

## **Mineslec**

Pam Brown

I'll start with an analytical, egghead-type view of what an essay might be before I read one version of an essay out to you. This is from Rachel Blau du Plessis' *Blue Studios* :

'The essay is restless. Essay is the play of speculation. The test of the essay is whether it opens a space for the reader, rather than closing one. The essay is interested and agnostic, situational and material, presentational, investigative, and heuristic. Writing an essay comes from curiosity and need - the need to examine opinions and contradictions and to interrogate cultural materials, especially those taken for granted. The essay has an ethos of porous, lambent, intense examination, an antiauthoritarian play of perpetual dialectics'

I think this talk is more like a lite rambling lecture than an essay : it's not called, as a 'Sydney Morning Herald' journalist put it, 'Poetry for Dummies', it's called

### **Say It With Rroses**

(the 'Rr' referring to 'Rose Selavy' an alter ego of Marcel Duchamp)

### **Or Roses Only**

Traditionally, and kind of obviously, an occasional poem is one written for a special occasion - someone's birthday for example. Acrostics are often a favourite form for birthdays (a basic acrostic poem usually has the first letter of each line, when read vertically, spelling out words - maybe the recipient's name or spelling out 'Happy Birthday' perhaps..). Other occasions that often call for poems might be weddings, or funerals (people who have never written poetry before often write a poem as a eulogy for a funeral).

After the funerals, there are incalculable 'in memoriam' poems - in memory of friends, relatives, pop stars, philosophers, politicians, mentors, famous writers. Poems for people the poet may or may not have met (nor even lived in the same country as) and yet have been an influence or have been admired by the poet.

Famously, W.H. Auden's poem 'Funeral Blues', although unintended for the movies -was popularised last century by the English comedy 'Four Weddings and a Funeral'. It was published as a pocket-sized edition by Penguin - just the thing for an occasional declaration of love.

Having seen the film, many British people, used the same Auden poem as an expression of grief accompanying the wads of floristed bouquets when the Princess of Wales died in a car crash in Paris in 1997.

And according to Nicholas Jenkins, in a recent article in the *Times Literary Supplement* : “Discussing arrangements for [Diana’s] funeral, a leader in *The Times* recalled a great poem written for a state funeral, [Alfred Lord] Tennyson’s ‘Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington’, but concluded that a different tone was wanted now: ‘Not Tennyson’s pomp and circumstance but Auden’s sad lines . . . strike the right note.’

Since then, the poem has been recited at tens of thousands of private funeral services across Britain “

(you can read the ‘Funeral Blues’ on the Red Room web site)

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I’ve only written a few occasional poems. Over twenty years ago now, I made a poem into a tiny book for a friend’s birthday - each page had one small handwritten stanza. The book could fit into the palm of your hand - the poem was called ‘Rain Story’ - it’s too long to read here but you can find it online at the Red Room site. I wrote another one not long ago for the poet John Tranter when he turned 60 which I didn’t publish but gave him as a gift. (And I can’t find a copy of that so perhaps I didn’t keep one.)

I was asked to write a poem as a kind of ‘accompanying catalogue’ by the abstract painter Virginia Coventry on the occasion of one of her exhibitions at Watters’ Gallery -

### **Squint**

weather  
empties itself  
gradually  
out of the painter  
like  
pilfered obliquities

the huge gauze  
of formalism  
lifts

breathing  
takes over  
as random flukes  
& tiny asperities  
invent  
a parameter.  
a flight path,  
an almost  
aerial city

in this absence  
of semaphore  
which colour  
makes the code ?

I did publish a New Year poem. I wrote it for Xavi Abad, a friend from Barcelona who spent the New Year holiday with us a couple of years ago. He introduced us to Catalan New Year superstitions -

### **New Year Poem for Xavi**

your pink lilies open  
and decorate  
    our white blouses  
with orange pollen

at the gothic  
    government palace  
long-necked gargoyles  
    spew rainwater  
onto our heads,  
    the teeming rain  
    arcs in streetlight

let's write down  
    anything doleful  
on these papers  
    and set them alight

let's toss  
    whatever's  
in these tumblers  
    over our shoulders

add  
    twelve green grapes,  
    freshen up,  
    last drinks  
for what's to come.

A few weeks ago I was filling in time, waiting for a movie session to begin at a nearby cinema, in Berkelouw's bookshop on Oxford Street, and as I browsed their sorrowfully unsurprising and quite small poetry section I came across a Viking-

Penguin hardback book called 'Poems For Occasions'. The Viking-Penguin occasions for poems are 'Babies/Infants/Children', 'Marriage', 'Death/Mourning/Grief', 'Partings', 'Christmas', 'New Year', and 'Valentine's Day'.

No such categories as art exhibitions, launching ships, opening buildings and no birthdays - I guess because a birthday poem is usually personal rather than generic.

Generic, like greeting card verse and, these days, electronic-greeting cards or 'e-cards' where you can 'personalise' a message. Serendipitously, the North American poet Elaine Equi has edited a selection of greeting-card poems called 'The Holiday Album' online in the current Jacket magazine. In the introduction she says

'Like many people, my first exposure to poetry was through the medium of greeting cards. Before I knew Lorca, Desnos, Stein, or Celan, I knew Hallmark. It was the habit of my mother and grandmother to save whatever cards had been sent throughout the year in order to know who should receive a reciprocal one, but to me pouring over those ornate decks was a stimulating and rewarding pastime in and of itself. From them I deduced that brevity with words, sometimes arranged in shapes called stanzas, was often rewarded with a unique and lavish visual setting that included bouquets, cakes, hearts, and gilded lettering among other things. Being very young, I couldn't quite figure out exactly what the relationship between word and image was in a poem, but I sensed it was important. Thus poetry was originally for me a kind of picture-writing — and greeting cards, the hieroglyphic flashcards that taught me to read it.

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The popular customs associated with Saint Valentine's Day had their origin in a conventional belief in England and France during the Middle Ages, that on 14 February, that is, halfway through the second month of the year, the birds began to pair. So in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowles* we read:

For this was sent on Seynt Valentyne's day  
Whan every foul cometh ther to choose his mate

For this reason the day was looked upon as specially consecrated to lovers and as a proper occasion for writing love letters and poems and sending lovers' tokens.

There are many occasions now, including neo-traditions brought to us by the USA - Mother's Day and Father's Day. Perhaps soon we'll be writing Halloween greeting poems. In the last couple of years many people here have begun to display a glad national pride by wishing each other 'Happy Australia Day' and recently, a friend told me that she was wished 'Happy Anzac Day'. Hmm... inspiring days for future occasional poems ?

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Continuing in the spirit of the quote I began with - 'The essay is restless. Essay is the play of speculation...' - I'll move on to the notion of identity and pseudonyms, starting with a few lines from the contemporary French poet Pierre Alferi's book of poems *oxo*

the first second she reminds  
you of someone else then of  
herself the second second

In Australia, it seems, a writer can only have a pseudonym if she is a hip hop artist or if she speaks the TRUTH. Some Aussie pseudonymous novelists have come a cropper - Helen Demidenko and Wanda Koolmatrie for instance. And some have been luckier for shedding their pseudonym, like the journalist Ross Edwards who, as the actual Peter Robb, writes brilliantly about things Italian. As you know, the most famous and the most written about is Ern Malley. The poet invented by James McAuley and Harold Stewart, whose poems caused such a ruckus way back in the 1940s.

The Adelaide-based poet Ken Bolton who always tells the TRUTH has had an almost endless list of pseudonyms: Dostoyevsky Bros., Raoul Du Plicit, Wulf Huberman, Howard Climbing, Fran Daddo, A.F. Drawings. But, he says 'not for any real reason'.

Jill Jones, another always most TRUTHful poet, has some too and for some real reasons -

Her three main pseudonyms are Jill Taylor, Dorothy Moore and Angela Mysterioso.

Mysteriously, she told me ... "I also have a more recent pseudonym which I've used on the internet and still may have some use for it so I won't give that one away."

She went on to say -

"I used the other three at a time when people were a little more circumspect about being 'out' as lesbian or gay due to their work or family situation. A lot of people tend to forget there were such times. For instance, 'Jill Taylor' was one of the editors of 'Falling For Grace', the first anthology of Australian lesbian fiction, and there were other author names such as Creme Brûlée and Emily Hagg. So, obviously, other writers were also protecting themselves and/or making a point.

Jill said:

I gave each name separate duties, mostly. 'Jill Taylor' was the editor, 'Angela Mysterioso' was the fiction writer and 'Dorothy Moore' was the poet. "Angela

Mysterioso took her inspiration from l'Angelo Mysterioso - 'mysterious angel' which was the pseudonym George Harrison used on 'Goodbye Cream'. I was always surprised that no-one ever noticed, forgetting that my musical tastes have rarely coincided with the tastes of the 'lesbian and gay community'. I had a colleague in our publishing venture whose pseudonym was 'Peter Moore' so I thought we could be 'sisters', and 'Dorothy' was kind of obvious. Though, in the end, how many Dorothys can one have in Australian poetry? It's no great revelation, I did reveal my Jill-Jones-identity to Dorothy Porter years ago, when she launched a book which contained poems by 'Dorothy Moore'. I have found in all the cases where I've had a pseudonym that I wrote in a different way."

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By the way, Dorothy Porter, wrote her best poems, in my opinion, early on, back in the late 1970s, as 'Dorothy *Featherstone* Porter' - that 'Featherstone' was a lucky charm.

(Perhaps it's lucky for the Red Room's Johanna ?)

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*Expecting* to find pseudonyms can be a bit of a worry. I always thought that the Prague-based Australian poet Louis Armand was someone else entirely but he has disappointed me by telling me recently that he really is Louis Armand. And when poems by Andrea Sherwood first appeared in print I thought that they were a hoax created by Gig Ryan. The same for Emma Lew. But I think that reveals more about my own scepticism than anything else.

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And I've always thought that Les Murray *was* altogether somebody else.

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When I mentioned this aspect of the Red Room project to Laurie Duggan, he remarked: "As for pseudonyms it always makes me think of genteel people who have a 'secret life' as writers. Or write pornography maybe?"

Yes that's so. But I think that pseudonyms can also be useful disguises for both modest and arrogant poets and, mostly, they can be liberating and fun.

Gwen Harwood, who was born as Gwendoline Nessie Foster, used pseudonyms inventively with a touch as deft as a milliner inventing a hat for a racing carnival. Early on she called herself W.W. Hagendoor - an anagram of Gwen Harwood but none of that work was published. Her successful pseudonyms were

Walter Lehmann, Francis Geyer, T.F. Kline and Miriam Stone . As you know, she started publishing in the early 1960s. She is known as a poet of wry wit, a natural parodist with a highly developed sense of fun and mischief, who readily confessed to a fondness for 'wigs, jokes, puzzles, games'. She once said 'I like disguises, I like wigs and beards' Gwen Harwood was associated, with Vincent Buckley, in the perpetration of several literary hoaxes especially the one in 1961 involving the Abelard and Eloisa acrostic sonnets with their uncomplimentary message to the editors of the *Bulletin*. Gwen Harwood's first pseudonym, Walter Lehmann, was born out of her frustration with what she perceived as unfair rejections of her poems, as she regarded the poetry that was being published in the *Bulletin* as inferior to her own. When she submitted two nonsense sonnets 'Eloisa to Abelard' and 'Abelard to Eloisa' as Walter Lehmann they were published immediately. Reading acrostically the poems declared 'SO LONG BULLETIN' and 'FUCK ALL EDITORS'. The outraged *Bulletin* editor (who I think at that time, was Donald Horne) stirred up quite a media storm and Frank Packer, the magazine's proprietor, tried to sue her but found that he couldn't. (those famous sonnets can be found on the Red Room internet site). The love of masquerade and the creation of later personae such as Krote and Eisenbart is an important component of Gwen Harwood's poetic identity.

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I've been through my own phases with my name as a poet . When I first began to publish poems as a teenager I wrote as Pamela J.B. Brown, and in those days some of my friends used to call me 'PJB'. I've really only had one name that could be thought of as a 'pseudonym' but it was more of an identity. A name inspired by the whacked-out Superstars who gathered around Andy Warhol in the early 60s in the days of his Factory - Candy Darling, Ultra Violet, Billy Name, Paul America, Brigid Berlin, Silver Thin (actually the name of a brand of cigarette), Holly Woodlawn. I called myself 'Cocabola'. I wrote for alternative newspapers and wrote poetry as Pamela Cocabola Brown, gradually dropping, by the feminist mid-seventies, to Pamela Brown, then, as my close friends seemed to be calling me 'Pam', eventually to Pam Brown. But all along I would have liked to have been a really clean and cool 'p.b'.

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Rambling backwards to the first topic -  
The word 'occasional' can also connote ephemerality.

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People like the word 'poetry' but don't always know what that means. It can be used to describe anything from a flowing tunic to a car or a chair by advertising copywriters and journalists who contribute to the fabrication of the mostly

illusory realm of designer fashion.

So we arrive at, as the camp guy says on 'Ugly Betty', 'a hot topic de jour' - 'What is *fashion* ?'

Literally, to fashion means to turn something into something else - and in the illusory realm of fashion it is to turn some cloth, trinkets, accessories, shoes and so on into ephemeral commodities,

I haven't spent any length of time considering this kind of fashion because, with regard to clothing, I find it hard to work up much enthusiasm, and with regard to 'the fashion industry' I don't know any more about it than any average Josephine. I generally only read anything resembling a fashion magazine when I visit the hairdresser and then I flip through the shiny pages of perfect pouts and postures in order to stave off the boredom of waiting for the chemical to fix inside the aluminium foils folded around my thinning strands.

Designer fashion *can appear* to be a method of control. Some super wealthy campy men and bitchy women decreeing to an inflated market what to wear and where to wear it - wear some skin next to your skin and sometimes it just looks totally impractical. The question asked on the red carpets of film festivals has now become quite glib and has nothing to do with the actual films, but it is to ask the actors 'Who are you wearing?'

I like the SBS-TV newsreader, Lee Lin Chin's homemade clothes, and her recent TV program 'Fashionista' gave me an insight into what the graduates of fashion degrees at art schools are doing in their tiny workshops around the country. Fashion, of course, is much more than your clothing, it's about fashioning your clothing into a look that will give you attitude or cred if you want it. I think you can do that by using your imagination rather than becoming a dedicated follower, as it were.

Really I just don't care enough about Collette Dinnigan's 'Parisian Haunts' or Alex Perry's big-hair-clients, or floor length gowns versus mini-skirts, or whether Josh Goot is going to be the next designer to scribble on our clothes.

When Marge Simpson goes to the hairdresser she reads the lifestyle magazine 'Better Homes Than Yours'.

Maybe I should just take a book with me.

Fashions in poetry are usually about whether you're writing as a formalist, or an eco poet, a symbolist or a postmodernist or a new romantic or a school of quietudist or simply an old-fashioned poet. It's like philosophy and music in that regard.

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But back to Gwen Harwood.

She once attended one of the same Brisbane primary schools that I did. Late in her life she had a penchant for wearing strange d'oyley-like white collars draped from her neck out to her shoulders. I remembered her when I was visiting Brisbane some years ago and I wrote a series of twelve-line sonnets called 'Eyes on potatoes', including this one

in the city of my rebellions      a swayback iron bridge  
spans the powerful river      Teneriffe sugar mill -  
redundant,      like most first-world port city mills,  
another conversion to flats.      cool river air streams through louvres,  
& up-to-date young poets choose Europe's leather coats -  
in 30° heat, clothes maketh the poet      - I select a flimsy blouse,  
subfusc, to wear against the glare.      so, to wonder      - why did  
Gwen Harwood wear those wide, white, lace-trimmed  
reformation-style collars ?      was she a quaker,  
a shaker, a musketeer      were the collars a joke ?  
like her most famous acrostic      from which,      in this,  
Gwen's city,      one poetry editor differs,      definitely ...

That poetry editor is, of course, myself.

Gwen loved her cheeky acrostics but I don't think she cared about fashion, certainly not as a serious pursuit. Gwen and I, we don't have the poise of catwalk models but we've often poised the biro.

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Finally,  
perhaps in this digital era, the avatar has replaced or subsumed the pseudonym.

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**Endnote:**

Some of the notes on Gwen Harwood were borrowed while reading *Boundary Conditions* by Jennifer Strauss and *Gwen Harwood : The Real and The Imagined World* by Alison Hoddinott.)

**Links:**

Elaine Equi in the current Jacket magazine -  
<http://jacketmagazine.com/32/holiday-album.shtml>

### **Eloisa to Abelard**

Solace and hope depart. God's finger traces  
on fields of frozen darkness: You shall find  
loss, absence, nothing. Walking on the wind  
Our lord speaks to a crowd of foolish faces,

no face that is not mine, while filtering through  
gaps, honeycombs of memory you seem  
but the faint ghost of a remembered dream.  
Unveiled by pain, I bleed. My wound is you.

Lost in the well of space, my spirit hears  
"*Lucis creator optime...*" The choir  
entreats God, out of tune. I join my voice  
to theirs. Nightfall's immense. I taste my tears.  
I reap the harvest of my own desire.  
No heart escapes the torment of its choice.

### **Abelard to Eloisa**

Far above memory's landscape let the fears  
unlatched from thundering valleys of your mind  
carry their lightning. Stare the sun up. Find  
kinetic heat to scorch your mist of tears.

All that vision limned by night appears  
loose in dismembering air: think yourself blind.  
Louder than death in headlines the unkind  
elements hawk my passion: stop your ears.

Deny me now. Be Doubting Thomas. Thrust  
into my side the finger of your grief.  
Tell me I am an apparition frayed  
out of the tattered winding-sheet of lust.  
Recall no ghost of love. Let no belief  
summon me, fleshed and bleeding, from the shade.

## **Funeral Blues**

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,  
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,  
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum  
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead  
Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead,  
Put crepe bows round the white necks of the public doves,  
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.

He was my North, my South, my East and West,  
My working week and my Sunday rest,  
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;  
I thought that love would last for ever: I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;  
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;  
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.  
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

W.H. Auden