Patterns of Being
Volume 1 – Major creative work

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Volume 1 – Major creative work

Patterns of Being: a verse novel
Abstract

Major creative work: 'Patterns of Being' – a verse novel.

The major creative work is a narrative in open verse. The fictional narrative was inspired by an interview with Rupert Max Stuart in The Age on August 19, 2002, titled, 'Max Stuart reflects, finds peace'. Rupert Max Stuart is a South Australian Aboriginal man who was imprisoned in the 1950s for the murder and rape of Mary Hattam, a young white girl. The case created controversy around issues of race and capital punishment for many years. 'Patterns of Being' is a fictional narrative about grief and reconciliation. A girl named Dawn is murdered and police accuse a carnival worker named Rufus. The story is told by Annie, who is Dawn's cousin. She recalls her own experiences but also imagines the remembrances of Lilly, Dawn's mother and Aril, a nymph-like girl who moves through dimensions of time and space. The imagery is inspired by the environment of regional South Australia and the narrative shows Annie's psychic evolution. Annie is 'both the agent and the theatre of individuation' (Simondon). 'Patterns of Being' shows how Annie uses the collective voices of her interior to navigate a path through grief.
Thesis declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint award of this degree.

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Heather Anne Stuart

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Author's note:

This is a work of fiction, loosely based on some facts of state history and personal history to ground its context, but in no way does it tell the truth of any real events or real people.
Book 1. Separation
1.1. separation

(Annie's memories of early childhood and the overlap of worlds)
1.1 separation

1.

flying home

        it feels good
        to hear Aussie accents
        to see children

Berkeley

        seems void of children
        and old people

I sit by a window

        listen to Australian rock bands
        on the headphones

the closer

        I get
        to the Southern Hemisphere
        the more I
        anticipate
        the land

        the great pull
        of the big sky
        the vast southern ocean
        the stretch of the land

I fall

        into memory

around my head

        a tiny swallow
        zigzags
        back and forth
chasing insects
weaves me
into its wind tunnels
until I am
once again
a child

2.

afternoon
floor boards
gleam
as lace curtains
billow

I turn cartwheels
on the shiny floor
celebrate the sun
and
a rainbow room

but my mother
Margaret
sees only the emptiness
empty fridge
empty promises

I eat baked beans
as my mother pulls
a filtered cigarette
from a gold box
with fancy writing

the red lipstick
makes patterns
1.1 separation

on the filter
as she talks to me
about my father

Bill
what he said
what she said
why we have to leave

I know she isn’t really
talking to me
she is preparing herself
for when
he walks in the door

she will say it all again

but he doesn't
come home

3.
early next morning
a taxi arrives
and the driver
silently
puts our bags
in the back

the street is dark
and still

I wonder how
Dad will find us

we catch a bus
1.1 separation

at the city depot

soon

a long road
with dusty paddocks
stretching
flat towards the sky

low purple ranges
beyond

a bus full of strangers
as a hot sun lifts

windows open
to catch dust

Mum reads poems
from *The Golden Treasury*
covered in dark blue linen

she recites a poem
about daffodils

I dream I am a butterfly
sitting on a daffodil
the sun washes me
through the window glass

inside my head

a red glow
that grows brighter
extinguishes sense
dissolves me
into
sleep

when my eyes open
white silos
    loom
    like sentries

one pub
    some houses
    straddle
    a railway line

in the heat
    of the bus
    faces
    crumple

a sudden sea breeze
    makes us squint
    stretch
    gather ourselves

the general store
    with a red petrol pump
    trucks parked nearby

a few people congregate
    on the veranda

we climb down from the bus

the driver pulls out our bags

we stand
    on the hot pavement

Aunt Lilly and cousin Dawn
    pull up
    in their
    blue Holden
1.1 separation

they load us into the car
    then a whir of wheels
    in dust

the evening
    sunlight arcs
    intrusively
    into
    the scrubby undergrowth

the rush of surf
    raises a symphony
    from the deep
    that lifts into
    approaching stars

the last
    playful
    flicker of gold
    dances on sage
    and purple pig face flowers

dunes roll
    onto the road
    to soften our path

my mother is telling Aunt Lilly
    stories about my father

I sing songs
    without words
    let my mind
    rise above
    dry land
    to float
    out to sea
4.

Lilly's tin house is blue
in the setting sun

a pepper tree
   traces shadows
   of gunmetal lace

a rusted Model-T Ford
   parked
   next to an axe-wedged stump
   amid the skeletal remains
   of ploughs and old carts

hunting dogs lie
   like fading memories
   with golden sand
   on their backs

my fingers trace
   the spindly green
   of pepper tree
   as I wait for bags
   to be unloaded
   in the shade

red pearls of pepper
   hang
   like unspoken afterthoughts
   from the heat of day
   and whispered conversation
next morning
Dawn and I
march
to the sea
our noses painted white
towels on our heads
thongs flip-flopping
in red dirt

below the cliff face
turbulent white horses
jump over rocks
and end
their journey
with a crash

Dawn drags her beach bag
in the sand
stops short
of a rip
in the surf
pauses
looks towards the caves
drops her bag
turns to the horizon

her thin legs
run as fast
as horses
into waves
to wade deep

she is six years older
I strain to catch her
jump over white foam
Dawn stands like a rock
    waves lapping at her chin

a swell of translucent green
    glides closer
    we hold our breath
    in time with the pull

the wrap of fluid sounds
    the slap of sand and kelp
    the desperate holding
        of mouth and nose
        even ears
            closing to guard
            from drowning

miraculously
    we bounce on sand
        until sky explodes
            in open eyes

a gasp of air
    recovery of legs
        as a white froth
            sweeps over the pebbles
                rolls small shells into the moat
                of a sand castle

across the expanse of white sand
    black shale caves
        sit in eroded sandstone
        their shadows
            echo wind and water
        like friends
            whisper ancient confessions
green straps of seaweed
   spread across the sand
   like water snakes waiting
   to hear the news

small fingernail fish
   like grains of rice
   float in light patches
   as jellyfish
   pump
   their clear umbrellas

our bare feet
   step and stir
   in the shallows
   make little clouds
   of sand
   disrupt
delicate crabs
   and
   tiny sea lice

waves lap over our knees

salt dries the white hair
   on our thighs
   into a fine filigree
   like fish scales

I find a rock pool
   waist deep
   still
   and I float
   look up
   at a warming sun

I scan the silent water
towards faded yellow sand
distant ochre cliffs
and the dark caves

orange turrets loom
where swallows
loop
in and out
their mud nests
are pores
in the cliff face

we eat sandwiches
on a blanket
walk
back to town

dry spinifex
rolls
across the russet verge

an old tribal woman
walks ahead

the sea breeze
whisks small sand slaps
across our calves

the sun baked sand
leaves tenderness
between the calluses
on our feet
makes us step faster

small flies dance
around our eyes
looking for devil crumbs
Dawn and I hang
  from monkey bars
  watch out
  over the ocean
  drop like hot peaches
  from the tree
  roll on the yellow grass
  chase each other
we touch our toes
  into the lapping foam

on the horizon
  the dropping sun
  leaks brilliant red
  across the water

6.
as darkness falls
  Uncle Chad
  revs the truck engine
  and we board
Mum and Lilly
  squeeze into the cabin
  next to Chad
Dawn and I stand on the tray
  cling to the rails
  behind the cabin window
Dawn warns
  *hold on tight!*

kangaroo dogs
  chained
  to the tray
  two boys
  beside us
  their shotguns poised

the scrub twilight
  is a silver chaos
  of limbs

bushy heads of mallee shrubs
  sweep the dry ground

at each boundary
  a gate unhinged
  the scrape of metal on earth
  vibrates a warning

a spotlight
  rigged on the roof
  opens a door
  on the night

startled rabbits frenzy

stark light
  hosts
  a volley of gunshot
  collapses
  their flight

Chad stops the truck
  to load
  hessian sacks
  with the warm
rabbit bodies

a hand-rolled
   hangs
   from his thin lips

hat pushed back
   he sets off again

Chad is
   Dad’s younger brother
taller
   lean in body
   with an edge
   like barbed wire
   snags anything
   that gets close

sudden acceleration
dust rises
   to meet the moon

a large red kangaroo
   high bounds
   over rocks
   transfixed
   in the light

just before the shot
   a cloud like orange gas
   a thud of parts
   the rigid fix
   of death

a bulge
   in the fur
   a foot protrudes
a joey face appears

Chad holds up the mother 'roo
lifts out the gangly babe
slits mother from beneath

I feel
torn

he peels
  the stomach skin
  reveals
  the inner tubing
  but also
  the sweat under his arm

his long bony fingers
  grip at the knife blade
  his boyish face
  pleased
  in our pain

the night gets darker
  the spotlight dimmer
  the petrol tank low
  we are
  tired
  and disturbed

the shooting continues
  until the tray
  is full

a wind comes up
  from centre earth
trees thrash about

the last gate
    is shut

the dogs are muzzled
    sleep at our feet

Chad speeds home
    bounces us about
        remembering cold beer

7.

it is Sunday
    and Aunt Lilly
decides to drive inland
        while Uncle Chad sleeps

Dawn and I sit on the tray
    watch the dust rise

the mallee scrub thickens
    a random weave of limbs
        where dusty leaves
            hang distraught

beyond the wave of wheat
    we stop at granite boulders
        where little rock pools
    have dried into salt skins

the smell of kangaroos
    pushes up from the rocks
a falcon swoops
    and dry grasses fold in light

Lilly drives overland
    and stops at an old ruin

two old trucks are parked
    under a pepper tree

three women sit
    stoking a fire
        white haired children
    jump and laugh

Lilly and my mother meet the women
    Dawn and I
        follow the children
            to a dry river bed

we cross rippled sand dunes
    where sleepy lizards laze
        see fields
            where thin sheep graze

we play until hunger
    drives us back
        to the camp
            and char-grilled lamb

Lilly limps

my mother helps her back
    into the truck cabin

I peer in the back window

Lilly is in pain
and clutching at her tummy

Mum has her arm around her shoulders

*there now Lilly*

*you’ll be right as rain*

*in a few days*

Lilly rests in the car

Dawn and I eat before Mum calls us to depart

Mum drives this time

Lilly’s hand hangs out the window

Lilly has a scar on her ring finger

she says it’s from chopping wood

*chopped that finger right off!*

she found it wrapped it in ice

at the hospital they stitched it back

Lilly tells lots of stories

it is hot when we get back
and she reclines on the couch
in a black lace petticoat

she tells me there is a snake
in the wall
sometimes
it pokes its head out
1.2 Neptune's cave

(Annie's childhood memory of the cave and the consequences of discovery and loss)
Neptune’s cave

1.

bare-chested men
  hammer guy ropes
  securing a white tent
  on the oval
  while buses and trucks
  deliver
  caravans
  of metal cages
  holding the pace of tigers
  little dogs
  a brown bear

elephants graze
  under the scoreboard

a man sells candy floss

bright pink syrup
  stains fingers
  congeals
  in the wiry web
  sticky threads
  pulled like clown hair

sugar melts on the tongue
  like the outside world
  disappears
  when the brass band
  colours the air

inside the tent
  we look upwards
  at wires and swings
  nets
  cupped
below

young women in sequined leotards
curl their legs
around the ropes
pulling themselves
towards each other
on a landing
graceful flourishes
smiles outwards
eyes searching
back and forth
questioning
cues
changes of tempo
in the
orchestra pit
a clown loses his
pompon shoe
and limps
a lion
jumps through a hoop
of fire
small dogs sit on a raised board
then jump
over a trotting horse
Dawn's seat is empty
I turn to Aunty Lilly
who is talking to Mum
then I see Dawn
at the back of the tent
laughing with friends
at clowns
   who duel
   with their shoes
   under the spotlight

it is Dawn’s twelfth birthday
   she wears pink lipstick
   her hair is teased
   into a bouffant

the trapeze artists
   sail cross the tent
   make us look up
       in awe

everyone claps

Dawn talks
   to an older boy

he is lean and dark
   a carnival worker

Aunty calls her
   tells her
       to stay in her seat
   not to mess
   with
   those drifters

that night I dream
   of flying through a jungle
       on green ropes
   my legs entwine
       around the vines
   until they are
1.2 Neptune’s Cave

green and grey
reaching ever
upwards

I am on a tightrope
my mother at one end
my father at the other
but I can't decide
which one
I am moving towards
it is so hard
to keep my balance

a clown
thrusts his slipper at me
and I wake

2.

Dawn and I
walk towards the beach
the water is choppy grey
agitated by a sea breeze

we stroll
down the dirt path

a small brown snake
slides into the shadows
of fallen rocks

on the white sands
I find some driftwood
to weigh down our towels
in the restless breeze
in the water
   Dawn dives under

I stand
   letting the waves
   lap at my tummy

we make sand castles
   then Dawn
   makes a deep hole

I lie in it and she
   covers me to the neck

it feels strange
   not seeing my body
   to look out to sea
   as if I am a ghost

the sun is still hot
   but sliding west

Dawn puts a hat on my head
   the brim falls over my eyes

Dawn, Dawn!

I worry
   because I can't see
   and she does not answer me

I hear a strange voice

from under the hat
   I can just see black boots
   hear a young man
you here alone kid?

I freeze
confused

Dawn's feet
follow the boots
towards the caves

the white rays
of sunlight
pierce holes
in the weave
of the hat
so
I am drawn
to look upwards

the sand
is wet
and loosely packed

I push my fingers
into air pockets

my toes wriggle
but my ankles
are wedged

the tidal sea
licks at the beach
a rush
of foam tongues
a soft sigh
of hesitation
waves
there is a scream of help
    echoing around me
    from inside the sand
    a voice
    calling
    help!

I know now this scream
    is coming from me

then Dawn
    runs back
    digs quickly
    tells me
    not to tell

I ask why
    but she will not
    speak of it
    again

3.

a few days later
    we go back to the beach

Dawn is wearing
    a new
    two-piece swimsuit
    and lipstick

when we get to the cliffs
    I see the boy from
Dawn waves

he looks up

at the base of the cliffs

we find a sandy patch

between piles of wet kelp

Dawn declares a challenge
to build
a sandcastle
big enough
for
King Neptune's
sea maidens
to visit for
afternoon tea

she says

she will
be building
another castle
in the mouth
of the cave

when she is finished

she will come
to get me

my castle has

a splendid moat
scooped deep
with dredged sand
Neptune’s cave

piled high

someone watches
from behind a wall
of seaweed

the head bobs
then blue eyes
long blond hair
caught in the wind

are you King Neptune’s maiden?
I haven’t finished yet!

she does not answer
so I keep
patting at sand

you are bigger than I thought
this castle will be too small

she crawls forward
sits atop a kelp bed
then I see
she is naked
with hair to her knees

do you want
to help me?

she crawls closer
the strange blue
of her eyes
reflect the sun

crouched beside me
she touches the
pink beach towel
  as if
  she is touching
  something precious
then she makes a noise
  like a grey dove
  and rubs her cheek
  with the silken fringe

*Aril*
  she whispers
  as if she remembers
    softness
    from the past
    and with it
    her name
I drape it around her shoulders
  and she laughs
    stands and runs
    with it flying
    behind her
I run after her
  towards
  an estuary
white sand hills
  cascade for miles
  covered in low scrub
I follow her to a clearing
  where low lying shrubs
  make shade
  and there
    a mob of kangaroos
Neptune’s cave

stretch out
in cool
white sands

the biggest kangaroo rises
thumps his tail

the others stand
ears pricked

Aril stops still
and turns to me
gives me
the towel
puts her hands
on my shoulders
pushes me to sit
on the sand

she smiles
sits just in front of me

the kangaroos relax
two have joeys
in pouch

Aril calls to them
they wriggle from sleep
pop their heads to light
eject onto the sand
one after the other

their soft fur begs touch

Aril strokes their necks

suddenly I remember
I have to go!

I rise quickly
run back
towards the sea

she follows me
to the beach
then turns back

I run as fast as I can

the tide is
working inwards

when I get to my sandcastle
the water has
already eaten it
half away

clouds gather
over the sea
sky bruises
from the wind

it is cold

Dawn is absent

a man
is
staggering
along the beach
towards me

I run to the cave
1.2 Neptune’s cave

calling for Dawn

her towel is caught
in a rock crevice

her bikini top
half hidden in the sand

it is dark in the grotto

I call her name
then turn
to see the man
staring at me
the last light of day
like an aura
around his head
he is drunk
and rambles
in his language

I cannot understand
until he shouts
go!

he waves his hands
pushes me back
towards the sunlight
points towards town

where is Dawn?

no!' he insists
he pushes me
out into the light

 go!
I run
   without knowing
   where to run

I run without legs

I run in my head
   like the undertow
   on a wild beach
   carries the force
   of the unseen

I run up the hillside
   along the dirt road
   past the playground
   past the railway tracks
   down the back streets
   past tin shanties
   through old limestone walls
   under old pepper trees

I run to Aunt Lilly's gate
   straight
   to the out-house
sit on the wooden bench
   with the door bolted

the smell of the pit
   rises through me
   like fear

4.

Aunt Lilly is boiling water
   in the copper
to wash her hair

she is complaining
  that Dawn is late home

it is our last night

Mum tells me to concentrate
  get our washing
    from the laundry

still frozen inside
  I grab the bundle of dry clothes
  startle
  when Lilly asks me

*where did Dawn…*

I approach her
she carries a saucepan
  there is an instant
    of hesitation
      but momentum continues
        the saucepan drops

screams fill my ears
  the obscenity of fear
    as water spills on my chest

my orlon jumper sticks

Mum is shouting at Lilly

*they pull off my jumper*
  and the skin
    lifts too
1.3 dimensions of space

(Annie's memories of childhood pain and change)
1.
surrounded by white tiles
   I awake
   floor to ceiling
   glaze of light

implements shine
   on white benches
   glass doors
   reflect the surgery bed

while I am wrapped
   like a mummy
   wondering if my mother
       is on the other side
   of the wall

an old nurse
   stiff white
   her veil marches
       towards me

a wide glass jar
   of cold cream
   like razor blades
       cuts
       my body free
       to watch
       from the ceiling
   as she dabs white cream
       over my shaking

the iceberg room
   has crevices for
       losing time and mind
1.3 dimensions of space

2.

my dad arrives from Adelaide
    with a new conviction
    of sobriety
    to calm my mother

they slip into
    a world
    of their own
    negotiation

I slip into
    a cloud
    of blue lights
    and forgetfulness

morning unpeels
    the gauze
    pulls pain
    into tickles

the butter yellow
    of lanolin weave
    takes a day’s cells
    and leaves

little chest craters
    weep
    as nurses
    pin me down

applied cold
    the creams warm
with new gauze
gently layered

in the high bed
white hard sheets
wrap me like
butcher's bones

metal bed head
vertical bars
signal the delay
of my escape

at dusk
the caged budgerigars
on the veranda
chatter
about priorities

crows caw
numerical codes
from top branches
to auger chaos

as darkness descends
sleep dragons fly
to the meniscus
of my fluid body

membranes
tremble
their luminescence
vibrates

like a palpitation
of the heart
an ecstatic lift
1.3 dimensions of space

into the sun

the old matron
wheels me
to the veranda
to sleep

I lie next to
women
from the mission
come
to give birth

sweet babies
swaddled in hospital blankets
brought by nurses
to their waiting mothers

their tiny faces
crinkled

their little fingers
unfolding
like night into dawn

the mothers hold them
to suckle
in rainbow circles

as I grow stronger
they tell me stories
and sing me
their ‘dreaming’

the women speak
in their own language
the music of it
warm and gentle

words roll
off their tongues
full bodied
like witchetty grubs

a sweet
butter melody
that makes me
feel loved

my butterfly sister
is a spirit
they call back
into my eyes

the totem takes me
to ancient grasses
and the comfort
of petals

the fragrance
of wild iris
cups my curious
caterpillar pain

they tell me
to sing my life patterns
and make a nectar
out of adversity

the butterfly spirit
brands me
as a creature
of change
the women sing low
in the sunset
and sow seeds
   of knowing

like the tide
   always rising
   and then lowering
   for moments of balance

the flutter of wings
   agitates air
   softly caresses water
   absorbs the calm of lavender

a love of life
   to cling
   to the back
   of tomorrow

3.

I am somewhere else
   on the desert floor
      with a kangaroo mother
   in a soft pouch
      of contemplation
   and bounding through
      the veil of pain

after I wake
   a nurse
      wheels me outside
   to see
      my mother and father
children play
on the hospital lawn
‘Ring a Rosie’
and
‘Bells of St Clements’
arms up
arms down
turning inside
out

my parents bring
a matchbox toy
a blue Holden
to drive
across the weave
of my bedspread
over leg mountains
towards the edge

later
when moonlight
unfolds the veranda
an Aboriginal woman
sits next to my bed

she has fed her baby
and the starched white nurse
has stolen him back
to the nursery

she looks at me
with cheeks all round
her warm eyes
smile many lights

you will carry
the butterfly
1.3 dimensions of space

deep in your skin
close to your heart

4.

after two weeks
the doctors agree on
plastic surgery
in Adelaide

a long bus ride
no conversation
no scenery

only the drone
of a bus engine

oblivious to branch shadows
lost in bloodshot clouds
and dull passenger discussion
I long for cotton sheets

5.

at the private hospital
young nurses sing
‘The purple people eater’
as they change my bandages

they wheel me onto the lawn
to smell the sea breeze
as pink and purple clouds
blossom upwards
just at end of visiting hours
  Mum and Dad arrive from work

the nurses
  look at their watches
  my father is silent
  Mum arranges flowers

when the morning comes
  I see green masks and smell ether

a man asks me to count

6.

there is a large bandage
  around my left thigh

my chest and neck and ears
  all wrapped tight

it feels like
  being buried in the sand
  I can wiggle my toes

I am in
  a white cocoon
  it is painful
  I must be patient
I am placed in boxes
beds
rooms and buildings
with my eyes open
but I am behind
a veil

curtains are pulled when doctors
unwrap me
and nurses hold me down
change
the dressings

7.

when I go home
Aunty Mabel comes over
every night
to hold me
when Mum
changes the dressings

they lie me
on the kitchen table
their faces very sad

the lanoline is cold

8.

when we visit the surgeon
my dad sees the scar
for the first time
and faints
1.3 dimensions of space

a nurse lifts him
from the floor
the smell of chloroform
fills the hallway

out in North Terrace
down the tall red steps
of the fancy townhouse
Mother frets

it is a shame
you won't ever
wear low-cut
dresses!

the tissues make
shiny craters
set like egg whites
with a ridged edge

red wings to the neck
a tear on each breast
a butterfly
in flight

and on the left thigh
a clumsy square
of grated raw skin
gentian violet
9.

when I start school
  I button my
  cotton school dress
  to the neck

the butterfly
  in my skin
  reminds me
  who I am

10.

my parents rent a house
  near Aunt Mabel and Uncle John
  so Mum can go to work

there are debts to pay

Aunt Mabel takes me to school
  on the back of her push bike
  but I walk home
  once I know the way

one day after school
  I follow my friends
  down a little side street
  where all the children
  pay sixpence

there on a makeshift stage
  is a skinny man
in a loin cloth
  and he lies down
on a bed of nails

I have a loose tooth
    and I wobble it
    as I watch
    the dark prongs
    push into the man
    who is motionless

as I walk home
    I study
    neat little gardens
    each brick house

a purple lantana bush
    spills across the path

cabbage moths flutter
    in the afternoon sun
    sit
    to open and shut their wings

I try to catch them
    one after another

feel the fine black powder
    they leave
    on my hands

I wonder why
    the man
    lay on the nails

did we pay
    to see his pain
    or his poverty?
he didn’t show any pain
    and he took
        lots of money

I find quartz crystals
    on the road verge
    hold them to the sun

their rainbows make me rich

finger sized hexagons
    perfect cut to a point
        now hidden in my pocket

I dream of sleeping
    on a bed of pointy crystals
    with the sun reflecting
        many colours through my body
    until I float
        suspended in the air

I hide my crystals
    inside the stalks
of ‘red hot pokers’
        that grow in the back yard

I climb into
    a thick stand of bamboos
perched high
        on the gnarled roots
protected on all sides
        by the smooth green poles
my eyes close

        I remember
            a white tunnel
from this point
    I spiral up
    into endless light
    and
    I smile

11.

my parents and I
    spend
    Easter holidays
    with Aunty Mabel and Uncle John
    at their beach house

Saturday night
    everyone gets dressed up
    for the movie
    in the town hall

wooden chairs
    in rows
    kids at the front
    adults in the middle

teenagers slink
    into the back rows
    ‘Jaffas’ roll down
    the wooden floor

all stand for
    ‘God Save the Queen’

the chair cushion
    sticks to my best dress
laughing from the boys
    as I pull off
    the grey chewing gum
    and resume my seat

I study the projection box
    there is a man
    surrounded in light
    winding the wheel
    as he
    threads the thin film

when the movie has ended
    we emerge

the heat of day
    has given way
    to a sea breeze

my dad decides to
    visit Uncle Chad
    who now lives
    at the motel

when we get to the motel
    they say he is working
    on the power lines
    just outside town

the wide deserted roads
    turn off in all directions
    to the beach
    wheat silos
    the mission
    and the hospital

we head towards
the mission
    and after some miles
    we come to his work truck

Uncle Chad is high up
    attached to the pole
        arms outstretched
            like a Jesus
        in blue overalls
            repairing
                the phone line

my dad calls out
    but Chad
        does not answer

eventually Dad
    drives away

my mother
    says Chad
        has never been the same
            since the court case

what court case?
    I ask

my father scolds

did anyone speak to you?

12.

the next day
    there is a family picnic
on the beach
  a thatched roof
    on mallee poles
  a long table
    set with salads
    and cold meats

a lazy surf
  flops
  upon the sand

dolphins graze near the shore
  ribbons of dried kelp
    wrap around our ankles

a noon breeze
  lifts sand
    in low clouds
    along the beach

the men sit in circles
  on the sand
    while women lean on cars
      half at attention
      half asleep and talking

as night falls
  the purple and orange lights
    weave across the sky into
      rose pink and crimson feathers

the calm sea lies dumb
  as if silenced by heaven
    and the gentle trickle of tide
      laces the night tranquil

the men gather their nets
onto the back of the dinghy
    and one man rows
    as another spreads the webs down

the lantern on the dinghy
    a solitary light atop the water
    bobs up and down
    making a slow semi-circle

all the children
    run up and down
    the white beach

I feel the cool smooth sand
    on my feet
    collect little fossils
    dotted on the shore

a bonfire blazes on the beach
    its flames twist to the stars
    as men tell tales
    of the last catch

we wait patiently for midnight

when the men rise
    to fetch the dinghy
    everyone rushes
    to the shore

the waves lift
    white foam
    make bubbles in pools

all the men wade deep
    pull the nets into the shore
women and children wait
1.3 dimensions of space

like disciples

and then

the sudden silver flash
as fish burst forth
out of the shallows

mercury arcs to land
a quivering sea of scales
cavorting last gasps
round glass eyes
shuttered from us

the flapping tails
slap at a dry sky
shoot from
our impatient hands

13.

as the sun rises
we sit in the kitchen
eating the pan fried flesh
white as snow

sweet and lemon salted
the fine skin patterns
like grey silk threads
woven in white flesh

everyone eats in silence
and gratitude
listening to waves applaud
the morning
pelicans land gracefully
    to peck for leftovers

seagulls squabble
    for offal on the grass

the men secure ropes
    and scale the cliffs
        to swim in rock pools
            protected from the surf

bodies weave
    in the clear water
        above a garden
            of red and yellow grasses

laughter echoes
    off the rock face

the sun glints
    on the pool surface
        while the turbulence
            from the underworld
                sprays its irritable mists
                    and crashes waves
                        beyond the rocks

14.

at night
    everyone is spent
        from sea and salt

women fuss
    over trifles and scones
1.3 dimensions of space

in the kitchen
then a phone call
   catches
Aunty Mabel's pallor
   and the adults gather together
in the living room

they turn off the Elvis record
send the teenagers
to the back caravan
talk in low voices

then Mum tells the girls
to stay in the bedroom
close the door
   and be quiet

she tells us to
   sit on the floor
   between the beds

*Uncle Chad has a gun*
   and he's threatening to use it!

the muffled conversation
in the darkened hall
   indicates he is liquored up
   and on his way

I pray and pray and pray
my knees shake
   but my smallest cousin
has fallen asleep
   oblivious
   to the strange world
   of adults
I think of the kangaroo
with its stomach peeled
and muted sounds
from Dawn's room

I wonder where Dawn is
and Aunty Lilly
and wonder why
Chad
is angry with us

eventually the phone rings

anxious silence

then Uncle John's slow voice

(Constable Craig has him!)

I drift into fitful sleep
and wake to breakfast
and everything is
as if normal
but nothing is the same

15.

as we drive
back to Adelaide
the car windows
are left open
like an escape valve

there is a warm
inland breeze
my father
    is worried about
    Uncle Chad

I ask about Aunty Lilly and Dawn
    Mum says Aunt Lilly
        is in hospital
            in Adelaide

she tells me Dawn died
    and Aunt Lilly
        went into shock
            for a long time

it was just after the accident
    when I was burned
        the police came
            just after the ambulance
                took me
                    to the hospital

that's when
    the police told Lilly
        Dawn was dead

Dad said
    Uncle Chad was already ill
        trauma from the war

some bad things went on
    in the jungles
        of New Guinea

now he has had
    a relapse

I ask how Dawn died
my mother looks out the window
carefully places her words

* a man from up north was arrested
  * a drifter from the carnival

* he was sent to jail
  * he won't hurt any more
    * little girls

I ask
* did he hurt other girls too?
  * but my mother lights a cigarette

my father looks at my mother
then adds

* they didn't find any other girls!

16.

some months later
  * my dad picks me up
    * from school
      * in his new white Holden

Uncle Chad
  * is in the front
    * passenger seat
      * like a shadow

I sit in the back seat
  * behind him
    * so I can't see
his face

when I feel Uncle Chad
right there
in our car
I am very uncomfortable

my father decides
to stop at his mate’s
parks in the street
goes in to see Tom

leaves me in the car
with Chad

I stare at the back of Chad’s head
I am frozen

it seems like hours

I need to go to the toilet

I cannot speak
or move

I watch a thistle grow
on the riverbank
as my body speaks

when we get home
I confess
to my mother
I have soiled myself

you are a silly girl!

whatever got into you?
Book 2. Elemental Beings
2.1 patience

(Annie's imagination of Lilly's story of grief and change)
1.

the traffic noises
push in
through the curtained glass

my arms hang limp

my spine
has weakened
from letting go
all connections

now it rests
on the stretcher
while an attendant talks

I cannot move
nothing moves
except my heart
tick
ticking
a code
so I might hold
by a fine thread
strong enough
to bind being
and moment

the ambulance stops under pine trees
cool scented branches
sway
and fill my ears
with hushed stirrings
the nurse lifts my shoulders
  then a man helps her
  consider
  my inertia

together
  they lift me into a wheelchair

it is a clumsy procedure

my mouth is drooling
  my hair has clumped
  over my shoulders

I don't want to be
  any part
  of this

body is my armour

silence is my shield

there is nothing else

I am no longer
  needed
     no babe to suckle
     no toddler
        to carry on my hip
     no child to sleep in my arms

I do not know
  where to turn

not to him
  no
not he
who fathered them

that is a damaged craft
cut loose of its moorings
drifting
taking on water
without direction
carried in rifts of confusion

watching himself
in case
he would call names and places
in his sleep
shutting the blinds
on light of day

closing his mind
to the consequences
of steamy jungles

night after night
trembling under the sheets
sweating
fitful jerking
fists flying
to wake suddenly
go to the toilet
return as if
nothing had happened

the bruises
on my arm
he would insist
of my own doing
in the garden

so many years
lying in the same bed
but solitary

and now
I am past loneliness

I should rip open my chest
to unburden the pain
all the pests of past and future
pressed up against each other
contained in my breast
like maggots

but if I give them air
surely
they will take wing
they will pull my pain apart
and replace it with
a buzzing
I won’t be able to stop

and who would benefit?

2.

they wheel me up the driveway

it is a blue Autumn day
birds are muttering
inside wattle trees

a fountain
splashes water into a pond

the white cement is streaked
with pink and green slime
    that glistens
    in the sunlight

we enter a courtyard

there is a statue of Jesus
    arms open
    the fingers
    on his right hand
    have been broken

I can feel the eyes of the dead
    hover in the corners
    unable to reconcile
    the loss of pain

they have traded the body
    for the walls of
    forgetfulness

I am glad they cannot see me
    inside
    this dilapidated body

a live prisoner approaches
    dressed in a nurse's uniform
    clean and starched
    face as cold as Hades

she takes control
    of my chair
    parks me in a dark hallway
    outside an office

she goes inside
2.1 patience

I can hear voices
    muted
    grow louder
    then soft again

two thickset men
    move towards me
    as deliberately
    as tortoises
    hold each other's hands
    stop to prod me

one squirms

the other pulls him away

they run into the shadows

an old woman
    shuffles from behind
    moves past me
    then stops
    suddenly turns and points
    her index finger
    close to my chest
    like an accusation

then she erupts
    into hysterical laughter
    as she shuffles away

the office door
    opens

I see shiny leather shoes
    finely tailored grey herringbone tweed
    one inch cuffs
on narrow leg trousers
only mild wear at the knees

almost hidden
by the white cotton coat
large pearl buttons
one
two
three

a face
at right-angles
mouth open to show yellowed teeth

a smile protruding
from under a grey moustache

if only
I could
turn away

3.

they put me
in a cot
lock three
of the metal sides
bring a wash pan
sponge my body

the air pricks me
until a scratchy towel
deletes subtlety

black scissors snip
and the matted pods
of worried hair
   fall about me
   like the shedding
   of an old stringy bark

the window’s
   morning reflection
   shows me transformed
   anonymous
   figure of frail woman
   a sparrow’s runt

the cotton dress
   made of squares
   gathered at the neck
   with a tie at the back

a woollen shawl
   to drape over shoulders
   for dinner

the dining hall
   a dank long room
   punctuated by small
   square windows

white light angles
   across the long pine table
   well worn benches

bodies sit quietly
   until my wheelchair
   is placed at the end
   of a long trestle
   to look down
   a corridor
   of unfortunate faces
a man jumps up
    sits at the end of the table
    and touches my hand

someone hits his hand
    with a dessert spoon

he holds my hand tighter

someone tries to pull him off
    our fingers are locked

when bowls of lamb stew
    are placed
    he eats mine first
    then his own

4.

a nurse wheels me to a sunroom

a woman is playing a piano

the wide windows
    capture the lawns outside
    a vegetable garden
    a lavender hedge
    and new daffodils

the woman is playing
    Grieg's piano concerto
    in A minor

deep from my heart
2.1 patience

a voice hums

my eyelids drop
    as I slip into a slumber
    deeper than the ocean
    higher than the moon

I spread my being
    into the sky
    as if unburdened

when it is finished
    I stand
    walk out
    into the garden

5.

in the doctor’s office
    I lie on the couch
    as I have done
    twice a week
    since purpose returned
    to my body

wearing a red and purple floral dress
    beige 30 denier stockings
    flat black leather shoes
    my hair
    is straight to my shoulders
    and grey

he is talking in a muffled tone
    on his telephone
I do not exist

I am a couch
    holding the weight of bodies
    that rest on me
    heedless of their position
    oblivious to mine

the grey moustache has developed handles
    the lips plump
    around a cigar
        little puffs of smoke escape
            as he speaks

a crash at the window
    a dove bounces back
        its wings agitate
            drop

the doctor does not notice
    the spot
    of blood
    slowly
    sliding

I close my eyes again

pretend to dream
    or am I dreaming?

the warmth of the Persian rugs
    and the yellowed books
        exude
            the aroma
                of past lives
                    the catechism
wood fires
sherry glasses filled
after supper

6.

I have a favourite seat
behind the courtyard
where the afternoon sun
splashes through a pepper tree

the sun renews my heart
the breeze
awakens my layers
of sense

a younger man
stands
under the pepper tree
rolling a cigarette
offers me one

we sit there
quietly inhaling

I have seen his paintings

they are very fine
intricate detail
motifs repeated in cycles
birds in flight
emissions
from a benevolent sun

he sits a fraction closer
puts a hand
on the seat
    next to my left thigh

his right foot
    begins to tap nervously

I place my hand
    on his right knee
    to steady his agitation

he smiles and inhales
    one more time

as he exhales
    he takes my hand
    and kisses it
    deeply
    in the palm

I place my hand back in my lap

7.

the weather is dark
    storm clouds gather in the West
    and all the birds
    are hiding

I go to the studio
    where Patrick
    leans into his canvas
    almost kissing the red flashes
    of oil sunset
he traces fine black marks
   into his oily desert

he turns

I see red paint on his chin

his blue eyes take me
   into him
   then he brushes dust
      off a wooden seat
   and puts it forward
      gesturing me to sit

he puts away the desert
   and puts up
      the other canvas
      where I am looking
      back at myself

the water bottles replaced
   the light adjusted

I take off my clothes
   straddle the chair
      arms folded
      on the wooden back
      one hand dropped
      to caress the wood

my hair hangs
   behind my shoulders
   except for one strand
      he insists
      must hang
      over my left eye
he usually
    tilts my head
    to the left
    to focus on a black spot
    placed on the top
    of the tall easel

but today I am tired
he decides
to paint my feet
    so I can put my chin
    on my arms
    and catch a little sleep

8.

I have moved into 'the Lodge'
    a half-way house
    my own room
    with blue walls

Patrick has a similar room
    at the end of the hall

at midnight
    he knocks gently

I open quietly

he enters with care

our bodies merge
    until I quiver
    at the touch
    of his silken skin
his tongue expresses
  my thoughts
  so perfectly
  it is
  as if he were with me
in my dreams
  days earlier
  weeks later
we do not remember
  we are somewhere else
entwined
in a complicated tapestry
  of arms and legs
  so we do not know which are his
  or which are mine
and we sleep
  in a blissful knot
    that slowly unravels
      with the dawn

9.

I receive a letter
  from Margaret

the doctor says she may visit
  I am nervous
    waiting in the foyer

I have had no news of family
  or of the murder case

the doctor said I could not
  testify
I was relieved
their accusing eyes
could have
cut me down
and I could not explain
why I didn't search sooner
why I thought Dawn
was deliberately
trying me
blaming me
for the illness
in her father

Margaret arrives late
shiny new dress
gathered at the waist
a wide black belt
black high heels
matching handbag
her thin lips
pursed around a cigarette
in the garden

she starts to remind me
how stressful
everything has been
for her
dealing with the police
the lawyers
the funeral details
the murder trial

I am nauseous
her mouth keeps moving
as I slide onto a bench
as if pushed down
by her monotonous
complaining

now she is detailing
    the inconvenience
    of her husband’s new sobriety
    weekly meetings and dour attitudes
    the debts to be paid
    from his gambling
    the people he needs to help
    in the middle of the night

my head begins to spin
I am wanting to close down
    down
    down

10.

the doctor hands me a glass of water
    gives me a sedative
    begs me rest on the couch
    asks me about my sister
which sister I wonder
    the kind, intelligent one
    or the angry self-centred one
    the femme fatale
    or the prudish matron

I am speechless
    there is a traffic jam in my throat
    the water soothes
    the sedative lubricates

11.
I move to a small bed-sitter
by the sea
my first television
a green vinyl lounge suite
delivered by the Salvos
my tablets labelled
and organised in a box

Margaret has ordered
the daily newspaper
as she insists
I re-enter the world

a pile of rolled newspapers
in a cardboard box
and a letter from Patrick
waiting to be opened

I sit and look out the window
at the afternoon light
spreading across the sea

12.

I remember
a bitumen road
relentless
driving all night
the car headlights
slowly
dissolve
in the pre-dawn haze
as we approach
the range
emus strut across the plains
kangaroos bound roadside
a murder of crows
lift from the power lines
scatter towards the horizon
where just on the black edge
of hills
a red sun
weeps
a transfusion
of expanding light

Chad slows the car on a ridge
pulls to the side and parks
so we can watch the sun rise

it is Anzac Day
so he turns on the radio
to find
a dawn service

a lone bugle
fills the car
spills across the plain

we are caught
in that space
between
then and now
remembering our fathers

13.

my Dad left memories
in his paintings
of soldiers' faces
empty of emotion
drained of hope
and there was a
sense of foreboding
in the mysterious
grey waters
studied over many months
on troop ships

I was only thirteen
when they left his coffin
in the lounge room
I could not look

all their hushed voices
like silent screams
bounced in my head

my mother in black
cut us all off
lost as she was
in complicated musings

some weeks later
my mother
threw out
all Dad's books
as if it would
finally rid her
of something
she never understood

she seemed bitter
and fearful of solitude
she stopped paying bills
and sat on the front veranda
watching for milk money thieves
and boys breaking letter boxes

14.

I go to my father's grave
    hoping he might appear
    or speak to me
    with some reason to believe
    that there is any sense
    in living

he is the only one
    who had some quiet knowledge
    that stilled him
    when chaos ensued

there was always
    a space around him
    where one could shelter
    and know warmth
    but he never spoke about it
    he never gave me words to hang on to

15.

I often see Dawn
    in my garden
    as the two year old
    picking clover in the grass
    hugging the cat
    or digging in a sand pit

she looks happy
doing the same actions
over and over again
 as if she wants to stay
in that groove
and not get
   to the cave
   on the beach
2.2 crossing the veil

(Annie's imagination of Aril's search for humanity)
1.

my human mother
tucks me into bed
tells me
a story

2.

one day
she comes for wood
to boil water
and sees
on the wood pile
a white blanket

she grabs at it
thinking that
the neighbour's children
have left a play doll

but it is warm
and a small hand lifts
like a pea shoot unfolds to the sun
the baby makes a cry
that strikes deep
into her heart

so she cradles it
looks into the blue eyes
and sees
it is newly born

she looks out
into a golden shine
of wheat
where her husband
is harvesting
and seeing him in the field
she runs
through the waist high wheat
towards him

he sees her arrive
with tears in her eyes
they stand there
for some time
dazed by the sunshine
and the beautiful glow
that comes
from the child

they call the child Aril
a mysterious seed
inside the husk
of human form

we are happy together
until I am old enough
to walk

one night
the wind blows fierce
and air rushes
down the chimney
sparks fly from the hearth
and fire spreads
like a brawl
into the hall
my mother wakes to smoke
    shakes her husband
        out of his snoring
    they cough and reach for clothes

my mother grabs me
    to her breast
        but my father falls
            under a crash of beams

she puts me on the floor
    and tries to free
        my father
            but the smoke
        fills her sobbing
            and her heart is overcome

she falls to the floor

I crawl
    towards the door

I escape down the track
    look back
        the inferno
    throws yellow tongues
        towards the moonlit sky

I run until my breathing labours
    more than I can push
and fall asleep
    under a sapling pine
4.

at dawn
  my eyes open
  to the smouldering remains
  and a light rainfall

just a few metres away
  a dozen kangaroos graze
  and a large female
    moves gently
      towards me

she puts me
  in her pouch
  pushes my head down
    then bounds across the fields
      with the other kangaroos

before long
  we arrive
    near a creek

high granite boulders
  line the hillside
    and under a large
      gum tree
        the entrance to a cave

there the kangaroo rests
  spread across the ground

when I cry
  she releases the milk
    that has formed
      for her lost joey
she is still bleeding from a gunshot wound

I snuggle into the kangaroo cry for a long time

5.

I run with the mob

my kangaroo mother always on guard

when the pace quickens

at the sight of hunters

they hide me in tall grasses or under mallee branches

the rest of the mob bound in different directions as decoys return hours later

when grazing the kangaroos collect berries and fungi

they watch until campfires are deserted then search for edible remnants empty their pouches by my nest
the lactating mothers
    feed their joeys first
    but spare some milk
    for me

they take me
    to waterholes
    teach me to dig
    in the sand

I run
    as fast as the wind

I am lean
    like a ghost gum

my hair hangs
    like golden ropes
    to my hips
    and I sing with the birds

6.

the day comes
    when I begin
    to bleed

I hide
    deep in a limestone cave
    to suilk
    and wash
    in the lapping pool

water
    rises and lowers
    from its pull
with the moon

I weep
because I fear
I will die

but after several days
the bleeding stops
and I emerge
weak but renewed

in time
I understand
I must eat well
when the moon wanes
and store food
in my cave

7.

when a drought
dries the water holes
and favourite grasses
become sparse
the mob moves
ever closer
to the town
in search of fresh greens

under cover of nightfall
they go to the oval
after the men in white
have turned off their lights

the grass is green there
and they graze
   until first light
   and the sound of engines

one day
   large trucks arrive
   with strange animals
   and men raise a white tent

the whole oval is covered
   with people
   their noisy machines
   and caged animals

I am curious
   entranced by a man
   more strange
   more beautiful
   than any other

tall and slim
   his hair
   shines
   like spider webs

his eyes flash
   like moonlight
   flickering
   through the leaves

he speaks words
   I cannot understand
   but the music of his voice
   calls to me
the sun blazes
    so the mob rests in dunes
    near the mouth
    of a creek
it is dry
    but the sand
    is still cool
    from the darkness
a sea breeze
    brings some relief
    from the swelter
    of the inland sleep
I lie on top
    of a sand dune
    watch the beach
    search for humans
in the distance
    I see two girls
    run along the shore
    stop near the caves
they play in the sand
    then the older one
    buries the smaller girl
    in the sand
just her head is left
    and the child cries
    but the older girl
    walks back to the caves
I slide along
the crest of the dunes
to look closely

there is a hat
over the child's face
she is crying

I sneak
to the mouth
of the cave
stepping softly

stretch
into a cavity
to peer
towards laughter

I am transfixed

it is the one I desire
there
fondling
the giggling girl

in distress
I climb down
run back to the dunes
tears stream
as my heart pounds

inside me
a confusion of feelings

I curl into a ball
and nestle into a hole
the wind
    carries the cries
    of the smaller child
    and the shouting of the other

9.

another day
    I see two men
      staggering
        up the beach
they have bottles

the older man is dressed in orange
    his voice
      is not familiar
    his skin
      is midnight blue

the young man
    is the beautiful one
        from the circus

lean and graceful
    he runs
      into the surf

by the time he emerges
  the older man
    has climbed the dunes
      to sleep

so the young man
    lies naked
2.2 crossing the veil

in the sand to dry

I move forward
    stealthily
    across the sand
    until my shadow meets his

I lean over him
    my hair softly
    scraping his arm

he flicks his hand

he looks up
    sees me
    crouched
    beside him

he curses in surprise

I am frightened
    run down the beach

10.

I hide
    confused and wounded
    watch him
    sitting on the sand
    his head on his knees

then he stands up
    grabs his clothes
    runs to the caves
the two girls run along the beach

they carry buckets and spades brightly coloured towels around their necks

the older one stops in front of the caves drops her towel and starts to dig

once the younger one is focused playing with sand the older girl walks up to the caves

I move closer

the younger girl taps sand from her bucket hums a happy tune that catches curiosity

the little girl follows me back to the mob

I am pleased but also disappointed because I would prefer to be
that other girl

is a problem

the beautiful chaos

of feelings

that circulates around the boy

still beckons me

the kangaroos

accept my small visitor

but are relieved

when she runs back

11.

I watch the small girl

skip back along the shore

I see the older man

run towards the girl

he chases her

away from the cave

she runs up the path

towards town

and the older man

drops to his knees

he is very drunk

staring out to sea

lifting the bottle
to his mouth
  he shouts at phantoms
    in his language

then he throws his
  empty bottle
    aside
  and staggers
    up the hillside path
  towards town
2.3 acceptance

(Annie's memory of being a child and discovering other worlds)
1.

I feel the sunlight
   caress my face
   open my eyes

see my parents
   getting ready
   for work

at school
   I tell my teacher
   about
   the girl
   that lives with kangaroos

when my mother comes for me
   they say what a vivid
   imagination
   I have

such a strange girl!
   my mother shakes her head
   the other day
   she said she saw
   an Aboriginal woman
   in the back yard
   it is a worry!

2.

some weeks later
   deep in sleep
   I am woken by a noise
   a scratching
at my window

I try to ignore it
then I look
my room is filled
with a glow
and at the foot of my bed
Aril stands
her long yellow hair
flowing behind her
the blue eyes smiling

she tugs at my feet

I want to scream
but the sound
won't come out

I close my eyes
and then I feel very cold

I am on a beach

Aril is running ahead
and turning to beckon me

when I catch up to her
she gives me
a black feather

3.

after school
I find a black
crow feather
on the driveway

I take the feather
    and sit
in the garden

I close my eyes
    and feel
the warm sun
    surround me

there are red and orange lights
    then blue and green
dancing inside
    my lids

I feel the gentle breeze
    it stirs a soft
flutter of leaves
    in the willow tree

then from the tall
    ghost gum
comes the deep caw
    of a crow

caw
    caw
    caw
    caw

like knocking on a door

the sun shines upon me
    it sends its rays to me
    it warms me
2.3 acceptance

caw
caw

a crow flies down
and pecks at a worm
  to the left of my feet

then it struts
around me
  flies back
    into the tree

4.

the evening news
  in black and white
    a man
      bends
        into a police car
          hands chained
            behind his back

a voice
  says
    he will be hanged
      for murder
        and rape

Dawn's photo
  pierces me
    through the heart
      my gut lifts

I look hard
it is the older man I saw on the beach

I didn't kill the little girl! he says

the newspaper has photos of people outside Parliament House with signs 'No Death Penalty'

is Aunty Lilly still in hospital?

can we visit her Mum?

Mum grabs the paper

I don't know I don't think so

5.

one day I walk to the creek

it meanders towards the sea and there are wetlands

spiky reeds prick the air
like green plastic wands
   with tiny brown stars

there is green slime
   in stagnant ponds
   and frog eggs
   softly floating
   under sticks

an ibis pecks
   at the water
   makes ripples
   that radiate light
   upwards
   reflecting the blue
   of the sky

a white feather
   floats
   towards me

I hold it to the sun
   see fine down
   on the quill

there is a splash
   behind me
   a rustling
   in the water

I see an old Aboriginal woman
   pulling watercress

children cross the footbridge
   towards the church
   their laughter bounces
they chase each other
    they don’t notice me

I know now
    they won’t see
        the old woman
            as she waddles up the bank
she turns
    and waves
        to me

6.

on Sunday mornings
    my mother sings
        as she cleans

my father
    visits prisoners
        shares lessons of drink
            and stories of war
Sunday afternoons
    different men
        come
            to our kitchen table

Dad tells me
    they are from all
        walks of life
            a taxi driver
            a priest
            a professor
            a journalist
            a painter
two ballet dancers

the kitchen is filled
    with discussion

in my cubby house
    under the wattle tree
        I pour cold tea
        listen to the magpies
            warble above me

pungent pollen balls
    explode

a possum stirs
    trying to sleep
        in the drone of bees

a black and white
    magpie feather
        stabs the grass

I pick it up
    to see
        a blurred line
            where black meets white

I am staring
    at a place
        inside of me
7.

my mother’s voice

calls

    from the back porch

I go into the kitchen

    there are pink lamington cakes
    and lemon meringue tarts

Aunty Lilly

    is sitting at the table
    she looks much older

she is eating

    a lamington
    with her hand
    under her chin
    to catch the crumbs

I see the stubbly finger

    which was sown back on

she isn’t wearing

    any rings

she smiles at me

    as if she didn’t know me
    so I sit next to my mother
    and swing my feet

Mum stirs her tea

    even though
    she doesn’t
    take sugar

my black patent shoes
2.3 acceptance

reflect the light

the small silver buckles
    on the ankle strap
dig into my skin

something isn't right

I notice
    my shoes are too tight
pins and needles
    are beginning to spread
    and in the back
    of my head
there is a discomfort
    as if
something is expanding
    wanting to break free

Lilly has rough scales
    on her elbows

she looks at me
    intently for a moment
    then looks
    at the tablecloth

a newspaper is open
    on the table

Mum reads aloud

*Rufus gets stay of execution!*

I ask what that means

the blue budgie
in a cage
by the kitchen window
starts to chatter

Mum
puts a towel
over his cage
for silence

I am told to go outside
and play

8.

I look in the fronds
of the banana palm

a purple pod
almost as big as a football
hangs down
and as each
petal lifts
there is a smooth
glossy maroon inside
and five white
trumpet flowers
their hollows
just big enough
for a bee

higher up
the flowers have turned
into green fingers
each hand
cupped
towards the sky
9.

one Sunday afternoon
Dad tells Mum
he's met Rufus
at the prison

the same Rufus?

my mother lights
a cigarette
glazes over
for a time
tells me
to go
to my room

10.

If I had not
gone with Aril
I might have
seen something
heard someone

I might have saved her

there are other voices
sometimes
they shout at each other
in my head

one wants to find Dawn

another says she was
behaving badly

yet another voice
says to forget
    everything

*let the adults*
    *work it out!*

on the school oval
    in front of me
    a bright green feather
        from a rosella

I sit quietly
    under a wattle tree
        and feel
            the intense green
                of the quill
                    vibrate

11.

the senior girl
    at ballet class
        graces
            the front of the room
                with hands that
                    flow like water
                        and arms
                            more supple than
                                a willow

I practice tirelessly at home
    hoping to swim
through air
   with fingers
   like feathers

the teacher
   announces exam results
   my gold medal

mothers fuss
   around their daughters
   after class

they turn their backs
   as I collect my things

my mother is still at work

I wait alone
   on the pavement
   outside
it will be an hour
before my father
can collect me

a small honey eater
   flits in the jacaranda
   flash of yellow
   its delicate black beak
   chirps
   dances in flight

one small tail feather
   lands at my feet

I balance without and within
   remember to breathe deep
Book 3. Return
3.1 patterns

(Annie's imagination of Lilly's thoughts on changing patterns)
1.

the letter from Patrick
   has sat unopened

I am not sure
   I can prepare myself

nothing in life
   is permanent
   and I would desire
      permanence
      at times
      some sense of forever

the comfort
   of not changing

the warmth of recognition

but he is a work of art
   perception in process

he will not be permanent
   in self
      nor in craft

how could such a swift process
   slow enough
   for a commitment
      to the mundane

I am grateful
   for fleeting
      moments of happiness

the way he opens the window
3.1 patterns

to a full moon
or riding
through wheat fields
on the back of his scooter

happiness
is as random
as whimsical
as the flit and float
of a butterfly
contemplating
a burst of white blossoms
the same chaotic path
woven by each passing
set of wandering wings

2.

in the newspaper
a story about the abolition
of the Death Sentence
in South Australia

Margaret has left
a marker on the page

*Rufus will not hang*

I feel ill

I see the remains
of my beautiful girl
as I have seen
a thousand times
every time
    a thought touches
    a gate opens
    the same trembling reality

as on that day
    Chad came home
    changed his clothes
    blood on his fist

he did not confide

left me
    alone in my pain
    without resolution

I shut down
    because I had
    nowhere to go
    no-one to trust

3.

when I go
    to the therapist
    finally
    the words come

Chad didn't want
    another child

he was angry

told me he would leave us
    if I had the baby
but there were complications
from the termination

when Annie was scalded
    I was in abdominal pain
    and grieving my baby

after the ambulance left
    I found Chad
drunk
    snoring in the shed

I couldn't find Dawn anywhere

when the police came
    to tell me
    Dawn had been murdered
    my body went numb

Bill arrived the next day
    from Adelaide

he had seen the headlines
    as the bus pulled in

found his brother
    in the shed

carried him to bed

then he sat with me
    in the kitchen
    asked about Annie
    but I could not respond
said he'd take me
to the hospital

I was lost
  back into childhood
  and the thought
  of a black coffin
  in the lounge room

4.

after my life with Chad
  it is suddenly clear
    that my Dad also
      was troubled by war

my mother suffered
  as women suffer
    the remnants of men's battle
      endless revenge

it is at night
  they unravel in dreams
    shout back
  at the enemy

by day
the shadow war
  is a headspace
sculptured by denial

I understand my mother
  better now
    her frustration
      with stubborn non-compliance
how can a mother
   explain to her children
      the things
         their father
         confesses
             in the dark

or the sudden
  panic
    as a street incident
    brings a memory
      of a foreign place

some trauma
   too horrific to speak

a paralysis
   of memory

a fear of loss
   that demands loss

5.

when I stroll on a beach
    see the red and yellow
       ochre cliffs
          rise
     into the blue haze
       of a
          summer day
I think of Dawn and Annie
   playing happily
      at the water's edge
just like my sisters and I
    used to play
    sun burnt
    and salt coated
    from hours of surf
    and sand castles

why Dawn was taken
    I may never know

the grief travels
    like waves
    coming and going
    never able
    to catch its measure

a swell of emotion
    outwardly calm
    then whipped up
    unexpectedly
    like a summer storm
    unpredictable

sometimes
    the grief itself
    destructive
    curling in
    on itself
    until it is released

    in slow repetitions
    moments of fear
    and glimpses
    of remembrance

I loved Chad once
perhaps I still do
    but I need to move away
from my own
    habitual reactions

it is time
    to trace
    new patterns

6.

I open
    Patrick's letter

    it has been posted in Sydney

he tells me
    he has a new studio
        near Redfern

    and a gallery
        is selling his paintings

he is happy
    and well

says he misses me

asks when
    can I join him?
7.

the television
makes a background noise
to the
ideas in my head

some memories
are exploding
over desire

there are faces
coming and going
from the perimeter
of my consciousness

Rufus is there

sometimes he laughs

sometimes he is sad
and hopeless

and Chad scowls
gloats over his dogs

my mother is crying
she holds her arms out

Dawn runs along the beach
carefree

then I hear the news reporter
as if he were
a figment of my imagination
saying
Pardon!

Rufus has been pardoned
by the Premier

where is the justice
for Dawn?

who will reveal
her fateful end?

I pack a bag

phone Patrick

tell him
I will come by train

8.

Patrick meets me
at the station
his hair in a pony tail
a beard to his chest

he carries my bag
tells me about his exhibition
as we walk
through back streets

we stop
at a small corner café
to order pasta
and look at each other
there is a sense of purpose
in the way
    he places
        his hand on mine

I know he will never say
what it is
    that draws us to each other
as if words
    might catch a solid meaning
where there is
    nothing to grasp
    but that which we are
when
    our perfumes blend
        and our thoughts fade

more tangible notions
    are common illusions

he tells me
    he has a new model

I prepare myself
    to see his thoughts
        in another body

her name is Talia
    a feline creature he found
        at a university coffee shop
            and rescued from obscurity

the possibility of
    another muse
        has been anticipated
            but avoided
now I am
  exuding fear
    from all extremities
      like a primitive memory

I am anxious
  rummaging my skull
    for a remnant
      of my own will

as we walk towards the gallery
  people are gathering

Patrick quickens his pace
  then stops suddenly

I hope you will understand
  what I have tried to do here
    that it will mean something
      to you

9.

directly in front of the entrance
  blasted in white light
    a life-sized woman
      in a black robe
        wrestling with a jackal

her bare feet
  claw at the yellow sand

her nails dig
  into the blood-stained fur
the title reads

Blame

by Patrick Bon Arbour

on the opposite wall

Forgiveness

lies naked under white chiffon
the body draped
across a bed
as if waiting
for moonlight

Speculation stands on a beach

the naked woman has left
her footprints in the sand
but she has stopped suddenly
turned to see
the waves
ride over
her tracks

the face is pained
her hands reach
towards the past
summoning proof

Persistence is a rock face
and the naked woman
suspended on ropes
pulling upwards

her hands are bleeding
the harness cuts
into her buttocks
her right foot stretches to a narrow ledge and the ball of her left foot teeters

*Comfort*

is the naked woman reclining in soft grass looking up to the sky

the face is serene and blissful the lips opening

the face in every painting is mine captured in every facet of transformation

he has identified every muscle every miracle facial expression physical exertion but also the spirit of transition

and when I am able to speak I do not but squeeze his hand a little tighter
Patrick has rented a row house
   white wash walls
       ivy draping
           from the balcony

an old pushbike
   on the veranda
       three tins of blue
           industrial paint

he opens the door
   to scents of curry
       and tobacco
makes me sit
   in a black leather armchair
       while he prepares food

I watch his face
   as he places antipasto
       in patterns of unfolding
3.2 in retrospect
(Annie's imagination of Aril's story of Neptune's cave)
1.

sometime after
    seeing those girls
    at the beach
    there is a big rain

my mob
    move up north
    to the inland sea
    lots of grasses
    and plenty of water

in some places
    plenty of people too

we move
    until
    there is only the cries of birds
    teaching their young to fly

water lilies
    explode like yellow stars
    on the tops of the ponds
    and wild flowers
    make a rainbow
    across the ground

hundreds of flavours
    nestle
    like gifts
    in the grasses
2.

one day
  I come across
    a lonely man
      sleeping in the grass

I watch him a long time
  the way his chest
    rises and sinks

now and then
  he mumbles sounds

I move closer
  and lie beside him

it is necessary
  because I cannot
    keep up with the mob

they want me
  to be
    with my kind

I lay there a long time
  wondering
    if he will ever wake

I worry
  he might
    reject me

there is an old utility
  parked up the road
    a sheepdog chained
      to the back
I nestle
    into the hollow
    of his back
    the smell of his neck
    makes me happy

suddenly
    he jumps to his feet
    as if he's been bitten
    by a bull ant

he stands there
    his mouth open
    hands on his hips

then shouts something
    very loud
    to the sky

he bends over
    and touches my arm

jumps back

then touches my arm
    again

I swat his hand
    and laugh

he starts walking in circles
    picks up the empty bottle
    looks for more drink

then he sits on a rock
    just staring at me
    blinking his eyes
3.2 in retrospect

3.

I tell him my name

    Aril

he teaches me some words

    Sergeant Tom
    I love you Sergeant Tom
    I would die for you Sergeant Tom

I follow him everywhere he goes
    sleep beside him at night

one day
    he leaves
    drives to a mission
    comes back
    with a dress
    asks me
    to put it on

he is a prospector
    has a little shed
    at the edge of a lake

I stay there
    with his dog
    when he takes his samples
    to the city

he is always sad
    when he goes
    to the city
    hates its noises
    and the cars
    doesn't like
3.2 in retrospect

all the people

when he comes back
he drinks
    all the bottles
he has squeezed
    into his car

I go into the scrub
    for a week or two
    come back
to him
    when he stops drinking

4.

Tom brings some newspapers

I see a picture
    of an Aboriginal man

I ask
    who is it?
    I have seen him before

Sergeant Tom tells me
    it is Rufus
    who is accused of murdering a girl

Tom says he was in prison
    supposed to be executed
    but lawyers and newspapers
    have kept him safe
    from the hang-man
I remember the beach
   and the little girl
       who ran with me
   and the bigger girl
       who went into the cave
           with the beautiful boy

I remember Rufus
   crying on the beach
       making the little girl run home
           then going back to town

I snuck up to the cave
   after he left

I climbed into the nook
   where I had
       watched them before
   but they were not
           to be seen

I thought I heard
   the girl crying
       I couldn't see her
           sounds were muffled

maybe there was
   a man's voice
       but the tide was riding in
           and water was crashing
               on the rocks

I heard the girl scream

I ran
3.2 in retrospect

ran fast as I could
ran to the estuary
and hid
    in the sand hills
3.3 expansion
(Annie’s return to land, river and sea)
1. after many hours in the clouds
   I glimpse Sydney red roofs 
   and blue bays white fringed sand lines 
   the bridge and the towers of glass and steel 

2. the flight to Adelaide descends over the Coorong the grazing lands and crops of the Bremer Valley then the forested hills glistening dams 

the sweep of suburbia box houses and pools the city rising neat with its ovals and churches 

the Torrens River winding to the sea 

the airport close to shore 

the plane circles over city beaches white sands
waves breaking

the landing
  closes another chapter
  opens new possibilities
  as I exit the rear stairs
  to the sea breeze
  and seagulls circling

Mum and Dad
  wait at the Arrivals lounge

their faces lighten
  when our eyes meet

3.

next day
  I visit Dad

we go to
  the Botanic Gardens
  walk
  watch the ducks

after lunch
  we sit by a fountain

I tell him
  I had a dream
  while in America

woke up one night
  bolt upright
  shouted out loud
he didn't do it!

haunted me for days

Dad tells me
that Rufus has been pardoned

nobody knows for sure what happened
in that cave

I ask about Chad

Dad says he's had
some counselling
and has moved up North
works on a station
past Parachilna

4.

I move to Mannum
where I get a job
in a second hand store
that specializes
in Australian crafts

rent a room
on a property
a few kilometres
out of town

the owners are two teachers
Greg and Bob
who are renovating
an old farmhouse

in a Volkswagen 'Combi' van
I explore
the landscape
along the River Murray

park in a clearing
walk down a hillside
towards a tributary

rain clouds loom
over huge boulders
and smooth slabs of granite
that slide
into the deep pools
surrounded by reeds

gnarled river gums
twist up
from crevices
their trunks
myriad colours

in the distance
rounded hills
with outcrops of rock
and grazing sheep

the first pool
has a large flat rock
and I sense it
as a place of tribal dance

I can feel the energy
of serpentine steps
ancient voices
muted by the reeds

I take the higher path
  over the rocks
  see the eagle hawk
  circle the hillside

look down
  to a billabong
  deep water gurgling
    through dry reeds

Monarch butterflies
  waft across the path
  nestle on shrubs
    chase each other

blue and green parrots
  chatter happily
    in the branches of
      wattle trees

the path winds
  atop the hill
  windswept grasses
    rustle in sunlight

as I descend towards
  another deep pool
    I see the gorge rocks
      rise steeply upwards

strappy plants
  nestle amongst the rocks
    the reds and browns
      are reflected in the water
the depth
  is beguiling
    the tranquility
      unnerving

there is a sense
  of being watched
    that one wrongly placed step
      will bring retribution

it is a sacred place
  and I feel its power
    I know I must
      tread with respect

I follow the river path
  looking up
    to see
      a rock formation

a huge serpent
  half coiled
    its head raised
      looking to the sky

and nearby
  the rounded boulders
    like female buttocks
      warmed in the sun

rain clouds
  roll over the gorge
    make a fine mist
      unsettle the waters

as I drive back
there is a vivid rainbow
  stretching
  across the plains

it seems like one end
  is nestled in the gorge
  and the other end
  is close to home

but as I get closer
  it moves
  or perhaps
    it is not possible
    to see
    when one
      is immersed

5.

open to a full moon
  the window of my room
    has rusty fly wire
    and a small lizard sits there

we watch the stars together
  the great galaxy swirls
    and we also swirl
      in the endless moment

the fragrance of cut hay
  hangs in the warm air
    and an owl's hoot
      punctuates silence

the dam reflects the moon
and frogs begin to sing
their monotonous
ancient calls

6.
even though
I can travel
to the other side
of the world
I cannot leave
the red sand
the dust of time
and the memory of Dawn
nor the call of the wild surf
the playful swim of seals
desolate beaches
and the call of Aril

it is as if
she follows my dreams
haunts my houses
and begs me
to return to the sand dunes
to visit the caves
travel deeper than thoughts
find the mystery
in the crystalline tunnels

I travel to the sea
walk the grassy hillsides
climb huge granite rocks
carved by ancient ice slides
the old shifting of land mass
and the swell of time
spirals me into
the depths of the waters

I see a swimmer
twist and turn
slide along the sandy bed
dance with sting rays

she ascends
towards the sun
bubbles rising around her
until she lifts
out of the water

I am sprayed
by a wave
crashing on the rocks
nearly pulled
into the depths
black and endless
like a moonless sky

I cannot see her
only sense her eyes
watching
waiting
for me to listen
carefully enough

but I avoid
her
overcome
by a panic
of
expectations
late at night
an Australian woman
talks on radio

born a Catholic
she became
a Buddhist nun
and now
she says
she meets people
of many religions
and realizes
she could have found
the same truths
in the church
where she started

I return
to the billabong
where butterflies
make their silent prayer
across
the purple flowers
and lovebirds
chatter in the gum trees
at water’s edge
the explosion of insects
a fine mist
    rising
towards the blush
    of an opening sky
time is inverted
    as if the galaxy
    were deep inside
    the waters
    and the waters
    are deep
    inside me

9.
one night
    I turn on the television
    to see a documentary
    about Rufus
the reporter says

    now he is free
    living up north
    he has trained
    in the ancient teachings

    he does not need
    the drink anymore

    he doesn't talk
    about the past

    he never says
    he did it
or he didn't do it

Instead
he works hard
spends time
with his wife
and his family

he has become
a healer
in his community

he says
when all those people around the world
prayed for him
nothing else mattered

10.
sweet swallows
weave in the blue above

I hold an old shoe box
full of feathers
slide my finger
   gently
along a silken edge
of a magpie feather

it is fine
   like the edge of truth
   it bends
   it gives way
as we also must bend
   if we would fly
I take the box of feathers
    to where the red cliffs
    rise above the river
        and I shake my feathers free
APPENDIX

Proposed book cover for 'Patterns of Being'.
Patterns of Being  a verse novel by  Heather Sladdin

Patterns of Being is a fictional narrative in open verse. The story is told by Annie, who recalls her childhood trauma and imagines the remembrances of Lily, her aunt and Ann’s nymph-like girl who moves through dimensions of time and space. The poetry gets a soulful interpretation in the words and music, and creates a unique world view for survival.