

# The heart of the matter: Vincent Buckley's *Late Winter Child*

LYN JACOBS  
Flinders University

Vincent Buckley was a celebrated poet, teacher, editor (*The Bulletin* 1961-1963, *Prospect* 1958-1963) critic, essayist, reviewer, Catholic intellectual, Professor of English at Melbourne University, member of the Australian Academy of the Humanities and a founder of the Committee for Civil Rights in Ireland. His writing and opinions vitally influenced Australian artistic and political life and he taught at a dynamic time in the evolution of the national literature. I met him when he was a visiting scholar, poet-in-residence and mentor of colleagues at Flinders University in the early 1980s and benefited, as a post-graduate undertaking a doctoral study of the poetry of Slessor, Webb and Buckley, from his insights and advice. I recall a man who was generous in sharing his appreciations of the skills of others but reluctant to speak of his own achievements.

Buckley's personal and political life fuelled his poetry. Despite his early involvement with labor party politics, the Catholic Left, the Independent Labour Movement and Irish Republican Politics, his central place in debates about the white Australia policy, Vietnam, Hungarian politics, the Nationalist versus Internationalist argument, conscription and birth-control and his work in civil rights in Ireland, he did not seem to regard himself as a political person. However, he did acknowledge that a claim of non-involvement in such issues might itself represent a political stance and that political situations often offer paradigms for human relationships. In time, this Catholic, increasingly catholic poet, moved away from the dogma of fixed opinion, relinquishing theology in favour of comparative religion, anthropology, humanism and the teachings of Koestler (Booth 30). Never a confessional poet, Buckley maintained a faith in writing as a 'sacralising act', as a means of setting aside to reveal through memory, and consistently pursued a socially responsible poetic stance. The nearest he comes to the use of a directly personal voice in poetry is in songs from the heart directed to family and most particularly in *Late Winter Child*.

Buckley's intense engagement with the forms and function of poetry and his on-going revision of poetic expression saw the relinquishment of 'bardic tendencies,' characterised by rhetoric and statement, and assumption of a discourse which more precisely conveyed the direct articulation of perception and sensuous expression of the textures of lived experience. The technical innovation of *Golden Builders*, with its orchestration of images of deconstruction and reconstruction and contestation between old and new ways of seeing and saying, paved the way. This article acknowledges these developments and the complementary nature of *The Pattern* but focuses on the sequences of *Late Winter Child* to demonstrate Buckley's innovative 'growth into uncertainty' (Booth 28). The *Golden Builders* sequence accommodated Buckley's interests in time, memory, history and myth and embraced regional and idiomatic concerns but it also pre-figured new directions as the poet attempted, like Eliot, Pound and the imagists, 'to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase rather than the sequence of the metronome' (*Essays in Poetry* 29). Appreciation of the work of American poets and prose writers fuelled further experimentation with poetic language that celebrated speech idioms and 'the bodily particularity of things' (Kirkby 138), features particularly evident in the simultaneously published *Late Winter Child* and *The Pattern* (1979). In *Last*

*Poems*, he wryly returned to overt statement to confirm his preference for ‘A Poetry without attitudes’: a position arrived at after a lifetime’s engagement with poetic language:

A poetry without attitudes  
 that, like a chance at happiness,  
 arrives too late, so candid  
 it will seem secret  
 and will satisfy no-one,  
  
 be useless in seminars  
 and will certainly aggravate critics  
  
 and force even the publisher  
 to speak of a New, a Mature voice  
  
 while actually you are learning  
 to walk with it, to lie against it,  
  
 your earth-tremor, your vibrato  
 turning you slowly into song. (147)

Increasingly, Buckley creates complex scores in which candid observation co-exists with mediating responses as vital components of the poetry’s music. There is:

...a further sophistication in the use of image as a partial substitute for statement. In *The Pattern* Buckley links beginnings and endings in his definition of life patterns. He shapes womb and cell-like structures that hollow out as the flesh dwindles and bone and cave-like structures remain. He skirts the resources of holy wells, sets houses stone within stone on an island surrounded by a sea encompassed by a ‘fish-web of fathers’. He conjures circles of fear, reserve, light, warmth, seasonal cycles, images of stone, tree, pearls, discs, bud and suns and enacts descents into sleep, death, or the interned pre-occupations of closed minds. There are eggs, pollen, bushels pipes and rounded musical notes, tiny points of security opposing the immensities of curved sky and the acknowledged world of experience beyond self...He attempts and manages to give a ‘rhythmic shape to a whole life experience’ rather than to simply talk about it. (Jacobs, ‘Poetry’ 99)

*The Pattern* (in memory of Buckley’s parents) reflects the legacies of Irish/Australian inheritance and past familial experience in a review of origins. Both (simultaneously published) volumes are notable for their grace and clarity, careful patterning of word and image and judicious ordering of rhythm and cadence and each speaks differently of love, vulnerability and survival.

*Late Winter Child* (dedicated to mother and child) is a delicately nuanced sequence tracing the intimate personal experience of a relationship, confinement, childbirth and continuity. *Late Winter Child*’s prologue and twenty-eight lyrics follow the gestation of new life and the prospect of fatherhood in middle-age but a contrapuntal growth of fear co-exists when the lives of the woman and child are endangered and the relationship itself put at risk. In contrast to *Late Winter Child* where a birth is transformative, *The Pattern* has an elegy for a dead mother at its heart and its key (the O.E.D definition of pattern with its connotation of patron) unlocks both identification and alienation. In this volume there is a spiralling towards and

then away from the central matrix as Australian and Irish experience is weighed. Each poem contributes a strand to the overview of ancestral and racial memory as the poet revisits parental birthplaces, personal and cultural identity and maturely assesses the formative effects of emotional, geographic and historical distance. The suggestion that Buckley had resorted to poetry of ‘ethnic affection’ (Rowlands 70) misreads processes of delving into self in order to transcend self and the complexity of his appraisal of Irish cultural identity and the costs of migration. John McLaren’s more recent reading of *The Pattern* as ‘an extensive meditation on ancestry and nationalism’ illuminates the ways in which the ‘sense of being outside’ a loved country and needing to ‘learn Ireland’, informs the poetry (282). Initially, the immediacy of the portrayal of burgeoning life in *Late Winter Child* seems remote from the contrary evidence of *The Pattern* but poems like ‘The Internment’ (53) paradoxically testify to humanity as Patrick Shivers thinks of his son in the face of torture and death (54) and poems about a loved but foreign land are only as remote as a dividing ‘membrane of air’ (63). Despite the different scale of the two environments (the passionate involvement of one and the sense of being at a remove that characterises the other), the two volumes enact a mutually enlightening reconciliation of personal and public worlds.

Vincent Buckley spent a life-time performing on the public stage, wrestling with issues of consequence in intellectual and religious realms but there was an inability to speak openly of what mattered most (a long-held love) which finally found expression in the finely-honed understatement of *Late Winter Child*. In a season where death and life were imminently juxtaposed, a newly urgent language evolved as image, pace and tone were tuned to precisely convey private truths. *Late Winter Child* begins with a prologue hinting at the potency of these new beginnings and then enacts an unsettled, restless mind-movement and tremulous anticipation of another’s presence:

Maundy sunlight: the air  
mouldy with thunder  
strained through hands  
and curtains      Who whom?

I was seeking      you  
the cold at my back  
fluttered like a leaf  
I could feel my body  
quaver like ozone under me  
the air      heavy with pulse

on the table darkness stirred  
the closed book      I walked

upstairs and down, clumsy  
opening the long glass doors

so the horizon’s fault-line  
recoiled, flashed, blinded my eyes,  
stretching my scalp      to see glow  
parting the thunderhead

restlessness of the new home. (7)

The limited movement, interrupted action and observation of disturbance (the ‘cold at my back’ is a Marvellian reminder of time) co-exists with awareness of the body’s ‘pulse’ and institutes a synthesis of emotional, rational, physical and metaphysical elements that sustains the sequence. Buckley spoke in 1976 of ‘the poet’s intuitive sometimes telepathic entry into communication with other lives and the forces of the Universe’ as ‘a key religious act’ and despite their private focus, these poems admit an interplay between individual will and global consciousness (Booth, 30). After a dramatic ignition encompassing the sweep of ‘horizon’ and ‘thunderhead’ and heralding change, the first poem begins in a tone of intimate admission:

I

Hardest to talk about  
your skin: the intent colour  
that flows towards your eyes  
under the room’s pressure

Sound of water splashing: apricot

light in the window  
growing knots of wood  
your eyes curving

I shiver  
with the pleasure  
of earliness (9)

The subdued flow of light and colour, emphasis on curve and hue, soft sounds (Buckley read ‘plashing’ in a recorded version) and gentle rhythms of the poem synthesise observation and sensation. While the texture of the loved face may be ‘hardest to talk about’ there is considerable subtlety and variation in the unfolding story of events (past and present) defined by and subject to changing emotional states. There is an initial quickening of pace, a dance-like lilt in lines expressing a fruitful summer season, before more fulsome description charting the changing conditions of pregnancy. Mutual anticipation of the child’s embryonic presence pre-cedes a paternalistic assumption of the advent of a male child (Paulina responds similarly to the news of Hermione’s child in *The Winter’s Tale*) but, more significantly, from this point in the sequence the anonymous child becomes the daughter progressively owned. The fluent mobility of the child’s world contrasts with the stasis of waiting as starkly as the smells of summer herald and anticipate the late winter child:

II

(Gently rounded as your hips  
in the yellow kaftan)  
we’ll hear him, some time,  
whistling and changing in your body,

your flesh and blood. Sweet William  
with candytuft in the one bowl  
I bought you. Stationed here  
we’ll wait as he strains into

his clinging tent of waters,  
waiting for fins,  
for eyes bulbing, for breath  
itching at the dance-like morning.

Before the phone shrills there is  
a ticking in the wood beside it

gardens rise level as platforms  
pressing their smell through every leaf

we spent our summers  
preparing a late-winter child (10)

Buckley spoke of his interest in language and season in these terms:

I am absolutely fascinated by the possibility of matching in language the vibrations chiefly of the external world as manifested in the seasons, in the vibrations of nature, that on one hand, and the inner vibrations of the person on the other. It seems to me that poetry at its greatest can match up those vibrations and I am fascinated by the possibility of doing that... (Rosenbloom 324)

In this sequence intimations of new life also incur a ‘warp’ of worry or psychological pain that runs contrary to the grain. In poems III, IV and V, a rising ‘heat’ in the woman’s body is registered like a barometric indication of complication threatening ‘futures’ and ‘limbs/ nesting a life’(12). This imagery provides an associative link to the fifth poem where the heat and aridity of past ‘dry years’ speaks of sterility rather than fertility, of an earlier time of less tropic intensity when the woman was characterised as ‘soft outsider’. Now there is pain ‘coarse as seaweed’ and the woman in red with ‘melted light’ colouring her cheekbones is the simmering point of both projected hope and fear. The laboured syntax of the once ‘dry dismayed womb pausing’ institutes a pause in the fifth poem culminating in the desire to relieve the temperature of ‘gorged’ veins via the almost baptismal relief of immersion in ‘an absolute/clear centre of cold water’(13). Throughout, there is a rise and fall of heat and colour as physical conditions and the relationship flares and flickers.

Evidence of physical change (the ‘double-weight’ suggested by a slowed pace and more deliberately stressed lines) is reinforced in the sixth poem in the first stanza’s summary of change:

VI

But I’d grown with you fifteen years;  
was I to lose you, now you were  
distant with child, you eyes drawling  
like a sleepwalker’s feet; and morning  
I’d say, where is the morning  
of rain and the strong bright light  
that pricks up our eyes, and the park  
where I would hope to see you  
running, the dog beside you,  
and, under the belted raincoat

that hides your body's lines of heat,  
cool linen on your shoulders (14)

The season of waiting sees the woman dreaming of the child and this is echoed in poem XIV where the 'curious' child prophetically anticipates another. Poem VI embraces the concerns of the whole as Buckley sets intimacy against distance, present against the past and dream against reality. Liberty is balanced by constraint, lightness with weight, growth with potential loss, dryness with a desire for rain, the 'shut face' and the 'drawling eye' offset by the shared bed and the 'pricked' eye (14). Throughout, there is a tension between accessibility and inaccessibility as delight in both relationship and pregnancy is muted by fears of loss, fears for the child and woman and of the distance of pregnancy itself. In the light of a new day the poet admits and dismisses one obvious concern in this loving tribute:

VII

We have to pay for  
such loneliness: morning  
opens my eyes on the patio-white  
wall of nothing: my pulse  
thick, scratchy as wool.

I'm not afraid of age,  
love, even in you: hope even,

to watch it rise like dew  
in the oval of your girl-face  
the light at home in your skin  
as it will always be: the scarf  
blown from you across the  
sulphurous air (15)

The hope of growing old together implies a contrary possibility without pathos just as the 'thick' pulse serves as a reminder of mortality. In an echo of the first and last poem of the sequence, the woman's face, skin and movement of scarf are captured like one of Eliot's essential moments akin to the 'heart of light' in *Burnt Norton* with its reflections on time and reality. Throughout, it is the sheer impact of the woman's vitality that draws the poet back from doubt and depressed pre-occupations and to this end poem VIII works like a transfusion. The intimacy of the early poems is re-established as the pregnant woman, now in the 'stretched' red dress with 'heart trip-hammering' excites 'a second lust'. Olfactory as well as visual senses register change as the woman's movements respond to this new 'ellipse' of her life. There is an echo of the prologue in the reference to horizons and the phrase 'clean as a cat' may nod to Sylvia Plath's 'Morning Song' (11). The vital spark of new life (the budding child) and new awareness of each other (recalling the excitements of foreignness) suggests an intense intimacy. A contrasting 'point of passage' is captured in lyric IX where sensuous proximity is noticeably absent – gone the closeness of the smell of a hair-parting as a phone call breaches geographical distance but fails to alleviate either the bleak winter prospect or desolate state of mind:

Chirr chirr on the other side  
of the corridor's  
thin carpet. I move there. I reach into your voice  
with dread

though you're close to me  
as the blue vein in my arm. (17)

This poem sets the tone for the next three sections confirming the dangerous state of the woman's health, a medical crisis and subsequent convalescence. In poem X the travel homeward from the east's 'quartzite dryness' and 'scalpy hills' is fraught in the knowledge that 'hour by hour/distant as the moon/the blood seeped in your body dangerously' but there is renewal beyond the journey west towards the 'light' of the woman's face:

In six weeks my hands  
had aged so much  
they shook brushing your hair. (18)

Buckley returns to a more easeful body language in poem XII where touch and proximity prove both restorative and reassuring. Empty hands are filled, colour returns and in bright sunlight 'the garden breathed' around the 'prim convalescents' (19). But an unspoken undercurrent now more overtly plagues the monitoring of on-going life. As the prospective parents respond to the evident growth of the child, feeling its revolving heels and imagining the transfer of nutrient from mother to infant, the distracted father fights other unspoken agendas:

## XII

Often I could not face you: the smoky dovebreast  
light of cloud transformed us with evening, but still  
tears of shame

turned my cheekbones to the window. Constant as  
a wave, she surged inside you. The wind ran low  
against the birch-leaves. Hinging of doors, ripple of  
skin and nerves (20)

In consecutive poems the images of wind, air, face, averted gaze and trembling hands are re-used but the harmony of their conjunction in the previous lyric is unsettled as 'fingers you spread on my/ breast tremble slightly, as if a heart in them beat into my heart/ [not seeing, not listening]' (20). The man's anxiety and isolation is set against the child's sure growth but as she 'revolves' (in time and motion) and the mother's life is shared, the father's energies are tapped. The three stanzas of the thirteenth poem shift from a plea for forgiveness, through a bitter sense of loss (a mind-halting moment when 'there was nothing') to a determined refocussing on the lives of woman and child: 'There she is in you/ [there is no death]' (21). In a Lowellian echo ('Fetus') the seriousness of this fight for life is then articulated:

a waste between us  
I should have told you,  
then, death was your rival  
that darkened my brain  
with fears, plans, the thin copper  
movements of a worm on the hot stone (23)

Like the earlier dry years, a further time of 'waste' has ensued when the man is an impediment, as he now sees it, an 'object' in the woman's path 'giving no echo' (23). Poem XVI symbolically confirms this contrast between the woman's life and the man's constraint (the form and rhythm recalls poem VI) when, as gathered heads of lavender were culled and

held to her face, the man remained as ‘silent as a cowl’ (24). A jaundiced eye, body paralysed by fear (watching the woman’s hands take on a ‘saffron tint’) and throat ‘stiff with vomit’ defines a state of extreme hollowness in poems XVII and XVIII. The couple like ‘hypnotised seals’ are stranded, just as in poem XXV, lost communication is also imaged as ‘skins [dried] out like bark’ (35). But the winter body, the dried branch, can be startled back into life and this motif has resonance with a series of recurrent images of wood, its grain and knot (the origin of the branch) and autumnal and winter manifestations that become, in the last poem of the sequence, the branch finally borne to the fire. But at this juncture the woody flowers re-ignite or ‘startle’ the ‘winter body’ (27):

These, too, will get the heady  
woodflower scent, the throes of leaning  
bodies on a glass’s rim (27)

From here the father addresses his child and the fight she will have to arrive. The physical pressure that triggers the birth process is the antithesis of the emotional tension that constrains the man and it is the resolution to be born that is celebrated:

I can see by the way you rally  
your own body into the world  
out there, between her legs,  
you will fight your way home;  
and I will at last  
touch you with full hands. (28)

Buckley spoke about speech idioms at a conference (later published in Joan Kirkby’s *The American Model*, 1982) acknowledging the influence of Whitman, Lowell, Hart Crane and prose writers like Faulkner, Steinbeck and Hemingway who had sharpened his appreciation of writing as ‘a deeply and variably mimetic art’ (145). He confirmed his appreciation of Faulkner’s ‘ease of language’ in *As I Lay Dying*, noting that:

The quality is one of perception, which is largely a matter of intimate and prolonged sensation, the sensation of *noticing* being used as the focus for the other, more clearly animal sensations; a matter of sensation, and of pace in its expounding (that is to say its uncovering, its outlaying); hence of idiom, since the enterprise is to a certain degree mimetic, and will have to depend on the availability of language which is close to the bodily particularity of things and of their common local names; hence of the rhythm which will deliver that idiom and the thinginess which it enfolds. (138)

The twentieth poem of the sequence observes and embodies childbirth and there is not a better poem in the sequence to demonstrate the mimetic principles, control of rhythm, convincing particularity and astute perception, that Buckley sought:

XX  
(Your pain like a heart beating);  
oval with sweat you  
reared on the tightened mattress;  
white sheets could not hold you;  
you gasped, counting; she was the boiling  
total at your body’s fringes.

Lights pressed outlines on us.  
 The nurses bent like rowers  
 flailing you onward                      I rubbed  
 rubbed the moist skin  
 of your hand                      you urged,    shaking  
 cradle and stirrups, until the metal  
 cracked like harness and, straddled  
 by your legs, she came eyelids pouting,

into an air of white fabric  
 her mouth puzzled at not crying,  
 her hips  
 trimly sliding with blood

(so, any second in the clear space  
 by this wall, the cat will leap  
 and fill the sight completely  
 as a door opening  
 open darkness beyond it)

For hours afterwards, the room  
 was quiet, the musks of birth  
 slowly wearing out; you lay  
 with leg flexed, prone  
 as an athlete  
 in the pristine  
 coolness of his oil. (30)

The heat and gathering pace of maturation culminates in the ‘boiling total’, of childbirth as the mother toils like a jockey in harness and the child arrives with a surge that echoes ‘Kilmore Races’ ‘bodies urging the gates/for a jump away’ (*Collected* 146). The foaling analogy is apt given the further description of the child in poem XXII riding her mother’s hip ‘passionate as a horse cropping’ (31). The penultimate stanza’s re-use of the cat image from poem VIII reasserts the link with thunder and blinding flash from the prologue and the triumphant arrival at a ‘new home’. But there is just a moment’s glimpse of contrary darkness at the border of life and death. In conversation Buckley indicated that poems VI, XVI, XX, XV and XVI were replacement poems, written after the initial draft. They are pivotal in the sequence as reconsiderations of events affording vital resonances within the text as a whole. There are two sections to poem XXII: the first re-tells the story of birth to the child as a tribute to her part in a Sisyphian task, and then celebrates her growing presence ‘everyday, now, she’s born again’ (31). Beyond the ward there is a world and the lens of the poetry then widens to re-accommodate it. In the poem that Buckley liked least (XXIII) the couple return to everyday life like dazed survivors. There is something of the earlier ‘prim convalescents’ in the monochromatic image of them dining together as ‘figures/ in a Dutch interior’(32). Beyond this there is a return to, and re-discovery of, the cities of Dublin and Melbourne (XXIV) in a season where dues are paid (the brief reference to lawyers hints at the formal end of a marriage that is, like Buckley’s heart disease, the unspoken agenda of the sequence) but the climate remains chill despite the generated steam of renewed daily activity.

Like Buckley, Bruce Dawe observed the duality involved in the poet’s need to attend to:

...the public world in which we have a stake as citizens like everyone else and that private world where we confront the mystery of our individual personalities, our individual perceptions and affections, our individual destinies. (Kirkby 162)

An inside view of the task of sustaining these two worlds is indicated in the emphatically numbered octaves of poem XXV which provides a background and review of the private, closely observed moments of the sequence. Section 1 reinstates a vision of the woman whose post-partum body is returned to her, but the remembrance of early sensual love remains over-shadowed by past fears of betrayal. The entire process of the relationship, with its potential, hope and diminished expectations, summarised as the cost and erosion of the 'dry years' is admitted: 'the years of part love/when you learned, as you grew desolate, /how the language runs out like milk' (34). The long struggle to survive separation and the deprivation of leeched sustenance is articulated in the third and central section:

Worst of all, because we expected them  
so humbly, the years of nothingness  
when , separate, more and more slowly,  
we both fought against age  
with childless poems, dance classes,  
images of cities built on journeys,  
counting as triumphs every chance  
of laughter, each fresh nuance of dress (34).

However, the re-assessment of this poem unequivocally celebrates the 'one power' that sustained the possibility of the future, 'the shared pulse/ across gaps and continents, version /of the dolphin's whistle' (35). The fear of 'drying out' for the lack of the others' presence is countered by the suggestion of an arrival. The past tense of the final claim that 'your touch (was) the heat that upheld me' (35) confirms the poignancy and struggle of a mutual journey. Love remains and what hope there is now resides in the simplest of things:

...not a god, but a child,  
a place: a sunrise: a whistle: bird on stem:  
low sky, downy with redness (35).

In 1976 Buckley observed that:

I had to change my whole attitude to life about 12, 15 years ago. I was engaged not just in public controversy and public activities, television, wireless and so on but I was also a member of a whole movement in Australian Catholicism in which I took a prominent part. Now, I gave that up, and I then had to recast my way of life from inside, not just in terms of behaviour but in terms of attitude; and that took a long time. It's enabled me to write poetry much better, but it has also meant that I have (partly deliberately, partly as a matter of course) narrowed my circle of activities and interests so that, while intellectually I'm interested in the broader range of things, socially I'm interested in a smaller range. I intend to become interested in a smaller range still, because I think that as one gets older one simply has to focus on the basic questions of life and death in the way in which the mystics do, and not to be distracted. (Booth 31)

The sequence weaves a simple unity out of the gathered strands of painfully acquired understanding. Not the least of Buckley's achievements is that the relinquishment of a public

voice and the complicated joys of striving to create poetry did not overtake the expression of the joy of being the parent of a child or simply, loved. In the final three poems of the sequence the youth/age dichotomy is initially re-visited as something intensely personal ('Today age gave its one stroke/inside my body') as an intimation of death. But continuities are reasserted as the child, like a mythical deity (the 'Janus-child') breaks into the very process of recording this blow and with an 'acclaiming cry' she reasserts her authority as an embodiment of past and future ('One day she will give back, or jettison/ your youth, my age, your growing up, my waning') (36). The penultimate poem offers an orchestrated tempering of the day's and perhaps the sequence's heat, ('The room cools down in throes. /Tropic cool. Wide flowers, streaming air'). But there is an interesting synthesis here given the prior imagery. Intense heat has fused two lives and created one yet, in proximity, the woman again seeks out the distance that has been lost, perhaps in an act of re-establishing a different kind of separateness. The now externalised tropic flower is like an emblem of promise and the 'in-flowing' air pressure of the early poems is liberated in the 'steaming air'. In contrast the wood that 'ticked' with life is now hollowed as a receptor for other more 'brackish' messages (37). Despite these transformations, the pleasures of 'earliness' (poems I and VII) are echoed in the summary of distance travelled. The sequence that has canvassed so precisely an unrepeatable season culminates in this fine tribute to the woman who kindled and nurtured life in the winter body:

## XXVIII

age does not frighten me  
 love, even in you. At fifty  
 I know when you are coming

back into the room, or when,  
 scarf of wind at you hair, music

plays the green leaf,  
 I rise at your footfall still.

But never again be here with you,  
 never again have soft hair

never to repeat these  
 chill winds that  
 (when the bare branch  
 is picked up on the mountain)  
 still breathe around it  
 as you carry it to the fire (38)

Vincent Buckley once indicated that he aspired 'to create, bring about, or bring out rhythmic shapes that are both true to the world as it actually is, and true to what I take to be an enduring aspiration of men: that is to the paradisaic possibilities of life' (Rosenbloom 234). *Late Winter Child* gracefully lends its testimony. Like Yeats, whose rhythmic mastery he valued, Buckley's mature poetry departed from the style and preoccupations that sustained earlier work while demonstrating continuing respect for classical forms and the music of language. Buckley lived through an era when the poet as intercessor or authoritative interpreter conceded a more fallible speaking position. His distinctive exploration of language, fuelled by competing personal and political pressures, epitomised a formative era in Australian poetry

and testified to the wisdom of his understanding of poetry as an imperative ‘voyage of discovery’ (*Essays* 94).

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