

## Event

JUDITH BISHOP was born in Melbourne, Australia in 1972. Her poems have won numerous awards, including the prestigious Marten Bequest Travelling Scholarship in Poetry (2002–2004), an Academy of American Poets University Prize (2004), and the *Australian Book Review* Poetry Prize (2006), and they appear in *The Best Australian Poetry 2006* (ed. Judith Beveridge) and *The Best Australian Poems 2006* (ed. Dorothy Porter). She works as a Linguist/Project Manager with a speech technology company in Sydney.



# Event

POEMS

JUDITH BISHOP



CAMBRIDGE

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**ARTS  
VICTORIA**



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*for my mother & father*



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Event



## After the Elements

You and I, we are too far  
from fire now: the chimney-pots  
have driven out their smoke,  
and stood alert for its return,  
but flames are rare, or else  
they are disaster; our rooms in brick and board  
have insulated from the wind  
our blood and voices,  
so that neither moves inside the wilder air—  
those bands of warm and cold, force  
and impetus or null  
that comes when two great streams oppose  
and cancel out; we are  
too far from water now, both you and I,  
the green of dissolution kissing  
wrack to wrack, sun  
crisping to the glitter  
of the stars; for in the water, night  
comes soon, and in the water, there are bands  
of cold and warm, and in the one  
you die, and in the other, live  
but briefly, you and I;  
we are too far from earth,  
and when we lie down on the grass,  
the palm a star, a shadow-bed,  
we'll never know if under us  
there creep the fossils of a youth  
who died and slumped beneath the earth,  
and earth has moved across  
his thorax and his thigh; until the air  
we are too far from, though within  
its stale caress, had brushed the last  
of sandstone from his eyes,

and took from bones  
the oxygen they kept,  
that entered time as expiration,  
and enters us as breath.

*for Gustaf Sobin, 1935—2005*

I.

“Not I, but the wind that blows through me!”

— D.H. LAWRENCE



## Desert Wind

High, bright winter morning: the tenements' tree-antlers  
clatter on each corner and the stepping black spines are smooth  
and glossy as mirages; framed, the scene shines as if transported  
to a desert,  
and never (since this winter day will not end hereafter, having left  
the field of time), will the trees  
flicker leaves again or carry broods of flowers; but still, as in a desert,  
a random bird alights, hoarse-throated after days of luckless questing  
for a moth or a spider that has cellared spring rains in its body,  
so honeying  
the juices of itself; and when startled by a boy skating down the lane  
a moment,  
she is swallowed by the wind, as a rasping draws nearer on the dirt  
and turns articulate,  
becomes the *shuck, shuck* of a snake tasting engine oil and frost,  
as if astonished  
how far it has gone across terrains, when last it knew, an iridescence  
meant the felled wing of a hummingbird, and thus the sweetest  
meat, but never such a black stench as pools below this metal corpse . . .  
High, bright winter's morning: the desert wind whistling from the north,  
radio static from the kitchen clarifying to the small maracas rattle  
of the sand,  
briefly clambering with every wave of air: go, stop; go, stop; and then,  
a long silence—  
(as if entire days have held their breath). Now comes a human voice,  
low, soft,  
perhaps yours, rising like the yam tendril, which knows how to bind  
whatever's still,  
and for long enough to touch.

## The Master of Ikebana

My son,  
you ask me why. I say,

to bend to our coinings  
these gestures of pine; to dream  
in the idioms of wolfberry and thorn—  
to ring through the air  
with our selves of wood!

True, pine remains pine.  
And the hunger of thrushes propagates  
the berry bush, and these thorns deter thieves.  
True, we leave a mine's tailings  
in the ikebana bowl . . .

Yet, this knot of imperfections,  
these incidents of wind—just to graph  
our soul's volutes in the lifts  
and the pressures of a singular form!  
I might

have read your mother's love in them,  
had I tried.



## Late in the Day

Arrives the moment of contradiction. A rat  
has sown its leanness in the earth;  
a hawk, blue stencil, floats low across the field of hay,  
resembling, as you see it, the  
brushed hair of a child.

Wind has ferried the hawk south  
toward a swatch of pines.  
There, a boy with shaky hands  
shoots her down with a stone.

In his fingers,  
he gently takes the threads of her entrails.  
His eyes reflect a sky sharp as water  
from a spring.

In late-shadowed pines,  
her young incline toward the sun.  
A screen of white down  
lies aggrieved by wind at dawn.

## Passage of Winter Precluded; or, Death Imagined

*for my mother*

Then it seemed a white angel  
crossed your breath; your voice unhusked,  
grain by grain it grew visible.

Paused lucid by the garden bath,  
the angel drew sharp breath;  
pinched between grasses,  
its voice grew thin & low.  
The roots of common weeds  
dried from morning  
into winter.

Then I dared look neither down,  
nor back: it drew the earth about it,  
water & teeming soil;  
it shadowed in flight the waters of land's end,  
where love alone could never shore a globe  
waned flat as leaves decayed  
& skeletal—

When I was a child,  
the garden water held our faces,  
two in one: your steady eyes afloat,  
& mine. Between your sheets at night,  
I buoyed.

But since that day, my mother, your hands  
have knotted, aches  
fluttering—  
white cloth fragments—

and mother      I fear most the angel's eyes

## The Indifferent

So many times your feet are lifted and grounded, at this distance from the water, equidistant from the dunes. Unscrolling an invisible path, a “middle ground”, making this time, perhaps, your mind’s passage out of love. Lightly, lightly, gone, your message-bearers without message, only moving, only moving, by a sea that cleans incessantly its lower palimpsest of sands; the higher, all gull bones and cuttlefish blades, dropped each hour in the battlefield of rips—where here and now the squid’s pulse, for which expulsion is the groundswell of direction, here and there whose surge is in and out and hardly up but onward, honed to horizontal shifts, now allows the final vertical, invisible path. A bee gets dragged into the sea, an element too cold not sweet, your feet are grounded and are lifted on the middle palimpsest. Bees crawl among the gull bones on the higher palimpsest, their wings emitting keen timbres consonant with solar heat, the bee in brine grinding out of tune will halt as if to hear, the double bass of rollers breaking in a music only movement, only movement, in the groundswell of direction, into which you walked: beloved . . .

## II.

“Even the most delicate chords of animal feeling . . . are aligned in their entire performance for a going out toward other creatures.”

—JOHANN GOTTFRIED VON HERDER



## Rabbit

Life shivers between yourself and us: help us to stretch  
toward the kingdom of our burrows in the earth: we'll never occupy  
again the silk-soft that was a womb, but we wander the night grass  
with you,  
searching for a tenderness, an innocence at birth: until the quiet  
winds cut  
the quiet breath from your mouth and your hindquarters stamp,  
*Quickly, I must go—*

Rabbit, winding up your stride, in your alignment, recalling full  
stretch,  
a god's arrow-head, shaft, lengthening from nose to tail, aching  
to occupy  
the whole damn bubble of the moment of each movement: if you  
made it, what would snap, whose shining fingers, what scene  
would cut  
abruptly to another, what deity float gently in to bid us her  
good night?

Rabbit, laid ragged at the fold of day's field, where the sparrow-hawk  
stretched  
the stars' scarf across her wing: with your velvet heart, you occupied  
the blood's old theatre: with your hushed ballet of spring, you  
performed the coiled rites you have taught us tonight: showed  
our ropes of matter cut  
by the one puppet-master, hanging in his own winds.

# Doña Marina: Part I

## FIRST VOICE

*Hear her: she is breathing.*

*Breath in, Nahuatl;*

*breath out,*

*Maya.*

*Hair flails from her mouth:*

*taste the fragrant oil on it.*

*Shutters clap across the green:*

*open, Maya; closed,*

*Spanish.*

## I. HUMMINGBIRD: MARINA

It was my name-day. I was five or six. But I remember  
this—

I broke the neck of a baby hummingbird.

Flung from the nest

for faults divined by the hen: a twisted wing bone,  
an ill-formed bladder?

I saw its throat wobble by the silk-cotton tree.

The sky was candled by the moon.

My hands moved, a doubled arc.

I held my palms out for the gods, the silken  
down and a little blood adhering,

and I thought—

*Now I'll never be that wrinkled belly in the dust.*

## II. HEART: MARINA

I grew. When the *rush, hush* of dragging feet woke me and the candle's star that pierced my door's opening strode in, I addressed them directly, knowing why they came. I saw the lizards of my dreams padding forward on their stones, and in their circle flew the lavish moth, which fluttering out the window, hissed the name of Xicalango. The slave traders' port. There are ways to kill a child, and there are ways to exile her from her heart so completely, she is dead. My body wore a many-coloured cloth. Then I was torn from it.

### SECOND VOICE

*She is wailing, beats her head with stones.*

*She would not tell you this.*

*Her birth was ill-starred; it was prophesied.*

*She would not tell you this.*

*Step father kissed her on the mouth last night.*

*She would not tell you this.*

*She thinks the gods have made a bet on her.*

*She'd tell you this.*

### III. XICALANGO: MARINA

#### I.

Sticks and stones I gather for this lord  
who loans and repossesses me.  
I bend and stab with herons in the mud, I poke for crabs  
among the roots, as if I had no rank.

A stone dislodges from a lava bed.  
Prodigal piece of firework, must it be driven,  
storm by storm, toward the river bed?  
And if that stone's a girl?

#### II.

Something builds across the skies today: a bent  
to which the maize submits. These are the wind  
bridges which the gods may use to visit us.  
If they should come to break us,

I'll desire them, I'll arch. Grass is  
as grass does: for this, I blame my mother.  
Why not delay my birth with herbs,  
or bring me out sooner?

Storms build across the skies. The rats have come  
to take their young to higher ground,  
biting gently on their necks. The scarlet flowers  
throw old petals at my feet.

As a child, I saw a youth tumble down  
the temple steps: limbs beautiful, his heart  
torn out and burned. Cihuacoatl  
needed flesh to eat, they said.  
This much, I understood:  
if the gods weaken, we'll be left alone on earth.