

## Poems by Claire Smith

### Cat's Cradle

Music clangs: vibrating drums, a trumpet sawing  
through woody bark, a voice congealing  
an accompaniment. A papery blank page calls  
for the past to resonate. She recalls Halloween

at Eastnor Park; the castle echoing its presence  
behind the trees. A silhouette of the Gothic poking  
its finger from hundreds of years before: grey buttresses,  
towers of stone. It reminisces Sleeping Beauty

cowering, encased in a coffin of ivy. The trees  
are her guardsman, jagged branches, overbearing  
shades; sun beating at the bracken. She casts back  
to a decade before in Australia. The same eerie scrub,

but a thirteen kilometre hike to Aboriginal caves;  
paralysed kangaroos carpeting the hills. The sun  
transforming them to sandy statues thousands of miles  
ago. Now a page of memories webbed as a cat's cradle.

### The Ducks at Newent Lake

Lakeside illuminated by lamps,  
Walking along a rusted leaf path  
Toward the bank. No ducks  
In sight. My mother-in-law fishes  
In her pocket for corn. A duck  
Appears like an apparition,  
As if our arrival announced  
A feast. Rustling the plastic

Two, three, four arrive, guests  
To a dinner party, as if by magic,  
Like rabbits pulled, one after another,  
From a Top Hat. Throwing corn  
To the ground, we watch dazed  
As we lose count—ducks  
Appearing from the orange-pink  
Sky, from the foliage

On the other side—leaving long thin  
Ripples on the water's surface.  
A carpet of duck-tails woven  
Like Prince Ahmed's Rug,  
They vie for the scraps. We peel

Ourselves from them, leave  
Them to dine, stunned  
By this vision, to go home  
Under a water-sky.

### The Mirror

#### I

Dancing like a figure skater round a rink, costume  
Flapping; sometimes a sinking smile first  
Thing in the morning. I hear the music  
She used to play when dressing for the evening,  
See her movements to a Nocturne as she combed  
Wet hair, dangling salted seaweed, wiped beads  
Of sweat from her brow, coloured lips  
Red as russet apples fresh from the tree.

#### II

Restored by a girl with the touch  
Of a lover. Filling cursed cracks  
That ran down me like a river's delta.  
Caressing my glass with sweet  
Smelling potions. Softly stroking my frame  
With an emery cloth. Staining stale wood  
To come up new. A finishing touch  
With a polish of flowered honey wax.  
All to stand on show—a trapped bear in a circus  
Playing tricks for strangers' amusement.

#### III

I perch on a sideboard amongst antiquities  
In a creaking Manor House, an embalmed bird  
Awaiting its resurrection. A cleaning lady  
My one companion, a hag of a woman  
Always dressed in a blue uniform,  
Coarsely smearing my glass with a dirty cloth  
Every morning for Tourists to admire.  
Faces pointing at my varnished  
Frame, poking fingers in fascination. Contorted  
Complexions, eyes glaring, cutting  
Commentaries on my history.

At times they run from the room  
Screeching, shrieking they've seen  
An elderly woman smiling back  
Instead of their own reflection.

## Water-Gall

The brown-black darkness around her eyes,  
Shadows of a crisis leaving a mark.  
Or a rainbow once more foreboding rain.  
She dowsed her emotions, left clean cuts  
In her psyche: water-witch. Salt water  
Tears cried night after night, flowing  
Like the Mississippi, relentless Father  
Of the Waters.

Alone sitting by the sea—feeling the slap  
Slap of waves across her face.  
Or under a waterfall, the cascade  
Suffocating. She went to the funeral  
Today: walked behind the cortege  
In a film of rain. Death coming  
Again and again. A coffin lowered  
Silently into the ground.