

When and Where will another come to take your holy place?  
 Old man mumbling in his dotage, or crying child, unborn?

1970

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## JUDITH WRIGHT

1915–2000

Lamenting that “the song is gone; the dance / is secret with the dancers in the earth,” the Australian poet Judith Wright mourned in “Bora Ring,” an early poem, the dispersal and destruction of the Aborigines who inhabited her native land before it was conquered by the British. In part, those lines predicted one major direction her artistic career would take: in producing more than a dozen volumes of verse and a number of collections of essays on criticism and articles on conservation, as well as editing several anthologies of Australian poetry, this prolific and deeply engaged artist memorialized Australia as “my blood’s country . . . the high lean country / full of old stories that still go walking in my sleep.” At the same time, however, much of her poetry meditated on such matters from a distinctively female perspective, a point of view explicitly summarized by the title of her second book, *Woman to Man* (1949).

The descendant of what one commentator calls “pioneering rural stock,” Wright was born in Armidale, New South Wales, and educated at New England Girls School, Armidale, and the University of Sydney. Married to the philosopher J. P. McKinney, and the mother of one daughter, she worked for some time as a secretary and civil servant before taking up a position as honors tutor in English at the University of Queensland. In the mid-1950s, she wrote, the “two threads of my life, the love of the land itself and the deep unease over the fate of its original people, were beginning to twine together, and the rest of my life would be influenced by that connection.” By the 1960s, she had become increasingly involved in political action, including the antiwar movement, Australia’s conservationist movement, and the movement to change the treatment of the country’s Aboriginal peoples (about whose oppression she wrote *The Cry of the Dead*, 1982). Cofounder and former president of the Wild Life Preservation Society of Queensland, she spent the last third of her life, after she was widowed, living in a wildlife sanctuary near Braidwood, and in these years she also befriended the Aboriginal poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker), whose verse she helped publish and to whom she addressed her moving “Two Dreamtimes.”

Such poems as “Ishtar” and “Eve to Her Daughters” suggest the connections that Wright saw between female power and the forces of nature, even while they argue that there is a causal relationship between Adam’s fear that “outside Eden the earth was imperfect” and the twentieth century’s assault on the environment. That this poet identified deeply with women’s literary tradition is also made clear in these works, as well as in her “‘Rosina Alcona to Julius Brenzaida,’” a piece whose title is taken from a poem by another female acolyte of nature—the Victorian poet-novelist Emily Brontë. Characteristically, Wright last appeared in public, a month before her death, at a march for reconciliation with Aboriginal people. She herself, wrote one critic in an obituary, “was described as feeling almost Aboriginal about the Australian landscape.” Her activism was as integral to her poetry as her aesthetic skill. The “true function of art and culture is to interpret us to ourselves,” she once declared, “and to relate us to the country and the society in which we live.”

with knife and fork in either hand.

1966



### Eve<sup>1</sup> to Her Daughters

It was not I who began it.  
Turned out into drafty caves,  
hungry so often, having to work for our bread,  
hearing the children whining,

1. I.e., joint of roast meat.

1. The first woman, created by God as a companion for Adam in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2.18-22). Genesis 3 describes how she was tempted by the serpent into eating the forbidden

fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which she gave to Adam; this act precipitated their expulsion from Eden and the introduction of work, pain, and death into the world (Genesis 3).

5 I was nevertheless not unhappy.  
Where Adam went I was fairly contented to go.  
I adapted myself to the punishment: it was my life.

But Adam, you know . . . !  
He kept on brooding over the insult,  
10 over the trick They had played on us, over the scolding.  
He had discovered a flaw in himself  
and he had to make up for it.

Outside Eden the earth was imperfect,  
the seasons changed, the game was fleet-footed,  
15 he had to work for our living, and he didn't like it.  
He even complained of my cooking  
(it was hard to compete with Heaven).

So he set to work.  
The earth must be made a new Eden  
20 with central heating, domesticated animals,  
mechanical harvesters, combustion engines,  
escalators, refrigerators,  
and modern means of communication  
and multiplied opportunities for safe investment  
25 and higher education for Abel and Cain<sup>2</sup>  
and the rest of the family.  
You can see how his pride had been hurt.

In the process he had to unravel everything,  
because he believed that mechanism  
30 was the whole secret—he was always mechanical-minded.  
He got to the very inside of the whole machine  
exclaiming as he went, So this is how it works!  
And now that I know how it works, why, I must have invented it.  
As for God and the Other,<sup>3</sup> they cannot be demonstrated,  
35 and what cannot be demonstrated  
doesn't exist.  
You see, he had always been jealous.

Yes, he got to the center  
where nothing at all can be demonstrated.  
40 And clearly he doesn't exist; but he refuses  
to accept the conclusion.  
You see, he was always an egotist.

It was warmer than this in the cave;  
there was none of this fall-out.  
45 I would suggest, for the sake of the children,  
that it's time you took over.

2. The first two sons of Adam and Eve; Cain murdered Abel out of jealousy because God preferred Abel's offerings (Genesis 4.4-8).

3. I.e., Satan, whose name is derived from the Hebrew word meaning "adversary."

But you are my daughters, you inherit my own faults of character;  
you are submissive, following Adam  
even beyond existence.

50 Faults of character have their own logic  
and it always works out.  
I observed this with Abel and Cain.

Perhaps the whole elaborate fable  
right from the beginning  
55 is meant to demonstrate this; perhaps it's the whole secret.  
Perhaps nothing exists but our faults?  
At least they can be demonstrated.

But it's useless to make  
such a suggestion to Adam.  
60 He has turned himself into God,  
who is faultless, and doesn't exist.

1966