

Assaulting Matilda

a collection of sonnets

By Alexandra Mildenhall

The Charlotte

His wave of anger washes over her.
He ties her hands with rope onto the ship.
Silent, she waits for what will now occur.
He lifts his arm and belts her with his whip.

Botany Bay is where she disembarks.
Her flag will henceforth always fly half-mast,
her blind defiance eaten by the sharks.
The courts decided. Now the die is cast.

She must submit; she does not have a choice.
Her master cocks a kookaburra smirk.
She knows the rules; she must not raise her voice.
She falls down on her knees and gets to work.

Her only sin is wishing she were dead
Instead of stealing that small loaf of bread.
January 26th, 1788

The Charlotte

This rope will do to tie the woman's hands,
And she will do exactly as I say.
I belt her with my whip. She must obey.
The woman has to follow my commands.

She has to meet my critical demands,
And thus she bleeds a very red display,
The flames and tears and wine of her dismay.
So it must be until she understands—

Women should never dare to mock a man,
A laughing kookaburra that controls
The world outside himself, however sweet.
We merry men pursue a lustful plan.
We whip our women and eclipse their souls.
We are gentlemen. This the first fleet.

January 26th, 1788

Underneath the Dirty Canvas

The infant cries. A brand new day is dawning.
His father rushes out to pan for gold.
She rises from her dirty canvas awning.
Although still young, she looks so very old.

The kettle boils; the Currawong awakes.
The law says breakfast must be porridge oats.
They often pay a dozen golden flakes
For food in tins. They force it down their throats.

He promises: "We'll all be rich some day!"
Yet she is ill-equipped to share his hope.
All she can do is sew. She cannot pray
Or wonder how she manages to cope.

Eureka is an unfamiliar word.
He carries on, completely undeterred.
September 6th, 1851,

Underneath the Dirty Canvas

Down in the creek, I 'ear poor Bert complain.
It tears me 'eart out, that pathetic sound.
But as for 'er, I wish she'd gone and drowned.
To tell the truth, she ain't got that much brain.

'Ere's me: me back's in almost constant pain.
An' 'er? Moan, moan moan, an' loungin' around.
An' does she ever ask me what I've found?
Oh no. One look, and then she's off again.

"Your 'ands are dirty as your clumsy pan!
Give it a rest!" the Currawong 'e cries.
"Soon," I tell 'im. God knows I much preferred
Bein' unmarried. Better a single man
Than 'ave to see her sad, accusing eyes.
And ne'er a smile or sweet an' soothing word.

September, 6th 1851

Into Her Hall of Fame

Then all at once the Dean has snatched her hand
And crushed her fingers in his giant palm.
The crowd all roar as up as one they stand,
Blowing away her poor pretence of calm.

She scrawled her mark upon these hallowed halls
By graduating, menfolk at her side.
She goes to meet a destiny that calls
Her “pioneer.” She takes it in her stride.

Today a Spectacled Monarch proudly soars
Higher than her spirits—her degree—
That storms the gates and opens all the doors.
While others dreamed, this girl produced the key.

We watch her walk into the halls of fame.
Bella Guerin is more than just a name.
December 6th, 1883

Into her Hall of Fame

The spark of approbation did ignite
a flame of envy in the doctor’s mind.
He woke up from his bible dreams to find
A woman on the stage; a novel sight.

Should men like him give in without a fight?
Could women ever hope to match his kind?
The intellect of women lags behind.
Nor should she be employed—this is not right.

Perhaps it would be best to seal the cage
And disavow the promise of a key;
Let women cultivate romantic things
With a room of their own well behind the stage.
What has become? A Mistress’s degree?
Find the Spectacled Monarch. Clip its wings.

December 6th, 1883

Woollen Drought

Wild is the golden grass, tangling their land.
The shearing shed abandoned in his place.
Once, flocking fleece—in rows on his command—
Would trot the field by mimicking each pace.

No longer will the needed wool be shorn.
An early winter falls upon her ranch,
The woollen sweater that she should have worn
Not made. Now Crows line up along the branch.

And when the bough breaks, the cradle will fall.
They need this income so they can survive.
And down will come baby, cradle and all.
The Labor Party keeps her hopes alive.

A new day dawns. She tries to get some sleep
By counting hens. Much easier than sheep.
June 21st, 1891

Woollen Drought

Don't *you* complain about the lack of trade!
I know we need to feed our new-born child,
Provide for him and such. I'm driven wild.
You don't know what it's like to be unpaid.

I blame Charles Fairbain, and I feel betrayed.
He was our friend as long as fortune smiled.
You've seen the paperwork that's been compiled.
Enough to put the whole ranch in the shade.

But that's the way it's always been. The boss
Thinks of himself, cares nowt for me and you.
That old black Crow is probably deranged
By the land drought sweeping far across...
It's not a case of what I want to do.
I have to strike, dear, till the laws are changed.

June 21st, 1891

Ballot Box 1895

His ballot paper drops into the box.
Despondently, outside, the lady waits.
She gets to think of laundering his socks
While he has been determining their fates.

A handkerchief is smothering her tears,
A minor case of censoring her voice.
Again he tries to make her see her fears
Are all unfounded since she has no choice.

He and his kind assume they are in charge,
Yet all the while their ignorance promotes
The Noisy Miners, looming very large,
The lobbyists commanding biased votes.

As they abuse the very rights she lacks,
She wonders why she has to pay her tax.
March 5, 1895

Ballot Box 1895

The handmade placards plead with us to sign
our signatures upon their vile petitions.
Thus women hide political ambitions
Behind the mask of desperation's whine.

They shed their tears, yet still they call us swine.
They think that we will break with our traditions
Just because they mock our politicians:
"These men are cowards. See, they have no spine."

These women are a positive disgrace.
Can they not see that they themselves become
The Noisy Miners that they would berate?
These traitors to their gender and their race
Must think we men are blind and deaf and dumb.
We like our women cheerful and sedate.

March 5, 1895

Sewing wise

Dexterous now, she plasters up the fracture;
she strives to satisfy his former space.
These female hands have learnt to manufacture
as he once did. She sits there in his place.

Expertly sewing, trimming wire and lead,
she joins the cables. Now she does her duty.
She replicates what once she did with thread
Before the First World War in search of beauty.

A dress rehearsal for emancipation,
She does the job her husband used to do
No longer plagued by mental constipation.
Release from harness had been overdue.

No equal salary is guaranteed.
A Finch, she pecks at the absences of seed.
September 2nd, 1914

Sewing Wire

I hope you have the provender you need.
But do remember where your duty lies.
Domestic duty. That's what I'd advise.
A woman's place is in the home indeed.

Domestic duty! Here you can succeed!
As long as you are given good supplies
'Tis easier, dear, than dirty work and flies.
So don't go pecking in the salary seed.

No, don't go pecking like those Finches do.
And if they offer you my job, beware!
It's hard to have to work against the grain.
You may well like the thought of something new,
But work is work, not something you can share.
When I come back, I'll want my job again.

September 2nd, 1914

Pecking Crumbs

The weekly cent through her small hand has tumbled.
The jam's lid locks again onto her jar.
Rations of bread in his poor mouth have crumbled,
just like the money she has seen so far.

Breadwinners are not easy to be found.
All she can do is knead a little dough.
A Little Stint pecks small crumbs off the ground,
A feast compared to all her months of woe.

Factory work at half the going wage
Abuses her gender, an olfactory hell.
To help the men who are three times her age
Auxiliary care outstays its own farewell.

Her pay rise cancelled due to the recession,
She suffers from a very small depression.
October 4th, 1930

Pecking Crumbs

“All aboard!” I take the country train
To seek some kind of rural occupation,
A desperate bid to stave off our starvation.
I walk for hours, lashed by sun and rain,
to feed them by providing them with grain.
I hope to win a bit of compensation
Instead of just her bland solicitation
To provide for her. May she not complain.

Why is it that when now she is employed,
She claims that she no longer wants to be?
Why do I have to face all this aggression?
Our income is already quite destroyed.
Inveigled Little Stints engaged will always plea
Like her: “Free us from the Great Depression!”

October 4th, 1930

Scarlet Drip

His insentient body drips the darkest red,
just like a rose, yet never half as sweet.
A gun, its thorn, has pieced him and has bled
his hands, his heart, his limbs, his head, his feet.

This young man's life is her concern alone.
His fledgling lips bleed words that softly plea
For other faces, people he has known.
Her main routine is this despondency.

A Scarlet Robin, crimson in his chest—
the bandage cannot hide his badly damaged wing—
Slowly descends towards eternal rest.
She sees his hand and its engagement ring.

It's not the first death that she's seen today.
World War II, an endless disarray.
June 16th, 1939

Scarlet Drip

He lies there dying on the cold, wet earth.
The cries of the injured echo everywhere.
He shouts *Oh Nurse! Oh Nurse!* She is not there.
But still he shouts for all that he is worth:

*That woman needs no help in giving birth!
Nurse! My heart's a ticking time bomb, I swear!
Where the fuck's the nurse who gives me care?
I'm dying here upon the cold, wet earth!*

He's going to die the reddest crimson death,
A Scarlet Robin lost without its wing.
No nurse it seems—but with eternal mourning.
And here it is, his final dying breath:
*My wife, I now see your engagement ring!
I'm home... I'm home.... And.... I'm home! Good morning!*

16th June, 1939

Sterile Dripping

Her unclothed hands drip sterile linen sheets
Stained in distress. She scrubs off all regret,
Tugged slowly by the washboard's bitter sweets,
Knee-deep in water, now a waiting Egret.

Fabricated for domestic toils,
The tub sings effervescently of plight.
Foaming with a froth of squandered spoils
The tub cries acquiescently delight.

With a new wave of hope, she elutes the dirt.
Pegged to her toils, she makes them quite divine.
Compressed in the cupboard, his lovely ironed shirt.
She drapes herself like clothes onto the line.

Mirroring her mother's quandary.
Why does she have to do the laundry?
23rd June,, 1950

Sterile Dripping

It is a woman's job to clothe me, and
only a woman would scrub off my sweat
Motionless. She bathes just like an Egret.
"Into the washtub with you," I command.

"Into the washtub, do you understand?
Come, quickly, my dear; don't make me regret
my marriage to you, this 'preserved' duet.
This job is not finished yet. Need I expand?

Quick, quick, quick! Come, elute the dirt.
I have quite an important meeting at five!
Sympathy? 'Tis easy. Do not whine!
A child could iron this pure cotton shirt.
I make this income so that you and I survive.
Go drape yourself like clothes onto the line."

23rd June,, 1950

Garden Seeds

As she so rubs tenderly at its bulge,
The pill softly shifts in its captive foil.
It now gives her the freedom to indulge;
her flowers now can flourish without soil.

Licensed to love, to linger and to lust,
She finds a world where she is in control,
And where she need not face a man's disgust.
This seed inside her fills a great black hole.

Hard to believe this unassuming pill
Signals the end of years of hard research.
Eliminating risk, but not the thrill,
it pins the wild Black Falcon to his perch.

These little seeds allow insemination,
totally forbidding fertilization.
December 4th, 1962

Garden Seeds

No longer do I feel afraid to nip
The girls. With one eye on the competition
I wait for her to give me her permission.
I know I need no mini-pillowslip.

With gasps and whispers soon I can unzip
My opportunity. My intuition
Leads me to the moment of coition,
Where I display my skills in brinkmanship,

Anticipating what is now to come.
I am the wild Black Falcon, yet now tamed
Back to my perch. And finally I thrill;
Her presence flawless, now I must succumb
To matchless beauty. Then I am ashamed.
Thank the Lord for the contraceptive pill!

December 4th, 1962

Pink Tabloids

'Equal women working for equal pay'
A release of glee, albeit confused.
The tabloids scream a revolution day.
Now her hard labour must not be abused

Because of gender. Now she can move on.
To the promised land, a basic human right.
At last, a level field to build upon.
The Pink Galah nearby squawks loud in spite.

A glorious day on which to be non-male,
To know now she will meet sincerity.
No longer does she feel she is for sale,
Inheriting the same prosperity.

An equal pay will lay secure foundations,
At least for her and future generations.
November 1st, 1969

Pink Tabloids

Darling, our company cannot afford
a big remuneration just for you.
Maybe your job will just have to fall through
as we cannot comply with such reward.

It's nothing personal; you are adored.
Please understand, there's nothing we can do.
Hard economic times may soon ensue.
This company must know it is insured.

But meanwhile why not educate our daughter?
And you can rest yourself. Teach her the skill
She needs to keep things clean, cooking, croquet.
And how to wash our clothes with soap and water.
You'll sing just like all those Pink Galahs will
Without the hassle of the equal pay.

November 1st, 1969

Saviour of Sons

Her only son was thrust into this war—
Conscription is a terrible command—
in Vietnam. And now she will implore,
beseech, protest, insist, complain, demand

At several vigils, marches, demonstrations.
War erupts at home, a fight for fairness.
The prayers, threats and invocations
Echo her son's plight. She spreads awareness.

They carry banners blue and white and high,
Embellished with belligerent inscription.
Marching as one, like Peaceful Doves, they cry,
Defying catcalls backing up conscription,

In vain appealing: "Spare our darling ones—
Please, we beseech you; please just Save Our Sons!"
February 5th, 1970

Saviour our Sons

Twenty years young and forced to go without
a chance at all to offer his objection.
"Please help me, mum. I need all your protection.
You have to get here soon and bail me out.

Vietnam will slaughter me, no doubt.
Please organise some kind of insurrection
To save me from the horror of defection.
Please pull me out of this unholy drought.

So we can both resume our normal roles,
Where I'll work hard and you can stay at home.
So the almighty, Peaceful Dove can soar.
Never again should war devour our souls!
Never again should vile conscription roam
and plague our country with a foreign war."

February 5th, 1970

Rock-a-bye

Her biological clock. It never struck
his two hands of the time upon her door.
He entered hastily and went amuck.
The future never echoed what he swore.

It's all the things that niggle in the night
That pump the memories of childish dread.
"Don't let the bedbugs bite. Good night. Sleep tight."
As she recalls her mother always said.

The clicking clock forever forward ticks.
Her employment bump is soon to be installed.
Infants and work can never intermix.
The Stork came differently, as she recalled.

Her erstwhile love denies paternity
As she descends into maternity.
November 1st, 1990

Rock-a-bye

His wooden door has evidently split,
Producing what should not be a surprise.
He looks at her as tears run from her eyes.
Both of them know he never will admit

He is the father; there's no doubt of it.
And he has fooled her with his lover's guise
As he still entered in between her thighs.
He never did intend to babysit.

He brings nine months of pure unplanned regret.
He should have known what havoc he would cause.
The Stork transported what he tries to kill.
In spite of tears and hate and blood and sweat
He goes on thrusting; pain that he ignores
To give himself a lustful, fleeting thrill.

November 1st, 1990

Crimson Wing

Bracing this country on her podium,
Julia Gillard deserves her victory.
Despite incurring petty odium,
She finally goes down in history.

All women should rejoice: this is their time.
A triumph for the gender's liberation.
Julia Gillard, a woman in her prime,
Moving forward brand new legislation.

A Crimson Rosella, flying high and free,
She spreads her wings and takes her maiden flight.
A woman is in charge! Democracy!
Julia Gillard will put this country right.

Julia Gillard has reached the final goal
Of womankind: political control.
September 14th, 2010

Crimson Wing

A woman running this Australian land?
Julia Gillard has giant shoes to fill.
But if it is the populace's will...
I must say though, I fail to understand.

Perhaps they think we need a woman's hand?
She doesn't have the necessary skill
Or stamina. It won't be long until
This Crimson Rosella chokes upon the sand.

I think she's going to find it very tough.
In politics a week is like a year.
Her glory days are pretty sure to fade
When people see her hacking in the rough.
In four years' time it will be crystal clear
She failed to keep the promises she made.

September 14th, 2010

Paintbrush

Innocent and passionate and young,
I lie here naked with my naked twin.
Her palms and fingers, liquid lips and tongue
caress the empty canvas of my skin.

My sweetheart! How flamboyantly she paints
a promised land above these stormy seas!
A tableau sanctioned by our matron saints,
a sacred rite performed on hands and knees.

What is this rain that's ruined our parade?
Whose tears are these I find upon the sheets?
Is it a crime? Enraptured maid on maid?
Have mercy on these Rainbow Lorikeets!

To judge from Daddy's disapproving stare,
this match made in heaven's a sad affair.

May 12th, 2012

Paintbrush

A bloke should never couple with a bloke;
a Sheila's what he wants between his sheets.
Look at these perverts, Rainbow Lorikeets!
And now they want to marry! It's a joke.

And meanwhile, when I want to have a smoke,
I have to stand outside or walk the streets.
They could have built some shelters with some seats.
They're alienating law-abiding folk.

Next they'll say we mustn't drink or fart,
but quite alright to take it in the bum.
We always get gratuitous advice.
I get told off for saying "Silly tart!"
It's sad to see Australia has become
an anti-smoking, faggot paradise.

May 12th, 2012

Impending Prospect

I am a mother, a wife, a daughter,
an ex-convict floating on seas of jade.
I pan gold flakes as I walk on water,
pick diamonds of the highest grade.

I am a shearer; through wool I have won
my right to vote in the next election.
I am a war nurse, farmed by the gun.
I support the ban on vivisection.

I am the washer, the linen folder,
now able to flourish beyond the earth.
I am what I earn, a passport holder,
protesting and voting and giving birth.

A Kookaburra laughing next to man,
Free and proud to be a women
January 26th, 2024

Impending Prospect

I fall at once onto my knees,
keen to seek her full attention.
It's quite beyond my comprehension
that she can achieve whatever she please.

My love for her's an old disease
outdated by this new dimension.
Now we are blessed with hyper-suspension,
she soars above the Ghost Gum trees.

My love's replaced with a fiery desire
to cultivate my non-resistance.
I see my Kookaburra hen
forever exposed in unclothed attire.
Men know they owe their whole existence
to women. Women make us men.

January 26th, 2024