

Beverley Farmer 1941-2018: A Tribute **Archetypes and fluency in *This Water: Five Tales***

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In the history of story-telling the declining importance of oral transmission in modern times has been linked to diminished leisure, changing modes of production and what Walter Benjamin called the lack of ‘a community of listeners’ and while the need for recitation of ancient narratives may have diminished in some cultures, story-telling has found new forms in image and song-making to convey its common truths (Benjamin 91). There is now a far wider appreciation of different kinds of originality and re-evaluation of what has gone before is vital to that process. Women’s writing challenges the ways in which women have been represented in traditional narratives by interrogating identity, space and power. Beverley Farmer’s work examines content and process and employs irony, ambiguity and variations of perspective to scrutinise and re-negotiate meaning.

It is not unusual to encounter feminist re-readings of traditional stories, in the manner of speaking back via parodic challenges to gender stereotypes, but it is rare to find a writer re-dressing the skeletal bones of narrative to offer nuanced and sensual texts which subvert but also re-animate tales. And that is what is achieved in Beverley Farmer’s *This Water: Five Tales* (2017). After the contemplative essays of *The Bone House* (2005), with their stark black and white imagery and emphasis on dormancy and stone, Farmer returns to fiction where inherited stories are re-shaped to challenge the confines of precedent. This new publication includes a first-person story that illustrates the formative effects of word and image, reinterpretations of two Celtic tales, one Greek legend and a macabre European fairy-tale. Each story is discrete but they all reconsider masculinist perceptions of women through the ages. This paper considers the re-framing and interrogation of the gendered designs of oral and folkloric traditions in *This Water: Five Tales*, focussing on ‘water’ as a unifying theme and the fluency of Farmer’s poetic prose.

In Beverley Farmer’s life and writing, bodies of water feature as distinctive sites of negotiation between real and imagined worlds. Childhood experience of bayside Melbourne beaches, a sojourn in Greece, a return to life and seaside work in Lorne and long-term habitation in Pt. Lonsdale, a small Victorian coastal town, shaped an appreciation of the sea and diverse waterways as sources of story. Writing residencies at Århus in Denmark and Annaghmakerrig in Ireland and visits to Europe, Mediterranean islands and mountainous Tibet, with its glacial flows, generated further interest in the way different terrains—coasts, lakes, rivers, streams, beaches or frozen lands—might distinctively reflect or mirror worlds. *This Water: Five Tales* reconsiders legends arising from diverse regions, cultures and eras. In these new iterations, seasons, tides, memories and passions ebb and flow like blood or water in a finely calibrated tapestry of story-telling.

The tales include some of the innovative style and content of Farmer’s other texts: in *A Body of Water* (1990) reading and writing serve as mirroring registers as five short stories arise from a mainstream flow of consciousness like islands reborn from the flux. In the novel *The Seal Woman* (1992) an immigrant readjusts her understanding of an Antipodean world through her study of ancient legends with their insights into fertility and birth gaining a ‘new

skin' and a new story gifted to the next generation. *This Water: Five Tales* similarly acknowledges myths, folk tales and sagas of historical times and links them to warnings about threatened waterways and climate change. *The Seal Woman* spoke of 'the spectre of the death of the sea' (115), ozone depletion, global warming, the effects of chlorofluorocarbons and dioxins and *This Water* articulates the fear that 'the sea will rise and make a clean sweep of us' (57). As in earlier writing, individual agency is shadowed by re-iterated patterns of tribal circumstance: the politics and performance of nurturing, desire, sexuality and spirituality in a changing world. Like the essays of *The Bone House* or *A Body of Water* these new meditations are explored via the senses and the vibrancy of finely focussed imagery. Throughout, the graceful prose shifts smoothly between forms using first and third person speech, associative thought, resonant imagery and poetry in a flowing, sensuous style that offers insight into the nature of things. Here, writing is used as a process of registering and revealing potential.

In *This Water*'s first seascape, 'A Ring of Gold,' the narrator walks a familiar beach. The sudden appearance of a massive bull seal disrupts the day's momentum and frightens on-lookers as it defiantly stands its ground before a return to the sea. What is seen as an amusing diversion by other witnesses is viewed by this woman as a visitation with fearful potency. In Irish, Scottish and Icelandic legend the selkies are form-changing sea-creatures with seductive powers, who father children with mortal women, 'those unhappy with their life' (Westwood & Kingshill 404-5). In some versions the selkie is a female who is stranded on-shore when her seal-skin is stolen. For a woman aware of such myths, the sight of the seal's directed stare and yawning maw (a ring of golden bone) is both intense and personal and, in the context of this story, prophetic (6). Beyond this irruption the narrative settles into a contemplative mood:

Day after day, filling and draining in channels all along, the rising tide leaves finny wakes behind in wet sand that is always on the boil, flooding full of the bubble breath of hidden sea life, or of empty air, who knows, as memories rise and sink under the surface of time. (58)

In the calm after storms, when the still beach is washed clean and piled with kelp, the woman, a fisherman's widow, describes her family house and recalls childhood dreams, fears and desires. The formative power of reading is acknowledged as stories and images 'cling'— 'the lost and gone books, those front doors into other lives, haunt her the most' (57). This is not simply nostalgia but a meditative process where influences are acknowledged and the clutter of a life is shed to make something of loss. Significant encounters are recalled: recollections of a sea-faring husband and the trauma of his death, tales of seals, fishing and expeditions, reminders of the perils of the ocean (Coleridge and his mariners dying of thirst at sea) and current threats of inundation in Venice, the water city under siege by tides twice daily. This city, described as 'bride queen of the Adriatic' has a counterpart in the 'sea groom' the other party in a dangerous marriage (56). There is also a wry aside about the prospects of Venice and its need to be 'purified' given its current flood of visitors. What is made clear is the intricate power of memory and the lasting effect of words on a growing sensibility as narrative arises from both lived experience and cultural practice. A mother's un-thinking reference to menstruation as the 'curse' may indeed seed the ground for a lifetime's banishment from perfection.

The prose is eloquent as the woman marks and makes her days in her coastal location observing and detailing natural wonders (lakeside with swans, seasons and tides):

Always after sunset or a cool change, though the sea holds its heat for hours, it goes glassy and dim with the sun out of it and the tawny kelp forests gone dark. On days of heavy surf a hail of air drops and sand makes it impenetrable. Even on calm days all you see from the outside, from above, is a mass of glazed blue opacities. Not so once you see into it and beyond, though, from the inside—rock walls riven with canyons and arches furred with auburn plumes and rubbery straps of weed that roll and sway and slowly unravel, depending on the tide, and skeins of old rose or shrill green. (15)

There are contrasts between this mellow summer holiday place and descriptions of it as a site of dark undercurrents. This woman is no simple beach lover but one with a stated preference for underwater horizons, a diver who has an acute awareness of the dangers of the sea and rapidly changing conditions.

The Rip is all turbulence and surges, whirlpools, hidden platforms and scoured rocks, shallow as it is, except for the Entrance Deep, and the safe—for ships—passage known as the Abyss. (38)

In the final section, in the manner of fated beginnings and ends, the swimmer is drawn against her better judgement to swim at the exposed surf beach after an unnaturally late season ‘spell of heat’. Her final vision of peculiar massed waves of ‘winnowing incandescence’ sees her ‘wedged’ and ‘blindfolded,’ mouthing an echo of the seal’s call before being taken by the sea. The terrible power of the imagination, of language, to bring things into being, is enacted.

‘This Water’ revisits the Irish legend of Diarmuid and Gráinne, a medieval play in poetic prose, which some claim was the forerunner of the story of Tristan and Iseult and the ballet ‘Swan Lake’ (MacKillop, 132). The tale of passion and vengeance unfolds as the narrator’s youthful self-interest shifts from careless innocence to heart-rending experience and a willed exercise of power. The intricate plot is recounted by a mature woman recalling a ‘true love’ that has ‘slipped through her fingers’ as she ‘[lives] on... as ‘hostage to the peace’ (69). This favoured but headstrong royal daughter lived freely in her privileged nobility until an elderly warrior, a dangerous enemy, arrived to press his request for a ‘bed-warmer’ and her compliance was demanded by her father as the price of alliance (72). Radically underestimated, the daughter drugs the company, escapes with a willing but principled young nobleman with whom she initially lives in an unconsummated relationship until overtaken by desire in a decidedly non-baptismal lakeside scene: her taunt that the water entering her body is bolder than the lover sees him overcome restraint. Four sons and a daughter are born in the years spent evading the determined old suitor who seeks redress for the loss of ‘his’ woman stolen by one of his own (79). The danger of continuing violence has the couple’s sons sent away until the old suitor seeks a pact. Finally, after much spilled blood and the intercession of the lover’s high-born foster-father, there is a brokered peace. But in the truce, the son/lover becomes the unknowing victim of his own father’s mis-deeds. He is fated to kill a boar and be killed by the old suitor who is the single being who might save him with life-giving water. This act of mercy is withheld. In this tale of life, love, sexuality and death, the son is doomed by a father and the girl’s rash actions cost the life of her lover. The woman is left to lament his loss and her failure to attend his death. Farmer’s prose implies residual turbulence:

Love is like water, a trickle enough to drown in, and a lake not enough to quench the thirst of it. Like love, water is always underlying its invisible self, folding and rising and falling. Its skin a mirror or a crusty turbulence. It alone knows what lies under it and at what depth... Water will have its own way. (77)

After long years the woman agrees to marry the old warrior in an unwanted alliance in order to end hostilities and reconcile the kingdom, her 'bed of stone' being the price of negotiation for her sons' lives and the country's peace. The premise of love being 'like water,' 'essential and terrible' (and fatal if withheld) is confirmed in the claim that 'to love is to lose' but the mature woman in her veil of mourning worn over red silks, is not the same as the girl who defied her father (79). As the object of the old suitor's desire she is possessed—but this time on her terms. In Farmer's reconsideration of this legend, the woman targeted in this long pursuit does not demand that her sons avenge their father's death, nor does she fade away over lost love but instead she binds the warrior by marriage to their negotiated agreement. This highly charged and heated arena of action pre-figures but inverts the slow, cold intensities of the final story of this collection.

The second of the two Celtic tales, 'The Blood Red of her Silks' again references ancient tales of medieval kings, marriage, inheritance and power but here the fates of four children who are cursed by a disgruntled stepmother provides the impetus for a saga of nine hundred years duration. 'The Blood Red of Her Silks' draws on the ancient Irish tale of *The Children of Lir* and begins at a lake at the heart of an island 'steeped in green' where woodlands are flooded by water and the land is subject to bitter south winds:

This water has eels in its belly and reed beds and waterlily pads haunted by swans in the sheltered coves around the rim. Here land and water alike are full of presence, the ruffle and whirr of swans, now visible, now not, and their nests, old and new, full or barren, and their eggshells, feathers and bones.

Stories in this land have the texture of dreams, with no happy endings. (96)

In this world of dangerous feudal allegiances, a young princess draws the jealous ire of an unloved step-mother and she and her brothers are cursed, doomed to exist as swans exiled in time. Beverly Farmer's version charts their journeys between lands, seasons, decades and philosophies which see the children outlive a pagan world to eventually arrive at a site where the prophesy of their release is imminent. Drawing attention to the perpetrator of the curse, Farmer demonstrates how a young optimistic woman might become the proverbial wicked step-mother in a tale of a queen's death in childbirth and the fate of a sister appointed as her replacement. The substitute fails to fill the loved woman's place in the hearts of inherited children and husband and resentment grows as the unloved, un-nourished woman watches her niece attain prominence in her (and her sister's) stead. As prescribed by legend the grandfather's gift of the dead queen's blood red silk dress—a garment in which the sister was supposedly laid to rest—is the final straw that triggers vengeance. The lake becomes the site of an embittered and malicious action against the royal children who are turned into swans and banished to exist for three hundred years in each of three waterways: the 'water of this spell-binding,' 'the narrow straits between this land and the white lands to the East' and then in the 'outlying shores and islands of the west' (105). The curse ensures that 'to water you are bound, on water you stay' (105). In turn the stepmother is undone—the king diminishes her to a 'fiery wraith'—but the curse remains, leaving the children trapped in swan bodies with human voices to air their laments. Farmer transforms this tale to make something wondrous of the swans' journeys and their oversight of a changing world. The banished children rise

from their bloodied lake, trapped between bird and human life, loving each other but immutably held in sway by the directives of the curse. In memory of their loss swans are protected for years but in the great span of time communication ceases when their kingdom runs its course:

Their life has become one stream of image and sound, smell and taste, cold touch of weed, and warm of feather and air, and heavy, of water. Only now and then does any of them dream of being a child, a pillar of ice, a turbulence in a silky lake of blood, only to wake to a new shock, a desolation. (120)

Bound to cross mountains and wilderness, they suffer all seasons and weathers in their protracted migrations until they reach a place of sanctuary:

Of all the islands and headlands rich in bird life on these outer shores and all the lakes, this one is one they are drawn to. (119)

Here, they encounter a hermit raised by Christian carers who has the grace and faith to believe in miracles and sufficient compassion to share his shelter and listen to their tale. For the hermit they represent a religious epiphany, a pentecostal vision (125). They are his choir of angels and the promised peace that comes to him as a dream. Their relationship grows through the sharing of stories as medieval curse meets Christian faith and story-telling ameliorates the pain of isolation. The hermit's self-sufficiency, and his book with its sacred images of mother and child, provides solace to the swans if not answers to their dilemma. The oldest begins to comprehend the link between the red dress she wore that was made for her mother and the bloody act of her aunt. In mutual trust the swan/children share their gift of song. The legend ends as predicted with the advent of strangers on a hunting mission and the subsequent death of the swans. They do not return to childhood forms but are released from life, their dead eyes being 'like drops of water'(150). Transformation (rather than resurrection) sees the husks of the aged children's feathered bodies returned to the sea by the hermit fisherman.

Diverse versions of this complicated tale have survived the ages: a fearful relic of sorcery and past times or, as Farmer suggests, a banal warning to 'stay away from the deep water if you know what is good for you' (159). In Shauna O'Halloran's re-telling of the legend the four singing swans live for three hundred years on Lake Derravaragh, three hundred on the Straits of Moyle and three hundred more on the isle of Inish Glora and the spell made by Aoife is only broken by bell sounding the arrival of St Patrick in Ireland and the children being saved by a last minute christening by him. Instead Farmer imagines the terrors of the journey and the love of the siblings and leaves them a story and 'presence' in a loved place as memorial:

This water has a long memory. To this day something of their presence lingers on in the lake of their transformation and may be seen, if you have the eyes to see, floating from time to time, catching the edge of light, in a splash of white, a ripple, a scrawl of shadow or mirrored clout, either at twilight, when the lake edge is a spangled hem and most clearly in the late summer and early autumn, seen in the high glare of noon...at such times you may catch sight of a quick flank, a thigh, a gilded thread, a ravel of blood deep underwater, no sooner seen than gone. (159)

Water is both gift and survival necessity and deprivation or inundation may cause harm. The fluencies of the former tale are withdrawn in 'Tongue of Blood,' a Greek tragedy of arid despair re-enacted as the dead queen of a murderous household feeds her thirst for revenge in a waterless cavern in Hades. The speaker is Clytemnestra, wife of Agamemnon, mother of the sacrificed Iphigenia and her grief-stricken, strident voice rings out from stone caves in the Land of the Shades inhabited by snakes, spiders and her fellow dead (Brewer 21). In a poetic sequence set in a pre-Christian world her lament is a cry of frustration, grief and rage for a lost daughter's life: a call for vengeance expressed with disturbing vehemence. Farmer's rendition of this drama begins and ends with two poems that enclose a sustained keening, an intricate orchestration of distress that speaks of treachery, lechery, murder and matricide (the cause and aftermath of the Trojan War), interspersed with a choric dialogue between women and heartless gods. Farmer interweaves motifs of blood, silk, nets, water, fire, stone and pomegranate seed to acknowledge Leda's and Clytemnestra's heritage. When the Queen, the swan's offspring, obeys the commands of husband and women's work, she unknowingly sends her virgin daughter to be sacrificed in the name of political greed, rape, pillage and war. The wife then murders her husband, the killer of her child, who 'got [another] daughter on my sister,' and weaves a shroud to despatch her husband before falling prey to her son's brutal retaliation (Harvey 12).

In so many legends women are bound in intricate webs of desire and domination. Farmer's lament is for a daughter, a virgin bride sold by a king in his campaign to wage the war of the wooden horse. Raging against those who would kill a first-born at the whim of a priest and change of wind, Clytemnestra refuses to be silenced or 'kept' underground. Instead, grief and anger rise on slender threads to pierce rock and rekindle the flame of vengeance:

If you on the earth whose ears are flesh can hear, know that when blood spills
and sinks out of sight, it is not done with but cries out under your feet whether
you hear it or not. It cries out for justice and the soles of your feet of all the
living carry the stain over the earth. As I give tongue out of the cave mouth.

I labyrinthine I shade. (176)

This version of the tale illustrates the ways in which speech, writing and naming continue to have effect as the parched shade, whose thirst cannot be quenched with water only blood, seeks not only a daughter but a way of conveying her message to the world. Nourished by residual 'blood' she fuels her journey through the labyrinthine darkness trading hints of possible escape with the dying, bargaining in the hope that some messenger from underground might continue her search. The final poem is both a threat and a directive to the living not to forget.

Some readings claim that Iphigenia was later rescued by Artemis, but Beverley Farmer focuses on the central frustration of a mother who has no such vision of a future, who grieves, not only for loss, but for the fact that the daughter must have died thinking her complicit in her husband's treachery. Grief is exacerbated by the daughter's disappearance: the women of a city can only protest at the injustice of patriarchy and priesthood by performing a ceremonial wake to bury the bridal clothes of the deceased. The mythological detail is familiar but it is this mother's voice that re-invigorates this lament. The effect is heightened by tension between the slow-paced evocation and the violence of accumulating rage. Ivor Indyk has called this one of the great laments of Australian Literature and his comment is astute, with or without the national ascription (conversation 2017). In the context of these five tales this story is about lost nourishment: the flame of life itself.

In a polar reflection, 'The Ice Bride' is a stark depiction of a loss of innocence and an interrogation of the deviousness of patriarchal society's historical commodification of women. It offers a poignant reconsideration of the story of Bluebeard by Charles Perrault which well and truly transcends origins. The original tale is about a murderous husband and the dangers of wifely curiosity. This new narrative portrays the slowly changing awareness of a woman in a painstaking acquisition of knowledge as her need to know brings this 'bride' into conflict with her 'groom,' a term that acquires a new significance in this story as the woman is trained to meet the requirements of her master. Here Farmer's long-standing preoccupations with the effects of time in life and art, the transience of moments of beauty or pleasure and the complexities of human relationships, are re-configured. This bride is a central participant in the 'marry game' but she is not only replaceable but an expendable body in a realm where the outside—the vast body of a natural world—is being slowly iced over. Or perhaps this place is set apart: a museum of collected items from a dead world. Chosen but enclosed in the King's snow dome she is his 'winter bride, masterpiece and paragon in the making' made whole by her lover's presence. As a novice she is bound to learn the relationship game and the part she is to play in her master's designs. The story is conveyed through the prism of shifting observation:

Their silken robes have a suppleness and sheen, and a translucency that catches at the edge of light as they move, so that at time their limbs show darkly through it or the folds and contours of the bodies inside leave shadows on the surface. Brocaded or sleek as water, they are always white but for the tinge of blue or yellow that the light leaves in the folds and in this they are like the surrounding snow. Sometimes she is so distracted with the flow and shine, the pools and grooves and fringes of shadow that stain her clothes and his, that she loses the thread of what he is telling her. If he catches her attention straying he pulls her up firmly. She can never make him see what has drawn her eyes away and how helpless she is to resist; but, warned by the faint pleat of impatience between his eyebrows, she soon learns to look steadily at him or down at her hands at such times, only not away, and to pay attention. (208)

Her desire to be the perfect bride is fed by his love—he only possesses 'perfect things' and she has a dawning awareness that 'to be loved is to be without flaw'—but as his absences lengthen and her curiosity grows the gradually opening doors of her habitat admit new understanding and her lord's displeasure. After a discussion of water's capacity to enliven stone a warning is issued, 'Undo one such small matter as the behaviour of water, my Lady Bride, he says, in dry amusement, and the rule is that you may undo the universe' (249).

The story proceeds in a series of carefully modulated dialogues that raise philosophical questions about time and the nature of being. Gradually, the delights of discovery are overtaken by acquired wariness: first doubt, then distraction, distance, a sense of a possible past and of worlds outside this enclosed space. Initially the bride is her lover's prized 'gem' as rare as his collected samples of stone, or his bee trapped in amber, simply his 'to have and to hold' but her intelligence is dangerous. Devoid of memory but haunted by half-remembered images of a prior life, the woman seeks understanding:

It is in the bath, lying back with her eyes half closed, that the answer comes to mind. They were all in water, somewhere, once. Wherever it was, they were in a water that the stones must have drunk in, along with all that was in it. They are beings at home in water! Was the amber being one of them? But she could fly—

less these beings flew in water? There are ripples in so many of the stones that might have been water before the stone drank them in. And she has seen this water before, but where?—running water full of beings that live and fly, the darker for being submerged, the larger and more intense in colour and the deeper, the faster. (227)

Learning disconcertingly that ‘eyes do not see the same’ leads to dispute, further absence and protracted times to imagine, remember and discover herself as well as a sense of others beyond reach (222). But this woman does not give up the game easily as she strives for perfection and attempts to become the perfected bride. Farmer creates a gradual shift away from cold perfection towards unnamed desire—possibly the desire to exist beyond the eye of the beholder—in a slow thaw. Eventually, her world implodes with the advent of a third party, unheralded, undesired, a strange ‘fool’ born of fire (and shifty in demeanor) who appears in her husband’s absence ostensibly to do the master’s bidding. With his eventual conveyance of three gifts, live things from the world beyond, the tale of seduction takes a further sinister turn.

The prose has rich verbal textures counterpointed with imagery of water and fire. Spatial territories reflect emotional terrains and a sense of enclosure or entrapment is palpable. The bride discovers a gravesite, a sedimentary layer within her sanctuary: not an attic of strangled brides in Bluebeard tradition but a mortuary of the iced remains of women frozen within the dome, a veritable bed-rock of brides. She sees that the ring of gold that binds her has also bound others. Her brief taste of life—in this instance via the gifts forced upon her—ends with a pomegranate seed sown in her mouth in an act akin to rape. This is the nadir of her existence and the symbolic end of Eden. The postscript spoken by the Master of the house leaves the reader with the question of who is the fool, who has been fooled by whom. This is an apt metaphor for a troubled world where inequality persists. The final evocation of desired knowledge, read as temptation, adds an illuminating twist to a very, very old story.

In ‘The Ice Bride’ Beverley Farmer tackles the formative legends of male female relationships bestowed by the world’s cultures and religions to implicitly ask what does it say about an idea of perfection if becoming more human represents a ‘fall’ from grace? Could the idea itself be flawed? In the enclosed world depicted here ‘perfect’ women are kept and imprisoned like collector’s items, valued as acquisitions/museum pieces and discarded if they threaten to think or feel in ways contrary to desired patterns of conformity. This is an horrific vision of the future so precisely rendered in a short story that it makes Attwood’s *Handmaid’s Tale* seem wordy.

Signs, symbols, images and colours recur in dreams of flight, blood, ice or immersion. In these tales a gold ring may be given, lost or ‘clamped’ to a hand and the marriage ‘games’ that feature in this compilation of women’s voices depict a range of familiar human responses. In the first tale of the collection a widowed woman who has lost a child reviews her childhood, in the second a girl becomes the mother who sacrifices self for the safety of her sons, in the third a mother-less child nurtures her siblings. The fourth tale is a mother’s lament for a murdered child and the fifth features a woman who will not become a mother as this would be a ‘fall’ from perfection. Throughout, Beverley Farmer employs what Nicolette Stasko called ‘ellipsis,’ the technique ‘of saying less than the obvious and asking the reader to fill in what is not there’ (44).

An American critic interviewing Beverley Farmer once observed, ‘You are not a casual writer are you?’, to which she replied: ‘No I’m not. There has to be a grain of truth in the fiction for me to feel it’s worth creating’ (Willbanks 72). This capacity to precisely observe, then orchestrate word and image to create ‘other-worlds’ to reflect on life and unveil further constellations of meaning is what fine art does. And Beverley Farmer’s art is very fine. Writing slowly and painstakingly, she has created a body of work since the 1980s that is relatively small but highly regarded for its experimental use of language and form and the extraordinary clarity, lyricism and poetic rhythms of its prose. There are recurrent preoccupations with place, gender, relationships and the cultural myths and practices of life, death and renewal. There is a constant celebration of the miracles of the natural world and of the transformative potential of art and story-telling. This is a writer who mindfully attempts to make every word count. Believing that good writing speaks for itself, Beverley Farmer has not sought to publicly explicate or guide the reading of her work, as contemporary authors now so often do. Being reclusive and modest about her achievement has limited appreciation of her scholarship as the late acknowledgement (2009) of The Patrick White Award suggests (Jacobs, 213). Her reputation as one of Australia’s finest prose stylists is confirmed by *This Water: Five Tales* where revived archetypal songs and laments, swan songs and discourses, with their elemental images of water, stone fire and blood, collectively evince a peculiar force. They are richly imagined, carefully wrought tales which celebrate the power and potential of literature to nourish, warn, disturb or enchant.

Against The Grain: Beverly Farmer’s Writing was published in 2001 by University of Queensland Press in the UQP Studies in Australian Literature series (Jacobs). This survey of the collected work and its reception is currently the most comprehensive coverage of this writer’s achievement. This response to *This Water: Five Tales*, Beverley Farmer’s last published work, completes Jacobs’ survey.

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