

Classic Poetry Series

Sarah Day
- poems -

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Sarah Day(1958 -)

Sarah Day was born in England and grew up in Tasmania, Australia.

Grass Notes (Brandl & Schlesinger 2009) is her most recent collection. The Ship (Brandl & Schlesinger 2004) won the University of Melbourne Wesley Michel Wright Prize 2004, the Queensland Premier's Judith Wright Calanthe Award for Poetry 2005 and was joint winner of the ACT Art & Literary Awards' Judith Wright Prize with Joanne Burns.

In 2002 her New and Selected Poems was published by Arc in UK where it received a Special Commendation by the Poetry Book Society. It was shortlisted for the NSW Premier's Awards. Before that, Quickening (Penguin Books Australia Ltd.) was published in 1997.

Her other books include A Hunger to be Less Serious which won the Anne Elder Award for a first volume of poetry in 1987 and A Madder Dance which was shortlisted for the NBC Banjo Awards.

She has received grants from the Literature Fund of the Australia Council and Arts Tasmania and was resident at the BR Whiting Library in Rome in 1993. She was invited to the Festival de Poesie in Paris in 2001 and 2004 and has been a guest at Australian festivals including Adelaide, Melbourne, Mildura, Byron Bay, Brisbane and Hobart writers festivals and at King's Lynn in England. In 2011 she read at a symposium on Australian literature and culture at the University of Lisbon, Portugal.

Her poems have been put to music by British composers Anthony Gilbert and Adam Gorb. She was poetry editor of Island Magazine for seven years. She lives in Hobart, Tasmania with her husband and two daughters. She has taught English and Creative Writing for a number of years at university and year 12 level. She has been a member of the Literature Board of the Australia Council.

Hens

I think I've been waiting for you all my life.
To glimpse you through the kitchen window
scratching between iris and daffodil,
disrupting roots, sprawling moll-like
in a patch of sun, wings spread flush
with the ground, a coquettish leg
in the air and rolling lascivious eye.
You're disruptive of course –
annuals, seedlings go by the wayside,
Christmas lilies cordoned off,
brassicas like khaki interns on parade –
but what small price
for that vigorous rustling
as mulch scatters from under hedges,
to have you beady at my side
grabbing worms as I pull up buttercups;
or whetting your beaks on the path, this side
that side, like good chefs sharpening knives.
I love the way you pose like weathervanes
on the axe handle,
to watch as I wash dishes
how today's menu, or tonic
is borage or bindweed or dock
that you will strip back
to a handful of cellulose spikes.
The way you share a laying box
when there is one for each of you
and midwife one another
through your confinements.
The way you lay eggs –
those warm white ellipses
on the straw.
Somehow for all the wreckage
the garden was never more alive.
You offer a remote conviviality
that I don't presume upon
as I would, say, a dog or cat,
I'm afraid it's species that I'm celebrating here,
not personality,

that atavistic sense of well-being you provoke
you unremarkably remarkable hens.
I'm grateful, watching you just now
splashing about in dust
for that reassurance you give,
of simple notions, like goodness.

Sarah Day

Observatory

The rattle of wind in sclerophyll
is the murmur of cosmic dust
and particle shift. With each break
in the clouds the queue shuffles
a patient step forward.
Beyond the observatory's dim glow
bush is black as dark matter tonight;
the distant river is negative space,
and the city on the other side
a scattered galaxy.
Swathed in overcoats against the cold
we wait and wait to put an eye to the telescope.
Through a fish-eye lens
the universe gazes back
into the great eye of humanity
orbiting a mundane star on the outer margins
of the Milky Way, one stella cluster
among the infinite.

Sarah Day

Sky Writing

Things fall apart. Across a summer sky
the emblematic Coca Cola script
above the uproar, miles long, a mile high

dissolves like cirrus before the squinting eye,
until all that's left's a vaporous postscript.
Things fall apart. Across a summer sky,
once, subtler heavenly signs might testify

foreshadowing the end of Rome or Egypt.
above the uproar, miles long, a mile high.
That titanium on blue could edify...
there's a lofty riddle to decrypt.

Things fall apart. Across a summer sky
now wind-drift pulls the letters all awry
the pilot banks, the plane signs off, wings tipped
above the uproar, miles long, a mile high.

See how the characters emulsify
into the blue, now vacuous, nondescript.
Things fall apart. Across a summer sky
above the uproar, miles long, a mile high.

Sarah Day

Wombat

The wombat lay, full length,
as long as a big dog, but thicker set,
a mass of weight and muscle.
Soft still, his bulk gave but didn't shift.
It gives me an uneasy feeling
to leave an animal on a road
to flatten into fur and flesh
under so many tyre prints.
You may say that bone dust is all the same –
that morsels for ravens
or worms are neither here nor there
but those meaty silhouettes receding
into ignominious shadows
on the asphalt make me unhappy.
Here, right on the bend,
this dead wombat was a ploy
to catch the outer front wheel
unawares; someone's wheel
some time in the night
had caught his living self by surprise.
His head was as big as a person's
and his grey palms big and soft as
a child's, with lines scored:
the line of fate, the line of the heart.
His fur was not like that of a possum –
even, mink-like to the touch;
his pelt was all manner of hair:
dense brown under-fleece to keep him warm,
marsupial-grey flecked outer fur he shared
with wallaby and bandicoot
for melting into landscapes;
but struck all through in one
inexorable direction from head
to rear like a boar's or an otter's,
these needle-thick and pointed-at-the-end
black hairs. They seemed to be
his courage and his will.
His small eyes, his lesser sense,
already dull, evacuated; his nose,

the greater part of his great head.
His claws and shoulders brought to mind
the anecdotes of those who, rearing orphan wombats
in a human house, find, returning home,
the babies have made soft work
of plywood doors and hardwood floors.
In the end, the only way to move his bulk
was to hook an arm under each of his
and haul him like a dead man
off the yellow gravel across the ditch
and leave him on the grass bank
as if in deep repose.
Somehow, his poor back leg,
already gnawed away to the bone
by a devil or a quoll or a dog,
with its missing claw
had tucked itself away out of sight.
There he lies; the living ants and maggots will do their job:
his fur will fall apart, his mass collapse
from within, his head and claws
and massive shoulders
the last to tie him to his shape and life
as the rest recedes into two dimensions:
an arrangement of bones upon the drying grass,
summer warming up his patch of earth;
the forest ravens jawing higher up the hill,
a magpie carolling each lightening morning
and skylarks overhead
rising on each ascending note.

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