

**Natalie Damjanovich-Napoleon - Writing Samples**

*From First Blood (Ginninderra Press, 2019)...*

**FIRST BLOOD: A SESTINA**

There was a time when the girl  
never thought about the colour blue, or blood,  
could be amused by the flicking of a lit match,  
the delicate shiver of a spider orchid;  
summer holidays stretched out, days dropping time  
like a missed knitting stitch.

But her body was not hers, a stitch  
of animal, a pinch of dirt, a girl  
is made of words plus liquid minus time  
and what she does not have; blood,  
defines her. Like an orchid  
about to bloom she unfurls, unlit match

between her teeth, nobody to match  
her unkissed lips, until the stitch  
is pulled and the thread of the cloth orchid  
undoes, just enough to reveal the gone girl.  
Nobody told her there would be so much blood!  
Her mother had tried to mend the old time

ways, when girls were never told in time  
about periods, as if knowledge alone could match  
an image of her baba scrubbing the blood  
out of torn rags, her hair greasy, a stitch  
unwashed once every month. Cold water, girls  
know, washes out blood, and orchids

should be kept indoors and warm, orchids  
are to be protected from a cold breeze. In time  
the blue liquid in the TV ads for girl-  
products made sense, red stains to mismatch  
the pastel spots on her skirt enough to stitch  
shame to her chest. Blood

is not to be seen - except the blood  
of war or violence. Blood 'n Bone drinks the orchid,  
the fetor forcing the girl to sprint until a stitch

bites her side and the breath of time  
 stabs; finding a way to strike the match  
 of bloom and decay in the body of a girl.

She came to see a stitch in time  
 could not repair the stain of first blood, spider orchids  
 are too delicate to touch, and nothing can hold a match to a bleeding girl.

*This poem won the Bruce Dawe National Poetry Prize in 2018.*

## **HOW TO MAKE SAND**

First, a star must be formed;  
 bodies colliding into hot bodies

through infinite time and space  
 destroying one story, creating another,

molten ball of fire and gas  
 time upon time, and when that fire dies out,

or retreats deep into the core  
 Earth, the planet, and earth, the terra, is made.

Then, take a rock or a mountain or a hill  
 wear it down, wear it down.

Rocks broken back and forth through time;  
 epiclastic: storms, water, wind,

the moon's pull, the tides,  
 clocks that curl under the earth's beach;

shaping, until it is between two millimetres  
 and a sweet sixteenth of a millimetre, not so

round or perfect or thin.  
 Silica and quartz, gypsum, coral

and shell, obsidian grains, deep olivine -  
 zircon, 4.4 billion years old,

found in the Jack Hills of Western Australia,



narrow hallways  
say good night.

a lie  
“I never kissed him. Mrs. XYZ is lying,”

because I knew  
                                  to touch my ---- wasn't a sin  
                                  and besides, why should I get in trouble?  
I didn't ---- him

*Ornithology*  
*In the hope that she will learn to fly*

                                  tearful,  
                                  throbbing,  
                                  kissed,

chilly

                                  letters

                                  inscribed  
                                  my real name  
girl.

***From If There Is a Butterfly That Drinks Tears (Life Before Man/Gazebo Books, 2023)....***

### **IF THERE IS A BUTTERFLY THAT DRINKS TEARS**

If there is a butterfly that drinks tears  
let it drink the tears of mothers. Down South

great walls begin to spring up between butterfly  
preserves at the speed ice sheets break

off in Antarctica. Monarchs fight to  
find a place to overwinter. Target holes

in their wings, a ragged curtain left hanging  
in a house too long. If I step off this path

and crush a butterfly underfoot will my  
misstep ripple through time?

On the siding of our cottage, my four-year-old  
spies a chrysalis. In the high overhead

light we observe the translucent veil between  
two worlds, the pulse of a heartbeat, the stained

glass window outline of wings.  
There are 'ooos' and 'aaahs.'

With two sticks in hand my son plays crocodile and  
whacks the chrysalis, splitting it from the cremaster.

I scream, 'No!'  
Insides turn to liquid.

The turtle does not turn her head, she  
plods on, a map of the Milky Way carved

onto the shell she carries on her back.  
If there is a butterfly that drinks tears

let it drink the tears of children who do  
not understand their mother's anger. I pick

up the chrysalis from the ground, set it on a  
warm ledge and hope for the best. I try to

explain action and consequence to my  
four-year old, but to him there is only

the action and reaction of an impassive,  
amoral toddler-dictator. The caterpillar digests itself,

turns to liquid inside the chrysalis before it is made  
into a butterfly. In that soup there are cells that

survive this process; imaginal discs.  
These cells hold onto a memory of what

they are to become. How do we remember who  
we're meant to be? A sip of salt, imaginal discs,

a scatter of minerals, infinitesimal elements in a  
stew that keeps us alive. In the Amazon,

Julia butterflies drink the tears of turtles;  
the sweat of animals; humans,

and given the chance, crocodile tears, too.

*This poem was published in The Weekend Australian in February 2020 and won the 2019 Katharine  
Susannah Prichard Poetry Prize.*

## IN MOTHERHOOD A KIND OF MADNESS

Day after day wallpaper sheds layers, reveals a kind of madness,  
life lived through a child's laughter and joy.

The house a Hall of Mirrors, dead ends, distorted images;  
the wallpaper drives me mad, where does the pattern start?

Life lived through a child's laughter and joy,  
to find my own joy, my one art—there's disaster.  
The wallpaper drives me mad, where does the pattern start?  
Where does it end? This life cannot be my beginning.

To find my own joy, my one art—there's disaster.  
My mind whirled in a Gravitron, stuck to walls, immovable—  
where does it end? This life cannot be my beginning.  
Beside my wailing child on the carousel, a spectator spinning round.

My mind whirled in a Gravitron, stuck to walls, immovable.  
Women crawl and shake inside the wallpaper, climb through free.  
Beside my wailing child on the carousel, a spectator spinning round,  
peeling back paper, strip by strip, 'til bare walls revealed.

Women crawl and shake inside the wallpaper, climb through free.  
In the pattern I've lost the outline of my country, my father, my keys.  
Peeling back paper, strip by strip, 'til bare walls—  
Day after day wallpaper sheds layers exposes—  
beginnings.

## NIGHT STITCHES (A CENTO)

At this hour the men all look  
 as if they'd never had mothers.  
 They do not see me. I bring the cups.  
 I bring the silver. The dark itself not dark enough  
 but needing to be added to handful  
 by handful if necessary.

The night has cut each from each  
 and curled the petals back from the stalk.  
 'The poets are fools. They read  
 only  
         in fragments.'

The stillness chained by  
 wrinkled darkness strains  
 throughout the Universe to be free.  
 Mother, I write home, I am close,  
 and give me my body back.

Hear, how the night becomes  
 thinned-out and hollow.  
 Night like a fling of crows  
 disperses and is gone.

One night might come upon me like a  
 doorless cage while I sleep,  
 soul and body  
 constructing each other after dark.

And poetry of the night  
 and the witness in shadow,  
 in dust, in Nothing.

## NIGHT-BLOOMING CEREUS

*After the Sally Mann photograph 'Night-blooming Cereus, 1988'*

Family: *Cactaceae*

Genus: *Hylocereus Undatus*

Water: Regularly until flowering commences

Passed down from mother to daughter, friend to friend  
 this blood moon eclipse reflects in the waxy shadow  
 of my cup of tea, an oxidized lunar sky. Milky clouds drift  
 across the tea's surface revealing to peoples, ancient & present,  
 the moon moves beyond the edge; she is a great sphere, returning  
 the Earth's light back to us each evening as an act of love.

The shadows of youth move across the moon, clinging  
 to the bark of a tree, the siding of a house, the nearest bare wall,  
 the flat chests of boys and girls and those in-between  
 with roots that breathe globules of wet air.  
 Once flowering each bud remains luminescent for one  
 night before withering into a dancer's full-length skirt.  
 Spent blooms hug the neck of childhood,  
 a wounded swan seeking solace from the sins of men.  
 In the deep South, the Queen  
 of the Night may flower all summer long.  
 Water sparingly once blooms appear.  
 Origin unknown.

## INFERTILITY

! [the first year]

!/? [the second]

— [the third]

... [the years in between]

X [one year after my father died]

; [the fifteenth year]

/ / [how I learned to live with it]



From "The Commonwealth of Amnesia" (PhD, Edith Cowan University, 2024)...

# IMMIGRATION TRITION

No. 17. *Immigration trition.* 1901.

## IMMIGRATION TRITION.

No. 17 of 1901.

An Act to pla

by King

Commonwealth

Australia

Short title.

1. This Act may be ; the *Immigration Act*

Definition.

2. this Act, means an Act

means an

is

Prohibited

immigrants.

See Natal Act

1897, No. 1, s. 3.

W.A. 1897,

No. 13, s. 2.

N.S.W. 1898,

No. 3, s. 3.

3. into the Commonwealth of the persons the following paragraphs of this section is prohibited, namely:

an European

opinion

a

person

of a loathsome or dangerous character

within three year

political or

or longer than

pardon

others

persons under a contract or agreement to perform manual labour

special skill

in the

trade

ruling in the Commonwealth.

1901. Immigration Restriction. No. 17.

But the following are excepted:—

Exemptions.  
Natal Act 1897,  
No. 1, s. 2  
W.A. 1897,  
No. 13, s. 2  
N.S.W. 1896,  
No. 3, s. 2

the form

force

land sea  
any public vessel

any port

See Vict.  
No. 1073 s. 8.

a wife

children

N.S.W. 1896,  
No. 3, s. 6.

by writing under his hand.

Certificates of  
exemption.

a person

Immigrants  
evading the  
officers or found  
within the  
Commonwealth.

against this Act.

Reference: Immigration Restriction Act 1901. (1901, Dec 23). [Federal Register of Legislation](https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C1901A00017).  
<https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C1901A00017> (Commonly known as the White Australia Policy).

This poem was shortlisted for the Australian Book Review Peter Porter Poetry Prize in 2024.