

Classic Poetry Series

Judith Beveridge
- poems -

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Judith Beveridge(1956 -)

Judith Beveridge (born 1956) is a contemporary Australian poet, editor and academic.

Judith Beveridge was born in London, England, arriving in Australia with her parents in 1960. Completing a BA at UTS she has worked in libraries, teaching, as a researcher and in environmental regeneration. She currently teaches creative writing at Newcastle and Sydney universities and is poetry editor for Meanjin, having previously edited Hobo and the Australian Arabic literature journal Kalimat.

Appaloosa

<i>I have always loved the word guitar </i>
- David St. John

I have never been bumped in a saddle as a horse springs
from one diagonal to another,
a two-beat gait, light and balanced,
as the four-beats per stride become the hair-blowing,
wind-in-the-face, grass-rippling,
muscle-loosening, forward-leaning
exhilaration of the gallop.

And I have never counted the slow four-beat pace
of distinct, successive hoofbeats
in such an order as to be called The Walk.
Or learned capriole, piaffe, croupade in a riding school,
nor heard the lingo of outback cattle-cutters
spat out with their whip-ends and phlegm.

I have never stepped my hands over the flanks
of a spotted mare; nor hidden a Cleveland Bay
carriage horse, or a Yorkshire coach horse;
a French Percheron with musical snicker;
or a little Connemara its face buried
in broomcorn, or in a bin of Wexford apples.

I have never called a horse Dancer, Seabiscuit, Ned,
Nellie, Trigger or Chester, or made clicking
noises with my tongue, fifty kilometers
to town with a baulking gelding and a green
quartern top buggy. Nor stood in a field while
an old nag worked very acre,
only stopping to release difficult knobs of manure,
and swat flies with her tail. And though I have

waited for jockeys at the backs of stables
in the mist and rain, for the soft feel of their riding silks
and saddles, for the cool smoke of their growth stunting
cigarettes, for the names of the yearlings
and mares they whisper along with the names

of horse-owning millionaires—ah, more, more even
than them—I have always loved the word appaloosa.

Judith Beveridge

Bahadour

The sun stamps his shadow on the wall
and he's left one wheel of his bicycle
spinning. It is dusk, there are a few minutes

before he must pedal his wares through
the streets again. But now, nothing
is more important than this kite working

its way into the wobbly winter sky.
For the time he can live at the summit
of his head without a ticket, he is following

the kite through pastures of snow where
his father calls into the mountains for him,
where his mother weeps his farewell into

the carriages of a five-day train. You can
see so many boys out on the rooftops this
time of day, surrendering diamonds to

the thin blue air, putting their arms up, neither
in answer nor apprehension, but because
the days tenders them a coupon of release.

He does not think about the failing light,
nor of how his legs must mint so many steel
suns from a bicycle's wheels each day,

nor of how his life must dropp like a token
into its appropriate slot; not even
of constructing whatever angles would break

the deal that transacted away his childhood –
nor of taking some fairness back to Nepal,
but only of how he can find purchase

with whatever minutes of dusk are left
to raise a diamond, to claim some share
of hope, some acre of sky within a hard-fisted

budget; and of how happy he is, yielding,
his arms up, equivalent now only to himself,
a last spoke in the denominations of light.

Judith Beveridge

Capricorn

Through the end of an old Coke bottle he tracks
the flight of a petrel, until it is tattered by
sea-wind and another blurred mintage of the sun.

Along the pier, he hears the men with their
reels, with their currency of damp sand. His rod
quivers – weighted not with fish, but with

the names of storms: Harmattan, Vendavales –
turbid winds running the vanguard of
dangerous straits. He kicks at a pile of fishscales:
galleon ballast, a hoard of ducats spilled
from an old Dutch dogger. The men will soon
chase him off, this raucous hero plundering

brigs. But now the bottle is a horn into which
he pours so much breath, and the air has
a tone borrowed from a blowhole, from wind
singing through a bridge's rusting struts.
A crab sifts sandgrains for its hole; its claw,
an old sea-brigand's hook, is paying out

doubloons and threats. Ah, but you know – if
you were to take this child's hand, if you
were to keep his gaze in yours and wait for
each circulation of his breath; if you were
to watch the pirated scenes of daydreams
play out through a windfall of glass – then

you'd see the copper-coloured sun. You'd walk
this beach a long time with your thoughts
trading in weather and wind, the petrels keeping
pace with the rackish lines of dreams
sailing in with the clinker-built storms. The past
and the present would not be depressions

facing each other, nor would there be grains
of sand abrading your fate... On the shore,
a gull, dead from the night's storm. With his rod,
the boy flings it up, the glove of a dueller

he's just Zorroed with his sword... No, the world
would not be a wave repeating its collapse,
but whatever mintage of story a boy can find
among fishscales, sand, and the common
issuance of wind; a boy who knows nothing
of the linkages between storms; nor of
the men, yet, who log weather's quick decay
onto gauges of abuse; who knows nothing
about paying for that old voyage toward death.

Judith Beveridge

How to Love Bats

Begin in a cave.

Listen to the floor boil with rodents, insects.

Weep for the pups that have fallen. Later,
you'll fly the narrow passages of those bones,

but for now —

open your mouth, out will fly names
like Pipistrelle, Desmodus, Tadarida. Then,
listen for a frequency
lower than the seep of water, higher
than an ice planet hibernating
beyond a glacier of Time.

Visit op shops. Hide in their closets.
Breathe in the scales and dust
of clothes left hanging. To the underwear
and to the crumbled black silks — well,
give them your imagination
and plenty of line, also a night of gentle wind.

By now your fingers should have
touched petals open. You should have been dreaming
each night of anthers and of giving
to their furred beauty
your nectar-loving tongue. But also,
your tongue should have been practising the cold
of a slippery, frog-filled pond.

Go down on your elbows and knees.
You'll need a speliologist's desire for rebirth
and a miner's paranoia of gases —
but try to find within yourself
the scent of a bat-loving flower.

Read books on pogroms. Never trust an owl.
Its face is the biography of propaganda.
Never trust a hawk. See its solutions
in the fur and bones of regurgitated pellets.

And have you considered the smoke
yet from a moving train? You can start
half an hour before sunset,
but make sure the journey is long, uninterrupted
and that you never discover
the faces of those Trans-Siberian exiles.

Spend time in the folds of curtains.
Seek out boarding-school cloakrooms.
Practise the gymnastics of web umbrellas.

Are you
floating yet, thought-light,
without a keel on your breastbone?
Then, meditate on your bones as piccolos,
on mastering the thermals
beyond the tremolo; reverberations
beyond the lexical.

Become adept
at describing the spectacles of the echo —
but don't watch dark clouds
passing across the moon. This may lead you
to fetishes and cults that worship false gods
by lapping up bowls of blood from a tomb.

Practise echo-locating aerodromes,
stamens. Send out rippling octaves
into the fossils of dank caves —
then edit these soundtracks
with a metronome of dripping rocks, heartbeats
and with a continuous, high-scaled wondering
about the evolution of your own mind.

But look, I must tell you — these instructions
are no manual. Months of practice
may still only win you appreciation
of the acoustical moth,
hatred of the hawk and owl. You may need

to observe further the floating black host
through the hills.

Judith Beveridge

Mud Crabs, Low Tide

I feel a sharpness under the surface like tin-tacks,
having come down to their soft mud among smells
where most would retch. They sift broken bits,
tuck into their mud; the bay has the sound

that could suck a crab-claw clean: a low-tide restaurant.
Like the guileless yachts, or tunes
of light sociable chopsticks: their lilted suck and clink—
but it stops when you move, when the wind changes,

or when you ask what is their beginning or end?
Millenia ago there may have been a life for them
separate from the shore. Now they mechanically mudwallow—
half pig, half earth-moving equipment,

before they're dragged up on lines, harnessed and killed.
Clamped together they will clang into a bucket.
They'll try to scuttle away on claws like tin-openers.
But a time waits in the mangroves

when branches will basket leaves to the tide.
They accept the sun drenches them,
the mud and its fetor, the shore and its equivocal messages,
the moon shining in the ranks of their claws.

Yachts pick (cutlery tinkering an appetite)
and they thimble quickly back, their eyes needling
like blindmen's cues feeling holes.
The tide comes and the river pours. By morning,

they will have pulled themselves
through the same acres. I think of the
tinkling, the rattling in the enormous troughs
they're thrown into by the bucketful in kitchens,

steam kettling their flesh. The sun walks high
over dark mud and the made beach of their generations.
How long must they pace the brown field,
how long to endlessly dredge the sweet, the sour earth?

Judith Beveridge

Mulla Mulla Beach

Before the sea stops a long mile out
I hear the blades of fishermen scotching the rocks

and their reels beginning to grind like bicycle gears.
The sand is smooth but for weed,

jelly-fish clear as surgical gloves.
I watch the men who fish all day, eyes fast

on the water, who were born hearing the sea always there.
A place will seep into the voice

of any local. I walk where sponges grow
like moist yeast, a new world to me,

but familiar. I squeeze the sea out.
Part of that plain voice goes dead.

It is the talk of people living here all year round
who wish just to be left alone.

Now, at almost dark, a dead confetti
of fish-scales sticks to the rocks.

There's no word but the sea's and tide-winded shells
pacing quietly as shore-runners:

though sometimes, there is a line, a murmur
winding and unwinding in the shells.

Judith Beveridge

Orb Spider

I saw her, pegging out her web
thin as a pressed flower in the bleaching light.
From the bushes a few small insects
clicked like opening seed-pods. I knew some
would be trussed up by her and gone next morning.
She was so beautiful spinning her web
above the marigolds the sun had made
more apricot, more amber; any bee
lost from its solar flight could be gathered
back to the anther, and threaded onto the flower
like a jewel.

She hung in the shadows
as the sun burnt low on the horizon
mirrored by the round garden bed. Small petals
moved as one flame, as one perfectly-lit hoop.
I watched her work, produce her known world,
a pattern, her way to traverse
a little portion of the sky;
a simple cosmography, a web drawn
by the smallest nib. And out of my own world
mapped from smallness, the source
of sorrow pricked, I could see
immovable stars.

Each night
I saw the same dance in the sky,
the pattern like a match-box puzzle,
tiny balls stuck in a grid until shaken
so much, all the orbits were in place.
Above the bright marigolds
of that quick year, the hour-long day,
she taught me to love the smallest transit,
that the coldest star has planetesimal beauty.
I watched her above the low flowers
tracing her world, making it one perfect drawing.

Judith Beveridge

The Dice-Player

I've had my nose in the ring since I was nine.
I learned those cubes fast: how to play a blind
bargain; how to empty a die from my palm
and beguile by turns loaded with prayers –
then sleight of hand. Ten or fifteen years
and you get wrists like a tabla-player's, jaws

cut and edged by the knuckles and customs
of luck and deception. The fun's in sham,
in subterfuge, in the eyes smoking out
an opponent's call. I let my thumb stalk
each die, get to know which edge might
damage probability's well-worn curves.

See, all dice are cut on the teeth of thugs
liars and raconteurs. I've concocted calls
those dealing in risk and perfidy, bluff or
perjury, would envy. But I've never stolen
or coveted dice fashioned from agate
or amber, slate or jasper, or from

the perfumed peach stones of distant shores.
Some think fortunes will be won with dice
made from the regurgitated pellets of owls;
or from the guano of seabirds that ride only
the loftiest thermals. I've always had faith
in the anklebones of goats, in the luxated

kneecaps of mountain-loving pugs. Look,
I've wagered all my life on the belief that
I can dupe the stars, subtend the arcs, turn
out scrolls, louvres, pups, knacks, double
demons – well, at least give a game rhythm.
I know there'll always be an affliction

of black spots before my eyes, that my face
has its smile stacked slightly higher on
the one side, that the odds I'm not a swindler
are never square. But, Sir, when some rough

justice gets me back again to the floor,
then watch me throw fate a weighted side.

Judith Beveridge

The Fisherman's Son

Perhaps it was when he first felt his shoulders
roll an oar, or when he pulled the thick boots on.
Perhaps it was when he saw the curved thin rod
of the moon angle into his father's face and hook
his mouth into an ugly grin; or perhaps when
the sun rerouted his eyes to the necks of wading
birds along the shore as the first pink tones

of dusk uncurled along the ferns. It could have
been the way his father's knife eased out the eyes
of so many fish like spoonfuls of compote that gave
him thoughts black as the inky emulsions of squid,
a sleep no fishing boat could ease, nor star prick
with its comforting pin. Perhaps he learned nothing
from his father's face except how whiskey

trawled sleep from his eyes and left him pursued
by pain and thunder and a show of lightning's
yellow flares. Perhaps when he felt the rod
pull his arms through a reel's band of static,
when he heard his father's voice in the headache
scudding low across his forehead, the reel
with an insect's drum-head pitch his heart into

summer's mounting heat; the slow drip of days
revved up by outboards then dispelled by a drill
of mosquitoes, or weather finding tenor in its squalls.
Among stars and fish, those notes from the waste
hours he gutted, from the river's sweep of years,
who could know how many knives he heard
audition for his nerves, or what beat his heart

took, or how many rounds of an ingoing lake
before the wind rushed into the uncaulked
cracks and left him face-down, deep-drummed,
gear-slipped, deaf to his inner repertoire, blind
now to the river's weather-beaten stare.
Perhaps from a tangle of yellow air, or when
he heard the wind bale out of a speeding sky,

or a firetail add its flute to the rankling handle
of a windlass, a lyrebird weigh its call in
with an anchor's unrolling links, some twisting
erratic pull of tackle as the mosquitoes buzzed;
when he heard his father's voice in each dizzy
injected dose.... All day such talk went on
as the men brought in their hauls, gutting fish

to the noise of pelicans, those bills clacking
like clapperboards, the ease of routine. Here
among the brace of tides, as wind skips along
ropes left lank and loose and dangling now
among the sloops, no one fully knowing why
a boy would desire to die....The avocets walking
the shore with their hesitant, hair-splitting steps.

Judith Beveridge

The Kite

Today I watched a boy fly his kite.
It didn't crackle in the wind - but
gave out a barely perceptible hum.

At a certain height, I'd swear I heard
it sing. He could make it climb in
any wind; could crank those angles up,

make it veer with the precision of
an insect targeting a sting; then he'd
let it roil in rapturous finesse, a tiny

bird in mid-air courtship. When
lightning cracked across the cliff -
(like quick pale flicks of yak-hair

fly-whisks) - he stayed steady. For
so long he kept his arms up, as if
he knew he'd hoist that kite enough.

I asked if it was made of special silk,
if he used some particular string -
and what he'd heard while holding it.

He looked at me from a distance,
then asked about my alms bowl,
my robes, and about that for which

a monk lives. It was then I saw
I could tell him nothing in the cohort
wind, that didn't sound illusory.

Judith Beveridge

The Shark

We heard the creaking clutch of the crank
as they drew it up by cable and wheel
and hung it sleek as a hull from the roof.

Grennan jammed open the great jaws
and we saw how the upper jaw hung from
the skull. We flinched at the stench of blood

that dripped on the fishhouse floor, and
even Davey—when Grennan reached in
past the scowl and the steel prop for the

stump—just about passed out. The limb's
skin had already blanched, a sight none
of us could stomach, and we retched

though Grennan, cool, began cutting off
the flesh in knots, slashing off the flesh
in strips; and then Davey, flensing and

flanching, opened up the stomach and
the steaming bowels. Gulls circled like
ghouls. Still they taunt us with their cries

and our hearts still burn inside us when
we remember, how Grennan with a tool
took out what was left of the child.

Judith Beveridge

To The Islands

I will use the sound of wind and the splash
of the cormorant diving and the music
any boatman will hear in the running threads
as they sing about leaving for the Islands.

I will use a sinker's zinc arpeggio as it
rolls across a wooden jetty and the sound
of crabs in the shifting gravel and the scrape
of awls across the hulls of yachts.

I will use the wash-board chorus of the sea
and the boats and the skiffler's skirl
of tide-steered surf taken out by the wind
through the cliffs. Look—I don't know

much about how to reach the Islands, only
what I've heard from the boatman's song
and from a man who walked the headland
to find a place in the rocks free of salt

and osprey. But perhaps I can use
the bladder-wrack and barnacle, the gull
wafting above the mussels and the bird
diving back to sea. Perhaps I can use

the song sponge divers sing to time each dive
and then use their gasps as they lift
their bags onto the skiffs. Perhaps
the seapool whispers of the sun-downers

or the terns above the harbour are what
the divers sing to as they hold their
breath and swim the silent minutes through
with prayer. I will use the gull's height

and the limpet's splash and the wasps' nest
hanging like a paper lamp under the pier
and the little boat sailing out. Even the
fishermen lugging shoals over the stones,

even the sailors shift-walking the decks,
even the end-blown note of a shell leveled
towards the horizon. I will use the eagle's
flight moored in the eyes of children

and the voices of men, the ones, they say,
who've made it, though perhaps the purlin
creaking on its rafter, the gull squawking
from the jetty, the wind calling

along the moorings and the notes the divers
hear in the quiet waters of their breathing
as they seek release through depths
are all I'll, know about finding the Islands.

Meanwhile, I'll use the sound of sunlight
filling the sponges and a diver's saturated
breathing in the lungs of an oarsman
rowing weightless cargo over the reefs.

Judith Beveridge

Woman and Child

They listen to the myna birds dicker in the grass.

The child's blue shoes are caked with
garden dirt. When he runs, she sees the antics
of a pair of wrens. She works the garden,

a pot of rusting gardenias has given off its ales
and infused the danker germinations of her
grief. She watches her son chase pigeons,
kick at the leaves piled high. Now, a magpie

adds to his cascades of laughter as he runs with
the hose, pours a fine spray, happy to be giving
to the grass this silver courtship. She sighs,
watches the drops settle in. Today, who

can explain the sadness she feels. Surely this
day is to be treasured: the sun out, the breeze
like a cat's tongue licking a moon of milk;
her son expending himself in small, public

bursts, happy among clover where bees hover,
and unfold centrefolds of nectar. Today,
who can explain the heaviness in her head, as if
all her worries were tomes toward a larger work,

one she knows she will never finish, but to which
she must keep adding, thought by thought.
She sweeps the petals, smells their russet imprint.
Soon dusk will come with an envoy of smoke

and her son outlast her patience by a rose.
Already he is tiring, puling at the flowers.
It won't be long before they'll go in, listen
to the jug purr comfort. He'll sleep and she'll

lie back, or get up to unhook the cry of her cat
from the wire door. Now, a few cicadas are idling,
giving each other the gun and a cockatoo calls,
a haughty felon. She sighs, knowing she won't

escape her mood today, the turned earth
or its rank persuasions; her child's petulance
flaring like an orchid, or a cockatoo's unruly crest.
Today, she knows she will need to consider

her unhappiness, of what she is a prisoner - if not
the loss of hope's particulars. Her son soaks
the path, rinses the sky of its featureless blue.
He is giving that water, now, to everything.

Judith Beveridge