split eye. Not picking about itself
sliding half true till a final say flitted away Not
scuttle out ebbing dry webbing and tinny When thin
finger rings rattle plaques on deft rubbings When
pedestals tilt with a breathless and sense drops in
preen. Marble and please argue lean.

Set other distinct after mean. Double is audience,
luggage. Form forced to barge, formed to breaker
still single absorb. . . . Relating distorts. Halfso
and bitmade and hard and a mess of explain. Gaps
under tension attention will petrify.

Alone see alone into swathe.

Ride, ride. . . . till the moment the mountain, mountain
rise isolate, word owned entire at arrive.

Only unaudienced choose The exact the exacting word
fit for its being fits a being fits being.

Being freed.

stein songs for the blue house

(i)

O daughter o sister sweet mothering muddlefoot

pull back the door Glad
plug in the jug Kit
roll up the rug Susie
turn up the gram Mill

shake out night's hide for sound to pour out

here women are spreading toss heading and shedding
undoing the room in a tanglefoot bangledin laughing
and lark rudder
bottom bunch arm flock and gleam into eyelids and
crylids drop streamers and maze
blood beats a much dance a wild dance thrive o alive
dance goes wheeling and snapping uncracking exacting
the stiff spine to undulance knees and slip hips
loosing old overcoats worn wan past wanting to long
skirt the floorboards softly for falls
while light bulbs spill tipsy and discs on the wall
splash and deep coloured air waves entice and derange
in a spell dance the well dance the drown dance down
swell under wrist under elbow and flare
to open the the blue house is opening and blooming
on Friday the blue house blooms steep dancing red
rooms the women are dancing a dancing red moon

(ii)

Could anyone any one love anyone any one?
Any one anyone love one for loving and any one
love one and love one another an other like birth?

In dancing in changing of partners

o reach —

needing and heeding not needing though reading

half search half grasp unclasp and gone —

move and remove and intrude with the feet beat

the pink beat the eye sweet prospecting whose

fetching a body breed —

sweet lead to power plead: release o increase

me go under go higher go wanting o wanting come

in till I join you in more till you join me o

cloister the join —

till touch the guitarist softens the strum till

a sleeve sweeps her cheek —

till touch the tight stringer disentangles her

theme —

out of a red fist whose clutch stifles luminous

clutch augurs ominous tossed to the harper who

kindles a grace note whose eyes swing a monsoon

to spin in a fingertip spin out of foliage under

a breast dip where breakers change role —

then might be any one any one anyone might be a one

to be knowing with growing any one might be a love

A New Year company

You have exhausted me
 my friends —
your loves and quarrels and disasters,
 even your wins.
 Limp
 as a dishcloth
 after the party wash

I breathe loose ends
 in a wrung-out flat

 close
the curtains to a kiss,
 dim
the living room.
 The drooping Christmas tree peers
 into a gulf of low tide
 droppings. . . .

 exhaust
would mix a fable in green smoke,
a visitation enter softly, roses
 rise above the table

 The alarm is set.
Day nudges, a bulging wardrobe
 by the bed
 a flayed woman
 in its stain skirls
 into knots.

She wants an Order,
she has joined the cell. . . .
 drops
her mortal shoes
for charts and moons.

Planets, signs, shape humanly.
I recognise them,
recognise the smiles, the walks. . . .
 sharpening, call them in.

2.

They crowd,
they rout the room's
convergence
hold it!

Black-clothed, conspirator
and judge,
I smoothe the patchwork quilt
court's in!
*

First the Huntress —
who grew up with hills and horses,
stalks the goat, hawk-eyed
spots the fugitive
and turns away.
Tireless rider, hiker, driver,
she shoots demons, wild men, frog fears —
skins the beasts for a coat . . .
Paddock, motorway, mountain
succumb to careless memoirs,
suits flap in her slipstream,
cities shrink behind her boots.
She drops her surplus to the meek,
rich in lovers picks the bold —
will not hold back, nor hold,
nor stay.
Furies guide her aim.

*Diana grant her a wicked mare to gallop
blue peninsular hills, and steeplechase
cathedrals*

All our sisters bring a gift

3.

Next the Bound Woman

Her squeezed face dreamt magnificence,
made it a splitlevel bowl
in a portly suburb.

She flickers behind the glass,
a groper mouth blows,
bubbles lift like small lost souls
to break and spit . . .

Fins lift her polish cloth,
in gleaming kitchen rows the cupboards swarm,
shelves tip, the packets glare,
a desperate brilliance dashes on the dishes

Outside, the clothesline coils
at her wrist —
as she hangs wet sheets
one white enormous shroud bellies up
to thickening cloud.

*Psyche usher a glimpse of love's face
to her wandering midnight*

All our sisters bring a gift

Then the Stranger

to breed exotica, cables, a whiff of distance.

She spills illusion,
tightens gaps in squabble family and parliament,
bequeathes a rash of restless dreams.

She has camped on desert edges,
slept in embassy and commune,
eaten fried parasite,
hitchhiked the landmine borders —
has learnt corners of bazaars,
geocentric odysseys of the heart,
the riddled routes and goads to platforms,
and moves on.

Light with crosscurrent and shifting deck
she will not sink, be caught
in backyards she was bom with,
cups of tea and talk.

*Tiamat spread her the bright Pacific, a seaweed wake,
a network of open bolds*

All our sisters bring a gift.

4.

The Guardian . . .

Her voice is woolly-wrapped,
her bosom, fallen gourds,
her keys, a bulge in a pocket,
sharp if pressed.

A lighthouse down dark corridors,
bigger than her charge
she squashes fever footprints in the doorstep,
tuts the stab to scratch,
the pain to plateau,
shines, a liberty statue, cups
of love on a steaming tray.

Or bending, large-lapped nets the drowning,
steers them into stern
with tonic and big fists . . .

A poor fish gone — swears break, like tears —
baptise the body into bedrock
where every withered child leaves a print.

Cardea grant her long watch calm the straits

All our sisters bring a gift

The Black Lady . . .

prowling sweat nights.

She pauses, smiles, smokes

at arms length . . . turns

.to the newcomer, broaches outcast

and flap-foot drunk,

vanishes with touch.

Miscast odalisque, betrayer,

she roams the river, its blind bends,

cathedral steps . . .

pauses under a streetlight as the last bus pulls away,

laughs inside the poster, up the nave.

Seen from upper storey windows,

a broomstick wraith, she melts into thin air,

appears in tyrant dreams of lost allegiance . . .

A burnt ancestress whispers in her ear,

she flaunts —

she lures

the grasper into alleyways and haunts

without a trophy.

Hecate grant her many visitations

All our sisters bring a gift

5.

The Seer

in a tree-net cottage.
She shuts the city elements out
for elemental sight,
cuts and deals Lovers, Fool, the Tower —
Lightning-struck — impassively
as Chariot, Empress, Death;
will trace in chart or palm
the drop, the sickness, seize hour,
insurrection.

Her pale eyes cut limelight,
her hair, a herbal foliage, will not
flatten.

Planets move in her fingers,
hook the wormwood route
to aspects. . .
her fifth world potters
over cures, ephemerides, tisanes,
out of traffic.

*Persephone sprout her an everlasting garden,
a chatty spirit in the greenhouse
All our sisters bring a gift*

The Priestess . . .

glides in long dark crepe
between half-lit confessions.

Keeper of mysteries and charms
she draws a circle in straight line time,
drapes it in Eastern hangings,
dips it in chants and incense.

The blinds are down,
a silk scarf mists the lamp,
delicate tasselled fans bring back
old China, or Japan . . .

Her smiles raise coloured domes,
her voice anoints shop wounds,
hot windscreens fade in the brassware . . .
ah, all

is peace and honey
in her hands.

6.

She offers flowers to converts,
a thought breeds phone calls, visits, aches.

Candles float the spill to cosmic lakes.
Aphrodite guide the moon brides to her altar
All our sisters bring a gift

The Amazon. . .
works in her terms
to the end
to win.

Power in her belly, power in her breast
unsettles bigot eyes.

Hawk with magpies, morepork among sparrows,
no eye more true, more ruthless,
more intense, she unpicks
grievance - avenger
will swear hex for blood,
hound rapist and bully guard,
let no tissue heal without a hardening . . .
lofty, casts no stray glance
at the lounge, ignores
a footpath dalliance or bask,
yet throws beams
to the trapped,
cups the trodden seed.

Gentle spirits trust her lifted frontier -
fire to warm in,
air to reach to,
water to wash the hub
her shoulders heave.

Her feet crunch rock for ballast in old volcanic ground.
Artemis grant her farms, green cities, wills to build
All our sisters bring a gift

7.

And the Stick Woman . . .

Hunger hatched her,
a rag death tweaks her sleeve.
On the edge of everywhere
she struts in flame,
hums broken song,
tosses her wild hair . . .

then twists the air to loggerheads,
quotes sabotage, and Guy Fawkes.

A tattoo lacing covers
awkward scars,
a knitting needle elbow
jars the moon . . .

homeless children crowd the iron gate.

Arrogant, kea beaked,

she counts no loss -
steals from glitter counters to feed
her orphans, turns scavenger to set up
nests for strays.

Hestia load hill caches for her plains family

All our sisters bring a gift

The Artist . . .

splits to a cell

where she is, is not, inhabitant . . . -

watcher, traps the city, its flashing signs,
lover, probes an armpit, its dark grapevine,
maker, plots a table -
bread, a posy vase, a jug.

Shades, like fathen in a vacant section, sprout
prolifically, overnight —

she sharpens urgent pens to reshape light.

Props shrink, and bleed -

hands graze bone, turn white inside —
a crazy pavement hangs below the skylight
where accident, exactness

meet intent.

Patient, celebrant, she scrapes again, again

at her life sentence,

its crosscut sights.

Cerridwen promise age to fulfil the vision

All our sisters bring a gift

8.

The Clown . . .

who mimes a puppet, a pea queen,
a grizzly child —

whose tumbles ease bruised bums.

Mummer, trapezist, juggler,

she pricks ringmastery,

its tophat trips,

pokes the pompous waistcoat,

fouls herself in the whip

she might — just — crack.

The crowd's laugh coddles,

a giant pod —

she lifts her arms to it . . .

The sidetracked eve. a death route, beats

pursuit, a skip shifts

ground to glacier,

a tear mask mimics pain —

her red grin does not change.

Isis offer a springbed for high dive landings

All our sisters bring d gift

Last, and start, the Addict . . .

who eats powder for a hungry heart.

Marvellous gardens swell in pinpoint eyes,

the table top is neonland,

wallpaper melts in magic shifting cracks.

The toxin dries, black things rise.

She dodges cattleprods outside glass buildings,

the stalls where faces fall,

streets of backyard junk.

Gas, onionweed, reach out of old house smells,

the stairwell sprinkles plaster

on her head, a cat scuff

in the hallway wreathes her step

outside, the dunny leans on drunken palings,

between tin roof and blackened strut

a gape mouth flaps with wind —

she stares it down.

The death pit shifts.

Urania stretch a hand to unmask her courage

All our sisters bring a gift

9.

Personae, mythic ones

recede

the poet, scratch-headed, in retreat,
crops grains of an enormity.

The portraits, a new crop
in an old frame
circle

their unknown source
whose splinters light the figures
as a quick whiff sparks a mood —
sage, daphne, wintersweet.

I smoothe the patchwork quilt

judge, Order,
change for sleep.

After solstice

An irritation in the air . . .
wind flicking, pecking with bird heads,
with a too close weight of wings against
the face, the sky stretched out in dunes . . .
and heat breathes down, and tightens . . .

Another plains day for the Visitor
to disappear in, for the last snow claws
to shrivel up the alps, the bush fuzz
sink, blue knuckles, into haze . . .

The city subsides, panting, out
to edges, beaches buzz with flesh, and
coloured scraps, dogs scat wildly into foam.
Flats, office blocks go soft, the depot
shakes its roof, the bus stews quietly . . .

And the Visitor who comes with mint
tea, sage and poppies, has smiled and closed
her trail. Heat slops across it, leaves a
rotting shellfish smell, harsh as the
hitchhikers' raw red skin tilling the back
seat, speechless . . . Hair streaks their cheeks,
hands crouch on haversacks . . . the paddocks,
the outside greens, wear a numb patina . . .

to Kaiapoi . . . and the river slurs
between its banks, a sickly clay-soaked
bargeway . . . mud, old iron, discharge through
its vein. Down from the bridge where a
concrete wall holds the current stiff at its
side, weed floats and bulges, torn skirts
swelling darkly under ripples, limp swaying
shapes that stir . . .

Past the Boat Club into uncut grass
and hawkbit . . . Branches trap pale shadow here,
the wind flails aimlessly. Dandelions, splashed
sun drops, jaunty —and prolific —mimic
a comedian flock . . . a tortured willow dips loose
shady porches, foxtail, ryegrass, clump
beside a track that wavers, wormlike, up
the verge . . .

We unpack lunch. Bread, raisins,
boiled eggs, crepe-veined lettuce, fat
tomatoes with red and springy pouches,
apricots with sunbursts under the skin . . .
Surely the Visitor was here, she the benign
one over fruit and fern, she who makes
compositions of discards and ugly water,
the mudflats, gaping tins . . .

and the companion who bites a sandwich
and laughs ripely, the children like wild
lupin in an overgrown section, who swing
a rod and a borrowed sunhat in their
straight-backed fishers' place . . . the Visitor
paused here . . .

I stretch, my smile content. I itch,
I twist — I'd tear the sky's dry dunes.
Slapping a sandfly on my hand, the blood spot,
I peer at the opposite bank. A boat tied
to a small grey wharf, both retired from
hawkage . . . the green hull rolls and slips,
thick brown river foams and widen round it . . .

Wind irritates, heat breathes in . . .
A plains day squeezed, uneasy, not quite
feverish . . . its last inch must induce the
Visitor to . . .

A New Year Terminal

A caller thumps at the door . . . her workshirt
hangs sweat-darkened, she blots the unfilled sun
above the hills . . . her haversack holds causes, her
aura joins old aches and refugees . . . sisters, and
this parliament . . . a chopper shakes the greenery,
a pale horse flees behind the sun-dazed walls . . .

*and the Sugarloaf mast sharpens,
a glitter outline*

and bees fly, furry-bagged, above the roof,
and clamber up jostling grass . . . all is moving,
and carries back, the myths of past and future . . .
the next great heave bares stalks and branches

for revolt

Crossing Sydenham Park

Crossing Sydenham Park to meet the trees
I caught their current . . .

shore shore shore shore

Wind lights a cyclone in the foliage, young
oaks fling their leaves . . . Under a rag washed sky
trunks wrench themselves, stump-legged, into March,
this hot wet month blows bees awry, and sense . . .
Small black bodies crawl in grass, in dirtworks,
my feet squelch on the cricket pitch, the grounds
stretch, sheetlike . . .

shore shore shore shore

The pale woman, she with the shut jaw and white
gown, would have relished trees, the walk . . . her talk
was hearty, her loving hard . . . A branch like a breaker
sweeps its leaf crowd sideways . . . Down by the pensioner
flats, pigeons peck small heaps of crusts . . .

shore shore shore shore

A coffin always small, the last sight long.
Under a tall tree cloister the body walks . . . perception
shifts, Cybele's million bee tracks swing, the brain
tips from infinity to a daisy stalk . . . white petals,
the pink vertices emerge, quick jars of love and
pain . . . Magpies yodel, a sweet curdle, in the wind . . .

shore shore shore shore

A seagull fleet moors, halfmoons, in the grass,
the rearguard cock their wings and paddle forward . . .
a school bell rings. Somewhere over the skyline and
Nazareth House high fences, a flat collects lost
bearings . . . paintings, breast bowl, photographs . . .
crossed hands that hated bedrest . . . They circuit
the white cauldron where healing stirs, and
changes . . .

shore shore shore shore

Birds break flight, the sky droops, spits.
Thin arms, the powerlines, string empty staves across
it . . . the park's a tilting barge while trucks crank
whooping past . . . Crosscurrents over death, as love . . .
the living city rocks its elements, a woman, her
living absence . . .

shore shore shore shore

(for Perl 1979)

A song for Cardea of the hinges

I was born in a war
I was bom in a cry
On the twentyeighth day the moon
rose in a powerful sign

*I have come a long way
a long way yet to come*

*Cardea has left her chair
Cardea has cut off her hair*

Mother bore children and ghosts
Father shipped home a limp
In the twentyeighth year the sun
blazed on a Polar split

*I have come a long way
a long way yet to come*

*Cardea has breathed out the past
Cardea has broken her fast*

I straddle the front line glare
My hands lift redly apart
The lean years stiffen my belly
with urgent chants

*I have come a long way
a long way yet to come*

*Cardea swings back the lame god's door
Cardea calls from the kitchen porch
She steps out into a hungry wind
past laundry, waterfront, whare, grave
Cardea looks for her human face*

For her thirtysixth year, a breakout

This is the rage of a burning woman
this is the year of her rising

This is the rage of a woman
who did thirtysix years time

in a coffin-brake

with little of her ambition on the horizon
with one great love in her life and many sweet ones
with one great cause in her life and many painful others
with one vast sensitivity and a wardrobe of contradictions

This is the rage of a woman woken out of a box
broken out of nails, bars, tight forms
breaking into a new improbable image
tossing off that hunched apologetic loiterer on the edge
crumpling that skin, a torn singlet
for hotwater cupboard rags
filling her lungs with air

This is the rage of a woman spun in long night voices, long night cells
who finds as she blinks in the sun
that the manhole and its grating cut off shoots
and she, old clothespeg, came to life outside

*what should I do with this rage
swelling in my belly, a red fist?*

This is the rage of a woman who must passionately
believe in what she does
and many times did not
did much having seen no alternative
continued to do so in fear and love and duty
'when it seemed right'
who did what she must when pain broke crockery at her head
and jabbed her brain with splinters
who did what she hated when strung nerves burst and hit

This is the rage of a woman with a millenium to disturb

* * *

This woman finds a lineage of survivors
who boiled coppers in the washhouse once a week,
chopped sticks, and spread their long unplaited hair to dry
who read by candlelight, and rode for miles to dance

Who sometimes imagined glories more vast than could be seen
standing on country roads late at night
urging visions from the dark hills
whose bulk is more mysterious than sky
whose outline nudges a solid memory of one immoveable time

those women startling at a white shape on the fence
a morepork that flies off
one legend says to death

those women turning back to a flaked verandah
to face the photographer unsmiling
from the folds of gathered gowns

*Here for a moment the rage withers
here for a moment the rage curls down*

Only to rise knotted when she looks at her loved ones
all having been worn and wrung
in wars, in kitchens, in machinery —
who'd dreamt and scrubbed

Some splay arthritic fingers
like bent ti-trees on the road verge to the beach
some of the old hands hurt

Only to rise knotted
at crack mouths, pothole eyes
across bright promise

A woman caught behind a clothesline
the wire has bound her
she sways bumpily, a hung cushion to be pummelled

A tentative young man, his tadpole waistcoat
swells in an office bowl —
he fattens, snaps at flies

*Where can I put this rage, these hydra-headed
skulls in a skinny rib cage?*

◆ * *

This is the rage of a woman knowing suicides too closely
who spun in their convolutions
and teetered on the Up of a crazy blowhole

this is the rage of a woman who knew hands around her throat
and could not move
and afterwards walked timidly
and would not face the suits that made her so

this is the rage at waste
at paralysis, at despair

the rage of a woman among women
who sees them kill themselves in swallows
and laugh grind into shot

the rage of a woman among men
who sees a strut turn jailor at a cross
and Iqve use up

this is the rage that dances, dances
till armpits flower blades
and the blue ecliptic urges strike

*This is the rage that simmers
behind irrevocable change*

Have you heard of Artemisia?

Have you heard of Artemisia of Halicarnassus,
or Cartismandua? or Camilla?

Have you heard of Hieria of Mysia? Or Julia
Mammaea who ruled Rome? Or Tomyris the Celtic
queen who killed great Cyrus of the invading
Medes and Persians?

Have you heard of Boadicea who fought
an attacking empire — who would not be a Roman
Triumph and died by her own hand?

Have you heard of Martia Proba, Martia the Just?
Her Martian Statute after a thousand years
was the source of Alfred's code . . .

And what of Hypatia of Alexandria? head of
the School of Philosophy, logician, astronomer,
mathematician, torn to pieces by a Christian
bishop's flock . . .

Have you heard of Thecla the Apostle, or Aspasia,
or Nausicaa? and if you know passionate Sappho
what of Corinna, St Bridget, or the Lady Uallach?
and since you know Joan of Arc, should I
mention the Papess Joan or good Queen Maud,
or Philippa the beloved queen whose merchants
bought her pawned crown back . . .

I did not learn them at school, these queens
and scholars . . . but scan names such as Mary,
Elizabeth, Shulamith, for their story — vivid
women who lived as the Celts did, with audacia,
and loved their sisters . . .

In a wheel's radiation all spokes fit the motion . . .
old Europe's strain has crossed the Pacific Ocean
and I have heard it, who am a descendant
in a train, going back to a flat with a goddess
wall, whose connections travel countrywide
in quiet woman's guise . . .

dedicated to Elizabeth Gould Davis and Max Jacob

Dedicated to women who work in oils, acrylic, blood
and obscurity

There are whispers under the rosebush. There are partitions in the view. When you go to the director he may not let you through. You have fed the anonymous genius. And must wait.

The order is confinement. The overseers shrug. Who arbitrate division frame a subscribers' code. Club bars jam at macho. Galleries pull the blinds. Your sights split apple jelly. And set minds.

Flesh, the unmade culprit, sheds old cords. Words break, wethheaded, red. In the cylinder's boil at midnight you laugh at your white bed. Custodians will slide off shaky walls, the easel stand. And grow. You might have picked the role. And died well-owned.

Quests incubate. And bloom. And sometimes spill. Through wound, mask, breech-birth cries, you strip the embedded will. Rage, its tight black cells, does not pass you by. You "keep your agonies in closed rooms. And your eyes dry." And tug the newborn image out of fragments, and hair cracks. And survive.

You know who close a stilt eye not to know. Those hung on straws and one last gulp to go. The elect, massmade, discolouring in its glare. Those swallowed in a messy family maw. Those stretched across a relic's threadbare set. Crafters, who dig the backyard gully springs. Those passionately caught in one small ring. And those who "labour to the new" — the few, who still will love come morepork dawn.

Mythology, sonics, powerlines, whisper past kitchen wars. Who come, come quietly. And leave their hobbyhorse at the door. You, who know rare flight paths, know the hill tracks, hearts. And more. You ease an aching back, and talk of gardens, plants. And growing old. And dying, maybe, satisfied.

Theology and a Patchwork Absolute

Time and again,
time and again I tried to write a goddess song.
Now that I have fleshed the lyric tongue a poem
stirs. It breaks from its inhabitants. Red shapes
blaze in the patchwork quilt. Here are two women
naked on a bed.

Such proximity is heretical and a sin
to theologians and borough councillors. Their voices
shake the boardrooms. Bearded ones look stonily
from blazoned coats of arms. Thick carpet corridors
choke between the walls.

And we strip absolution. We have become
our own theologians and counsellors. Our skins are
moon washed. Our laughter escalates. If sometimes
we hear Unclean Unclean we ascribe it to the
mythical leper, mournful behind his bell. From
driftwood fire to loft we heal the biblical
landscape.

We have unpicked the spiral staircase.
We have pieced out a goddess ancestry from digs
and neglected pottery to risk her gifts.

One is the faculty of clearing a Selective
Hard of Hearing. Libraries and presses yield
their fast. Shelves inch out to accommodate new
limbs. A poem holds the shell of an inner
chamber.

*Voices between the breasts. Satin
and seersucker edged with feather stitch. Arms
that slide down forearms. Yellow plums.
Serenities.*

Proximity of old lyric tongues and this.

*(Having seen past the gods,
their power, we make a goddess,
ours . . .)*

It comes in a flat box
with instructions and an illustrated front.
Tapemeasure snaking greenly
round her, the cover model, immaculately
toothed and coiffed
points at the product
triumphantly —
a substitute body
for home sewers.

It resembles a museum case escapee -
“the armoured torso”
to protect —
or a scold’s — bridle
mortify —
the flesh . . .
Such anonymity
is scope.

The goddess unapproachable . . .
a shape in the maker’s hands
before clothes
make the class, or fantasy —
before a woman
sews herself in place.

2.

Headless, legless, armless.
More substance might have picked the more
substantial, except
good dressmakers cut cloth to suit
the budget,
and a goddess
lovingly, explorer-wrought,
can be done
by anyone
in patchwork, paua, clay
or fishbone lace.

I pull out packet, pattern, pieces.
Weird genius to copy curves in cardboard
hard as boxes.
What a front!
Old whalebone corsets
might have matched it — tender
as a stuffed frog's rump.

I lay out parts,
align the a's and b's,
the figured sheet.
And kneel between them.
Idol? icon? dummy?
with spare parts?

I shopped for drapery today
through thick material bolts
and dressing smells,
where ceilings lower
claustrophobic . . .
Turning slowly on a string above the customers
hung pink tied legs,
hairless,
nylon-bagged.

3.

Stock limbs for
the offloaded old?
bodies at last
an artifact —
all young, curvaceous, plastic,
choose your fit?

My knees twitch . . .
First, efface the fantasy.
The common woman
does not aspire to idol.
A homemade figure,
like darns and patches, argues
a common skin-
equality within.

Material is harder.
I start with pins.
And pinheads, beady whitebait eyes
that shift and bruise
the fingers.
Seams pull apart —
the partings slip -
metamorphosis is slow
and somewhat risky.
A loose point claws my arm.

I rub the thin red scratch.
It takes me back . . .
the shirring nips,
a puckered waistband . . .
the mother's mouth clips
lipless, mumbling pins . . .
the child fidgets, pulling faces at the wall,
hates
the place behind her knees exposed
to a prickly hem, elbows up
stiffly, fuss . . .

and slips away . . .
 takes out the paper dolls
 to play. They beam
 from fancy outfits:
 princess, pirate, star . . .
 They block
 the bodiced frock,
 the sewing class oven cloth,
 or potholder, or unbleached calico pinny
 a girl needs.

Words "clothe the intangible
 habitat" —
 this stuff
 bonds a concept.
 I peer at the pattern,
 its missing midriff.
 The oval slot's a waist that
 starts the frame,
 the frame a lampshade,
 tips —
 and upsets tacks . . .

*old newsreels flash —
 bodies wasted on limp bone, skin
 drawn back from teeth*
 I lose the thread —
 the taste for making effigies . . .
 this jigsaw job's
 past butchery, or ahead . . .
 deaths brood in its fledgling
 shape.

A hammer crashes —
 the room blinks back.
 Dust blows out the door, the air
 puffs new-sawn carpentry,
 stooping figures in overalls and jeans . . .
 a work space this.
 Women's work.
 Voices brush through noise,
 a cheeky pigeon pecks
 about the floor.

5.

I let out breath.

I pick up tacks,

I test the joins.

The project gathers strands . . .

even nudges overweight.

A carbohydrate spectre hovers,

her generous lines

invoke the weekly cake tin and

drape

any comfy granny

sweetening childhood stays.

. . . but small.

A goddess need not loom to emanate power.

And hollow,

to fill with immaterial dimensions.

Not works prolapsed,

ruptured organs big with babies, bags, or

blows . . .

What operations shift,

or diet, sheds substance

in the infinite -

we know, we know

the stoic's haunt

no designer shows.

Flat ribs of course,

and breasts

ex Aphrodite . . .

no flop, no flab,

no brown wrinkled nipples —

and no give.

6.

Models exude immunity
from the mortal.
A moveable clotheshorse
Nada glides the catwalk,
sails
a bottled frigate in a stream,
a season's rigging
the buyer's forum
forecasts . . .
fades
unimpeachably on the dais —
the garment's spotlight.

The blueprint notches
dart. I dart.
An unfashionable shape
unfit for mass consumption . . .
Mannequins bypass
washhouse, kitchen, crew,
as planets pass, and waves,
inhumanly.
A figurehead steers above the waters . . .
yet carved by travellers' kin
goes with them.

And she had many shapes —
this torso one . . .
flatbacked, Amazon, upright.
Not a crowbar, more
a clerical cast. Hmm.
Her neck's a bent stalk, broody,
I lift to gaze.
Impartial, full moon in a leafy night,
these shoulders hold up worlds.
As subject bodies have
done, timelessly.

7.

So next the head.
Faceless, eggshaped,
a wig dome
without the wig
The goddess harbours hairlessness
and shocks.
Women shaven for adultery,
for love, or witchcraft,
share her pity . . .
if to claim it
sparked a burning.

Today young women shear
their locks
and leaf through old wives' treatises
for herbal cures
predating white coat wizardry.
Custom cropped to a wholesome outlook
loses perms, skirts, corsetry
and silence.
And confinement.
I step back
in an overseer's spot.

And hanker, briefly, for the power
to project an image
untranscribed —
I want a flying goddess, a bird's eye view.
A hobbled goddess glints
obscurely,
shrinks in capsule, prison, pew,
breaks in travellers' sightings -
"goddesses are mountains in Nepal" —
and bushy hills
were Hine's thighs,
and sacred once,
and Demeter flew.

8.

I lift Persephone's
stand-in.
The trunk tilts lightly,
a cardboard shell.
A hanger waits for arms.
I steady the funnel, fumble flat sides
into socket, jar the rods
to make a tripod,
equilateral,
and her
stand.

A deity risen,
green, three-legged?
a trinity?
As maiden, woman, crone
reflect moon phases,
intellect, will, spirit,
knit identity,
so three pipes, girth-wide, fit
a moon circumference; rods
circled, dock in
equilibrium.

I chuckle.
A soft sculpture has its candour.
Balance shifts involuntarily
with knocks . . .
this clotheshorse rocks.
It needs, maybe,
a pedestal?
That
like highheeled shoes
has traps.
A trumped-up goddess risks
bunions, displaced vertebrae, toe-corns —
and cannot run.

9.

Drills judder up the street,
 cracked fillings jar.
The old city is inexorably torn out . . .
a demolished portico strews bricks —
I rescue some
 like matriarchal fragments
 and brace her shanks
 to withstand jolts.
 She is fragile
 but secure.

 And very bare.
What gown for a naked goddess with
 a sibyl's head, bald,
 featureless
 for imagining . . . ?
Should goddesses be clothed?

The old masters opted No.
Venus rose, a sweet anaemic Tiamat,
 a bather, half exposed. •
Limbs glow,
 the subtle brushwork sings,
 “beauty streams to flesh” . . .
A scaffold rebuffs that entree.
 The possessor clothed her bones
 skin-deep -
 a skeleton wants truth.

 Yet richness feeds
 a lineage,
 colours charge the text.
I dress her in “blackest night cape”
 and a blue-gold gown
 and a red heart,
 pinned, blood-red . . .
 a mirror in it.
 Facing
Mysteries the celebrant's first trial
 is reflection.

10.

A doll baby
celluloid, redlipped, inflammable,
sits at her feet
. . . velvet-lined, maroon
the womb is hidden.
One function does not make a total role —
she may choose not to breed.
Creatrix,
queen of poets, lovers, explorers, space,
she bleeds, she is death-eater
and the doll has upraised hands —
the creche.

A zodiac behind her head
evokes the galaxy —
a dartboard
I painted gold and
hung, wrytongued —
nimbus (astrological) and
target.
She was cursed.
I test the roller that suspends her sphere,
I rearrange her skirt.

Jealous gods broke
wholeness.
Their makers grab the masks
to prowl the city,
man the benches,
bar redress . . .
She absorbs it,
and remains . . .
a peg, a moon, a split tree
in a bog, the stake, the smoking ruins.
Archaeologists in peat swamps dig up
seeds that planted, grow —
their green stalks
vigorous.

11.

We pile
her niche with produce -
flowers are suns, fruit, vegetables
a harvest —
chrysanthemums, fennel, ryegrass, apples, corn.
A gold book charts the process,
red candles warm
the glass.

And masks left
for participants to draw her face
flare oddly: a mushroom mouth
half hump, half curl,
a spectacled stare,
a teeth-blown lunge,
one grave angelic smile.
The enigma's spun.
Her pasts — wise, bloody, gay -
start up,
vivid faces
stake her genealogy.

Chant from the Goddess stand

*I have been humankind
have seen more years
than I care to count
in the handled showcase stand
the shadow behind the man*

*ignored or ridden or raised
a hen in a wire coop
what I have been defaced
what I shall be
is at stake*

who can be your own

She who has hatched the future and reflects it
she who has clung to her vestment, never coerced
she who has been reborn and discards old skins

She of the beak sharp mind and lidded sight
she of the porcelain smile, propped in family plate
she of the stringy arms and unlaced laugh
she in the dark

She in a flowery dress and she in worker's gear
she in a bride mask, smiling
she in a scar frieze, staring
she in a gorgon's glare and elaborate sleeves
she on the roadside
she in the refuge
she in the window waving a white-gloved hand

She who was laid bleeding on white sheets
she who thrusts a wet head into the world
she who has sung a step ahead of climbers
she who moves silently, silently, barely seen

Heather McPherson has had work published in *Spiral*, *Islands and Landfall* and in the United States. She has been closely involved with the women's art movement and was recently the co-ordinator of *Women and violence* at The Women's Gallery. Heather is a lesbian feminist and lives in Christchurch with her son,