WHO WAS ALAN CARVOSSO?

GREGORY KRATZMANN UNEARTHS YET ANOTHER GWEN HARWOOD PERSONA

This essay is dedicated to the memory of Thomas (Tony) Riddell, who died on 21 December 2003. ‘Friendship is a sheltering tree’ (Coleridge).

FRED Hackleskinner, Theophilus Panbury, Tiny Tim, Lady Olga Nethersole, W.W. Hagendoor, Walter Lehmann, Francis Geyer, Miriam Stone and Timothy Kline are members of a very unusual literary pantheon. All are pseudonyms of Gwen Harwood. The last four are best known, because they materialised later and published poetry in distinguished literary journals. (The first four were letter writers and poets manqué.) Now they are joined by one Alan Carvosso, for whom no biographical records survive; of him we know only that he was born in Queensland in 1940. Had he lived and fulfilled the promise of his two surviving poems, reproduced here, his work would no doubt be known to all students of Australian poetry. Alan Carvosso’s tiny opus suggests that he was at least as talented as the
older poets Walter Lehmann and Francis Geyer, whose stars blazed so brightly in the early 1960s that they were sought out by some of the country’s most distinguished poetry editors. Both poems have titles drawn from music, ‘O Sleep, why dost thou leave me?’ from Handel’s Semele, ‘On Wings of Song’ from Mendelssohn.

When Alison Hoddinott and I were preparing our edition of Gwen Harwood’s Collected Poems, we set about recovering all of her verse, published and unpublished, using bibliographies, unpublished correspondence and other papers, and the indexes of a wide range of journals and little magazines. The Selected Poems, first compiled by Gwen Harwood in 1975, and revised by her several times after that, inevitably excluded some very good pieces from her individual volumes. When, after her death, I was asked to prepare a new edition of the Selected, I included several ‘uncollected’ poems, as well as work from The Present Tense, which Alison Hoddinott prepared for publication in 1995, the year of Gwen Harwood’s death. Collected Poems 1943–1995 includes previously uncollected works of two kinds: poems published in journals and magazines that were not included in the six published volumes, and unpublished poems that were given to friends.

Our edition follows the new edition of the Selected in reinstating the names under which the pseudonymously published works first appeared. One reason for doing this was to enable readers to try to imagine how, for example, a poem written under a masculine name might be read differently from the same poem written by Gwen Harwood. This is, admittedly, a difficult imaginative exercise, as Gwen Harwood excised Francis Geyer and Walter Lehmann, by claiming ‘their’ works as Harwoods when she chose the contents of Poems (1963) and Poems / Volume Two (1968). (Miriam Stone also became ‘Gwen Harwood.’) Peter Porter, in his review of the Collected, thinks that Alison Hoddinott and I ‘don’t serve her particularly well by retaining her aliases,’ but we are unrepentant: her writing under assumed names is a fascinating aspect of Gwen Harwood’s long and distinguished career. Tom Shapcott wrote in 1990 of Gwen Harwood’s various writing selves: ‘If ever there is a full and final Gwen Harwood Collected Poems, I hope they all nestle in; and are recognised; and are counted.’

Between 1992 and 1994 I received from Hobart dozens of fat Australia Post envelopes—‘show bags’, Gwen Harwood called them—crammed with a variety of material: letters and postcards received from friends and colleagues, invitations, programs, menus, newspaper cuttings, unsolicited manuscripts sent to her by aspiring writers. Sometimes they contained handwritten copies of poems she had completed. ‘O Sleep, why dost thou leave me?’ and ‘On Wings of Song’ are two of a series of nine poems typed on A4 sheets, of which she sent me a photo-
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copy. The occasion that is documented by the typescript must have involved the reading of poems in a program of words and recorded music, as some of the nine poems are accompanied by a note to the appropriate piece of music. That a performance of some kind (perhaps a radio performance) is envisaged is clear from the notes:

   MUSIC: Prelude and Fugue No.3 in C sharp major from The Well Tempered Clavier
   MUSIC: Gigue from the Fifth French Suite in G

   MUSIC: The carol ‘Puer Natus in Bethlehem, Alleluia/Unde gaudet Jerusalem, Alleluia’
   OR some plainsong from the Christmas Office

   MUSIC: a motet by this composer

4. Poem: ‘O Sleep, why dost thou leave me?’, by Alan Carvosso (Qld, b. 1940)
   MUSIC: Handel’s song ‘O Sleep, why dost thou leave me?’
   (not all of it—cut it off at some convenient point)

   MUSIC: ‘The Carnival of Venice’ played on a flute; could we have one of the variations to suggest ‘trills dense as a summer tree’?

6. Poem: ‘On Wings of Song’, by Alan Carvosso (Qld, b. 1940)
   MUSIC: ‘On Wings of Song’, Mendelssohn, any performer

   MUSIC: Please choose a section of this mass of Palestrina that you think best suits the poem

Of these contents, the poems by Beaglehole, Bly, Shapcott and McAuley are unproblematic. The two Australian poets were close friends of Gwen Harwood;
the Robert Bly poem would have been known to her after she became interested in the work of her American contemporaries (Robert Penn Warren was a particular favourite); she would have read Beaglehole, famous for his historical research on the voyages of James Cook, in Allen Curnow's *A Book of New Zealand Verse. But William Berry and Alan Carvosso?

There is an American poet called Wendell Berry, but to my knowledge no poet called William Berry. Even if there is, he is not the author of 'The Carnival of Venice'. That distinction belongs to Gwen Harwood, or rather to one of her writing selves, Timothy Kline, to whom this poem, with the title 'The Music Breather', was first attributed in 1969. Born in Hobart in 1946 (he was the same age as Gwen Harwood's eldest son), Kline, when he wasn't building boats, baking cakes, and drinking and whoring, was a poet whose talent and range went beyond 'converting agnostics and writing acrostics'. His work is by turns lyrical, satirical, tormented and chauvinistic, and his claims for poetry and for his own inventive powers put him in the company of Ern Malley, that notorious genius of the 1940s, the child of James McAuley and Harold Stewart. The biographical note in Tom Shapcott's *Australian Poetry Now* (1970) blazons:

> Let no word bear the slow infection of imprecision, and let no sagging phrase grown slack with ease encyst hosts of stale images ... let me love soundly and long, and live to see language more fruitful for our marriage.

Timothy Kline published eighteen poems over seven years, the first as a 22-year-old protesting against the war in Vietnam. Interestingly, his publication career lasted longer than those of Lehmann, Geyer and Stone, but 'the boy who died of tear-gas / At the height of his career' never had 'his' poems reclaimed by the writer who gave him life. 'The Carnival of Venice' is a partial exception, because Gwen Harwood revised the poem slightly (adding a stanza) and changed its name from the original cryptic title 'The Music Breather'.

'The Carnival of Venice' is unique in the annals of Australian poetry not only because it exists in three forms, each slightly different from the others, but also because it appears under not one, or even two, but three names: Timothy Kline, Gwen Harwood and now William Berry. The 'Berry' poem is closer to 'The Carnival of Venice' claimed by Gwen Harwood for her first *Selected Poems*, in that it has ten stanzas rather than the nine of 'The Music Breather'.

If we assume for a moment that Alan Carvosso might have existed, his career as a poet was short and singular. He wrote fewer poems than the ill-fated Timothy
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Kline—only ‘On Wings of Song’ and ‘O Sleep, why dost thou leave me?’ Both works are strongly in the style of Gwen Harwood, or rather Gwen Harwood in the guise of Francis Geyer, whose biography, recorded in *Verse in Australia*, 1961, reads: ‘I am a musician, particularly interested in Bartok and have spoken English fluently from about the age of seven.’ Alan Carvosso did not exist, unless by some bizarre circumstance he had an extraordinary talent for mimicry. Unlike Gwen Harwood’s other masculine pseudonyms (Lehmann, Geyer, Kline/Klein), his is not a Germanic name. I assumed that Carvosso was an Italian name, but in fact it is from Cornwall. The Carvossos were distinguished nonconformists, some of whom emigrated to South Australia, Queensland and Tasmania in the late nineteenth century. Gwen Harwood may have remembered the name from her childhood in Queensland. William Nathaniel Jaggard, Gwen Foster’s Methodist maternal grandfather, lived in central Queensland, where there were also Carvossos. Ever since the childhood days when she played among the ‘flaking memorials’ of Toowong cemetery she was a reader of gravestones; perhaps this is how she encountered the name.

How can we be sure that these two poems are genuine Harwoods? If they are not, I can only say that they were written by someone who was uncannily intimate with her poetry. Gwen Harwood’s signature manifests itself in these poems through mise-en-scène, cadence and mood. First, though, Gwen Harwood’s fondness for themes and titles drawn from music needs to be recognised; about twenty-five of her poem titles are ‘musical’. Harwood had an intimate knowledge of Handel’s music (she was taught by the renowned Handel scholar Robert Dalley-Scarlett), and in ‘O Sleep, why dost thou leave me?’ there are direct quotations from Newburgh Hamilton’s libretto for *Semele*:

\[
O\ sleep,\ why\ dost\ thou\ leave\ me,
\Why\ thy\ visionary\ joys\ remove?
O\ sleep,\ again\ deceive\ me,
To\ my\ arms\ restore\ my\ wand’ring\ love!
\]

The speaker here is the nymph Semele, daughter of Cadmus and the beloved of Jupiter. The speaking voice of the poem, on the other hand, is male, and its ‘wandering love’ is the ‘earthy nymph’ rather than the all-powerful immortal of the oratorio. The gender reversal, whereby the power relations of patriarchal legend are subverted, is a characteristic of Gwen Harwood’s approach to tradition from, for example, a very early poem such as ‘Water Music’ in 1949 (Handel

The dramatic settings of these poems recall those of known Harwood works. The speaker of ‘O Sleep’, for example, has his counterpart in the T of ‘The Suppliant’, ‘The Last Evening’ and ‘Ebb-Tide’ (all originally from the pen of ‘Francis Geyer’), in that he is a supplicant, tormented by the unexplained absence of the woman he loves, and longing for the solace provided by dreaming. The restorative power of the dream is a motif that recurs throughout Gwen Harwood’s work. ‘On Wings of Song’ is voiced by one who observes two lovers, ‘no longer young’, whom he imagines to be revisiting their younger selves as they walk through the late-summer setting of a park that is also a graveyard. The mise-en-scène, with its attendant mood of celebration and elegy, recalls that of ‘At the Sea’s Edge’, while the urban setting is that of ‘September Snow, Hobart’.

In both poems the theme of mortality is articulated through paired images of the city; the living city of ‘steel and glass’ is set over against the city of the dead, associated in both poems with flowering and luxuriance. Hobart’s St David’s Park, with its manicured lawns and English trees, and now-restored historic graveyard, is surely the literal point of reference here; it is the resting place of the girl believed to be ‘The First White Child’ buried after the establishment of the Hobart Town settlement in 1804. St David’s Park and the streets around it figure in other Harwood poems, such as ‘Naked Vision’.

Writing of his discovery of the identity of Timothy Kline, who has until now been presumed to be the last of the pseudonyms, Tom Shapcott refers to his recognition of ‘the cadence of Gwen Harwood’. The Harwood cadence is even more strongly evident in these two Carvosso poems. By this I mean the running on of an idea from one line to another, the fluid alternation between short and long periods, the interposition of questions and emphases (‘this must be’), and those carefully turned inflections at the conclusions—upward in ‘O Sleep’, and the remarkable ‘dying fall’ of the last line of ‘Wings’. It would be tedious to cite at length echoes of other poems, but those familiar with Gwen Harwood’s work will surely recognise her signature, both in voicing and in language. ‘Radiant’ and ‘anguish’ are common words in the Harwood lexicon; ‘gulf of sleep’ and ‘suffer my love’ in ‘O Sleep’ have close parallels in ‘Night Flight’, a poem written
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in 1969; the striking phrase 'Blue air' in 'Wings' is repeated in 'Carnal Knowledge I'; 'flesh wears the gravity that pulls it down' echoes a metaphor in 'Dust to Dust'. Readers of the two Carvosso poems will doubtless find other verbal parallels.

I have been unable to identify the occasion with which the 'Words and Music' text is linked, although it is possible it was a reading that also involved James McAuley, who lived in Hobart after 1961 and who was the first to encourage Gwen Harwood to read her work in public. They often appeared at readings together, and the typescript's note to the McAuley piece ('Please choose a section of this mass ... that you think best suits the poem') suggests that he was its immediate audience. The date, similarly, cannot be determined with any precision, but on the basis of the textual links with other poems it can be conjectured that it was put together in the late 1960s—at any rate before March 1969, when 'The Music Breather' was broadcast on the ABC as a Timothy Kline poem (the Berry signature would have had no point after this). If I am right about the allusion to St David's Park, the typescript cannot be later than 1972, the year in which Hobart City Council removed some of the stones in an attempt to secure the ruined cemetery.

'O Sleep, why dost thou leave me?' and 'On Wings of Song' are, even by the high standards of Gwen Harwood's mid-career poetry, fine poems. 'O Sleep' contains some enigmatic images that remind me of similar effects in later poems such as 'Space of a Dream' and 'Mappings of the Plane' (both from The Lion's Bride); perhaps someone who reads the poem here will be able to explain the arresting 'I see / your eye (what colour?) one sharp tooth / but not your smile'. For me at least, 'On Wings of Song' is the more satisfying poem, a worthy companion to other Harwood works that meditate on her grand Romantic themes of love and mutability.

So why do they not appear in the Collected Poems? The fault, alas, is mine. When Alison Hoddinott and I began to work on this volume I recalled that Gwen had sent me a typescript that had puzzled me; again and again I searched for it in folders of Harwood correspondence and papers, until I began to think that I had imagined its existence. Earlier this year, I removed a jammed drawer from my desk, to find on the floor behind the desk the crumpled typescript with my green biro '?' pinned to the first page. So much for safe places and good housekeeping! My hope is that, until a second edition of the Collected appears, readers will copy the texts from Meanjin and clip them in between 'Uncollected Poems 1968–1975' and 'Poems 1969–1974'.

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Gwen Harwood was sometimes impatient when asked about her various poetic selves—particularly about Walter Lehmann and his acrostic sonnets which made headline news after their publication in the *Bulletin* in 1961. I recall her response to a question I asked when we were walking together in West Hobart in 1992. We had been talking about the Sibyl in her various manifestations, so I thought it a good time to ask whether there had been any Harwood pseudonyms after Timothy Kline. 'NO!' she flashed, then a few minutes later asked with a grin, 'One never knows, do one?' In a letter she wrote to Tony Riddell on 22 October 1969, she describes how Tom Shapcott and Roger McDonald have unmasked Timothy Kline:

You will see from the enclosed letters that Tom & Roger have smoked me out; indeed I emerged from my box, coughing up the Shapcott tear gas, and Admitted All. I wonder if Roger will be cross. I think he suspected anyway. I wrote to him & to Tom Shapcott asking them to keep it quiet, but they won't, of course. Luckily there are no feehthy acrostics involved. Kline is currently being translated into Spanish for Norman Talbot's anthology. I can never really understand why my doppelgängers are more successful than I am. Kline has a collection of encouraging letters! Hobart addresses are useless. I am going to start up again if Ann Jennings will let me use her Sydney address; she ran Geyer for a long time, and may be willing to harbour another poetical infant in a wicker basket.

Alan Carvosso, a 'poetical infant' of twenty-nine at the time, seems to be the most likely occupant of the wicker basket.

NOTES
7. Shapcott, p. 114.