

Following Her Footsteps

Ann-Marie Priest travels to Tasmania to get to know Gwen Harwood.

The distinguished English biographer Richard Holmes once described biography as 'a handshake across time'. He was trying to draw out the degree to which writing a biography is 'an act of human solidarity, and in its own way an act of recognition and of love'. This is surely true, but his analogy strikes me as somehow too cool. For me, writing a biography has been more like a big warm bear-hug across time, or maybe a wild, nose-in-the-air, nose-to-the-ground fox-hunt across time.

Of course, a hound on the hunt has murder in its heart, while the biographer has only desperate and thwarted love in hers. But the hunt was once a favourite image of lover-poets, and one my own biographical subject, Tasmanian poet Gwen Harwood, liked to use, so perhaps it's not entirely inappropriate. 'Here and everywhere,' she writes in 'Meditation on Wyatt I', 'I meet your crazy scent' – and I know what she means. Like Harwood's lover-hound on the trail, I seem to have Harwood's 'world either side of my nose'. Like her, I 'root and feast' in the 'harping grasses'.

The terrain of the hunt for me has largely been typescript and manuscript pages in library reading rooms, but recently the search was transferred to the streets and mountains and beaches of Tasmania, thanks to the 2017 Hazel Rowley Fellowship. At the end of a year that had somehow become an escalating blur of urgent work demands, I found myself all at once with nothing to do but open myself to this island and to Gwen, to wander and think and sniff and write.

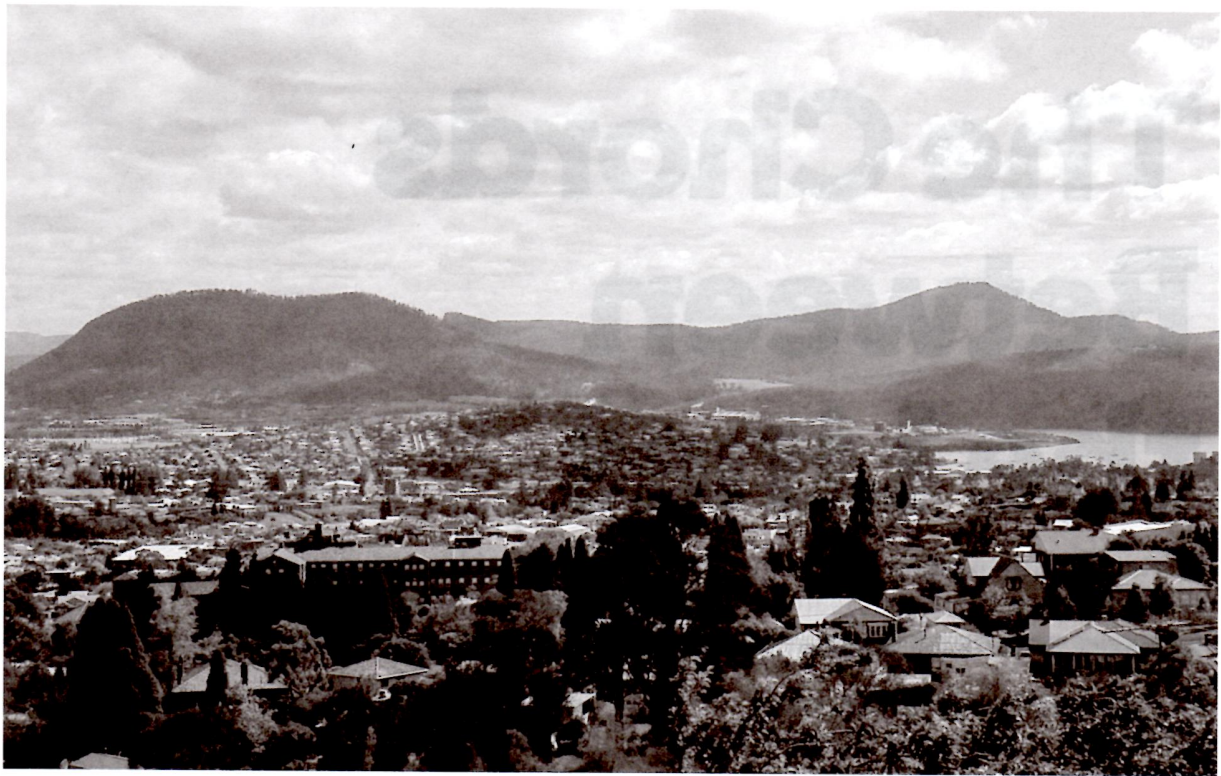
Like Gwen, I came to the 'Antarctic wastes' from Queensland, but unlike her, I was enchanted by the place. Admittedly, I was there in summer, and for me, the clear, dry sunshine was a welcome relief from sub-tropical heat. What's more, I was there for only three months, whereas she was

there for fifty years – and felt trapped and immured for at least some of that time. But most importantly, I had her to settle me in. Overwhelmingly, it was the trace of her own presence that enchanted Tasmania for me: the words of her poems, letters, stories and memoirs created a nostalgic geography before I even set foot in the place.

I stayed in a weatherboard house on a hillside in Mount Stuart, and set up my desk in the front room with its sweep of windows overlooking the city. From my eyrie I had an unimpeded view of the stately red-brick edifice of Calvary Hospital, where Gwen bore her children in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and of Augusta Road sweeping gently away downhill. I could almost make out the huge cypress hedge surrounding the large family home where Gwen – ironically styling herself the Sappho of Lenah Valley – lived with her young family for some twenty-five years.

I came to know her walks, following her paths through the city. I visited her beaches, the liminal spaces so important to her, where she went to picnic with her children, to meet a lover, to fossick in rock pools, to walk with a friend, to brood over past sorrows, to push out from the shore in her dinghy, going after the flathead. I drove to Oyster Cove, where she and her husband, Bill, had spent ten years 'changing five acres of scrubby bush into a charming estate' ('The Seventh House'). Here I scrambled down a low escarpment to stand on a 'narrow ledge/of sandstone by the water's edge' and see the 'Stones rolled in lively anarchy/through centuries of water' ('Littoral').

I had not understood, before I came to Tasmania, how different these beachscapes were from the ones I – and Gwen – had known in Queensland. They took me back to an earlier time, to the windy grey beaches of my childhood in South Australia. Only there,



View over Hobart. Photo by Ann-Marie Priest.

I had never seen oyster shells flung in joyful abundance across the black rocks, or mussels crowding every stone.

On a beach on the South Arm peninsula, I squatted down to peer into a rock pool, and was thrilled to see a sprinkling of sea anemones on its rocky sides, their scarlet tentacles streaming in the current. I remembered sea anemones from the cool-water beaches of Yorke Peninsula, but they had been rings of brownish fringe in the sand, not colourful blooms like this. We children would race to be the first to press a fingertip to each velvety centre, and shiver with delight as the soft mouths closed upon us. In 'The Sea Anemone', Harwood describes them more sinisterly as 'gouts of blood', shining 'blood drop by drop among the rocks'. In her poem, the 'hungering gentleness' of the sea creature's touch is transformed into the lips of a newborn child at the breast, the motion of a lover's mouth on an outflung palm. But for her, these innocent blooms are 'Not flowers, no, animals that must eat or die'. As I reached into the water to touch one tiny, blood-red creature, I felt a sudden fear—toxins, tentacles, the lion's mouth. The red fringe brushed my flesh, sticky as a spider's web, and for a moment my fingertip was caught between velvet teeth. Eat or die. I sat back on my heels, exhilarated.

This is what I have taken away from my time in Tasmania: a knowledge of Gwen's places that is in my fingertips, in my feet, in my flesh, not just in my mind. Now, when I am writing, I see this knowledge emerge in unexpected places in my text. I feel the confidence it brings, the fillip it gives to my imagination. Not a handshake, no, but certainly an exhilarating act of love. ♡

Ann-Marie Priest is the author of 'A Free Flame: Australian Women Writers and Vocation in the Twentieth Century' and 'Great Writers, Great Loves: The Reinvention of Love in the Twentieth Century'. Her essays and reviews have appeared in 'Australian Book Review', 'Meanjin', 'Southerly', 'The Weekend Australian' and 'The Age'. In 2017, she won the Hazel Rowley Literary Fellowship for a forthcoming biography of poet Gwen Harwood.