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HSC English Prescriptions 2009–2012

Electives: Standard Poetry

Douglas Stewart

Module A: Experience Through Language

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Lady Feeding the Cats

Douglas Stewart

1

Shuffling along in her broken shoes from the slums,
A blue-eyed lady showing the weather's stain,
Her long dress green and black like a pine in the rain,
Her bonnet much bedraggled, daily she comes
Uphill past the Moreton Bays and the smoky gums
With a sack of bones on her back and a song in her brain
To feed those outlaws prowling about the Domain,
Those furtive she-cats and those villainous toms.

Proudly they step to meet her, they march together
With an arching of backs and a waving of plummy tails
And smiles that swear they never would harm a feather.
They rub at her legs for the bounty that never fails,
They think she is a princess out of a tower,
And so she is, she is trembling with love and power.

2

Meat, it is true, is meat, and demands attention
But this is the sweetest moment that they know
Whose courtship even is a hiss, a howl and a blow.
At so much kindness passing their comprehension
– Beggars and rogues who never deserved this pension –
Some recollection of old punctilio
Dawns in their eyes, and as she moves to go
They turn their battered heads in condescension.

She smiles and walks back lightly to the slums.
If she has fed their bodies, they have fed
More than the body in her; they purr like drums,
Their tails are banners and fountains inside her head.
The times are hard for exiled aristocrats,
But gracious and sweet it is to be queen of the cats.

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Wombat

Douglas Stewart

Ha there! old pig, old bear, old bristly and gingery
Wombat out of the red earth peering gingerly
Was there some thud of foot in the mist and the silence
That stiffens whisker and ear in sound's fierce absence,
Some smell means man?
I see the dewdrop trembling upon the rushes,
All else is the mist's now, river and rocks and ridges.
Poor lump of movable clay, snuffling and blinking,
Too thick in the head to know what thumps in your thinking,
Rears in the rain –
Be easy, old tree-root's companion; down there where your burrow
Dips in its yellow shadow, deep in the hollow,
We have one mother, good brother; it is Her laughter
That sends you now snorting and plunging like red flood-water
To earth again.

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The Snow-Gum

Douglas Stewart

It is the snow-gum silently,
In noon's blue and the silvery
Flowering of light on snow.
Performing its slow miracle
Where upon drift and icicle
Perfect lies its shadow.

Leaf upon leaf's fidelity,
The creamy trunk's solidity,
The full-grown curve of the crown,
It is the tree's perfection
Now shown in clear reflection
Like flakes of soft grey stone.

Out of the granite's eternity,
Out of the winter's long enmity,
Something is done on the snow;
And the silver light like ecstasy
Flows where the green tree perfectly
Curves to its perfect shadow.

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Nesting Time

Douglas Stewart

Oh never in this hard world was such an absurd
Charming utterly disarming little bird,
The mossy green, the sunlit honey-eater
That darts from scribbly-gum to banksia tree
And lights upon the head of my small daughter.

It must decide, for men and birds alike,
As pick-pick-pick it goes with its sharp beak,
If so much trust is possible in Nature;
And back it darts to that safe banksia tree
Then swoops on my own head, the brave wild creature.

It thinks it must have hair to line its nest
And hair will have, and it will chance the rest;
And up and down my neck and then my daughter's
Those prickly black feet run, that tugging beak,
And loud like wind it whirrs its green wing-feathers.

Then take your choice from me or those fair tresses
Your darting bird too shy for our caresses;
There's just this gap in Nature and in man
Where birds may perch on heads and pull out hair
And if you want to chance it, well, you can.

© Douglas Stewart.

The Moths

Douglas Stewart

Such a blaze of snow, such a smoke of sleet, such a fume of moths in
the air

You'd think a wind of the dusk had swept the blossoming tea-trees
bare

But the gust that blew the sunlight out and bade the thrush be silent
Has left the branches glittering white where the dark stream cuts
the granite

And still in a whirring hush of wings the bent old tea-tree showers
Storm upon storm of snow-white moths from the midst of its cloud
of flowers.

Bursting and foaming, spinning and gushing, secret above the
stream,

Nothing is left of the mountains now, nothing is left of time:
Only in depths of space and night there thrusts this ragged bough
And wheeling around its cloud of flowers the galaxies swarm like
snow.

© Douglas Stewart.

The Fireflies

Douglas Stewart

But they are moving steadily, the height of a man,
Like a man among the dark trees holding a lantern
A clear small floating flame with a tinge of green,
Many small flames, all climbing the stony mountain,
Like an invisible army; but no footfalls move
Over the soft red dust, so shadow ruffles
The yellow-box-trees that the silver phalangers love;
Oh there are no men here, there are only the fireflies,
Steadfast and radiant travelling over the spur
Where the hot earth lies heavy in dust and silence;
But indeed oh indeed some army is moving here,
Some invisible power flashing in points of brilliance
Unravelling over the earth its unearthly plans,
Uncanny to meet at night among the stones.

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Waterlily

Douglas Stewart

Look, look, there is an angel in the fishpond,
It wakes its yellow wings above the water;
Or say the naked moon came down to bathe here
And dipped her toe in weeds and so we caught her;
Or say the sun fell in and sprang up yellow,
Or say that mud's in flower today – no matter:
All images and fancies coalesce and cancel
In mystery at last; it is an angel,
And moves its yellow wings above the water.

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Cave Painting

Douglas Stewart

Look there are dark hands in the black rock,
Man's hands, woman's hands, child's hands hiding in a cave,
Shadows of hands, but with such a living look
They seem to waver and beckon, they seem to move
In a language of gesture startling and piercing as speech.
Up from the green water here we clambered
Say the hands and the bodies of the hands, to hold and to touch,
And here we camped, and here we shall be remembered.

And they are so close and yet so far and wild
They seem to breathe and speak for all humanity
Who made their camp so, man and woman and child,
And flowed with the green river down to infinity;
And beautifully and terribly they wave
In the black rock, like hands alive in a grave.

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