

Classic Poetry Series

**Judith Beveridge**  
**- poems -**

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## Judith Beveridge(1956 -)

Judith Beveridge (born 1956) is a contemporary Australian poet, editor and academic.

Judith Beveridge was born in London, England, arriving in Australia with her parents in 1960. Completing a BA at UTS she has worked in libraries, teaching, as a researcher and in environmental regeneration. She currently teaches creative writing at Newcastle and Sydney universities and is poetry editor for Meanjin, having previously edited Hobo and the Australian Arabic literature journal Kalimat.

# Appaloosa

&lt;i&gt;I have always loved the word guitar &lt;/i&gt;  
- David St. John

I have never been bumped in a saddle as a horse springs  
from one diagonal to another,  
a two-beat gait, light and balanced,  
as the four-beats per stride become the hair-blowing,  
wind-in-the-face, grass-rippling,  
muscle-loosening, forward-leaning  
exhilaration of the gallop.

And I have never counted the slow four-beat pace  
of distinct, successive hoofbeats  
in such an order as to be called The Walk.  
Or learned capriole, piaffe, croupade in a riding school,  
nor heard the lingo of outback cattle-cutters  
spat out with their whip-ends and phlegm.

I have never stepped my hands over the flanks  
of a spotted mare; nor hidden a Cleveland Bay  
carriage horse, or a Yorkshire coach horse;  
a French Percheron with musical snicker;  
or a little Connemara its face buried  
in broomcorn, or in a bin of Wexford apples.

I have never called a horse Dancer, Seabiscuit, Ned,  
Nellie, Trigger or Chester, or made clicking  
noises with my tongue, fifty kilometers  
to town with a baulking gelding and a green  
quartern top buggy. Nor stood in a field while  
an old nag worked very acre,  
only stopping to release difficult knobs of manure,  
and swat flies with her tail. And though I have

waited for jockeys at the backs of stables  
in the mist and rain, for the soft feel of their riding silks  
and saddles, for the cool smoke of their growth stunting  
cigarettes, for the names of the yearlings  
and mares they whisper along with the names

of horse-owning millionaires—ah, more, more even  
than them—I have always loved the word appaloosa.

Judith Beveridge

# Bahadour

The sun stamps his shadow on the wall  
and he's left one wheel of his bicycle  
spinning. It is dusk, there are a few minutes

before he must pedal his wares through  
the streets again. But now, nothing  
is more important than this kite working

its way into the wobbly winter sky.  
For the time he can live at the summit  
of his head without a ticket, he is following

the kite through pastures of snow where  
his father calls into the mountains for him,  
where his mother weeps his farewell into

the carriages of a five-day train. You can  
see so many boys out on the rooftops this  
time of day, surrendering diamonds to

the thin blue air, putting their arms up, neither  
in answer nor apprehension, but because  
the days tenders them a coupon of release.

He does not think about the failing light,  
nor of how his legs must mint so many steel  
suns from a bicycle's wheels each day,

nor of how his life must dropp like a token  
into its appropriate slot; not even  
of constructing whatever angles would break

the deal that transacted away his childhood –  
nor of taking some fairness back to Nepal,  
but only of how he can find purchase

with whatever minutes of dusk are left  
to raise a diamond, to claim some share  
of hope, some acre of sky within a hard-fisted

budget; and of how happy he is, yielding,  
his arms up, equivalent now only to himself,  
a last spoke in the denominations of light.

Judith Beveridge

# Capricorn

Through the end of an old Coke bottle he tracks  
the flight of a petrel, until it is tattered by  
sea-wind and another blurred mintage of the sun.

Along the pier, he hears the men with their  
reels, with their currency of damp sand. His rod  
quivers – weighted not with fish, but with

the names of storms: Harmattan, Vendavales –  
turbid winds running the vanguard of  
dangerous straits. He kicks at a pile of fishscales:  
galleon ballast, a hoard of ducats spilled  
from an old Dutch dogger. The men will soon  
chase him off, this raucous hero plundering

brigs. But now the bottle is a horn into which  
he pours so much breath, and the air has  
a tone borrowed from a blowhole, from wind  
singing through a bridge's rusting struts.  
A crab sifts sandgrains for its hole; its claw,  
an old sea-brigand's hook, is paying out

doubloons and threats. Ah, but you know – if  
you were to take this child's hand, if you  
were to keep his gaze in yours and wait for  
each circulation of his breath; if you were  
to watch the pirated scenes of daydreams  
play out through a windfall of glass – then

you'd see the copper-coloured sun. You'd walk  
this beach a long time with your thoughts  
trading in weather and wind, the petrels keeping  
pace with the rackish lines of dreams  
sailing in with the clinker-built storms. The past  
and the present would not be depressions

facing each other, nor would there be grains  
of sand abrading your fate... On the shore,  
a gull, dead from the night's storm. With his rod,  
the boy flings it up, the glove of a dueller

he's just Zorroed with his sword... No, the world  
would not be a wave repeating its collapse,  
but whatever mintage of story a boy can find  
among fishscales, sand, and the common  
issuance of wind; a boy who knows nothing  
of the linkages between storms; nor of  
the men, yet, who log weather's quick decay  
onto gauges of abuse; who knows nothing  
about paying for that old voyage toward death.

Judith Beveridge

# How to Love Bats

Begin in a cave.

Listen to the floor boil with rodents, insects.

Weep for the pups that have fallen. Later,  
you'll fly the narrow passages of those bones,

but for now —

open your mouth, out will fly names  
like Pipistrelle, Desmodus, Tadarida. Then,  
listen for a frequency  
lower than the seep of water, higher  
than an ice planet hibernating  
beyond a glacier of Time.

Visit op shops. Hide in their closets.  
Breathe in the scales and dust  
of clothes left hanging. To the underwear  
and to the crumbled black silks — well,  
give them your imagination  
and plenty of line, also a night of gentle wind.

By now your fingers should have  
touched petals open. You should have been dreaming  
each night of anthers and of giving  
to their furred beauty  
your nectar-loving tongue. But also,  
your tongue should have been practising the cold  
of a slippery, frog-filled pond.

Go down on your elbows and knees.  
You'll need a speliologist's desire for rebirth  
and a miner's paranoia of gases —  
but try to find within yourself  
the scent of a bat-loving flower.

Read books on pogroms. Never trust an owl.  
Its face is the biography of propaganda.  
Never trust a hawk. See its solutions  
in the fur and bones of regurgitated pellets.

And have you considered the smoke  
yet from a moving train? You can start  
half an hour before sunset,  
but make sure the journey is long, uninterrupted  
and that you never discover  
the faces of those Trans-Siberian exiles.

Spend time in the folds of curtains.  
Seek out boarding-school cloakrooms.  
Practise the gymnastics of web umbrellas.

Are you

floating yet, thought-light,  
without a keel on your breastbone?  
Then, meditate on your bones as piccolos,  
on mastering the thermals  
beyond the tremolo; reverberations  
beyond the lexical.

Become adept

at describing the spectacles of the echo —  
but don't watch dark clouds  
passing across the moon. This may lead you  
to fetishes and cults that worship false gods  
by lapping up bowls of blood from a tomb.

Practise echo-locating aerodromes,  
stamens. Send out rippling octaves  
into the fossils of dank caves —  
then edit these soundtracks  
with a metronome of dripping rocks, heartbeats  
and with a continuous, high-scaled wondering  
about the evolution of your own mind.

But look, I must tell you — these instructions  
are no manual. Months of practice  
may still only win you appreciation  
of the acoustical moth,  
hatred of the hawk and owl. You may need

to observe further the floating black host  
through the hills.

Judith Beveridge

# Mud Crabs, Low Tide

I feel a sharpness under the surface like tin-tacks,  
having come down to their soft mud among smells  
where most would retch. They sift broken bits,  
tuck into their mud; the bay has the sound

that could suck a crab-claw clean: a low-tide restaurant.  
Like the guileless yachts, or tunes  
of light sociable chopsticks: their lilting suck and clink—  
but it stops when you move, when the wind changes,

or when you ask what is their beginning or end?  
Millenia ago there may have been a life for them  
separate from the shore. Now they mechanically mudwallow—  
half pig, half earth-moving equipment,

before they're dragged up on lines, harnessed and killed.  
Clamped together they will clang into a bucket.  
They'll try to scuttle away on claws like tin-openers.  
But a time waits in the mangroves

when branches will basket leaves to the tide.  
They accept the sun drenches them,  
the mud and its fetor, the shore and its equivocal messages,  
the moon shining in the ranks of their claws.

Yachts pick (cutlery tinkering an appetite)  
and they thimble quickly back, their eyes needling  
like blindmen's cues feeling holes.  
The tide comes and the river pours. By morning,

they will have pulled themselves  
through the same acres. I think of the  
tinkling, the rattling in the enormous troughs  
they're thrown into by the bucketful in kitchens,

steam kettling their flesh. The sun walks high  
over dark mud and the made beach of their generations.  
How long must they pace the brown field,  
how long to endlessly dredge the sweet, the sour earth?

Judith Beveridge

# Mulla Mulla Beach

Before the sea stops a long mile out  
I hear the blades of fishermen scotching the rocks  
  
and their reels beginning to grind like bicycle gears.  
The sand is smooth but for weed,  
  
jelly-fish clear as surgical gloves.  
I watch the men who fish all day, eyes fast  
  
on the water, who were born hearing the sea always there.  
A place will seep into the voice  
  
of any local. I walk where sponges grow  
like moist yeast, a new world to me,  
  
but familiar. I squeeze the sea out.  
Part of that plain voice goes dead.  
  
It is the talk of people living here all year round  
who wish just to be left alone.  
  
Now, at almost dark, a dead confetti  
of fish-scales sticks to the rocks.  
  
There's no word but the sea's and tide-winded shells  
pacing quietly as shore-runners:  
  
though sometimes, there is a line, a murmur  
winding and unwinding in the shells.

Judith Beveridge

# Orb Spider

I saw her, pegging out her web  
thin as a pressed flower in the bleaching light.  
From the bushes a few small insects  
clicked like opening seed-pods. I knew some  
would be trussed up by her and gone next morning.  
She was so beautiful spinning her web  
above the marigolds the sun had made  
more apricot, more amber; any bee  
lost from its solar flight could be gathered  
back to the anther, and threaded onto the flower  
like a jewel.

She hung in the shadows  
as the sun burnt low on the horizon  
mirrored by the round garden bed. Small petals  
moved as one flame, as one perfectly-lit hoop.  
I watched her work, produce her known world,  
a pattern, her way to traverse  
a little portion of the sky;  
a simple cosmography, a web drawn  
by the smallest nib. And out of my own world  
mapped from smallness, the source  
of sorrow pricked, I could see  
immovable stars.

Each night  
I saw the same dance in the sky,  
the pattern like a match-box puzzle,  
tiny balls stuck in a grid until shaken  
so much, all the orbits were in place.  
Above the bright marigolds  
of that quick year, the hour-long day,  
she taught me to love the smallest transit,  
that the coldest star has planetesimal beauty.  
I watched her above the low flowers  
tracing her world, making it one perfect drawing.

Judith Beveridge

# The Dice-Player

I've had my nose in the ring since I was nine.  
I learned those cubes fast: how to play a blind  
bargain; how to empty a die from my palm  
and beguile by turns loaded with prayers –  
then sleight of hand. Ten or fifteen years  
and you get wrists like a tabla-player's, jaws

cut and edged by the knuckles and customs  
of luck and deception. The fun's in sham,  
in subterfuge, in the eyes smoking out  
an opponent's call. I let my thumb stalk  
each die, get to know which edge might  
damage probability's well-worn curves.

See, all dice are cut on the teeth of thugs  
liars and raconteurs. I've concocted calls  
those dealing in risk and perfidy, bluff or  
perjury, would envy. But I've never stolen  
or coveted dice fashioned from agate  
or amber, slate or jasper, or from

the perfumed peach stones of distant shores.  
Some think fortunes will be won with dice  
made from the regurgitated pellets of owls;  
or from the guano of seabirds that ride only  
the loftiest thermals. I've always had faith  
in the anklebones of goats, in the luxated

kneecaps of mountain-loving pugs. Look,  
I've wagered all my life on the belief that  
I can dupe the stars, subtend the arcs, turn  
out scrolls, louvres, pups, knacks, double  
demons – well, at least give a game rhythm.  
I know there'll always be an affliction

of black spots before my eyes, that my face  
has its smile stacked slightly higher on  
the one side, that the odds I'm not a swindler  
are never square. But, Sir, when some rough

justice gets me back again to the floor,  
then watch me throw fate a weighted side.

Judith Beveridge

# The Fisherman's Son

Perhaps it was when he first felt his shoulders  
roll an oar, or when he pulled the thick boots on.  
Perhaps it was when he saw the curved thin rod  
of the moon angle into his father's face and hook  
his mouth into an ugly grin; or perhaps when  
the sun rerouted his eyes to the necks of wading  
birds along the shore as the first pink tones

of dusk uncurled along the ferns. It could have  
been the way his father's knife eased out the eyes  
of so many fish like spoonfuls of compote that gave  
him thoughts black as the inky emulsions of squid,  
a sleep no fishing boat could ease, nor star prick  
with its comforting pin. Perhaps he learned nothing  
from his father's face except how whiskey

trawled sleep from his eyes and left him pursued  
by pain and thunder and a show of lightning's  
yellow flares. Perhaps when he felt the rod  
pull his arms through a reel's band of static,  
when he heard his father's voice in the headache  
scudding low across his forehead, the reel  
with an insect's drum-head pitch his heart into

summer's mounting heat; the slow drip of days  
revved up by outboards then dispelled by a drill  
of mosquitoes, or weather finding tenor in its squalls.  
Among stars and fish, those notes from the waste  
hours he gutted, from the river's sweep of years,  
who could know how many knives he heard  
audition for his nerves, or what beat his heart

took, or how many rounds of an ingoing lake  
before the wind rushed into the uncaulked  
cracks and left him face-down, deep-drummed,  
gear-slipped, deaf to his inner repertoire, blind  
now to the river's weather-beaten stare.  
Perhaps from a tangle of yellow air, or when  
he heard the wind bale out of a speeding sky,

or a firetail add its flute to the rankling handle  
of a windlass, a lyrebird weigh its call in  
with an anchor's unrolling links, some twisting  
erratic pull of tackle as the mosquitoes buzzed;  
when he heard his father's voice in each dizzy  
injected dose.... All day such talk went on  
as the men brought in their hauls, gutting fish

to the noise of pelicans, those bills clacking  
like clapperboards, the ease of routine. Here  
among the brace of tides, as wind skips along  
ropes left lank and loose and dangling now  
among the sloops, no one fully knowing why  
a boy would desire to die....The avocets walking  
the shore with their hesitant, hair-splitting steps.

Judith Beveridge

# The Kite

Today I watched a boy fly his kite.  
It didn't crackle in the wind - but  
gave out a barely perceptible hum.

At a certain height, I'd swear I heard  
it sing. He could make it climb in  
any wind; could crank those angles up,

make it veer with the precision of  
an insect targeting a sting; then he'd  
let it roil in rapturous finesse, a tiny

bird in mid-air courtship. When  
lightning cracked across the cliff -  
(like quick pale flicks of yak-hair

fly-whisks) - he stayed steady. For  
so long he kept his arms up, as if  
he knew he'd hoist that kite enough.

I asked if it was made of special silk,  
if he used some particular string -  
and what he'd heard while holding it.

He looked at me from a distance,  
then asked about my alms bowl,  
my robes, and about that for which

a monk lives. It was then I saw  
I could tell him nothing in the cohort  
wind, that didn't sound illusory.

Judith Beveridge

# The Shark

We heard the creaking clutch of the crank  
as they drew it up by cable and wheel  
and hung it sleek as a hull from the roof.

Grennan jammed open the great jaws  
and we saw how the upper jaw hung from  
the skull. We flinched at the stench of blood

that dripped on the fishhouse floor, and  
even Davey—when Grennan reached in  
past the scowl and the steel prop for the

stump—just about passed out. The limb's  
skin had already blanched, a sight none  
of us could stomach, and we retched

though Grennan, cool, began cutting off  
the flesh in knots, slashing off the flesh  
in strips; and then Davey, flensing and

flanching, opened up the stomach and  
the steaming bowels. Gulls circled like  
ghouls. Still they taunt us with their cries

and our hearts still burn inside us when  
we remember, how Grennan with a tool  
took out what was left of the child.

Judith Beveridge

# To The Islands

I will use the sound of wind and the splash  
of the cormorant diving and the music  
any boatman will hear in the running threads  
as they sing about leaving for the Islands.

I will use a sinker's zinc arpeggio as it  
rolls across a wooden jetty and the sound  
of crabs in the shifting gravel and the scrape  
of awls across the hulls of yachts.

I will use the wash-board chorus of the sea  
and the boats and the skiffler's skirl  
of tide-steered surf taken out by the wind  
through the cliffs. Look—I don't know

much about how to reach the Islands, only  
what I've heard from the boatman's song  
and from a man who walked the headland  
to find a place in the rocks free of salt

and osprey. But perhaps I can use  
the bladder-wrack and barnacle, the gull  
wafting above the mussels and the bird  
diving back to sea. Perhaps I can use

the song sponge divers sing to time each dive  
and then use their gasps as they lift  
their bags onto the skiffs. Perhaps  
the seapool whispers of the sun-downers

or the terns above the harbour are what  
the divers sing to as they hold their  
breath and swim the silent minutes through  
with prayer. I will use the gull's height

and the limpet's splash and the wasps' nest  
hanging like a paper lamp under the pier  
and the little boat sailing out. Even the  
fishermen lugging shoals over the stones,

even the sailors shift-walking the decks,  
even the end-blown note of a shell leveled  
towards the horizon. I will use the eagle's  
flight moored in the eyes of children

and the voices of men, the ones, they say,  
who've made it, though perhaps the purlin  
creaking on its rafter, the gull squawking  
from the jetty, the wind calling

along the moorings and the notes the divers  
hear in the quiet waters of their breathing  
as they seek release through depths  
are all I'll, know about finding the Islands.

Meanwhile, I'll use the sound of sunlight  
filling the sponges and a diver's saturated  
breathing in the lungs of an oarsman  
rowing weightless cargo over the reefs.

Judith Beveridge

# Woman and Child

They listen to the myna birds dicker in the grass.

The child's blue shoes are caked with  
garden dirt. When he runs, she sees the antics  
of a pair of wrens. She works the garden,

a pot of rusting gardenias has given off its ales  
and infused the danker germinations of her  
grief. She watches her son chase pigeons,  
kick at the leaves piled high. Now, a magpie

adds to his cascades of laughter as he runs with  
the hose, pours a fine spray, happy to be giving  
to the grass this silver courtship. She sighs,  
watches the drops settle in. Today, who

can explain the sadness she feels. Surely this  
day is to be treasured: the sun out, the breeze  
like a cat's tongue licking a moon of milk;  
her son expending himself in small, public

bursts, happy among clover where bees hover,  
and unfold centrefolds of nectar. Today,  
who can explain the heaviness in her head, as if  
all her worries were tomes toward a larger work,

one she knows she will never finish, but to which  
she must keep adding, thought by thought.  
She sweeps the petals, smells their russet imprint.  
Soon dusk will come with an envoy of smoke

and her son outlast her patience by a rose.  
Already he is tiring, puling at the flowers.  
It won't be long before they'll go in, listen  
to the jug purr comfort. He'll sleep and she'll

lie back, or get up to unhook the cry of her cat  
from the wire door. Now, a few cicadas are idling,  
giving each other the gun and a cockatoo calls,  
a haughty felon. She sighs, knowing she won't

escape her mood today, the turned earth  
or its rank persuasions; her child's petulance  
flaring like an orchid, or a cockatoo's unruly crest.  
Today, she knows she will need to consider

her unhappiness, of what she is a prisoner - if not  
the loss of hope's particulars. Her son soaks  
the path, rinses the sky of its featureless blue.  
He is giving that water, now, to everything.

Judith Beveridge