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AGAINST
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BEVERLEY
FARMER'S
WRITING

LYN
JACOBS



Against the Grain: Beverley Farmer's Writing

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For my family

*and in memory of my parents
Estelle and George Seward*

**Against the Grain:
Beverley Farmer's Writing**

Lyn Jacobs

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"... there is nothing that can feed art but life and other reading, so the work fruits out of these".

Beverley Farmer¹

"... the only work that one does that is any good is always the work one does against the grain"

Ford Maddox Ford²

Grain:

a small hard seed

gathered seeds in the mass

a small hard particle

the smallest unit of weight (originally determined by a plump grain of wheat)

leather from which the hair has been removed

the fibres or yarn in a piece of fabric

lamination or cleavage of stone

granular texture

particles which constitute a photographic emulsion (of a film or plate)

temper or natural character

to granulate

Usage:

A grain of truth

To take with a grain of salt

To go against the grain

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Lastly, I thank my family, especially Professor Gus Worby, my partner and colleague, for love, friendship, encouragement and much more.

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Preface

Beverley Farmer's writing investigates life, art, language and culture and changing social and ecological imperatives in local and global contexts, all vital issues in contemporary times. Her short stories are distinguished by a deft and economical use of imagery and dialogue and by astute portraits of family life and relationships. The novels, increasingly experimental in form and content, investigate the cultural narratives, myths and legends which sustain or shape lives. There is also a small but impressive collection of poetry which encompasses and distils these themes of generation and continuity. Farmer's writing has been valued for its clarity and intellectual breadth, perceptive appreciations of people and place, and for its lyrical, evocative and stylish prose.

Dorothy Green once described literature as "work made of words which gives ... pleasure as well as information",¹ while Elizabeth Jolley spoke of her preference for the kind of novel "which is a storehouse of observation and experience, thought and feeling".² Farmer's art meets both criteria.

This first critical study identifies central preoccupations and thematic foci of successive publications, and comments on characteristics of style and form. Critical reception is also considered, especially in the first chapter which deals comprehensively with life/ art relationships. The emphasis thereafter is on the writing, but significant critical approaches are referred to throughout. There have been radical changes to both writing and reception during the years of Farmer's engagement: shifts in gender politics, departures from modernist paradigms, problematisations of self-expression and authenticity, re-definitions of performative, fictocritical and queer writing-spaces and increasing hybridity of genre and form. Farmer's work is read in relation to these dynamic revaluations of language and contexts.

While the early chapters chart personal and artistic correspondences they also prefigure more recent work where writing, as an authentication of existence, is secondary to involvement with the ways in which art comes into being. This iteration of the labyrinthine art/life nexus is distinguished by increasing sophistication of expression as the dialectics of the early prose are subsumed by finely-tuned compositional fluencies: visual art or photographs provide frames for retrospective reconsiderations of other artists' creativity and process seems more vital than product.

Farmer's texts portray diverse experience but also function as vehicles of imaginative exploration to lead readers beyond familiar thresholds. In these ways, Farmer writes "against the grain" to convey a sensuous appreciation of the essential qualities of objects of her scrutiny. She takes a small "seed" of truth, plants it to see what might grow or be discovered, and in this process demonstrates the potential of literature. Chapter Eight, entitled "'A Grain of Fire': Recent Writing", summarises the distinctive features of this creative journey.

Publication successes since the novel *Alone* (1980)-the short stories of *Milk* (1983), *Home Time* (1985) and *Collected Stories* (1996), *A Body of Water* (1990), and the novels, *The Seal Woman* (1992) and *The House in the Light* (1995)-have confirmed Farmer's position as an esteemed Australian Writer. It is the diversity, but interconnectivity, of this evolving body of writing which is explored in this survey of Farmer's achievement.

Lyn Jacobs

Adelaide, March 2001

Chronology

- 1941 Born in Windsor, Melbourne, the only child of Maude Ruby Thomas (3rd generation Australian of Irish descent) and Colin Stewart Farmer (2nd generation Australian of Scottish and Welsh descent) who worked for State Electricity Commission (SEC). The family lived in Carnegie (Melbourne).
- 1947-51 Educated at Carnegie State School (Dux)
- 1952-53 Gardiner Central School
- 1954-57 MacRobertson Girls High School (Dux of Humanities)
Aged sixteen, began a draft for a novel about a girl who had a child and claimed a virgin birth—a second coming of the Virgin Mary. Discarded, along with religious convictions.
- 1958-60 Melbourne. University on an Education Department Studentship ("Bond"): BA (Pass) in French/English after three years of Honours).
- 1958-59 Residential scholarship at University Women's College. Summer holiday work, December /January: 1958 Dromana (with "Catherine"); 1959 Mt Buffalo Chalet. The poem "Night" (*Alone*) sent to *Meanjin* and *Poetry Australia*, but rejected.
- 1961 Dip. Ed. and first teaching round at MacRobertson-ill health (break-down, diagnosed as schizophrenia) led to the breaking of her Education Department teaching bond and the demand for repayment of studentship. Found work at Mt Buffalo.
- 1961 December: Hitchhiked to Sydney, caught Messageries Maritimes boat to Tahiti via Noumea and Port Vila but returned in April, reluctantly, due to lack of employment. Lived in Carnegie briefly (late for start of Dip. Ed.), hitchhiked outback, and then lived in Fitzroy. Interview with the Education Department psychologist about fitness to teach. Found alternative employment as a waitress, then as a housemaid-waitress in St Kilda, and later at Mt Buffalo Chalet. '
- 1961/2 Met Christos Talihrnanidis, an assisted migrant who came to Melbourne on the *Patris* in 1960, (having acquired a spray-painting certificate to migrate to Australia). He was a cook at Mt Buffalo Chalet who then evaded Bonegilla to work at General Motors Holden at Fisherman's Bend,

- 1962 The couple moved to Melbourne when Chris fell ill with double pneumonia and pleurisy. Farmer contacted the Education Department and was handed a letter sent the previous year (but not received), which absolved her from her bond; she also saw the psychologist's report which had recommended that she should not be allowed to teach.
- 1963 The couple lived with Beverley's parents, worked in a coffee shop and Farmer applied to the Education Department as a Temporary [Unclassified] Teacher. Despite her health report, she was employed.
- 1964 Taught at Karingal High School and lived at Seaford
- 1965-66 Taught at Bonbeach High School
- 1967-69 Taught at Mentone Girls High School, plus in-service training to qualify for permanency.
- 1965 Married at Registry Office 17 May 1965 and built a house.
- 1968 First two stories published in *Westerly* ("Evening" and "Alone"), the latter, the seed of *Alone*.
- 1969 Left Australia to live with husband's parents who ran a small tobacco, wheat and barley farm north of Thessaloniki [or Salonika]. *Alone* mostly written in this time.
- 1969-72 Farmer's civil marriage not recognised in Greece. Farmer had the status of "resident alien" and no work permit, and so she gave private English lessons to children and businessmen and her husband worked in hotels in Volos and Litohoro. In 1971 they travelled to England for three months. Farmer became pregnant in September, toured Peloponnesus in November and spent December to February in the village-snowbound.
- 1972 Farmer returned to Australia with her husband who worked at a restaurant and rented a room in Carlton, while Farmer lived with her parents at Karingal.
- 1972 14 June, birth of Philip Eustratios Talihmanidis (Taki) in Frankston Hospital.
- 1972 Leased the "Marine Cafe" in Lorne, a seaside resort in south-west Victoria.
- 1973 Father died. Farmer suffered a miscarriage. The cafe now owned and called "Chris's Restaurant".
- 1974 Farmer's mother moved to Lorne. Between June and September they visited Greece: Orthodox baptism and their "wedding" is followed a week later by Taki's baptism. Farmer suffered a further miscarriage. She remained in Australia because of her mother's frailty, while Chris returned with Taki to Greece for three months. Farmer ran the restaurant with the help of Chris's younger brother. In this time Farmer revised *Alone* and sent it to publishers (Wren, Outback Press).

- 1976 June to September the couple again travelled to Greece. They spent a month at Molyvo on Lesbos, but separated on their return. In Melbourne Farmer taught in the Education Department's Technical Division: one term at Aspendale Technical School; one term at Essendon Technical School, and then worked as a full-time waitress at the Southern Cross Hotel.
- 1978 Farmer's mother died and Farmer inherited the Lorne house. Divorced.
- 1979 Started writing again ("Gerontissa"), and attended a short story course at the CAE, Melbourne. "Gerontissa" accepted for publication in *Tabloid Story*.
- 1980 Farmer enrolled full-time in a Professional Writing course at Prahran CAE, now Deakin University Toorak Campus: other subjects Modern Greek and Indonesian. *Alone* was accepted by Sisters and published.
- 1983 Farmer visited the USA-New Haven. The first collection of short stories, *Milk*, was written with the assistance of a Literature Board New Writer's Grant. This collection drew on experience of Greek village life and won the NSW Premier's award for fiction.
- 1983 February: Ash Wednesday bushfires, in Lorne and elsewhere. September: returned to Greece alone where she wrote "Pomegranate Time" and "White Friday".
- 1985 Chris's Restaurant sold and demolished. Farmer bought a cottage in Carlton. *Home Time* stories written before term as writer-in-residence at the University of Tasmania, (except "Place of Birth").
- 1986 Bought Point Lonsdale house.
- 1987 Wrote *A Body of Water*.
- 1990 *Place of Birth* published by Faber and Faber: London (stories chosen by editor from *Milk* and *Home Time*).
- 1991 February: Read at *Winter's Tales* at Harbourfront, Toronto; flew to Europe (research for *The Seal Woman*) and visited Copenhagen. Visited Oslo and Bergen, and Kirkenes in the Arctic Circle; then Copenhagen, Vienna, Athens and Paros, before spending a week in the village at Thessaloniki.
- 1992 *The Seal Woman* published.
- 1995 *The House in the Light* published
- 1996 *Collected Stories* published

Prizes, Shortlistings

- 1983 *Milk*, short stories, McPhee Gribble/Penguin
Alan Marshall Award, Caltex / *Bendigo Advertiser*

- 1984 NSW Premier's Prize for Fiction 1984
shortlisted, 1985 Victorian Premier's Prize for Fiction
- 1985 *Home Time*, short stories, McPhee Gribble/Penguin
shortlisted, *The Age* Book of the Year
- 1990 *A Body of Water*, fiction in the form of a journal and stories,
UQP
shortlisted, NBC Award (Non-Fiction)
shortlisted, NSW Premier's Prize for Non-Fiction
- 1992 *The Seal Woman*, novel, UQP
Bendigo Advertiser /Sandhurst Trustees 1993 prize
shortlisted, 1993 NSW Premier's Prize for Fiction
- 1995 *The House in the Light*, novel, UQP
shortlisted, 1996 Miles Franklin Award
shortlisted, 1996 Braille and Talking Book Library Awards

Writer-in-residence

- 1995 University of Tasmania, Hobart
- 1987 The Geelong College
- 1988 Deakin University, Geelong
- 1994 The Women's College of the University of Queensland
- 1995 The Flinders University of South Australia
- 1996 University of Arhus, Denmark

Overseas readings

- 1991 Toronto Harbourfront
- 1994 Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language
Studies Conference, Leeds and BASA Conference,
University of Kent in Canterbury, UK. Graduate seminar,
University of Arhus, Denmark
- 1995 Listener Women's Book Festival, New Zealand
- 1995 Vancouver International Writers and Readers Festival,
Calgary Big Secret Theatre, Banff Centre for the Arts,
Canada
- 1995 ACLALS Conference, Colombo, Sri Lanka
- 1996 University of Arhus, Denmark
- 1996 EACLALS Conference, Oviedo, Spain
- 1997 AASA Conference, Trivandrum, Kerala

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99

Chapter 1

Introduction: Life and Art

A book is a passionate thing, it is made of experience, it is lived as it is written, it is more immediate than reality.

A.S. Byatt¹

Nothing may be taken for granted in an imagined world which may or may not work like the one we live in outside the book.

Beverley Farmer²

Beverley Farmer is best known for her fiction but she is also an accomplished critic, reviewer, poet and photographer whose diverse interests increasingly inform her writing. She began by writing short-stories and a novel (*Alone*) based on aspects of her life experience, but all of her work is influenced by a life-time's reading and appreciation of literature: specifically, English, Australian, American, French and Greek writing. Farmer was, as a group of my t-shirted undergraduate students wryly designated themselves recently, a "girlie swot"; dux of her Primary and High schools, and a young woman imaginatively immersed in literature's pleasures and pains. At the University of Melbourne in the late 1950s there were sufficient intellectual, social and sexual stimuli to interfere with study and shape life well beyond the text.³ A disastrous relationship, and its resultant turmoil and emotional upheaval, took its toll, but was formative.⁴ Twenty years later, Farmer's writing would articulate the dilemmas of an Australian society where sexuality, gender roles, love, marriage, work-patterns, individual and parental roles are intensely scrutinised and challenged. Like Gamer, Moorhouse and Wilding, Farmer's writing expresses the fears and desires of a generation "liberated" but uncertain of directions. However, Farmer claims however, that as a young

woman she was ill-equipped to enjoy bohemian alternatives.⁵ *Alone* was written when distance had lent a manageable perspective.

In the 1980s, Farmer's focus on Greek/ Australian cross-cultural relations was timely in an Australian society coming to terms with its increasingly multicultural identity. Social and generational responsibilities in migrant communities were under review, and Australian life was being revised in culturally relative terms. There was a new accommodation of alternative voices, among them women who spoke of experiences previously neglected in the imaging and literary representation of Australian social history. Farmer's writing authoritatively canvassed Greek/ Australian interactions from both outsider and insider viewpoints and frequently foregrounded female protagonists negotiating difference.

This occurred at a time of significant regional and global literary reassessment when Leavisite and New Critical readings were overtaken by structuralist, post-humanist and postmodern re-evaluations of language, life and art. The ways in which texts were received, and therefore written, were revolutionised. The forms and functions of literature became less certain, but locally the arts were invigorated by being implicated in re-negotiations of national and post-colonial global politics. Meanwhile, writers persisted with vocations in the face of rapid social change and used their lives as creatively as ever in the making of art.

In today's society, attempts to clarify relations between life and art (and fiction and history) are reflected in proliferating generic labels like faction, life-writing, autobiography, auto-biography, fictocriticism, or women's, feminist, queer or lesbian writing. Paradoxically these descriptors of increasingly hybridised literary forms have emerged despite heightened awareness of the slipperiness of such definitions. This suggests more flexible attitudes to diverse speaking positions as a spin-off from postmodern revisions of writing and reading practices.

Amid such change, it is noticeable that some literary responses persist, particularly the on-going interrogation of the vectors of life/art production and legitimisation; the business of who speaks for whom and with what authority. The

question of where the "lie" of fiction fits in relation to life and what is its currency has been very evident in the literary criticism and stock-taking resumes of the end of the twentieth century. Recent debates about authenticity and authorial responsibility indicate continuing ambivalence about the role of the writer as an independent investigator of the dynamics of culture, society or times, or conversely, as a representative and subsidised spokesperson selected to reflect or "legitimate" communal experience. This preoccupation ranges historically from the writing of documentary evidence, that we now see in terms of inventive reportage, beyond realistic fictions to the intricacies of representation inherent in the work of artists as diverse as "Em Malley", Mudrooroo or Demidenko.⁷ Contested ethnicities and competing cultural values have further complicated matters but, despite ambiguity, equivocation and memorable fraudulence, Australian readers have determinedly remained mindful of the person beyond the text. Readers have maintained their residual faith in an association between creator and product despite post-structuralist pleas for clear distinctions between author and art. Paradoxically this has been fostered by publishers' promotion of authors as products, as performers increasingly implicated in their marketing strategies. Brian Castro recently claimed that:

the identity principle is a difficult one to shuck off-the habit of identifying an author with his/her character or narrator, of legitimising fact through organising a criterion for validity, conflating truth with logic.⁸

While Farmer's fiction avoids the extremes of this debate (in that she has been consistently frank about her sources and conservative, indeed diffident, about foregrounding self in the promotion of her art), consideration of the reception of her work, and especially of her first novel *Alone*, illustrates the continuing significance of the "identity principle" as a pervasive critical reading habit. Farmer has also been careful in her negotiation of cross-cultural spaces and identities, and her protagonists are often tactfully used to define rather than transgress boundaries (of race, knowledge or propriety) beyond which it would be inappropriate or insensitive to

proceed.⁹ But her fictions do reveal the problems of daily negotiation of no-go zones within cultural, social and sexual territories.

The novel *Alone* prefigured this interest. It was welcomed as fine writing when it appeared at the forefront of the burgeoning publication of women's writing in Australia in the 1980s and, as I have suggested, it emerged amid debate about representations of the feminine and the social construction of knowledge post-feminism. A useful forum for discussion of this appears in Chapter Two, which includes a brief summary of David English's comparison of Farmer's and Hewett's writing in the context of "autobiography", Xavier Pons' article entitled "Dramatising the Self: Beverley Farmer's fiction"; Kerryn Goldsworthy's early criticism of the author's treatment of women (and Farmer's reply); Jennifer Strauss' survey of women's novels and recent re-readings of the novel *Alone* as a lesbian/ queer text.

Farmer is a well-read and informed reader whose criticism is both sound and illuminating. My decision to include authorial comments and interviews, alongside other critical commentary, reflects my appreciation of her skills, and further illustrates the inter-active, linguistic palimpsest through which fictions and lives are both lived and performed. The issue of life/ art relationships provides a good starting point because early evaluations of Farmer's work did not acknowledge the complexity of these relations.¹⁰ Extremely alive to life's ironies, Farmer recently observed, "Who was it who said that the author is dead, but still being interviewed?"¹¹ While interpretation of what is intended is another text, itself subject to modification and re-reading through time, what authors say they were attempting is often illuminating and informative. Twenty years after Barthes argued for texts as separate from authorial determination to allow for variable interpretations, and "to show the importance [significance] of relationships [between] texts", these distinctions remain clearer in theory than in practice.¹²

As the following chapter suggests, there was an autobiographical *incentive* for Farmer's first novel *Alone*, but it was not motivated by a desire to make the personal public or to

foreground self, but rather stemmed from a particular idea of the importance of credible expression:

It came down to a sense that this experience was most truly mine. It had made me what I was. I had got it the hardest way in my life so far. It was my credential as a would-be writer.¹³

This issue of "legitimacy" is sometimes read differently, affecting responses to the writing. To some the nature of Farmer's early work, and her narrator's apparent frankness, seemed confessional, which fuelled or "licensed" speculation, blurring critical distinctions between life and art.¹⁴ Readers were either passionately convinced of the honesty and accuracy of *Alone's* portrayal of a lesbian relationship, and of the subsequent short stories' persuasive and realistic reflections of contemporary family truths (*Milk* and *Home Time*), or dismissive of writing which appeared to offer exposes of self, family and cross-cultural experience. There is also a curious response from some critics to recurrent writing about Greek/ Australian relations which deserves further consideration given the tolerance of other writers' reiterated imaginative terrains (Astley's Queensland, Jolley's wheat belt or Winton's seascapes).

Briefly, the novel *Alone* is about a young women's life crisis, but it also explores the tension between revelation and secrecy, between the inner life and its expression. There is a Joycean management of the correlation between individual consciousness and representational life and an investigation of the imperatives which might lead a young woman to write. Similarly, the short stories investigate a spectrum of experience beyond the author's own.¹⁵ Striving for effectiveness as a writer, Farmer understood the risks and implications of her stance¹⁶ but Nicolette Stasko rightly notes that "there is much more to the art of Beverley Farmer than concealed autobiography."¹⁷ Here the cast of characters is used to explore a complex range of imagined life options, extending beyond the vital starting points of a single life. To ignore the performative and speculative elements of this work is to undervalue Farmer's craft.

Writers draw upon what they know, from either lived or imagined resources, and Farmer's fictions, readings and inter-

views are overtly enhanced by illustrative first-hand knowledge of her subjects, the people, places and cultures featured in her fiction. She has acknowledged the ways in which her narratives grow from life-but only as part of the story. Her writing is informed by research and rigorous compositional editing-overlooked by those who have read this fiction as confession, autobiography or "life-writing". These terms are considered more closely in relation to *A Body of Water* in Chapter Four.

Within competing realms of private and public revelation autobiography is a political act and it has been suggested that texts which stem from life or express a life have traditionally been received in gendered ways: that beyond the histories of great men's authoritative stories, women have been "permitted the memoir ... which supposedly catered for the domestic and the personal whence introspective unhealthiness like vanity and morbidity emanated".¹⁸ Citing Eliot's invention of the "objective correlative" as his means of managing feeling and reality, Brian Castro proposed that "a text could be delegitimated as being an 'autobiographical novel' or elevated as 'not merely autobiographical' but 'epic'." These issues, and the reception of fiction with a focus on the domestic, are pursued in the ensuing analyses of Farmer's achievement.

Current literary and social trends also influence readings and Farmer has had cause to observe that the ideology of the reader is a factor in the reception of any text. In 1986 she stoutly defended her right, as a writer, to exercise independence from feminist proscriptions despite being a feminist.¹⁹ These issues will be further considered in Chapter Two. In speaking with would-be writers about methodology and ways of creating credible characterisations, Farmer indicated the partial nature of all knowledge and the vagaries of its transmission and reception:

The ground-work, the spade-work of writing-and of reading- a piece of fiction concerned with human lives is to see every character as the centre of a universe ... but we never know all the truth.²⁰

So, in the following chapters, writing is celebrated as the

product of both lived and conceptualised experience as a site for negotiating correspondences.

As the chronology indicates, Farmer grew up in Melbourne and, after university, met and married a Greek migrant before leaving Australia to live with her husband's family north of Thessaloniki. Their return to raise a son and open a restaurant in Lorne left little time for writing, and there was an interval of ten years between the first short stories and the novel *Alone*.²¹ Although she is now divorced, Farmer maintains contact with her immediate family and relatives in Greece. Relevant aspects of her family's migration and cross-cultural experience are addressed in Chapters Three, Six and Seven. In a note entitled "Why I Write" Farmer describes writing as a process of creating:

an illusion of depth and movement in time and space within the time of the thing-story, poem, novel-and a symmetry set up by resonances and correspondences ... Towards the end it seems to be writing itself, fulfilling its own demands. The whole should have the feel of lived experience, and seem to come together naturally.²²

These qualifications of "seeming", "illusion" and the business of constructing "the feel of lived experience", clearly distinguish between reality and artefact. Like Elizabeth Jolley, Peter Carey and other writers who cheerfully acknowledge the "lie" of fiction, Farmer reminds readers that fiction is not life but a means of modifying and exploring diverse truths.²³ Speaking with Wenche Ommundsen in August 1999 she agreed that "all fiction is a lie. It's a bit like the Greek word for acting, *hypokrisia*; so that actors are praised for their expertise in hypocrisy. My own fiction, like all fiction is lying."²⁴ This is not as clear cut as it sounds because Farmer has nominated her desire to convey "a grain of truth" which "makes fiction worth creating" as a crucial incentive; but what these texts present is not necessarily her truth but a composite picture of possibilities.²⁵ Not surprisingly, she has expressed disappointment at the ease with which some readers have persistently conflated narrator and writer:

the assumption that Shirley is me in *Alone* can be very irritating. I'm not surprised by people making this connection, but I feel

invaded by it. On the other hand, it's a risk any writer takes because the illusion you're trying to create is that this is a real woman speaking to you from her real self.²⁶

Designating fiction as a mode that "lies" needs to be offset by the fact that Farmer's writing is valued for a range of reasons, not the least among them her capacity to use her fiction to "tell the truth and face it steadily".²⁷ Again, it is the nature of this "truth", as human rather than personal, which needs to be emphasised.

In *Alone* Farmer was experimenting with her craft. Speaking in 1990 about her "apprenticeship of writing" and the process of translating aspects of past (sometimes painful) experience into fiction to incorporate imagined possibilities, she confirmed that her early work was resonant with loss. She offered this retrospective understanding of her artistic development:²⁸

For a time-when I was writing my novella *Alone*, and the earlier stories in *Milk* and *Home Time*-it was enough to aim at creating a fictional structure to dramatise private experiences ... It was only with the last stories for *Home Time* that some internal shift came about ... While it was still the case in those stories that one or more of the characters, male and female, whose point of view the reader inhabited would inevitably experience a loss, now it went beyond their personal experience, their wound sustained in isolation, to a sense of what Bertrand Russell called in his auto- biography "the loneliness of the human soul".²⁹

This shift from portrayal of the particular to the general, and from the individual to the human condition, is also reflected in the authorial/narrational journey from *Alone* to *A Body of Water*, and beyond.

Commenting further on the dynamic but ambiguous relations between life and art Farmer wryly observed that "my stories have stayed the same but I am not the woman who wrote them".³⁰ In the same interview she indicated her awareness of the reciprocal element in the creative act, as "work brings about changes in its author, it creates, re-creates, its author. The more biographies I read ... the more fascinating I find this process." There are other correspondences and appreciations of this interplay between text and life investi-

gated in the subsequent writing. For example, there is an expressed desire to transcend self in *A Body of Water* where knowledge of Buddhist philosophy sees the focus upon the individual redirected by a more mature protagonist who comes to appreciate that "all of life is practice".³¹ In a symposium at Aarhus in 1996 Farmer observed:

practically, how does the work issue from a self? And from what part of the self does it? What is the self? And the not-self? I had been studying Buddhist texts, and Buddhism rejects the self as baseless and subjective, a perception founded on illusion, a momentary and necessary constellation of illusions.³²

This extract comes from a wide-ranging discussion, referred to again in Chapter Four, in which Farmer claims that *A Body of Water* is "in the genre of self-portrait, rather than autobiography" and that the complementary novel, *The Seal Woman*, is "overtly fiction about a woman who has lost her self the way a seal might lose its skin and must find it or die".³³ The complexities of this claim and its repercussions on the form and context are more fully analysed in Chapter Five. In an article entitled "Language, the instrument of Fiction" Nicolette Stasko, reviewing the writing of Dorothy Hewett, Gail Jones and Beverley Farmer, insightfully observes that:

In one sense there can be no writing which is not fiction: any history, biography, autobiography, is subject to the distortion caused by the act of narration itself, authored by an author who is only a collection of momentary identities, who cannot claim any kind of "objectivity", who does not really exist.

On the other hand, perhaps there can be no fiction: everything written is fact, a selective reordering of "reality", an expression of the unconscious which, though not visible, has been "proven" by psychoanalytic theory to exist, a hodgepodge of past, present and culture defined and mediated by language itself—a conundrum, pleasing or uncomfortable depending on your point of view.³⁴

With these kinds of uncertainties in mind, this study begins with a survey of authorial and critical ideas about art and inscription, and feminism and sexuality—themes reiterated diversely in subsequent writing. These serve as points of entry into the worlds of Farmer's writing. Other interests are more

fully explored in ensuing chapters: questions of sites and rights and life and death in personal, communal, regional, national and global contexts. The study also investigates the roles of cultural myths and changing imperatives of contemporary narratives in social and natural environments.

Chapter 2

Alone

Doris: "A woman runs a terrible risk."

T.S. Eliot¹

"Since you ask, no, I don't love you any more."

Beverley Farmer²

As I have indicated, the idea for *Alone* came from a sketch/short story, initially published in *Westerly*, which had its origins in a relationship ten years before.³ The novel traces the predicament of a lonely, immature and intense girl/ woman intent on suicide.⁴ Radically decentred by the loss of another, her mirrored self, she is trapped in a narrow and circumscribed universe. Her mental claustrophobia pre-figures physical and emotional confinements that Farmer will later exploit in *The House in the Light*. The earlier narrative is confined to Shirley's last forty-eight hours of waiting in the vain hope that her lover will respond to her suicide note or at least intervene to restore her self-esteem. Her recollections reveal the trauma and obsession of the "failed" relationship-which she has understood as love. But this is also a "diary of the artist as a young woman" retrospectively being re-read by a woman who has "flown past" a net or two in the business of becoming a writer.⁵ Farmer later observed that:

In its final form *Alone* is a dramatic monologue in the present tense in the voice of a girl of eighteen who has decided to kill herself that day. The original idea was to tell it from three points of view, in three voices: that of the girl, Shirley; that of the fellow student she was in love with, who had ended the affair: and that of the landlady of the Fitzroy flophouse where Shirley was renting a room ... When it came to Catherine, the lost lover, she was a total

void, not even dust and ashes. When I tried to find a voice for her, nothing came out but silence. The novel takes place in the absence of Catherine. By the end I had learned something about myself and romantic love as such ... I didn't know Catherine. To get inside her skin would be a lie. The novel was left with Shirley's single voice, alone indeed.⁶

Alone was publicised as an innovative expose of lesbian love, which is a fair description, given the narrator's expression of desire, sensual appreciations of her own and her lover's body and depiction of positive erotic lesbian experiences as opposed to the sordid heterosexual encounters the novel portrays. The excitement of being the "object" of love is poignantly conveyed, as is the pathos of its loss as a corollary. But the development of the female *artist* in a contemporary Australian urban wasteland, *reinscribed* by female experience, was initially overlooked.⁷ This *recit* or monograph also echoes Eliot's despair of modern post-war social conditions with its use of literary paradigm and carefully orchestrated imagery—a debt which in turn is mirrored or parodied as pastiche within the text.

Shirley's monologue expresses her failure, despair and distaste for a world she is preparing to leave. Having exercised a degree of self-dramatisation by giving up university literary studies to write, she finds that her muse is not a sustaining creative stimulus. Shirley claims that "From the day I told her I loved her I found I could not write another word"—and yet the text does include work generated in tribute to this relationship (100). The bleak terrain of this spiritual desert is reflected in the monotones of a narration where depression and loss prevail. This is only momentarily illuminated when images of a happier past pierce the prevailing darkness, like Slessor's or Eliot's redeeming shafts of light. Ironically, there is enough skill in this writing to suggest the artistry that might have offered the girl a future.

The "Summer" when the women's-relationship was at its zenith is eulogised in the poem of that name, as is the experience of a sequence of nights, encompassing the cumulative experience of both Shirley and Catherine. In the later poem "Night", Farmer has the young poet judge her own efforts

while asserting her distinctive vision as she pessimistically (or honestly) signs her poem as "Shelley I Nonne" (52). In between, Shirley experiments with prose (and another pseudonym) in the short story "Heroes" by S.I. Nonne which turns a boarding house character into "demonic orderly" who kills recuperating POWs in the service of his country (41). This text is bleakly funny, as Morry, the sheep-skull, candle-holding *memento mori* sheds momentary light, but the trauma of loving and seeing oneself as defined as an outsider or "deviant" in a determinedly heterosexual society puts Shirley's distress into a more sombre perspective. Shirley is not the radical non-conformist whose art drives her to ceaseless intellectual exploration like Shelley, and her imaginative vision is too fragile to sustain.

There is however, a further "grain of truth" beyond these aspects of lived experience, in that the novel incorporates poetry written when Farmer was twenty (Shirley is eighteen). Shirley is not just the young Farmer who lived in residence at university and later in Fitzroy (but not in Carlton until 1985), as she is cast as both character and product of her times. Shirley is shaped by an idea of love inherited from Romantic artistic philosophies which demand the subjection of a would-be artist to life, in the belief that she has nothing to write about until she has "lived". She is caught between worlds-living with modernist rejections of ideals without its sense of elitist style.⁸ While the novel is Proustian in its "remembrance of things past" it avoids the kind of aestheticism and artificiality that demanded a divorce from life which characterised Huysmans' novel entitled *Against The Grain*.⁹ Like Colette, whose writing Farmer admires,¹⁰ Shirley subjects herself to risk. She escapes suburban security, but her journey proves hideously unrewarding, as this description of her relationship suggests:

For her benefit I lashed myself into sterile frenzies of ambition; I wrote brutal, enigmatic poems; I brooded over my novel. We were both convinced that I had genius. I was brusque and awkward, intense, scornful, unkempt, *farouche*. A female Rimbaud. (100)

In the text the would-be-writer reviews her unsatisfactory life, and there is self-mockery in her stated desire to create "a

masterpiece as exquisitely corrupt as the *Fleurs du Mal*, as Australian as the waratah" (98). Throughout, Farmer maintains the tension between her protagonist's acute introspection and the more distanced objectivity of the artist.

Shirley is committed to her art because it is through this medium that she still hopes to consolidate her relationship or at least to leave a legacy of pride in past association. But her introspection and thwarted desire also illustrate her limited understanding of sexuality and her dangerous lack of self-esteem. Shirley's 1950s Australian-style sexual prejudices are also firmly in place as she acknowledges her peers' suspicions of her lesbian friendship and judges herself as deviant for loving another woman while behaving so badly that she is "written off" as an undesirable companion of any kind.¹¹ Like Shelley's Alastor, of whom he said "he lived, he died, he sang, in solitude",¹² Shirley is set apart by her wilful project.

Shirley becomes convinced that an exit from life is its only definition. Regrettably fiction and fact are akin here as there are a host of young people who die in this country before or around the age of twenty while still trying to work out their personal priorities and sexual preferences. Shirley's artistic predecessor Sylvia Plath also attempted suicide at nineteen and succeeded at thirty. Like anorexics who indict the world and its priorities through their claim that the only thing they can control is their body, Farmer's Shirley thinks that this is *all* that remains to "inscribe"-which she does, literally, sketching herself naked, using the knife point on her body and compulsively recording her last days.

Like other young artists, Shirley's world view is shaped by what she reads until dependence on the work of others is subsumed, and practice and experimentation with language lead to a distinctive voice and style. In *Alone*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, Eliot's *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*, Slessor's poetry and French writers like Mallarmé, Baudelaire and Collette are all vital sources, but these overt literary reference points are not incidental in the novel, but illustrative. The count-down of the hours of Shirley's life reveals an intricate interplay between the fictionalised life and the emergent art. Despite this protagonist's relatively meagre emotional, physical and literary

resources, this novel's pattern of intra-textual reflection is seminal.

The setting in the squalid tenement in Carlton also enhances Farmer's deconstruction of modern myths of romance, as does Shirley's short story about war veterans which is far too subversive for *The Women's Weekly* because a general poverty of the human spirit and lack of meaningful social interchange in the Australian urban terrain is exposed. However, like Patrick White, Farmer values people the world sometimes rejects, and Shirley has momentary glimpses of potential in the limited community in the boarding house. It is one of the narrative's central ironies that while Shirley is engaged in the business of constructing her single-minded scenario, she is oblivious to other life traumas in the house in which she abides.¹³ Farmer acknowledges that Balzac's *Le Pere Goriot* was an influence:

Shirley as a newcomer to the grotty boarding house is like Rastignac at the Maison Vauquer, the proprietress, Madame Vauquer, and Vautrin, the master-criminal, become nightmare versions of the mother and father figure for him, as May O'Toole and the old pensioner do in a comic way for Shirley. And Shirley's quote, "A nous deux maintenant!" is Rastignac's gauntlet thrown down, from the Pere-Lachaise cemetery, ... after the death of Old Goriot.¹⁴

Shirley retreats from life into her idea of what art is, but she remains a compulsive recorder, even of her own actions. She recalls that:

Catherine told me I was obsessed with surface detail, immersed in surface impressions. Life for me has finally acquired the rapt sterility of a work of art. It has come to a standstill. I come alive in mirrors and at windows, in artificial life. Light, I mean artificial light. A still life, a photograph, is reality congealed in the mind of the artist a painting by Cezanne is like a reflection in a slowly freezing river, shifting fragmented. (6)

Roberta Buffi has described Shirley's obsession with self-image as an attempt to establish subjectivity:

As Farmer depicts it, the mirror serves as a prism that reveals Shirly's manifold angles; it is a surface that dissects and decomposes both the female character's body and subjectivity, and re-assembles

the fragmented parts as in a cubist pictorial construction. In *Alone*, the mirror is a trope that is essential for Shirl's self-discovery; at times it is described as acquiring a life of its own, as an almost animated object that regulates the direction of the inward gaze of the protagonist: "The mirror flames" says Shirl. It reflects the distorted visions surfacing from her own inscape, and thus appears as a distorted surface, as a ubiquitous Dali-like item that cannot be eluded. In fact, it is vital for the self-recognition and self-definition of the woman who sits in front of it. Here the Lacanian implication is quite discernible, corroborated by Farmer's protagonist herself early in the text as she maintains: "I come alive at mirrors and at windows".¹⁵

But the desire for clear-cut images is constantly threatened by erasure. While taking photographs for an intended **film** (this one of a port scene featuring boat departures at night, perhaps the Black Ships story still pending in *A Body of Water*) she is accosted by a man "muttering wannafuck" and in making her panicky escape smashes her camera and ends up with a completely black film. It is again Catherine who judges her performance:

It's like everything you do, she said. You think you're conveying something, when there's nothing but a blank. No ships, no dripping lights. You mind's turned in on itself. What do you think you've got to write about. (6)

In earlier, more confident days Shirley countered Catherine's claims about her "superficial vision" by protesting, "but where does the surface end?" but her faith in self, in the absence of the other, is impossible to sustain. Similarly, her insistent claim that she has something to say, and that the Carlton residence will permit her to do so, eventually provides an insufficient rationale for life. In terms of her own esteem she only "exists" in the mirrored gaze of the other-and that is a dangerous space to inhabit, especially if the other averts the gaze or withdraws it completely. The novel *Alone* investigates this very human dilemma and is about a profoundly acute crisis of identity.

The sections of the novel incorporate writing exercises as the novice tries out dialogues, "palimpsests of purple poetry [and prose]", letters, poems, lyrical passages, diary entries,

stream-of-consciousness and ambiguously authored statements of various kinds, some of them stark in their intensity: (27) "whatever happens, never forget that it was not something imaginary between us, but deep and real" (27).

The movement of the novel from life towards art serves as a metaphor for the Joycean idea of a necessary divorce from life demanded in the "making" of the artist; but this is counter-balanced by the girl's real existential dilemma: "I wanted to see Catherine again tonight for one last reflection of me" (66) and the direct claim that: "She was the only person to ever love me" (26).

The tragedy and triumph of the narrative is that the ideals of art are not matched by life experience, but in Shirley's divorce from life the objective distance of the incipient artist is prefigured.

One of the skills of this novel is that Shirley's monologue and obsessively detailed version of events is offset by an implicit sub-text charting an emotional spectrum slightly beyond the grasp of the narrator. In this way the author explores the conditions of mind (the self-centre of which Farmer spoke) that might lead an intelligent, but disturbed girl in a Melbourne suburb to consider suicide.¹⁶ When it was published this text was admired by many but dismissed by some as unimportant on the grounds of evidence of cliché, lack of maturity and "disproportionate adolescent reactions" which were seen as faults.¹⁷ They are however, the very traits that Farmer's design reveals in her unhappy and vulnerable Shirley.¹⁸

The Waste Land

On the bridges around the empty city the inscription of the word "Eternity" is increasingly mocking.¹⁹ It is as incongruous as the fact that while crime, prostitution and sexual molestation are rife in the neighbourhood, Shirley, seeking experience, is stopped by the police for riding her bike without a light. The text replays hollowly the vocabulary and imagery of "Prufrock", *The Waste Land* (especially "The Fire Sermon" and "A Game of Chess") and "Portrait of a Lady". In this wasteland, the tolling clock sounds in a coffee shop rather than a pub,

and Shirley asks "Shall I at least set my [affairs] in order", while Jerry's "g'night sweet ladies" is undercut by the other tenant's opinion that there are no ladies to be found in this locale. (14)

Waking on her eighteenth birthday to cats shrieking, Shirley adopts a mock-heroic mode and claims to "hear the voices of children singing *Chantant dans la coupole*", but despite her vivid imagination, masturbating in bed amid cabbage smells is only distantly related to drifting in a barge on the Thames, although Margate does beckon in these lines:

Where are you? Down on the Yarra Bank? With your freaks and cranks and fanatics. Afterwards we walked to watch the black ships on the sliding sunset river.

The river glints
Slime and oil
Gulls prance
In the sludge tread
A rat's corpse
Bled
The red sun sinks in eddy and coil.

Pastiche, intones Miss Jones, is something of a misapplication of your undoubted intelligence. (20)

The final note here is terribly ironic as Shirley precipitately decides that she will "neither teach nor be taught" and so quits university for a waitressing job, further alienating her parents and Catherine. Prefiguring the short stories of *Honie Time*,²⁰ Shirley does not find comfort at home or away:

Now it would be time-"Shir-irl, the iron's hot, Shirl"-to go and iron the same old striped, stained hankies and tea towels and pillow-cases on the cleared kitchen table, dark by now under the lace curtain limp over grey palings. (21)

Shirley phones home, but, with a head full of the significance of this as her last day coloured by Eliotian quotes about "knowledge and forgiveness", she cannot breach the gap between her mother's world and her own. Their conversations do not meet but remain tangential and misunderstandings prevail despite her mother's concern about meals and safety.²¹

As she replies to her mother's enquiry about whether she came home from the library alone, she cites Eliot's Doris in *Fragment of an Agan*, "Alone, yes. A woman runs a terrible risk", and Sweeney's hypnotic story of the disposal of a girl's body in a bath of lysol hideously prefigures Shirley's terrible plans for herself (56).

One escape from the colourless suburban desolation or lurid or sordid melodrama is recalled. On a hitch-hiking trip into the desert, walking in red dust, Shirley remembers Catherine speaking of Venice "I think for the sake of the sound of water only", but just as "the Thunder said": "Here is no water but only rock" (67). This girl, while acknowledging her thirst, is at a dead end, left like Carthage, burning. Assessing her reflected self as abject she decides:

This flesh strolling in glass is what failed me, failed us both: this lumpish, frigid, blunt, torpid prude's body. Those virgin forks. I am not mad. I am in my right mind. In my right body no less, I have reached a dead end. My hands fanned under the lamp, scrawny and webbed, are golden claws. (74)

In a "dull", "dim" and "dank" setting the residual spark of life is the "bloody, bold and resolute" would-be-artist, mirrored as she designs variant epitaphs by candlelight. In the boarding-house amid the physical realities of Jerry and his prostate problem, Maria's miscarriage and death, and Mrs O'Toole's opulent "glory" in "the bath she sat in, like a burnisht throne" as she prepares for her fancy sailor-man who is a whoring opportunist, residual illusions are sequentially eroded (91). "I read, much of the night, and go mad in the morning" (27) says Shirley, and later, "I cry, much of the day, and go out in the evening" (56). Eventually she contrives to be "rudely fore'd" attempting to mirror Catherine's experience, in fact using her name for the act of allowing herself to be sexually abused (their relationship initially grew from Shirley's comforting Catherine post-rape). In facing death, life plays tricks and Shirley seems doomed to be as unrequited in attempting to find self-effacement as she is in attempting to find love.

The book-end readings of *The Waste Land* encapsulating Shirley's narrative culminate in her ritual severing of her hair

(her only asset, she believes) and in a far too late conversation with May O'Toole, who blithely wishes to be as young as this eighteen-year-old who is literally spending the "butt end of [her] days and ways" (94) in conversation about this older woman's desires. Having only opened the door in the last hope that Catherine had arrived at last, this is a bitter visit-one underscored by May's proffered intimacy and her genuine concern for the girl. Farmer has observed that:

The landlady was an amalgam of mother-figures, aunts and neighbours, with a bit of Patrick White's Alma Lusty from *The Ham Funeral* and a bit of Edna Everage in her old Moonee Pond days, the common housewife.²²

Intoning the lament from "Portrait of a Lady": "you do not know, you do not know /What life is, you who hold it in your hands", Shirley waits for her landlady to leave to free her for an imminent exit.

The achievement in this novel is not only in revealing the passion, pointlessness and psychological degradation of Shirley's situation as well as her short-comings, but in conveying her capacity for love-the positive that reflects a relationship of meaning, if only to Shirley. The sordid scene and the desperate measures counterpoint an absent ideal, a strategy that Farmer later exploits in *Home Time*. As I have suggested, the sensuous and delicately rendered intermissions in the text illustrate moments of togetherness which explain and dignify the young woman's acute sense of loss:

We swam, green-lit. We walked miles and miles after midnight. Leaves drifted like snow about the street lamps, power lines sizzled, crickets fell silent at our footfall. We lay in the cool sand under rolling stars.-In a lit, empty carriage of the express you kissed me, crashing past dark suburbs. Would you have married me if I'd been a man? (65)

The novel is about absence as subject, rather like a photograph, and this is something that Farmer reviews in different ways in her later writing. Shirley's summary of her performance as a woman and her self-assessment as an artist is scathing: "It crossed my mind that I had taken the wound that might have made a writer of me. But it has only festered

in all those months" (87). Despite the repugnance of her vision of May O'Toole in bed, which she compulsively pictures, this imaginative act tacitly reaffirms her commitment to art:

It's not as if I could ever have written that out. A novel is a mirror taken walking down a road; I read that somewhere, any puddle of mud and piss glowing in the gutter mirrors the sun. (98)

Shirley makes her peace to a degree, or at least she comes to terms with the realities of her uneven "relationship", and the extent of her trauma is revealed when we find that her writing mentor, and possible mentor for her profession, also had prior claims to her lover's affection. Her refusal to "teach" thus acquires another dimension:

It would be unjust to blame her. I had learnt what little I knew about love and passion from novels, like Madame Bovary herself, n'est-ce pas? My own body was a secret I kept even from myself. She knew much more. Miss Jones had been in love with her. (100)

Despite its unlikely elements, this novel is an epitaph to love. It is a wiser Shirley who observes that: "A work of art is never finished, only abandoned, or so I read somewhere, and in that it is like a life" (99). Farmer has described *Alone* as a "contemplative novel" and as "a projection of adolescence"; both of these definitions distance it from autobiography.²³

Autobiography

Xavier Pons' article "Dramatising the Self: Beverley Farmer's Fiction" salutes Farmer's authorial skills and unexceptionally claims that: "there is a clear autobiographical dimension to Beverley Farmer's fiction."²⁴ But the next claim that "her own life and experience provide the material that goes into her writing, and the latter charts her progress, as it were, down the years" is worrying in that there is a slippage from text to life that needs qualification, especially as Pons then makes the claim that: "Unlike many other novelists such as Keneally, Malouf or Hall, she does not have to research her subjects-she looks within".²⁵ The fiction does provide the space for an examination of a range of *imagined* attitudes, perspectives and possible experiences, but the idea that this is all "the material" that "goes into Farmer's writing" is misleading and inaccurate.

The implication that Farmer might be a writer "confined" to writing about herself or that we should "read" the writer via the texts is as limited as suggesting that Rushdie only ever articulates his own life. In an era experienced in separating author and text the persistence of this claim in relation to Farmer's work is puzzling.²⁶

Even more alarming is the claim that "the way in which the author's often disturbing emotions are fictionalised in an effort to cope and come to terms with them", as this defines Farmer's writing as therapy and the work of art as something under "control" unlike the life. In his reading of *Alone Pons* implies that Farmer is "confirming her evolution" in some "private and painful" exorcism of pain.²⁷ This confuses narrator and author. While Pons acknowledges the pervasive emphasis on bodily functions and concedes that his selected textual illustrations (all of them about pissing) might be termed "in poor taste", he concludes with the odd declaration that these events are significant as "this confirms how self-centred Farmer's fiction is". In this reading Farmer eventually graduates to "melodrama". There are, however, other more soundly based observations in the article, among them the claim that this is not "erotic" but "deeply sensual" writing.

Closer to home, David English has written persuasively about the differences between the reception of Patrick White's work and that of women writers like Dorothy Hewett and Farmer. He has analysed a considerable disparity in treatment as gender discrimination, claiming a "critical blindness" as well as ambivalence about the relation between fiction and autobiography. English claims that autobiography has been devalued as consequence of seeing it as "faction" or "a cheap resort to easy material, a kind of plagiarism, albeit from oneself".²⁸ English investigates sexual and cultural politics and critical subjectivities by comparing the reception of Farmer's *A Body of Water* and Dorothy Hewett's *The Toucher* with Patrick White's novels to speculate about the reasons why autobiographical elements are more likely to be challenged or interrogated in women writers' texts when they are generally ignored in men's. English claims that these writings become "sites for contests between gender-related presumptions about

the interrelationship between form and order, the subject self and the acts of writing and reading".²⁹ He also observes that "it is clear that the gendered imagery, for example around water, the body and sexuality, was irritating and disturbing to the reader and associated with what was declared as the failure of the book". In a further analysis of the reception of *A Body of Water* English reads Rosemary Sorensen's expression of discomfort with this work in the light of changed expectations about the "imprint of authority" (a lack of "genre clues") which Farmer deliberately refuses in this text and which Sorensen reads as "passivity". So we have criticism based on too much authoring, not enough authority (in that the reader must be more pro-active) and fact/ fiction ambiguities that cannot be determined.

Given my earlier suggestion about the fluidity of genre definitions, Barbara Milech's historical survey of connections between autobiography and fiction is illuminating. She notes that:

The boundary between autobiography and fiction is necessarily negotiable. In the nineteenth century that boundary was policed by the conventions of realism-by the twin notions that literature is generally a reflection of a life in a given society, and that autobiography is a reflection that can be empirically validated. From the later part of the nineteenth century onwards, however, realist notions of literature as mimesis (as the representation of prior truth) and autobiography as history (as the representation of a prior life) give way to modernist notions of fiction as self-referential and autobiography as self-invention: where the prior life was seen to produce the text, the text comes to be seen as producing the life-though, either way such a life is seen as coherent, volitional and (albeit enmeshed in history) somehow transcending contingent being. Still later, the boundary between prose fiction and autobiography is further problematised by postmodern notions of individual and social being as the product of language, ideology and discourse, and consequently of the arbitrariness of distinctions between fiction and reality. Now textuality produces the effect of reality, the effect of fiction, the effect of selfhood as a consequence of this evolution of a premise, contemporary theorisation of autobiography tends to erase the boundary between fiction and autobiography.³⁰

Laurie Clancy's review of *Alone* more carefully avoids the trap of mirrored narrator/ author identification. Clancy distinguishes between cause and effect and offers a parenthetical disclaimer as he notes that the text "giv[es] the impression of having been wrenched out of intense personal agony and distress (this is not, of course, the same thing as saying it is autobiographical)".³¹ While Clancy also sees Farmer as "participant rather than observer" he keeps an appropriate distance between art and life by indicating that the narrator's "self-pity is not allowed to become the novel's". Confirming this distinction Farmer observed:

I don't really want to identify with any of my female figures. I hope they're separate from me just as one's child is. They have a separate life which is much more limited and defined and small than real life is ... they are encapsulated in story.³²

As I will argue in Chapter Three in the discussion of *Home Time*, reviewers accustomed to asserting direct links between the life and the art were progressively forced to adjust their horizons as the spectrum of Farmer's art became more highly, and, at times, violently coloured and the speculative range of her fiction widened.

Reading lesbian or queer

In the fifties in Australia, before popular feminist discourse or overt interrogation of identity politics through the advent of lesbian and gay writing, and well before queer theory, any articulation of same-sex love demanded a degree of bravery (for example, Manoly Larcaris was not publicly acknowledged as White's partner and muse for years). Farmer has spoken of her inability to publish this novel while her parents were alive (as they were unaware of the relationship which contributed to Shirley's story).³³ It is hard for people born into a generation post-liberation or post sex-education in schools in Australia to imagine the social constraints and sexual inhibition which shaped many men's and women's lives then, or to imagine a critical climate where convention (reticence or a degree of tact) constrained the kinds of questions asked of authors who had not already chosen to bare their souls, and definitely not their

sexual preferences, in public. In Elizabeth Jolley's most recent novel *An Accommodating Spouse* a visiting poet is accosted by a questioner publicly demanding to know "Are you a lesbian?"; she replies with sanguine ambiguity, "No, actually I am a widow".³⁴

It may even be difficult to imagine the degree of stress encountered then by those who necessarily "transgressed" heterosexual conformity which people, forty years later, now speak publicly of leaping beyond.³⁵ When making such a claim, I am mindful of on-going problems of self-identity, homophobia, depression and youth suicide exacerbated by unsympathetic home or social environments which remain unresolved. But it is undoubtedly "acceptable" in the 1990s to decide one's sexual preferences, and be supported in this choice, in ways that simply were not available in the 1960s.³⁶

When Dean Kiley recently embarked on a "re-queering re-analysis of the de-queering criticism" and chastised a critical "establishment" for its "aestheticised poetics", "dispossession" and "refusal to read", he was, like those who insist on the primary influence of autobiography, half right.³⁷ He asserted his 1990s reader's prerogative to analyse the text liberated from its historical context, critical or authorial, dismissing extratextual evidence in *A Body of Water* where the narrator appears to offer a commentary on earlier work. In so doing he placed self, the narrator of his "auto-graph", into spaces where a dialogue about "queerness" and his own fictionalised *Kiinstlerroman* could creatively jostle for attention within this new frame. He did not pursue the question of what constitutes a "lesbian novel" or even a "queer" one: this was interrogated in other editorial correspondence in *Southerly*:

The questions seem to become "what does a queer text look like?" and "need it include a lesbian?". I don't have the answer to that question either. Reading your work I think Farmer is saying that she is always already queer, in the sense unlabellable. In this sense when Dean asks in terms of *Alone* "why are the sexual-politics, relationship dynamics, sociological issues, and sexuality problematics not addressed in the criticism?" and points out (rightly) that "they're not just fetish for the novel-as analytical-object, they drive the novel". He may miss that the same issues do still drive

Beverley Farmer's other writing, only not so explicitly as in *Alone*, perhaps more subtly indeed.³⁸

Kiley's summary confirmed the elusive nature of Farmer's writing and the effectiveness of her first novel in foregrounding crucial issues of sexual identity, but also the difficulty of commenting on or equating text and response, writing and reading, narrator and author without diminishing either. He concluded that:

Alone is a painful and powerful novel that makes it hard for me to think, almost impossible for me to negotiate some middle-distance between theorised critique of critical discourse around/through it, and personalised writing-back-as-reading. Hence this monstrous queer hybrid of a text.³⁹

The text is available for a range of readings, among them the author's, and Farmer offered two crucial points of clarification about life/ art relationships in *Alone*, not in another text, which Kiley sees as problematic, but in an interview (which I acknowledge may be differently problematic) speaking of the distance between raw experience and "ripened and distilled experience":

I think the novel is misunderstood to some degree. Because the love affair that fails for Shirley, the main character, is a lesbian love affair, the novel has been more or less regarded as a lesbian book, a novel about lesbianism like Elizabeth Jolley's *Palomino*, which came out in the same year. But for me, at least, *Alone* is about suicide. I see it as a dramatic monologue. It's told in the first person and present, which can be very irritating I realise now, but didn't then. It's very heightened and intense and adolescent ... with a sort of heightened emotionality ... Shirley has resolved to kill herself; she's going through rituals that she has planned for this day.⁴⁰

In an interview with Beverley Farmer, Willbanks pursued the issue of the "autobiographical" nature of the lesbian experience, and Farmer acknowledged the formative importance and experience of her first sexual relationship, but she also stated that: "to me the lesbian issue is a side issue, but it has become the central one to most readers of the book, which I think is a pity".⁴¹ Elizabeth Jolley once remarked that she

avoids the label of "lesbian" as no-one asks novelists if are they writing a "heterosexual novel". While the term queer seems to raise more problems than it solves in relation to the ambiguity of Farmer's stance in presenting Shirley's lesbian experience, it does suggest contested "speaking positions" and is worth considering further in that light.

Annamarie Jagose has addressed some of the questions raised by those seeking to use the term "queer". She sees this as a new discursive regime which may help to escape labels in current use. She canvasses the historical use of the term "queer" with its shifts from "slang for homosexual" to "homophobic abuse" and explains its usefulness as a mode of interrogating "allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire", its association with the lesbian and gay community and its signification of a gender-neutral space.⁴² The complex politics of the term (explored further by Judith Butler and Teresa De Laurentis) are beyond the ambit of this discussion but they are useful in relation to Farmer's work in that:

Queer is always an identity under construction, a site of permanent becoming: "utopic" in its negativity, queer theory curves endlessly towards a realisation that its realisation remains impossible.⁴³

This idea of identity "under construction" aptly describes the creative project of *Alone*.

When asked about her treatment of male characters in the early fiction Farmer rejected easy "essentialist" gender distinctions:

I don't have a fixed view of what's male or female. I don't know that anyone is fixed; people fluctuate throughout their lives and vary from one to another. Those adjectives and characteristics apply equally to a lot of my female characters too.⁴⁴

In the same interview she conceded that as a writer "she is often only conscious of the men at the moment when they're in conflict with the women in their lives", that she was interested in portraying "non-meeting[s] of minds", and that the writers who engaged her most were those whose work crossed boundaries or embraced both gender viewpoints to "embrace

the whole of humanity".⁴⁵ To my mind, the queer position provides an escape from gender labelling, but it also seems not so far from the disengaged viewing position advocated in Joyce's idea of the artist beyond it all "paring his fingernails". Farmer is more involved than omniscient-unlike Eliot she has her gloves off-but she has asserted her right to maintain a healthy distance from the actions of her protagonists, who are often used to consider the relational roles, expectations and gestures of gendered positions.

Margaret Smith's survey "Australian Women Novelists of the 1970s" unequivocally refers to *Alone* as a "Lesbian Novel" citing kinship with alienation expressed in Jolley's *Palomino* and Nancy Keesing's assessment of its protagonist as "a clever misfit with a passion for reading poetry and some talent for writing it".⁴⁶ In her review Keesing observed that:

Farmer's *Alone* [has] made me for the umpteenth time ponder the hoary question of the extent to which in any given culture and era, life is mirrored in fiction, or fiction itself alters life.

Keesing did not pursue the observation further, except to suggest her impatience with the protagonist's behaviour and her social concern at the "psychiatric condition" of the distraught young woman.⁴⁷ Once again the cross-over between art and life is interesting as Farmer did experience a near breakdown, and as the chronology indicates, the pattern of her subsequent employment was affected by this episode in her life. In the fiction Shirley's predicament is different but undoubtedly related to this formative experience. So while the question is raised, the relation between life and work remains unclear or implied, and then only in terms of the reader's response rather than an analysis of the text itself. It is also interesting that in this 1950s generation any hint of instability-especially in women-was fuel either for gossip, speculation or outright dismissal. Geoffrey Dutton, tight-lipped, reviewed Barbara Jeffris' reception of *Alone* rather than the book, as it was her praise which bothered him. Jeffris claimed that:

Beverley Farmer's *Alone* is a novella beautifully shaped and controlled within the compass of a single day and night ... this is a sad, small, anguished book, memorable for its truths about the implacable destructiveness of self-doubt.⁴⁸

Opting for the moral high ground in the context of a discussion about Windsor's "stirring up a controversy at the Adelaide Writers' Festival by claiming that women writers are now more kindly treated than men", Dutton again illustrates my point by absolutely conflating author and protagonist:

What author is there who is not full of self-doubt when his/her first book goes out from the publisher? Or indeed, any later book. A review need not be kind but it is a help if it does not nourish that "implacable destructiveness".⁴⁹

Feminist debate

Feminist debate about Farmer's "place" was fulsomely canvassed by Jennifer Strauss in "Are Women's Novels Feminist Novels?", but it was in response to suggestions of the different treatment of men and women writers that Kerryn Goldsworthy disputed Windsor's claims about preferential treatment.⁵⁰ In so doing, Goldsworthy directly contrasted the achievement of Helen Gamer and Beverley Farmer, arguing for a distinction between their representations of "oppressed" women.⁵¹ Strauss notes that:

despite praise of Farmer's style she reaches on political grounds, a position easily alignable with Marion Halligan's aesthetic rejection of the "dullness of victimised women exhibiting scars".⁵²

In escaping one binary generalisation Strauss suggests that Goldsworthy found herself in a "minefield"-in a volatile arena which smouldered on, to erupt years later in the controversy about competing feminisms surrounding Gamer's transgression of life/ art boundaries in *The First Stone*. Not surprisingly Farmer found it necessary to respond to the claim of being "reactionary" and she did so by asserting her independence from ideologies with this riposte:

Feminism may be a powerful political force, but it's not a dictatorship. Writers of fiction, in Australia at least, can still keep ideology-any ideology-at bay if it so happens that they see human experience in other terms. Fiction is at once more and less than history and sociology; its sources are beyond reach. There are many ways of writing; and of reading.⁵³

In 1988 Wenche Ommundsen suggested to Farmer that "by creating the female viewpoint you may perhaps be perceived as inviting a feminist reading?" In replying, Farmer conveyed her understanding of the axiom that a text is no longer entirely owned once it is "loosed upon the world", but also that ideas about reception and "re-distributive meaning" have a vital impact (questions of reading and reception are discussed in relation to the short stories in Chapter Three and *A Body of Water* in Chapter Four). Farmer claimed:

That depends as much on the ideology of the perceiver as on the writing. When, for example, readers see a character who seems to be a victim, whether they react with anger or disgust or sympathy, depends more on them than on the writer. Or at least as much.⁵⁴

One of Farmer's clearest statements about gender, feminism and the pressures incumbent on women writers was made in interview with Jennifer Ellison in *Rooms of Their Own* when she distinguished between life and art in these ways:

I think Dorothy Hewett was terrific on the subject of being "women writers" in Adelaide in 1980, when she gave a speech about how ambivalent she felt about this feminist ghetto that we risk walling ourselves up in, and all the defensiveness and hostility and self-justification that follows from that. You build the wall yourself, and you create your own prison. We shouldn't be doing that. The point of fiction is that it leaps over walls; it turns them into panes of glass.⁵⁵

Women's writing

In *Alone*, Farmer demonstrated her ability to reconsider language and literary precedent in the light of contemporary, female experience, and this prefigured directions in her subsequent work. Farmer observed:

I am a women's writer to the extent that I am a woman writer. But I don't know that the interest in my stories is limited to women; human experience is of equal interest to men after all. And as for the second part of the question [Do you think of yourself as a feminist writer?] I see myself as a feminist in "real" life. It depends, of course; there are various groups of feminism, some mutually exclusive and antagonistic. Not all feminists would class me as

one. I'm not trying to boost the value of feminism consciously in my writing. Propagandising doesn't belong in the sort of fiction I write.⁵⁶

Today, the diverse nature of feminisms has been well and truly illustrated, partly as a consequence of post-colonial deconstructions of the limited and non-accommodating frame of reference of a single concept of Western feminism which elided a goodly proportion of the women of the world. Grand narratives, canons of "great" works and single authoritative readings of a text have all been challenged. In affirmation of the reciprocal notion of life/ art relationships articulated by Farmer, the experimentation with language initiated by post-modernism criticism has had a direct bearing on the nature of texts produced, among them, Farmer's. It has been observed that:

We live in the epoch of the "non-fiction novel", of memoirs that take novelistic liberties with the truth, with biographies that stage discussions between biographer and his long-dead subject (such as the fairly recent biography of Dickens by Peter Ackroyd, who "talks" to the nineteenth century writer [*and locally, Brian Matthews on Louisa Lawson, or Drusilla Modjeska in Poppy*]). Some critics have argued that creative energy is released when an inferior literary genre (the comic strip, for instance, or the mystery story) is elevated to the status of high art. One could just as easily contend that a similar heat is generated when two genres are rubbed against each other to form something entirely new.⁵⁷
(*my comment and emphasis*)

In the following chapters these preoccupations will be canvassed, as even in this first novel *Alone* there is a foregrounding of the processes of art and inscription. The claim made here about the formation of new genres is further addressed in relation to *A Body of Water* in Chapter Four.

Themes that are seminal in *Alone-gender*, family, inscription, mythologies, relationships-resonate in later work. Images and motifs echo and accrue meanings or serve increasingly symbolic functions, and there are intricately varied reiterations of sea, light, water, cats, bees, food etc., as the fiction is used to examine a diversity of human experience. In all of Farmer's writing there is a refusal to overlook or obliterate aspects of life,

images or subjects, which are commonly censored from fictionalised depictions of reality. In this, Farmer is neither prudish nor exhibitionist but squarely and sensitively involved in dealing with what *is-from* the detail of menstrual blood to issues of domestic violence.

Farmer recalls Joyce Carol Oates' response to accusations of violence in her writing: "Well, what world do you live in?", when she insists that the writer's job is to "face the facts".⁵⁸ For Farmer, art does not offer an escape from life but a way of revealing its richness and texture. Given the preoccupations of Farmer's mature work, *Alone*, with its close scrutiny of the body, its fears about the mind's capacity to accommodate life and the artist's ability to render it truthfully, was a prophetic beginning. This novel also signalled a lifelong debate about whether a commitment to art demands a solitary existence: a proposition tempered by this artist's continuing faith in "the holiness of the heart's affections".⁵⁹

Chapter 3

Place and Domestic Space: *Milk and Home Time*

To come from elsewhere, from "there" and not "here", and hence to be simultaneously "inside" and "outside" the situation at hand, is to live in the intersections of histories and memories ... This is ... the drama of the stranger.

Iain Chambers¹

Maybe our lives are of no more account than a bee's, if the truth be known.

Beverly Farmer²

Place: location

The first two collections of short-stories (*Milk*, 1983 and *Home Time*, 1985) consider place in terms of location but also in relation to gender, origin, "migrancy", identity and conditions of exile. Farmer depicts contrasting domestic circumstances, generational divides and cross-cultural interactions to reveal gaps in the social and linguistic fabric which sometimes see people stranded. But these stories also enact revisions of understanding as characters review their relationships within or beyond family and culture. There are closely observed descriptions of physical environments and carefully modulated dialogues that identify the speakers culturally and socially. Farmer also reveals differences between speaking and communicating and investigates the business of translation (a process that later transforms narrative methodology). The short stories collectively illustrate the tensions of being family or stranger, "insider" or "outsider" in domestic or social environments.

Place of birth is a crucial location and formative years are irrevocably shaped by home environments, as David Malouf has shown.³ Farmer understands the politics of belonging and

ownership which impinge on individual and family lives; and her fiction is tuned to express this experience. If people or relatives are divided between cultures then allegiances are further complicated, but fiction may provide a space, a figurative no-man's land, where such tensions can be safely or productively interrogated.

Alone was published in 1980 and *Milk*, Farmer's first collection of short stories, won the New South Wales Premier's award for fiction in 1983. Both collections drew on Farmer's experience of Greek village life where characters are engaged in a consideration of their situations; in residence within family hierarchies, or travelling beyond familiar home environments. Farmer investigates relational and domestic spaces as her characters negotiate room to move. In these stories identification with place, locality, country and environment provides a rationale for existence and departures from known places may involve risk. Cross-cultural comparisons between Greece and Australia also inform these narratives.

Greek settings: White and Farmer

A consideration of Farmer's and Patrick White's response to Greece is revealing.⁴ Like White, Farmer considers diverse relationships in different or tangentially related stories. White's fiction also considered same-gender, cross-gendered, sibling, parental, filial, marital and artistic relations. He articulated the inner lives of his characters and made it clear that they could be reduced by a shuffle of history or by the quieter erosion of time. White's experimentation with non-realistic modes, his tendency to dispense with conventional narrative continuities, and his utilisation of highly patterned, often ironic verbal structures, was influential in Australian literature.. Farmer has acknowledged her identification with White's "love of Greece", his creation of a "very authentic Greek male character in *The Tree of Man*, a rather beautiful, simple physical, natural being, an object of desire", and "the metaphysical dimension" of his work which indicated that our "sober suburban life could be transfigured".⁵ Vitally concerned with the nature of individual perception-what it is that we see and how it shapes our lives-White foregrounded conflicts arising from the non-

intersection of the different fictions by which we live. His human dramas traced the distinctive views and qualities of his "burnt" characters. Farmer is similarly tolerant of difference and equally interested in the prismatic possibilities of point of view.

In Patrick White's writing, Greece features as the birthplace of culture, a source of ancient myth and a symbolic setting where a passionate society with an acute sense of its past confronts the antithetical values of western materialism (*The Burnt Ones*). Farmer, like White, acknowledges Greek tradition and implicitly compares life in Greece and Australia, contrasting social mores and sexual politics, but her impressions of Greek landscape and life are immediate, vividly rendered and celebratory. Whereas White uses the domestic scene to direct attention to the history of characters who have been shaped or mis-shaped by place, Farmer records details of everyday life with almost photographic accuracy. This aspect of her work informs the analysis of *The House in the Light* in Chapter Six which further maps cultural and spiritual topographies.⁶ In the final chapter of this study it is the myths of regeneration associated with female deities which rekindle interest in Greek mythology.

In *Milk and Home Time* there is a distinctive appreciation of the unique qualities of object, place or person, and patterns of colour, light and shade, warmth and cold are varied to define the texture of Greek and Australian lives. Alterations of pace, pitch and tone reveal the dispositional qualities of characters and there is an exploration of the potentialities of objects; of the form, texture, mass or incidence of things. Farmer carefully conveys perceptual experience, sensation and observation to establish significance. Moments of social interchange, like meal times or family gatherings, with their commonplace rituals of eating and preparing food, permit a mediation between physical and emotional action. In Farmer's writing, sensory awareness works like metaphor to direct attention to the unspoken agendas which are often the focus of the narratives. Even a potentially antagonistic encounter can be de-fused by communion wrought by the common elements of shared food or laughter:

Every bite of the melon uncovered seeds sown like stones in the now, thawing red snow. She flicked them out with a finger and bit deep. The guard spat his seeds through the gap in his furred teeth straight at the Fiat: pfoo pfoo. Vassilaki stared; then he tried it. Barbara laughed. At once the guard relented. (156)

Viewed as a tourist, dismissed collectively as "Catholics, Reds and Anarchists" by this local observer, Barbara initially encounters the guard's wrath, but their exchange ends in acceptance despite her foreignness, just as the story ends in a moment's reconciliation between husband and wife through their mutual reference, their child.

Differences between people are mediated similarly in other stories. For example, children are ameliorating presences in "Snake". As Manya speaks of Greek/ Turkish relations and the communities' mutual fear of war she remarks:

They love children, as we do. I believe that there is one thing that might save the world from destruction: our love of children. This is stronger than hate, or nothing_is. This hope, or no hope. (104)

In a review of *Reflections: Selected Works from Greek Australian Literature*, Farmer cited Berger's claim that: "Emigration, forced or chosen, across national frontiers or from village to metropolis, is the quintessential experience of our time ... this century is the century of banishment"⁷ and for those accustomed by long centuries of occupation to the certainties, rituals and expectations of known worlds, "world destruction" might well be manifest in the forced or chosen departures from home territories. The destabilisation of travel is an indicator of the kind of upheaval relocation causes, but this is a desired event. Other journeys like migration may be fuelled by trauma or the need to survive, and then radical disorientation or alienation may ensue. Beverley Farmer's stories start closer to home with the positives and negatives of family in two places, but the stories in the two collections *Milk* and *Home Time* are varied to incorporate and investigate increasingly complex aspects of the migratory experience. In all of them protagonists are forced to consider their own imperatives in the light of changing relational, physical or social spaces.

Migration and landscape

Speaking of her own life, Farmer has said that:

The experience of migration has always interested me ever since I first met my ex-husband in Australia, and lived very close to his experience, to what he was going through. Later on we went back to Greece, or he went back and I went with him, and our positions were reversed. I was then the migrant trying to find my feet and he was then attempting a re-entry into the past which had suddenly spun by him and changed behind his back. So there were all these permutations of migration that were constantly confronted. All our friends, his brothers, his cousin-I was aware of a sort of prism of migration in Greece which affected me, but also the extraordinary landscape, the frugality, the austerity and brilliance and harshness of that landscape after the landscape of southern Australia.⁸

The two-way nature of this experience is investigated in many of the short stories in *Milk and Home Time*. Characters migrate or travel, remain behind, correspond with others overseas or encounter themselves in new ways when living and working in foreign territory. They reconsider what it means to be "at home", that is, to be at ease with social mores and expectations of family and friends, to be cognisant of and adept at ways of doing things and confident about opinion and expression. Responses ranging from acute alienation to re-identification or reunion occur within stories, as subjects adjust to changing circumstance, or are overtaken by homesickness or the difficulties of being foreign, ignorant, or out of place. The age and gender of the traveller or migrant is also a factor, and inter-generational interactions feature in these stories as children accommodate grandparents or attempt to manage life without the kind of support that might make their own bearable. Some narratives are "deceptively simple" (*Milk* is ostensibly recalled by a child) as they work at several levels; in this instance the boy's experience reflects on the family's history and the customs of the village. These are sensitively and sensuously rendered portraits of people alone and in families, loving, hating, working or waiting; and of place diversely influenced by setting or culture. But while cross-cultural tensions and human frailty abound, these narratives also confirm a

universal need for love and consolation.

Landscapes, and their effect upon the people who dwell within them, are more apparently central in later texts like *The Seal Woman*, but the short stories are sustained by the fineness of Farmer's depictions of place; whether indoors or out; in Australia, Tahiti, America or Greece. The climate, environment and cultural *milieu* are crafted to reflect nuances of story: the strangeness of a hot, dry, day of fire in Greece is a portent for an analogous turmoil of mind (a fusion of past and future) in "White Friday", while "Summer on Ice" is about a woman in an equivalent state of emotional suspension. Mental and physical landscapes are often coterminous, and this is apt, given that landscape is a perceptual term which implies a way of looking at diverse terrains.⁹ As Gillian Tyas suggested: "Concepts of space, environment, nature, spirituality and time become part of a library of landscape."¹¹ Farmer has acknowledged that: "It's necessary for me to get the place right before I can fit a fiction in a place."¹¹

Having suggested that conditions of mind colour the view of place, the reverse is also true in that the liveliness of depictions of seascapes and other physical environments is sometimes seen by protagonists as an ameliorating factor, rather than mere projection of emotional states. Sometimes reproducing images of landscapes is a solace which appeases, as in "Snake" when Sophoula (who has exorcised her child's death by obsessively recreating her image) moves on to depict landscapes "watercolours done in precise detail", images of "birds and insects and snakes", or of "Old men lapped in shadow at the tables of *kafeneia*, sea light wandering on them as they drowse, these long afternoons" (109). Farmer is a painterly writer, very aware of light and its effects, of refraction and the interplay of shadow on surfaces and of the tonal variations that distinguish or suggest form and substance.

Short Stories: *Milk*

In the first collection, *Milk*, there is a thematic exploration of nurturing and formative influences and an astute appraisal of the effects of ageing and loss. Farmer moves beyond the earlier investigation of the differences between art and life in *Alone* to

portray cultural distance (between Greek and Australian lifestyles, expectations and experience), the distance between generations (young and old, fathers and daughters, mothers and sons), and journeys undertaken over lifetimes. There are depictions of single, married, divorced and aged women: some at the end of their journey, like Gerontissa who claims like her counterpart Gerontion "to have lived many lives" (90-98), or the woman surveying her own image in the mirror for evidence of her cancer (161-169). Others like "Ismini" are just beginning.

The stories often foreground feminine imperatives and while many of the protagonists are acutely isolated by their choices or circumstances, Farmer's view is not gender-exclusive. The comparable but different desires of male experiences indicate the intricate fabric of family life and the benefits of ties and constraints of emotional proximity are weighed. The dilemma of enforced separation is set against the positives of independence in an analysis of the nature of the bond that makes distance between people either painful or necessary. Farmer also considers tri-partite familial relationships and recurrent mother/ son, mother/ daughter interaction but, as Brenda Walker has observed, Farmer forsakes Oedipal formulae and produces "a complicated account of family structure": "She does not insist on a common position, within a common structure, for women who mother sons or indeed daughters. There is no myth that holds true for us all."¹²

"Milk"

The title story, "Milk" (7-14), is structured by interwoven patterns of concern as a child, whose mother died of cancer when he was three, visits his father and grandparents in Greece. The boy's father cares for him as they mourn the lost mother and the grandmother attempts to console a dying friend. The boy struggles to keep an orphaned baby donkey alive in the village where the extra mouth to feed simply represents a liability. Only vaguely comprehending the complexity of the adult world around him, the boy remains true to his central, culturally conditioned idea of common justice. Farmer creates a pattern of ritual offerings of nourishment: milk, yogurt, love, friendship, and loyalty and their exchange as she traces the

diverse needs that give purpose, direction and sustenance to family and community life. Even hate may provide an incentive. Gradually, the child accommodates, but never approves of, the strange phenomenon of the adults' acceptance of death. In so doing he comes to terms with his own loss.

Thematic unity is achieved by a careful organisation of image. In a manner that becomes characteristic, Farmer judiciously illustrates a range of perspectives and uses small incidents to define the limitations of a single character's vision. In this instance the boy exhibits a human need to give and receive love, and through him essential links are forged between family and generation which transcend pettiness, misunderstanding and suffering. The harshness of the Greek landscape that Farmer has spoken of is manifest in the lifestyle and pragmatic attitudes of the villagers. The child, however, is given another dimension of understanding about life and the bonds of family, despite his reluctant acceptance of strange ways.¹³

"Ismini"

In contrast, in "Ismini" a teenage girl sees herself as abandoned, first by an Australian mother who has left home, and then by her Greek-born father who fails to arrive for her birthday celebration (67-75).¹⁴ Here culinary art is demonstrably an act of love, and the girl's delight in colour and form also testifies to her growing awareness of the shapes, textures and impulses of her own ripening sexuality. Like Niko in "Milk", Ismini has egocentric priorities and a partial view of family affairs, but this not only defines her character but redirects attention to a more comprehensive view of the family's situation. The narrative begins with this simple but eloquent demonstration of the dilemma of a child whose identity and view of the world is shaped by two parents, two languages and two cultures:

Oh, what is it Baba?

Kalamari.

Mummy, Baba's caught a kamalari!

Oh yes, look. A squid.

In English it was a different creature. (67)

The narrative is structured to allow access to the stories of the other members of the family. Ismini writes notes, and then an essay, about her family to impress a loved teacher, but also to lay the ghost of her Greek grandmother.¹⁵ This exercise leads to an exploration of her own identity as she tries on the various attitudes she has inherited. Caught between Greek and Australian expectations of duty, different kinds of loyalty to her now separated parents, and fluctuating between states of acceptance and rebellion, Ismini embodies a divided self. The neighbour Theia Frosso hastens to offer what is essentially unwelcome reassurance:

"I tell you, your Baba, he a very lucky, he hev a daughter like you to look after him. A good Greek housewife."

"Tm not really Greek."

"What you tokkink about? You Greek." (69)

Ismini is also in the throes of a transition from child to adult and Farmer has her shift from homework and the after-school glass of milk to a defiant glass of red wine, candlelight and an imaginary lover through the course of the story: "Ismini took a long swig and held her glass against the swelling candle flame. Light swung rocking all over her, the kitchen walls, the window panes. The luminous crimson plums sat glowing there. She bit one through its skin and its juice spurted" (75). The prose is heightened by an intricate use of colour and image. For example, the grandmother's death mask, and mirrored images of mother and daughter, suggest a life-line, just as the colour red traces the blood-line of the story's emotional spectrum.

In this way Farmer examines the dialectic of social and individual experience to illustrate the multi-faceted nature of Ismini's inheritance. She uses deceptively simple narrative devices—two phone calls, a neighbour's visit, and a meal time coloured by recollection and some wonderfully ironic wishful thinking as Ismini's monologue reveals her Romantic diet. There is a further sophistication of this form in the second collection where the prose is even more tightly organised to achieve a structural coherence and precision of expression more commonly found in poetry.

Domestic space

Farmer is an astute observer of the politics of domestic space, and in this matter *Milk* and *Home Time* are both complementary and radically different: one charts the benefits of home as a nurturing space while the other problematises it. As "Ismini" indicates, the imaginative life is not necessarily constrained at home; in fact this may be a licensed place where behaviour can be tried out, performed, "mirrored" or exorcised. Conversely, home may be a place of terrible confinement, if you are a woman like Marina suffering post-partum depression with an unfaithful husband, a demanding baby and no means of social or familial support ("Marina" 125).

Since Farmer began writing, some domestic spaces in Australia have been radically revised; certainly they have been fictionalised in different ways—for example, White's rather patronising dismissals of the domestic are a world away from Lohrey's *Camille's Bread*. Once the province or retreat of women, domestic spaces are now increasingly shared or co-maintained by men. Tim Winton's *The Riders* confronts this brave new world. Although studies indicate that, like the distance between life and art, there is still a gap between principle and practice in the management of shared households in Australia, attitudes to roles and gendered expectations about domestic spaces have altered.¹⁶ Australian drama has long exploited domestic spaces as forums where families might be scrutinised going about their daily business, from "The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll" to White's "The Season at Sarsaparilla". This is a legacy of realism which reveals the nineteenth and twentieth century's preoccupation with the "drawing room", the in-house mystery and domestic spaces which gauge or reveal psychological conditions. In Australia, the liminal space of the verandah has been identified as a licensed and gender-neutral site between the "civilised and the wild", where conversations and inter-actions beyond the formal constraint of indoors may be enacted. Australian art has similarly exploited contrasts between interiors and bush with prospects framed by the open door or window as a consistently employed trope.

In the world in which Farmer grew up, houses were gen-

erally the province of women, economically and figuratively "headed" by men. Given these sexual politics, domestic venues were often undervalued-and continuing argument about unpaid domestic work or child-care indicates that there is still a way to go on these issues. One of the interesting cross-cultural aspects of Farmer's texts is that in contrast to this Australian picture, the households in her Greek settings are often places of female power and influence. Speaking with Ray Willbanks, Farmer advised that in "real" life the Greek household she lived in was definitely "matriarchal":

The patriarch kept well away and didn't infringe upon her territory at all. But having spent my whole adolescence in a struggle to liberate myself from my own mother, it was a bit hard to knuckle down ten years later to my husband's mother. But because I loved her so much, I tried to do it. She was a terrific gallant woman to everyone who knew her: she was gallant and beautiful and strong and brave ... and generous ... I got on better with her than did my Greek sister-in-law, in fact, much better.¹⁷

Farmer explained the dynamics of power in this household but also the obligation to sustain patriarchal hierarchies within the community. In the short stories while the patterns and effects of negotiations, of "obligation, honour, jealousy, piety, cruelty, anger" and love are revealed, domestic spaces are often positively celebrated. These fruitful sources of fiction are returned to again in *The House in the Light* where the house has ceased to be symbol of security and become a place of incarceration, but also a site of memory. Between *Alone* and *The House in the Light* this crucial meeting-place frames the interactions of families, and residency is shown to be both formative and influential.¹⁸

"Melpo"

Cross-cultural mores are interrogated in "Melpo" when the pregnant Australian bride-to-be (Kerry) is summoned to meet her lover's mother who, though frail, is still in command. The interview takes place in an inner sanctum, the mother's bedroom, where Kerry finds that the hoped-for blessing is not forthcoming as the old woman wishes her to call off the wedding on the grounds that she is not a virgin and not Greek.

Both parties have been previously married and the old woman's prior interference (on grounds of honour) saw the departure of the first, unfaithful wife Magda. Kerry, who is less malleable, cannot be so easily bought off and the implication is that in Kerry the old woman has met her match. The dialogue is skilfully managed to convey the nuances of the old woman's accent and her none-too-subtle manipulation as she pulls out all stops to exact compliance:

"You will need to be stronk. You are, yairs. Nor *oraia*, that doesun mutter. How you say?"

"*Oraia*? Beautiful. I know I'm not."

"Better not. You not uckly. Too *oraia* no good. They fall in love with they own faces. They mek the men jealoust." A smile bares the wires around her loose eye-teeth. "Lonk time now Dimitri tellink me: this woman, this Keri, Mama, I want you to meet her. Keri? I say. Her name Kyriaki? No. he say, she Australian woman, she not Greek. Not Greek, Dimitri? I <loan want to meet her. But he keep saying please, Mama. Orright, I say. If you think.ink to merry her, orright. Because now I hev not lonk time to live." (21)

Having established that she is dying and only wants to see her boy "heppy" she shrewdly acknowledges Kerry as a "Good-heart woman" but then asks only one essential favour: "Tell Dimitri you woan merry him". She tempers this with the concession that they may live together but remains adamant that, as a divorced woman, Kerry is unsuitable as a wife. This double standard causes Kerry to absent herself forthwith, but the story is well tuned as the son's filial love is placatory. While confirming his intention to marry, in contrast to his earlier subservience, he maintains his silence about past pain caused by his mother's actions in forcing his separation by weighing this against her years of mothering. Mutual love is confirmed in her statement, "Well. I done my best. I hope so you woan be sorry, you know?" (26).

It is the delicacy with which the nuances of these human dramas are depicted that makes them memorable, and it is often the unspoken agendas, sketched rather than fully depicted, which give the stories their resonance. There are linguistic innovations in the dialogue as accents and hesitations are

emulated. The employment of a bi-lingual framework in some of the short stories prefigures more comprehensive analysis in later texts, like *The House in the Light* and *The Seal Woman* where acts of translation offer further dimensions to the narratives. The employment of sensuous, figurative language and the recording of the fine details of observed life are characteristic of Farmer's writing:

When I married Magda, Jimmy is thinking, all our family danced. We roasted kids and lambs in our whitewashed oven outside. We drank ouzo and new wine by the demijohn. The whole village was there. My mother had cooked everything. Cheese pies the size of cartwheels, meatballs, *pilafia* ... In spring she picked nettles and dandelions and stewed them with rice, for Lent. In autumn, she brewed thick jams from our apples and figs and windfall apricots. Tubs of yogurt and curd cheese sat wrapped all day in blankets by our stove. On feast days an aged hen seethed, tawny and plump, in the pot. Until the Germans came, and then the Civil War. (15)

"At the Airport"

A world away from this turmoil the pain of separation is differently envisaged. In "At the Airport" a mother farewells her child who is on his way to visit Greece and his Greek family with his father and his new woman. The story of how the parents have arrived at this point of further severance is implied rather than revealed in the sequence of narrative flash-backs.

They both cringe under their son's accusing gaze. They have stopped accusing each other, and now make what amends they can. They trust each other to behave well. It was not always so. (61)

But again, the unspoken text of the narrative, a sub-text, is expressed in a deftly managed interchange between mother and son as the boy worries about the re-location of a dog and the mother imagines the possible transportation of her son. The father's new relationship changes the rules of their separate co-existence, and the following conversation occurs before the departure-laced with ambiguity as the woman vacillates

between their residual trust and an imperative need to know-without evidently prying:

"You make better chips than Vanessa," her son told her on a visit a few months ago.

"That's good. Who's Vanessa?"

"A lady. She lives at our place, She's got this dog. Its name's Roly. Guess why."

"Short for Roland?"

"No. Because it's always rolling! Mum, if my Dad marries Vanessa, will Roly be in my family?"

"I suppose. Vanessa. She's not Greek, is she?"

"No. She comes from Sydney."

"Has she been to Greece, do you know?"

"Yes. She loves it. She'd like to live there, she says. Could she take Roly?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Is he friendly?"

"Oh yes. You make the best chips I've ever aten."

"Eaten."

"Eaten." (64)

The woman fears being consumed in this exchange by the act of severance that her son's permanent departure might mean. The story ends in the reassurance, relief and blessing of the child's return from the holiday rather than the lifetime's stay in Greece.

Birthdays, departures and returns

In "Sally's Birthday" the pathos of another broken marriage and the death of a child see a drunken father momentarily sheltered by a young woman who may, or may not, resemble his dead daughter. The man is ill and obsessed. His escalating demands see him ejected and returned to the gutter, but the human damage of alcoholism and the cost of lost family connections are dramatically illustrated. The effect of children being taken away has a terrible resonance in an Australian context where indigenous families were dispersed in the name of policy. There is also pathos in the fact that the girl who drowned was earlier taught to swim by the father, and it is also troubling that the past of the girl who takes him in remains

untold, and there is just a hint of her need to locate someone lost as well, possibly a father.

In contrast, in "Saint Kay's Day" a woman thinks she may have found love, only to realise her error when her desirable language student arrives with his girlfriend in tow. Her shared birthday celebrations then only confirm her continuing isolation (54).

The young woman in "Darling Odile" is determined to see and experience the world. She seems to take up where Shirley left off in *Alone*, but she drifts into circumstances well beyond her control in Tahiti when the locals read her innocence as a challenge and target for her pack-rape. Her "friendship" with Odile is also revealed as usage, but it is the odd distance between the narrator's idea of romance and its consequences which is the focus of the story.¹⁹ A disenchanted, deflowered Rosie ruefully takes the boat home.

In diametrical opposition, Caroline in "Summer on Ice" is left at home and asked to "wait" while her lover takes his wife to America to consider *his* future prospects. Caroline exists for a while on the possibilities of a post-marital promise, but the effort involved in this cultivation of the mind is not rewarded. Both stories explore sexual politics while revealing more pain than pleasure. While Rosie in "Darling Odile" is physically disempowered, there is the suggestion that she, like Caroline, does metaphorically learn to skate-over very thin ice indeed. Both women escape but not unscathed. The lover's cruel vacillation and eventual retreat to his marriage in "Summer on Ice", after he makes a deal with his wife to give up Caroline, is only "topped" by his crass parting comments that "it was fun" and "you were great". The story's final image is of the woman "on ice", now surer of her solo position (138)

"Snake"

Another aspect of the waiting game is enacted in "Snake" when a girl in a Greek village keeps customary cultural and religious proprieties by regularly withstanding her fiance's sexual advances while he slakes his appetite with tourists. Eventually understanding the game, she succumbs, but loses because "the dice are loaded". She becomes pregnant, the child dies and the

man marries her cousin. Now an aged single woman living in the Edenic setting of Lesbos she paints and recalls the past. The story's "snake" in her mind was the fear experienced when she escaped from a real snake on her path years before. Continuing the Edenic theme her mother sees her as the garden's resident "fallen angel". Manya's only sin is her "pride" and her subsequent "fall" embodies biblical dualities. This allegorical use of the subtleties of desire echoes a similar pattern in "Melpo".

In "Inheritance" questions of love, loyalty and family duty are approached differently in an Australian environment. Here the mother manages the death of her parents and intervenes to ameliorate loss for her daughter's sake. In all of these stories a complexity of relationships is fleshed out. Physical and emotional parental legacies, and recollections accumulate until a final image or decision confirms direction. A dark story like "Maria's Girl", which is about the terror of incest, guilt, war and death, still reveals a love salvaged and sees some light return as a daughter comes back to the family home years later-and promises to return again to "see the sunflower" her dead mother has loved. There are other connections between the stories "The Woman in the Mirror", "Maria's Girl" and "Inheritance" as family members come to terms with cancer, or watch over the sleeping young who remain blissfully unaware of their imminent loss (169).

House and home

The other two stories of *Milk*, "Pumpkin" and "The Captain's House", feature Barbara and Andoni, the Australian and Greek parents of Vassilaki. These stories are about the power relations of men, women and children in the community and illustrate cross-cultural tensions. "You hev to say you paint your hairs"? asks a distraught husband after a public conversation about hair-dye, which is incidental in an Australian life but a matter of potential shame in the Greek culture. This small incident reveals more serious issues: patriarchal dominance and the non-negotiability of extended family ties in an inflexible hierarchy of priorities. When Jill, Barbara's sister, proposes that mother and child accompany them a short way on their journey, the response is definite: " 'No,' says Andoni. 'Sorry.

Not Vassilaki ... ' Then he walks into their room and slams the door on himself and the child" (122). There is an implied ownership of the child in his naming and claiming assertion, and a double standard as the order that the sister must go fails to recognise the wife's blood ties as significant.

In both narratives family vulnerabilities are exposed when visitors, or an outsider like the glamorous-girl-next-door called Voula, become catalysts for marital discord. Andoni's mother is an unlikely guardian angel, but while living in "The Captain's House" she accurately foresees trouble and tries to warn Barbara. There is a continuity between this narrative and the further account of Barbara's and Andoni's relationship in "Our Lady of the Beehives" in *Home Time* where their story is resumed and resolved (179). In many of these narratives a child is the saving grace, love given is returned and human kindness prevails. Brenda Walker has observed that:

In Farmer, the patriarchal family structure is by no means inevitable and matrilineal authority in the form of the grandmother is recognised, even if the connection between women such as a mother and a grandmother exists because of the patriarchal "prestige" of a son and grandson. Yet Farmer is far from sentimental about women's affiliations with one another. Women's relationships are often strained, or in conflict. Women are literally foreign to one another ... Areas of cultural communality, particularly among women are shown to be the areas of the most intransigent conflict ... The women literally misinterpret one another.²⁰

Farmer is not dealing with formulaic fictions but genuinely investigating a range of human potential.

Home Time

In the second collection, home is viewed as a dangerous place. Like Blake's *Songs of Experience*, these stories comment on innocence by their distance from it, and Farmer has suggested that here she was not writing about love but the absence of it.²¹ In "A Woman with Black Hair" a victim of rape is forced to speak a text supplied by her attacker, and in "Marina" the distance from home results in tragedy because of a traumatised young woman's inability, post-partum, to maintain a family life without support. In "Fire and Flood" the contrary belief that

one is safe if one stays put is belied by two tragedies and the third story of a survivor who, in the aftermath, "has nothing to say to anyone there". "Caffe Veneta" and "Matrimonial Home" consider instability and infidelity, but the collection, despite its evocation of absence, paradoxically speaks eloquently of the need for "honour, endurance and love".

Reviews of this collection initially focused on the collection's "legitimate" rendering of experience, the skilful portrayal of domestic circumstance and their bleak realism. In *Home Time* Farmer's experiments with form reach a new sophistication; narrative structures become more complex, stories continue or encapsulate others, intertextual references serve as sub-texts, and the imagery, motifs and themes resonate to accumulate meaning.

Home Time is a companion volume to *Milk* and there are some inter-connections between the stories from each collection; characters reappear and relationships develop or are altered by new experience. Again, each story has its unity of effect but also lends its perspective to the thematic exploration of the collection. In *Home Time* we find an adult reevaluation of places of birth, home, parents, and present or previous experience. Each story considers the meaning or nature of home as a place of birth, growth, departure or return.

"Place of Birth"

In the first aptly named story, a Greek family is anticipating a shut-in winter season on the last day before snow (1-25). The narrative is enclosed and informed by two sharply etched images: the initial picture of the Greek family in their setting "flare-bright with sunlight ... printed over with black branches and coils of grapevine" (1); and the final imprint of Bell's last photographs, "bare interiors of sun and shade and firelight in which as always she appears absent" (25). The woman advertises her sense of transience and imminent departure by overtly recording and storing these images that will offer a source of nourishment later. Bell is facing a confinement, but her fear of being restricted and committed to a life in Greece because of the birth of her child on Greek soil is the implicit subject of the

story. After receiving a letter from her parents at home in Australia, Bell surprises herself by reacting instinctively:

"I think I want to have it at home," Bell hears herself say.

"At home!" Kyria Sophia is delighted. "Why not? I had all mine here. Grigori was born in the room you sleep in!" (3)

As an indication of her alienation, home means Australia for Bell, but for Kyria Sofia the word implies a different set of alternatives—she does not distinguish between Greece and Australia but between house and hospital. The impending parents are aware that the issue will determine futures and Bell's plans cause a family schism while also revealing a cultural gap which is manifest in different attitudes towards home. These are the means whereby Farmer defines distance. She allows the rest of the family to see Bell as fixed in her attitudes, like the snow woman outside who is also only there for a season, while we are privy to the woman's private anxieties. The woman is subsequently dismissed as heartless, wilful, cold-blooded and "living in a world of her own" (17). The story encompasses complementary journeys, the mother-in-law's contrived escape and Chloe's equally desperate departure, and these provide an ironic counterpoint to the family's condemnation of Bell. There is a partial acknowledgement of her need to go when the old man poses for photographs which he suggests Bell will show her parents (12).

Even the fairy-tale being told to the child implicitly comments on the drama being enacted in this house.²² Snow White and Rose Red were two sisters notable for their exemplary obedience, their unselfishness and their ability to live in harmony with their mother. In consequence they were rewarded with a handsome prince apiece. Farmer advises us, wryly, that the tale is familiar in Greek or English. In this house the two daughters-in-law struggle with patriarchal authority, matriarchal dominance, toothache, jealousy, and frustration as their princes are frequently absent: "Alone in the cold bed Bell is awake for the first unmistakable tremor of the quickening" (23). Without resorting to overt didacticism Farmer causes us to reflect upon the distance between the familiar tale and the sexual politics of contemporary society. It is, however, equally characteristic

that she portrays both the household's tensions and the moments of warmth, peace and good humour that bear witness to the enduring positives to which Bell later returns.

In the story aptly entitled "Pomegranates" Bell, like Persephone, having experienced her season in the "underworld" of Australia, returns to the light and grace of Greece where genuine affection between the young woman and her ex-mother-in-law transcends the pain and severance of divorce. Time has provided a necessary maturity and modified the effects of distance. Unlike some of her characters, Farmer says that:

I was just lucky in Greece in that I was hurtled straight into a family. Their families are not like mine was. We just had no contact. We would shield each other from our feelings. We thought it was polite and I was brought up not to show my feelings, not to be abrasive, not to make contact with other people. And then suddenly you're in this Greek situation where everyone is bellowing and struggling and ending up spread-eagled and bleeding on the ground and then getting up and fighting again. This naked clash of wills in a Greek family probably comes out in the stories. It was something I had never experienced and that I loved. I thought it was liberating.²³

The final story of the collection, "Our Lady of the Beehives" (179-204), expresses the emotional life, light and warmth (*sans* violence) that is suggested by this observation; the kind of full-bodied interchange that contrasts with the guarded responses, fading light and advancing chill of the portrait of a family in "Place of Birth" (1-25). Recurrent patterns of imagery again provide an organising principle in the narrative structure and the story ends with the affirmative benediction of the experienced grandmother Kyria Eirini. This serves as a finale or arrival after the collection's evocation of journeying, and it continues Barbara's and Andoni's story from "Pumpkin" and "The Captain's House" in *Milk*, but Voula is now the sumptuous honey-coloured next-door-neighbour with a fascination for Andoni as well Andoni's son, the child Vassilaki. The bee-like Andoni, "glistened, brown all over and shadowed with black hairs, barred as well with shadows that fell from the window over him" (192), is attracted to Voula who watches "Over the

sandbank" where "the water was a honeycomb, a golden net" (195) while the serenely pregnant Barbara initially ignores her mother-in-law's warning of impending disaster. The house with its bee-box-like lid (the "kapaki") hums with the family's activities until a series of misadventures leads to the child's accident and Youla's subsequent fall from grace in the eyes of Andoni. The old woman accepts the sacrifice of the small life of the bee for the greater good and goes to the chapel on the hill to give thanks and offer her salve for all at the end of the day.²⁴

Seasons: home and away

Between these winter and summer worlds, the other stories offer their evidence of different seasons, different lives and varying distances from home. In each, Farmer appropriately modifies form to invoke a particular mood; pace, pitch, vocabulary and imagery are tuned in accordance with each story's unique content.

The portrait of the Greek household in the first story, "Place of Birth", is framed by images of sunlight and shadow. A more formal frame-narrative is employed in stories like "Home-Time" and "A Man in the Laundrette". In these stories the act of writing serves as a home base or outside parameter to which the writer returns to evaluate encapsulated experience. Here Farmer offers a story within a story. In a discussion of the classic film *Casablanca* Umberto Eco spoke of the textual strategy of this film as a collage where "cliches talk among themselves".²⁵ Farmer uses this film as a centerpiece to explore a thesis about the effects of time and change by illustrating their damaging effects between the opening and closing sentences of her scriptor's story. *Casablanca* was the romance of the 1940s in which Rick (Bogart) sacrificed himself for the safety of Ilsa (Bergman), America and the entire United Nations. This pre-war, propagandist (and now celebrated) cult movie serves as a backdrop and exemplar. Its popular theme song acknowledging the "search for love and glory ... as time goes by" provides an extremely wry sub-text as Farmer reviews such idealism.²⁶

The narrative of the title story "Home Time" begins with a

slightly tense interchange between lovers—the woman is restless and the man preoccupied. This situation is temporarily resolved as they decide to watch *Casablanca*, "in America, together". Their failing relationship is scrutinised as they view the fictional lovers' permanent youth and inviolate love. In the bar an older woman's story, a saga that incorporates grand passion, domestic violence and a steady but hardly passionate on-going relationship, is told in counter-point to the movie. The older woman admits time's erosion of her relationship, but claims that "real people have their moments of glory", and that even lost love has value as it lives on in memory. Blurred as it is by self-pity, alcohol and sisterly empathy, her statement offers a key to Farmer's design. Throughout, there is an implicit comparison between the romantic ideals of the film and life's more sordid realities. The story ends with a return to the apartment, where the young woman's interest in recording the older woman's narrative is seen by her partner as "scavenging". In the limited span of a short story, Farmer considers four love stories and allows them to comment on one another in the manner of an "intertextual discourse". The romance of the screen remains fixed forever in impossible perfection; its celluloid images promising an elusive paradigm. In total contrast, the relationship between the young couple deteriorates irrevocably, and "A Man in the Laundrette", in the same collection, confirms the diagnosis of their dying love.

Farmer's writing often investigates the effect of changes wrought by time, and articulates a sense of the distance between desire and disenchantment, and in this collection there are several interlinked stories that serve this function. In "A Man in the Laundrette" we re-encounter the couple from "Home Time". Domestic issues now irk and the woman is looking for a reason to escape to the laundrette alone, which is a significant shift from the earlier mutual outing to the tavern. An insignificant detail in the first story, the taunt of the black boys, seems, in retrospect, to prefigure the second story's enlarged central incident where the woman, without the protection of a male companion, is confronted by the violence of racial and sexual intimidation. Similarly, the earlier story's harmless exchange of confidences is recalled, as Farmer offers

us an implicit contrast when the full bitterness of the black man's experience is unleashed on the vulnerable woman.

Light and shade

Within the collection Farmer has allowed one text to comment on another like poems in a poetic sequence. When the woman in "A Man in the Laundrette" escapes the threat, her return home does not bring comfort but further accusations of her supposed complicity, and the phrase "she asked for it" as an excuse for sexual violence is a backdrop to the action. After being accused of mismanaging the incident by a witness who sees her to the corner she later confronts the smaller but in some ways more scarifying violence of domestic mistrust. She responds to both the sexual threat and the accusation of complicity by asking "Why me?" (99). Farmer carefully arranges her dialogue and her narrative to reply, not overtly, but by illustrating the sexual tensions of a society, not simply those of the couple engaged in the process of losing each other in their home away from home. The witness in the laundromat says it all:

"He was so drunk," she says. "What made him act like that, I mean, why me?"

His fine black hair flaps in the wind. "You didn't handle him right," he says.

"What's right?"

"You dunno. Everybody see that. Just whatever you did, you got the guy mad, you know?"(99)

There are other subtle links between the stories. In the first, the woman's work-place is described as she looks out on the wintry world between the light of her two lamps and is comforted. In the second, the man is viewed similarly but in front of his window facing the wall in dark profile. Farmer pursues this patterning of light and shade until the woman acknowledges the deteriorating state of their relationship-"there is no light in this passage"-and must look beyond the man to discover illumination:

and here a slant of sun strikes. Leaves all the colours of fire flicker and tap the glass. "Look. You'd think it was stained glass, wouldn't

you ?" Look, she is suddenly saying aloud, "I'll never forget this window". He could be a statue or the shadow of one, a hard edge of lamplight. He gives no sign of having heard. (101)

The fluctuating nuances of relationships are traced as different ways of seeing, shades in depths of colour are used to enhance meaning and the *dynamis* that the work is designed to effect. The woman, whose experience is the story's subject, is engaged in the act of writing a story and each successive line of her text comments on the action and earlier dialogue until her current relationship ends and both stories in life and art are complete:

Then she sits down at the table under the lamps with her writing pad and pen and scrawls on, though her hand, she sees, is shaking.

"Not to be with me."

She smiles. "Of course to be with you. You know that."

"I thought you had a story you wanted to finish."

"I had. It's finished." (101)

The strategic use of such mirroring devices further widens the scope and range of Farmer's exploration with form.

In a witty employment of Baudelaire as tour guide through Farmer's fiction, Ian Henderson assessed the ways in which these stories seduce and "problematise writing itself as 'revelation'" and argued that the "sting" in the stories is in their power to reveal.²⁷ Certainly that is a power that the un-named lover fears when he adds his aggression and implicit threat to that already experienced by the writer in "Home Time":

"I am not to figure in anything you write," comes the smooth voice again. "Never. I hope you understand that."

Hardly breathing, she cranes her neck forward to have a sip of coffee, but he grabs the mug from her and slams it down on the table, where it breaks. (80)

Like "Home Time" and "A Man in the Laundrette", "Caffe Veneto" and "Matrimonial Home" are complementary. The first has a tripartite structure; beginning with Anne's view of her father, enclosing a central cameo portrait of another family and ending with the father's view of Anne. Throughout, the daughter's assessment of the father is modified. His pre-

occupation with his own concerns permits a "loosening of the ties that bind" as the girl, mindful of her own new love, re-designates her father as a man, but not one she can any longer admire. She finds that it is not his infidelity that causes pain but that the prospect of her mother's abandonment appals. This necessitates a reassessment of her parents' roles:

"What's she like?"

"Beautiful."

"You were my household gods," she says, as if to herself.

"Warm and luminous. One each side of the fire." (40)

The reflective glow and sustenance that home has provided is reconsidered in the later story where a retrospective analysis of the parents' failed relationship is conducted from that same fireside position. In this story the distance between home-coming based on a lie, and actual warmth and confidence, is demonstrated. Again Farmer indicates the separating force of different attitudes within a family but also acknowledges a common need of trust as the basis of relationship.

As I have suggested, the theme of the collection is consistent, but there is a constant appraisal of different attitudes to home as Farmer manipulates point-of-view and explores diverse experience. In complete contrast to the sombre mood of many of the stories we are also offered the light relief of the child's perspective in "The Harem" (41-52) where the child Bell (Annabel) cannot quite keep pace with the complexities of adult behaviour. In this collection this story has something of the impact of "Happy Story" in Carey's *The Fat Man in History* (52). Humour is generated by the distance between the child's partial understanding of household politics and the sexual proclivities of her neighbours and the wider view shared by the reader. There are deadly serious manoeuvres being made by the adults as two women compete for the affections of a man and two girls have their moment of conflict stemming from "possession" in an echo of the main game.

At the other end of the emotional spectrum there are the stories like "Marina" and "Fire and Flood". Demonstrating the price of distance from home, these stories present bleak views of characters trapped within the nightmare of terrifying events

and emotional disturbance. Marina suffers the effects of alienation, neglect, inadequacy, isolation and disorientation, post-partum depression and incipient madness, which culminate in baby-bashing, or rather the attempt of a sick woman to silence an unbearable noise. The child's death is the appalling outcome of Marina's final unanswered call for help. It does not seem too imaginative to suggest that Farmer uses this name quite deliberately, given the recurrent patterns in her writing. In Shakespeare's *Pericles* Marina is a heroine separated from her mother, hated by a foster-mother, and sold to a brothel where she was so virtuous that she reformed the customers.²⁸ She is portrayed as a paragon of virtue, patience, constancy, purity who is renowned for her ability to "smile extremity out of act". T.S. Eliot's poem "Marina" concentrates on the psychological tempest of the father as he grieves for the loss of his daughter (115), while Vance Palmer's "What is Love" considers the trauma of a lost child and a lost love whilst affording the Italian migrant woman, Marina, the partial comfort of communal grief.²⁹ Farmer's story seems informed by these precedents but it focuses on Marina, the totally inadequate, isolated Greek girl who commits the ultimate sin of being unable to cope. This "failure" is unacceptable in classical Stoic traditions or in Greek/ Australian society.

The story "Fire and Flood" is equally stark in its portrayal of a damaged survivor of natural disaster who feels guilty for being unable to have changed events and for being alive when others have died. Farmer charts the shock, reaction and abortive attempts to accommodate loss, and the painful and inadequate rehabilitation of those who go on living beyond disaster. One reviewer complained that Farmer

writes of unbearable events. I don't want to read about a child burning to death in a bushfire ... There is no understanding, no growing through pain, nothing to provide a reason for considering such things.³⁰

But Farmer illustrates that for this character there is no further growth. This is not a "happy story". Like Marina's predicament with its contrasting dramatisation of mounting hysteria, this grim saga enacts a different process of mind; the colourless,

enervated replay of facts testifies to the relentless events, and to the narrator's scarred emotional condition. Having decided that "We are set in motion by a malevolent hand, unable to know in what our actions are rooted or what fruit they will bear" (123), this man eventually resorts to the exorcism of writing, which offers a slim chance of discovering meaning and the redemption of a new beginning.

New beginnings are not always possible, but two other stories lend their testimony, and both are about survival of a kind. In both "Market Day" and "A Woman with Black Hair" Farmer restricts dialogue and points of view. Using a single image of a woman's hair as a central stimulus for the narratives she considers different ways of viewing that image. In "Market Day" a blind woman discovers accidentally that she is now grey and old, but this woman transcends her tragic past and self-interest to serve the cause of her niece's love. This little brown Aunt who has patiently endured physical and emotional suffering is almost deified because of her capacity to love a world she cannot see. She accommodates the loss of her own youth, and by the end of the story her hair is no longer the focus of her despair but, appropriately, has the appearance of a bronze crown. This narrative is also interesting in that Farmer recreates the particular textures and sounds of Elpida's environment as the reader shares the blind woman's dependence upon aural or mnemonic experience.

"A Woman with Black Hair"

In direct contrast to the characterisation of Elpida in "Market Day", the anonymous and inter-changeable woman with black hair is only allowed to speak a text supplied by her attacker. Her hair, and the way she looks, makes her a target, and her thoughts, ambitions, desires or fears are ignored. Suspense is sustained as we become aware of the insidious purpose of this intent observation of a woman's life, until the rapist penetrates the house and the woman's body.³¹ But the violence of the tale does not reside solely in the detail of physical attack. Farmer ensures that her reader looks beyond this moment to foresee

the outcome of lost security. The act of rape is portrayed as a demonstration of imposed will and an extreme negation of freedom of choice.

Other writers have considered the prowler in action, often for satiric or ironic social comment. Patrick White's *The Night The Prowler* actually liberates the victim from the clutches of social convention while David Malouf's *The Prowler* is the catalyst for an exposure of suburban repression and neuroses. Once again Farmer's reconsideration of the issues offers a reply and she tackles this subject fearlessly and effectively. In her portrait of misused power the narrator condemns himself through word and deed as the woman's loss of peace of mind and future security is implicitly weighed against this incident in this jogger's regular exercise schedule. The story is stark and unforgettable.

This story has become the target of accusations of presenting women as "victims"-but women who are raped are victims. Farmer has written about this act of violence on more than one occasion just as she has written about other fears that men and women endure-like loss, or culture shock, or lack of affinity with partners or parents. Rape is about power and possession of another without their consent. People are "re-inscribed" by being treated as merely a body, as something used at the disposal or whim of another. Like other subject matter deemed contentious and more customarily avoided by some writers, Farmer looks squarely at this act for what it is. She investigates how women live with the threat of rape and adjust their lives around it. *Alane's* narrator also diagnoses these risks. Farmer also considers the taboos that define the importance of virginity in various societies in "Snake" and "Darling Odile".

While violence and predatory calculation suppress the woman in "A Woman with Black Hair", constraints of self-imposed silence prevail when, post-rape, Rosie in "Darling Odile" cries "but tells no one". Ian Henderson sees her as someone who transcends the proscribed text by assuming a degree of control.³² The woman with black hair is further disempowered as her children as well as her throat are implicitly at threat. Her acquiescence is planned, bartered and bought and she is the commodity, a replaceable one at that. She will

again wake with her nightmares and alarm for her daughters as she is trapped by a cage of fear that has been lowered over her space, like all people when rape is used as a weapon. This story is about lost innocence and there is a reiteration of protest each time the bird bangs itself on the glass to remind the woman of surveillance, invasion and violence.

"White Friday"

The woman in "White Friday" wakes from her nightmare with "blank eyes on a strange white room". Farmer creates a sense of suspended moment and heightened perception as the pre-occupied woman struggles to dispel her homesickness and sense of alienation as she tries to decide where her home is. She is torn between allegiances in Greece and Australia and aware of her need at mid-life to redefine directions. Once again Farmer provides a text within a text. The woman is reading the *Memoirs of Hadrian*, the story of the Spanish-born Roman commander written by Marguerite Yourcenar (82). In this novel Hadrian realises, too late, that love is more important to him than Empire-building, and that he has failed to pay attention to the dreams and portents that might have changed his fate. This protagonist starts her day by accidentally smashing her loved white tea-pot which has travelled so far with her. At the end of her day she makes positive choices. It is interesting that she is affected by the unexpected contact with the old woman on the hill whose interrogation about what home is allows her the interval for self-analysis that is necessary in her decision-making. This woman reads the signs and goes home.

Home Time demonstrates a range of choices and considers the nature of "honour, endurance, free will and love" (153). The collection begins with this epigraph by Odysseus Elytis:

let the soil at your feet be thin
 so that you will have nowhere to spread roots
 and have to delve in the depths continually.
To Axion Esti from Genesis

It ends with an old woman hoping that: "In the next world may we all be young again ... all of us young and at peace by the sea forever" (204).

Farmer began with the idea of home as birth place, with its benefits of support and instinctive nourishment, and she conducts us through the circuitous alternatives of adult expectation and concession to arrive at a more complex concept of home.³³ Like the perfection of *Casablanca*, the ideal of home is often beyond reach, but the final story offers a potential rebirth. These are stories of subtlety and unusual power, and their effectiveness resides in the careful integration of form and content, the clarity and precision of this writer's use of image and in the elegant synthesis of traditional and contemporary textual evidence. The "Greek" and "bleak" aspects of content that draw criticism are undeniably there but it is not only the women who are the victims of time or fate. Farmer's artistry encompasses and gives new meaning to disparate strands of experience and she has lent her contemporary understanding to Eliot's claim that: "Home is where one starts from: As we grow older/ The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated."³⁴

A changing pattern: *Collected Stories*

In the *Collected Stories*, which are arranged chronologically, there are five "new" narratives.³⁵ These include stories to be discussed in Chapter Four, *A Body of Water*, which is read differently in the context of the collection's amniotic "sea" of contributing knowledge, and an American story "Snowfall", which is related to the cast, circumstance and emotional *milieu* of "Caffe Veneto", "Matrimonial Home" and "A Man in the Laundrette". There is also a terrifying story of parental neglect that rivals Astley's exposes of "grannie dumping" entitled "A Pawpaw all the way from Queensland" and a delightful fall from innocence called "Baptism", the story of a young man's first sexual encounter. "Inheritance" is a narrative about death and generation, while "The Albatross" is about the discovery of poetry as a gift (discussed in Chapter Seven). The chronological arrangement relieves the starkness of *Home Time's* impact and demonstrates the diversity and range of tone and subject in Farmer's writing.³⁶

In speaking of her work Farmer has suggested that the short stories were invaluable as spaces where the craft of writing was

learned. She distinguished between her early use of characterisation in *Alone* and her later creation and employment of characters in the following ways:

I can allow a character to materialise in the reader's mind without feeling I have to direct it like a puppet from here to there, as if it were a film I was directing and the character was only real when on the screen. Now I've got an idea of how to have characters live on when they're out of sight, so there's more depth to them than there was. They're not all surface, as I think of my past work as being.³⁷

Projections they may have been, but "puppets" manipulated with sufficient skill to be memorable enough to cause others to reflect on reality.

Chapter 4

"Only Connect": *A Body of Water*

A poem is a fountain, a novela river—a story a pool, lake, bill-abong? For Joyce in the end, all thought, all language rolled into one great river. Beverley Farmer¹

Life in the body is all, and enough, and she is sailing away from, not to, Byzantium. Beverley Farmer

A Body of Water is an innovative and challenging text. Its form evolved from an inter-weaving of parallel genres: a diary, with a montage-like compilation of writer's notes and critical and textual reference, and emergent creative work—the creative writing (prose, short-stories and poetry) of a one-year period from February 1987. The narrator's mediating consciousness is foregrounded, recording responses to reading and events, acknowledging sources and literary precedent and enacting a quest for new modes of expression. As the year proceeds, the well-springs of writing are plumbed and five short stories and several poems emerge like pearls retrieved from the flux. This symbiosis of process and product was received with delight by those who acknowledged an experimental meditation on life and art. Others, for whom the deliberately controlled pace, shifting tonal register, and highly orchestrated composition seemed either too precious or too remote from the social realism of earlier work, expressed either confusion or disappointment. This text irritatingly refused to fit neat generic prescriptions.³

A Body of Water was published as fiction. It was also compared with Murray Bail's *Longhand*, another writer's notebook,

but the distance between Bail's cryptic jottings about art and life and Farmer's fluent and "gracious invitation to share the gestation" makes this analogy tenuous. Farmer's text is designed to illustrate interconnections between diverse bodies of knowledge and individual perception, but it is also about the potential risk and the terror of writing.⁴ Published in 1990, it was short-listed for the National Book Council Non-fiction Banjo award and for the NSW Douglas Stewart prize for *non-fiction*, confirming its ambiguous form.⁵

The best analogy I can offer is a musical one. The text enacts a reversal of the patterns employed by the Czech composer Smetana in his symphonic poem *Md Vlast* (My Country). One section, "Vlatav" or "The Moldau", depicts the progress of a river from its source in the mountains through the countryside to Prague and on to the sea (the narrow rapids mellowing to smooth passages before its broadly fluent exit). In contrast, *A Body of Water* is a "stream of consciousness" narrative, which gradually accumulates or gathers material to enact a shift from stasis to flow. In the latter, multiple sources feed very slowly into the textual mainstream until a clear, narrow path towards Tibet is figured in the climax of the narrative. The final passage suggests an arrival, or a realisation of a clear direction or space, but also a transcendence, perhaps of life itself, where only the dream of existence or memory of the word remains:

There are dry river beds in the Land of Snows filled with crazed sun and sand only, like those in the hot desert regions of our own land; and they too can suddenly flood, taking unawares the people and cattle camped in them. The glaciers of the Mountains of Snow are old, old, left behind from the last Ice Age of the world, great white lizards clamped in crystal on the crags and peaks. No new snow will arise to take their place. For they are melting. Every day that the sun shines in their burning glass that surface melts, dilates the drips, and great tongues of water go rolling and ruffling along the ancient paths until at last, far below, as night falls, they come to the dry river beds. With nightfall on the peaks the crystal stiffens. Under the stars no more water flows. By daybreak the absence of the river will have reached down into the gorges and all day the sand will dry its colours in the bare sun. These are the ghosts of rivers, night-flowering vines of water, rivers of dream. (292)

Intertextuality

The narration is tempered and enhanced throughout by critical appreciations and discoveries of diverse writing and of other lives and philosophies. There are passages feeding the narrative cited from works by Paz, Zweig, Austen, James, Proust, Tolstoy, Hardy, Yeats, Dickens, Flaubert, Spinoza, Lawrence, Woolf, Durrell, Barnard, Prichard, Byatt, Masters, Jolley, Anderson, Whitman, Rilke, Eliot, Lowell, Plath, Snyder, Handke, Loser, Mansfield, Barnard and many others, as well as references to philosophies as diverse as *Tractacus Logico-Philosophicus* or *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. But these are highly selected references, and as Farmer pays her dues to collective artistry the text becomes "a single story in many voices", a kind of music, "not so much a melody as a leit-motiv prolonged indefinitely" (19). In these ways Farmer enacts her thesis about the value of art as she contributes to literature's "great continuous discussion throughout the ages and across the world".⁶

In recent years we have become more accustomed to a multiplicity of discourses and the overlapping of literary and visual texts. For Bakhtin "language was a field of contending voices", but Farmer's work is closer to that of Kristeva who "thought of the text as a site of redistribution".

The text is therefore a *productivity* and this means: first, that its relationship to the language in which it is situated is redistributive ... and second, that it is a permutation of texts, an intertextuality: in the space of a given text several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect.⁷

Whereas Kristeva goes on to suggest that the intersection causes the voices to "neutralise one another" Farmer's intertextuality contributes "productivity" and enhances the complex fabric of the text by demonstrating *connections* between ideas and creativity.⁸ Intertextuality is integral and there is a consistent acknowledgement and celebration of literary influences (Chekhov, Eliot, Joyce, Collette, Slessor, Plath and others). Similarly, there is a merging of multiple forms as poetry, prose and critical commentary on writing are juxtaposed to establish patterns of resonance and reflection.

It is apt that Farmer arrived at the title of this work when

reading a biography of Sylvia Plath, a moment she describes in the following way:

[I] had just read where she and Ted Hughes found an apartment in Boston that overlooked a river. Something boiled over on the stove then and I closed the book and got up, thinking aloud to myself that Sylvia would have liked that. She would like to look out over a body of water. I was pleased. I was delighted for her. Then it hit me. I had my title. Multifaceted with rich implications, a gift. I was not surprised ... The death of the author does not silence her ... or need not anyway, if we are open and receptive.⁹

This advertised network of connections, both artistic and spiritual, between the literature and lives of other artists and the narrator's daily experience and personal contacts is illustrated by the following paradigm:

The Buddhist allegory of "Indra's Net" tells of an endless net of threads throughout the universe, the horizontal threads running through space, the vertical ones through time. At every crossing of threads is an individual, and every individual is a crystal bead. The great light of "Absolute Being" illuminates and penetrates every crystal bead; moreover, every crystal bead reflects not only the light from every other crystal in the net-but also every reflection of every reflection throughout the universe. (118)

The metaphor of reflected light (the prismatic crystal) recurs in a text punctuated by points of illumination and recurrent images of water, but this reference to spatial dimensions signifies a desire to transcend linear narrative and establish other inter-relationships. Farmer adopted new procedures by allowing the structure and design of this narrative to arise from the work "where form, not plot, imparts the meaning", rather than have it evolve as a product squeezed or hammered into some inflexible shape:

This new writing: I want it to be an interweaving of visual images-more open, loose and rich, and free of angst. And if I keep a notebook this time as I go, it will grow side by side with the stories, like a placenta and the baby in the womb. (3)

Brenda Walker observed that, while the procreative trope may be cliched, Farmer's use of the body is increasingly distinctive-and this will be discussed later in this chapter.¹⁰

Other writers also applauded Farmer's experiment. Sara Dowse spoke of prefiguring innovations in eighties writing, but claimed that: "*A Body of Water* is a breakthrough ... a book with all the empty spaces and scaffolding left behind. It is exciting to see this so well done."¹¹

Marion Eldridge praised a "shapely and resonant book, a book that teases the imagination", where "seemingly disconnected ideas" are skilfully linked.¹² Others commented on the altered relations between writers and readers of such experimental texts by claiming that "this book demands a certain patience of the reader" and that it "requires that one learn or remember how to contemplate".¹³ Some readers impatiently refused the task and accused the writer of exercising her "authorial ego" by offering them a "scrapbook".¹⁴

The latter represents an echo of responses to earlier Farmer books, but those assuming autobiographical revelations in this text would have been disappointed when Farmer carefully distinguished between self and speaker and advised that the narrator's thoughts, observations, insights and confidences deliberately omitted essential elements of *her* life experience.¹⁵ As the narrative's epigraph by Robert Lowell so aptly states:

Conscience incurable
 convinces me I am not writing my life;
 life never assures which part of ourself is life.

Farmer confirmed that *A Body of Water* is shaped by two mirroring registers: interleaved reading and writing material; but it is also shaped by a rigorous *excision* of both personal events and the early drafts of creative writing.¹⁶

Whatever entries had no bearing on any of the poems and stories of the year I cut out, lopped off. This alone, to my mind, is enough to qualify the book as fictional. There were events of great personal importance that had not issued in any story or poem: they don't get a mention ... At other times of emotional pressure I had happened not to write in my notebook ... Rather than concoct an entry, I made no mention of these events either. The result is a distortion, a falsification, a fiction with its own inner logic and no necessary correspondence to the lived life of that year, the truth, the raw material out of which it had been fashioned. Does that make it a novel? I think it does.¹⁷

B.S. Johnson distinguishes between the terms "novel" and "fiction" by arguing that the "novel is a form in the way that a sonnet is a form" and, within that, "one may write truth or fiction".¹⁸ Farmer again demonstrates the complex nature of truth, the diverse growths that a grain or seed of truth might produce. Speaking about form and the novel Farmer advised that:

Whatever the "novel" is, what I want to do with it is not synonymous with narrative. What I write will probably-almost invariably, maybe invariably-have an element of narrative but it need not be the major element or the basis of the structure. The events and the sequence they make and the play of causality in and through them may be overlaid, underlaid with leitmotifs, recurrent images that follow their own inner logic and echo and resonate with each other independently of what is going on in the narrative. It's a bit like the way a painting can be about its subject, what we see it represents, and also about the way a colour-any colour-is set flowing about the surface to be picked out here, there, directing the eye all over, seeking its own balance on its own terms. It's as if you had a diagram of the human skeleton, and superimposed on it a diagram of the major blood vessels, and then a diagram of the digestive system. They could have been made separately and put together to make the novel. There are writers who work like this and get results. I can't. For me they have to all grow together from the first idea. This takes patience on the part of the reader, I grant you, and more still, it takes trust. Which the writer has to earn, of course, but that's a longer story.¹⁹

Lastly, *A Body of Water* is a quest, an extended contemplation and a speculative venture. It dramatises a search for a "way", a "passage" or "threshold" promising new directions, artistically, emotionally and spiritually, as the writer learns that "The Path is the Practice. Not theory. Practice" (48). While this resonates with the Buddhist journey being undertaken, which demands an un-learning in order to see life differently, there are also discoveries and revisions of attitudes about art as the writer encounters claims like those of Paz that "poetry requires no special talent but rather a kind of spiritual daring, an unbinding that is also an unwinding" (56). The narrator dares to undertake an emptying out of preconceptions about writing

andform in order to experiment or create a text that explores the possibility of new meanings, On a panel with Alex Miller at the Melbourne Writers Festival in 1993, Farmer presented a paper on "The effect of Asian spirituality on my writing" and, characteristically, acknowledged influential texts and some life-changing endeavours of her peers before offering this summary-which is lengthy but worth citing as it is central to her work:

How much of a Budd.hist does this make me? I'm not a believer by nature, not religious, not spiritual. Nor do I regard faith as a virtue. Doctrine and dogma can all toooften be shackles and they can be swords, as is everywhere apparent. -As far as it's in my power I want to be a free thinker. Thereis a place for the free mind in Buddhism, where we are told we must all make out our own path step by step. I don't believe in the cycle of rebirths, which is fundamental to Buddhism, as it is to Hinduism. It may be true that we are reborn again and again, but I doubt it. I find it as hard as the Resurrection to accept. I can't prove that it's *not* the case that we are reborn without knowing it: I'd have to say I was agnostic on the matter of rebirth. An Orthodox Buddhist-if this is not a contradiction in terms-would deny that I was one at all. All the same, as I see it I am on a Budd.hist path, a *graduated* path, what the Tibetans call *lam rim*, and for me the path involves writing. As the Buddha advised on his deathbed, I am working out my salvation with diligence. I put my faith in the things of the earth as my senses apprehend them, the concrete things, while accepting that they are illusory as the *Gita* says, and the Buddha says, and the physicists of our timesay. In any religion, livingor dead, what I love is the myth, the metaphor of creation, of being, the beauty and coherence and multiplicity of the spirit worlds that man, and woman, have created. What it amounts to, I suppose, is that I look on religions as works of art.

A Body oJWater is a writing notebook of the year 1987-88, when I was spending a lot of time on Buddhism and went regularly to teachings at a centre in Melbourne headed by a Tibetan monk. The book is an exploration of what it is to be a self, what a self is constructed of-and *who* is doing the constructing?-moment by moment, and of the attempts of the self out of its depth in a universe of flux to find a foothold. Buddhism is the backbone of the book, assuming bodies of water have backbones. I found in Buddhist thought at the time a crystallisation of my vague

intuitions, inklings, about the nature of perception and experience. It had and has a bearing on what sort of thing will strike a spark in my mind-what will seem to have, for the purposes of fiction, a microcosmic significance. The Buddha taught detachment from the desirous, angry, ignorant self trapped in *maya*, illusion, and he taught spiritual exercises intended to bring this detachment about. Kierkegaard-I'm quoting from memory here-said somewhere, "Most people are subjective about themselves and objective about others. The task is to be objective about ourselves, subjective about others." This is another way of putting what I mean-this is detachment in action.²⁰

When negotiating the Buddhist way the narrator often finds herself "in error" and there are similar checks and adjustments made in learning about and practising the writing process. David Brooks observed that:

Farmer's protagonist is a woman on the verge: just passing her mid-forties, she is facing the prospect not only of menopause but of a life alone ... She is a writer. Somehow the mind she seeks to change or escape is inherent even in the forms she uses. Beginning to suspect, that is, that the inherited forms of narrative, like the inherited forms of the self, are misrecognitions, misperceptions, distortions toward and in the collective interest, serving an ideological and probably phallogocentric status quo, she seeks to go beyond them, finding nonetheless that in virtually every direction she is faced by some form or another of the mirror.²¹

This mirroring may be both positive and negative (both interrogation and containment) but the claim here of some challenge to the "phallogocentric" is hard to support, given the evidence of the text. There is arguably more direct evidence of this in the complementary text, *The Seal Woman*.²² In *A Body of Water*, as a consequence of the accessed fund of knowledge, and the renegotiation of present and past in the light of assimilated wisdom, this self is eventually re-located-in positive ways. Earlier fictions, texts and life situations are reframed and differently acknowledged as change is accommodated. The negative of this endeavour is the difficulty in establishing a stable viewing position, or a safe point from which to distinguish appropriate depth, form and substance-the safe distance to lean without drowning: That is the problem. The Task. Sink

in under the surface of the self, the mirror's skin, weighted down enough and not too much" (80). The writer is required to gauge or monitor this intrinsically risky „dive" into beyond self, and the mirror is a tool, not a mere device for seeing self. I would argue that *A Body of Water* is introspective rather than narcissistic (a term examined within this text) as the narrator looks inwards to evaluate the world's gifts. The self is merely the departure point. In the text, this preoccupation with form, voice and artistry beyond the "skin of self" is articulated by Seamus Heaney:

You are miming the real thing until one day the chain draws unexpectedly tight and you have dipped into waters that will continue to entice you back. You'll have broken the skin on the pond of yourself. Your praties will be "fit for digging" ... Technique entails the watermarking of your essential patterns of perception, voice and thought into the touch and texture of your lines; it is that whole creative effort of the mind's and body's resources to bring the meaning of experience within the jurisdiction of form. (198)

Initially, anxiety about artistic stasis is the platform for the leap into the unknown, an action fuelled by a desire to establish new incentives and directions in life and art, beyond current conditions of "drought" or sterility. This problem is discussed pragmatically since writing is a source of necessary income. While the traveller is willing to be influenced, guided, delighted and nurtured by others' writing, she is often severe in her self-scrutiny and critical of her own performance. In a similar way the narrator reminds herself of priorities by citing Buddhist tenets, like the following, as a cautionary reminder:

The body itself is the vehicle, and the human body, incarnation as a human being, is rare and wonderful in the teeming universe: it is the precious vehicle. But it has no substance. We live under the illusion that it has, when we and the whole universe are a whirling constellation of atoms. It has no more substance than the reflection of fire in water.²³

The body as vehicle

In all of Farmer's writing, the body is an insistent and substantial "vehicle" which refutes claims of illusion, and as a *locus* it is a site of both frustration and celebration, but one impos-

sible to ignore. Similarly, there is a creative tension between the ideals of faith or theory and the competing demands of lived practice.²⁴

Kristin Hammett wisely suggests that Farmer's writing "gives voice to the various connections that exist between women, asserting its presence through the inclusion of details of women's bodily experience".²⁵ This has not always met with approval, and objections to Farmer's methodology, her deliberate inclusion rather than deletion of bodily functions, spring to mind—Geoffrey Dutton's suggestion that *A Body of Water* included details that "the ordinary reader probably didn't want to hear about"²⁶ and Xavier Pons' claim that in Farmer's fiction "the body is privatised" and "that is why the fiction abounds with references to intimate bodily functions".²⁷ Fanner has consistently used the body as a means of demonstrating a sensual appreciation of the world, but this emphasis distorts by disregarding contexts. Such criticism also neglects a body of writing that has radically changed ideas about inscription and female representation—a context in which Farmer's work is located. Anne Cranny-Francis has noted that:

Women will and should write about subjects freely, about their bodies should *they* desire to do so, without being labelled or confined by that interest. Postmodern democratisation allowed women to re-locate self. To unravel legends and re-think relationships. So we have poems from: woman to woman, subject to artist, woman to man, women to men, daughter to mother as familiar narratives are re-contextualised and women's images further interrogated. The politics of the body have provided a real stimulus in women's poetry as writers have challenged representations and textual inscriptions of women's bodies and spoken in favour of "real life" depictions, while avoiding the controversies of biological essentialism.²⁸

Writing the body

In recent years psychoanalysts, semioticians and feminists have reviewed the relation of the human body to language and place, and investigated the hierarchising function of dichotomous thinking about bodies and minds. Oppositional binaries which separated mind and body, objective/subjective or male/female have been seen as form of control, "an exclusion

of a disruptive field of possibilities".²⁹ On the positive side, the body has been released of its servitude as prison of the soul. Recently Terry Eagleton made the following observations, which have some bearing on the two women's differing conceptions of the body in *The House in the Light*:

It is part of the damage done by a Cartesian tradition that one of the first images the word "body" brings to mind is that of a corpse. To announce the presence of the body in the library is by no means to allude to an industrious reader. Thomas Aquinas thought that there was no such thing as that dead body, only the remains of a living one. Christianity places its faith in the resurrection of the body, not in the immortality of the soul; and this is just a way of saying that if heaven does not involve my body, it doesn't involve me ... the human body is that which is able to make something of what makes it, and to this extent its paradigm is that other mark of our humanity, language, a given which continually generates the unpredictable.³⁰

In recent years the ways in which bodies have been fetishised, demonised, appropriated or positioned, by ways of seeing or speaking, have also been theorised.³¹ The functioning or malfunctioning body, bound by subjective symptoms and unconscious desires, has been liberated by thinking of it in terms of social, cultural and spatial contexts. There is a new understanding of corporeality as vital material upon which a culture is inscribed.³² Bodies have been found to articulate and represent identities and ideologies in diverse ways, reflecting differences of ethnicity, gender and class, as well as group allegiance or self-representation.³³ Elizabeth Grosz and Judith Butler have argued persuasively that "bodies have all the explanatory power of minds", and that subjectivity and knowledge are not the exclusive domain of consciousness as previously defined.³⁴

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has spoken of the problems of theorising *the body*, preferring to speak of *bodies* to avoid the dangers of essentialism when the tendency to "biologise gender" still exists.³⁵ Elizabeth Grosz suggests that:

This re-thinking of the body has implications well beyond the disciplinary interests of philosophy: it implies that the ways in which we understand subjectivity, and its co-implicated terms-space

and time, materiality, exchange, knowledge, power, pleasure and social and cultural production-must themselves be transformed.³⁶

Contributing to this debate, contemporary writers of fiction, working with or beyond post-structuralist, postmodern or post-colonial discourses, have also re-considered the wonders and limitations of the body. Authors have re-positioned characters to voice revisionist protest, to flesh out issues of social and political weight and deconstruct cultural myths defining "authentic", personal, regional and national spaces. They have successfully plotted interrogations of knowledge using the corporeal as a medium through which worlds might be differently known. In her fictional synthesis of mathematics and desire, *Leaning Towards Infinity*, Sue Woolfe has her central protagonist observe:

I saw with him that she thought with her whole body, that long after the noise of the question had faded she found her answer with a timing that was voluptuous, like the majestic pace of an equation as it moves deliberately into its silent conclusion.³⁷

Farmer consistently reads the world via the *aegis* of the body which absolutely makes its presence felt through the colours and dimensions of being it transcribes. So when Farmer insists on the inclusion of bodily realities in her prose or poetry she is demonstrating a reading of the world that is tuned to its seasons, rhythms and physical manifestations in ways which texts bound by mind/body dichotomies simply did not register.

The poem "Epitaphios" (a Good Friday ritual at the bier of Jesus) offers a stark example as it confronts the reader with the physical reality of miscarriage (and it is true that an earlier generation did not speak of such things), but the personal, spiritual and political ramifications of this experience are common to many women. In *A Body of Water*, this poem is constantly rejected-providing a cameo of the problem that to speak of such sensitivities or write about the body is seen, by others, as taboo. This is a bitter and passionate poem which is addressed to a Creator who takes new life while expecting dutiful, ritual celebrations of religious re-birth in return. But more than this, it is about managing life and death issues. The poem is the child's epitaph:

Epitaphios

Boiling eggs in red-dyed water
I dwell on the birth
of a son, or daughter.

The heavy blood stopped long ago
that each month stained
the lips below,

My breasts swell fat and sleek as silk
as if already
full of milk.

My nipples pout, and my belly's mound.
The eggs are done
none cracked, all sound,

Crimson as the nailed Christ's blood-
Pain hammers me.
A quivering flood

Runs hotly from my clenching womb.
I crawl
into another room.

Once hand held underneath, I squat
and catch the lump
that bulges out.

An addled egg, an unfledged bird
lies on my palm
O Flesh Made Word,

What earthly good, these hard-boiled eggs,
this searing curdle
down my legs?

What heavenly good, when my child's torn
from me that the eggs
mean, You're reborn?

Must we break our fast with eggs dyed red
shout, "Christ is risen"?
My child's dead. (22)

This poem interrogates the creation process and concepts of divine "justice" in the face of the terrible realities of life, where the truths of physical experience are in opposition to spiritual promises like that of the "Flesh Made Word". There is a literal reversal here. The choice of vocabulary is deliberately stark but this is only one strand of a range of considerations about the functions and pharmacy of the body. Farmer has observed that we consist of 90% water:

the child, the foetus, the placenta; the twisted cord that binds them, the life-line; and, of course the waters, the amniotic fluid, which is the first body of water that we all experience. We are all grown in water. We all know water with the knowledge of the body, that domain of the unconscious. It was with this image in the forefront of my mind that I went on into the year of work out of which was to come *A Body of Water*.³⁸

This emphasis co-exists in *A Body of Water* with different, more "esoteric" choices in relation to the body. Farmer has fellow pilgrims like Octavio Paz in *The Bow and the Lyre* speak more distantly:

All our endeavours are aimed at finding the old path, the forgotten way of communication ... Our search tends to rediscover or to verify the universal correspondence of opposites, reflection of their original identity. Inspired by this principle, the Tantric systems conceive the body as a metaphor or image of the cosmos. (55)

While reflection and immersion in life are sometimes understood as oppositional, Farmer avoids stereotypical body/ mind binaries in all her writing. Her inhabited bodies speak eloquently. At the other end of this continuum, Octave Nadal speaks of a dilemma of creation, citing Valery's poetry about *The Angel*, which was the embodiment of the image of Narcissus, the mind's reflection made incarnate, noting that even this "extreme point of consciousness ... cannot understand its own Fatal Cause" (210). Farmer writes of physical and metaphoric bodies, but there is a scathing criticism near the end of the narrative journey when her narrator encounters a book entitled *Centering: The Power of Meditation* which offers such a "cocktail of inspirational hokum" about levitation requiring

"a bit of effort" and "glands" being "magically" linked to the planets that this student of the body, books and Buddhism is incensed (240). Her general interest is in the integration of the body with natural, seasonal processes.

As I suggested earlier, at a different level the body registers life:

I read that Colette wrote of an old man's body as being "silvery all over, like a vanilla bean": a remark startling and beautiful enough at first just below the surface, the visual plane; and then still more so underneath, in that a warm and wise sensual appreciation is comprehended in it. (160)

The tension between knowledges, lived and learned, sustains and provides an on-going stimulus in this text as multiple strands of experience give rise to creativity. Even anger or protest may be a source of writing. As well as channelling constituent elements to fuel mind and soul, *A Body of Water* encompasses a spectrum of human conditions of being that range through isolation, obsession, sterility, anger, vulnerability, and despair to momentary happiness or communion. The wisdom of Zweig's insistence upon the "essentialness of ordinary life ... and relationships" is heeded, and interpersonal relationships are vital ingredients.

The narrator begins with what is known before tracing transmissions between lives, fictions and philosophies to celebrate possible unities. The self, at times anxious and isolated, dwells on past frames of reference, The local environment, the seascape at Queenscliff, is a setting for observations of time and tide, and the highs and lows, eddies and backwaters of emotional nuance. The observer charts seasons of growth and decay, diurnal patterns, weather, tidal and shipping movements and records departures and returns. The seascape is a stimulus, resource, solace and a place of return. In the text a difficult journey is enacted around the obstacles of self and entrenched attitudes to arrive at an imaginative clear space—a "land of snows"—beyond familiar terrain or personal history. Farmer offers this elegant metaphor for the life journey:

Time is a river. We are the rowers, heavy-laden with the past and low in the water, the rowers around whom the present is creating

itself with every mirrored movement toward an unseen future. The rower is facing the past while sliding with every stroke into the invisible becoming, which is the future. We can only see the past and that is precisely where we can never go. We can see but not reach the paradise lost.³⁹

Divining patterns: red fishes

The diary of *A Body of Water* begins with close observation of the physical world, the purchase of plants and the unexpected gift of the "Matisse Print: Vase with Red Fishes" which offers a narrative direction (15). The initial attempt to appreciate this work and create a complementary story is stalled by questions and confusion about the elements that constitute the "heart of the painting". The narrator's attention is deflected as life intervenes and the story is temporarily set aside. In time, a poem is accepted, there is an ebb and flow of people and events, and a decision to undertake a Buddhist retreat which offers a different direction and hope of renewal. This experience leads to a debate about concepts of completion. The search for self and patience is recontextualised:

the Rinpoche compared the detached mind observing itself to a sun with no clouds; a slow fish in water; a bird leaving no footprints in the air.

We were getting to Emptiness. (Two days ago someone asked, When are we getting to Emptiness? Patience first! he answered). We were at the non-self of the person: "I" is not my form, feeling, perception, mental formation, consciousness ... "I", the mediator, am empty: who is looking for the "I"? Now someone asked: If there is no "I" in me or in others, if all being is empty, why are we striving to achieve Compassion? Emptiness is real, he was answered, and Suffering is also real. Nor are others "Other" ...

"It amounts to this", said G said at the end. "We came all this way-for Nothing!"

We all laughed. "Yes, yes" said the Rinpoche, "but-who's "we"? (49)

While acquired wisdom does not make the narrator's re-entry into the world any easier, the business of considering wholeness and emptiness is explored in the emerging narrative. The retreat becomes a story, a drop, a stream, a lake, a novel. "A Drop of Water" begins with Dogen's observation

that: "The whole moon and the whole sky are reflected/in a dewdrop in the grass, in one drop of water" (117). Thereafter Farmer sets the sheer physicality of the "chattering retreaters" beside the aesthetic withdrawal of the Buddhist teachers, not in a judgemental dichotomy, but in order to see how such diverse manifestations of life can be accommodated:

The discourses are on Wisdom, and Compassion and Emptiness and Tenzin has heard it all ten thousand times. The lama takes frequent sips of water. The gumpa is crowded with yawning, shifting strangers on cushions and sheepskins, rugs around their shoulders; coughs and farts echo. Children sleep, cry out and suck loudly at the breast. Emptiness, Tenzin thinks. Our bodies, our actions, our thoughts, scum on the water of the lake. Rust on a mirror. (63)

Tenzin's need for solitude and his tolerance are further threatened when a young couple invade the gumpa to make love, and in dealing with their actions the central question of "nothing and emptiness" is again interrogated.⁴⁰ The young monk arrives at the understanding that he must "take the emptiness whole" and exercise priestly acceptance of the invasion of his privacy before a restoration to the pacific, but unpeopled, lake where he attempts to re-learn the precept to "let the mind be like a drop of water" (77).

From this original story about a nourishing drop where bodies and minds seem in opposition, there is a gradual accretion, an accumulation of imagery and thought, which expands to accommodate the text's final narrative or coda, the story of the "Land of Snows" with its "great surge of the river under the ice" which "continues invisible, unheard" in the "rivers of dream" (284, 290). By the final chapter we have travelled so far that the woman's hand, clamped to the vegemite glass of frozen water taken from a fridge in Queenscliff, can be, despite incongruities, understood as linked to the Hermit of Tsang's relief as he is absorbed into his beloved mountains in The Land of Snows. Farmer has described this as a "spirit journey made at the point of death by a Tibetan monk of the mind".⁴¹ Like the illuminations around the world in Indra's "net" the simple gesture of creating and momentarily holding the imagined ice mountain serves as an indication of

place or location in a vast matrix:

In the Land of Snows, where the sky, the air, has the absolute dry clarity of a burning glass, the mind which aspires to attain to that same clarity may, in the vast solitude and stillness, for a time achieve it. The consciousness expands to take in all it sees and knows and has ever known. All time becomes one. In sultry or damp weather it can happen, pilgrims have noted, that the disturbance of the air causes the past briefly to well up and flood into consciousness, only to subside as the air dries, keeping time with the air's drying. (290)

While the solitude of the Lamas is not that of the artist, kinship is established via the text which also investigates merging states of fluency: writing, bodily fluids, water in all its manifestations, consciousness and the instabilities of emotional, physical and spiritual transitions.

"Among Pigeons"

In the main body of the novel inks, tears, bubbles of memory, all contribute their substance to another story of a boy "Among Pigeons" and a man whose violence stains the boy's life. While this tale is firmly lodged in contemporary life, its situation is archetypal and refers back to the Oedipal problems of the story of the boy in the gumpa. A father leaves, a new man^u replaces" him and a woman and child are damaged by both trauma and violence. Typically it is not the skeletal plot that is impressive but the carefully managed dialogue, and the subtle imagery which suggests the shifting emotional spectrum of the boy's horizons and his changing awareness of social circumstance. The fine line between entertainment and abuse is eventually crossed and the mother in her upigeon-grey" dress banishes the man from their lives. Before this, an understated pattern of reciprocal need is implied as the narration is focussed by the boy's perspective:

I only wanted one croissant but I had to have toast first and not be greedy. Everyone had toast first except the man, whose every move I was watching: he only had croissants. They were all talking at once ... The pigeons gathered round with soft sounds like sobs. (89)

Farmer recalls being advised as a student teacher that "What you have to remember is that everyone is the centre of their own worlds. It is like throwing stones into water; and concentric rings intersect and you get a pattern of broken rings. Each person is the centre, seeing everything differently".⁴² Transferring this useful advice from practice-teaching methodology to writing, Farmer indicates that "it is that kind of refraction that I try to achieve in fiction".⁴³

Reflecting interiors

By June and the onset of winter the novel is sustained by recalling village stories until the creative drop grows to encompass a third story called "Vase with Red Fishes". This was mooted at the outset of the narrative but deferred (formerly "Matisse Print: Vase with Red Fishes") and its naming supplants another interim title, "Interior with Goldfish". In the gestation period, the focus of the story has altered. The initial gift from H. is now relocated, the details of the scene are differently viewed and the description is moderated to suggest a re-framing of experience. There is a different narrative component which draws on imagery from earlier observations of seascape and lighthouse, for example, the metal staircase from the cliff-top that chimes when walked on (103). Farmer observes that:

I wanted to have the **TWO** characters alternately rising from the painted interior to move and be, then flattening back into the picture. *Trompe-l'oeil*. To have them behave like an M.C. Escher drawing, modulating from plane to plane, form to form, dovetailing ... the woman in the story insists on depth, on her depth of being, where for the man she is part of the surface. She is this dragon biting its tail. (93)

The print used as the novel's cover sets the scene, and while the compositional elements of fish, water, room and observer remain, they are rearranged so that the reader adjusts assumptions as Farmer explores relationships between visual stimuli and the written word. This is particularly apt as Matisse's paintings have to be worked on or completed by the spectator's participation, and collage or montage were techniques he employed.

Initially, the woman imagines a dive into a "deep pool of blue rock" below the "undersurface of water" and sees the fish "mirroring each other" outside the confines of the bowl. In opposition, the man "observes":

The images of her in his mind's eye [as] flat, two-dimensional, all shape and no substance, like a sole or a flounder, those moon fish. When they make love he is astonished to find himself sinking through the surface into her embrace ... (16)

In the second narrative:

He is a painter. Of interiors? Of exteriors? Where to draw the line? She serves as his model. The images of her in his mind are flat, all shape, so much like a sole or flounder, those moon fish, that it would hardly surprise him if she had a dark underside to match the pearly belly he is labouring on. The shadow where the flesh sags down from the hipbone ... He peers, brush high. His astonishment on first entering her is repeated, though more mildly, every time. Suddenly she is three dimensional, four, yes, suddenly he finds himself engulfed, embedded in a warm and clinging soft mass moving over and under. His eyes had given him no knowledge of this. He is as astonished as if he had fallen into the canvas into this embrace. (108)

A similar slippage occurs between the woman and fish as subjects as their colours merge and they exist in the fixed position of the painter's gaze. Matisse similarly used colour to stir sensual instinct and, like Farmer, used decorative themes or motifs as a principle of patterning, understanding the psychological imprint or impression of form and colour on the senses. Matisse also advocated freedom from outline and desired to construct form by accumulation. As the narrative metamorphosis takes place, the heart or central focus upon the red fishes or their absence becomes problematic. The woman provocatively conducts an experiment painting out a fish form on the glass of the picture, but the text of the first draft is subtly re-drawn as ideas about containment and controlling gaze are manipulated.

The painter now captures the image of the woman in the pool on the beach, linking it with the myth of Narcissus, which the woman rejects as gendered. Kristin Hammett cites this story's exploration of the issue of "Schopenhauer's soli-

tude and freedom as they relate to both intimacy and artistic endeavour".⁴⁴

Accused of being narcissistic, the woman in "Vase with Red Fishes" describes Narcissus as "a male myth" which doesn't "reflect--echo anything in women". For her Narcissus is a figure which women "don't see themselves in" (104). The man's objection that the myth is universal is sharply countered: I think it is an illusion ... that human beings can transcend gender. Through the strength of the woman's response and the ensuing silence, Farmer invites us to consider the possibilities of the myth, its implications for women and for fiction. Fundamental to the criticism in Farmer's story is the fact that the myth of Narcissus and Echo entails a relegation of woman to either the position of Other, "Echo" of a male, denied her own voice, unable to express even her desire (which can only be for him) except through echoing the last of another's words, or to the position occupied by Liriope, the subservient and silent mother of Narcissus.⁴⁵

Hammett rightly notes Farmer's different objectives as her fictions "weave mythologies" celebrating "female subjectivity and desire". The male protagonist's frame of reference is further defined as subject and object shift planes, and the summer scene is transformed by the interactions of painter and lover. The gift-giver researches the history of the print and locates it via the "blue guide" as a depiction of winter in France. The woman who has imaged it as Cote d'Azur, summer, insists that these authoritative facts are irrelevant as this is an "interior of the mind" (112). This reading of perspective and exposure of different means of interpreting vital signs leads to a dramatic revision of "the picture" of the relationship. Eventually the painter, drawing on the precedent already established, paints himself out of the picture, literally, and departs the formal frame of the narrative. The novel's resumption then provides a way out of the encapsulated, self-reflective, fish-bowl world of the short story.

The narrator's purchase of a "Black Genoa" fig tree gives its name to the fourth tale. It celebrates female artistry in ways akin to those employed by Drusilla Modjeska in *Stravinsky's Lunch*.⁴⁶ This tribute to the artistry of Marjorie Barnard, to letter-writing as mutual support between women, and particularly

s a gift to a friend grieving her father's death, is another significant point on the path of the novel. Here Farmer is dealing with a new "language". Barbara Milech's overview of the significance of Irigaray's critical reassessment of female imagery illustrative:

In *Speculum of the Other Woman* Irigaray's ... interest is in the assumptions and central concepts of Western thought and her purpose is to demonstrate that its representational economy projects only one subjectivity and sexuality—a masculine one. Woman supports this speculation as mystery and mirror. She is just like man (human, rational, moral) in which case her specificity disappears. Or she is man's complement (wife, mother, reflection) in which she is the function of the masculine project of self-definition. Whatever variation of representation used, the result is female¹ difference and autonomy are erased. This is a representational system which, in Irigaray's terms is driven by a "desire for the same, the self-identical ... the male dominates the representational economy" ⁴⁷

Irigaray has since been criticised in that her ways of expressing difference meant a departure from the language of common cultural production. Her book, *Je, tu, nous: Toward a culture of difference*, continues to suggest that we are "living men and omen, that is to say 'sexuate', and that our identity can't be constructed without the benefit of a framework of relations ... at respects this difference", ⁴⁸ but this text is more accessible than the language used to debate the issues. It is the *value* of the feminine that Irigaray insists is in need of modification and her work does indicate the exclusivity of the language of the patriarchal discourse. It is this discourse which Farmer's work consistently challenges. It is apt that the next story in the journey of *A Body of Water* applies the knowledge about artistry and autonomy gained in the previous encounter. This time women's writing is the resource.

Marjorie Barnard's life, and especially "The Persimmon Tree", is recalled. In the main body of the text the boundaries between dream and reality are diffuse as a nightmare ends in actual death, and the friend's loss and grief is implicitly set against the narrator's emptiness and inability to grieve. The final image of the Black Genoa, gleaming in the rain

promising "green hands" and fruit in another season, serves two purposes: first to connect this story with the narrator's memories; and second to indicate a prospect, as the seed sown by Barnard's unique artistry will again bear fruit (26). Like the tracery of light on the wall, the two women's lives are reflected. Like the persimmon tree in Barnard's story, which only appears in shadow, the narrator's story remains unsaid, however the outline of her friend's grief is articulated in relief. As in the other stories, the imagery is delicately but effectively manipulated.

The art of judicious selection, placement and revision becomes an on-going part of the writer's task which demands a re-engagement with the past. In a country where forgetting has been a national past-time, Farmer's understanding that "the past is life's undertow" is to be valued. The narrator comes to the sobering realisation that an immersion in the past is necessary, perhaps inevitable, if progression beyond it is possible: "The past. How to make amends for the past? The undertow, underflow, memory. Dream. No freeing yourself. No way out, but in." (149) The season from August to February sees a further dive beneath the skin. In a search for the place to set a new story, there is a review of family and authorial performance and a re-engagement with the sinuous and serpent-like windings of desire and the imagination. The fascination with language and consciousness leads to the heart of the matter—a return to the past before the creation of a clean space, or new page, for continued life:

feeling like a ghost from the future, I walked past the rented house that I lived in two years ago (187) ... No. I won't write about obsessive love, the keeper and the inhabitant of the cage ... Move on. (191)

States of being, like dejection, emptiness, doubt or desolation, like bushfires, leave fertile ground for new growth. The artist acknowledges them but moves beyond an Ash Wednesday vacuum, where fears of isolation, inadequacy, loss or stasis dominate. Shoots sprout from a broken hibiscus, belladonna lilies rise from the bushfire-scarred land and a tenacious fig tree lends its lessons about drought and survival. ' Menstrual blood flows, relationships survive deaths of various

kinds but assume new forms, and this realisation brings comfort and a renewed celebration of potential.

The narrator's actions permit an investigation of perception and collective consciousness. November and December have their gains and losses, but the steady absorption of others' writing continues until a hymn of praise suggests a transcendence of effort. Life itself is acknowledged "as a mere bubble on the surface" (248), but the self is no longer lost but rather relocated—"each of us is the whole cosmos" (251). The narrator's Zen retreat and an analysis of the sameness of emptiness and form complete the year's and the mind's cycle. There is a return or resumption of ordinary routine, but this is a different interval as estrangement is exorcised.

Beneath the surface: underflow or stillness?

Early interest in synthesis and experimental intermingling of styles and expression in *Alone* prefigured the more transgressive experimentation of *A Body of Water*. Farmer employs postmodern techniques in merging and overlaying material fluently to recontextualise word and image. She has spoken of a shift in her writing with the discovery of the possibilities of "electronic" juxtapositions of text and sub-texts and the potential of using parallel texts (fiction and notebook as work-in-progress and "scaffolding") which influenced the composition of *A Body of Water* and *The Seal Woman*.⁴⁹

Throughout *A Body of Water* poetry and prose are used like a surface through which depths are gauged. Seemingly disparate elements are blended to ensure a rich and intricately patterned verbal texture. The image of a dive of discovery, below surfaces, behind appearances or beyond images, recurs. The portents are simple enough initially, a child's planned dive is cancelled by bad weather, but links between pleasure and danger are established and a meditation on youth and age, and life and art ensues. The manner of Virginia Woolf's death (weighted and drowned) is reviewed. She claims that:

My writing now delights me solely because I love writing and don't, honestly, care a hang what anyone says. What seas of horror one dives through to pick up these pearls-however they

are worth it. (27)

and that "I see myself as a fish in a stream; deflected; held in place; but cannot describe the stream" (256).

In *A Body of Water* Farmer is less imprisoned by her art. The narrator lives in the shadow of a lighthouse ensuring the safe passage of ships (which at times physically "shake" her house) and this serves both as a marker of locality and also as a potent symbol and possible tribute to Woolf's artistry. This technique of deliberate echoing within and beyond the text is characteristic. In the passage on the difference between technique and craft for example, Seamus Heaney also noted:

If I were asked for a figure who represents pure techniques, I would say a water diviner ... As Sir Philip Sidney notes in his "*Apologia for Poetry*": Among the Romans a Poet was called *Vates*, which is as much as a Diviner. (198)

In the new year Farmer, now identifying strongly with place, juxtaposes Heaney's wisdom with a line of poetry by George Seferis: "Here, in the earth, is a cistern rooted" and a quotation from the *Bhagavad-Gita* which, in part, recalls the story of the ancient fig tree, and the Black Genoa planted as a memorial:

Roots it has also
Reaching downward
Into this world,
The roots of man's action (206)

And so the sub-stratum nourishes like an underground stream. Speaking about sources of art, and the potential of the stone from which the artist makes a statue spring, Farmer commented that:

There was an article in the Education Supplement of *The Australian* that you might have seen recently by Paul Davies, the author of *The Mind of God*. It was all about, I quote "remnants of micro-organisms from several kilometres below the earth's surface, deep beneath solid granite ..." Davies speculates that these may have migrated to the surface, initially into the oceans-that they are the seeds of all life on earth. The Tibetans believe, incidentally; that fossils are the remains of beings who once lived and died in the heart of the rock. The Australian Aborigines believe in Mimi spirits that '

come and go in rock. So too may a statue? And in a sense, so may a poem, a story, a painting, to stretch a metaphor.⁵⁰

Like the image of the statue within the rock that is "found" by the artist, these buried seeds wait until the time is ripe for their lowering. So the forces of life and creation, and the regenerative capacity of art are interlinked. Unlike some other contemporary novelists overtly manipulating form, Farmer seems less concerned with the experiment than with finding a way to remain open and receptive to new experience and thereby creatively to accommodate change. In spirit the text owes something to Virginia Woolf's understanding of transient time, to Kenneth Slessor's view of "time as a wave" and to Margaret Atwood's view of the act of retrieval and interaction between present and past time in *Cat's Eye*, when she claimed that:

I began ... to think of time as having a shape, something you could see like a series of liquid transparencies, one laid on top of another. You don't look back along time but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away.⁵¹

Farmer manipulates form in *A Body of Water* by "performing" such co-existences, but also by theorising writing while exploring through writing. This interactive *tour de force* defies easy definition, but the terms life-writing and fictocriticism reflect something of the undertaking of the novel. Interestingly, fictocriticism has been described as a "hybrid" form:

Postmodern critical and creative work is moving rapidly away from, on the one hand, the traditional academic genres of essay, chapter and journal article and, on the other, the creative genres of fiction and poetry. A hybrid kind of writing, part critical, part theoretical, part creative, is proving influential in the reformulation of literary and cultural studies, not least for its recent exposure of what has always been the literariness of critical genres. Influential work of cultural commentary is currently being done by writers working outside and against disciplinary generic norms, confronting crucial questions of subjectivity, objectivity, value and cultural politics.⁵²

The emphasis here on synthesis and accommodation is

appropriate given the nature of Farmer's text as the artist is sharing both creative and critical faculties. Like fictocriticism Farmer's text aims at multiplying the possible sites of reception. This creative methodology is a long way from authorial assertion of ownership of the linear text. Fictocriticism generally refers to a single reading or adaptation of the style or preoccupations of a text in the making of another. As Farmer's interest resides on the creative process of this synthesis of criticism and art it seems wholly apt that the term "novel", with full understanding of the accommodation of this term, would be employed. Jane Sloan advocates the usefulness of the term "life-writing" when describing this phenomenon, which she defines as distinct from autobiography, as Farmer models a mirroring process between art and life in *A Body of Water*. Sloan concludes that:

Rather than the issue being one of the presence or absence of discernibly autobiographical recording or documentation, life-writing can instead be defined by its reflexive textualisation. Life-writing reflects a certain world back to itself and to its readers but makes us aware of the process of textualisation that goes with rendering the narrative form; so what we are witness to in Farmer are the very threads that tie "writing" to "life". This conjoining of "life" with "writing" forces together two apparently discrete terms that become no longer separable in Farmer's form of literary text ... Her notebooks trace the transformation of observation to fictional rendering by creating a repetitive, or rhythmic movement from life to writing ... the work of fictionalisation, its processes—the supposed shadow becomes the substance.⁵³

The bringing together of disparate strands of art and life in this endeavour sees the narrative "unearthed", rediscovered from the wealth of textual evidence, but the thing created is only part of the process. This reminds us of the path or journey that this text sets out to explore, a matter of mind and body. When Wittgenstein claims that "The human body is the best picture of the human soul" he speaks of one kind of reflective correspondence, and life and art have traditionally demonstrated another. Farmer's fiction holds a mirror to nature, but also to her literary predecessors: one that is positioned differently. This is not reflected intermittence from the

static rock, and its prismatic view not only illuminates the diversity and hybridity of life but also sheds light on the shared processes of creation.

The marvellous thing about *A Body of Water* is that it is all of the things I have described-and none of them: that it manages to evade being encompassed by a fixed descriptor or by a single reading. Like the water that is its subject, it finds its own form in the contours of each reader's mind. It is apt then to conclude this section with Farmer's reading of the writing process where form emerges as a final act-and not as a pre-prepared envelope into which the author's thoughts are poured:

When I make a beginning on a piece of writing, a novel is not something I have in the forefront of my mind, least of all "the" novel. While I'm writing, I find I have to be wary of thinking in terms of form at all: a short story, I think-never "the" short story and a novel if it starts expanding and getting long, but never "the novel". I avoid thinking in terms of form in the novel, if by form is meant something, an idea, existing before and apart from the particular novel in the process of being written or being read. I suppose I'm leery of theory. The vague idea that is the germ of a novel has to grow into its organic form: the fear is of imposing some demand from outside that might deform what you're working on and restrict its development-some formula or definition or habit might take over. It comes last, when the piece of work is complete.⁵⁴

In these terms *A Body of Water* is central in Farmer's *oeuvre* as a site of renewal and discovery.

Chapter 5

Language and myth: *The Seal Woman*

How is it we forget so easily that time swings us away to where we see further, see smaller, all of our old selves as if from above ...

The Seal Woman (95)

With the skin in her arms she ran out of the house through the mist on to the rock shelf and sat between the cliff face crowded with birds and the hills of kelp; and when the sun sank into a nest of spindrift she put on the skin.

The Seal Woman (310)

This is Farmer's most overtly feminist novel. *It* interrogates the nature of knowledge and inscription while demonstrating continuities between private and public narratives and physical and linguistic environments. Like Drusilla Modjeska in *Poppy*, Farmer abandons a linear form in favour of a "pattern or tissue" as she gathers and interweaves threads of diverse human experience to create a speculative text. Aptly, the protagonist, Dagmar, is a woman learning a new language (Australian English), which is also the language of survival in a strange place. This development parallels Farmer's as an artist, and grants new agency. Beyond this novel's focus on languages and on story-telling as a cultural practice, there is an expansion of authorial expression of concern about the environment. This is a story of one woman's personal crisis designed to "alert us to environmental crisis".¹

Published two years after *A Body of Water*, this "sister" novel mirrors its preoccupations. It shares a setting ("Swanhaven" on

the Victorian coast at Queenscliff) and utilises techniques learned through the earlier exploration of style, structure and form.² *The Seal Woman* takes up and extends concepts of "inter-relatedness" in two ways: by illustrating global environmental dependencies, and by celebrating continuities between mythic resources and contemporary narratives. This merging of linguistic and environmental contexts is central to the novel's design. When we also consider Farmer's poetry, it is evident that this is an essential feature of her art. In the quest to find a distinctive voice, one tuned by both the exigencies of life and the craft of literature, the extent of the imaginative journey is apparent in the distance between the confinement of the single self in *Alone*, and the Seal Woman's contrasting capacity to encompass or participate in history and change.

This novel is about Dagmar, a Danish widow and school-teacher "over-wintering" in Australia, who is attempting to come to terms with the death of her husband, lost in a tanker accident at sea. Farmer describes his death as "a mockery of a Viking funeral".³ Having visited as a bride years before, the woman seeks refuge from her grief in "Swanhaven, Australia, of all places, the far keel of the world" (5). Migrating south she is cast as the barren "goose girl" who embarks "on a wild goose chase"-partly to escape figurative "burial alive" as a widow in Denmark. Farmer claims that:

[Dagmar's] image of the place Australia, which she has not seen for twenty years, is a sort of alternative world, an underworld, the life after death. She is the shadow of the girl who came before- or that girl is the shadow.⁴

The novel traces a thaw in her frozen emotional state as she comes to terms with her husband's absence and the memories of a lost child and an earlier sexual encounter. Gradually she finds a degree of purpose and acceptance in this sleepy back-water, but the old world and past experience are not easily left behind. There is an increasing awareness of the residual effects of the past, and of continuities between hemispheres, and between events seemingly far apart. Paradoxically, there are also evident connections between people seemingly islanded by their own needs and desires. Dagmar discovers linking "seas", some actual, others subconscious:

The channel is deep that drains Swan Water into the bay. The boat harbour lies along it. Out in the strait and then the ocean out of sight of all lighthouses are the whales and dolphins and loud seals, sea lions and elephants, penguins, the stormy latitudes and the islands, of rock, of snow, and further on through the slurry and pack ice, the silent Antarctic bays, where Finn went. (9)

Throughout, Farmer maintains a balance between the apparent simplicity of one migrant woman's exclusive story, with its nuances, modulations and personal significance, and a multi-faceted narrative, a linguistic tessellation, which demonstrates a thesis about cultural difference but also about the inter-relatedness of one world.

Farmer described this novel as nearer the genre of "self-portrait" than autobiography, a distinction Modjeska rightly notes is "slight-and vast in its connotations".⁵ This is akin to the relationship between *A Body of Water* and *The Seal Woman*, and perhaps between life and art, because there is a further acquired distancing in the intersubjective process of translating between languages undertaken by the narrator of the latter. Dagmar's pragmatic observation of her own performance permits a perception of fresh relations between the present and the past. Similarly, a self-portrait is a construction which demands a long, steady look at self in order to feature a reading or re-composition of envisioned character. What is seen and depicted must then be lived with. While portraits are often judged by their verisimilitude, not as a photographic image, but as an evocation of character summed up by the artist, the self-portrait demands a preferencing of the artistic role, an intellectual honesty and dispassionate gaze. Arguably the relation between creator and artefact is more complex in self-portraiture.

In the previous chapter I indicated that Farmer had carefully distinguished between self and speaker when she confirmed that her notebook is not a diary, and that *A Body of Water's* narrator's thoughts, observations, insights and confidences deliberately omit essential elements of *her* life experience. The fictionalised Dagmar's experiences offer another angle on these omissions, so that the life, the notebook and the novel exist in a relational triangle—a design with the author (beyond

it all) exercising techniques which work like the dramatic use of the mask. Projections of lived experience and imagined possibilities co-exist and are publicly negotiated. As in the self-portrait, the woman behind these enigmas of representation may escape from view. Like the artist who represents a composed self, the novelist reveals only aspects of a designed or desired projection of her truth.

Farmer has Dagmar as widow, immigrant and incipient artist gradually confront the loss of her husband and her own needs. Her withdrawn state is ameliorated by the kindness of local people and by the sheer beauty of the place itself. Through a process of assimilation and accumulation of knowledge, acquired through reading, socialisation, travel and love, she is reconciled to life. While a sexual relationship provides a reference point for the examination of her desires, it is the woman's renewed interest in life, wrought by the prospect of a new child, that is transformative-the achieved miracle of regeneration. The novel also explores relationships (affinities, alliances and competition) between women.

Before Dagmar can embrace a new life she must come to terms with the past by acknowledging and identifying with her husband's experience. To re-live his life and death imaginatively is one way of putting him to rest:

She immerses herself in accounts of journey's like Shackleton's to Antarctica, when his ship was trapped in the ice, and Sir John Franklin's expedition in search of the North-West Passage, and the spirit journeys of Aboriginal and Eskimo shamans under the ice, under the sea and to other worlds.⁶

Farmer has defined this complex response as a kind of shock therapy, suggesting that:

Dagmar has largely forgotten her husband Finn. All she can remember is the loss of him. The present is like a reflection that doesn't quite match the past, where she can't get her bearings or seem to find her way. She is jolted out of time and place. Her surroundings have no connection with her. She and they are equally unreal until with the help of two friends, a man and a woman, she finds a solid foothold at last. She finds a new path, and a task.⁷

Through the course of this novel there is again a deliberate

charting of change: tidal movements, cycles of blood, seasonal shifts, emotional tides and distances between cold and warmth are recorded in a journey from sterility towards a season of abundance and fruitfulness. As the death-in-life state of grief is reversed, the woman finds incentives for growth. She plants dry beans which in time bear fruit and, as the season ripens, her plantings of summer herbs and a fig tree flourish to become gifts, and eventually residual tributes from this house-guest. There are stark contrasts between seasonal images which echo conditions of body and mind. The flowering or ripening of garden produce, for example, the harvested plums, has its counterpart in pregnancy.

Initially this re-entry into life, a kind of re-birth, extracts a price because, along with a renewed appreciation of sensual and physical realities, Dagmar must also embrace her own and the world's "grief". To be fully alive is to accommodate the spectrum of human and global experience. The infelicities of her present lover pale to insignificance in the face of the larger issues she confronts: global warming, ozone depletion, the effects of chlorofluorocarbons and dioxins, and the beleaguered world of animals close to extinction because of the persistent "blood bath" of whaling, seal-hunting and drift-net fishing. This wider vision in turn affects the politics and philosophies of her life, so that the woman mourning a single death is haunted by the death of the planet.

The spectre of the death of the sea. A film on television one night showed a camera as it swooped over acre on acre of the Mediterranean seabed and found nothing but sand drifts and tangles of hairy black starfish that crawled here and there picking over empty shells. So it is too with the reefs in tropical Australian waters where a spiny starfish called the Crown of Thorns has eaten away the coral and left only walls of white bone. (115)

Dagmar identifies with the sea, and the terms "seal-woman" and "soul-woman" are used interchangeably. She dives with the seals, collects information about their habits and immerses herself in research for the song or children's story she intends to write. Gradually she learns to trust her own intuition and to make sense of her own vision. But it takes this woman time to own her own skin. She experiences seasonal variations

and, like the "ice anchors which trap life within and thaw in the sunlight", (46) she undergoes a sea-change. Acquiring a new language is a useful metaphor for this process, but it is also a dangerous business. In loving she finds that "to live with is not necessarily to know", that the rituals of existence may mask knowledge, and that love has various colours. The epigraph by Derek Walcott suggests that "love is a stone", but it is also an underwater presence, a source. The emotional spectrum of the novel includes seasons of light and shade, the contraries of presence and absence, substance and shadow, and surfaces and depth. Fire and water are seen in harmony and opposition. Even the imported lighthouse is made of basalt, which is crystallised fire! The way in which the tangible world is reviewed is an indication of the woman's increasing "health".

Regional and global environments

Farmer has recorded the "physical place" of the Bellarine Peninsula, with "Swanhaven, West Head, East Head, Balayang, the caves, lighthouses and pubs [with] almost photographic accuracy".⁸ They are the settings from which to depart imaginatively via fiction, and in *A Body of Water* she indicates that her writing begins with "place". But Port Philip Bay and the sea, the backwater that preoccupies her protagonist, are also a route to the world, and its links are echoed by other interconnections: the webs, contacts, personal lives and communal mythologies that support both regional and global cultures.

The global preoccupations of the text emerge from the conversations of Dagmar's acquaintance, from her reading as she confronts the past, and from her recollections and re-contextualisation of images and experience as her awareness grows. What was once a myth is newly confronted as reality and sometimes as a warning; in fact, the textual evidence that is garnered here suggests the interconnections between diverse cultures' attempts to arm future generations with information crucial to their survival:

We who live on the green rim can put what is out of sight out of mind only for so long. This is the two-hundredth year that the land is in white hands, and the desert is twice the size it was in 1788. The rivers and sea are a swill of excrement and silt, farm and

factory waste. Ancient rain forests are felled and left lifeless, and the rains fail. The silt that runs off the old forest floor chokes the fish and coral reefs to death. The land withers under its white burdens of wheat and sheep, rabbits, foxes, dogs and cats, donkey, camels, water buffalo. From horizon to horizon vast lands are already dry dust under a white shimmer like ice, the death mask of the salt. A waste land where the salt crystals grow and grow, in the shade of skeleton trees. In the myth of the waste land, says the speaker, a curse was laid on the land. (23)

The Seal Woman is about origins and tomorrows, death and healing, loss and reconciliation, isolation and family, and the business of reconciling the positives and negatives of life. Kenzaburo Oe claimed that: "It is the second job of literature to create myth. But its first job is to destroy that myth."⁹ Farmer's novel undertakes both, but also heeds prior wisdom.

Myths and legends

Early in the narrative Dagmar encounters two children on the beach. When they ask her about seals she tells them with customary directness, the facts about survival—that when ice-bound they chew the edges of their hole in the encroaching ice until they lose their teeth and drown (46). One child does not wish to hear this resolution and, clutching his faith in his story of their capacity "to share", he flees, to become, Farmer implies, the adult children who do not learn the truths inherent in the legends of their forebears. This tale is later echoed in the conversation of the surfers in the pool room discussing the freeing of a man drowned in the bull-kelp. Dagmar's neighbour, Tess, brings her a book of Eskimo stories, some of them very fierce indeed, and they refer to another narrative poem, the *Great Silkie of Sule Skerry*. These allusions to creativity, power and resistance resonate in the novel. More than that, like *Alone*, such narratives are re-read in the light of contemporary feminine experience:

Feminist writers and critics destabilise literary and scientific myths of origin, telling new stories to inscribe into the picture of reality those characters, events and resolutions that were previously invisible, untold, unspoken. There are important continuities here with earlier feminist thought—for instance, the insistence upon the

centrality of gender ... and the emphasis on the representation of everyday life.¹⁰

Farmer writes about shamanism, gender and cultural inscription and the ways in which knowledge is perpetuated. Her designs are subtle.

Among the Copper Eskimos the shaman descends to the bottom of the sea, or lures the spirit up to a breathing-hole in the floor, and catches her by the wrists with a noose ... Or, a shaman waits at a hole made in the floor while the assemblage sings the special song until the sea spirit comes riding up on a seal and takes possession of the shaman. She accuses people of breaking taboos, and they confess, while men struggle to keep her from flattening the dance house with ice and letting loose fierce storms. (107)

When the goddess is made ill by men's sins, the shaman's task is to "comb" the goddess's hair. Dagmar asks: "So why has she no fingers of her own?" as she investigates a range of creation myths and ancient legends and finds that each narrative has some relevance to the reality of her present circumstance. Farmer has said of Dagmar:

she knows all the tales of visits to the land of the dead such as the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice and the story of the Eskimo shaman and his voyage under the ice to speak to the Goddess of the sea beasts; and about Norse mythology as well as about the Bog people in Denmark whose bodies were supposedly resurrected from the bogs looking as if they died yesterday, although they were 2,000 years old. I make her conscious of all this without weaving it in too closely or making it too obvious, I hope. She deals with her bereavement basically through these tales ...¹¹

The narrator's preoccupation with seals is seen by her friends as obsessive-to the point where a dead seal found on the beach, not sighted by anyone else, not only becomes a potent symbol of her vision, but also of gaps in communication between herself and others. The argument that seeing is believing is complex in an environmental context when an early reading of the signs is often imperative. The juxtaposition of images of seal and woman throughout the novel also suggests identifications beyond mere empathy with another endangered species.¹² Felicity Plunkett drew a more extreme

analogy between Dagmar's position in her relationship and the aforementioned seals, who damage their teeth in their fight with the pack-ice for survival:

This is the conundrum for Dagmar: she chooses between two environments, each of which promises, sooner or later, to destroy her, regardless of mouthing languages new and old ... Yet the freedom the mouth bites towards, wears down the teeth and precipitates drowning.¹³

Despite her "foreignness", Dagmar seems more in control than this suggests. Farmer charts legends of the Norse and Inuit cultures, ghost stories, the Danish *Kalevala* and other world mythologies: the Selchie legends, Aboriginal creation and conception myths, Andersen's fairy-tales and local evocations of bunyips and "bad banksia men", which are all fed into the mainstream. While digesting such knowledge, Dagmar sits in a park watching a group of Aboriginal people picnicking. She experiences an acute sense of her otherness, her difference, and especially her outlandishly pale appearance against "gaudy parked cars" (203). An Aboriginal child approaches and grins when he is given cherries, but the incident is also a reminder of prior ownership and of wholly different relations with the land. The recurrence of this imagery lends a further link with the narratives of other indigenous fights for survival. The scene prefigures residual imprints of prior presence pursued later in the text: "After they packed up and left I looked down at the little bag of twigs and little bloodied teeth I had on my lap, stunned" (204). A consumer society is captured here as economically and deftly as in a Japanese artist's calligraphic brushstroke. This technique of juxtaposing images and setting up resonances is haunting as the sharing gesture of the woman recalls an earlier conversation about death and survival with the children on the beach. Farmer is vitally interested in people and politics and concerned about the large and small issues which inform Australian lives. These interests are manifest in the concerns of protagonists like Dagmar:

Almost as soon as Dagmar finds her feet here in Australia she is aware of a spirit of place which makes itself felt at some level below the conscious. There are other ghosts here. The black tribe

belonging to this landscape has left no traces, the language is dead and the people are thin air. She is in a state of mind to be conscious of this because the husband who first brought her here, a sailor, has been lost in a fire at sea. In the year since then his body has not been recovered. It's as if he has melted into the sea and the land. The sea and the land themselves are sick, and perhaps dying. Her landscape is a vast graveyard full of relics and ghosts—the mummies lost for centuries in the bogs of Denmark, of the Norse tales of drowned sailors coming to ships to take the living, or heroes turned into animals, into stone. She sees cliff faces with open mouths in the act of uttering what silent words? Her old fear of what might befall her husband in Antarctica comes back to life in dreams of its frozen landscapes of snow and sea and rock that she has never seen. On a friend's wall she notices a photo of hand prints, stencilled on rock in a cave, life-size, pale hands with the blue grey mottle of stone showing through. Nearby is the cave where an escaped convict is said to have lived, where he was frightened out one night by a giant bull seal. Not long afterwards he was found by blacks who look him for the ghost of a dead warrior and adopted him. He spent over thirty years with his tribal brothers. Apart from this convict, sealers were the first whites on this coast. They enslaved black women to stalk and club the seals. **In** a local Gallery Dagmar sees paintings of this coast as it was then—that is, in the artist's mind, of course—oil paintings full of blood and black skin, fire and seawater. She hears the legend of creation belonging to the tribe of the Head of the Bight, who were of the Whale Dreaming: it takes place in the very caves she will enter, where she will see the mummies of animals and the stone rings of the lost people. The landscape as she experiences it finds its echo in the films she sees and in books. Among them are ones written by anthropologists about the Dreaming of the Aborigines and their ancient beliefs about fertility and birth, spirits and spirit children and the ancestor beings who created the land and who are the land to whom it is sacred. The beliefs are akin to the ancient beliefs whose roots still survive after thousands of years in her own landscape. Dagmar has been in Swanhaven for nearly six months when one day black people appear in the foreshore park.¹⁴

Dagmar is a migrant, assimilating difference, but she is also a representative woman re-adjusting her understanding of a woman's role in the contemporary world. Initially lost, she is now actively and creatively seeking an alternative rationale for

life. The novel articulates strategies for survival, among them Dagmar's as she sheds an old skin and finds a new voice.

The feeling of being disenfranchised, with power in someone else's hands, has caused other women to re-inscribe their lives through feminist discourse, what McCredden and Lucas call, "a strategy for describing and changing the experience of women in Western patriarchy" that has grown from the understanding that the personal and the political are intertwined.¹⁵ Women writers like Farmer have taken up the challenge to write about their own conditions, sometimes in humorous terms but often in deadly serious reply, and Dagmar is invested with this responsibility. Texts targeted are often canonical ones like the Bible, the Greek myths and persistently reiterated fairy-tales and legends-as formative and instructional narratives—from Eve to Red Riding Hood. Buchbinder reminds us of the legitimacy of this review noting that: "A text ... is not [only] a reflection of prior meanings but rather part of the never-ending process of the construction of the meanings through which we live our lives."¹⁶ It is in the context of this larger re-evaluation that Farmer's interest in mythologies and their power should be valued. When Dagmar travels to inland Australia she radically revises her attitudes to re-assess her distance from Martin's perspective. In doing so she is liberated.

Language and translation

Dagmar is also translating between her Danish language and the new world of her immediate experience. This aspect of cross-cultural reality, a painful process of re-shaping identity, is pursued again in *The House in the Light*. Dagmar demonstrates that:

Language is not primarily a means of communication; it is, above all, a means of cultural construction in which our very selves and sense are constituted. There is no clear or obvious "message", no language that is not punctuated by its contexts, by our bodies, by our selves, just as there is no neutral means of representation.¹⁷

Striving for meaning and understanding, and not being able wholly to convince others in her own terms brings Dagmar to a rebellion against language itself; but it is a protest crucially

interwoven with her emotional well-being and the shortcomings of her relationship. The narrator is engaging in a slow acquisition of meaning and an examination of the complex fabric of language, and this is fraught with difficulty. When the task seems too arduous Dagmar is overtaken by the sense that language might not be enough:

I was tired to death of words, sick and tired of reading and speaking, of utterance. I who have always loved words, the life of language, and gulped in the flood of words, always greedy for more. I was tired of love also. This love, all loves, the treadmill of love, the always feeling bound and beholden. (220)

Webs and networks

Like the crystal points of light in Indra's net, words strung together may be "links" in a positive sense, or webs that ensnare. In the narrative, the narrator clears encroaching gossamer threads away from her house to admit more light and finds "Gossamer, goose-summer, the threads which connect with the past". But these co-exist with elisions, silences, differences, gaps or thin ice that are also being delicately traversed.

In a central scene, the couple watch Ingmar Bergman's *Through a Glass Darkly* in which the woman finds that the vision of the spider she has long remembered and associated with this film simply does not exist, except in her own imagination. Martin claims "that the film works as a string quartet for four voices and ends on a strange chord. Hope, healing", but the woman adds: "That was not how I remembered it" (122). She remembers the spindel / spider-the heart of the web of every life, the self, the cold spider. Her experience suggests the supremacy of imagination over the real, and this is a premise enacted throughout. The spider and web imagery is also linked to the "gossamer" thread which recurs throughout. This dialogue indicates the ways in which Farmer interweaves the strands of her imagery to indicate the cross-currents of the discourse and reveal the tensions in relationships. Walking with father and daughter, Dagmar turns back to look at the cliffs and spontaneously identifies the face of Tollund Man in the profile of the cliffs; but she is chastised by Martin as a consequence.

Later, the couple debate the issue of what should be said in front of the child. Dagmar claims:

"She likes the stories, the make believe, she thrives on it. See how she comes alive."

"I know all that, I know she's a willing victim. It's like you and your spider webs."

"What?" I was the spider here?

"You went *on*, is what I'm saying, again, after you could see she was frightened."

"So I am to see myself as the spider here?"

"Not like that-when you *walked* into the webs."

"When did I?"

"You were white as a sheet", Tess said. "It's the fixation I mean. The *lust* that you-"

"The gossamer?"

"Oh shit" He grasped his hair.

"You wanted to talk about Lyn, okay? *Lust*? I took it to be how to?-a sort of thrill, excitement-like at school the children-"

"School's different. You'll just have to take my word for it. If you had kids ... How do I get through to you that she just can't handle it? She can't sleep any more. She wets the bed the whole

time." "And this is *my* fault?"

"You're not helping."

The spider. I often wondered if it was possible that what we most dread, what we loathe, is what we must become, even, perhaps, what we are already. I said: "I thought I was, you see. Helping."

"Of course you did, woman, do you think I don't know that? Would I be standing here arguing the point if I didn't know that?"

"We have to face our fear. Not run away."

"See. That's what you're in Australia for, is it." (186)

Martin's demands, needs and frustrations are implicit, but without the authority of shared parenting Dagmar's way of sharing is also under-valued. There is a basic difference about the couple's attitudes to children and perhaps to life itself. This also relates back to the harsh reality of the story of the seals (in terms of confronting fear) and points forward to Dagmar's eventual decision that her way of seeing, although in opposition to Martin's, is significant enough for her to wish to share

it with the child, Lyn. The gift is given in the full knowledge that, like an alternative skin, this will only be possible when the father allows the child to become herself.

Texts and gender

Turning in on her own past, Dagmar, like Yeats, speaks of time as a winding stair, a coil, a spiral. This image is central as the woman, at sea metaphorically, visits the lighthouse with its "beehive lantern" at its heart. In a small but central scene the narrator remembers being inside a spiral lighthouse and looking into a *camera obscura*, a darkened chamber or box into which light is admitted through a double convex lens to form an image of external objects on paper or glass placed at the focus of the lens. As a metaphor for the artist's distanced view this is persuasive. But here, the child sees her father outside and diminished in scale and cannot communicate with him. Farmer has advised that this adjustment of perspective, "the effect on the child of seeing her father transformed, [becoming] a tiny being in a tiny garden that is outside and out of reach [is] rather like *Alice in Wonderland* and *Alice through the Looking Glass* ... the *camera obscura* [is] a metaphor for art, the artist".¹⁸ I am reminded of the claim that perspectives may be gendered:

Feminist literary theory demonstrates that our socially given identities as feminine and masculine, and the differential access to social power and privilege those entities entail, shape the writing and reading of texts of all kinds.¹⁹

Farmer is negotiating this territory as the adult woman's patriarchal language comes to be seen as fossilised and the loved Martin regrettably revealed as its spokesperson. Part of the difficulty is that Martin, despite his sexual attractiveness and desire to communicate, seems imbued with a legacy of opinion born from binary understandings of gender. In a discussion about gender difference in relation to writing, Farmer observed that:

I don't like the feeling that men writers are still regarded as more ordered and more cerebral, whereas women are instinctive and confessional and impulsive. Who could be more of those things than D.H. Lawrence when he was worked up for example? And

George Eliot was as cerebral and, you know, ordered, as any man. There's really no point in going by these stereotypes; there never has been.²⁰

The characters Farmer creates implicitly articulate and challenge these assumptions, despite the civilised veneer of equality which appears to gloss their interpersonal relations. Dagmar is widowed. Martin is between women: he expects faithfulness but practises a double/ quadruple standard! Like the bull seal of Swanhaven he is so busy defending his patch and demanding attention that he fails to read the nature of his litter's or his lover's growth. We observe that Martin "opens doors and stands back" (223). He is an intellectual peer but one unable to find value in alternative interpretation, and ultimately his well-meaning but sterile voice becomes increasingly judgmental. Dagmar suggests that "he would not see". He constantly reviews spontaneous gestures and has "second thoughts" while Dagmar's signature tune becomes the phrase "never mind". The two voices are temperamentally opposed:

Any film seen with Martin is a river I have bathed in, moonlight and shadow-his are always black and white films-and nothing has sunk in. This turbulence in me, only with him there. Often when we have talked, he has come out with a complaint that I was not listening. If then I said something to show I was, I was not letting him speak. And always under his watchful stillness, the blur in me somewhere. (174)

Their relationship shifts from good sex in "eskimo heaven" to a "walk on the bog" as tensions increase and mistrust is proved to be justified. The charm of the Fisher King, with his association with death and decay, is eventually relinquished. Dagmar thanks him for the gift but rejects Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* as a "coils of words" (145). Instead, a female/feminist voice begins to evolve in defiance of this kind of art. This shift is interesting given Farmer's earlier use of Eliot's work in *Alone* and in the short stories of *Home Time* where such authoritative texts were paradigmatic. Katharine England observed that:

It is tempting to see Martin as a thoroughly unsatisfactory character and to hold Farmer responsible for his curmudgeonly

condescension, his frequent coldness, his lack of generosity, but it is fairer to credit the author with having created a thoroughly unsatisfactory and *consummately recognisable person*.²¹

Obedying Martin's directive, Dagmar takes the arranged journey to the Nullarbor. The tour offers a descent into the "lungs of the earth", the largest underground space in Australia, with two guides of a company called Albatross whose attitudes to their environment make Dagmar interrogate the nature of cultural respect. But the experience is not without its insights. She begins dutifully recording the tour with camera and notebook, but then writes back to Martin in a different order of language—something more akin to the signs of the hands she witnesses. The imaged outline of her own is sent as a message, and we are reminded that it is her "good hands" which have soothed him throughout. The first-hand knowledge of place gives rise to a surer voice:

This is not a black land, this Nullarbor Plain, whatever Martin says, but bronze and amber, copper, a garden of blue and grey-green bushes fading to every skyline: vast and at the same time a dwarf garden where all the plants are stunted intricate, crouched in each other's shade around the gnarled shells of low trees. In its rock it harbours the bones of the ancient sea beings, the forebears. They are black opal and bum with the sea fire, blue and green and red, or white opal and milky, mother of pearl. (253)

The feminist theorist Irigaray has spoken about male ownership of traditional discourse as a kind of cage:

Everywhere you shut me in. Always you assign a place for me. Even outside the frame that I form with you. You set limits even to events that could happen with others. You mark out boundaries, draw lines, surround, enclose, existing, cutting out. What is your fear? that you might lose your property. What remains is an empty frame.²²

The Seal Woman explores the ways in which images and ideologies are reframed by alternative readings or wider experience. Dagmar discovers, amid narratives of Aboriginal conception beliefs, the intriguing understanding that the child "chooses" the mother, that these imperative links between conception and place bind people to country for the rest of their

life (229). As if "touched by such knowledge", when the story ends she is pregnant, and planning to depart Australia for a distant home. Significantly Dagmar sees her child as a gift of "the land itself", and she is re-located by a sense of unity within the scheme of things (298). Surfacing from the "skin of sleep" after her dreams of the songs of seals she hears:

Echoes in the towers of black ice, echoes of the foghorn kept me awake.

Daybreak at the windows, a white world and pooled in the lamplight a woman, a speck in a yolk, in a soft shell, worlds within worlds of burning luminous wrote (304)

The single self is now multiple and the world within (and beyond) is imaged in a differently inter-connected way. This is the same place and the same woman who woke in Chapter One, but the imagery now ensures that we understand she has been transformed, "utterly".

Between women

Like post-colonial writing, which replies to colonial politics and performance, feminist agendas are not simply bound by the prerogative to speak back, and Farmer's novel articulates other dimensions of the debate about the roles and expectations of gender. While it is often noted that ideological positions, like feminism or postmodernism, allow men and women to speak out to reconsider or express alternative ways of seeing and being, women's writing also provides a venue for women to speak to women of their shared experience and mutual interests. Women's writing has things of interest to say to men and, if co-existence and mutual respect are the name of the game then, like cross-cultural knowledge, cross-gendered understanding is essential. Farmer has acknowledged the multiplicity of feminisms, and her focus is on women's concerns through her women narrators, because of the perspectives she "owns". When asked "if she felt that it was difficult being a female writer?", Farmer replied:

This is the big question isn't it? I don't know. If I were a man would you be sitting here and asking, "Do you feel it's difficult being a male writer?"²³

Luce Irigaray, who wrote an influential treatise on women's *writing-Speculum of the Other Woman* (a speculum is the instrument used in the gynaecological examination of women)-suggested why and how we should read the texts of the "old masters". Barbara Milech's summary of Irigaray's work usefully directs attention to features of writing by women, and the latter part of this has particular relevance to Farmer's work:

Irigaray reads the magisterial texts of Plato, Freud and other Western Philosophers from the inside, not only for what is said but for the tone, contradictions, exclusions, repressions-for the "blind spots". Her interest is in the assumptions and central concepts of Western thought and her purpose is to demonstrate that its "representational economy" projects only one subjectivity and sexuality-a masculine one. "Woman" supports this speculation ... as mystery and mirror. She is just like man (human, rational, moral) in which case her specificity disappears. Or she is man's complement (wife, mother, reflection) in which she is the function of the masculine project of self-definition. Whatever variation of representation used, the result is female difference and autonomy is erased. This is a representational system which, in Irigaray's terms is driven by a "desire for the same, the self-identical"...

Irigaray invokes the possibility of a female imagery. Only then, she argues, will it be possible to have a relationship between the sexes. Irigaray recommends the writing into being of women's sexuality, the sexualised mother and the autonomous woman. She bends language and representation. She stages conversations, deploys non-linear argumentation, disrupts syntax, capitalises on ambiguity, has recourse to puns, irreverence and mockery, metaphorises the female body, imagines the mother/ daughter relation as one between two sexualised beings and invokes the divine as an image of female autonomy.²⁴

I have spoken in the previous chapter of Farmer's use of "the female body" as a focus of knowledge. In *The Seal Woman* autonomy is essential but a desire for alternate connections remains. This is achieved through the legends and myths which are vital links in the communal memory. In the light of the changing politics, language, ethics or social imperatives of the day their relevance is renewed. Milton's, Coleridge's and Eliot's ideologies are worlds apart, but are related through their

use of myth. Myth also suggests the continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity. This is a way of controlling, ordering, and of giving shape to new experience. Women's writing often recommends a re-ordering, not for continuity's sake, but in the name of change, and Farmer's fiction enacts these imperatives. But she has also spoken about the symbolic elements in *The Seal Woman*, and the ways in which women's writing engages with and replies to earlier texts. The context of this discussion was Farmer's relation to Asian spirituality:

In my last book of fiction, *The Seal Woman*, the narrator, Dagmar, a Dane, is haunted by the god Odin. She sees his face in that of the Tollund Man, a bog man who was hanged as a sacrifice thousands of years ago, and preserved in the peat of Jutland. She finds this face again in a rock at Point Lonsdale. She never knew her father; her own husband was unable to be a father: in Australia she falls in love with a man she first sees in his role as a father. To Dagmar, Odin is the unknown father, he is the mystery of fatherhood itself. Why drag Odin into this? you may be thinking. Odin's a far cry from Asia, isn't he. Well, no, not such a far cry really: Odin was one of the Norse gods known as the IEsir, the "Asian" ones, the invading gods who in other incarnations took over Greece as Zeus, Poseidon, Ares, and so on; and as Jupiter, Neptune, Mars in Rome, and in India as Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva and the others. Odin is a shaman as well, like those of Central Asia, perhaps having picked it up on the way west. All the gods are shape-shifters and thieves of each other's powers. This pantheon that straddled Asia and Europe for centuries is our common heritage. Asian spirituality is not distinct from European: there has always been interpenetration, only more so in some epochs than in others. In an earlier book I dealt directly in a semi-fictional form with Buddhism and its consequences for me.²⁵

With this kind of respect for the "gods of the past", departures in the form of new myths are not undertaken lightly. In Chapter Two I suggested that Farmer was initially "located" as a writer between Romantic and Modernist literary legacies, but it is a tribute to her respect for the past and her capacity to innovate that she is not bound by these "fixed" positions. She has used her fiction to consider alternative means of exploring changing worlds. This is the sense in which the suggestion of

"writing against the grain" is especially pertinent.

As I have suggested earlier, "fixed positions" may also affect readings. Two critics, Alan Wearne and Michael Sharkey, read *The Seal Woman* in the context of women's writing, and in relation to the controversy surrounding the Goldsworthy /Farmer debate about feminist ideology and writing. Wearne's review was minimal as the Farmer text was one of four reviewed. In his dismissal of *The Seal Woman* Weame said that he had read a third of the text "but wasn't interested in the outcome". His summary of this intricate text, or mis-reading of the book cover's promotion, was as follows:

A Dane returned to the scene of her Port Philip Bay honeymoon, Dagmar is childless, post-menopausal [which is inaccurate] and recently widowed, a middle-aged woman still in search of love and capable of vigorous sex. Hoping to find her "inner self" she makes love a bit and reads a lot, transcribing myth, fable, news and historical and geographical writing into this text.²⁶

Given his inability to find *anything* interesting in the experience of a middle-age female protagonist, and "reading" only in relation to a masculine, but hardly critical, contact point, it would have been far more honest if Wearne had refrained from any comment at all on Farmer's novel.

Michael Sharkey was more observant but had other problems in mind when he suggested that the territory was "a minefield" when referring to the then topical critical discussion about feminist representation in Farmer's work. He began with a dismissal of the book's "paper" and claimed that he felt constrained by the detailed daily routines and introspection of the novel's protagonist. He did give the book a dutiful second read, but was disconcerted by the protagonist's "didactic tone" and hoped that this was a parody of the "search-for-meaning-brigade feminist or otherwise". He offered several suggestions about why Farmer might have deliberately made her protagonist dull or "disoriented" and concluded with a modest admission of his "superficial summary" of the novel's plot:

[a] somewhat emotionally skew-whiff woman goes abroad, has affair, conceives a child says cheerio to the other begetter, and goes home happy and solo, end of yarn.²⁷

Unlike Weame, Sharkey knew there was more going on than met the eye-but could not find it here. In later appreciations of Farmer's work this was modified.

Much later, in an article rather than a review-and I acknowledge the exigencies of different time constraints implicit in this distinction between these genres-Xavier Pons also struggled with the difficult question of "*écriture féminine*" in relation to *The Seal Woman*, which he found "stunningly beautiful".²⁸ In "Blood and Water: Feminine Writing in Beverley Fanner's *The Seal Woman*" in *Kunapipi*, he canvassed the tensions between writing with "feminine characteristics" and readings which failed to value "so-called feminine activities, places and emotions". The difficulty that Pons faced was that, despite his desire to redress a non-tolerance of women's difference, he hedged his bets as he flirted with both the dualist's and the biological essentialist's collective summary of women as a job-lot:

A male chauvinist would say that women are the victims of anatomy, almost of instinct. Indeed Dagmar's behaviour seems determined by factors beyond her control. But the implication is that this results from women being in touch with or attuned to realities to which men are simply blind. The source of their behaviour is far deeper than the tyranny of patriarchal order. Women are in and of the world, not detached on-lookers like men: they participate in its rhythms; their experience is almost necessarily t;osmic.

This attempt at analysis of different ways of seeing falls back into older patterns of reading. If the cosmic reference was gender-inclusive, and Dagmar's sense of inter-connection with the world was seen as deliberately political, rather than instinctive, this critic would be nearer to the novel's intent. Instead he tells us that the novel is technically a "homodiegetic narration" and that the narrative mode is "parataxic", but that the narrator is a "frustrated anthropologist", not an individual coming to terms with loss by investigating the state of the world's environment beyond her own sense of alienation. Pons worryingly expresses surprise that "trivial everyday activities like gardening can be the starting point of a meditation on the mysteries of life, to which even farting is not

irrelevant". In a country which has valued Stan Parker in his garden experimenting with gobs of spittle, love as a table or god as a dog, as well as Burke in his backyard, this should be no surprise. Pons does arrive at an appreciation of the way in which imagery functions in this prose:

Beverley Farmer's preoccupation with living and dying is not expressed in an abstract, philosophical fashion. She eschews intellectual discourse and allegory alike and relies instead on clusters of images to let significance emerge. One very basic function of her metaphors is to establish an invisible kinship which unites all creatures of nature: human beings, animals, plants, the earth itself are a whole: "the whole land when you think of it, is a vast body," Dagmar exclaims (185) and to her the Nullarbor caves are the "lungs of the earth" (247). Elsewhere she writes of the "dry rough skin of the rock" (4) or the "fleshy smell" which a beach has in its salt, thereby emphasising the links between humanity and the vegetable and animal kingdom. The pubic hair of Dagmar's lover is "damp and warm like seaweed" (1); the sounds made by children running on the wooden floor suggest "a swan leaving the water; a pelican, slow beats of a paddle" (1). The linkage between various worlds is also expressed, with particular insistence, by the legend of the seal woman and the silkie-mythical creatures who are human beings upon the land and animals in the water.

This conclusion is extended to claim for Farmer an "all-inclusiveness", a "refusal to regard anything as beyond the pale", and an "openness-feminine to the extent that the masculine often means discrimination and exclusion". The question of writing controlled by the "primacy of intellect" is contentious:

What, in conclusion, can *The Seal Woman* tell us about feminine writing? It shows that this is a kind of writing which, as male critics suspected, is not placed under the primacy of the intellect. The critics concluded that this made it inferior but I would argue that it makes it simply different. There is of course no lack of intelligence or subtlety in this writing, quite the reverse, but its intelligence is as it were made flesh. It has a sensuous organic quality about it which male writing seldom attains, and which appears for instance in the loving attention to visual details.²⁹

Reading these reviews demonstrates that gendered reading remains alive and well; that there are some subjects, or ways

of seeing and saying, which do not engage men and women at the same level; but having said this, I am aware of disparate receptions by two readers of the same gender. Pons addresses the question of gendered styles by citing a similar use of the "mythopoeic" and "holistic" in Wole Soyinka's and Beverie) Farmer's writing, but the territory is difficult to negotiate. There do seem to be different tolerances of pace and different levels of desire to engage with process rather than product at work here. The aforementioned sense that there is something else going on in Farmer's writing is more obviously disconcerting for the male reviewers of this novel.³⁰ *The Seal Woman* employs an experimental form that admits an accumulation of textual evidence via its multiple sources as it examines the relation of language to life and of life to art. It is a novel about framing and interpretation which examines the "skins" of all kinds in which women have been mythologised. Michael Sharkey senses this, while Alan Wearne does not get beyond the mirror. Xavier Pons overcomes his "queasiness" about biological functions and begins to see how the linkages between images of blood, or cyclic physiological patterns, are related to a larger artistic design.

Coda: eco-feminism and textual "skins"

If a reader/ writer questions or dismisses certain myths and legends of the past they incur other responsibilities; a void is abhorred so literature creates new/ different truths. This is one definition of women's writing. This also describes the function of the coda in *The Seal Woman* where Farmer takes up the challenge to offer a final song which synthesises the journey and discoveries of the text. Before commenting on this postscript I wish to return briefly to the issue of global environments within the context of eco-feminism.

Eco-feminism

While Farmer has rejected identification with *any* ideology, the preoccupations in this text invite comparison with eco-feminist principles. Rosemary Radford Ruether's writing has indicated the historical relationships between the biology of natural environmental systems and male and female contributions to

cultures and social systems.³¹ She also surveyed ancient identifications of women with nature and men with culture. This intersection of feminist and environmental philosophy involves consideration of "deep ecology", spirituality and human and animal rights. While Farmer's text does not overtly link degradation of the environment with the oppression of women, it does convey a sense of ecological crisis, and it interrogates the myths and gendered rules by which we live. Throughout the novel there are warnings about the world's condition and the narrator is cast as a recorder of evidence. Farmer has Dagmar keep watch:

Alone I watch the documentaries. I have seen a polar bear hunt seals among ice floes, the sweep and sprawl of his underwater paddle, and kayakers glide in the fjords of Greenland in a mirror of icebergs. I have taped some and watch these parts over and over if I am alone, for Martin has to be in the mood for documentaries and somehow he never is. I watch penguins shooting out of a wave on to high ice and diving like eider ducks. Seals, harbour seals, filmed underwater in the sub-Arctic, squinny into the lens as they loop and swerve, glide away into the thickening dark of distance, paying out a seaweedy ribbon of shit. They tread water. Their dance is all twists and supple archings, sleekly glistening. They clap their hands and barrel through caves and tunnels of water. Divers with cameras prowl along drift nets, the *walls of death*, as they are called, spun out from ships and those torn or cut and floating free, the *ghost nets* that stretch for miles and snare whatever hits the mesh. Albatrosses and gannets, penguins, dolphins, whales, fish and seals hang like flies. (174)

The responsibility for this environmental threat lies in the greedy and large-scale harvesting of the sea that endangers entire species. These nets are the oppositional manifestation of the positive, but more expedient, networks which spread the word and serve as connecting points. The documentary does serve, like some of the ancient legends, to force the watcher to face the truth. Martin does not feel the need to bear witness to such global events. Dagmar is wise enough to know that such films are made at a price and she considers the possibility that consumer voyeurism may result in the deliberate "sacrifice" of some creatures so that these films can be made-and this is not an idle speculation (1,77). While Farmer's eco-feminism is

"saved", and the reshaping of political truths via propaganda or suppression. This is a deceitful art. The repercussions of this conditioning are evident throughout the text. Martin is answered by the coda, where the responsibility for one's own skin is the bottom line. The reader must also interrogate Martin's reading of this tale, as he sees the outcome of an escape by an imprisoned woman with no skin intact, as "unhappy".

Gradually the groundswell of the central narrative becomes a wave that moves the narrator beyond the stasis of her situation. The coda, "The Seal Woman's fable", re-sounds depths previously charted by the narrative and culminates in a quite remarkable celebration of quest. The novel's body of knowledge becomes a song celebrating imaginative release. There is constant reference to the legacy of cultural inscription, but its forms repeat the constant battle to capture and ensnare, while this song offers an antidote. Ruth Blair observes that Farmer's use of metaphor as a "medium of exchange" reveals configurations of lost links between images of bodies and land, and suggests the fluid dimensions of this song.³²

The first draft of the seal story is offered to Martin, who accepts it with suspicion and returns it with unwanted comments. The second is a gift to his daughter, offered with the proviso that it is read when she is old enough to understand, and the third is the novel itself. Martin's earlier intrusive reading of the notebook has marked a deterioration of the relationship and the final song/story encodes it. The song reflects on the lives, legends and sexual politics which have been its source. Katherine Cummings observes that:

A parallel is drawn between Dagmar and the myth of the Seal Woman, whose skin is stolen by a man so that she had to serve him as his wife until she found her skin and returned to the Seal People. One of the Seal People conspires with the husband to find his wife and carry her away with the aid of spells. Once more she is his thrall/ wife and once more she serves him faithfully until she again finds her skin in its hiding place and escapes, this time forever.³³

Like all good allegories, this one offers multiple meanings. Felicity Plunkett confirms that Dagmar's story "has no happy

ending" but reads the story in line with her analysis of the text as one expressing grief for "a lost woman".³⁴ Nicolette Stasko acknowledges the story as a gift to Martin's daughter, admits the possibility that the text *is* the rewritten ancient myth, but adds an hypothesis about the allegory of a woman's "inability to remain in a land where the language is not her own, especially when she realises that her identity is more fluid than she first believed".³⁵ This suggests to me the occupation of linguistic space so that the allegory about the new skin embraces the journey of a woman claiming her right to a distinctive authorial voice. This is in keeping with the process of the text and the nature of the behest to the young girl.

Storytelling is a means of building community, identity and relationships; it invites engagement with and access to the past, as a way of sharing human experience, and it serves a folkloric function by articulating the beliefs, legends and customs of a people. Narrative is both a cultural product and a lived practice. Women's writing challenges the ways in which women have been depicted in traditional narratives, and it interrogates identity, space and power. This work often employs irony, ambiguity and variations of perspective to scrutinise language and re-negotiate meaning. Farmer's writings re-configure content and process, noting and revising the contradictions, blank spots, exclusions and emphases of patriarchal texts to construct new myths which represent women differently. Barbara Milech observed that:

women ... in the nineteenth century pioneered protests against the oppressions of sexism or racism. The twentieth century expression of voices previously silenced and new appreciations of the ways in which these concepts are "embedded in language" and literature, as its representation, has made more people aware of the need to tune contemporary discourse to be inclusive and to more aptly express the changing views of society.³⁶

In a discussion and justification of the wisdom of compiling an anthology of women's poetry in contemporary times, Susan Lever considered the vexed question of gendered language, and the disparities between the emphases of men's and women's writing. The argument is about poetry, but the principles explored are also valid for fiction:

When arguments about the inherent differences between the sexes turn to poetry, a number of contradictory positions may be taken. Some critics claim that women's poetry is "obedient" to current literary fashions; others that it has been overlooked because it refuses to conform to the dominant order prescribed by men. Theories about the sex-determined nature of poetry usually come to ground on the differences between poetry by individual women, since these are often greater than the proposed disparities between poetry of men and women as a whole.

Some readers and writers (including some women poets) see the argument about differences as irrelevant-arguing that there is poetry, and the sex of the author bears no relation to whether it is good poetry or not. Yet Australian men and women have lived different kinds of lives in accordance with notions of "appropriate" behaviour and as a result, poetry has played different roles in their lives. This cultural difference means that women's poetry has been written out of different life conditions and sometimes addresses different audiences, from that of men.³⁷

Farmer's fiction draws its stimulus from the latter, from the conviction that the life experience provides the raw material for fiction, but that human difference, sexual, social and cultural, ensures a generative multiplicity of meanings. In this way Farmer's writing is postmodern. Dale Spender's summary of this term is relevant, especially the recommended shift towards an appreciation of the "multiplicity of meanings":

Post-modernism ... with its questioning of sequence, unity, narrative, its emphasis on the juxtaposition of images-and its demotion of the writer, deconstruction of the text, and development of reader independence, post-modernism, embodies many of the concepts and conventions of the computer era. It has been part of the process of decentring the word, of overturning the fixed canon of the ,great white men and of encoding the potential for many different cultural groups, and many different societies to have their own many different literatures. This move from the fixed and universal centre to encompass the literature of women, of Blacks, of post-colonial peoples, can be seen by some as the collapse of standards, even as the end of the "white civilisation" as it has been known through the print medium. But it can also be seen as the emergence of a multiplicity of meanings which reflect the multiple experiences of the human condition: it can be seen as a realisation of the potential of the information revolution which

allows for the democratisation of meanings, for the end of the distinction between culture maker and culture receiver, between writer and reader.³⁸

Working against the grain of archetypal texts, other meanings emerge. *The Seal Woman* demonstrates a female consciousness of prior complicity and new responsibility through an active capacity to participate in change. It is about "the discourses and preferences saturating the culture which appear to be inevitable and natural, discourses as influential and ephemeral as myth".³⁹

Chapter 6

The Third Eye: *The House in the Light*

The silence of the language of the photograph is greater in black and white than in colour-maybe in that black and white is more remote from seen reality. The composure, the depth, transfix.ity, the graininess, fine and coarse, of photographic surfaces, is like bare skin.

Beverley Farmer¹

If something is caught. How much more is lost?

Ross Gibson²

In *The House in the Light*, Beverley Farmer reconsiders the "metaphysics of absence", the losses and gains wrought by time, and the distances between seeing and knowing, understanding and communicating.³ The narrator Bell (who featured in the short story collection *Home Time*) is ostensibly on a dual mission to Greece to re-visit her ex mother-in-law, Kyria Sofia, and belatedly to acknowledge her ex-father-in-law's death. But she is not the Bell she once was and is now travelling from Australia to Europe to complete research for a proposed film. While she observes and records impressions, the style, focus and angle of her vision-her ways of seeing-are juxtaposed with those of Kyria Sofia to reveal, not only the competing demands of art and life, but the individual nature of vision, perception and faith.

This is a complex, quietly understated novel which encompasses a wide-ranging exploration of human experience within a deliberately constrained field of reference. Its effects are achieved through a fine control of pace, pitch and tone and in the orchestration of dialogue and detail. Farmer explains her compositional methodology in the following way:

it was a musical analogy I had in mind: that of the string quartet, by way of the Ingmar Bergman film *Through a Glass Darkly*: four characters, with Bell as first violin and Kyria Sofia as cello, the other two women in between, and all four in harmony and counterpoint, accord, discord, voices echoing and interweaving.⁴

Delia Falconer's reading of Farmer's techniques focusses on the proposed making of a video, a collage which directs attention to the text's visual and aural qualities:

The central metaphor of this quest in *The House in the Light* is provided by the project that has brought Bell back to Greece in the first place. She is working on a video that will consist of a slide montage, "independent, not matched to or made to keep time with the changing images except at moments, chords: the elements of sound mixed, then isolated, as the images will be, and backing, advancing, unravelling in concert, counterpointed."⁵

This process is analogous with Farmer's larger design in *The House in the Light's* complex counterpointing of familial allegiances and generational and cross-cultural conflict. Its action is framed by week-long Easter rituals and sustained by the two women's negotiation of confinement within the family's house (home remains problematic). Their interactions are also affected by social expectations in a village setting in a season of stasis in both women's lives.

This chapter focuses on three central aspects of the novel: photography, religion and language as framing and shaping devices, not only of this text but in the lives of the two women central to the narratives.

Photography

Farmer has explored the visual and narrational potential of photography before; manipulating light sources as a means of directing the gaze, or adjusting field and depth to locate her characters in relation to place or each other. Who is present or absent in the record (or holding the camera) may also define the picture of transient or changing state of relationships. In the earlier story "Place of Birth" the narrative is enclosed by two sharply etched images: an initial picture of a Greek family in a setting "flare-bright with sunlight ... printed over with black branches and coils of grapevine", and the stark imprint of Bell's

last photographs "bare interiors of sun and shade and firelight in which as always she appears absent".⁶ Here the woman announces her imminent departure by overtly recording and storing images as a source of later nourishment. In *The House in the Light* Bell has been changed by loss, but also by her independence and growth. Her rolls of film and camera have become vital creative resources.

This writer has also effectively constructed intra-textual and referential connections between the work of other artists, filmmakers and writers.⁷ She acknowledges that her artistic *modus operandi* is tuned by the mind's eye: "I have a mind that thinks in pictures ... For better or worse, mine is a visual imagination."⁸ Farmer is also differently engaged in a subtle and intricate analysis of the ways in which images, signs and language (might be selectively read to affect human behaviour. Like Roland Barthes, Farmer uses the codes of photography and language to reveal the consequences of "Perceptive connotation, cognitive connotation ... ideological connotation and ethical connotation ... which introduces reasons or values into the reading of an image".⁹

While Bell's testimony predominantly controls our view, her hopes, desires and partial knowledge are interrogated, directly by Kyria Sofia whose oppositional perspectives (starkly black or white) represent a direct challenge, and indirectly by the novel's discourse about the nature of relative truths. In this text, heat and light and shade and cold are also manipulated to create a delicately rendered but complex emotional chiaroscuro.¹⁰

As a foreigner and divorced woman who travels alone, armed with her camera and notebook, Bell is perceived as an oddity but welcomed still as family. She finds the place altered but strangely familiar as despite the advent of cars, television and a new priest, village rituals, superstitions and prejudices remain intact. The family hearth and home are as remembered, but her mother-in-law is physically and symbolically diminished in scale:

Bell can see with her own eyes what all the photos of the last two summers were telling her, if she could have believed it: Mamma, swathed in her black wool, has shrunk away like a candlestick. (5)

Without the diversion of children, husbands, or the ameliorating presence of other relatives, Kyria Sofia and Bell meet face-to-face. This should facilitate a dialogue, but Fanner deftly illustrates the ways in which *a priori* experience conditions perception and affects communication.¹¹

Bell has been warned by her ex-husband Grigori: "You will hardly know Mama", but Bell is shocked by the disparity between her stored images and the old woman's frail appearance. Throughout the novel, what is "read", retained or understood is seen to be (necessarily) subject to modification. In *The House in the Light* photographs are still exchanged between the branches of the family in Greece and Australia, but any notion that they are simple objective references that facilitate the maintenance of family contact through time and over distance is critiqued. Each image is re-invested with meaning, depending on viewer and context; the "fixed" image is subject to time and reappraisal. For example, Bell sees her youthful marital relationship recontextualised by the juxtaposition of recent photos of Grigori and his new wife and, despite Kyria Sofia's love of her grandson, his image is a distraction rather than a consolation (15). Paradoxically, in death, the father-in-law remains metaphorically lodged in his customary chair in his Australian grandson's favourite photograph, defying the elision of his presence-and name in accordance with Greek custom-while his formal identification is ironically misspelled on the grave's commemorative stone. Throughout, presence and absence are weighed as Farmer illustrates how both visual and verbal inscriptions of lives compete with those held as significant in the mind's eye.

The power of the moment to stamp its imprint indelibly on the future is confirmed as the two women speak of their past, and reveal the different "truths" by which they have chosen to live. For example, the stories of Bell's residual affection for her brother-in-law Andrea, occasioned by Bell's disappointment with Grigori's response to her during an earlier family crisis, and Kyria Sofia's possessive love of his son and subsequent judgment of Andrea, while divergent in outcome, arise from similar convictions:

She saw into the truth of him at that moment-there was no hid-

ing what he thought-as fast as a camera shot, indelible, one flash and before we know what is going on the shutter blades have slid open and the truth is caught and fixed. We have been judged and we have judged. Every day we are betraying ourselves to each other like this in our small and large ways without our knowledge: betraying aspects of ourselves, anyway, since we are all half hidden, more than half ... It was a moment of truth we say. How true is it really? The camera lies all the time. It tells half-truths. Don't we mostly see what we know or think we do, what we expect? (78)

Initially, the old photos framed on the house's white-washed walls induce nostalgia, just as familiar rituals sustain the women as they strive to re-establish common ground but, as Farmer advises, they mean different things to the two women:

Photos, as fragments of past time, are solid matter, unlike memories, and yet like memories they are as changeable as water, open to shifting interpretations.

What they mean to Bell, a photographer by trade, is different from what they mean to Kyria Sofia. When Bell is ushered inside, the first thing she sees is the wall covered with photos of herself surrounded by the family, herself when young and all the ages in between. Within each photo is a lost world. Alongside, the old woman has put the saints' ikons and a votive lamp. The Greeks are the people of the ikon and the photos are heraldic, a formal statement to all who enter here of a holy bond: they are ikons of family.¹²

Large changes have been accommodated, Grigori is re-married and awaiting the birth of a child, and Bell has come, if belatedly, to pay her respects. But small irritations chafe and accumulate, such as the disputed territory of a bedroom, with its associations from the past. Despite the desire for warmth, the women increasingly confront the cool distances of their own making. This psychological terrain is fraught with pitfalls and Bell's self-analysis takes her into deeper water as other forgotten images are unpacked:

What is it about this house that draws the past out of her like the bitter juices out of a salted eggplant. Nothing in Australia seems to. There is nothing left there to dredge it up and no one who shared it is alive, as far as she knows ... As he aged, her father

would never talk about the past, and her mother's memory was gone with her power of speech, ten years before her death, after a stroke. She left no photos either, when she died. Even Bell's own photos are gone, the Brownie snaps of holidays at the beach and in the hills. Searching for the album to pack for Greece, the first time, she found it in a carton of books in the garage, dry, but warped and swollen from an old soaking. Her father had never expected the roof to leak, it was bad luck, he was sorry. She found all the photos she had taken since she was eight drowned in the grey pages, stuck in thick clumps which came apart to show the bare skin spotty with mildew and runny, melted in parts, a peeled head showing through here and there, as if a match had been held up close until it burned down to the flesh. (115-6)

These lost or damaged childhood photos negate an opportunity of review, and this is a crucial incentive for Bell's return to Greece. Her visit is about rediscovering family or "place" and locating the self, once and for all, beyond the intensities of the past. When later interrogated about her reasons for returning, Bell confirms her need of the Greek family, but is shocked to realise that her continued acceptance might have been influenced by the anticipation of financial benefit. During the week's proximities, as her mother-in-law becomes more adamant that she conform to family and religious orthodoxies (she must be seen to dress and act "appropriately"), Bell's distance is confirmed. In contrast, she is "taken aback by [the] sense of a vast displacement" of her father-in-law's absence. She observes that the loss of his "silence" has made "a shift in the balance of the household" (102).

Farmer's text indicates that every framing or recording is an act of appropriation—an attempt to fix or define space either for reasons of possession, colonisation, management or simply to make comprehensible some fragment of what is seen. The novel quite clearly demonstrates the mediated nature of communication. Recent theorisations of the codes of reading and performative practices, and scrutiny of the nature of object/subject depictions, have indicated the culturally determined and gendered nature of such transactions.¹³ *The House in the Light* is informed and shaped by such postmodern readings of the ways in which image and language construct our realities. Bell is aware that:

the truly important action might be what is happening just off-stage, out of sight, while our attention is fixed *on* what has caught our eye. No, suddenly we *know*. We have seen into the depths of another soul, just for this moment. Beyond reason we trust in our moment of insight--Even if, at the same time, we are convinced the soul and all experience are one flow of surface like shallow water, glinting and hollowing from moment to moment, never fixed, never graspable--which may, must, be why I choose film, choose photography to reflect my world. I must think about this. The false significance of the moment out of time ... we have such a need to find the hidden meaning ... So, in our need, we decide that we *have* found it. Right or wrong, we cling to it. And we act on it, and the balance shifts. They are hinges in time, these moments. Our lives change course. (78-79)

Life is here seen to be a process of reinterpretation in the face of flux, and is a further demonstration of *The Seal Woman's* discoveries. As these women "re-read" each other, the opinions and images they have of each other must be re-drawn, confirmed or replaced in accordance with changes in both the subject and the viewer. The artistry of the novel resides in the sustained tension between what seems apparent, and the exposure of more complex human motivations. Old photographs, and "old opinions", are not unequivocal "maps" of the terrain, and the "house" cannot merely be returned to, as its structure and history both frame and advertise the family's changing identity. In a fine essay on photography, Gail Jones recently noted that:

Perhaps the most famous popular text on the meaning of photography is Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* (1980). Barthes does not, as one might expect, analyse the form under the then fashionable psychoanalysis of seeing: he does not consider narcissism, exhibitionism, voyeurism or indeed any of the various cultural and ideological orders of scopophilia. Instead his subject is grief; he over-exposes and develops his own mourning for his mother, the absent centre around which the text centripetally turns and by which all his other examples bleach into pale blurry supplements. *Camera Lucida*, that is to say, is a contemplation-using photography-on the metaphysics of absence. The argument is in essence simple: photographs summon not the presence of people but their radical absence: it is a mode of seizure, disembodiment and the impossibility of resurrection. It is loss, pure and simple.¹⁴

Barthes speaks of photography as "profoundly connotative" and this is a useful analogy for the methodology employed in Farmer's novel. As the narrator and her subject, Kyria Sofia, examine the meanings of what they see, they expose "absent centres". It is also profoundly ironic that Bell's artistic, secular realisation of an "impossibility of resurrection" occurs at a time when Easter celebrations are asserting an oppositional view. *The House in the Light* demonstrates that there is nothing "simple" about either faith or loss. Farmer suggests that she has created:

a sequence, a narrative, and also a metastructure of resonances and echoes that are in counterpoint to the narrative. They are a bit like tapestries or murals which depict a succession of events in a row while ignoring, or selectively ignoring, perspective.¹⁵

This manipulation of perspective is partly achieved by interspersing the multiple frames of time past with monologues, stream-of-consciousness intermissions and present events. The camera's "third eye" observing, framing and recording, indicates change; but photographs or images are like icons, held by the family as proof of identity. They assert connections within the "four white walls" of the house, or within religions, in opposition to the threat of the outside world where the chaos of past turmoil, like the war with Turkey, or currently Operation Desert Storm, threaten.

Religion

The novel is timed to echo the Easter week rituals, and while household patterns of eating, cooking and worship conform to Church routines, there is a further implicit parallel as Bell's Palm Sunday arrival is followed by a week punctuated by interrogation, temptation, suffering, rebellion, acquiescence, communion, celebration and release—a cathartic spiritual pilgrimage that both women enact differently. Farmer's novel encompasses two ontological views (two religious and national perspectives), the contrasting and shaping forces of two lives, two generations of women, and diverse narratives informing past and present. Kyria Sofia's Greek Orthodox faith shapes her unquestioning compliance with prescribed edicts, and she is

both bound and sustained by duty and devotion to family. Her conviction that the loss of family members is a consequence of the curse of the "evil eye" or "the wrath of God" is a further burden. But as the novel proceeds, more information about the history of her tenacious faith, as a saving grace against extreme odds, moderates our initial view of her rigidity. In her illness she sees her house, once lit in memory by sunlight and mutual love, clouded by Bell's radically disparate ideas of motherhood, marriage and religion, and she is threatened by Bell's allegiances to texts and actions other than those sanctioned by the church.

Bell is engaged in a different but equally demanding quest, as she seeks a life purpose and fulfilment through Buddhist enlightenment. Her increasing opposition to matriarchal expectations embroils her in a trial which goes unrecognised by her mother-in-law, who is intent on her dutiful commemoration of the stations of the cross. Bell is caught between her wish to bury the past, and her unspoken desire for Kyria Sofia's blessing. Baptised Greek Orthodox to meet the requirements of marriage and motherhood, Bell hides her interest in Buddhism, but it remains an alternative way of seeing, a prospective "eye" in the mind.

We see the world, she writes, through the lens of the past. Are we condemned to do so by the nature of the mind, or are there ways to live the present moment pure and uncontaminated, undistorted, unburdened? My hope of meditation, practice, the clear light: that my eyes be stripped bare. Is that enlightenment, when the scales fall from the eyes? Is this why the stupa has eyes? (133)

Like the stupa which draws and embodies the gaze, Bell's engagement with Mahayana Buddhist philosophy (Tibetan, Japanese, Zen)-with its concepts of the six senses, conviction of the illusion of all substance, and its teaching on meditation and life beyond death-is the focus of her private meditation. This is contrasted with Kyria Sofia's Greek Orthodoxy, and while Bell values the comparative wisdom of texts like *He Who Must Die*, or *Christ Re-crucified*, she remains unconvinced by their sacrificial demands (184). For Bell, art (photography and writing) and an alternative spiritual vision offer potentially

liberating paths, but the house recalls the past and this countermands Buddhist emphasis upon living for the present. Farmer suggests that:

Bell is looking-although still only sidelong-to Buddhism for salvation in equanimity and balance, in detachment, the grace of detachment, of serene contemplation, embodied in the Buddha. But she has no ambition to transcend the physical universe and "all complexities of mire and blood". On the contrary, life in the body is all, and enough, and she is sailing away from, not to, Byzantium.¹⁶

The ideological conflict within this house is dramatised by detailing the characters' obsessive watchfulness, and their polarised but equally mindful self-analyses. Farmer charts their assertions, hesitations, dreams and grievances to create a richly resonant text. She has also indicated that:

A further aspect of the time span here is that the Christian Easter with its rituals of (male) church and (female) household is superimposed on an ancient rite of spring. Winter is banished, winter is stasis, death-in-life, and the green world teems with new being. The village is a holy land for Bell-as is the Australian inland, and the Tibetan plateau. If Bell worships anything it's the flow of fruitfulness in the world. This is the "mystery" to her mind, the bread and wine, and Kyria Sofia, as the matriarch, is a sort of Demeter figure, a Com Goddess, the Great Mother (a role Kyria Sofia would reject as pagan and blasphemous if she knew).¹⁷

The narrative is punctuated by recollections of past events and the admission of unfulfilled desires, as both women seek new directions. Kyria Sofia is tired of life itself, but as a Christian is bound to endure, and they are both held by their residual status as *ex-nyfi* and mother, and constrained by education and temperament. Despite Kyria Sofia's thwarted desires, it is she who comes closest to recognising that her lace-making and Bell's writing (black-lace) are similar endeavours. Bell's impatience with this season of stasis, this time of physical and spiritual aridity and acute claustrophobia, impairs her vision and she sustains herself by re-scripting the family's rituals, thus translating and transforming life. But other, unbidden, narratives intervene. In their exchange of reading material, old stories surface to revise understanding or confirm

opinion, like the re-telling of the "mother-heart" story which sees the cracks in the walls of the house widen further. Bell shrewdly observes that:

The house must be full of such secrets, unspoken, unspeakable: those that are known only to one or two or half-known, glimpsed; and those others that are known to everyone, open secrets, words said, deeds done and never to be undone. (81)

Sometimes, the same signs are read differently to expose contesting attitudes: the "unspeakable" aspects of the viewer's mind-set (an inscribed book leads Bell to reflect on love, while Kyria Sofia suspects infidelity). While Kyria Sofia recalls the turmoil of her life before immigrating to Greece as if it were yesterday, Bell is beset by coinciding visions of the past and the present.¹⁸ This exchange of "secrets" exposes things previously unsaid, but the women remain polarised. Kyria Sofia's accusation of her husband's failings alienate Bell, who has not lived through the German invasion, the exodus from Turkey, or the traumas of Kyria Sofia's life. Bell has endured other losses, but when she seeks comfort she finds that religious dogma bars the way. For her the "tree of life" remains the olive, for Kyria Sofia it is "The Cross". The latter's view of right and wrong is immutably etched as graphic black and white. Despite this, their mismatched communication poignantly reveals two women seeking love or absolution.

While Bell struggles to be true to self, Kyria Sofia, a witness of the power of the Satanic "Evil Eye" which can direct lightning to strike a sister or a beloved grandson to command her conviction, remains bound by the word and the rod:

"I wanted to be a teacher," Kyria Sofia says, "and if my brothers had not interfered-

"Grigori told me. It was one of the first things he told me."

"I would have been a good teacher. Do you know, that my brother-not the one in the village, my older brother who is forgiven-he lost an eye? Well God put that eye out. Because he stood in my light." Kyria Sofia says.

"Ela, Mammal"

"Yes, Yes, I tell you! He withheld the light from me, the light of learning. And so his light was taken. Not all. Half his light. One eye." (48)

This Old Testament logic of reciprocal retribution shocks Bell, while her casual remark about "giving the soul" for "good olive oil" unwittingly causes huge offence to a woman for whom the Devil is palpably real.

The visionary "third eye" is also differently viewed by both women. Kyria Sofia sees "the Evil Eye" as the Satanic counterpart, as powerful as the wrath of God, perpetually overseeing life as a mode of control.¹⁹ For Bell this is a site of meditation and potential release from life. The concept of an omniscient view, a skiapod, or some other spiritual or occult manifestation, has traditionally served narrative as a regulatory organ of power, and gods have overseen human performance, while emissaries or earth-bound visionaries have dutifully returned their gaze. In *The House in the Light* so-called "pagan" traditions co-exist as the blue "eye" is hung for protection on babies (and buses), and the black opal "mother-eye" is worn by Bell as an heirloom. Like love, these small icons reflect connections between communities otherwise divided by politics or language.²⁰

The Easter week passes in simmering unease and growing mistrust until Kyria Sofia's peace of mind is finally shattered by the extent of her anger at Bell's flagrant refusal to affirm her faith publicly. At her lowest ebb she refuses Bell's company at church and her resentments rise like a cross:

She might as well have been there; she stood in my light. And the truth is that I might as well not have been there; I saw nothing tonight while she stood like a shadow figure on a sheet between me and the light of the lantern. Does the figure stand and move and speak of its own will though, when you come to think of it? How much is she to blame? There is a puppet master and he is Satan who lies in wait for us all with his snares of sin. And the light of the Lord is a lantern light thrown into the chambers of hearts, as a father of the Church said; I read it in the *Life*. Nothing can stand in the way of his sight. What has He seen in my heart tonight? Anger, the fire of Satan. (109)

By Thursday of the Easter week, worn by Lenten fasting and stress, Kyria Sofia softens sufficiently to accept Bell's arm, to lean a little on their return from gathering the eggs, and to accept a compliment on her cooking and her "golden-hand-

edness" (119). But in the grip of her Easter passion she remains intent on Bell's salvation, and embittered by her recalcitrance. Throughout this text, the iconographies of olive, fig and family "trees" are set in opposition to that of the cross in a subtle enactment of the tensions discussed earlier in the poem "Epitaphios" from *A Body of Water*. Penny DeBelle has observed that:

Unlike Bell, who only dabbled in Buddhism, Farmer has been a student for many years and recently travelled to Tibet because, she says, it was part of her life's trajectory. Although Buddhism teaches everything is impermanent, she was distressed to witness the destruction of ancient monasteries by the Chinese. Her immersion in Buddhism comes and goes. "I don't know that I found Buddhism to be the answer," she says.²¹

This is interesting in the light of Farmer's exploration of tensions between the claims of body and mind, and presence and impermanence in *A Body of Water*-and in respect to her claim that "If Bell worships anything it's the flow of fruitfulness in the world".²²

Language and translation

Bell's and Kyria Sofia's central ideological conflict is manifest in their differing interpretation of The Word. For Kyria Sofia, language, with its origins in authorised texts, is formative, and Bell's experimentation with language is therefore a kind of heresy. The novel offers a meditation on language and exposes the ways in which "we are what we speak". Language shapes perspectives, and is used to edit personal narratives selectively, emerging from cultural heritage, memory and desire. Bell is acutely aware of the distance between her overt compliance and her insistently subversive counter-text: "I behold, I observe. Observe and observance, the gulf between these, can it be bridged? How?" (98) This tension between artistic distance and familial allegiance provides the suspense of *The House in the Light*. The artist is desperate "to fly past the nets of family and religion", but residual respect for the grandmother of a loved son prevails. These light and dark narrative strands are interwoven as the women create moments of

warmth, but are compelled to score point and counter-point-while hating themselves for asserting cross-purposes. Kyria Sofia wrestles with the several "snakes" in her mind, a legacy of past resentments, and a tenuous relationship with her own mother-in-law which now seems echoed by her daughter-in-law, as Bell the "paper-mouse" elusively slips into gaps between languages. Kyria Sofia attempts to command her attention:

"And by the grace of Christ one day Pandoleon found a child lying dead by the road with an echidna at his side-"

Bell laughs aloud. "A what?" she says. "Really? It sounded like echidna."

"Echidna Ochia, a sort of snake. You must know it."

"Ochia, I know it! Yes, I see-echidna. But in Australia that's a little hedgehog. It lives on ants."

"Then you are mistaken in Australia. Bella, will you listen?"

"Sorry." (39)

The differences between their worlds, constructed by different languages and fed by disparate imaginative resources, are manifest. For Bell, conversations about marriage, duty and loyalty are fraught with the unspoken accusation of her "desertion" of Grigori, which under duress is partially articulated. Steering around the perimeters of the dangerous text of their life dispute-the divorce-their reading material serves as a substitute focus of conflict. One reads the Orthodox *Life*, the other myths, legends and the story of a woman making "tracks" across the Australian desert. Kyria Sofia is shocked by what she sees as the licence of Bell's mythologies, and Bell is appalled by the inflexibility of hers. Kristin Hammett also notes that the "intergenerational conflicts which occur between the women in the house are presented as a battle between Eros and Psyche" and cites the conflict between Sofia and her grand- daughter in evidence of her claim.²³

But the dialogue is modulated to reveal the women's unconfessed need of each other, as Kyria Sofia and Bell continue to care enough to desire the conversion of the other. Farmer has them each at their most vulnerable when the other is angry, so that their desires remain inaccessible. Both women reconstruct the story of their relationship to confirm and justify their own

actions (aspects of their troubled stories are shared) and both create imagined scenarios which lead them away from genuine communication:

Bell's hand absurdly goes to the eye on its chain round her neck, dull and dark, its fires unkindled by torchlight, and clamps it. *It is her*. What is she always muttering under her breath if not spells?-prayers or spells, it's all the same to her. I know she believes in the Eye. They all do. She is a dry husk herself and she will never rest until I wither up like her. Stop it, you are being ridiculous, Bell tells herself, ridiculous, you know you don't believe any of it. All the same the fear gathers with the dark. (110)

In her more rational moments, Bell observes anomalies between languages which fuel different ways of seeing. This tasting and testing of language is a characteristic of all of Farmer's writing. Bell notes, for example, that in Greek, pale or light is "open" whereas "dark" is borrowed from Italian: "The idea in Greek of open colours, as if the shade from the beginning of time has been a matter of apertures, the lens, the iris" (150). The differences which exist between them because of ethnic, cultural or linguistic barriers are occasionally breached by insight. One of Bell's more illuminating observations occurs when she is trying to "empty self" of thought in order to worship appropriately, as:

It seems to her that this is all the old woman wants as well: to empty out her life, like the *samba* in the morning, the past, the ashes and debris and soot, like her womb, a dry husk. And just at that moment along I come, Bell thinks, in search of a womb to crawl in. Mamma, let me in, let me in! Is this like something in a book once? Of course, in the first Greek book Grigori ever gave me, the *_Kazantzaki* novel about an Easter passion play. (182)

Bell's journey does offer some conclusions as she chooses life rather than spiritual retreat, and decides, on Easter Monday, that her commandment is to "live and let live" (227).

There are also manifestations of the contesting languages of patriarchal and matriarchal discourses-the languages of church and house-but this is a problematic area as the narrative is so focussed on the matriarchal space of the house itself. Farmer has advised that:

All the women have at least stirrings of revolt against the givens of patriarchy. I don't see Bell as unproblematically an "outsider"- or no more so than the scornful and rebellious teenager, Sonya, for example, or Sonya's Communist father. Vai:a is determined, against custom, to inherit the house. Kyria Sofia herself was an outsider once, as an orphan and a Refugee. Bell may get on the family nerves, but she can stake a claim on the threshold, at the very least, by virtue of being her son's mother.

I see her as woven into the "archeomythology" of the house.

The word was coined by Marija Gimbutas, an archaeologist who spent a lifetime scrying the spirit of Stone Age Europe in their grave relics, raising the ghosts of the rituals and sacraments embodied in the bone and clay and stone images. Her dead are not the kings and pharaohs but the common people. Don't the living have collective and personal archeomythologies too?-embodied in keepsakes, heirlooms, talismans, household goods, all numinous and part of the story.²⁴

In speaking of the different frames of the English and Greek language, Farmer has acknowledged that "translation can never be word for word with two such dissimilar languages" but here there is the further complication of an encounter between differing understanding of the cultural meaning of "inherited" terms like woman and wife or daughter-in-law or mother.²⁵

Peter Pierce's review of the novel, "Easter in Greece, an unsentimental story", expressed pleasure in the novel's savouring of etymologies and cross-cultural insights but "located" it in a political frame:

Many Australian novels recently have made a routine and tiresome business of anguished, deracinated characters' search for their origins. Often this has been an excuse to justify the authors' myopic foreign travel and ill-disguised loathing of Australia.

Neither failing is part of Farmer's baggage. *The House in the Light* is full of unforeshadowed suggestions, judgements complicated or withheld, prejudices understood through analysis. The novel is a benchmark against which Australian fictions of provenance might be measured. Toughly intelligent and unmodish, *The House in the Light* could illuminate the murkiest recesses of multicultural politics, but will hardly be encouraged to do so.²⁶

The House in the Light-zooming in

Throughout this study I have indicated Farmer's interest in cross-cultural relations and her tendency to focus on physical detail and linguistic nuance to broaden the range and intensity of her narratives. In the introduction to this chapter I suggested an analogy between Farmer's paradigmatic "musical composition" where major characters are used in "counterpoint" within the text, and the photographer's/film-maker's task. Bell, for example, establishes a new pattern from the juxtaposed images and sounds of Greece in her video.

The House in the Light is about sequential re-framings of reality as further experience enlarges the picture or sharpens the field to admit another view. The novel investigates what is seen, imagined, known or selected as truth, while it exposes the shaping power of ideological frames of reference-religion, nationality or gender. Farmer has acknowledged that when she is writing a story she is "thinking in terms of angles, close-ups or long shot, pace and tempo, cut or dissolve", and she acknowledges the influence of the dialogues of film *auteurs* like Ingmar Bergman, Satyajit Ray and Alain Resnais and other makers of documentaries. So it is appropriate to focus, or "zoom-in", on the ways in which Farmer adeptly sets the scene and signals her characters' changes of perception.

The sequence selected for close scrutiny is entitled "Wednesday" (83-90). This charts a turning point in Bell's understanding of her mother-in-law and usefully illustrates Farmer's narrative techniques. In this scene Sofia returns to the house, and a central, arguably overdue confrontation between Bell and Sofia occurs. This is then re-contextualised by a retrospective survey of Sofia's past by her neighbour and friend. There is considerable variation of pace and tone, light and shade as intensities of one-to-one interactions are interspersed with recollections embracing panoramic action. As Bell struggles to come to terms with her own and her mother-in-law's past, as well as their current needs, she must translate between generations and cultures to arrive at a recognition of common humanity. By the end of this Easter "Wednesday" Bell emerges with a changed appreciation of difference, and while a re-birth via forgiveness is a promised rather than fulfilled potential,

Farmer has used Bell to investigate the kind of "illumination" of multicultural realities which Peter Pierce rightly applauds.

The opening passage customarily defines weather and place, as well as the narrator's complementary mood. In this instance both are sullen and overcast. Short phrases indicate a brooding unrest, and adjectives accumulate in a gathering tension which culminates in the return of Kyria Sofia. The use of the verb "swaddling" aptly heralds the major advent they are anticipating but not speaking about—the imminent birth of Sofia's grandchild in Australia.

WEDNESDAY

The morning air is muted, swarthy, or so Bell imagines. She wanders out to the yard with her coffee cup, hoping that none of the neighbours will see her and call out a greeting as early as this. The old woman must have gone out. Zoumboulitsa will be here soon, not that Bell is looking forward to it; she is in no mood for company today. A smell of smoke, diesel from the bus or a tractor, hangs in the air. Every blade of grass is as still as the fat hyacinths. They and the leaves of the olive saplings have a slick of shine, but they feel dry, cool and dry in her fingers. She goes in and makes her porridge and a second coffee with the light on in the kitchen, so little of the daylight comes in. Mound6s, she thinks, is the word for this weather: sullen, scowling, burdened with snow, with rain and other things impossible to shed, smoke or ashes, or soot, an air of desolation swaddling the whole earth. (83)

Sofia arrives home with an Australian letter and new photos and Bell asks "too loudly" of news of the baby only to be chastened by Sofia's assertion that her son "will phone". A clash between the past, present and future is inevitable as the absent son (the ex-husband) is still the focus of both women's intense interest. The following conversation about boat ownership is at one level diversionary, but at another, like the Greek way of saying "making the baby" (as opposed to "having a baby") it emphasises cultural difference. Throughout the novel the dialogue indicates the women's small but vital misreadings of each other, and illustrates the ease with which such misunderstandings may divide. This is not simply a cultural comment, as these readjustments are increasingly affirmative

as the two women persistently "leap" such barriers to keep speaking with each other.

Without even glancing at the photos she presses her lips and the envelope shut and takes the glasses off. Bell is not to ask for a look, it seems, either because the sight might wound her, or because the mere fact of her seeing might bring harm on the new wife at this fine point of balance between two lives. Or for both those reasons. *Elcane to mor6?* Her own voice rings in her head. Has she made the baby? Made comes closer to the truth of it, when you think.

"The new boat is ready. Did you know he owns half a boat now?"

"Half?"

"Half a fishing *kaiki*."

"Much good that is, half a boat!"

"A half-share, *janoum*."

"All right, Mamma. I understand."

She squinnies without her glasses. "He says they painted the name on yesterday: *Sofia*. They are sending lobsters and shellfish alive to Asia by air. They have ten staff now in the restaurant."

"A pity it wasn't like that in my time, Mamma. It was us two on our feet all day and half the night with a baby and a wood-fired stove."

"I say it only because this should have been the fruit of *your* hands."

Bell shrugs. "Since I have other fruit?"

"Marriage is never easy for the wife. It takes work, it takes patience. If only you had had patience, Bella! "

"I did. I had no choice. I had patience."

I made patience, Bell is thinking: in Greek you make patience, just as you make a child. Patience which is the child of-what?

Kyria Sofia gives a heavy sigh. "Since you are good friends enough now? All you had to do then was sit on your eggs and wait for the hard times to pass-" (84)

The women are skirting dangerous territory. Sofia's maternal pride is obvious in her iteration of Grigori's business success, but the past is unleashed as Bell attempts, perhaps for the first time, to explain to her ex mother-in-law the conditions which led to the couple's separation and divorce. She speaks of the anger and incipient violence of their relationship, of living under war-like conditions, and of her acute isolation in trying

to be a mother and sustain long working hours in the restaurant. When Bell claims that her separation from Sofia's son was ultimately a matter of "life and death" the women's communion is terminated as Kyria Sofia resumes her matriarchal role and speaks her mind about Bell's actions and what she sees as their consequences. Their extreme differences are revealed as Sofia's idea of the role of wife is seen to transcend Bell's individual rights. The seriousness of a life-threatening situation is then overtaken by Bell's anger about Sofia's refusal to come to Australia to help, but the terminology is varied with great subtlety as truth gives way to the cut-and-thrust of verbal point-scoring. Waiting her chance, perhaps after years of "simmering" resentment at her own losses, and her inability to be comforted in her need, Bell fights back:

Bell pounces. "Grigori wanted your help but so did Vafa. You chose Vafa. You looked after *her* son"-much good it did you, her look says, and the old woman's face concedes the point-"and I had no one to take the baby off *my* hands. My own mother was not well enough. Have another baby, you said, and then I will come to Australia. Instead I had a miscarriage. I lost-"

"I know."

"-two babies in two years."

Kyria Sofia has her haggard stare. She hangs her head. Bell has fought back too hard, brutally hard, to her shame, drawing blood, in front of Zoumboulitsa which makes it worse. And cheated as well: since when did she want Mamma or anyone taking the baby off her hands? Every word of what she has said might have been true-was true: the lie was in the essence. Not that the old woman knows. Bell has won, for once. No doubt she will pay for this, but she has silenced the inquisitor. (85)

Having spoken her mind, momentary satisfaction is immediately overtaken by contrition and a self-analytical awareness of the half-truth of her accusation of neglect. But Bell's connection between Sofia's mind-set and the "inquisition" indicates her subliminal sense of being judged or accused on religious grounds. There is a break in the dialogue as if to enact a resumption of silence. It takes a third person to intercede as Zoumboulitsa breaks this deadlock:

When Bell comes back from the *meros*, Zoumboulitsa is alone.

"Where has she gone?" Bell bites her lip.

"Back to church. She is great-souled, your mother-in-law," Zoumboulitsa says.

"Yes, what a good word. Great-souled she is."

"Great-souled and golden-handed and I am not saying that lightly. I only lived through the winter because of her."

"She is happy that you come here."

"She has had a hard life."

"I know."

"So you may, but not the way I know, after having lived alongside her all our lives. Nothing was easy. I tell you to know, Bella, it has been struggle, pure struggle."

"It is her nature, I think, to struggle."

"So it is, and that is why it's up to you-"

Why what is up to me? But Bell knows. (86)

In the interval of refuelling the fire a chastened Bell remembers the kindnesses of other times, and the connections between language, image and family that have fuelled her return to this house.

Megal6psychi kai chrysohera, as Zoumbou said, the lovely formal compound words of praise, so full and resonant, with an aura of the litany about them, and so commonplace. Everyday words. You hear them all the time. Bell was golden-handed herself one day, when Yanni was little and she was knitting him a jumper. They were out on the porch with a group of other women when Mamma grabbed hold of the sleeve and scrutinised the pattern of honeycomb and cable. It might be too big for him, but he will grow into it, she said. The others all wanted a look and Bell flushed red with pride as the jumper was passed around among the smiles and murmurs. *I chrysohera i nyfi mas*, Mamma said, and Bell in her confusion took it to mean that she was a golden widow. Mamma, what an ill-omened word to say! she exclaimed, and they were all puzzled until it was straightened out. Because *h{ra* is widow, and even a divorcee is a sort of widow in Greek, a *zondohfra* or living-widow, alive in death. But she was neither, after all, was she-then. By the time she sent a photo of Yanni in this jumper of braided wool, playing in a riverbed of wet and dry rocks and shadows near where they lived, in the same town, only apart: by then she was. Is it the same river? Kyria Sofia asked in a letter. As in the first photo, she meant. It could have been, when Bell came to

think of it, and besides the question gave her heart. Never the same river. It was a sign that Kyria Sofia was also on the watch for the continuities, such as they were. (86-87)

The narrative's "stream-of-consciousness" sees present time stopped as memories demonstrating the truth of the claims of Sofia's love and generosity of spirit are recalled. Bell was once centred by her place within the community, not separated by divorce; but it is clear from her recollections that there are larger issues at stake in this culture where a woman is removed from life itself if she is displaced from her role at the family's heart. The use of this phrase (to be given "heart") recalls the earlier story of the "mother-heart" and Bell's distaste for its meaning, precisely because she had not been able to sacrifice so much in the scheme of expectation implicitly set up by Greek precedent. Bell is reminded of her place in this house by the delicacy of Zouboulitsa's respect for her mother-in-law and the ensuing story centred around the history of the "axe" is a further axis, a hinge on which this conversation turns to open further doors into the past-this time of Sofia's war-time survival and of her capacity to endure:

"Now it bums well, Bella."

"Ah. Is the wood enough, Theia?"

"Enough, enough." Zouboulitsa sighs and smiles.

"What if I chop some?"

"If she asks."

"There's an axe out in the barn."

"She might be upset."

"So long as she doesn't do it."

Zouboulitsa jerks her head back. "*Janoum*, where would she find the strength?"

"I'm not sure I could lift that axe, to tell the truth."

"No, well, then! There is a boy she can call on, Manoli's Yordanaki, he's a good boy. That axe, *amdn!* The famous axe."

"The axe? Why?"

"It's the same one your Grigori held over his father's head one Easter to stop him slaughtering the lamb. That's how far back it goes. There was your father-in-law with the knife at the lamb's throat and Grigoraki brandishing this axe he couldn't lift. Both shaking with anger!"

"And who won?"

"Who do you think? Grigoraki was his darling. Yanni had to go out and buy a dead lamb. *Amtin!* How we all laughed!"

"He would have no problem now."

"And then in the Civil War? No one has told you? Well, you know after the Occupation-the Germans, Hitler?-there was the Civil War? Yes, well, the *andirtes* had their strongholds in the mountains. In these parts they were in the caves above Agia Vrissi, and they came down one night like wolves and looted every house in the village. They herded the men together at gunpoint up the mountain, leaving us women and children to starve. Any man too weak to walk they shot and left where he lay. My Christo was wounded. He would not have got far, only that Yanni and the old *papas* half-dragged, half-carried him and luckily it got dark quickly. Once there it was easy to hide the state he was in. Anyway, Sofia grabs the axe, the very same axe, *kale*, and she walks the length of the village with it to the house of the leader of the *andirtes*. In broad daylight, and not a soul to be seen. Your man has taken my man prisoner, she shouts through the shutters, and if he is not back here at my side by tomorrow, my lady, I will chop you into a mash, I swear before God."

"Wonderful! And was he?"

"He was, he escaped! No thanks to them."

"Just as well for the lady!"

"For everyone." (87-88)

In these ways family intimacies are juxtaposed with shared experiences and allegiances forged out of common suffering. The experiences which shape people but are not always spoken about may be just "wonderful" stories to those who come after, but their horrific effect on lives also determine the reactions of the living. As Bell strives to understand Farmer indicates the ways in which respect for privacy may be positive or negative. The reminder that people need or "desire" their stories to be told is salutary. The war narrative leads back to the "burning of the houses" and the doubled "catastrophe" of the family's prior experience of the sacking of Smyrna. The fact that Grigori was a child who remembers this past implicitly explains his responses to both his mother, and the house, in which so much of the family's life has been invested. The house becomes a symbol of their survival:

"What house was it?"

"The last one on the left on the road out, before you come to the bridge."

"The beekeeper's house?"

"You know it."

"Not the beekeeper? That gentle man!"

"No, no, his father."

"The beekeeper was his son? He came here with honey. He was a friend. He even helped dig the cesspit!"

"They were on good terms. Let me tell you something else. At the end when peace of a sort was made, that leader, the beekeeper's father, walked into the *kafenefon* and hit your father-in-law full in the face in front of everyone. They all urged Yanni to hit back but he stood firm. The war is over, he said. Let an end be made to it.

"When he got away that first night, though, what he did was unwrap and oil the gun he had fought the Germans with and join up against the *anddrtes*-the village was a battlefield, can you imagine?-and we women gathered the children up and fled to Thessaloniki."

"And your Christo?"

"Yes, when his wounds were healed he got away as well, Christo got away and he fought together with Yanni here and in Kilkis and Agia Vrissi until the *anddrtes* shot him dead. In Thessaloniki they tricked Yanni and some of the others from here into laying down their arms and took them prisoner. When the wives and children were called in to see their men they had to pass between two lines, *anddrtes* and their families, who battered and spat on them. You can ask Sofia to know."

"No, how can I just ask, Theia?"

"Yes, why not?"

"It would bring back bitter memories."

"It depends. I think-don't we all want our stories known? They burnt the house down too, the *anddrtes*, did you know that?"

"I know. Grigori was there."

"He was, he was! When he was still a boy. He and his grandmother, Katerina. They got out through a back window. They saw the houses torched, theirs, ours, house after house in flames. She said it was the Catastrophe, Theia Katerina. Smyrni all over again."

"I remember they were saying the same thing when the Turks bombed Cyprus and we all thought Greece would be next, and instead the Junta fell."

"Yes, and no wonder. None of us who fled from Smyrni will ever forget. I was a child and I see it in my sleep to this day. When it was over and Yanni came back-the Civil War was over, I mean-he made the new house with walls a metre thick. You only have to feel them and you can tell. It's a fortress. No eaves, no second floor, and that was because the fire caught in the eaves of the old one and spread upstairs through the floorboards. And the *andartes* looted first. Houses, barns."

"But you had all taken refuge in Thessaloniki by then."

"We had all taken refuge and no one was harmed, glory be to God." (88-89)

The house and the Greek country itself are places of refuge and not simply land or dwelling space. Similarly Bell is mapping the more immediate past, and the sequence ends with her re-establishing her bearings in the village she thought she knew and in the family she thought she knew. The street and garden are there still but the village has changed, and by the end of the novel, so has she. The aged fig trees provide the final images with their limbs, like those of Sofia, grasping the land which also has a demonstrated "grasp" on Bell's mind.

In a glint of the sun, a street of branches with all their buds, fat red wicks. The kitchen garden, the *bahtse*, is no more than this field of weeds, windswept, where the neighbour's hens strut and flap their combs. Bell has got her bearings by now. There are no beds of tobacco seedlings, of course, now that the fields are rented out; but more trees have gone as well, or else she doesn't know them by their skeletons. Even so, there seem to be fewer skeletons. The pomegranate that grew by the fence with the plum is gone. The weeds are deepest where the two old apricot trees were, on whose trunks the hammock was slung in summer. But there are spiky black trees further on that look like young apricots. And the corky limbs, poking their long fingernails out of the ditch, those are the figs whose leaves were shabby with all the summer dust of the road, broad hands spread to a fire. (90)

As Matthew Condon observes:

Farmer neatly overlaps ... journeys and cleverly returns to them throughout the novel, slipping back into different points along this familiar route. What could have been a difficult structure is handled with superb skill to the point where the interflow of previous lives, of memories, is virtually seamless.²⁷

This close look at the way in which sequential dialogue is used confirms the inter-weaving process, and the seamless integration of times and place as defined by Condon. It also indicates the ways in which physical objects like the house or the axe, oat or a photograph, may provide a key to motivation or **ai-xplanation** of past events. The physical object may then assume a metaphoric significance like the house lodged "in the mind" that provides the final episode of Farmer's exploration in *The House in the Light*.

Conclusion: the house in the mind

The house that is the central "character" of this novel is depicted as a home, as a hard-won territory, as a site of dramatic conflict but also as a setting where experience of passion has been enlivening. For Bell, however, there is only one "house in the light" and this is an imagined one, the image lodged in her "mind's eye" when first described by Grigori years ago in Australia: "The house of her dreams had white walls hung and luminous with grapes, and children, and hens like brown lampshades in the summer light" (15). If the house is an image of family then this is a metaphor for the distance between the ideal notion of what family might be, and the actual experience of it. The real house is darker, and has its own history, as the preceding reading suggests. It is more like the house of Bell's childhood and Grigori's first family home which she and Grigori visit, where Bell graphically envisages the layered lives and interlinked houses ("pits and underground caves and burrows of the lives that intersect here") binding people to the past (125). She decides it is "as if the soul, or an image of the soul, one moment of its being, were bound forever to the place where it had lived most intensely" (125). But the sterility of this season cannot prevail if life is to continue. And so the cycle of rebirth which sustains the Buddhist philosophy is enacted, pragmatically, in the Greek way, as the new Australian child, Sofia, is greeted with the saying "may she live for us" (229). Regeneration assured, Bell anticipates her exit from Greece and rehearses its sequence. Significantly she re-frames place, and metaphorically puts it behind her, by anticipating a composed "picture" and ensuring future control. Within the space of the

week, the mother-in-law, and this house, have assumed a "proper place" in Bell's life:

Here behind her back, all this will already be starting to shrink. Before she knows it the house will be back to its proper size in her life. She will call it up only to find it no more than a slide, an enamelling on black plastic, a rainbow slick on a puddle, a lantern slide in a box with all the others: there to be thrown up in light on a screen for a few seconds, or not, just as she chooses and either way, no threat. (232)

Family does permit a degree of reconciliation, but in a marvellously incongruous way. Kyria Sofia discovers that both Bell's grandfathers died and are buried at Gallipoli (as enemies of the Turks they were trying to save Greece), and Bell comes to see that her offence in not worshipping is because she is *not* a "foreigner" but one of the family (214). Bell farewells the house, "the marrow of their lives", but finds herself inarticulate in her mother-in-law's arms, with Kyria Sofia uncharacteristically acknowledging her "sharp tongue which wounds", which she "lives to regret"-while shrewdly bargaining for a further return before her death (201). The novel ends with Kyria Sofia's highly manipulative use of Bell's term, "sorry" (235). As Robin Lucas observed, Farmer portrays domestic tensions cleverly but that:

With *The House in the Light* [she] has relaxed her tone, lengthened the rhythm and taken a sidelong, reflective approach.²⁸

In *The Seal Woman*, the narrator, inside a spiral lighthouse, looked into a *camera obscura* and saw the world in a new light. Here the camera offers different kinds of reassessment as the writer shifts towards alternative sources of inspiration, those tuned by the body's commanding presence and other feminist imperatives.

In an interview in 1995 I asked Beverley Farmer the following question about *The House in the Light*. "Given that it is always difficult to return to intensities of past experience, not to mention re-instating a successful fiction character's status, what prompted the revivification of Bell? Was it a matter of unfinished business or the laying of a ghost? Or is it not so much Bell who is revisited as the house, the setting, or the past

itself?" To which Farmer replied: "You might say that 'returning to intensities of past experience' is the novelist's task-it's how fiction is made. Also how fiction is re-made each time in the reading. I began with a woman in a familiar situation who was taking misty and elusive shape in a definite house and, while there was no question of the house's identity, I wasn't so sure of hers at first. As for 'unfinished business', here we have another province of fiction!-as of life, of the past that isn't even past. Bell doesn't so much lay her ghosts as raise them. But the same is true of the other three women, Kyria Sofia, Vai" and Sonya. They meet in a webbing of ghostly presences, memories, dreams, sensations, belonging to this house."²⁹

The house is the pivot of the novel. The house is the world, with its own light of learning, of life. It is a light too, that Bell must withdraw from, so she can allow her own light to establish itself. A new life."³⁰

Farmer confirmed this in her response to the following question: "I suspect that the house is the central character of the book-the source from which the family defines its life. Is that too large a claim?" Farmer replied: "I think it is the temple, and perhaps the spirit."

The House in the Light confirms the sustaining power of vision and language as vital sources of nourishment and meditation in the compositional practices of lives. As Katrina Iffland wisely observed, this novel is "a tapestry of many tales".³¹

While many of the preoccupations of the earlier work are confirmed by *The House in the Light*, this novel furthers Farmer's investigation of the ways in which the world is seen, visualised and represented. The novel reconsiders the nature of record-keeping, the accuracies and inaccuracies of memory and photography, and prefigures more intense explorations of visual effects which are explored in later work. JYltile light and colour, texture and sensation give shape and contour to all the narratives there is a restraint in the palette in *The House in the Light*. When Bell leaves the house, imagining it without Sofia as "nothing more than a house, a shell, a shed skin on the other side of the world; stone and earth, lime, wood, fire and air. A lantern slide" (233), her emergence into the light of a possible

new life allows her to review the house as a "facade, slab on slab of silvery light and shade, and the blind glass of the window panes reflects only the shutters and the sky, a fringed cloud, vacancy". But this is a fleeting vision, as her desire for a clean exit is waylaid by the old woman's continuing claim on her life as she seeks the "forgiveness" that Bell could not ask for: "the eyes gazing straight up into hers now in their pouches of blood are the eyes of a hurt child" (235).

The eyes as doorways to the soul command further attention as Farmer writes about the work of visual artists like Gauguin, Munch and Van Gogh, whom Farmer admires for "the journey he made out of darkness and gloom into the incandescent light and richness of the South". In later writing she explores the discoveries and insights offered by science in assisting sight.³² *The House in the Light*, a novel with a title that Farmer claims is "implicitly photographic", is the creative product of authorial motivations expressed in these terms:

The task as I see it is to embody in fiction the truth behind and under and in-in-dwelling-in the facts, the surface appearance. The wholeness that is not accessible as we live a daily life, but only when we dwell on the hidden dimensions of a life, the bearing of all the past. The creative process as I see it can begin anywhere. When it begins in a thing observed ... there is more than appears on the surface. It sets off a train of thought, an exploration, to which memories and experiences of my own, over time will attach themselves.³³

Chapter 7

"Bees in a Hive of Glass": Poetry

A good poem is hard and clean like a bone, all that is left of
many days and nights.

Beverley Farmer, *Alone* (27)

Not the red of death
but the life blood in the gumtips,
a ripple of fire

Beverley Farmer, "Autumn"

Beverley Farmer is modest, in fact diffident, in her claims for herself as a poet. However, she has published more than thirty poems in national and international journals and there are others embedded within texts like *A Body of Water* or *Alone*.¹ There is also in draft a four-part sequence of *haiku*, one poem for every day of the year in weekly and seasonal sequences, which I will refer to in this chapter, as well as a long dramatic poem about Clytemnestra.² Like Amy Witting, another fine poet better known for her fiction, Farmer has published in compliance with the exigencies of survival, but poetry has remained a vital personal resource. Despite her relatively small output, this different body of work is of a quality that warrants and rewards closer attention.

Farmer's poetic depictions of personal spaces intensify and extend the fiction's exploration of life, art and environment. At times the subject matter seems to "determine" the form, such as in the choice of poetry as the mode of expression best suited to the intense experience encapsulated in the poem "Epitaphios" in *A Body of Water*.³ In her anthology of *Australian Women's Verse* Susan Lever observed that "since the 1970s more

and more Australian women have turned to poetry as the appropriate form to explore traditional subjects of love, the landscape, and the celebration of sensual perception, as well as to express their responses to the social world".⁴ These are themes Farmer has pursued, but she has employed a flexible attitude to genre to avoid "the rigid dichotomy that has become established between forms" (between fiction and poetry), which she suggests "has only harmed both".⁵ As I indicated in Chapter Four, *A Body of Water* effectively employs both compositional practices and transgresses predispositions of genre as poetry is used in counterpoint with prose to extend or distil meaning.

The desire to create prose "with the precision of poetry" that is "not strait-jacketed into being 'poetry'" led to the techniques of "sculpting" or "paring" away of inessentials to achieve an economy of expression that also progressively distinguishes the short stories.⁶ In poetry, where words are both the vehicle of thought and the medium of the poet's design, and where word choice, placement and juxtaposition affect semantic concentration, succinctness is even more imperative. This is epitomised by Farmer's recourse to *haiku* and *tanka*, which will be discussed in detail in the second half of this chapter. These are reiterated forms in the poetry and Farmer has acknowledged her delight in Robert Gray's description of *haiku* as the essence of poetry, a moment of unity with nature and as small, warm, and perfect to fondle-the poem as a *netsuke*.⁷ *Haiku* demands a carefully managed integration of form and content, the kind of synthesis that Terence Hawkes describes thus:

When the devices of versification, patterns of rhyme and rhythm are also considered, it becomes clear that they too contribute inextricably to the range of "meanings" available, in ways that are detemuned externally, by convention, and internally, by the expectations aroused by the poem itself ... In the end the poem is its devices, *is* its form.⁸

Poetry may convey concrete, symbolic or abstract meanings, and imply complex time shifts or evocations of moment. Farmer's poems are varied, but distinguished by their subtle modalities of pace and tone, precise imagery, visual emphasis and lyrical fluency wrought by this poet's attention to process.

The poetry also suggests a further kinship with the techniques of photography, discussed in the previous chapter, as both mediums permit the close scrutiny of revealing detail, line, scale, texture or grain-or conversely, incorporate the sweep of panoramic overviews which may span time or assert connection. Rose Lucas and Lyn McCredden have observed that:

Poetic language is a signifying system that highlights its multi-directionality; that is, it functions in a state of continual, dialectical negotiation with what are perceived as the dislocated realms of interior and exterior, private and public, logic and imagination. On the one hand, and particularly in comparison with language we would conventionally refer to as prose, poetry emerges as a mode that tends to privilege or give more space to the private and subjective.⁹

This description of poetry as a site of "dialectical negotiation" between "private and public" realms is particularly apt in relation to Farmer's writing. The poetry mirrors the evolving awareness of the world's complexities that engage this writer's attention in the fiction, but provides a clear space for a re-negotiation of familiar territories. Here Farmer reconsiders connections between place, time, seasons, myths and contemporary life, to accommodate changing imperatives and review patterns of relationship. Occasionally passing images within scenes in the fiction become the central subject of a poem with a consequent heightening of graphic intensity. This is discussed further in the following consideration of Farmer's use of *tanka* and *haiku*.

Farmer's poetry is used as a formative mode of apprehension and not simply as a vehicle for self-expression. While the view is singular, particular and discriminating, the poet transcends egocentric concerns to illuminate what is seen and valued. The poems are characterised by a deceptive ease, like the following *tanka* which evokes the sights and sounds of a specific domestic space (Farmer's house at Point Lonsdale) using a simple simile with reflective accuracy. This speaker, like others in Farmer's poetry, is responsive in a manner which recalls the unassuming attention to environment and clarity of observation that characterises the poetry of William Hart Smith.

Waking in this Room

Waking in this room
to the lighthouse on the point
hooting through sun haze,
the sound of water moving,
is like waking on board ship.¹⁰

Farmer negotiates familiar and "dislocated" speaking positions as well as variable points of view. Whether conjuring a deft sketch of a moment or a loved space as in this "waking" poem, or enacting more sustained and intricate comparisons between past and present, there is a constant weighing of individual and universal concerns. Rose Lucas suggests that:

Whoever the poet, and whatever the style or the issues, the poem, as a concentrated, linguistic art form, traces its concerns across a continuum which ranges between the impossible, destabilised poles of subjectivity and objectivity, the particular and the universal ... between the generative antithesis of the interior mind or imagination of the poet and the exterior world of nature and lived experience.¹¹

Farmer synthesises feeling and observation, and creates mediations between world and words without self-consciousness or didacticism. But this is a hard-won skill and before focussing on this achievement I wish to review a short story, written very early in Farmer's writing career, which is based on the experience of a young girl's "discovery" of poetry.

"The Albatross"-the gift of poetry

The short story "The Albatross" appears in *Collected Stories* where it interrogates the nature of the "gift" of poetry in an echo of the life/ art nexus discussed earlier.¹² The title is consciously ambiguous. In the narrative the albatross is sequentially: the ageing Polish-born school-teacher, who inducts her student into the world of French poetry, (Baudelaire's "*Harmonie du Soir*" precedes the recitation of "*L'Albatros*"); the girl, tongue-tied by the difference between her growing perception and her inability to be anything other than herself-inarticulate, young, awkward and inexperienced; and the gift of poetry itself.¹³

The visual imagery is manipulated to enforce the kinship between teacher and student, and the girl's reluctant acknowledgement of their shared interest in language. She is, however, marked for life: firstly by the teacher's attention, which isolates her from her peers; and secondly by an invitation to "tea" after school hours. Ironically, the complexities of this one word "tea" in the context of another's cultural circumstance, and her ignorance of the expectations of a "foreign" domestic environment, causes as much embarrassment to the girl as her stumbling French. The story ends with the belated acknowledgement that:

Worst of all was the thought that Madame could not have seen, in the heart of the pimply gawk shifting her hams in that golden room, intolerable knowledge planted there and thrusting, uncurling, like a watered beanshoot.¹⁴

The child grows, and with her grows a love of poetry's powerful enchantment.

In the novel *Alone*, Shirley's lost relationship, and her emotional isolation is similarly articulated via poetry. In her narrow and encapsulated existence poetry is the still-point amid chaos. In later fiction other poignant losses are recorded and memorialised, but Farmer generally avoids confessional poetry dominated by a dramatised self in the manner of Lowell or Plath.¹⁵ The child's manifestation of desire and fear, and the insecure, self-destructive tendencies of Farmer's young alter-ego, Shirley, are eventually left behind, overtaken by poetic *personae* who not only grow out of preoccupations with personal rejection, but instead make living and identification with *pldce* a crucial rationale for their existence. Farmer's mature poetry expresses a quotidian sense of purpose, and commitment to life, continuity and change. This is poetry about *life* in the fullest sense.

In speaking of the apprenticeship of writing, Fanner cites Seamus Heaney's distinction between the craft and techniques of poetry. For Heaney, writing is a practised exercise of mind and body and a linguistic articulation of the sensuous textures of voice or touch. He claims that:

technique is different from craft. Craft is what you can learn from other verse. Craft is the skill of making. It wins competitions ... It can be deployed without reference to the feelings or the self ... Learning the craft is learning to tum the windlass at the well of poetry. Usually you begin by dropping the bucket halfway down the shaft and winding up a taking of air. You are miming the real thing until one day the chain draws unexpectedly tight and you have dipped into waters that will continue to entice you back. You have broken the skin of the pool of yourself.

At that point it becomes appropriate to speak of technique rather than craft. Technique as I would define it involves not only a poet's way with words, [his] management of metre, rhythm and verbal texture; it involves the discovery of ways to go out of [his] normal cognitive bounds and raid the inarticulate: a dynamic alertness that mediates between origins of feeling and memory and experience and the formal ploys that express these in a work of art. Technique entails the watermarking of your essential patterns of perception, voice and thought into the touch and texture of your lines; it is that whole creative effort of the mind's and body's resources to bring meaning of experience and jurisdiction of form.¹⁶

This "watermarking of perceptions, voice, touch and texture", and experimentation to "break" the "skin" of self in order to discover further linguistic sources, provides the incentive to strive "against the grain", to make poetry happen. In the changing emphases of Farmer's poetry, Heaney's understanding of the crucial imperatives in blending "experience and jurisdiction of form" is evident as narrative voices reflect wider horizons and more experienced choices. Farmer's claiming of her own "voice" is a consequence of experimentation with the language of both poetry and prose, but her respect for poetry as a genre means that what is expressed in this way is "doubly" significant. This cognitive journey is inextricably linked with perceptions of place in Farmer's poetry.

Mapping spatial territories

While poets traditionally create individualised readings of the world, and cultivate mythologies of personal space *between* lived and literary experience, they do not always refine perspective or look more intently. Nor do they necessarily create

imaginative regions which are revisited to illuminate further dimensions of meaning. We have enjoyed regional celebration of sites in the work of earlier poets like William Wordsworth, Thomas Hardy or Robert Frost who registered places so distinctively that they made them accessible to generations who did not have the privilege of walking in England's Wessex or Lakes Districts, or in the quiet woods of the White Mountains. Australian poets like Judith Wright in New England, Gwen Harwood in Tasmania, Les Murray in Bulahdelah-Taree or Dorothy Hewett in Western Australia have also metaphorically "thrown nets" over local regions as starting points for their multi-faceted representations. Like photography, poetry may allow us, as Larkin claimed, "to see again in different terms".¹⁷ Paradoxically, Shklovsky argues that we "readily cease to see the world we live in and become anaesthetised to its distinctive feature", and that it is the business of the poet to "defamiliarise that with which we are overly familiar".¹⁸ The poet therefore both reflects the world perceived and projects imagined worlds.¹⁹

Farmer does not presume that we have not seen well. Rather she shares what is discovered with the delight of one who does not take vision for granted.²⁰ She has written wisely about diverse subjects, and more than adequately fulfils the requirement to surprise her readers into new awareness. More specifically she returns to two "known worlds", two regions of the global sphere, to re-examine formative events. They are the Greek landscape and the landscape of Queenscliff /Point Lonsdale in Victoria. Farmer thoroughly investigates communities of thought that cohere with them, and these venues serve as stimuli for close depiction, and as starting points for further imaginative exploration.

As the poetry develops there is a noticeable shift from a reliance on narrative to a more imagistic rendering of what is seen. This contrasts with those poets for whom expansion, addition and accumulation of further evidence determines directions. Unlike them, Vincent Buckley transformed his art in *Late Winter Child*, when his world necessarily "contracted" as he faced the imminent birth of a child and his own death. Like Farmer, his restricted view resulted in intimate, sharply-

honed poetry which was tuned by a desire to meticulously record the process.²¹

Such an intimate connection between art and life is not a view of art that Carl Jung would support, as he claimed that "the personal life of the poet cannot be held essential to [his] art-but at most [is] a help or hindrance to [his] creative task".²² This would deny the extent of involvement that gives rise to Farmer's writing as she has, in recent years, tuned her life to facilitate her art. As I argued in the introduction to this study, life and art are not the same but remain complementary. Northrop Frye also argued that "literature has no *consistent* connection with ordinary life", but the use of terms like "help or hindrance" and "consistency" by Jung and Frye confirms influence.²³ Both critics avoided spurious readings of the poet's life via their art. Jung argued that the poet may be a rogue and the poetry, significant beyond this, but the poet is still seen as the "instrument of the work". Farmer has observed:

I think this is an absurd statement of Carl Jung's. He was not a poet, of course (unless in private), and was not speaking from inside the experience of writing poetry. I think the Heaney quote (about craft/ technique) among others, entirely refutes it. Being a "rogue"-like Villon, maybe like Genet? Being a rogue is nothing but the crudest summing-up from the outside of a lived life-it has nothing to do with the complex subjectivities that produce behaviour that might get someone labelled a "rogue".²⁴

In the past, poems have been spoken about as "given", with the poet merely serving in the transmission of this gift. But in postmodern times the making of poetry is more related to craft, practice, and the imperatives of daily life than earlier assessments of metaphysics implied. Incidents and events in the poet's life, like the irritation of the grain of sand in an oyster shell, may indeed compel writing or trigger growth. It is impossible to neatly divorce life and art in a poem like "Epitaphios" when the experience *becomes* the poem.

As I indicated in earlier discussion of *The Seal Woman*, Farmer's political attention to the environment elicited eco-feminist praise for her work. But the "amorphous genre of the descriptive-meditative poem" engages both landscape and mindscape, and the poet's gaze may dwell on or move rapidly

beyond physical place.²⁵ A poem may begin on a named sea-shore but investigate intellectual territories which are not encompassed by ideologies like environmentalism or deep ecology. A moment's concentration on a bee or a seashell may activate a narrative which explores diverse emotional and philosophical contexts.

In the following poem, "Paddle", Farmer charts what appears to be a simple walk along a beach, but the poem becomes a delicately composed and intricate dance. The title implies casual movement and sequential progress as three women walk to the cove, but the conveyed picture is one of a sustained three-part harmony-where the women, and perhaps other elements in the picture, are essential to the balance of event.²⁶ I am reminded of Larkin's description of his Whitsunday train journey as a "frail travelling coincidence".

Paddle

We three women walked to the cove.
 Silver, the long light, swans drifting, pied
 cormorants on guard

and three gulls, restless
 as we tipped over the yellow rowboat
 stranded on the sea grass

its gathered leaves and rain
 water spilling in thin air.
 Shoes under one arm and trousers rolled

we made our way back

we three, planting each foot
 on clear dry sandstone
 studded with sharp wrinkles-

look, here's a starfish!-and a flowering
 here red, here gold
 of lichen

here a fan, here a broad
 charcoal heap and fire blister of rock
 and here a crinkling of white comb

 fine as an abalone mushroom

and sinking to our knees on to deep rocks
 the clearer for being immersed
 in that pure density and weight

more like the lees of the afternoon
 light, grey and leaf yellow
 and autumn cold, than

water. By then the hull
 was a lemon shell among shells
 on the edge of trees glassed

 in shadow, and still

one or other of the gulls was lifting
 off in a hush of feathers a d red
 feet, to settle back

down, fold and flourish of wing spray
 close by another who
 lifting, swept past, and so on

in slow sequences of approach
 and veer, those same three
 keeping the space of water and air

 between them constant. ²⁷

With its three-line intervals the typography establishes a pace, and the sense of time passing is conveyed with the onset of "long light" and the "lees" of afternoon. Similarly, distance and perspective are indicated by the shifting re-alignments of

the women measuring their relation to the yellow boat. The women's actions are also echoed by the movements of three gulls who similarly keep the "space of water and air /between them constant", not remaining static but obeying their mutually respected places within proximity. The body of the poem is in three parts: the walk (the "planted feet" ending with the single line "we made our way back"); the discoveries on the beach (which culminate in the fineness of the simile of comb as "abalone mushroom"); and then a meditative immersion in the late afternoon (matters of weight density and distance end with the single line "in shadow, and still"). The final analogy, a coda of three stanzas, encapsulates the actions of the poem's commemoration of shared time and space. The effective understatement of this poem recalls the timing of Lily Briscoe's completion of her painting in Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*, and the poem is impressionistic in its management of light and colour. This is definitely a movement beyond craft.

In an essay entitled "Landscapes of the Mind" Farmer noted that:

There is a sense in which you can maintain that all landscapes are of the mind—that perception is a fusion of what is perceived and the mind behind the organs of perception ... Our landscapes are partial and selective ... and we note only a fraction of what entered the eye ... I always start with a real landscape—the one I see. I [then] become aware, and the reader will be made gradually aware, of the character's subjective landscapes, the landscapes of their minds.²⁸

These may include negotiated territories, defined by discrepancies between visions, or between real and imagined landscapes. Farmer often notices what others customarily fail to observe: the shifts in the wind; the turns of tide; the gaps or silences in the fabric of conversations. It is such awareness that gives rise to art.

Poetry and place

Farmer's interest in the natural world, and garnering of personal, local and regional resources, is affirmative in a world registering tensions between them and global interests. The poetry is stimulated, at times irritated into being, by narrators

who are thinkers, map-makers, guides, fellow-travellers, mothers, daughters, women, lovers, friends, householders, beach-combers, characters of Greek mythology-or others whose view Farmer adopts in order to see better.²⁹ Occasional poems are used like snapshots to celebrate presence.

The following poem is about travelling in Australia to a remote place, to Kakadu in the Northern territory, where Farmer begins by recording the physical features of her destination-the age-old stone with its ancient inscriptions and residual archaeological legacies which provide a seemingly immutable backdrop to the transient butterflies, light, and human gestures.

Snapshots of Kakadu

for Jane Moore

The water has left
these cracked, high-ledged cliffs and fish
drawn up high and dry,
their bones heaved free of ripples,
have sunk themselves in deep stone.

Shapes burn in the cliff,
a flow of beings--colours
of flame, of smoulder.
Butterflies balance. You draw
the tossed hot heads of sand palms.

Spotted butterflies
flap loose at the cave mouth near
the hanging spider.
She steps to unwind a bee.
The spots settle in the rocks.

What's that small white ring
in and out of the water
in the photograph
of the billabong at dusk?
Is it the rising half-moon?

The moon was full. It's
 there in the lily puddle,
 that torn white shadow.
 The ring's an egret skimming
 low, mirrored, long wings dipping.³⁰

Heat and flame colour the first three stanzas as "shapes burn in the cliff", and a woman is watched as she draws "the tossed hot heads of sand palms". This is offset by the cool reflections of the last two stanzas which suggest further discoveries. Later, a developed film reveals a captured image of a bird rising from the water for flight, which is another unexpected register of presence. The reflected bird's moonlit flight is at the remote end of the time-spectrum represented by the bones of the fish embedded in rock, and yet the whole poem celebrates the colour and life of creatures in their element. The poem is a *tanka* with its regularly patterned syllabic count and careful arrangements of compositional elements. There is a detailed discussion of this form later in this chapter.

Placing the self in relation to locations is a commemorative impulse and the poet must decide not only on the view, but what lens, which frame or which angle of vision to adopt, in order to share perceptions. For example, the journey in "Snapshots of Kakadu" is emotionally remote from the "crossing" depicted in an earlier poem "Crossing to Zakynthos", which utilises stylistically different techniques to convey a time etched by intimations of dread. "Snapshots of Kakadu" is from *A Body of Water*, and is located in a discussion about the creation of the short stories "The Red Fishes" and "Among Pigeons". It is set amid reflections of performance in personal relationships, analysis of distances between surface appearances and depth, and considerations of the writing process. In both "Snapshots of Kakadu" and "Crossing to Zakynthos" place is again central, but in the Kakadu poem time is more telescoped, and the fear that emanates from the earlier recollection is not wholly left behind. In the contrasting journey of a "Crossing to Zakynthos" matters of life and death, past and present, enclosure and liberation compete, but the poem turns

on the juxtaposition of a haunting memory of a "black-robed shore" and the later commemoration of a child's fifteenth birthday.

Crossing to Zakynthos

At the roaring quay, with the ferry tied
and still at last, we saw a commotion-

we saw men shouldering down a coffin
and jostling women in black robes who shrieked

and received their dead: a boy. Men in arm-
bands, a priest. A loud funeral wound off.

No one had known a coffin was on board.
Who would, on such a day of winter storm,

knowing have embarked on Charon's ferry?
The gush and suck of froth, of the black wash

over hacked rocks to the sea wall: This could
be St Kilda, you or I smiled, cold, sick,

glancing out to sea. All day lay ahead,
and then a late-night ferry back. Coffins

had never frozen me with dread before.
Why? I was two months gone; and knew we had

too lightly borne this child I bore across
there to the black-robed shore of Zakynthos.³¹

This narrative poem pivots on the stark contrast between the different modes of carriage of two sons (in death and life), and this is reinforced by newly understood distinctions between carefree travel and the responsibilities of parenthood. The poem stands alone effectively, but in the context of *A Body of Water's* articulation of loss after two other pregnancies prove

abortive, there is further poignancy. The regular impetus of the pentameter couplets has a *gravitas* that is appropriate to the subject and the poem is also located by its mythic reference. The potential price of the journey between Greek shorelines at first unsettles, but is reviewed as a crucial brush with death. The witnesses to the funeral acknowledge parallels between places, and reassesses life's chances as they recognise a "there but for the grace of God" escape. The enacted movement of the sea in stanzas five and six compares with Slessor's experiments with onomatopoeia in "Five Bells" and "Sleep", and the central question answered by the final lines deftly implies a cyclic closure.

"Snapshots of Kakadu" and "Crossing to Zakynthos" are not only worlds apart geographically and in the nature of their findings, but they demonstrate a change from reliance upon a narrative line to a more imagistic rendering of experience which becomes a pattern in the evolution of Farmer's poetry.

In a distant place, and in another mood, a view from a headland in Tasmania is initially read positively as a peaceful, restful, panoramic site is described. But further scrutiny of the neglected graveyard's stones sees a shift in register and rising distress as the visitor comes to terms with the sheer number of lost children enumerated here.

Headland, Tasmania

Armchairs turned to the view-
 the quiet bay, one long ripple
 of black swans, one splash of the sun-
 or tall bedsteads, old bones cased in them,
 bracken for a rug, a leaf curtain:
 these old grave stones rear up and tumble
 crack, lean, and hide and sink in
 sword grass, bracken, bramble. Rough
 sandstone blocks trip you up, hot broken
 ship's biscuits tossed from a noonday oven,
 their graven surfaces almost eaten off,
 crumbling away. One has a cherub embossed,
 a doll's head given wings. Another here,

more here. *Sacred to the Memory of-Who*
were they all? Children: so many of them.
Children: and they made old bones.
When the sun is low, shadows ink in
their names, so stay, if you like, read
the shadows. As if anyone knew or cared
now whose bones the trees took root in
that tilting, hang leaves and shade
over grey trunks, yellow stone
and bracken stiff green
and red, iron-red.³²

In their disarray and decay the stones, like discarded "ships' biscuits", now seem animate as passage through the graveyard is impeded. But identities seem doubly lost when names are erased from neglected monuments. After the central iteration of "Children: they made old bones", relations between the living and the dead are reviewed. The iron-red "bedsteads" are now seen in a different light; in shadow beyond the sun, where the trees and bracken "feed" on the young, and the dark re-inscribes the chiselled hollows of the exiled settler's forgotten dead.

In "Heat Wave" there is another finely rendered observation of the sea, but this time at night in an oppressive heat wave. The poet records the oddness of colour and light, and the de-familiarisation of the coastline in the hot night's moonlight which is accented by flickering lightning out at sea. At midnight there is an unnatural liveliness as the seascape's creatures are evoked aurally.

Heatwave

It was a daybreak sky, the tide out
and the sea barely moving under the pale
glaze of mauve and lemony-rose at its surface

and the shadow of the lighthouse reaching far
out over the rock shelf and the flat
dimness of the water in the shape of a giant bell

only this was midnight, and the low moon
had cast it. Chimes, clicks and twitches poured
out of those dry fountains, the clumps of marram grass

as beetles, a bird or two, even a spun dragonfly
lifting in a black whirl across the moon like a witch
on a broomstick, behaved as if it was broad day.

We saw lightning flicker out at sea, but no smell
of rain came, and it was too hot for sleeping indoors,
we said, almost too hot and too bright to sleep at all.³³

There is an interweaving of imagery as the shadow of the light-house and the exposure of the reef in the bay are "cast" in the "shape of a giant bell", and the portents of an approaching storm and the confused insects are observed by sleepless watchers. In the witching hour, like a midsummer spell, this night is unnaturally turned into day. While it includes action and colour, the tension of this poem's reflection on stasis is well maintained. These lines of seemingly casual but restrained observance contrast markedly with the driving rhythms and flow of enjambment of the prose-poem "Rain".

In "Rain" Farmer offers a brief story of a ritual arrival and departure linked to this different season. The conversational tone and use of colloquial expression grant an informality that contrasts with the poems already discussed.

Rain

Here we get heat waves now and then in late
summer and out of the north, inland, a night
wind brings us these birds. Always a clear sky,
no moon, no sound but the branches' whine
and creak and then this call in a sough of flight
that just doesn't belong, its not one you hear
much in these parts. Always the two fly in low
calling out over the sky with this tired bark,
croak, hoot. They can stand on the clothesline
for an hour or more. It sags under the weight

of the pair of them, so tall, shaggy and grey,
grumbling a bit, like old dogs. Then off they go
with a toil of wings loud as you ever heard
passing back and forth overhead in the dark
hot wind with the stars. We have a fair idea
where they are any rate, if not what, though
some sort of owl seems likely. A rain bird,
whatever else. Come day they'll all be gone,
the north wind and the birds both, the sun
coming up dense and soft in a grey rain.³⁴

Attention to details of climate and natural life is manifest in other ways when the poet travels beyond her home environment. An example of this is "A Moth", where location gives way to analysis of what is seen, the poem being more about viewing than the view. Its three stanzas experiment with light and ways of seeing, the influences of shadows and the effects of deprivations of "light" (lamplit desks are recurrent images/settings in Farmer's work). The lamp initially occludes the view of the lit city beyond-which then returns when the room is dark-but it also attracts life, and the moth's presence is like a pulse as it engages the attention of the observer.

A Moth

The table lamp is already on, a dome
of tight silk, a still sun
that has started to patter. Shadows
hurtle from one side to the other
and the pool of light wavering
underneath blurs-there must be a moth
in the shade-as if a swimmer's feet
were stirring sand up.

Once I switch off the lamp
to keep it quiet and the pool disappears
-where did the moth go?-I see
in the window-panes a water city come

to slow light. On the far bank those dun
brown hills, hot as coals all day, have gone
cool, have gone black as coals. A honeycomb
candle tower lights Sandy Bay.

With the overhead lamp on
the room floats, a box kite with a giant
inside, to wedge itself in hills.
And the moth has appeared, clamped
on the pane with her wings wide
now she has half Hobart to brood over-
everywhere her eggs have started to hatch
and scatter moth darkness, a moth wind.³⁵

The poem manipulates scale as an encapsulated world stirs and opens up to reveal another wider perspective—the kite/room housing the "giant" writer "floats" above the city in an enlargement of the earlier image of moth and lamp. From the lamp's "still sun" the moth's disturbance alters patterns of light, and the longer view admits the heat and cooling processes of the day. In the simple action of freeing the moth, the chrysalis stage of writing is perhaps a sub-text, just as the darkness beyond the lit space with its candle-tower offers an alternate attraction for the moth intent on seeding the night air with its progeny. The final image is like the butterfly in chaos theory where one wing flap changes the world. The poem about the moth in the lamp has illuminated a wider field through its carefully orchestrated associative images.

In the poem "On Bruny, for Cassandra Pybus" Farmer creates a further example of manipulated light effects, and another tribute to place—this time, the lighthouse on Bruny Island, a wild, rugged and beautiful site just south of Hobart. Fittingly this poem has an intermittent form, shifting between *haiku* and *tanka* stanzas like the flashes of a lighthouse, as Farmer anchors the verse with the repetition and question of the final stanza. She begins with the sea, and another ferry crossing, negotiating a passage which cuts between the large and small islands.

On Bruny

for Cassandra Pybus

A swathe, a white swerve
of rain on the water. Waves
run among grey rocks.

The rocky headland, as if purpose-built, signals its dangers but also commands attention as the viewer notes the changing lights of the day. This nicely illustrates Farmer's gift for offering a new way of seeing to the reader as she reverses the usual function of the lighthouse and has the illuminated headland "turned on and off".

The rock pyramid
of the head flashes gold, black,
gold. Clouds turn it on
and off all afternoon, on
off, like a lighthouse lantern.

Black sky and soapstone
sea. Five black swans hook their necks,
dipping and dancing.

The movement, colours and effects of wind and waves, and the isolation of the site, are reinforced in the last two stanzas as the elements compete to make the sentinel stand of the lighthouse seem, if not ephemeral, then only temporarily secure.

Shadows, as clouds go
over, coil, unfold themselves
on the blown hills. Black
leaves on a tree, torn off, flap
staggering down. Ark, they cry.

How can the lighthouse
stand its green ground in this wind?
Rocks gape to grind it
and the sea has spread wide nets
that shimmer and lift, waiting.³⁶

In the cosmology of Farmer's art, the sea is a commanding presence and force, and there is an ominous note in the last line which implies it is all a matter of time. This adds another slant to the implications of transience, intermittency and brief visions that have given life to the poem.

Nevertheless lives are celebrated, and not just in dedications. There is one poem about a particularly "personal" place. Entitled "Annas Hus", it is written for an absent host, in this instance Anna Rutherford, in whose house Farmer stayed in the city of Arhus in Denmark.³⁷ It confirms this woman's generosity of spirit as Anna, in her time as an academic, accommodated many visiting Australians with a particular interest in New Literatures. It begins with a question asked by Syd Harrex when he heard that Farmer had just returned from Denmark: "And did that damn nightingale keep you awake?" What follows is an affectionately rendered, deft portrait of living alone with a borrowed house and cat, a reply to the above question, a brief picture of the time spent in Denmark and a poem, playful and appropriately expressing courteous regard, which is offered to Anna in tribute.

Annas Hus

There were chairs strung like lyres,
 highly-and in tune
 with their long shadows

musical chairs,
 only here once the music stopped
 these stayed bare.

I had a cat grey as fog for my lap
 to warm me with breath

and I slept low
 in a sunken room, sun on the sill
 and the cat taking slow

shape in the first vague yellow ochre
faltering of water and air-
blurry with overlicking

and licking, the pus?, and not in any hurry,
thanks. A grey wool rag, a sharp tongue
and tail quick to keep time

with a meditation on morning, on
the meaning of the word morning:

which was breakfast, nej? And the thrum
of a heart at the prospect of fish and
milk in the longed-for bowls up

the stairs side by side and round
and round we would go, till she was one furry
low and loud satisfaction, fed.

So we made ourselves at home
in the tall house of silence
enfolded, white outside and gold

in, butterscotch, this summer light,
sun and rain shade.

There was a softland
green all around, deep with rain, sun-
sodden. A chill in the distance

was soon to fasten white
ice panes over the glass ones and close
a lid of horn over the lake

where ducks
paced all day in rings, rings of the stave
and all on the one note -which did-

or cat mewl or wasp hum -
 no nightingale (no such lark)-in the long run

keep us awake. We tripped up on windfalls
 in the grass, apples and the yellow-red
 burst plum flesh-ripe,

wasps in black and gold thread
 were sewn in each silken plum seam-
 picked breakfast, ripe; autumn-cold.

We stayed at Anna's house
 in Anna's stead.³⁸

Seasons

In Farmer's poetry there is often an emphasis on the seasons, on time and change, and an expressed delight in fleeting moments or things transient. There are also poems which arise from visual or sensory stimuli. The former gives rise to a poem like "Here are caged shadows" which sketches cats playing together.

Here are caged shadows,
 here are gold tigers yawning,
 blinking their striped eyes.³⁹

The latter is well typified by "The Smell of Apples" which appears in *A Body of Water* amid associations which lead from an apple tree at a window, to windows of the mind, moments of illumination, memories of making jam in Greece, and also to Margaret Scott's "Housework" poems. Farmer evokes season and event, and uses the *haiku* to precisely link cause and effect.

The Smell of Apples

The smell of apples
 filling the cold room-one small
 green apple in here.

Picking blackberries
we sow on our hands warm red
seeds of juice and blood.⁴⁰

The poem "Figs" taps other symbolic resources. It was first published in Sybylla Press's book of erotica before appearing in *A Body of Water* in association with the story "Black Genoa", and the discussion of Marjorie Barnard's "Persimmon Tree". Despite its cautionary anatomical analogy in the first stanza the second is deliberately luscious-as a poem called figs should be.

Figs

A bubble of milk
will ooze out of the taut stem
when you pick a fig-
don't drink, the milk tastes bitter
though it looks like a man's juice.

When ripe to bursting
figs pass a drop of syrup
that glows at their pink
puckered holes. Put your mouth there.
Open the red seed-bellies.⁴¹

But not all seeds are this inviting. In *A Body of Water* another poem speaks of the need for watchfulness, of misconception, irritation or possible hurt.

Here and there are seeds

Here and there are seeds,
spindly, dry, a black scatter-
mice in the kitchen!

Out of the hot oil
fleas hop and speckle my arms:
bursting mustard seeds.

A plump mouse cornered
 on the bench crouches and stares
 until I turn my back.⁴²

Haiku and Tanka

Given Farmer's interest in the forms of Japanese poetry a close consideration of them is in order. Alan Watts suggests that a "good *haiku* is a pebble thrown into the pool of the listener's mind, evoking associations out of the richness of ... memory" and he stresses the participatory nature of the experience. Others have emphasised the element of surprise or recontextualisation that effective imagery in *haiku* exploits, or its surprising shifts in meaning. The mice juxtaposed with splattering hot oil in the above *haiku* are illustrative.⁴³ While the rules for *haiku* in Japanese are strict and glossaries are used to encourage precision, the application of its form in English is more flexible.⁴⁴ The great exponent Matsuo Basho advised students to "learn the rules and then forget them".⁴⁵

From the 1860s Japanese poets aimed at objectivity and refinement in their verse, but Basho's work saw plain speech "beautified" and colloquial speech employed in his celebrations of the natural world, often identified by "season words" (*kigo*) or illustrated by reflective, seemingly spontaneous, but cleverly inter-related, sharply-etched images.⁴⁶ The other point to be made is that *haiku* "sees things in their suchness, without comment—a view of the world which the Japanese call *sono-mama*, 'just as it is', or 'just so'".⁴⁷

Farmer's interest in Buddhism was discussed in the earlier account of *A Body of Water*, and it is not surprising that the aesthetics of this philosophy should also influence her work. The poem, "Thirteen turns of a wheel, Lhasa", is again place-specific but, like the linked verse of fourteenth-century Japan, it employs a sequential *haiku* form to enact successive turns of the prayer "wheel" of its title. The verses seem complete in themselves but they also suggest passages of time (diurnal and seasonal) in this narrative of place, people and religion, where present life is understood as only one tum of the wheel. In the first stanza the hyphen at the end of the second line institutes the required pause (*kireji*) before the "telling" of the prayer

wheel, and there is an implicit connection between the two lives and the two "quick small bells". In the dramatised intervals of the poem the place and season are defined by cold and sunlight.

Thirteen turns of a wheel, Lhasa

One old and feeble,
one young and one in between-
a lifetime of monks.

The wheel tells their lives
in the barrel of scored brass
and two quick small bells.

Taller than any-
one, brushing the chapel walls,
it scatters the sun.

The low doorway is
no more than a whitewash, light
on its rippled flank.

The other flank's **dark**,
a mirror of the altar,
butterflames flying.

The butter lamps are
stone tubs at the Buddha's feet:
gold water, firm ice.

A pilgrim bobbing
offers a hoard of butter
a trickle of gold.

Cradles of dry grain
he has, seven water bowls
and fiery butter.

Sonorous the monks
 drone *om*, mouths the pilgrim, *om*
mani padme hum.

The butter is caked
 like shaving soap with black curls,
 a stubble of wicks.

Noon frost. The wheel sheds
 brilliance. In the dark corner,
 brooms, jugs, sacks of grain.

When mice eat this grain,
 this butter, is their reward
 a human rebirth?

Offerings, sun, fire.
 I pull the handle, butter-
 slick, that churns the prayer.

An interlinking of human endeavours (worship, offerings, produce, chanting and prayer-making) is achieved in the analogy between butter chum, lamp and prayer wheel, and in the cycles of regeneration suggested. There are the pilgrims' on-going visits, the sun, fire, water replenishment rituals and the encompassed small "life" of mice and candles. The stone Buddha oversees all of this human activity and, like the prayer wheel which is taller than the people, is a symbol of constancy and continuity in the face of change. The poem balances and juxtaposes images of light and shade, fire and water, utilitarian and religious iconography, question and answer, observation and participation, and implies transmutations of various kinds (water/ gold) which are given, returned or reflected (light is "scattered" like grain) via the prayer wheel. The poem itself is a reflection of being at Lhasa with its thirteen snapshots of time spent there, and performs a synthesis of disparate elements as spiritual and physical experiences are brought into a harmonious whole.

Farmer understands the *haiku* form: the seventeen syllables

are there (3 lines 5-7-5) but, more significantly, so too are the tone and spirit of *haiku* which involves the limited use of personal pronouns, manipulations of image to evoke mood, paradox or surprising juxtapositions, the employment of deliberate ambiguity, and the creation of an engaging interplay between nature and people, highlighted by variations of sound, pace, pitch and colour. In the following sequence the discovery of the penguin's skull incurs an interruption in the flow of thought, a caesura before an extension into *tanka* form and a final summary. Throughout, the poem's images are reflected or shadowed as if to demonstrate the need to look again and to see differently. Twice the speaker corrects initial impressions, and the empty cup, the wine glasses and the hollow creature seem related in ways not fully pursued in the poem.

Pairs of dark swallows

Pairs of dark swallows
swoop over the waves, the sand-
half of them shadows.

Switch on the lamp and
blood will splash the cloth-claret
alight in glasses.

You raise your wine glass-
in the sky now there are two
pale summer half-moons.

My white bedside cup
is brimful of cool water-
no, of dry shadow.

Long spindles of light
let their green threads unravel
and wash loose and sink.

The shadows of gulls
splash the sand they move over
in the hot north wind.

A white moth is caught
in the window cobwebs-no,
a hovering gull.

These long pink-white eggs
are cuttlefish bones: stranded
in nests of seaweed.

White threads of moonlight
swaying when the curtain moves
startle the spider.

Washed up: a small skull
like fretty, translucent folds
of bloodstained paper,
beaked, waggled on a fine chain
that pokes out
from hunched feathers.

Here's a drowned penguin.
Its dense wings fold under, they
hang out like earlobes.⁴⁸

Farmer's observations are simple but elegant, and stark in their effect, as in this *haiku* from *A Body of Water* in the section where the Geshe visits the Melbourne Buddhist community.

Two seated Buddhas

Two seated buddhas
shadow the candlelit blind
one brass, one flesh.⁴⁹

Further *haiku* are written during the Buddhist retreat in *A Body of Water* and again they are offerings given as a gift, and a reminder of shared experience. The first stanza neatly locates the Australian setting, the second gets to the heart of the matter of the entire novel and the retreat, and the third speaks of the transience of time.

A temple of wood
by a lake of dead white trees.
Wheeling flies sing *Om*

Is there a jewel
in the lotus? A crystal
clear drop of water

Mist, trees round the lake,
corpses of drowned trees mirrored
are gone, wind-gathered.⁵⁰

Visual and seasonal elements and participation and observation again feature in this poem which uses metaphor effectively, likening "heaps of leaves" to "wet brown dogs", "sunlight" to "snow" or lichen-coated "apple trees" to deer "antlers". In the fifth and sixth stanzas sunlight and moonlight are again juxtaposed. This poem also taps another resource of *haiku* tradition—a delicately exercised humour—the cormorant is afloat "hanging out" its "two black sails to dry", and the speaker fears that the hooked fish might "swallow" not only the bait, but the boat.

Seven Haiku

A cormorant perched
on a boat is hanging out
two black sails to dry.

Under the bare trees
heaps of leaves wait patiently-
wet brown dogs asleep.

Two elms with white leaves.
Stand underneath in sunlight
and-look-it's snowing.

Grey antlers in fog,
a velvet of gold lichen-
winter apple trees.

Green grapes in a bowl
 all ripe and brown on one side-
 their sun is this lamp.

Walking up the beach
 the silvery swimmer sheds
 his scales of water.

A barracouta,
 hooked, lunges after the boat-
 he'll swallow it whole.

Japanese poetry borrows from traditional Chinese art forms, but because of the shift between uninflected and inflected languages, translation between the two languages demanded innovation as well as renegotiations of form (Chinese is monosyllabic and Japanese a polysyllabic language).⁵¹ Eventually "the sole basic rule of prosody ... a syllable count" would determine the various shapes of Japanese poetry.⁵² Farmer astutely obeys these prosodic rules and manages a lightness of tone in the following two *haiku*, about a butterfly and a snake, which are rendered in the lightest of brushstrokes.

Reeds and brown water

Reeds and brown water-
 bearing away mirrored light,
 a brown butterfly.

The creek flickers down
 the sand and touches the sea
 with a forked brown tongue.⁵³

In *haiku*, there are traditional links between poetry and song like those of the English tradition (the ballad, sonnet and other lyric forms), but the tradition of repetition and emulation, as a sign of deference acknowledging the work of esteemed artists, is much more a feature of Japanese and Chinese cultures than

of European traditions which set so much store on individuality and innovation. Beverley Farmer's *haiku* are recognisably Australian but they respectfully remain true to the design and spirit of the tradition.

"For the Days of Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter"

This sequence is a *tour de force*. There are three hundred and sixty-five *haiku* tributes to the days of the year set in a four-part "seasonal" harmony but, because of space, I will only deal with the "Autumn" sequence. It is important to illustrate a complete section to suggest the overall design. Series of seven poems (the days of the week) capture moments and suggest the characteristics of place (Point Lonsdale is accurately and economically evoked in its various moods and times), and subtle diurnal and seasonal shifts are recorded. I have indicated the weekly intervals of the poems by marking with "* * *". In the first "set" the transience of the physical environment is conveyed, and in the second, a boy learns its tidal lessons but drowns. A commemorative statue on his grave marks his passage. In the third, life and death co-exist, functioning like the moon and sun while in the fourth, late-flowering fruits recall earlier seasons of nurture.

For the days of autumn

Some at blood heat, some
cold, the pools have faint waves of
sand, shadow and light.

'This constant dripping
on the sand sounds like footsteps
never coming close.

Now is slack water,
dead water, between two tides,
two lives of the sea.

Clouds in the green wave
loom, chrome yellow, sand, out of
nowhere, a blank sea.

Black, vermilion, rust
red, the leaves of the green vine,
already turning.

Beacons flickering
on the far rim of the sea,
stars on the wet sand.

We are in the moon-
shade of the cliff. Now the beach
is dimmer, cooler.

•••

Spider threads not there
by day I snap by night, stray
hairs across my face.

Inrush of the tide,
of the fractured light and wind
flattening the weed.

The rise of the tide
swamps the tepid shallows with
new cold deep water.

Now he knows the sea,
how it swallows and spews out
the beach twice a day.

Heaped high, a yellow
quilt of sand on a new grave
there in the half dark.

The grave of the bronze
boy, drowned, a kouros, a bronze
dolphin at his side.

The lighthouse lantern,
like a white ball bounced up and
down in a rock pool.

•••

A clear sky, full moon,
stars, all reflected in rain
pools black as shadow.

The louder the hail
of apples on the tin roof,
the stronger the wind.

At midnight, a moon
so full that a bird waking
starts its chittering.

Not the red of death
but life blood in the gumtips,
a ripple of fire.

In the tea tree shade,
hollow boughs, dry leaves and sand
and a grey silence.

Grey, sullen, the sea
with the sun gone out of it
could be any depth.

A pomegranate
sun, a honeydew melon
moon in the balance.

You feel it at once
as sharp as a cool change, this
return of the tide.

Swan songs of summer,
coda, cadenza, pale days
of hot sky and sea.

Milk one last black drop
from the fountain pen, sea blood
on dry cuttlebone.

Russet, we wallow
through late sunshine and the path
of the daylight moon.

We are slippery
wet and red gold from the thighs
up, moonlight below.

I go to pick figs
and lacewing moths off the boughs
alight on my arms.

Figs soft in my hands
and more up high, swelling, bruised.
Milk stains on my shirt.

As the sequence progresses these summer fruits dwindle, but the green tomatoes still ripen when picked; the sea chills, wind-strength is charted by fallen fruit and brilliant light is leeched from the day only to return in the last rays gathered in before evening ("harvest suns"). Between summer and winter the observer, like the season, looks backwards and forwards, admitting heat and cold, distance and proximity. Throughout, Farmer evokes the only constancy-change-with an impressionist artist's dedication to detail. Again there is a sensual and tactile quality to the poetry as well as the experience of colour, light and temperature, which is lived and not merely recorded. This part of the quartet ends in the black and white of moonlight with shadows flying low over the sea.

No rain these two weeks
of the waxing moon. Dew is
dripping from the eaves.

A mist-laden sky
but, low and cold, a sharp wind
scouring the green sea.

Silky upswillings
and backsurges, sand and cool
water on bare feet.

The green tomatoes
take only hours to be red
gold balls of warm seed.

Fewer brown-dappled
yellow fig leaves by the day,
as the figs darken.

A flight of shadows
whirling, dazing us, black here
and white overhead.

A black trunk lying:
long teats in a row, sunlit
toffee, soft amber.

A shaft of blood sunk
through shoal and sandbank, driven
down by a red sun.

In this world without
colours, the water is depth
or transparency.

Coming in after
a moonlight walk, spiderwebs
caught in my lashes.

Placid afternoons,
the pier wading kneedeep,
petticoat hanging.

The breath of the earth,
dusty, tawny at sunset,
burning, an oast-house.

Whatever is smeared,
slicked, sodden with wet glistens
with gold lacquer. Red.

Strung over sandstone
crevices, a grey fabric,
spiders and bronze flies.

A line of poplars
against the late sun, burnt brown
as tobacco leaves.

They talk of harvest
moons. Here we have harvest suns,
long flows of honey.

Those are hills over
the sea, the white shag of mist,
or blue grey cloud banks.

The small waves crinkle,
narrow as a squid's mantle,
soundless on the sand.

The waves at twilight,
their crimped edge, like quince jelly
setting on a plate.

These pools have beaches,
curved ridges of sand and rock
etched black with mussels.

The dog by the pool's
edge shakes and sends spray flying,
clots, opacities.

All the sea's noises
are clear and close as if this
bed were in the sand.

When the waves peel back,
pores in the sand blow domes of
bubble on bubble.

Swimmers enfolding
fawn, grey green and lemony
pallors of storm light.

Pillars of dark cloud
in sky and sea, and out west,
toppling walls of storm.

The night of faint rain,
cricket trill, snails, lighted ships
smooth on the water.

Not burrs, bees, brown husks
crouched in the dusty gold spines
of the banksias.

One great hot salt breath
has flattened the whole bay, those
slow wet greenish swathes.

By the look of things
wind is the stronger, hurling,
winnowing the sea.

A blaze of white fire
in waves and printed sand, on
the bent marram grass.

No red fig grains here-
ash, excrement, uncurling
and blind, a pale grub.

Ice-crusting, the night,
and halfway down the jetty-
heat, salt, the soft wind.

Bursting its river-
skin in bright air, how does it
know, the dragonfly?

Ceaseless, steadfast, skip-
ping the waves like a pebble,
a lone cormorant.

Drifts of wind wrinkle
the fan of the rock pool, pull-
ing it smooth again.

The wave line forwards
is foam, backwards is folds, frills,
gathers of shadows.

All, whether spindrift,
surf, foam, spume or mass of cloud
or wing stir-all, white.

A wavering beam
tonight, a £launderer's torch
on the still surface.

The lighthouse lantern
keeps thrusting on walls of mist
its cage of shadow.

At the cave mouth, bright,
soft, a fall of drips, and pits
and rings in dry sand.

Where there is no sun
it could be water or air
in the grey rock pools.

Bands of shine winding,
cloud, sky, of almost-mirror,
all down the wet sand.

* * *

A bawling south wind.
The ferry is an iceberg
on the horizon.

Lowslung, grey, with slit
white eyes, a puffy white mouth,
sand-caked-a whole shark.

Lights on the bay break
off from the town's mosaic
of lights to drift close.

Scratch scratch at my head.
The rat in the wall boards (tongue-
in-groove) is awake.

Daytime sadness of
lights left on in small windows
all along the street.

A whole day of rain.
Only the tide-washed sand is
smooth and tight as skin.

Sure-footed he steps
from pool to pool, paddling and
trailing water strings.

* * *

Ringed beads of last night's
rain flare on grass blades and swell
the pale grain of them.

Lichen flowers in
rainy sea colours on dry
branches, whisky.

The swamp is living
skin, a shadow of water
twitching, shivering.

In the deep water-
fall pool, milky, cold, the rocks
feel as warm as flesh.

The filling moon, and
again we sleep light, wake light
in frog song, bird song.

My shadow at sun-
set on the long grass, a green
pyramid in gold.

Trails of river shine
where a boat passed or a wind's
dank saltwater breath.

The moon is water
on palm fronds; and crazed ice, hung
high in a pine crown.

Strung still on the glass
door where the lamplight hid it,
headlong, the spider.

The pool, the lotus-
no, it's a high bamboo husk
mirrored, and the sun.

Wild, the white fig, dark.
For roots it has hands that cling
in air to the bole.

Charcoal scratches on
moonlight, the long tassels, sea-
washed, of the sheoak.

The birds are awake.
(This bright moon.) Blurred shadows go
stitching my clear one.

Stingrays in one mass,
one overlapped swift moon shape,
in fear of the shark.

Noon, and the shadows
fly low: sharp on the sand, they
fade out in the sea.

Tanka is an evolutionary form in the Japanese literary aesthetic which has developed over thirteen centuries as opposed to *haiku's* three-century history, and it is a more formal, courtly mode than *haiku*, which allows for more contemplative or weighty considerations of thought. *Tanka* has two separate rhythm structures each of a breath's length with lines of thirty-one syllables in five lines shaped by 5-7, 5-7, 7 syllable counts.⁵⁴ Successive generations of Japanese and then European artists used them as flexible and expressive linguistic modes. Originating from eighth-century experiments with language and song the *tanka* form remains, like the sonnet, an illustration of requisite skill for lovers, suitors or would-be consorts.⁵⁵ In this demonstration of the form's potential Farmer juxtaposes presence and absence, life and decay, movement and stasis. Stanza three is re-worked by Farmer from the poem that otherwise consists of *haiku* which begins "Pairs of dark swallows".

Five Tanka

On a bare white wall
 ivy has left its shadow
 printed, its fossil
 of pronged and reaching branches,
 its web and after-image.

Morning glory scrolls
 flare out blue and five mauve seams.
 Within hours they shir,
 shrivel, suck in their pale frills.
 Puzzled, a late bee clambers.

Washed up, a small skull
 is fretty, translucent folds
 of blood-stained paper,
 black-beaked, waggled on a chain
 poking out of hunched feathers.

At sunset on the pier
a child whirls round in her dress
of sea blue, sky blue,
and she's the day's spindle, she
winds the silken stillness in.

The fence has a growth
of spider-webs, hairy grey
tufts in wooden groins.
A flapping of wind-spiders,
drops of dark water, run down.⁵⁶

"In bare apple boughs" clearly indicates the two-part structure and the intricate interplay between images, and the mirroring that lights the poem.

In bare apple boughs

In bare apple boughs
beyond the pane, a candle's
spear of light rears up.
Mirrored itself, the mirror
touches a flame to dark wood.⁵⁷

Both *haiku* and *tanka* employ "pivot words" to assert connections between observations and feeling, but effects are differently achieved in different languages. Brownas and Thwaite suggest that despite some untranslatable features of Japanese and English poetry there is a sharing of "prosodic techniques" between cultures in that there is a:

high incidence of vowels and the incisive cleanness of the single consonant makes assonance and alliteration highly effective. Certain vowels and consonants are conventionally associated within specifically defined moods and tones. Thus in employing assonance and alliteration, the Japanese poet is able to count on a more ready response to the atmosphere for which [he] is aiming than can ... [his] English counterpart.⁵⁸

The *tanka* "Midnight a high moon" synthesises a prose description of an incident at a waterfall prefigured in prose in *A Body of Water* but its effects (alliteration and use of image) conform to the techniques described above. The juxtaposition of the two stanzas suggests an elapse of time and alternative choices for the "flesh": the high "Romance" of suicide or the long doze into old age.

Midnight a high moon

Midnight, a high moon,
and here clinging naked to
rocks in the water-
fall at the gorge lip, my white
water flesh.,. Shall I let go?

Look, she's fast asleep.
the old girl's having a nap
this hot afternoon
with only the fine white sheet
of her skin thrown over her.⁵⁹

The wheel of life defined in *A Body of Water* as the "cycle of lust, tears, sorrow, bitterness" is more starkly rendered in this review of initial vision.

At the step a bird

At the step a bird
crouches, feathers the wind lifts,
cocking a gold eye-
no, a gold fly drones, leaving
socket and crouched bird, hollow.⁶⁰

While there are long poems which develop a definite narrative line, many are impressionistic and increasing! characterised by minimalist precision and economy of expression.⁶¹ Like Zen *sumi-e* art, which similarly capitalises on precision of 'line, these poems balance form and emptiness

vocabulary is kept simple, imagery is deftly rendered, end-rhymes are avoided and the tone is generally meditative.

Poetry and people

The following three poems address a relationship with "H" and may serve as a mini-sequence tracing a relationship. The first is joyous, rather like the gift of sound that it describes, while the second and third offer reflective winter and summer images of past time spent together. They are, in a different way to the poems initially discussed, commemorative.

Bells from Ladakh

ForH

You hold two small hats of pale gold
brocade, the black threads worn-
old chased brass, hung on a thong-

and swing them together, make them sound,
clash, sing their high song
that pleats with ripple

on loud ripple the pool of night
sky: old bells from a moon-dry king-
dom send ring on ring now

round a full falling moon with a
cold brass ring all its own-unless
your bells themselves
flung up its rim of paler light?⁶²

The shapes of "hats", music and ringed moon are skilfully interlinked so that the poem swings rhythmically into action, telling/ tolling its alliteration and assonance. The second poem is effectively a still life, as the speaker recalls the colours of a season, an image of a sleeping man, his room and the "white" mornings of winter where one wall "mirrors" sunlight.

She, thinking of him, remembers
 mornings with him were white. White
 walls, his room had, and
 stiff half-curtains on a white sky
 (this was winter). Gum trees poured
 waves of leaves. One
 wall mirrored
 fire while the sun rose
 while he slept on
 the white pillows, and awake
 made tea in a Chinese pot.
 Spots like glass spattered it, blue--
 raindrops on milk-
 held up to the sun. Cold mornings,
 late, each one white, and full
 like eggs on a plate ...⁶³

The third is full of life as it scrutinises, post-immersion, the signs and designs of a loved and familiar body, but the use of "colours" here has a further connotation.

Safe on the sand he sheds
 glitters of water, and
 all the colours of him are deep. She thinks
 how water, thrown over rocks
 makes their colours deep. Their flecks
 stand out. So it is with each
 freckle and mole ...⁶⁴

In an absolute contrast "The Woman in the Mirror" appears as an apparition bearing an incense stick through smoke presumably to extinguish its light, but the gesture here is more ominous. The terminology suggests that the incense sticks are like eyes being put out, leaving dark.

The Woman in the Mirror

The woman in the mirror
closes in, bows through the smoke-
strings' ripple and roll at our
double approach and lift of the incense stick
to stub one fire-bud, bloodspot, each
and leave the deep room dark⁶⁵

The diminution of light may be intrinsic to meditation, but in the cosmology of the poetry it suggests a deprivation. Similarly, the symbolism of the woman and the mirrored self is ambiguous and may represent contestation or unification of purpose. It is an extremely effective, if troubling poem, rendered with characteristic precision. The poem returns to "darkness" as a subject remote from the sunlit and moonlit landscapes of so much of the intervening poetry. The way the mirror is used here has nothing to do with the "narcissism" proposed by the male observer in "The Red Fishes" story in *A Body of Water*, but is more closely related to imagery in a much earlier poem, "Moiroloi".

"Moiroloi'": speech and fate-"bees in the hive of glass"

This consideration of Farmer's poetry examined "Crossing to Zakynthos" (1988) which re-enacted a memory of a "ferry" crossing and an acute intimation of death, and in accordance with my appreciation of changes in style and preoccupation, "developed" with the sharp immediacy of the *tanka* I have described. But there is a related poem which remains influential. "Moiroloi" (1990) records the earlier loss of a family member (Platon, Chris's brother in 1988)-the poems are therefore akin.⁶⁶ The first stands in relation to the poetry as *Alone* does to the subsequent prose, as it sets up preoccupations and images that will be returned to in modified ways throughout the ensuing work. The latter, exists as a lament or threnody for a dead son and brother-in-law, but the nature of this loss is reconsidered through the years. This "unfinished" business provides a major incentive for Farmer's current writing project (see Afterword), so it is fitting, despite chronology, to return to

this poem about beginnings and endings as a way of summarising her poetic achievement.

"Moiroloi:" was published in Athens (hence the prevalent use of Greek phrases), and, as in *Alone*, a debt to Eliot is apparent in the phrasing and format. But I am also reminded of Patrick White's evocation of cultural difference and common humanity in *The Aunt's Story* when Morai:tis and Theodora discuss their "countries of bones" and Moraitis speaks of Greek attitudes to death.⁶⁷ Like a seed-bed, this poem has many of the ingredients of the ensuing poetry (and prose): a mirroring of worlds (Greece and Australia); Greek Orthodox and Buddhist ceremonies; reflections of dark and light, ice and water, cold and warmth; concerns with mothering and loss; and coming to terms with death, and the ways in which other poets have spoken about such matters. This is a compassionate poem about the living-in the face of the loss of a loved child-and while the poem cannot mend or undo time, or successfully breach gaps of death or distance, it is about love and the movement beyond grief towards acceptance and reconciliation.

The poem is in three parts. In the first, the terrain is desolate, and despair, age and a "frozen" emotional state prevail; in contrasting places, the cattle move to the frozen river, the "ragged grove" bears fruit. But the imagery and market-place analogies are weighted by death. The second articulation, ritually confirms other presences within the physical world, offering the grieving woman evidential confirmation of life beyond her acute separation and distance. The third enacts a licensed out-pouring of grief in the Greek aftermath of burial where, months later, the son's body is disinterred and the skull, in accordance with tradition, is ceremonially returned to the mother before re-burial.⁶⁸ The sections are wholly different in register, tone and use of image in accordance with the contrasting evidence of life and death-and the anguished progression being enacted. The mother's loss is more evident for being set in a dialogue with words of comfort from a contrasting Australian location, and as if in acknowledgement of this, the refrain "What more could we have said" resounds hollowly in the void between worlds.

There are constant shifts between inanimate objects and physical beings, and in polishing a Buddha, the live skin of a child is intensely rendered—as is the central horror of outliving one's child. The poem shifts between past and present, myth and reality as the poem traces binding relationships in this dark passage between birth and promises of resurrection, between the shadow and the fire. Cognitive, corporeal, cultural and discursive domains are tapped as Farmer garners the wisdom of earlier poets and philosophers to commemorate a life. The Greek poet, whose words, linking past and present, are cited as comfort, is Yannis Ritsos, and the poem is like a laying-on of hands—an elegy, but also a tribute to the mother who has cared for and loved the son through life and death.⁶⁹

Moiroloi

1.

The river
is ice, fire.
Cattle have sunk slow mud-
prints, heads thrust low,
tongues numb with the black chill,
moving the surface, throwing its weave
over the cracked rock of the further bank,
tired, having tramped and swung over
singed acres, fired clay and white
grass, and drunk here.

Bees, and a ragged grove, banana
palms, fronds thrown wide
in a clatter swiping the hot wind,
each with a golden turkey neck
on a hook in the market brawl,
the head flayed.
Or a hanging heart,
the oozing lobes, the weight
of naked heart after heart
on the palm of the hand, so warm,
and above each one a fringe,

green-golden fingers bent up,
the buds, the bananas.

There is no water here. So
says the poet newly dead.

Sunlit on film, his lips,

his words: M:v 'f17t<XpX,et vep6

"Water does not exist.

[There is no/ does not
exist water]

Only light."

Mov(ixa \$me;

[Only light (fos)]

Mother, ax, uciva, look in the water

and see. Whose is the face?

Not yours, or is it? Tell me. Is it

[ach, mama/mother]

his, in a window of the world of shadows,
a skylight, shifting, wind-
winnowed?

Lay your palms on the cheeks.

The coldness.

Lift them. Be still. Wait.

Stand up now.

Let him sink.

Here is no water, only shadow.

Orpheus, whose severed head,
the poets say, seeping blood
as the river bore it seawards, sang aloud-
Orpheus alive in the film *Orphee*
hears the servant of Death say:
"You see Death at work
whenever you look in a mirror
like the bees in a hive of glass"

Mother in your black hood,
how long since we saw you, a dome
on a cold silence, a chapel, a beehive
grave come stumbling through the olive
trees towards us, and scattered to avoid

one who strikes dread in all
who have borne children?
May ours live!

What more could we have said?

2.

On the steps the peacock
is flourishing over the dim hen
shawl on shawl hoarsely tossed,
blue fishes, gold-tasselled water,
blue core in a flame.

Having spread Brasso all over
one honey-smooth shoulder then the other
of the statue, its brocades off,
and down the breast and arms and the hands
and folded feet, all the Buddha marks
engraved and a pearl embedded,
now I rub it back to fiery glass with rags.
Wet-gold he sits. Child in the lantern-light
smiling at the fur of suds in the bathdish,
the caress of thick palms
scooping the lather up, the light kiss
in the angle of the neck and shoulder
and in the core of the tufty crown.

Mirrored on the gompa floor behind me
lie the skin drum and conch shell
kept for the rites of the Great Black
blood-lapping Lord Mahakala,
Charose, you call him, he who plies
the red river: lord of the crown
of skulls and belt of hair-hung heads,
who for cup holds a skull-
ful of blood wave-tossed. A sea.
No statue of him. None needed
wherever on earth in sun, in shade,
we bear his statue clothed in flesh

and blood brocade of stems, webs and fans:
 his toothed white shell
 strung up on spools of spine.

Here too there is no water
 but shadow. One tree
 shades the whole hill above the gompa,
 and all around fire, a moat of smoke,
 crows lifting, a black scatter,
 and in a cleft of far hills a fan,
 an eye, the sea-
 leaves large as the hand
 spread out, and grubs, pale green, fat blood-red
 and black-beaded caterpillars that are,
 yes, are berries! Moupa. [Mulberries]
 A mulberry, this giant tree rooted
 plumping up blood drops and darkness here
 In Queensland, in a wheel of fire.

3.
 Old mother clothed in the black of earth
 womb of stone, empty hive,
 salt-blind in the noon sun:

We all went once to the ruins
 of Ay{a Avmnacria, to find [Saint Anastasia]
 what? Split beams, shafts, sifts of dust
 and sun through candle fumes. A skull
 monkey-small in a silver carapace
 locked in glass, over which
 one after another each face,
 ours, yours, his,
 plump with the living blood
 bent as if over water.

What could we have said,
 or your lame priest either,
 to you whose thick hands we saw
 sprinkled with olive-silver and shade
 numbly turn and turn

as if it were his schoolcap
 the skull bone of your child?
 What had the poet to say
 to all who mourn?
 Listen: "The sea does not weep"-
 Η 06Α.αοοα ΟΕΥ τλαία. [The sea does not weep]
 "The sea sings."

The sea only
 Η0w..αοοα [the sea]
 μovαxa [only]

Yes, cry out
 slow, strident
 in grief, your μοιποMr [dirge, lament for the
 to the earth and sea, dead, sung by old
 to us, to God, to Charos: women]

rta'ti? rta'ti? [Why?Why?]
 To the crow: Kopaim, [Crow]
 11mi?Why? [why?]
 Why did the child have to die.
 Not me?

AX, Ax, the shout [Ach, Ach,]
 of the parched sky.

Η 06Α.αοοα ΟΕΥ τλαίEt. [The sea does not weep.
 Τρpayouoon. It sings]

Then have done, μava μου, ma. [mother mine, now/ finally]
 Accept this leaving. Kiss
 the white crown, the shell
 the earth has drunk dry.
 Lick your lips. Does it taste salt?
 Hold it up to your ear.
 Is the sea singing?

And the fire?

In an interview with Fiona Capp about *The Seal Woman* Farmer spoke of Dagmar's obsessive preoccupation with the sea as the place "where her husband died" which led to a general discussion of the subject of grief and of its particular relation to Farmer's life as well as her art, especially as it is shaped in *The House in the Light*.⁷¹

Farmer speaks of her son's Greek grandmother, once a strong and gallant matriarch of the family, who has been devastated by the death of one of her sons. She has grown weary with the world and talks of retreating to a nunnery. This is the bewilderment of the older woman whose life has been her family. "Some grief can't be healed," Farmer reflects. "Some bereavement is a mortal blow. Dagmar was one of the lucky ones".⁷²

In "Moirolot' the son is dead, buried and his skull recovered for reinterment. But his mother does not recover. The complex interweaving of the imagery suggest irretrievable links between the worlds of light and shadow in the woman's mind. In the long journey of the fiction and poetry from *Alone* and "A Place of Birth" death has been an accompanying presence but now, no longer morbidly fascinated, Farmer returns for a good square look at the reality of death and its part in life. The concluding chapter takes up this narrative to confirm the social nature of the literary arts and is a testimony to David Buchbinder's understandings of the poem's place in history:

The poem is not only a literary fact, but also a social one. That is, the poem is produced within a context which includes the life of the author, the audience for whom he or she writes, and the background relationships of various social, historical and political factors. The poem, therefore is enmeshed in circumstance, both in its production by the poet and its reception by the reader. Such circumstances include sets of relations among author, audience, social context, the political and ideological complexions of these, and their position in the poem even if only understood as implicit.⁷³

This chapter has explored the business of locating the parameters of self and place in Farmer's poetry, and has illustrated this writer's "mastery" of a poetry of implicit rather than

explicit truths. While Farmer's poetry is generally celebratory, Lucas and McCredden's understanding of poetry's effectiveness as a "disruptor" of the "status quo" is also apt:

Poetic language is not bound by the demands of rational sense; rather it seeks to pursue its perceptions laterally, to meander into labyrinths of memory, possibility and desire that offer an alternative and/or a subversion of a dominant structure of exchange.⁷⁴

Chapter 8

"A Grain of Fire": Recent Writing

Willbanks: You're not a casual writer are you?

Farmer: No, I'm not. ¹

There has to be a grain of truth in the fiction for me to feel it's worth creating.

Beverley Farmer.²

Farmer's most recent work is characterised by further experimentation with genre and form, and a differently orientated interest in life/ art relationships. In *A Body of Water* the narrator shares the dynamic processes of discovery, which in turn give rise to art, but these writings are teleological: they begin with a place, a painting or a body of work, and retrospectively investigate the lives and circumstances under which this art, or reputation, came into being. Farmer has published a group of writings as independent "essays", but with a unified plan in mind.³ These are complementary responses to places visited or sites related to the origin of works of visual art or photography. A further publication is planned, to be illustrated with Farmer's photographs, which will pursue correlations between text and image. Farmer has explained that: "What [I'm] aiming at is constellations of meaning ... the nearest I can come with words that have to be read in sequence to the simultaneous impact of the visual".⁴

I call these compositions essays as they are literary compositions on particular subjects which consistently propose and "weigh" ideas. The writing synthesises elements of the travel diary, speculative essay, memoir, and analyses of literary or

artistic performance. Farmer garners and combines diverse material and her prose is heightened by reflective correspondences arranged in sequences like variations or movements in music. Unlike some essayists, Farmer seems more interested in the process of observation itself than in fixed outcomes or resolved arguments. In the narratives there is a gradual accretion and expansion of meaning. Referring to an article, perceptively entitled "Correspondence: The Art of Beverley Farmer", Nicolette Stasko defines this in modernist terms: "Clearly this piece is not a conventional essay. Its form is a kind of collage ... one that by its structure gestures towards important characteristics of [Farmer's] writing."⁵ In speaking of renewed interest in the essay form in contemporary times, Peter Craven noted that:

The essay which in one aspect represents the mind in the act of representing the quality of its own light and in another is the form that is used to depict and analyse the world is historically continuous with the rise of the novel. Both forms relate to the representation of subjectivity in an apparently objective world.⁶

Farmer's essays blend objective and subjective perspectives as they closely examine influences and origin. We are aware of a creative mind in action, engaging with the stimuli of other's creativity.

The trope of the journey, experienced in the context of time and travel, served as a paradigm for discovery in texts like *Milk*, *Home Time* and *The House in the Light*. These stories were illuminated by moments of self-awareness or revelations of understanding, but they were not necessarily the focus of attention.⁷ In recent writing, there is an active engagement with these transitional points in the lives of characters as disorder, circumstance, or long contemplation ripens into the revelation of art. The author works like a photographer controlling, but still being surprised by, the transformation of images developing in the frames of the texts.

Farmer investigates relationships between biography and fiction, and real and representational subject matter but in recent writing this is now integrated with greater assurance, without any apparent straining after effect. In earlier work,

sources were signalled by interspersing quotation and narrative in an overt dialectic, and there are still moments where this methodology is employed, but technically, these new texts are more seamless.⁸

Post-Impressionist artists

The lives and compositions of post-impressionist artists are central in this sequence of writing. These artists both problematised the concept of the fixed subject and focused upon "the optical qualities of light and colour".⁹ Gomrich observes that their "dissatisfactions" about representational art led to the very different solutions of Van Gogh's, Gauguin's or Cezanne's art, and later to the expressionism of Munch, but these artists were importantly re-thinking the nature of art by creating work in which the interplay or relations between elements canvassed were often deemed more significant than the things portrayed. Matisse suggested that in his designs "no point is more important than the other".¹⁰ Farmer adopts a similar relational policy in the construction of her narratives. Post-impressionist reviews of their art and its forms recalls the comparable modernist linguistic experimentation by writers like Joyce and Woolf.

"Ades"

A consideration of two of these complementary publications, "Arles" and "Fete des Miels" reveals aspects of Farmer's overall design. The texts are clearly related, being both set in Arles, but other essays are resonant and inter-connected thematically in ways which are not immediately obvious. The first, entitled "Ades", published initially in *Southerly*, offers a painterly evocation of this famous town visited in homage to Vincent Van Gogh.¹¹ The other, "Fete des Miels", in *Island Magazine*, is not sequential in a linear sense, but instead consists of a magnification of one of the incidents in the other story. In the former, the life of Arles, with its markets and festivals, is juxtaposed with considerations of Van Gogh's times and art. The place and its features are framed by the artist's prior presence and the guiding evidence of the artist's letters and accounts of his art and life. While the speaker is a visitor, she

is armed with *a priori* knowledge which layers responses, that present and past are interspersed and reviewed, at times ironically. Like the self-portrait in the painting of Lazarus, Van Gogh is "raised" to private consciousness by the town's annual commemorative celebration of his fame and notoriety. The narrator's enquiries about relationships between Gauguin and Van Gogh, and their time together before Vincent lapsed into madness, provide further incentives. This is a guided tour with a reconstitutive purpose. The narrator, like a *bricoleur*, is tracing lost clues in re-visioning the seed-time of what was a remarkable flowering of art. Van Gogh's time at Arles saw his art grow from a *bricolage* of images and experience. This narrative works similarly (90).

In the "Arles" essay the Alyscamps on a dark rainswept afternoon, with their massive tunnels "cradling the dead", are an apt site for a sombre consideration of human fate. The day of the visit to the local tombs dawns vividly. The caskets are blotched by "lichen like yellow paint". The journey of ancient corpses ferried in by barge with coins on dead eyelids to pay the ferrymen, once terminated here, but now the ruined walls are lit by the sun, and it is the living town that commands attention (82). With a characteristic certainty of focus the district's fruits of life, which were often the subjects of Van Gogh's art, are brought to life again by Farmer:

Asunstruck Saturday morning and the market stalls are strung out in double rows all along the Boulevard des Lices. A laneway of us jostling and halting. Thin aubergines with prickly caps, magenta or rich black skin, spongy, light, curved like the long nose of Indian miniatures. *Tresses* of garlic. Fine slender string beans from Bretagne and the bulkier, pale-podded *coco blanc*, and *coco rouge*, beans that dry speckled like quail eggs. Ahalved butternut pumpkin two feet long, like a painted ukulele. The cut watermelon is as red as the slabs of horsemeat. Honeys of Provence, *miel des garrigues*, *de romarin*, rosemary, chestnut, thyme. Rotisseries and skun rabbits, guinea fowl, turkey, and plain raw cocks and hens with their feet tucked in to hide the almost human nails. Terrines, pates, cheeses, marinated olives and pickle, sausages caked in black pepper. A hotplate of paella. Breads and pastries-wasps hanging over the slivers of singed apple on tarts. (84)

This marvellous melee of quinces and stingray, peaches, figs and boxed mushrooms, some with ominous names like "trumpets of the dead", is then "disappeared" as magically as it has been conjured: "Saturday afternoon, no trace of the market, all hosed down" (85), but the tourists and film-makers, weddings and festivals that feed the life of the town, parade on into the night. Finding her way home later, a paradox from Van Gogh's letters is recalled-when he chose life over art. He distinguished between life *drawing* when capturing the image of a rare night moth, and the contrary option of having to "kill" the creature for *painting*.¹² Farmer also overlays a memory of the "moth-like strokes" of the Paris self-portraits. The tensions and cross-currents of observation and inter-laced thought create the fabric of this essay about the business of art.

Life/ death tensions are strongly imaged in the Yellow house (which is haunted by the black and white presence of the nuns), and in the barred windows which frame the views of field and olive groves at St Remy that Van Gogh evokes. For the traveller, what is kept and lost in time and memory is seen to be as accidental, or long-lasting, as a "stain" of wine on a pale sleeve (89), or as incongruous as the "graffiti" on the wall- which reads "*Ceci n'est pas un mur*" (86). The latter is wryly echoed as the narrator bypasses the "Hotel Jules Cesar, then the Hotel de la Police, then the Hotel des Impots [tax office], noting *Ceci n'est pas un hotel*" (88).

There are bold strokes in the arrangement of the contrasting colours and shapes of Van Gogh's life in this sketch of the life of the town of Arles. A note records the actions of Dr Felix Rey, that opportunistic *bricoleur* who "used the portrait Vincent did of him to block up a hole in his attic" (90), and another note contemplates as yet unanswered questions about Gauguin's and Van Gogh's shared time in this town. The narrator considers what "Gauguin saw in the vineyard at Arles" which caused him to add a subtitle to his painting (*Human Misery*), but these dark tones are offset by the images of the flash of a "red dragonfly" or the "sunny square" where people play *boules*. Specific paintings are re-contextualised. Van Gogh's stay in the asylum sees bad weather in the yellow house ruin a partly constructed painting as Farmer gives us a sketch of the

artist himself as a: "Bricolage, collage, cobbled together, patched up, a patchwork, crackpot, papering over the cracks a makeshift, home-made, self made man" (90).

In a recent discussion of "Farmer's affiliation with modernist painterly modes" Roberta Buffi claimed that:

In many instances Farmer conveys the inner tensions that her characters experience by deploying the literary equivalents of clashes of colours and compositional dissonance, which highlights the diffracted projection of the subject onto a non-mimetic external reality.¹³

In this composition the elements directly reflect Van Gogh's vision and experience. It is as if Arles was, and is, a canvas upon which the varied colours and shades of the life of the artist who made it famous are re-assembled in order to discover missed dimensions. But that is not all, as it is primarily the odd nexus between the creative impulses of two very different artists that is sited/ cited, or becomes the signature, in this essay. In "Fete des Miels" Farmer notes that while Van Gogh is venerated Gauguin actively disliked the place and was only two months at Arles which he described as "so petty, so shabby".¹⁴

This narrative technique extends beyond that employed in the earlier Matisse/ red fishes short story in *A Body of Water*, where that Matisse painting reflected and partly determined the actions of the viewers, until one participant refused his "place" in the composition. In contrast, the "Arles" meditation ends with Gauguin's obtaining sunflower seeds from France to plant in Tahiti a decade later-perhaps the seed/idea for his painting of *Still Life with Sunflower*. Gauguin's summary of Vincent's loved yellow as "gleams of sunlight warming his soul, which detested fog", and his "craving for warmth" ends in the recalled pathos of Van Gogh's spiritual withdrawal or attempt to encompass the world. This is epitomised in the verbal ambiguities of "*Je suis sain d'Esprit. /Je suis Saint-Esprit. I am of sound mind, I am Holy Ghost*" (91).

The ease with which this wide-ranging and challenging analysis of art/biography, life and purpose is canvassed indicates Farmer's control of her medium. This is confirmed in the

essay "Fete des Miels" but before discussing this it is useful to shift from Van Gogh's assertion of sound mind to an oppositional text published as "Notes Towards the Scream", which is an apt inclusion in Brenda Walker's collection of writing called *Risks*.¹⁵ This establishes connections between Munch, Gauguin and Van Gogh which are further explored in these extended essays.

"Notes Towards the Scream"

Farmer's cryptic notes are like Gerard Manley-Hopkins' diary jottings for later drawings or poems. They are skeletal and provocative, but as in expressionist art, the reader/ viewer is left to flesh out the possible direction of the text. Munch's painting is sketched at the outset but the description has its own presence as its death-in-life images echo throughout:

the yellow and red swirls like slit flesh in the sky, and the figure faded in the mist, fallow, its eyes and mouth round, its hands clapped to its ears. Not a man nor a woman, nor a child, necessarily (it looks like a foetus): it is a self. It has its hands over its ears as if to shut out the scream which is in everything. The sky, the sea, the world. This being has become the instrument through which the scream utters itself. More, it knows the scream, is the scream. Pallor and gauntness, suffering. It resonates with the pain of the world. It bleeds with the sun. (199)

This now iconographic expressionist gesture of angst conveys an extreme torment of mind, and the movement of line suggests strong affinities with Van Gogh's art. There is a further attempt at a precise translation between media: "*Shriek* is closer than scream./ *Jeg* is a scream. I! Of course, always. *Ai! Jeg!//Jeg is the scream*" (203). A definition of other "threads" indicates links between the lives of the three artists: "the recourse to sun, fire, sun fruits and sunflowers; to ships and the sea; to preoccupations with bodies and self-mutilation; obsessions with mother figures; recourse to absinthe and madness; use of the self-portrait as mirror" (197); and writings and meetings between them all. The thread of narrative is established in Oslo, home of the Viking ships and setting for the painting, which is not entirely imagined as the region is known for the "meteorological phenomena of the streaked, striped sky

visible in Oslo" (200) and it encompasses the view from Nordstrand on the eastern shore of the fjord.¹⁶

In the notes that wind out from this central image of the scream, there is at first unease, and then rising terror as a haunted man/Munch lives his "incarnate hysteria" in a journey by train from Germany. He is captured by melancholy, and in confronting his alter ego (both male and female images of fellow-travellers), comes to embody the scream of his imagination. This is a portrait of an unstable mind grappling with sickness, sexual fears and madness, but also with the images he is forced to live with and re-create. The paintings are read for their compositional arrangement, their absence of colour and for what they suggest about this consumptive artist's dread. Notes from Munch's writings are interspersed to illuminate and confirm his preoccupations. Farmer's notes are all about watching and waiting, about voyeurism and art, about metaphysical horror and stark corporeality. These are the proposed chapter headings:

'The bright summer night, in which life and death, day and night,
go hand in hand (for drawing the extremities)'
'Mother, give me the sun'
'I was born dying'
'Art must be created with your heart's blood'.

The notes end with research sources in a tangle of cross-references about Munch's life, and the subject is mirrored by the stark image of a Peruvian mummy "open-mouthed, toothless, frozen, mute" (214). Munch's "Scream" is sometimes described as a "refusal to surrender" to depictions of "harmony and gentle optimism" by earlier nineteenth century painters.¹⁷ Farmer re-invokes the artist's protest.

"Fete des Miels"

In this essay an absence of bees, customarily humming on a known lavender bush, provides the associative link between Australia and Europe, and between disparate lives. There is a contextualising introduction which locates a specific season and occasion, an Arles festival, beyond midsummer. At the narrative's heart is a visit to a honey-shop-a passing moment in

the much larger artistic and historical landscape being reconsidered. This experience is fleshed out to demonstrate web-like connections as both apiarist's and artist's skills are mapped. During the Honey Festival, itself an off-shoot of the larger festival of rice in the French town, the visit leads to a delicately controlled assessment of creative processes and their effects. It is not so much the produce that catches the narrator's eye, although this is again lovingly rendered to evoke sensory delights, but a map on the shop wall labelled "la carte de la transhumance", a chart of flowering times which traditionally directs the moving of hives from place to place to ensure an appropriate harvest.¹⁸ Farmer considers the difference between transmigration between body and soul and this movement or migration of animals between places in accordance with seasons (41). But the bee "map" is suggestive in other ways as it offers a pattern for further resonances.

Hived together for a short, not immediately productive season (although some paintings of the Alyscamps and the Vineyards resulted), Gauguin and Van Gogh worked and lived, sharing alcohol, ideas and ill temper, in a brief and turbulent collaborative experiment:

Two volatile and vehement, driven men working side by side, out on the town after dark drinking absinthe, they struck sparks off each other, too often, until Vincent hacked off his own earlobe. Gauguin fled. Vincent lay mad in hospital, the Hotel Dieu, in a bed like an open coffin while rain flooded the streets of Arles and the damp seeped inside the Yellow House, empty-"shipwrecked", Vincent would write to Theo-but for the paintings hived in it, chrome yellow distillations of heat, a lantern through the cold light of day and the winter night. (42)

Prefiguring this Farmer has Gauguin enticed to Arles: "Because Vincent had lured him there with a parade of incandescent ' dreams, in letters that were lucid and subtle moves as compelling as the bee's honey dance" (42). Later we further appreciate this authorial move, and the subtlety of both the simile and the prior adjective, "shipwrecked", as Gauguin's Tahiti connections are surveyed and his transported story unfolds like the bee's intricate "dance". Gauguin is transplanted to a place which fuels his art, like the imported sunflowers pollinating '

images with new life. A biographer compares Gauguin to th bees, who, in Montaigne's words "plunder the flowers hee and there and make of them a honey which is entirely their; (41). After his death, Gauguin's drawings, the "private image hoard" which some claim were the secret life of his art, are exhibited/exposed. This self-designated "savage's" art recalls the later designation of Fauves as the "wild beasts" who constructed their designs through colour and challenged classical understanding of art.

Farmer's clustering of images offers nuances of meaning, which, like variations on a theme, ripen into the detailed description of the bee's instinctive performance. The narrator observes that some bees have a similar "but mutually incomprehensible dance languages", and that the female bees make a "map" out of a dance to lead their co-workers to their discovered sources of nectar. The bee sees in ultra violet and hears without ears. Van Gogh's visions are thus juxtaposed with Gauguin's and in the final paragraphs the scene and season shift, from honey to milk in a continuing "dance" of map-making. The art of *l'apiculture* and the plundering of images are allied. We are told of "the photos from Borobodur which inhabit like ghosts so many of the great Polynesian works [which] were part of the visible for Gauguin, what Rilke called *the great golden hive of the invisible*, for making into art" (41).

The facts of the artists' lives and their relationships are viewed as the essential scaffolding of their art, and mapping it "becomes an industry" for the town, and a pattern for others' art. But the narrative ends with a return to the sound and dance of the bees whose knowledge is expressed in a dance stimulating transhumance, an on-going songline that moves well beyond human comprehension (46).

"Seeing in the Dark"

"Seeing in the Dark" is a meditative reflection that seems unrelated to the other writing, but is again linked thematically. It is also about moments of transition or transformation between life and art. It begins with a suspenseful observation of the natural world in a still moment before a storm as "the world, sky and sea and shore, holds its breath".¹⁹ The following dis-

course on light and dark, image and negative, life and death and the alchemical properties of photographic art is initially "lit" or signalled by the intermittent flashes of whitebait turning in a still rockpool. There follows a progression of red, gold and copper images that emanate from this source to "bum" into being or trace threads of life memories. These lead associatively towards the central dark of the womb-like developing chamber in a retreat from the outside world where in an almost ritualised transition, with help from amniotic-like chemical treatments, the world is "re-birthing" in the different light of photography, its fluencies transformed by a "mineral fixity"(88). Like Drusilla Modjeska in *The Orchard*, Farmer recalls a "dark" season of feared loss of sight, but here, in a reversal of lost limb syndrome, damage is countered by the eye's paradoxical capacity to "tum a blind eye" to its own impairment and adjust its range and focus (90).

Since this essay was published Farmer has furthered her investigation of theories of vision and scientific inventions like the *camera obscura* to extend the range of this essay:

"Seeing/Dark" is the one that goes into the history of theories of vision, eyesight, on the back of the *camera obscura*-in Plato, Aristotle, Ptolemy Alhazen, Kepler, with delicious arcane suppositions from Lucretius, from Da Vinci ... It's not an exposition, just a quick glance, all the stress on continuities and correspondences.²⁰

In the discussion of *The House in The Light* Farmer's interest in the work of Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* was foregrounded and Barthes is again a source of "luminance" in this essay's consideration of ephemeral and bodily emanations. Barthes describes the incongruity of photography as a medium that records absence, but also the resuscitative power of art:

If photography belonged to a world with some residual sensitivity to myth, we should exult over the richness of the symbol: the loved body is immortalised by the mediation of a precious metal, silver (monument and luxury); to which we might add the notion that this metal, like all the metals of alchemy, is alive.²¹

But it is again the *process* of these gradual illuminations that is intriguing. A borrowed book leads to an examination of the

techniques of photographic development (the faces a disembodied spirit of light and darkness), and from there to ideas about "spirit photography". Beyond that, the piece describes Munch's self-portraits and "destiny photographs" created in Germany before the murals in Oslo, where years later, the narrator weighs issues of "material and immaterial" relevance (94). The culminating attempt to capture the image of the sun piercing the fog in the larger "pool" of Swan Bay offers a narrative reflection of the opening sequence. Similarly, but in another season, orange segments are echoed by the pomegranate's different vibrancy.

The photographer cannot be certain she has captured the desired vital moment of "transition, shadow over to reflection, or back again", but again the process engages (96). The writing refracts and is refocussed here like a lens in this complex interplay of verbal and visual significations:

The translation on to solid film and paper-linen-of what has been projected in flight on to the eye's retina. What is changed, either lost or gained, or conceivably both, in these translations into a silent language that the eye-what Barthes might have called *the eye of man-has* had to learn. The eye jibs accommodates, learns by what it has learnt, as does the *mind* (*pas faite de main d'homme*, not made by the hand of man, but the Greek says: *not made by [any] hand.*)²²

This translation is another kind of "transhumance" or crossing between thresholds. It is the latter which is further explored in "Mouths of Gold" (as yet unpublished) which is intended as the first essay of Farmer's new collection.

"Mouths of Gold"

In "Mouths of Gold", a narrative which may prove to be the seed of a novel, the lyrical qualities of the prose and poetry merge. Its organic form confirms directions described earlier. It begins with what is now a distinctive pattern in Farmer's writing—a succinct picture of diurnal and seasonal location followed by an evocation of mood established through the selection of pace, pitch and tone, in this instance, an appropriate *gravitas* for a discourse on memory and time:

All winter, for half an hour after sunrise on any clear morning, a stalk of sun burns along the edge of my blind on to the wardrobe door. It spreads a tall flame across the matchstick blind, like a church candle. Then the whole blind is fire and shadow, cast by the tree outside. A print, a lion face.

A slice of blood orange, a wheel of fire. The skin surrounds a smudged pith and ten radiating white veins sodden with dark red: ten segmented translucencies of red gold like a dragonfly wing, and filaments like combed hair. A segment of blood orange is a red gold mouth pressed thick on the mouth, bitter as pomegranate.

Low tide and a waveline of jellyfish like ice on the thaw, clearer than water, so clear the sand is alight.²³

The season, the closely observed particulars of the natural object (the "slice of blood orange"), and the monitored movements of time and tide of the beach setting, establish reference points that will echo or reverberate throughout the narrative. There is one other crucial element in this "story in the making" and that is a description of the architecture of the houses in this street with their curious "widow towers" from where waiting women watch for their men at sea. There is an ominous note in their casket-like shape and in the conveyed sense of suspended animation that is implied. There is also a stark contrast between the women's static incarceration and the brisk trade out in the sea-passage that the houses oversee. Beyond the description of "A street of caskets with glass lids" the narrator offers a further analogy between the processes of unfolding lives and stories:

This story in the making: more and more self-effaced, iapped in the folds of itself, as water is, and reflections on water, developing in loops rather than along a story line, and therefore devoid-or free-of narrative tension. The surface tension of water. It involves Grania and her daughter Rosalie on the day and night that the family sustains, at a remove, a violent death. To be true to its organic form, any tension there is will be that between the current of time and the reverberating rings of wave caused by the stone that has broken through.

Attention to what is. Because whatever is added to the image hoard of one mind is an addition to the world. Not a permanent one, needless to say. What is permanent about a grain of fire in space? (1)

This elegant and sustained piece of writing has an epic quality-except that this sounds too pompous for the tonal modulations of its graceful reverie. It is about a woman called Grania and her daughter Rosalie, about Makedonia, about ancient myths and burial practices, about the twin selves of life and death, light and shadow, about dream and reality, time and timelessness, gardening and God and two brothers-and that is just a part of it. The whole narrative is shaped by a lacework of inter-connected meanings and it arises from the premise that images "have a latency and the power to endure"(3). Near the beginning, like one mindful of the female bees' capacity for mapping, the speaker speculates about the mysteries of navigation:

Ours eyes live in a head they never see on a body more or less out of sight. What drives us all more than half blind in a world of invisibilities, and how do we find our way? The wayfarer's way of attention, observation, navigation by signs, by memory, by experience. (4)

What follows is a homage to the timelessness of such commitment and also to the tenacity of the human spirit:

We believe in anything rather than accept that a whole world emblazoned inside the egg-shell of the skull is fated for extinction. We must be more than sparks of matter, atoms of finite being. We bind ourselves to others and to the world in the three dimensions of time with silken threads of soul stuff, extrusions of the self into the void. Webs of meaning which we anchor where we can and hang there, the hope of the soul is tenacious. It is inborn, in our bones. (2)

A narrative unfolds as women go about their daily chores, albeit in sharply contrasting environments. Bringing in family washing-sweet-smelling sheets like square sails that encompass sun and light, which are then folded in a ritualised dance²⁴-contrasts markedly with Grania's digging through the palimpsests of memory and her layered sense of time:

The place is a midden, year after year laid down and now coming to light, a lifetime of summers, of winters closing in like night-fall, other lives, compost spread out as mulch, black potatoes, some

sprouting, avocado pits and their leather skins-fork the soil over anywhere along the dunes of the coast-ashes, knucklebones, eggshells, cuttle bones, a seabird's head all beak and eyehole, oyster and mussel shells, the antiquities of untold generations of a light-footed race, all the dark dead, their bones and blood and flow of hair. (2)

The multiple threads of narrative are laced loosely to allow for consideration of the power of images to last and regenerate like seeds: "No narrative, so no current of lived time, not so much as an undercurrent. The moment itself, stopped, as in the camera, isolated shuffled, strung-beads on a rosary (5). These moments in time, trapped or still-born, refuse to die and can be re-experienced years after events so that "meaning goes on growing, like desire, like memory, in the dark"(4). Farmer suggests that "The fullness of the meaning is only to be known by its weight, its power of displacement" (4). This testing of the past against the present is a feature of this text. In the narrative, a child watching a woman cooking remembers another; and an adult sees a previously unseen photo of self as a child and traces patterns of "double exposure", of overlapping lives shaped by presence and absence. The narrator considers the ways in which images and certain moments shape and sustain lives.

A world away, in geographic distance and in actual time, a car crashes, and this terrible moment is etched on the consciousness of those who live on. With his father's image printed in blood on his shirt, a son makes a hasty decision about a burial site and divides a family; a mother loses a son, a brother his other self and, momentarily, himself.

In a central sequence, a photograph of irises, with their beebecoming "mouths of gold" offers a gateway to a consideration of ancient ways of managing death and ensuring on-going life. The writing is informed by subjects like:

metamorphosis, burial customs, beliefs about deaths resurrection and immortality, megalithic and archaic monuments and survivals in custom and folklore of ancient lore, words and what is cocooned of the past in them, the afterlife, the underworld, the earth goddess, honey and bee biology.²⁵

A Grain of Fire

But these are sketched lightly. Like ghostly presences they haunt the narrative. The exploration of customs and rituals by the management of the transition between life and death: prefigure other attempts to create something lasting beyond life—the processes of self-realisation through art that were the subject of the previous essays. The narrative's accompanying photographs locate central images which are then re-read, just as the selected art works provide a visual key in other essays. There is intermittent attention to physical and spiritual concerns as if to demonstrate their inter-connectedness. Putting a grief-stricken and drunken husband to bed leads to a contemplation of the role of Demeter as keeper of the dead, whose lost child Kore became Persephone, bride of Hades. This distant region of the world is "one of the rare granaries in a land of dry rock". Amid death, seeds are resown and garnered. Farmer observes: "But like children, and cities, new gods grow by feeding off the old, and she went to earth, the goddess, earth to earth, bidding her time" (14).

Similarly the iris blooms briefly but magnificently, and this flower with its brief life and seductive attraction provides another layer of the narrative's cumulative meaning as "mysteries kept by women" are recalled and rituals of regeneration commemorated. In stark contrast, there is the widow of "Greek stock" whose world is determined by her maintenance of the dead, and there is the living but comatose wife who is presently safe from the knowledge of the death of her husband. Worlds away, a husband dead-to-the-world in his grief, becomes "the brother of the dead man". This discourse on death and rebirth both follows and departs from tradition in its awareness of its own processes:

In an oral culture they are presences as imminent as breath, having their whole being in the lived ceremony, the sacrifice, the oracle and the old wives' tale by the hearth fire. They can live on in a word, but only when given breath. Art turns them into stone. Writing is the death of them. (17)

The woman who finds three live seeds in a desiccated pomegranate does not eat them but returns them to the earth where they produce new shoots. In a similar metamorphosis

Persephone became Proserpina to the Romans, and Persipnei to the Etruscans, as her narrative took new forms.

According to custom, and echoing the poem "Moirolō'i", three years after the brother's death his body will be disinterred and his head re-buried in a pragmatic and perhaps symbolic utilisation of space. Other more ancient customs are canvassed, especially the placing of a gold seal across the mouth at death. The reason for this "mouth-mask" remains obscure but the covering may indicate the place the soul's exit from the body or the site of "golden words, silenced". Others were buried with miniatures of household goods, or other material indicators of social standing or position, or with gifts of oil and grain and wine for the long journey out of life. These "mouths of gold" reverse the promise of the photographed iris flowers.

The black-and-white photographic images of a negative print of a child on the threshold of life, the stone effigy of Kore/Persephone, or images of the skin-like close-detail of an ancient door threshold at Mycenae, are related by the consciousness of choice between directions that each conveys.²⁶ The images, like these narratives, may be read and re-read and therefore understood in a multitude of ways. They shimmer like elusive apparitions demonstrating the potential and ongoing "life" in the art of sharing observations. The narrator is without illusion about the tenuousness of both life and art and concedes that "We grasp at meaning, for an insecure foothold on truth" (6).

In speaking about this writing I have been obliged to select elements for discussion, emphasising some and neglecting others, and thus conveyed only a partial view of both the music and poetry of the prose. The enchantment of this work is undoubtedly in the direct experience of the writing and in the invitation to share discoveries-to in fact guarantee the re-seeding and continuation of narrative itself.

Afterword

and she went to earth the goddess ... biding her time.

Beverley Farmer!

Beverley Farmer's writing is engaging and challenging. I began this study appreciating this fiction's astute social observation, and its lucid and luminous prose. After engaging with the ongoing work, including the fine poetry, my respect has further increased. This body of work is lyrical and interrogative, performative and speculative, and quite remarkable for its intensity of focus and breadth of vision. Farmer adjusts narrative methodologies, explores intertextuality and integrates form, content and genre in creative ways to enhance textual designs. If Farmer is still to be considered a writer of *fiction* then the definition of this genre needs to be enlarged. Susan Lever recently argued that the "categorisation of texts by genre" has diminished critical attention to individual "contradictions and arguments", and while Farmer's work is distinctive, like that of Drusilla Modjeska or Marion Campbell, it has similarly engaged with "gender, art and the politics of freedom", and consciously and innovatively transgressed the boundaries of genre.² As I have indicated, this writing also draws on the graphic arts, music and literature to enact confluences and fluencies.

In the time Farmer has been writing, post-feminist, post-modernist and post-structuralist critical appreciations have vitally influenced the changing climate of writing and reading in Australia. We now read culture as text and relationships between truth and fiction as constructed or problematic. Farmer's work engages with these developments, and is informed by the discourses of science, semiotics and linguistics. It embodies investigations of the function of language, the effect of translation and the role of the artist/narrator/ sriptor which frame the ways stories are told. In the course of

refining her own work she has seriously engaged with the business of representation, inscription and textuality in a changing world.

Farmer has a gift for recording but transforming the ordinary, detailing changing perceptions and acknowledging complex ways of being, seeing and speaking. Her writing demonstrates the ambiguity of correspondences between people and place, but also the human capacity for allegiance and commemoration. She interrogates the sites and rites of cultural formation and change, and the effects of memory and time upon the present. There are also explorations of identity, ideology and prejudice which acknowledge the plurality of cognitive and discursive discourses.

This study has detailed Farmer's evocations of physical and psychic environments, and her interest in feminism, gender, the politics of family, sexuality and myth. The impulse to transcend surfaces, dig deeper and scrutinise outcomes results in multi-faceted, dynamic writing. I have argued in my interrogation of life/ art relationships that Farmer's poetry and prose represent sites of negotiation between real and imagined worlds. She maintains a deceptive simplicity of expression despite her engagement with philosophical and linguistic complexities that many writers of fiction simply avoid.

Farmer is highly skilled observer who, in coming to terms with her own diminished sight, has written with great clarity and vision. The texts' visual emphases have been surveyed here. Despite writing *against* the grain-and this writer refuses easier paths-Farmer has scrupulously added to her readers' stores of both pleasure and knowledge. I have confirmed that Farmer's interests extend well beyond personal or national boundaries, and that her truths are human rather than merely personal. This is epitomised by recent writing which is seeded with "grains of truth" that will undoubtedly continue to generate further miraculous fruit.

Notes to the Text

Epigraphs

- 1 Marylynn Scott, "Rebuilding Lifeworlds: Marylynn Scott interviews Beverley Farmer", *Kunapipi*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 1994, p.97.
- 2 Drusilla Modjeska, *Stravinsky's Lunch*, Picador, Sydney, 1999, p.53.

Notes to the Preface

- 1 Dorothy Green, "The Place of Literature", *Dorothy Green: Writer, Reader, Critic*, Primavera Press, Sydney, 1991, p.5.
- 2 Elizabeth Jolley, "The Goose Path" in Roger McDonald (ed.) *Gone Bush*, Bantam 1990, p.9.

Notes to Chapter 1

- 1 A.S. Byatt, *Babel Tower*, Random House London, 1996, p.574.
- 2 Marylynn Scott, "Rebuilding Lifeworlds: Marylynn Scott interviews Beverley Farmer", *Kunapipi*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 1994, p.97.
- 3 Farmer was on a bonded secondary studentship and enrolled in a combined Honours degree in English and French.
- 4 Farmer claims: "My life was fractured by the events of 1959-my disgrace compounded because C's father was the Professor of English and I saw common knowledge in every sidelong glance. I only stayed on because I was bonded, and only did enough for a bare Pass (which is equivalent, considering what my expectations had been, to Shirley's walking out of her Matric. exams.)" Email correspondence, October 1999.
- 5 Farmer notes: "In Melbourne 1962-1969 I retreated for safety-for survival-out of my own society into an ersatz Greek one and into the female working-class self I had been so eager to rise above, and capped it with a patriarchal marriage. It would be years before I could set foot on the Melbourne University campus without shaking and feeling faint. The second fracture/ faultline in my life was 1975-76, leaving my marriage and my child-a matter of desperation, ricochet-no more a striking out for authentic liberty than the first one was." Email correspondence, October 1999.
- 6 Later Kate Grenville sought to redress this imbalance in *Joan Makes History* which was an important Australian Bicentennial project in 1988.

- 7 The question of various hoaxes or controversial identifications from Em Malley's "fictive" preserve to the misrepresentations of Demidenko as a Ukrainian/ Australian, or Mudrooroo's crisis of identification as a perceived Aboriginal whose heritage is questionable, has foregrounded the residual emphasis placed on reading or locating legitimate voices.
- 8 Brian Castro, *Looking for Estrellita*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1999, p.107.
- 9 For example, in relation to Australian indigenous culture in *The Seal Woman* (see Chapter Five).
- 10 I have not included Farmer's lucid and carefully detailed rebuttal of Goldsworthy's claims which exists as an unpublished document, but it is well summarised in Farmer's published reply in the "Letter to Judith Brett", *Meanjin*, 45, No. 1, 1986, p.142.
- 11 Wenche Ommundsen, "An Interview with Beverley Farmer", *Mattoid* Vol. 31, No. 2, p.117.
- 12 Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author" in *Image, Music, Text: Essays Selected and Translated by Stephen Heath*, Fontana, Glasgow, 1977, p.142.
- 13 Beverley Farmer, "The Book in the Head", *Idiom*, 1, 1996, p.124.
- 14 Marion Halligan, "Substance or Formula", *Canberra Times*, 9 November 1985, p.B2. This problem prevailed. After the publication of the short stories Halligan claimed unequivocally, but somewhat recklessly, that "It is difficult not to suppose that both Barbara and Bell are Beverley, even knowing only scraps of her biography".
- 15 In an Email correspondence about influences (20 October 1999) Beverley Farmer advises that: "I read the first three pages of *Ulysses* on my 18th birthday ... It was a Damascus revelation. Eliot, yes, on the surface of the words, but Joyce all the way down."
- 16 In her third publication, *Home Time*, Farmer has one of her characters accuse the writer in the text of "scavenging" because she uses the detail of one woman's life as the basis of a story.
- 17 Nicolette Stasko. "Correspondence: the art of Beverley Farmer", *Southerly*, Vol. 58, No. 3, Spring 1998, p.42.
- 18 Brian Castro, *Looking/or Estrellita*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1999, pp.111-112.
- 19 Letter to Judith Brett, *Meanjin* 45, No. 1, 1986, p.142., and in Wenche Ommundsen "An Interview with Beverley Farmer", *Mattoid*, Vol. 31, No. 2, p.117.

- 20 Beverley Farmer, "The Book in the Head", *Idiom1*, 1996, p.126.
- 21 Two stories published as B. Christou appeared in 1968 (w.) and *Alone* was begun 1968-69, finished in typescriptb 19;erly published in 1980. The stories began again in 1979. y 'an
- 22 Beverley Farmer, "Why I Write", *Kunapipi*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 1994, p.65.
- 23 Jolley goes further to suggest that because she was such an incredible liar she became a writer. This is further pursued in Helen Daniels' *Liars: Australian New Novelists*, Penguin, Ringwood, Vic. 198
- 24 Wenche Ommundsen, "An Interview with Beverley Farmer", *Mattoid*, Vol. 31, No. 2, p.115, discusses Helen Daniel's volume *Liars*.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p.115. The second claim is made in the interview with Ray Willbanks, *Speaking Volumes: Australian Writers and their Work*, Penguin, Melbourne, 1992, p.85.
- 26 Marylynn Scott, "Rebuilding Lifeworlds: Marylynn Scott interviews Beverley Farmer", *Kunapipi*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 1994, p.91.
- 27 Ray Willbanks, *Speaking Volumes: Australian Writers and their Work*, Penguin, Melbourne, 1992, p.81.
- 28 Cassandra Pybus, "Loss and Reassurance: Beverley Farmer's Fiction", *Island Magazine*, 25-26 Summer, Autumn, 1986, pp.36-38.
- 29 Beverley Farmer, "Preoccupations", *Australian Literary Studies, Notes and Documents* Vol. 14, No. 3, May 1990, pp.390-392. The author advises that these are "White Friday", "Pomegranates", "Fire and Flood", "A Girl on the Sand" and "Place of Birth", and that "neither collection is in chronological order, and there was a gap with no stories from July 1983 to May 1984".
- 30 Marylynn Scott, "Rebuilding Lifeworlds: Marylynn Scott interviews Beverley Farmer", *Kunapipi*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 1994, p.91.
- 31 Beverley Farmer, *A Body of Water*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1990, p.48.
- 32 Beverley Farmer, "Self-Portraiture Symposium", English Department, Aarhus, April 1996, p.5.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p.6.
- 34 Nicolette Stasko, "Language, the instrument of fiction", *Southerly*, Vol. 53, No. 4, December, 1993, pp.181-182.

Notes to Chapter 2

- 1 T.S. Eliot, "Fragment of an Agon", *Collected Poetry*, Faber & Faber, London, 1963, p.134
- 2 Beverley Farmer, *Alone*, Sisters Publishing 1980, p.86.
- 3 B. Christou (pseudonym for Beverley Farmer), "Alone" *Westerly* 3 October 1968, p.28. This was the second story published in this name as "Evening" appeared in *Westerly*, 1, March 1968. p.18. Farmer relates that "Christou is the genitive case of Christos (Chris's) given name and a common Greek surname"; Email correspondence 26 October 1999.
- 4 There is a note in *A Body of Water* advising that this first novel takes its name from a Gauguin print titled Ohati-Tahitian for "alone". Beverley Farmer, *A Body of Water*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1990, pp.192-93.
- 5 Lyn Jacobs, "The Fiction of Beverley Farmer", *Australian Literary Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3, May 1990, p.325.
- 6 Beverley Farmer, "The Book in the Head", *Idiom* 1, 1996, p.125.
- 7 Lyn Jacobs, "The Fiction of Beverley Farmer" *Australian Literary Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3, May 1990 p.325.
- 8 Jennifer Ellison, *Rooms of Their Own*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1986, p.113. Farmer cites Michel Tournier's use of the term *recit* as more appropriate for *Alone* than novel or novella.
- 9 Edmund White, Proust's biographer, considers the relationship between these authors and Colette in *Proust*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1999, p.54.
- 10 A later short story in *Milk* entitled "Darling Odile" sees a resurrected Shirley (called Rosie) emulating Colette's view of the need for life experience setting sail for Tahiti only to find that *volupte* and *plaisir* are "lies in books" and very sordid business. (p.87). In *A Body of Water* the narrator advises "As a girl I was repelled as I was attracted by Colette's maturity, the extent of her experience and the languorous grace with which she could deploy herself. Such a practised voluptuary seemed to me corrupt and cynical, and besides, I saw my raw gauche and anxious self through those long eyes as disdainfully as if they could see me from the page. Not that the eyes have disappeared-no, it's I who have, or seem to have." p.177.
- 11 Peter Carey's retrospective assessment of his sexual ignorance, years later, is a poignant reminder of the tribulations of youth in the conservative society of late 1950s/ early 1960s Australia. *The Australian*, October 14-15, 1995, Magazine, pp.10-18.

- 12 Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Alastor; or The spirit of Solitude" .
Abrams (ed.) *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* M.
New York, 1986, p.669. ure, orton,
- 13 May O'Toole and Jerry are kind in their fashion; like MrsG db 1
in White's *Riders in the Chariot*, they would comfort, but Y
cannot afford involvement.
- 14 Beverley Farmer advises that this was "one of the four Balzacs
did in first year Honours French". Email correspondence with;:
author 22 October 1999.
- 15 Roberta Buffi, "Scraping and Repainting Reflecting Surfaces:
Mirrors and Water in Beverley Farmer's Fiction", *Antipodes*, June
2000, pp.35-40.
- 16 Jennifer Ellison, *Rooms of Their Own*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1986,
p.124. Farmer suggested that Shirley is unbalanced; that "part of
being on the borderline of schizophrenia is that you feel you're act-
ing a part all the time: living in mirrors".
- 17 Gerard Windsor, "Brisbane Blokes and Melbourne Ms", *Quadrant*,
June 1981, p.73. Gerard Windsor's review of *Alone* was aimed at
The Sisters publishing house for daring to publish this as its first
novel, and the review illustrates David English's claims about gen-
dered readings (the title says it all) by failing to engage with either
the drama of suicide or the textual parody of the would-be writer.
- 18 Gerard Windsor, "The Writer as Puppet", *Voices*, Vol. 6, No. 1,
Autumn 1996, p.20. Much later, Farmer's short stories *Milk* were
retrospectively cited as an example of a publishing boom in the
context of the 1990s "slow-down" of the literary market.
- 19 This inscription appears in Grenville's fiction and historically
locates a "real" mystery artist in Sydney not Melbourne; but
Farmer also recalls an "imitation" on Princes Bridge in Melbourne.
- 20 Shirley's anti-Dorothea Mackellar poem confirms her viewing
position.

I love a sunburnt country,
a land of stunted brains,
Of endless vapid villas
And clotted, leaking drains. (54)

Home is the subject of reconsideration in *Home Time* and the dis-
parity between, and idea of it and its actuality, is the tension that
sustains this text.

- 21 This also resonates with this text's claim:

"I gotta use words when I talk to you
 But if you understand or if you don't
 That's nothing to me and nothing to you
 We all gotta do what we gotta do"

T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, Faber, London, 1963 edition, p.135.

- 22 Beverley Farmer, "The Book in the Head", *Idiom*, 1, 1996, p.124.
- 23 Marylynn Scott, "Rebuilding Lifeworlds: Marylynn Scott interviews Beverley Farmer", *Kunapipi*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 1994, p.89.
- 24 Xavier Pons, "Dramatising the Self: Beverley Farmer's Fiction", *Australian Literary Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 2, October 1995, p.141.
- 25 This article was written five years after the publication of *A Body of Water* and ironically appeared with an article by Farmer about her research. "New Directions via A Body of Water", *Australian Literary Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 2, October 1995, p.177.
- 26 A survey of critical reviews indicates consistent admiration for Farmer's work qualified by a reiterated confusion about self/ art distinctions.
- 27 Pons pursues the text's "self-centredness", lack of fertility, "dramatising the self" and a gradual lifting of the "pall of bleakness", narcissism and angst, to ambiguously suggest an acknowledgement of "the past in order to find sustenance for the future".
- 28 David English, "Is the Book of Life a Good Book?: Autobiography in Patrick White, Dorothy Hewett and Beverley Farmer", *Southerly*, 57, No. 3, Spring 1997, pp.200-209.
- 29 English also argues persuasively about Farmer's transitional location between modernist and postmodern writing and the effect of this on reception, especially in relation to form. There is further consideration of these issues in Chapter Five in relation to *The Seal Woman*.
- 30 Barbara Milech, "A Novel I Believe In: Reading Elizabeth Jolley", *ASAL Proceedings of the Sixteenth Annual Conference 1994*, Australian Defence Force Academy Canberra, 1995, p.188.
- 31 Laurie Clancy, "A Year of Varietals", *Overland*, 84, 1981, p.929. Farmer recalls that Clancy once said at a conference that: "If he told someone his new novel was about an axe-murderer, the next question would still be, 'And is it autobiographical' "?
- 32 Ray Willbanks, *Speaking Volumes: Australian Writers and their Work*, Penguin, Melbourne, 1992, p.86.

- 33 Marylynn Scott, "Rebuilding Lifeworlds: Marylynn Scott interviews Beverly Farmer", *Kunapipi*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 1994, p.90
- 34 Elizabeth Jolley, *An Accommodating Spouse*, Penguin/Viking Ringwood, 1999, p.80.
- 35 This is not an ageist statement about sexual identity, as I have held the hands of too many people still getting things "straight" at 50 plus.
- 36 What I have in mind is a social milieu when publications like Erin Shale (ed.) *Inside-Out: An Australian Collection of Coming Out Stories*, Bookman Press, 1999, reflect alternatives.
- 37 Dean Kiley, "Alone again: naturally and queerly", *Southerly*, Vol. 58, No. 3, Spring, 1998, p.125.
- 38 Letter to Jane Sloan (Guest Editor), untitled, 7 December 1998 *Southerly*, Vol. 58, No. 3, Spring 1998, p.71.
- 39 Dean Kiley, "Alone again: naturally and queerly", *Southerly*, Vol. 58, No. 3, Spring, 1998, p.125.
- 40 Ray Willbanks, *Speaking Volumes: Australian Writers and their work*, Penguin, Melbourne, 1992, pp.73-86.
- 41 *Ibid.*, p.83.
- 42 Annamarie Jagose, "Queer Theory", *Australian Humanities Review* extract from *Queer Theory*, Melbourne University Press 1996, p.5.
- 43 *Ibid.*, p.5.
- 44 Marylynn Scott, "Rebuilding Lifeworlds: Marylynn Scott interviews Beverly Farmer", *Kunapipi*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 1994, p.93.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p.95.
- 46 Margaret Smith, "Australian Women Novelists of the 1970s: A Survey" in *Gender, Politics and Fiction: Twentieth Century Australian Women's Novels*, C. Ferrier (ed.), 1st edition, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1985, pp.200-221.
- 47 Farmer advised in interview that the young woman modelled on herself was perilously near serious illness-see chronology.
- 48 Geoffrey Dutton, "Christmas Presents for some well-known Australian authors", *Australian Literary Magazine*, December 20-21, 1986, p.6. Barbara Jeffris' review appeared in *The Sydney Morning Herald* in November 1980.
- 49 *Ibid.*, p.6.
- 50 Jennifer Strauss, "Are Women's Novels Feminist Novels: An Australian Perspective", *Major Minorities: English Literatures in Transit*, Raoul Grandqvist (ed.), Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993.

- 51 Kerryn Goldsworthy, "Feminist writings; feminist readings: recent Australian writing by women", *Meanjin*, 44, No. 4, December 1985, pp.506-515.
- 52 Jennifer Strauss, "Are Women's Novels Feminist Novels: An Australian Perspective", *Major Minorities: English Literatures in Transit*, Raoul Grandqvist, (ed.), Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993, pp.35-53.
- 53 Beverley Farmer, "Letter Judith Brett", *Meanjin*, 45, No. 1, 1986, p.142.
- 54 Wenche Ommundsen, "An Interview with Beverley Farmer", *Mattoid*, Vol. 31, No. 2, p.117.
- 55 Jennifer Ellison, *Rooms of Their Own*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1986, p.129.
- 56 Wenche Ommundsen, "An Interview with Beverley Farmer", *Mattoid* Vol. 31, No. 2, p.116.
- 57 Edmund White, *Proust*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1999, p.74-5.
- 58 Ray Willbanks, *Speaking Volumes: Australian Writers and their work*, Penguin, Melbourne, 1992, p.82.
- 59 Jennifer Ellison, *Rooms of Their Own*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1986, p.130.

Notes to Chapter 3

- 1 Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture and Identity*, Routledge, London, 1994, p.6.
- 2 Beverley Farmer, *Home Time*, McPhee Gribble/Penguin, Ringwood, 1985, p.202.
- 3 Malouf's Queensland house and its formative influences are well known. He takes up the debate again in *The Spirit of Play* when he suggests that Australia as a culture is shaped by an idea of itself as an island.
- 4 In a review of Farmer's work Marion Halligan suggested that "some years ago Beverley Farmer found a Greek mine, and has worked it with excellent results ever since". See "Substance or Formula", *Canberra Times*, 9 November, 1985, p.B2. I cannot recall anyone implying this of White.
- 5 Ray Willbanks, *Speaking Volumes, Australian Writers and their work*, Penguin, Melbourne, 1992, p.82.

- 6 In 1963 Farmer read White's short story "Being Kind to Titina" which remains a favourite.
- 7 Beverley Farmer, "The ABA of Greek Literature", *The Age Sunday Extra*, 8 October 1988, p.12.
- 8 Wench e Ommundsen, "An Interview with Beverley Farmer", *Mattoid*, Vol. 31, No. 2, 1988, pp.111-121.
- 9 Farmer renders the Australian landscape and its inhabitants as inextricably linked, and the idea of the spirit of the people encased (archaeologically) within the land is pursued in *The Seal Woman*.
- 10 Gillian Tyas, "What can you do with a horizon?: landscape in recent Australian fiction and the visual arts", Association for the Study of Australian Literature, *Proceedings of the Sixteenth Conference 1994*, p.18.
- 11 Ray Willbanks, *Speaking Volumes: Australian Writers and their Work*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1992, p.77.
- 12 Brenda Walker, "Fingers of the hand of motherhood: Mothers and Sons in Beverley Farmer's Fiction", *Southerly*, Vol. 58, No. 3, Spring, 1998, p.111.
- 13 This is a theme Farmer returns to in *The Seal Woman*, as a refusal to see must be overcome for any remedial action to be taken-and this is true of personal and environmental issues explored in this novel (see Chapter 5).
- 14 The day of birth or the birthday are often the catalysts for an examination of the tensions that bear upon the individual-rather like Christmas for families. There is "Sally's Birthday", "Saint Kay's Day" and an echo of *Alone* in this preoccupation or day of stock-taking.
- 15 The overt inclusion of such writing experiments continues, from *Alone* through to *House in the Light-where* the proposed text is photographic and visual.
- 16 A. Burns, & N. Grieves, (eds), "Why Do Women Put Up With the Double Load?", *Australian Women: Contemporary Feminist Thought*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1994.
- 17 Ray Willbanks, *Speaking Volumes: Australian Writers and their Work*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1992, p.74.
- 18 Beverley Farmer, unpublished paper "The Past Within", Warana, Brisbane 1993, pp.4-6.
- 19 This story elicited diverse reactions, as did "The Woman with Black Hair". Inez Baranay praised Farmer's lack of sentimentality

- and, while acknowledging Rosie's deflowering as "most unpretty", commended this depiction of "daring to open up the heart" as affirmative. Graham Burns suggested that this girl does have the "curious innocence of that era". "The Society of One", *Island Magazine*, 38, No. 22. 1985, p.39.
- 20 Brenda Walker, "Fingers of the Hand of Motherhood: Mothers and Sons in Beverley Farmer's Fiction", *Southerly*, Vol. 58, No. 3, Spring 1998, p.110.
- 21 *Home Time* is more about the non-meeting of minds and the impossibility of communication. Marylynn Scott, "Rebuilding Lifeworlds: Marylynn Scott Interviews Beverley Farmer", *Kunapipi*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 1994, p.95.
- 22 The use of myth and legend as a shadowing device in the narrative is extended in *The Seal Woman*.
- 23 Kate Aheame, *National Times*, 9-15 December, 1983, p.29.
- 24 The bee image is one which Farmer pursues in a variety of ways throughout her work. It is used in increasingly symbolic ways. Both productive and capable of stinging, it seems to serve as a reminder of the need for watchfulness, and as an emblem of creativity.
- 25 Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, Picador, London, p.209.
- 26 Kirsten Hammett has argued very persuasively that Farmer is profoundly antagonistic to romantic escapism. "Beverley Farmer: A Retrospective", *Southerly*, Vol. 56, No. 1 Autumn 1996, pp.92-105.
- 27 Ian Henderson, "Dead Wasps with Stings: Touching on Beverley Farmer's Collected Stories", *Southerly*, Vol. 58, No. 3, Spring 1998, p.59.
- 28 Shakespeare, W., "Pericles", *The Complete Signet Classic Shakespeare* D Barnet (ed.), pp.1418-1447.
- 29 Vance Palmer, "What is Love", *An Australian Selection*, J. Barnes (ed.), Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1974, pp.85-99.
- 30 Marion Halligan, "Substance or Formula", *Canberra Times*, 9 November 1985, p.B2.
- 31 Eden Liddelow, "Home is where the Art is: Beverley Farmer and Marion Campbell", *Scripts*, 4, No. 2, p.286. Liddelow misreads this text and oddly claims that "there is a clear suggestion in 'A Woman with Black Hair' that the rapist's sexual pleasure is shared by his victim. Where does this leave Beauvoir's argument?". I can see no textual evidence for this claim. The woman at knife point "moves"

- when ordered in fear of harm to her children and . . . speaker who claims that "our" blood moves, not the tr it is. the woman. Liddelow is right about the influence of ti ed Mansfield on Farmer's work and the increase of male t er ne with "psychologies". protagonist
- 32 Ian Henderson, "Dead Wasps with Stings: Touching onB Farmer's Collected Stories, *Southerly*, Vol. 58, No. 3, Sprinev;;;, p.57, g
- 33 Regina Weinrich, the reviewer of the American edition ofH *Time* for the *TLS*, 18 May 1986, p.24, suggested that Beve;l;e Farmer's stories "hit home". y
- 34 T.S. Eliot, "East Coker", *Collected Poems*, Faber & Faber, London, 1963, p.203.
- 35 This arrangement was Farmer's choice. Morris Lurie quipped that Farmer was writing a 'Kindergarten Trilogy' and that the addition of a book entitled *Fruit* would complete the series-Milk and Fruit and Home Time.
- 36 Uncollected stories like "A Ring of Gold", "Notes towards the Scream" and "Harbour" confirm continuing diversity.
- 37 Marylynn Scott, "Rebuilding Lifeworlds: Marylynn Scott Interviews Beverley Farmer", *Kunapipi*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 1994, p.89.

Notes to Chapter 4

- 1 Beverley Farmer, *A Body of Water*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1990, p.18.
- 2 Lyn Jacobs, "Beverley Farmer: a dialogue", *Southerly*, Vol. 58, No. 3, Spring 1998, p.27.
- 3 Debate about the regrettable conflation of author and narrator is discussed in Chapter One this study.
- 4 Katharine England, "Landscapes of the Mind", *The Advertiser*, Saturday 17 February 1990. England suggested that in contrast the latter made the reader "feel like something of a snoop".
- 5 See chronology for prize list.
- 6 Dorothy Green, "The Place of Literature", *Writer-Reader-Critic*, Primavera Press, Sydney, 1991, p.16.
- 7 Patrick Fuery & Nick Mansfield, *Cultural Studies and the New Humanities: Concepts and Controversies*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1997, pp.64-65.

- 8 The term *decoupage* which sees textual extracts from other sources included within the text is also relevant.
- 9 Beverley Farmer, "New Directions via *A Body of Water*", *Australian Literary Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 2, October 1995, p.177.
- 10 Brenda Walker, "Fingers of the hand of Motherhood: Mothers and Sons in Beverley Farmer's Fiction", *Southerly*, Vol. 58, No. 3, Spring 1998, p.112.
- 11 Sara Dowse, Untitled review, *Westerly*, 36, No. 1, March 1991, pp.90-92.
- 12 Marion Eldridge, "Strong and Sensuous Strokes of the Pen", *Canberra Times*, 17 March 1990, p.B4. In contrast, Marion Halligan concentrates on gardening metaphors, seeing the text as an "an intricately raked oriental garden"; but her discussion conflates author and narrator.
- 13 Megan Collins, "Out of a Dry Season", *Australian Women's Book Review* 2, No. 2, June 1990, p.24. Writers like Brian Castro with his interest in lack of closure and hybridity have incurred similar criticism. See Michael Deves, "Brian Castro: Hybridity, identity and reality", *Land & Identity*, Association for Studies in Australian Literature, Conference Proceedings 1998, p.220.
- 14 Tania Clyde, "Antipodean Resonance" *TLS*, September 14-20, 1990, p.980.
- 15 Beverley Farmer, "New Directions via *A Body of Water*", *Australian Literary Studies* Vol. 17, No. 2, October 1995, p.177. Although well-received, criticism hinged on the "self-referential" nature of the material.
- 16 Paradoxically this was published with an article insisting on the function of this text "largely to dramatise self", "somewhat narcissistically". Worse, this critic suggested that the text was a kind of therapy that "emotions were fictionalised in an effort to cope". The final and absolute inaccuracy of this reading was in the claim that "she does not have to research her subjects". Xavier Pons, "Dramatising the Self: Beverley Farmer's Fiction", *Australian Literary Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 2, October 1995, pp.141-148.
- 17 Beverley Farmer, "New Directions via *A Body of Water*", *Australian Literary Studies* Vol. 17, No. 2, October 1995, p.177.
- 18 B.S. Johnson, *Aren't you rather young to be writing your memoirs?* Hutchinson, London, 1973, p.14.
- 19 Beverley Farmer, "Dialogue on form: the novel", Canberra Word Fest, 1995. (unpublished)

- 20 Beverley Farmer, "The Effect of Asian Spirituality on my Writing", Melbourne Writers Festival, 1993. (unpublished)
- 21 David Brooks, "The Wheel, The Mirror and The Tower", in *The Writings of Dorothy Hewett*, ed. by Dorothy Hewett, *Dorothy Hewett: Selected Critical Essays*, B. Bennett (ed.), Fremantle Arts Press, 1995, p.190.
- 22 Ibid., p.189. Brooks investigates Lacanian theory in relation to "the ego and narcissistic process" and the "personal and feminist dimensions" of the interrelated use of my themes of mask, culture and mirror in Farmer's work.
- 23 Beverley Farmer, "New Directions via *A Body of Water*", *Australian Literary Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 2, October 1995, p.175.
- 24 Rosemary Sorensen's review of the publication "Peering into a pool of self-scrutiny", *The Age*, 24 February 1990, p.8., used the term "self-indulgent" which consequently resonates in other reviews. Geoffrey Dutton in "Return what is hungrily given", *Australian Book Review*, 119, April 1990, p.11, suggests that "the book could easily have been a self-indulgence as it sometimes is"; and Nancy Lee-Jones in "Literary Pretensions drown in a body of water", *Antipodes*, Vol. 5, No. 2, December 1991, p.150, suggests that while the thoughts are "sometimes compelling, *A Body of Water* commonly seems self-indulgent".
- 25 Kristen Hammett, "Beverley Farmer: A Retrospective", *Southerly*, Vol. 56, No. 1, Autumn 1996, p.101.
- 26 Geoffrey Dutton, "Return what is hungrily given", *Australian Book Review*, 119, April 1990.
- 27 Xavier Pons, "Dramatising the Self: Beverley Farmer's Fiction", *Australian Literary Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 2, October 1995, p.143. The discussion of the body in relation to ageing and sexuality is more comprehensive than this observation suggests.
- 28 Anne Cranny-Francis, *The Body in The Text*, Melbourne University Press, 1995.
- 29 Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1994, p.vii and "soul as imprisoned within body" an image derived from Foucault cited in Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On The Discursive Limits of Sex*, Routledge, New York, 1995, p.34.
- 30 Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, Oxford University Press, London, 1996, pp.71-72.
- 31 Anne Cranny-Francis, *The Body in The Text*, Melbourne University Press, 1995, pp.1-21.

- 32 Robert Hodge & Gunther Kress, *Social Semiotics*, Polity Press, London, 1988, p.53.
- 33 Anne Cranny-Francis, *The Body in The Text*, Melbourne University Press, 1995.
- 34 Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, Indiana University Press 1994, p.vii., and Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On The Discursive Limits of Sex*, Routledge, New York, 1995.
- 35 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, Routledge, London, 1993, p.19.
- 36 Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion*, Routledge, London, 1995, p.2.
- 37 Sue Woolfe, *Leaning Towards Infinity*, Random House Milsons, Point NSW, 1996, p.33.
- 38 Beverley Farmer, "New Directions via *A Body of Water*" Notes and Documents, *Australian Literary Studies* Vol. 17, No. 2, October 1995, pp.175-178.
- 39 Beverley Farmer, "The Past Within", Warana, Brisbane 1993, p.1. (unpublished)
- 40 Farmer has advised that "this represents a lesson in compassion as the man is 'insane' and the woman, generous".
- 41 Beverley Farmer, "The effect of Asian spirituality on my writing", Melbourne Writers' Festival 1993.
- 42 Phillipa Hawker, "Literary cat leaves a trail this time", *The Melbourne Herald*, 11 February 1990, p.32.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 Kirsten Hammett, "Beverley Farmer: A Retrospective", *Southerly*, Vol. 56, No. 1, Autumn 1996, p.100.
- 45 Ibid., p.101.
- 46 Drusilla Modjeska, *Stravinsky's Lunch*, Picador, Sydney, 1999.
- 47 Barbara Milech, "Poetry and Gender" in David Buchbinder, *Contemporary Literary Theory and the Reading of Poetry*, Macmillan, Sydney, 1991, p.130.
- 48 Luce Irigaray, (translated Alison Martin), *Je, Tu, Nous: Toward a Culture of Difference*, Routledge, New York, 1993, p.83.
- 49 Beverley Farmer, "Self-portraiture", English Department, Arhus, Denmark. Philip Salom's Keynote Address to *Soundings 97, Soundings: poetry and poetics*, Wakefield Press, Adelaide, 1998, Lyn Jacobs and Jeri Kroll (eds), echoes this in his discussion of poetry.

om P;?pos d th:"nai:ra v forms reJoining to be favoured by
sthme,,hii wchere be pncip trope is e search" but suggest-
ed at -te will e come more user luxurio us more persona1,
mvolving the senses directly. Computer screens, the act of read-
ing is no longer fluent; it has to be re-learnt. Here not only is
langua?e :1nstable, s? is the ar tectu e.of form. A genre we
recognise is, then, a given; to experence it is an acceptance, iti sa
site of security and well-being-genre as a site of comfort"?

- 50 Beverley Farmer, "New Directions via *A Body of Water*", *Australian Literary Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 2, October 1995, p.176.
- 51 Beverley Farmer citing Margaret Atwood in a talk delivered at a College of Advanced Education, 21 January 1995, p.3. (unpublished)
- 52 Philip Mead, University of Tasmania, <http://www.info.utas.edu.au/docs/humsoc/docll/5menu/7.5fictocrit.htm>
- 53 Jane Sloan, "Tain/Taint-Women/Writing: Figurations of the Feminine Other in Beverley Farmer's *A Body of Water*", *Southerly*, Vol. 58, No. 3, Spring 1998, pp.72-73.
- 54 Beverley Farmer, "Dialogue on Form: the novel", Canberra Word Fest, 1995, where *The House in the Light* was launched.

Notes to Chapter 5

- 1 Ruth Blair, "Writing the body: writing the land: Beverley Farmer's *The Seal Woman* and Terry Tempest Williams *Refuge*", unpublished paper, American Association of Australian Literary Studies Conference, Salt Lake City, Utah, April 1999, p.2.
- 2 In Marylynn Scott, "Rebuilding Lifeworlds: Marylynn Scott interviews Beverley Farmer", *Kunapipi*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 1994, p.87, Farmer claims:
"I can allow a character to materialise in the reader's mind without feeling like I have to direct it like a puppet from here to there, as if it were a film I was directing and the character was only real when on the screen. Now I've got more idea of how characters live when they are out of sight, so there's more depth to them than there was."
- 3 Beverley Farmer, "The Figure of the Matriarch". Staff seminar, English Department University of Arhus 1996, p.1. Farmer travelled to Arhus to see the Grauballe man and to go to Silkeborg (the Tollund Man) and to the Nationalmuseet in Copenhagen. (unpublished)

- 4 Beverley Farmer, "The Past Within", Warana, Brisbane 1993, p.2.
- 5 Drusilla Modjeska. *Stravinsky's Lunch*, Picador/Pan MacMillan, Sydney, 1999, p.111.
- 6 Beverley Farmer, "Journeys", paper for "Woman and Reading Seminar", Canberra 1992, p.5. (unpublished)
- 7 Ibid., p.2.
- 8 Fiona Capp, "Building on a sense of place", *The Age*, Saturday Extra, 29 August 1992, p.9.
- 9 Kenzaburo Oe, *The South China Morning Post*, 29 April 1995. The formula was taken up by Brian Castro in "Writing Asia", in *Looking for Estrellita*, pp.147-8.
Gillian Whitlock, "Women's writing 1970-1990", in Carole Ferrier (ed.) *Gender Politics & Fiction*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1985, p.241.
- 11 Marylynn Scott. "Rebuilding Lifeworlds: Marylynn Scott interviews Beverley Farmer", *Kunapipi*, Vol. 16., No. 1, 1994, p.99.
- 12 Felicity Plunkett reads this central metaphor in the text in terms of sexual identity in "True Sex and Other Catastrophes: sexuality, identity and grief in *The Seal Woman*", *Southerly*, Vol. 58, No. 3, Spring 1998, pp.115-124. Considering the triangular relationship between Tess, Martin and Dagmar she asks "is bi-sexuality the disputed terrain of this text"?, and takes issue with the "awkward closure" of Dagmar's embrace of maternity, p.122.
- 13 Felicity Plunkett cites Nicole Brossard "life is in the mouth that speaks", with its pun on *je theme* and *je t'aime*, p.117.
- 14 Beverley Farmer, "Landscapes of the Mind", 1999. (unpublished)
- 15 Lyn McCredden and Robin Lucas, *The Space of Poetry*, Melbourne University Press, 1996, p.xiv.
- 16 David Buchbinder, *Contemporary Literary Theory and the Reading of Poetry*, Macmillan, Sydney, 1991, p.129.
- 17 Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture and Identity*, Routledge, London, 1994, p.22.
- 18 Email correspondence with the author in response to questions about literary influences, October 1999.
- 19 David Buchbinder, *Contemporary Literary Theory and the Reading of Poetry*, Macmillan, Sydney, 1991, p.120.
- 20 Jennifer Ellison, *Rooms of Their Own*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1986, p.130.

- 21 Katharine Englan , "A return to the watery edges of fact and fable", *The Advertiser*, 5 September 1992, p.11.
- 22 Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion*, Routledge London, 1995, p.111.
- 23 Jennifer Ellison, *Rooms of Their Own*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1986, p.129.
- 24 Barbara Milech, "Poetry and Gender", in David Buchbinder, *Contemporary Literary Theory and the Reading of Poetry*, Macmillan, Sydney, 1991, pp.130-131.
- 25 Beverley Farmer, "The Effect of Asian Spirituality on my writing", Melbourne Writer's Festival, 1993. (unpublished)
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Michael Sharkey, "Slippery tale swims out of the fog", *The Weekend Australian*, (Review), 19/20 September 1992, p.7.
- 28 Xavier Pons, "Blood and Water: Feminine Writing in Beverley Farmer's *The Seal Woman*", *Kunapipi*, Vol. 16, No. 1. 1994, p.74.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Having taught this novel I have observed that there is a higher degree of tolerance of the pace and subtle use of imagery, and of this novel's conclusion, by women readers; but I find it impossible to define precisely why this should be so.
- 31 Rosemary Radford Reuther, *Women Healing Earth: Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism and Religion*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll New York, 1996.
- 32 Ruth Blair, "Writing the body: writing the land: Beverley Farmer's *The Seal Woman* and Terry Tempest Williams *Refuge*", (unpublished paper). American Association of Australian Literary Studies Conference, Salt Lake City, Utah, April 1999, p.3.
- 33 Katherine Cummings, "Something Rich and Strange", *Australian Women's Book Review* 1, March 1993, p.6. There is an interesting observation in this review that "Dagmar exorcises the past by consigning her current lover to the mirror image of her first extra-marital love" (7). The Orpheus story with death via the mirror is also relevant.
- 34 Felicity Plunkett, "True Sex and Other Catastrophes: sexuality, identity and grief in *The Seal Woman*", *Southerly*, Vol. 58, No. 3, Spring 1998, p.124.
- 35 Nicolette Stasko, "Language the Instrument of Fiction", *Southerly*, Vol. 53, No. 4, December 1993, pp.174-182.

- 36 Barbara Milech, "Poetry & Gender" in David Buchbinder. *Contemporary Literary Theory and the Reading of Poetry*, Macmillan, Sydney, 1991.
- 37 Susan Lever, *The Oxford Book of Australian Women's Verse*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1995, p.xvi.
- 38 Dale Spender, *Heroines*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1991, p.15.
- 39 David Buchbinder, *Masculinities and Identities*, Melbourne University Press 1994, p.viii. Buchbinder also suggests that it is "the mythology of gender that struggles to remain stable by continuing to insist on a particular model or group of models of attitudes or behaviour ... myth makes sense of the universe to a particular culture", p.8.

Notes to Chapter 6

- 1 Beverley Farmer, "Seeing in the Dark", *Southerly*, Vol. 58, No. 3, Spring 1998, p.92.
- 2 Ross Gibson film, *Camera Natura*, 1985
- 3 This phrase appears in Gail Jones, "The Heart Beating Across the Room (On possessing someone else's photographs)", National Library Australian Voices Essay, *Australian Book Review*, No. 173, August 1995, p.36, and is cited in full later in this article.
- 4 Lyn Jacobs, "Dialogue with Beverley Farmer", *Southerly*, Vol. 58, No. 3, Spring, 1998, p.28.
- 5 Delia Falconer, "Honeycomb Castles of Art", *The Age*, Saturday Extra, 15 April, 1995 p.9.
- 6 Beverley Farmer, *Home Time*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1985, p.25. This observation is further contextualised by an earlier study of Farmer's fiction: Lyn Jacobs, "The Fiction of Beverley Farmer", *Australian Literary Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3. May 1990, pp.325-335.
- 7 Farmer's *A Body of Water* (1990) offers a fine example of this interest as the narrative evolves from a compilation of visual, textual and lived experience until five stories emerge in a distinctive demonstration of the creative process. *The Seal Woman* (1992) similarly pays its dues to myths, narratives and images from a range of sources.
- 8 Beverley Farmer, "New Directions via *A Body of Water*", Notes & Documents, *Australian Literary Studies*, No. 17, No. 2. 1995, p.178.

- 9 Barthes Roland, (trans. Stephen Heath), "The Photographic Message", *Image Music Text*, London, 1977, p. 29.
- 10 This apt term I owe to J. Sloan (ed.) *Southerly*, Vol. 58, Spring 1998.
- 11 Gale MacLachlan & Ian Reid, *Framing and Interpretation*, Melbourne University Press, 1994, p.85, argue that to communicate in writing is to run a greater risk of being misunderstood; in face-to-face conversation, but Farmer also demonstrates that the "surface" of conversation is often "misinterpreted". For example, Bell simply asks in conversation "If the local shrine is still by the river", to which Kyria Sophia defensively retorts, "Why should it not be?" (11). Throughout, their communication is fraught by different cultural conversational practices.
- 12 Lyn Jacobs, "Dialogue with Beverley Farmer", *Southerly*, Vol. 58, No. 3, Spring 1998, p.29.
- 13 In the 1970s John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* was an influential text, but since then postmodern interest in the interpretive potential of "framing" and analysis of gender and power by feminist theorists like Julia Kristeva and Elizabeth Grosz has widened debate. Gail MacLachlan's and Ian Reid's *Framing and Interpretation* offers a useful introduction to reading practice and Grosz's *Volatile Bodies*, to issues of gender. Judith Butler (1998) analyses performative practices in *Excitable Speech: a Politics of the Performative* (Routledge, London). The French semiotician Ferdinand De Saussure insisted on the social nature of language, but stressed the fact that meaning is something not given but that words have a meaning because they belong to communities which receive and recognise a system of codes.
- 14 Gail Jones, "The Heart Beating Across the Room (On possessing someone else's photographs)", National Library Australian Voices Essay, *Australian Book Review*, No. 173, August 1995, p.36.
- 15 Beverley Farmer, "New Directions via *A Body of Water*", Notes & Documents, *Australian Literary Studies*, No. 17, No. 2, 1995, p.178.
- 16 Lyn Jacobs, "Dialogue with Beverley Farmer", *Southerly*, Vol. 58, No. 3, Spring 1998, p.27.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Offered *sardelles* for an evening meal Bell's vision of Mamma cooking outside is so acute that "she can even smell the pungent herb in the summer night" while in this later setting they have been pan-fried inside to avoid the rain (19).

- 19 "It was anciently believed that the eyes of some persons darted noxious rays on objects which they glared upon. The first morning glance of such eyes was certain destruction to man or beast ... Virgil speaks of an evil eye making cattle lean." *Brewers Dictionary of Phrase & Fable*, Avanel, New York, 1978, p.431.
- 20 There is a similar thematic use of the image of hands throughout the text: from the close-up photograph of Mamma's hands taken by Bell, her talisman which is lost symbolically when she steals the chocolate olive, to their use in Buddhist and Greek iconography and the observation that women's hands cannot stop war. (214)
- 21 Penny Debelle, "Making Connections", *The Age*, Saturday Extra, 24 June 1995, p.9.
- 22 Lyn Jacobs, "Dialogue with Beverley Farmer", *Southerly*, Vol. 58, No. 3, Spring 1998, p.27.
- 23 Kristin Hammett, "Beverley Farmer: a retrospective", *Southerly*, Vol. 56, No, Autumn, 1996, p.98.
- 24 Lyn Jacobs, "Dialogue with Beverley Farmer", *Southerly*, Vol. 58, No. 3, Spring 1998 p.29.
- 25 Beverley Farmer, "The Art of the Impossible", *Island Magazine*, 29, Summer, 1986/87, p.50.
- 26 Peter Pierce, "Easter in Greece, an unsentimental story", *Canberra Times*, 15 April 1995, p.C8.
- 27 Matthew Condon, "Pungent Greece", *The Weekend Australian*, 13-14 May, 1995, p.8.
- 28 Robin Lucas, "Glittering prism of life and love", *The Bulletin*, Vol. 11, No. 5955, 18 April 1995, p.105.
- 29 Lyn Jacobs, "Dialogue with Beverley Farmer", *Southerly*, Vol. 58, No. 3, Spring 1998, p.26.
- 30 Matthew Condon, "Pungent Greece", *The Weekend Australian*, 13-14 May 1995, p.8.
- 31 Katrina Iffland, "Turning facts into Fiction", *The Canberra Times*, Saturday 11 March, 1995, p.C13.
- 32 Beverley Farmer, "Talking to Lucia Bertagnin, 5 May 1994" (unpublished).
- 33 Ibid.

Notes to Chapter 7

- 1 KFarme 'pubdli shed pdoeTmsh appeali in jdo1:lrnals like *Island Magazine*, *unaplpl* an *O ver¹an*. ey are ste m the Bibliograph under Uncollected Verse.
- 2 Beverley Farmer, "For the Days of Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter", as yet unpublished. I have included a discussion of one section of the *haiku* sequence "Autumn" in this chapter. The dramatic poem is currently entitled "Tongue of Blood".
- 3 See Chapter Four, *A Body of Water*.
- 4 Susan Lever, *The Oxford Book of Australian Women's Verse*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne:, 1995. p.xx
- 5 Beverley Farmer, Email correspondence, 20 November 1999.
- 6 In an article by Peta Landman entitled "Home Time" published in *Follow me Gentlemen*, p.125, Farmer commends this "spare and simple prose" and observes: "I re-work my stories many times-sometimes the form is obscured by something that doesn't belong there. It's just chiselling away so that when you are left with the final story, everything coheres and is important."
- 7 Beverley Farmer at Warana in September 1993. Email correspondence, 7 December 1999.
- 8 Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics*, Routledge London, 1991, p.64.
- 9 Rose Lucas and Lyn McCredden, *Bridgings: Readings in Australian Women's Poetry*, Oxford Melbourne, 1996, p.xiii.
- 10 Beverley Farmer, *A Body of Water*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1990, p.81.
- 11 Rose Lucas, "J.S. Harry's Imaginary Pelicans: Translations on the poetic canvas" in Lyn McCredden and Stephanie Trigg, (eds), *The Space of Poetry*, Melbourne University Library, Melbourne, 1996, p.170.
- 12 Beverley Farmer, *Collected Stories*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1996.
- 13 I am reminded of Patrick White's remark about his Nobel Prize (1973) as "an albatross that when hung around the neck would be guaranteed to wreck anyone's life". Farmer indicates that the albatross in the Baudelaire poem owes nothing to Coleridge. "Precisely because of its giant wingspan, this one cannot take off from the deck where it has been lured, and where the earthbound crew jeer and torment it ... like Madame in the classroom. Her

- choice of the poem shows that she identifies with it. The last thing Brenda wants is to be drawn into the orbit of Madame (at first anyway)." Correspondence with author, December 2000.
- 14 Beverley Farmer, *Collected Stories*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1996, p.59
 - 15 An artist like Sylvia Plath re-invented herself (with Ted Hughes' help) to meet her own needy "ferocious" and "steady efforts". Discussion of Sylvia Plath's art and her early influence on Farmer's writing; email correspondence, 30 November 1999.
 - 16 Seamus Heaney in Beverley Farmer, "Preoccupations", Notes and Documents", *Australian Literary Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3, May 1990, p.390.
 - 17 Philip Larkin, *The Whitsun Weddings*, Faber & Faber, London, 1979, p.22.
 - 18 Shklovsky in Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* Routledge, London, 1991, p.62.
 - 19 Roger Cardinal, *Sensibility and Creation*, Croom Helm, London, 1977, p.14.
 - 20 Farmer is very short-sighted and wears contact lenses all the time.
 - 21 Vincent Buckley, *Late Winter Child*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1979.
 - 22 Carl G. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd., London, 1933, p.199. Farmer advises that Kristin Hammett in the 1995 *Southerly* incorrectly cites her at 1995 Canberra Wordfest as saying that "two of her bedside favourites are *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and *The Works of Carl Jung*".
 - 23 Northrop Frye, 'The Keys to Dreamland' in *The Educated Imagination*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1964, p.94.
 - 24 Beverley Farmer, correspondence December 2000.
 - 25 Rosemary Huisman, *The Written Poem*, Cassell, London, 1998, p.153.
 - 26 This harmony perhaps depends on the maintenance of spaces between the women but the lightness of tone does not emphasise this.
 - 27 Beverley Farmer, "Paddle", *Kunapipi*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 1994, p.72. Farmer advises that "the three women were Margaret Scott (it was her beach, her yellow boat); Ruth Blair and herself". She explains that "three women, three gulls and three-line William Carlos Williams stanzas-with a difference, the single lines interspersed:

- and that was because Ruth lent me a translation of Rilke's *Duino Elegies* done into strict William Carlos Williams stanzas a fascinating refocussing of these poems." Correspondence, December 2000.
- 28 Beverley Farmer, "Landscapes of the Mind", unpublished paper, 1999.
- 29 Unlike Thea Astley Farmer does not overtly offer to "draw a map" but she does set up fields of vision which constantly overlap to create a multi-layered palimpsest.
- 30 Beverley Farmer, "Snapshots of Kakadu, for Jane Moore" *Northern Perspective*, p.2. December 1986. p.84
- 31 Beverley Farmer, "Crossing to Zakynthos", first published in *The Age Saturday Extra*, 1988, 18 June, p.13, then in *A Body of Water* University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1990, p.95.
- 32 Beverley Farmer, "Headland, Tasmania", *Island Magazine*, No. 31, Winter 1987, p.72
- 33 Beverley Farmer, "Heat Wave", *Overland* 118, 1990, p.29
- 34 Beverley Farmer, "Rain", *Stand UK*, No. 38, 2, Spring 1997, p.76.
- 35 Beverley Farmer, "A Moth", *Island Magazine*, No. 31, Winter 1987, p.71.
- 36 Beverley Farmer, "On Bruny", *The Age*, 14 March 1987, p.13.
- 37 Beverley Farmer and Alex Miller were the Australian writers at the Leeds CLAS conference and then at Kent (BASA) and Aarhus.
- 38 This poem was written for a festschrift for Anna Rutherford (*A Talent [ed] Digger*) to commemorate her work with *Kunapipi* and her long and nurturing promotion of Australian Literature in Europe and elsewhere.
- 39 Beverley Farmer, *A Body of Water*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1990, p.261.
- 40 Ibid., p.21.
- 41 Ibid., p.114.
- 42 Ibid., p.24.
- 43 Alan W. Watts, *The Way of Zen*, Penguin, Middlesex, 1957, p.202. Farmer advises that her main reference for the Japanese forms was the Introduction to *The Penguin Book of Zen Poetry* edited and translated by Lucien Stryk and Takashi Ikemoto, 1981. She also notes that on p.91 Watts is referring to the most famous *haiku* of all time, Basho's: Old pond/leap-splash/ a frog.

- 44 This complexity is discussed further by Kametaro: [http://www.st.rim.or.jp/~beck/kametaro/seasonwords 2.htm/](http://www.st.rim.or.jp/~beck/kametaro/seasonwords2.htm/)
- 45 Jane Reichhold <http://www.ahapoetry.com>
 In illustrating Farmer's use of these forms the first lines are used as a key to publication but Farmer has noted that *haiku* should remain untitled.
- 46 The legacy of *haiku's* association with the principle of spontaneity, of recording the "here and now", is still debated but there is a tale of Basho's dream of being allowed to remain in a shrine and shelter from rain if he could construct a *haiku* that "fitted this moment", which he did successfully.
- 47 Alan W. Watts, *The Way of Zen*, Penguin, Middlesex, 1957, p.204
- 48 Beverley Farmer, *A Body of Water*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1990, p.6. This poem's central image recurs in a variant form in another poem entitled "Five *Tanka*".
- 49 Beverley Farmer, *A Body of Water*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1990, p.30.
- 50 *Ibid.*, p.52.
- 51 Geoffrey Brownas and Anthony Thwaite (translators), *The Penguin Book of Japanese Verse*, Penguin Books, Middlesex, 1964, p.xi.
- 52 *Ibid* p. xlv.
- 53 Beverley Farmer, *A Body of Water*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1990, p.262.
- 54 Richard MacDonald advises on <http://www.ahapoetry.com/tanka.htm#thanks> that rhyme is not used in Japanese *tankas* as this would be too easy and that the *tanka* was originally written to be chanted.
- 55 Geoffrey Brownas and Anthony Thwaite (translators), *The Penguin Book of Japanese Verse*, Penguin Books, Middlesex, 1964. p.xlviii
- 56 Beverley Farmer, *Luna* 24, 1986, p.23. The second-to-last stanza appears independently in *A Body of Water* where it constitutes a childhood memory, p.258.
- 57 Beverley Farmer, *A Body of Water*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1990, p.140.
- 58 Geoffrey Brownas and Anthony Thwaite (translators) *The Penguin Book of Japanese Verse*, Penguin Books, Middlesex, 1964. p.lii.
- 59 Beverley Farmer, *A Body of Water*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1990, p.34.

- 60 Ibid., p.36.
- 61 I am aware that t e eryone _appro:es of this style; the most memorable opposition ls found m Jennifer Maiden's protest ab t "u iquitous Japan:se- uence hit a ? type[s] of poem]" which she saw as akin to martial arts --cited in David Brooks *The Necessary Jungle: Literature and Excess*. Penguin/McPhe Gribble, Ringwood, 1990, p.64.
- 62 Beverley Farmer, *A Body of Water*, University of Queensland Press St Lucia, 1990, p.194.
- 63 Ibid., p.244.
- 64 Ibid., pp.244-245
- 65 Ibid., p.264.
- 66 *Moiroloi'* comes from *moira*, fate, and *logos*, pl. *logoi*, word, speech (translation Beverley Farmer)
- 67 Patrick White, *The Aunt's Story*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1948, p.108.
- 68 As I understand it this practice has evolved as a consequence of lack of physical space for burials over the centuries.
- 69 Yannis Ritzos, *The Fourth Dimension*, (translators Peter Breen and Beverly Bardsley), Princeton University Press, 1993. These are long poems amalgamating the past and present, the living and the dead.
- 70 *Southeastern Review*, Vol. 1, No. 3, (Greece) 1990, pp.161-164.
- 71 Beverley Farmer, Interview with Fiona Capp, "Building on a sense of place", *The Age*, Saturday Extra, 1992, 29 August, p.9.
- 72 Ibid., p.9.
- 73 David Buchbinder, "Poetry and History" *Contemporary Literary Theory and the Reading of Poetry*, MacMillan, Melbourne, 1991 p.98.
- 74 Rose Lucas and Lyn McCredden, *Bridgings: Readings in Australian Women's Poetry*, Oxford Melbourne, 1996, p.xiii.

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- 1 Ray Willbanks, *Speaking Volumes :Australian Writers and their work*, Penguin, Melbourne, 1992. p.80.
- 2 Ibid., p.84.
- 3 Several of the published works have since been modified and expanded. "Mouths of Gold" will be published shortly in *Heat* and

- is possibly part of a much longer work. Others are being re-shaped to fit the project described here where photographs and text are relational.
- 4 Beverley Farmer, Email correspondence 29 June 2000.
 - 5 Nicolette Stasko, "Correspondence: The Art of Beverley Farmer", *Southerly*, Vol. 56, No. 1, Autumn, p.41.
 - 6 Peter Craven, *The Best Australian Essays 2000*, Black Inc., Melbourne 2000, p.xii.
 - 7 Beverley Farmer wrote a paper for a Canberra "Women and Reading Seminar" in 1992 (unpublished) in which she observed that "any writing is a journey by its nature, a journey in time. Its medium is time. It's like music in that it has to be experienced in the context of time-unlike painting and sculpture, which is apprehended in space whether two-dimensional or three ... But music comes to us note by note in more or less complex patterns of rhythm, as do poetry and prose, in that case, word by word". Citing Dante's *Inferno* and Eliot's *Four Quartets*, Farmer acknowledged the exploration of "inner journeys" or journeys of mind as a pattern of her work in *The Seal Woman* and *A Body of Water*.
 - 8 The exception to this is "Notes Towards the Scream" which was published as work-in-progress in Brenda Walker's collection of new writing entitled *Risks*, Fremantle Arts Press, Fremantle WA, 1996, p.199.
 - 9 H. Gomrich, *The Story of Art*, Phaidon, London, 1950, p.422.
 - 10 Van Gogh and Gauguin are generally referred to as post-, given their rejection of impressionism. Farmer advises that Gauguin saw himself as a Symbolist or Synthetist while Munch assumed the mantle of the first expressionist. The designation "Fauves" describes the work of Braque, Rouault and others. Jean Clay advises in *Modern Art 1890-1918* that the term "Fauves" came from one critic's comparison of a classical sculpture in the Italian style surrounded by contrasting modern art in a room of a 1907 exhibition as "Donatello in the midst of wild beasts [fauves]". Octopus Books, 1978. p.312.
 - 11 Beverley Farmer, "Arles", *Southerly*, Vol. 56, No. 1, Autumn, 1996. pp.82-91.
 - 12 Farmer advises that a further paradox resides in the fact that the moth "is a symbol of death because its markings look like a drawing of a skull". Correspondence, December 2000.
 - 13 Roberta Buffi, "Scraping and Re-painting Reflecting Surfaces:

- Mirrors and Water in Beverley Farmer's Fiction" *A n t i p o d e s*, June, 2000, Vol. 14, No. 1, pp.35-40.
- 14 Beverley Farmer, "Pete des Miels", *Island* 80/81, Spring/Summer 1999/2000, p.41. In an email on 28 November 2000 Beverley Farmer advised that "Arles" is to be renamed "Pete de Soleil" as a match for "Pete des Miels". Farmer also advised that "there is a link between a fundraiser in Paris for flood victims called 'Pete de soleil' and Vincent Van Gogh's idea of Arles in the first place."
 - 15 Brenda Walker, *Risks*, Fremantle Arts Press, Fremantle WA, 1996. p.199.
 - 16 Farmer notes that while red sunsets appear anywhere, the conjunction of sunset and human angst is distinctive. Munch characteristically worked from real rather than imagined settings. Email correspondence December, 2000.
 - 17 Michael Levey, *A History of Western Art*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1968 p.311.
 - 18 Beverley Farmer, "Pete des Miels", *Island*, 80/81, Spring/Summer 1999/2000, p.40.
 - 19 Beverley Farmer, "Seeing in the Dark", *Southerly*, Vol. 58, No. 3, Spring, 1998, pp.84-97. This essay has since been radically revised and extended. Email, 28 November, 2000.
 - 20 Farmer advises that Robert Temple's *The Crystal Sun* was a useful source because of its information about lenses and telescopes in ancient Egypt, Carthage, Greece and Rome. Email 28 November 2000.
 - 21 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, London, 1984, p.81. Cited in Beverley Farmer, "Seeing in the Dark", *Southerly*, Vol. 58, No. 3, Spring, 1998, pp.84-97.
 - 22 Beverley Farmer, "Seeing in the Dark", *Southerly*, Vol. 58, No. 3, Spring, 1998. p.90.
 - 23 Beverley Farmer, "Mouths of Gold" (unpublished, due for publication *Heat* 2001) p.1.
 - 24 This image echoes Judith Wright's depiction of sheet-folding in the poem "Smalltown Dance" (1985), in John Leonard, *Australian Verse: An Oxford Anthology*, Oxford, Melbourne, 1998, p.212.
 - 25 Email, December 2000.
 - 26 Farmer notes that the Mycenae doorway is a negative print and refers to the passage in *The Golden Ass*. Email correspondence, December 2000.

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- 1 Beverley Farmer, "Mouths of Gold", (unpublished), p.14.
- 2 Susan Lever, *Real Relations: Australian Ficto-Realism, Feminism and Form*, ASAL Literary Series, Halstead Press, Sydney 2000, p.147.

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Beverley Farmer's writing is valued for its clarity and intellectual breadth, its perceptive appreciation of people and place and its lyrical, evocative and stylish prose. Lyn Jacobs' comprehensive critical study of Farmer's art surveys her poetry and prose and subsequent criticism to assess Farmer's contribution to contemporary Australian writing.

Farmer's interrogations of the sites and rites of cultural formation and change and the effects of memory and time are evaluated. Jacobs reads this work in relation to postmodern revision of writing and reception: shifts in gender politics, departures from modernist paradigms, problematisations of self-expression and authenticity, redefinitions of performative, fictocritical and queer writing-spaces, and increasing hybridity of genre and form. Jacobs argues that Farmer leads readers beyond familiar thresholds, writing 'against the grain' to convey a sensuous and intellectual appreciation of life experience.

Lyn Jacobs is Associate Professor in Australian Literature and Australian Studies at the Flinders University where she has taught English since 1979 and lectured since 1988. Lyn's reviews and articles on contemporary Australian fiction, Australian poetry and Australian women's writing, have been published and valued locally and internationally.

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