

# THE TENTH MUSE



*Poems by Sylvia Kantaris*

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HARRY CHAMBERS/PETERLOO POETS

# The Tenth Muse

SYLVIA KANTARIS



HARRY CHAMBERS/PETERLOO POETS

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**For my mother and father, with love**

## *Contents*

	<i>Page</i>
The Tenth Muse	9
Poets and Poetesses	10
Culinary Art	11
Love-Letter	12
Trunk Call	13
Body Language I	14
Body Language II	15
Body Language III	16
This Dark Longing	17
Stocking Up	18
Prickles	19
Fairy Tales	20
Fille de Joie	23
Diplomat	24
St. Paul Undone by Hair	25
Immortelles	26
From Limbo	27
Wild Flowers	28
The Gospel According to Mary	30
Annunciation	31
The White Peak	33
Alternatives	34
Package for the Distant Future	35
Through A Claude Glass	36
Islands	37
The Rose Chart	38
Magi, older than ever	39
Curtains	40
Gorgon	41
Place Tabs in Slots	43
Estranged	44
Twelfth Night	45
Not-Loving	46
Coming Home	47
‘Beautiful Memories’	49

Playing House	50
A Derbyshire Death	51
Elms and My Father	52
The Illusionist	53
Willow Pattern	58
‘May Townsend, 1893’	59
Bonfire	60
Engagement Calendars	61
Night People	62
What The Butler Saw	63
The Boat	64

## *The Tenth Muse*

My muse is not one of the nine nubile  
daughters of Mnemosyne  
in diaphanous nightshifts  
with names that linger in the air  
like scent of jasmine or magnolia  
on Mediterranean nights.  
Nor was any supple son of Zeus appointed  
to pollinate my ear with poppy dust  
or whispers of sea-spray.  
My muse lands with a thud  
like a sack of potatoes.  
He has no aura.  
The things he grunts are things  
I'd rather not hear.  
His attitude is 'Take it or leave it, that's  
the way it is', drumming his fingers  
on an empty pan by way of music.  
If I were a man I would enjoy  
such grace and favour,  
tuning my fork to Terpsichore's lyre,  
instead of having to cope with this dense  
late-invented eunuch  
with no more pedigree than the Incredible Hulk,  
who can't play a note  
and keeps repeating 'Women  
haven't got the knack'  
in my most delicately strung and scented ear.

## *Poets and Poetesses*

Mostly, at some stage, you find the men  
working in the garden, digging,  
rooting out weeds or mowing, and this leads  
inevitably to contemplation of the seasons,  
sky, landscape, whatever lies  
outside — horizons.

The women, on the other hand, are often found  
in kitchens, stuffing chickens,  
gutting fish and slicing fingers, tapping  
their own veins for inspiration or  
plucking them or brooding  
on their own seasons.

Looking from outside you'd think it was  
a weather-house and it was always raining,  
the woman preferring to shelter gratefully  
until the clouds move over  
while the man struggles and labours  
to maintain order.

Of course the women do their bit inside,  
pickling and preserving,  
but are more than likely to run berserk  
and leap down shafts of cupboards lined with jars,  
landing somewhere underneath the kitchen garden  
in a chaos of roots and nervous systems  
and work like fury cultivating twitch.

## *Culinary Art*

Sellotape still seals the gash in the kitchen window  
after three years.

I hardly ever notice it—  
or the notch in the door.

Old scars of old knife-wounds,  
they gaped once and shamed me  
and I said I was sorry.

Now I have assaulted the kitchen floor.

Not without purpose, mind:  
four dinner-plates and an antique meat-dish  
make a point when forcefully directed  
onto new vinyl.

I am not responsible,  
caught between cooker and cupboard and you  
in this shrinking space  
with no escape.

Something had to break.

Splinters and jagged pieces of your mind lie  
anyhow. I walk on them,  
having grown delinquent,  
and grind some in with the neat  
turn of a heel.

There is design in this.

You could apply yourself to finding meanings  
in my engravings.

I do not care for kitchens or containers.

You build enclosures,

I would shake foundations  
and drill great holes in your constructions,  
and yes I shall go on developing  
a style to reckon with in culinary art.

Keep standing in the doorway,  
talking, watching me creating  
dinner.

## *Love-Letter*

There must be others in the house,  
stuffed in old bags, old shoes,  
old books especially.

This one turned up in a copy of  
'Dr. Spock' and 'I shall love you always'  
stares me in the face along with longings  
as bottomless as oceans.

(We were moving over one in a big ship  
in separate cabins.)

Consider the ingredients for romance—  
one handsome male, unmarried,  
one female, still in transit, who  
could stand as wistfully as any  
nineteenth-century heroine at the rail  
with mandatory wind in flowing hair,  
one baby in her arms (a little out of place here)  
then, under the door in the early  
hours, this hot and urgent letter . . .

They might have lived together ever after,  
but on the envelope my scribbled list of needs reads:  
'Farex, orange-juice, disposable nappies' and  
'HELP!' in capitals. (The child  
had had his way with me the whole long  
feverish night.)

I'm sure I would have loved you  
but the timing wasn't right.

## *Trunk Call*

Love, we survive on sighs and  
caught breath over the telephone—  
which is more than those old  
separated lovers had, certainly,  
mooning alone,  
but not enough for today's people.  
Besides, we are subject to interference,  
the charged crackle and crossed lines.  
Instead of merely longing, since  
we can't meet we must invent our story—  
quarrels and partings and reconciliations,  
an entire abstraction of happenings,  
our bumping hearts plotting the curve  
of our imaginary relations.  
If you could see me you would think I have  
a passionate involvement with my telephone,  
judging by the way I have begun to  
claw it and bruise it  
and abuse it.  
There is, though, as I've found, no  
thoroughgoing satisfaction to be gained  
from this oddly-shaped and most  
unwieldy instrument, although  
if it had your size,  
your blood and arms and your eyes,  
I might find it quite enough  
to be going on with—  
in combination with your quickened breath  
and interrupted sighs.

## ***Body Language (I)***

I have laid in spells,  
stocking my head with your words  
and my words — letters read and written —  
such accumulation.

Who needs legs and arms and all that  
paraphernalia of flesh? Fingers  
are for holding pens, I think. Touch  
is quite unnecessary and would, in any  
case, disturb the disembodied  
ease of our relations.

Words are our people. They  
make love as we would,  
kaleidoscopically.

Our words can shatter into many crystals  
or conjure up anemones in deserts.  
Their arms and legs are multifoliate,  
manifold with meaning.

With such abundance we could hardly  
settle for the clumsiness of clods,  
stumps and the blood's thump,  
slug-fed.

Such witless lumps do not  
flower at our bidding, especially  
at our bidding. They do not indicate  
our subtleties and ambiguities,  
the dark at the heart and the seven  
seas of the blood and the dim shores.

On our islands are many gardens  
where we grow words like delicate perversions.  
Touch would bruise the bloom  
of our immaculate communications.

## *Body Language (II)*

He loved her so he wrote  
a long, passionate poem, melting  
his heart's wax on the page all night,  
burning the wick of his words at all ends  
to attract her.

She loved him and her little cries  
opened and closed like night anemones,  
scenting the empty air  
with the witching words of her mouth  
to call him to her.

Neither came to the other.

All night long he held himself spell-  
bound in the small circle of his own light  
until he was burnt out,  
and she, mesmerized by her own charms,  
entered the flower of herself  
and drew in her arms.

### *Body Language (III)*

Words come up crazy  
and choke him.  
He beats his head against a bank,  
flattening the campion.  
The fever will not go.  
If he could spin words,  
spin the right silken words  
and hold them folded  
ready on his tongue,  
he could unfurl them  
for her delectation  
and all would be well,  
would be very well.  
Instead his gagging love-songs  
splinter in his throat  
and maim him.  
Sometimes they limp up lame  
to his lump of a tongue  
and drop to earth  
like things with twisted wings.  
Their croaking sounds refuse  
to serve his delicate intentions,  
in spite of which  
she puts one finger on his lips  
and pulls him down among the campions.

## *This Dark Longing*

I seemed at home here, at one with the cock  
and the night-owl, the hanging bats black  
as black-currants — juice of the night and sunlight.  
The seasons were easy until you came and went,  
swift-like, leaving a thin rush of emptiness.  
Now the cock crows at sunfall and all day  
long the night-owl moans your name.  
I have grown wilder, full of you.  
I rise like a curse on the land and spread  
my black wings out to sea, wheeling,  
shrill with your name. I shriek it like the hag  
and shake the granite cliffs with sea-wails  
calling you back, back, back to the arms  
of my long love — to summer, glancing in sunlight.  
I would bind you forever in the tangled  
sea-hair of my unfathomable longing.

## *Stocking Up*

Winter shall not find me withered  
like the grasshopper. I take care  
to store the autumn riches  
against the lean times.  
The body wilts and the head blooms  
inside, amongst crab-apples.  
My shelves are lined with delicacies,  
salted or preserved in vinegar.  
I have spiced some bitter memories  
with dark, piquant humour  
and bottled my resentments  
ready for a hard winter.  
Instead of weeping over ash of roses  
I have laid in intellectual things  
to see us through the long, cold evenings.  
You may acquire a taste for my  
asperities and vinegar when we are old  
together indoors behind drawn curtains,  
warmed by little, fierce fires  
kindled with dead everlastings,  
enjoying the residual crackle and static  
of our summer conflagrations.

## *Prickles*

So you have felt this gorse-bush  
where my breasts should be, these  
thorns behind the blooms.  
I didn't put them there, they grew  
in spite of me and my flowery skin  
(I still dab perfume on the pulse-spots  
and waft my odours round the room,  
sporting my pollen). Here, take some  
and turn it into honey if you can  
navigate the prickles and alight on  
the right yellow flower  
at the right time  
before they all wither.  
(Kissing's out of fashion  
once the blooms have gone.)  
Somewhere in my memory are  
young lovers craning, lips  
nearly touching, one  
on either side of a golden  
gorse-bush, laughing  
but learning  
that love's a specialist  
in ways of hurting.

## *Fairy Tales*

1

Once as Aurora played in the sunshine  
happy castle, an old ovarian witch  
pricked her with a spindle—  
as was, of course, inevitable—  
so straightaway she fell into a swoon

and lay there still wearing her crown  
for what seemed like a hundred years  
and everything had grown  
before the brave prince came  
thrusting through the undergrowth,  
boldly braving thicket, thorns and all,  
not minding the blood,  
dressed in pink satin and all her  
long hair everywhere.

2

Another princess took a frog to bed  
and lay between the silken sheets with him  
night after slithery night  
and no-one thought it odd—  
or ever thought to mention his  
hard, green throb.

3

Beauty's father fixed her up  
with a terrible beast of a lover  
who knew exactly how to woo her.  
Sadly, he turned soft and princely  
just when she'd developed a taste for him  
as he was. The books record  
no cry of pleasure, and yet it seems  
they lived together happily ever after.

Perhaps she called him soft, bad names  
at night when they were alone  
and never stopped tormenting him  
until the beast emerged again  
from underneath the skin.

4

Prince Charming didn't recognise his dancing partner  
until he'd fitted the glass slipper  
and then he knew her  
feet instantly.  
The rest of her, including the hand he asked for,  
didn't seem to matter.  
The day he made his marriage vows  
his eyes were glued on her little, cunning,  
rose-tipped peek-a-boo toes.

5

The prince who wanted a woman  
with skin that bruised so easily  
she couldn't even lie on a pea  
without turning black and blue all over  
(despite the twenty mattresses)  
must have been peculiar  
to say the least. No-one knows  
what happened to her either  
after the marriage vows.

Here in the frozen thicket, brides  
and grooms keep smiling through the years  
and the tears barely show on them.  
There's a tangle of briars and babes  
in the glass woods, and brittle  
stepmothers and giants with broken backs.  
Things crack and overlap,  
but still the groom keeps smiling  
at the bride in her wedding-frock  
though her head's snapped off at the neck  
and both his arms lie shattered  
by the chime of a hickory clock.

## *Fille de Joie*

I know I have grown mean,  
hoarding my body like a dried fig.  
I will not pant as I did,  
sprawled round and under.  
I lie stiff in a desert  
under dark shapes slowly  
disfiguring the sun,  
their impersonal eyes fixed on  
minute particulars of my anatomy.  
They will give most intimate attention  
of wing and beak to every hidden vein  
and will not finish with me until  
I am stripped exquisitely to the bone.  
And then if anyone, anyone at all, should  
want my whoring bones  
to take their joy of them,  
they are welcome.  
My bones are very simple.  
Let them all come,  
spread-eagled, skull to cracked skull  
under the sun.

## *Diplomat*

His words appeared to come directly from  
the back of his neck, so easily they slid out  
through his lips without impediment,  
and all the pink and bald officials of his mind  
nodded approval and were well satisfied.  
He knew he mustn't ever open up his sentiments  
or look them in the eye or let them  
tumble into regions better left unvisited  
where things strain under the skin of things  
and no immunity is guaranteed.  
Down there a sentence could get  
out of hand and come up twitching  
with blood in its veins, babbling  
words that do not sidle sweetly round  
the surface of the ear and fall away  
but thump the drums in a most  
uncivilised manner, demanding entry  
disturbingly, undiplomatically.

## ***St. Paul Undone by Hair***

*For if a woman be not covered, let her also be shorn ...*

*For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, forasmuch  
as he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the  
glory of the man.*

*For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man.*

I Corinthians XI, 6-8

I do not envy him his image  
or his glory — or that dead  
weight of coagulated prayer.  
Instead, we women stood up  
taller than before and loosed  
our long, dark, dangerous hair  
which coiled and writhed and  
grew into a night  
where lovers looped the loop  
of the moon together  
and didn't give a fig for Who's  
Who or hierarchies or honour.

## *Immortelles*

Having come too suddenly to the river's edge,  
my friend closed her eyes and leapt  
to the other side. I'd rather drown,  
my staring eyes fixed on this green bank  
till I go under. Over there she stands  
with her back to my marvellous shore,  
looking heavenward, eternal home.  
Over there dead immortelles in bloom  
confuse with desiccated whispers.  
I shout. She prays dementedly,  
her back shut fast, like a door,  
and the river inches up behind the prayer.  
She feels it at her heels and sings  
her mad hymns louder, while I consider  
irises, narcissi, light,  
reflections of my changeling face  
and other riverside ephemera.

Reflections congeal and cling to surfaces  
forever if we let them.  
I shatter images with songs, make  
rings in water, dance  
with the dancers on the river bank.  
But she stands there still, my friend,  
knee-deep in a bog of prayer, sinking,  
her frightened hands contracting  
on immortelles, her throat  
on incantations. Her eyes,  
blinded by the sky's blank glare,  
see only that the sun is black.  
Her phantom flowers rattle in the night.

## *From Limbo*

'Hello God', I said, but he didn't answer,  
being one of those dark suits with stiff collars,  
buttoned up and basically a misanthropist.  
As Chairman of the Panel on the Day  
he played it by the Book from start to finish  
and wouldn't listen to appeals from riff-raff  
of any type or colour, even white.  
I had imagined him a bit more jovial  
and lenient, but he was in dead earnest,  
all minutes and formal procedures.  
I had to wait till 'Any other business'  
only to have my application dismissed  
because I hadn't got the forms of address  
right or filled the papers in, in triplicate.  
In any case the risen dead are not  
the kind of people I could turn and live with.

## *Wild Flowers*

### MILK-THISTLE

The leaves look like cast-off snake-skins  
with a camouflage of white markings.  
They have bitter milk in their veins,  
said to have dripped from Mary's breast  
while she was suckling Jesus—  
as if there was a touch of venom  
mixed in with the tenderness we know  
from paintings and effigies.  
Still, the leaves may be boiled, like spinach,  
and the stems stewed like homely rhubarb,  
if they are soaked first, to take away the taste.

### VIPER'S BUGLOSS

Stamens like vipers' tongues, but not venomous;  
in fact the seeds were said, by women,  
to stimulate the flow of mother's milk,  
if stewed in large quantities of wine  
and taken daily, with a pinch of salt.

### DEVIL'S BIT

Tradition has it that the devil,  
in a fit of anger at the Virgin,  
bit the root off, hence the name.  
Modest, upright, but bending her head  
tenderly — severed from her dark,  
entangled past, she looks tame.

### BIRTHWORT

The flowers are inconspicuous, the leaves  
large, shaped like a woman from the waist  
down, cut off at mid-thigh, the stalk

entering the space between the legs  
and spraying out, as from a fountain-head.  
Used to aid conception and childbirth,  
and at the same time keep the devil out.

RED SHANK

The dark spot across the centre-fold  
of the leaf, like a Rorschach blot,  
is said by some to be the blood of Christ,  
but others say the Devil or the Virgin  
pinched it, en passant. It looks like that —  
and those two did seem to pinch and bite a lot.  
Whichever way you read it, the stain  
remains as witness to the fact.

BLACKBERRY

The devil, up to his usual tricks,  
spat on blackberries at Michaelmas,  
or urinated over them. At least  
that's one story. The other is that  
they were splashed with woman's blood.  
In either case it's wise not to eat them  
after that date. They don't taste good.

BOUQUET

The countryside is full of ramping  
fumitory, snakes' heads, lady's bedstraw,  
nipplewort, broomrape, bastard toadflax  
and every other kind of wickedness  
for those who have the eyes to see it.  
To ward off demons, carry St. John's Wort—  
preferably the hairy kind — remembering that  
any plant which stops the red-eyed devil  
will also get a woman with child.

## *The Gospel According to Mary*

*'Woman, what have I to do with thee?'*

(St. John 2, 4)

‘Indeed I’ll show thee when I get thee  
home just what thou hast to do with me’,  
I said. Imagine it,  
talking to his own mother like that!  
I told him straight.  
I said he’d better get himself a job  
and a haircut,  
sort himself out.  
Him and his miracles —  
such high and mighty ways don’t wash with me.  
I gave him hell,  
and afterwards I marched right back  
up to the temple  
and told those fools to mind their own  
and leave my boy to me.  
‘If he comes to a bad end’, I said,  
‘I’ll know exactly who to blame,  
for treating him unnaturally.’  
Of course, they left the details out  
of that biography.

## *Annunciation*

It seems I must have been more fertile than most  
to have taken that wind-blown  
thistledown softly-spoken word  
into my body and grown big-bellied with it.  
Nor was I the first: there had been  
rumours of such goings-on before my turn  
came — tales of swansdown. Mine  
had no wings or feathers actually  
but it was hopeless trying to convince them.  
They like to think it was a mystical  
encounter, although they must know  
I am not of that fibre — and to say I was  
‘troubled’ is laughable.  
What I do remember is a great rejoicing,  
my body’s arch and flow, the awe,  
and the ringing and singing in my ears—  
and then the world stopped for a little while.  
But still they will keep on about the Word,  
which is their name for it, even though I’ve  
told them that is definitely  
not how I would put it.  
I should have known they’d try to take  
possession of my ecstasy and  
swaddle it in their portentous terminology.  
I should have kept it hidden in the dark  
web of my veins ...  
Though this child grows in me—  
not unwanted certainly, but  
not intended on my part; the risk  
did not concern me at the time, naturally.  
I must be simple to have told them anything.  
Just because I stressed the miracle of it  
they’ve rumoured it about the place that I’m  
immaculate — but then they always were afraid  
of female sexuality.  
I’ve pondered these things lately in my mind.

If they should canonize me  
(setting me up as chaste and meek and mild)  
God only knows what nonsense  
they'll visit on the child.

## *The White Peak*

*'new beauties, new intimacies, within a frame of breast-like hills and the womanly contours of the upland'*  
(Sean Jennett, *Deserts of England*)

When our Sunday School superintendent  
preached hell-fire at us, promising damnation  
for the sins we hadn't quite committed yet  
and lifted up his eyes unto the hills,  
I think perhaps his mind was wandering  
over those bare uplands where the rain  
is sensuous, fingering the softly curving  
limestone while he prayed for forgiveness.  
We were surrounded by such intimacies  
and all the girls were prey to wandering hands  
ruffling through the school-room like the winds  
that mould the contours of the uplands,  
or a sudden gusty rush of angels' wings.

## *Alternatives*

Things have certainly changed.  
We're not typecast now as  
sex-objects or chaste and saintly mothers.  
That old choice between Madonna and whore  
simply doesn't hold any more.  
Nowadays our guts are tough, we  
kick against the pricks  
and muscle in for fair shares  
of nuclear waste and oil slicks.  
Of course there are alternatives. Eve  
has recently been given a reprieve.  
Now that she's celebrated as  
therapist and guide, wise  
in her deep, dark mindlessness,  
her reconditioned role  
is to lead man back to Eden  
through the reconditioned hole.

## *Package for the Distant Future*

Dear Inheritor,  
Since you have dared to open this container  
you must be living in some far-distant,  
unimaginable future,  
and I am writing from a time of earth  
before your world began —  
we call it the era of Modern Man  
(a bit after the Cro-Magnon).  
Enclosed you will find evidence  
of our existence:  
a skein of yellow silk;  
a carving of a child of unknown origin  
with normal limbs and features;  
a violin;  
some lilac seeds;  
the Song of Solomon.  
The selection is not scientific, just  
flotsam and jetsam of our civilisation.  
I hope you like them.  
We had a lot of things we did not like  
and could have lived without.  
Do not invent gods.  
I hope the earth is nearly clean again.  
Sow the lilac seeds in damp soil  
and if they grow and flower, and if you can,  
smell them after rain.

## *Through A Claude Glass*

The eyes are not selective enough. They see too much, too soon, too clearly, when in fact you'd rather not include the inharmonious bits of pastoral scenes. For instance, to view that rustic portion of the Lake District cut off the tourist map, I recommend you frame it in an antique, tinted Claude glass which should reduce the features of the landscape and harmonize them in a mellow light. You'll note the hills; the sheep as still as art; the sparkling brooklet, and may possibly remark that Eden must have been just so without the accidental cloud above one untoward and inharmonious feature we can't reduce or bathe in atmosphere. Even in this mellow light the effect is unaesthetic. You need to shift the glass a bit to cut it out and get the picture right: the hills, with sleepy sheep on them; the brooklet; Arcadian days; a rosy glow at sunset.

## *Islands*

Only a few moments and places stand out  
clear like islands.

The ones first known had tallest trees  
with sunlight through leaves.

A log I sat on once with someone  
small and shadowy is still plainly visible  
although the face of my companion faded long ago.

Spots of time. They seem to have been green  
and gold and each one magical.

Some later ones were hallowed by a lover,  
who stands in shadow,  
and here a field of corn

and there a knot of city streets  
rise sharp like islands out of water,  
bounded on all sides, concentrated,  
leading nowhere.

Underneath the sea obliterated signposts point  
the way along forgotten roads to where  
we are now on this present land-mass,  
mapped out as if to hold it all together  
but shifting and breaking up into  
jig-saw pieces even as we stand here.

Some fragment of today may still remain tomorrow,  
although friends say 'Be seeing you' and fall away.

Great chunks of yesterday have sunk already.

Only high spots stay in evidence.

We fix our eyes on them  
till they, or we — we can't tell  
which is which — go down.

## *The Rose Chart*

Forgetting to notice the roses this summer  
I let them bloom and fall while my attention  
wandered and now there are only little drifts  
of withered petals, sad as old confetti.  
I shall make time to chart each flower's progress  
next year, noting the way the buds uncurl  
and stretch, like new babies, and how they speed up,  
posing for a minute in wedding-dress,  
before the brown ring closes round the edges.  
I shall watch them wrinkle from the outside  
in and register the small explosion  
which happens overnight as if the heart  
had overcharged itself with too much life  
too suddenly and fused under the strain.  
I have noticed an absence of roses  
where they must have flared this summer while  
I wasn't looking and burnt out,  
and all these ghosts under my feet.

## *Magi, older than ever*

Many are the ways and the grass is worn with journeys.  
We have come over the hill again this night,  
bearing gifts, driven by God knows what compulsion  
towards this Christmas-card of a barn.

We seem to have seen it all before. Dim,  
somewhere underneath our recollection, lie  
cradles upon cradles, an infinity  
of cradles, each holding a new beginning,  
and we old people come with the same old blessing.  
Why do we do it?

We have discussed these things amongst ourselves  
but have not got to the bottom of it.

Seasons, yes, the new buds tucked in  
this dull pod of winter like a promise —  
we should acknowledge them it seems,  
being old, always, at the end of things.  
But we grow tired of such journeys —  
hobbling with hunched backs through winter nights  
to kneel on that hard ground and look  
as if we like it.

At times an immeasurable longing comes over us  
to have done with it.

I have seen a crotchety look amongst the knitted  
wrinkles on my companions' faces —  
a peevish humour seeping up from stiff,  
arthritic knees through knuckle-bones, determining  
the hands' white clamp on cradle-edge, convulsively  
rocking it, and rocking it.

## *Curtains*

It's the luxury smell of decay that gets me.  
I could grow accustomed to this pot-pourri,  
my face, halfway there already, on the turn.  
I like a face caught pungently between  
the living and the dead. Young skins don't  
smell or hang right, all blown out like  
tulips or balloons. Old skins  
with heavy texture of brocade can  
fold and drape and keep the daylight out  
while deep inside the alcove  
round the bed the candles burn.  
If I look into a mirror very close  
it's possible to watch, but  
when I look too long there's nothing  
and it isn't very nice to stare  
at nothing. People draw their curtains  
in respect and veil their faces and their mirrors.  
But I am not so delicate. I stare  
inside and watch the whole performance,  
my stiffening, expectant lips politely  
waiting for the punch-line even when  
the props have been removed  
and all the lights are out.

## ***Gorgon***

*On reading that women should avoid the sun and emotional disturbance in order to preserve their looks*

So I shall sit here till the crack of doom  
without cracking—  
the Mona Lisa with the mudpack smile  
concealing fathoms of unfathomable years  
under my creaseless skin.

My voice shall be as flat as Pythia's  
issuing from  
the narrow cleft and words shall  
not perturb me though they come up  
criss-crossed all ways with woe.

I shall be the enigmatic  
lady of the gloom.  
My blank, unused face shall not reveal  
her secrets to the sun but shall remain  
eternally in bloom in a dark room.

O skin, see how I protect you,  
sacrificing  
my share of life languidly to your preservation.  
It shall not come here with its  
crabbing laughter and withering tears.

But something has been working up inside  
behind my moonface,  
coiling and feeding while the skin has kept intact,  
easing its long slack through  
hidden shafts and private places.

Shaded from the sun it has stayed  
smooth and ageless,  
inching up the column of the spine  
and through the inner tunnels of the brain  
to spawn at the hair's roots.

It stares out through my staring eyes  
without emotion,  
without disturbing the cast of my masking skin.  
Only my hair moves in the still air.  
My face is fixed and beautiful, like stone.

## *Place Tabs in Slots*

What you see here, ladies and gentlemen,  
is not me.  
It is a life-size, cardboard stand-up cut-out  
bearing my features,  
my interested smile and shiny shoes.  
It talks too:  
when you say this  
it says that  
and when you say that  
it says this —  
or sometimes that, to be  
extra agreeable in good company.  
But I am elsewhere, off  
on my own tack.  
I do many things behind your backs —  
even die dramatically on occasions —  
and no-one notices. My smile  
never slips out of place.  
I'm good at this  
(and that)  
so long as I don't actually have to be there.  
I wonder why you haven't noticed?  
Come to think of it  
you never do.  
In fact there's something curiously  
one-dimensional about you which  
begins to disturb me . . .

## *Estranged*

But they have not grown strange to each other  
like unfamiliar people, or queer ones.  
He does not plait his hair, put  
ferrets in his trousers for the thrill  
of it or pinch her; nor does she  
pray all day with wild, weird eyes  
or fill the house with toads and water-snakes  
or burn the dinner. Nothing at all  
has changed between them. They know  
everything there is to know about each other  
after so long — like the curtains,  
once so bright and beautiful and unfamiliar  
in the strange new house with the strange new lover.

## *Twelfth Night*

Now that the whole affair is over  
I can tell you that I'm glad it's over.  
It's a relief to slop around  
in my old, comfortable face again  
without the gift-wrapping.  
There will be no Christmas-presents this year,  
no tinsel smiles or intimate dinners together.  
The books you gave me last year  
are slotted into place on my shelves  
in alphabetical order.  
I had read them before.  
You have slipped so easily  
into my past like an old book  
that kept me awake all night  
once, to finish it.  
We are very polite.  
I watched two spiders mating on a branch  
and afterwards, quick as a whip,  
he snatched his present back  
and swung away on his safety line  
before she could eat it  
or him.  
Our ways are nicer.  
We trussed each other up  
alive in silken shrouds  
and kept each other hanging  
on a dead tree, like festive carcasses,  
long after Christmas was over.

## *Not-Loving*

The spine doesn't give or arch to it.  
It is brittle and stiff like dried sticks,  
winter parchment.  
Not-loving is spiky fingers scratching.  
It is cracks and angles, not  
smiling out of the round of the mouth and eyes.  
There are no vegetables or flowers,  
no fat baskets of wheat.  
The barns are always empty and the sky is colourless—  
not like any colours of water in East Anglia  
or anywhere at all where lovers meet  
like sky and water mirroring each other.  
Not-loving is having nobody to miss  
when you come out onto a station platform  
for instance, heart beating,  
nobody to run to suddenly, arms open,  
as to the harvest or a festival of bright flowers.

## *Coming Home*

Home smells strange when you come back,  
like a stranger's house.  
A few days away are enough.  
I tread carefully, skirting  
letters on the mat and newspapers  
that never will be read now.  
One of the plants has withered.  
Something always suffers.  
The cat watches, wary, does not approach me.  
I open cupboard doors with caution,  
rediscovering half-forgotten things,  
sit stiff on the edge of an upright chair  
like someone only waiting, not intending  
to stay here.  
The house will not accommodate me yet.  
Such things take time.  
You notice little, warming signs though,  
gradually, like lights left on by accident,  
like cracks in walls.  
With strangers, given time, there might be  
a slight loosening of the lines around the eyes,  
a possibly quite accidental touch of hands  
in passing, one soft word let slip,  
quite unintentional perhaps but  
half-heard, half-registered.  
Back home again there are fires to be lit,  
stopped clocks to wind up.  
Little by little the house starts to  
give a bit.  
The cat jumps up onto my lap.  
These things take time.  
Trying now to put things in order,  
unsettled still, I can't remember  
whether you chose my cheek or lips  
for that inconsequential parting kiss,

or which came last — ‘Let’s not be sad’  
or ‘Keep in touch’, as if  
you meant it,  
as if we really would.

## *'Beautiful Memories'*

Despite the epitaph, my memories of you  
are hardly beautiful, cousin,  
dead so long under that child's mound  
and you a grown man years ago if anyone  
could put your time right.

We never seemed to laugh together  
but I remember how you frightened me,  
draped in a sheet for a joke  
at the top of the stairs one wash-day,  
and how I ran and hid behind my mother.  
And when you lay with a lump on your shoulder  
I saw but dared not see  
your eyes grown back in your head like beads  
while we mimed a birthday-party  
around your bed, silently,  
without our shoes on.

We fixed our lips in a party grin  
for the celebration you couldn't join in  
and your slice of cake was propped on the counterpane  
like joke-cake, not to be eaten.

I never did like birthday cake again.  
We all pretended you blew the candles out  
but we had to do it instead  
and whisper 'hip hip hooray', three times,  
and the next day you were dead.  
I laughed and laughed and laughed out loud  
when they told me, as if I was glad.

## *Playing House*

My grandmother's kitchen looks almost normal  
on the surface, though a bit too bare.  
Nobody really cooks here. The drawer  
contains two knives and forks which don't match;  
there are two pans in the cupboard and a few  
odd mugs and plates. Nothing accumulates.  
There are no cans, jars, spices, packets  
or miraculous work-saving gadgets.  
Meals come from outside daily, telling the time,  
chopped into easier pieces by four  
elderly daughters on a rota system.  
When we were very young we used to store  
up cast-off pans and cutlery, and play  
at cooking leaves on a limestone wall,  
pretending we were keeping house like grown-ups  
among the dandelions and buttercups.  
Here we play like children in reverse.  
Setting the knives and forks on your table,  
I wonder if you know how little else  
remains of all the wedding-gifts (enough  
to last you out, you must have said, and laughed)  
or if you make believe you keep a real house  
among the plastic flowers you bought because  
they wouldn't ever need to be replaced  
like you, Grandmother, slumped over real food  
you have forgotten how to play with,  
and don't even pretend to taste.

## *A Derbyshire Death*

Th'eoowd lass is dead, but eoo's 'ad a good innin's;  
eoo wur ninety-nine, cloose on a hundred,  
'n' cudna deoo eoot fur 'ersen neoo mur.  
Eoo just set i' th' armcheer, wi' 'er teith  
in 'er pocket, and mumbled a bit, but yo'  
cudna tell what eoo wur seein' this twelvemonth,  
'cept thee wur summat abairt a young lad  
as set on a box at th' bottom o' t' bed  
every neight. 'It's none reight',  
eoo kept seein', 'fur 'im t' sit theer.'  
But nub'dy else seid 'im save 'er.  
Thee's neoot bur a box,' thee ouw said, a bit sceer't—  
like, 'thee isna a soul save arsels in 'ere';  
but Heoo teoowd 'em Hei wur as plain  
as a pikestaff — the cheiky young divil —  
wetchin' a woman o' 'er age 'n' ouw.  
Th'eoowd mon's picture hung o'er th' box  
(th' wun as wur tecken afoer thee wur wed)  
soo thee meooved it awee thinkin'  
'appen 'twur that as eoo seid.  
But things didna get better, th' lad  
wur still theer, neight after neight,  
sittin' up, starin' an' smilin' at her.  
I' th' end, eoo just slipped awee in 'er sleip,  
an' th' young 'un 'asna bein sein sin',  
neoo mur n'r thee seid 'im afoer.

*eoowd*, **old**

*(h)eoo* **she**

*eoot*, **anything**

*'ersen*, **herself**

*neoo mur*, **any more**

*seein'*, **saying**

*set*, **sat**

*seid*, **saw**

*neoot*, **nothing**

*ouw*, **all**

*sceer't*, **scared**

*arsels*, **ourselves**

*teoowd*, **told**

*as wur tecken*, **that was taken**

*afoer*, **before**

*'asna being sein sin'*, **hasn't been seen since**

*neoo mur n'r*, **no more than**

## *Elms and My Father*

For you each year now the hills grow steeper,  
the long walks even longer.  
I have begun to time you, thinking  
how you used to charge this bank  
before the elms started withering,  
not very long ago it seems,  
although I know the heart's  
yardsticks contract the mind.

## *The Illusionist*

THE PATTER

‘An illusionist is someone  
who makes you think reality  
is what you think  
you only think you see.’  
I chat them up while Gloria  
substitutes the rabbit for the handkerchief,  
but when she bungles it  
I have to double-talk them  
into thinking that they  
think they didn’t see.  
It’s all politics really.

THE MAESTRO

The one thing you can count on  
is that everybody loves a miracle.  
The favourite is the trick where Gloria  
rises into the air  
like Mary (but without the dressing-gown).  
That family knew their job alright, you  
have to hand it to them.  
We’re not in their class yet  
but Gloria’s not as wobbly as  
she used to be, and practice  
makes perfect.  
Thank God the audience hasn’t twigged  
the way we do it,  
or we’d all be out of a job by now —  
Him and me and Gloria  
and the rabbit.

CONUNDRUM

Sometimes I believe in God  
and sometimes I excuse Him,  
but not when things go very wrong —  
the trapdoor stuck, for instance,  
and Gloria nearly sawn in half, and screaming . . .  
At times like that  
He cops the lot, for not existing.

A SUBSTITUTION

They ask me what I call him;  
I say 'Stew', and they think 'Stewart'.  
As if I'd give a pet name  
to a rabbit.  
You can't get too attached  
to them; they come and go  
and when they've gone  
you end up feeling sad  
if you don't watch it.  
You simply blow your nose  
and get a replacement.  
Now you see him, now you don't,  
and suddenly, Hey Presto!  
there's another identical rabbit.  
What's the use of sentiment?  
Every box has an empty compartment.

THE GLAMOUR

When Gloria got tired of playing  
second fiddle and took  
the bones out of her bra  
and refused to be sawn in half  
or cramped up in a box any more,  
I pretended to agree with her  
and stroked her spangled hair  
and called her Bunnikins  
until she came round.

All they want really is  
a bit of fuss made of them.  
You only have to show appreciation  
of the vital role a glamorous helpmate plays  
in creating an illusion.

MATINEE

I'm not too keen on youngsters of  
a certain age, and neither is Gloria.  
They're too smart these days, by far,  
and cynical. They won't connive.  
One little slip's enough  
to make them cock their eyes.  
Somehow they make illusions seem  
a pack of lies.

VANISHING TRICK

Gloria nags and says I'm getting dull—  
no fun to be with any more.  
I don't even perform as I did:  
my hands are slower, clumsier,  
they let things drop.  
Nothing's right.  
My hair's turning white  
under the black stuff,  
and I have to use a thicker layer  
of grease-paint.  
Gloria's getting heavy at the rear  
and bitchy with it.  
Perhaps things will get better  
if I replace her.  
When you come to think about it,  
what's the use of a fat old cow  
to a performer?  
The act needs glamour.

SEEING TRIPLE

One night I dreamt I opened  
all three coffins, and Gloria  
was in every one of them,  
wedged tight and still talking.  
Enough's enough.  
When Gloria gets into my dreams  
in triplicate,  
everything's out of proportion.

CURTAIN CALL

The moment I like best is when  
the clapping nearly deafens me.  
I stand and bow and love them all  
because they all love me,  
but afterwards I tend to get  
a little moody.  
Nothing nice lasts long enough  
and if it did it wouldn't be nice anyway.  
Sometimes there seems no point in anything,  
especially when I roll into the hollow  
of the King size double bed, say,  
and hear myself there, breathing.

ENTR'ACTE

I don't know what the world  
is coming to. This new girl  
doesn't seem to care  
about the act. She doesn't even  
bleach her hair  
and several times she's let me down—  
just not turned up at all,  
and I've had to go it alone.  
The discipline has gone now,  
and the glamour.

Rabbits have lost their lustre.  
Audiences are thinner.  
My act gets shorter.  
I'm only on between scenes,  
as a filler.

HAT-TRICK

I've shuffled lots of dull things up  
in my hat, and said the magic words  
and then stood back,  
and sometimes there were doves  
or a white rabbit,  
the odd bouquet of paper flowers,  
and people clapped.  
But too many things recently have  
stuck in transit;  
I'll never know what happened to them—  
always becoming and never become.  
Tricks up my sleeve galore, and I  
practise sleight of hand by night and day  
with my silks and purples,  
but lately I can't fake it.  
I shout *Hey Presto!*  
and I'd swear that something colourless  
spills over the brim like a tear  
and slinks away,  
but the eye of my empty hat  
stares back at me, like a lie.

## *Willow Pattern*

What else was there to do after words  
as delicate as porcelain? What else,  
hands pocketed and both of us as dumb  
suddenly as if our thoughts had paired  
and taken flight without us like lovers  
changed into birds and soaring high above  
the sad willows and the fist-shaking perennial father  
to an enchanted place somewhere outside the picture?  
What could we do but fold our hands away  
in silence, knowing the pattern by heart  
and how those two were fired and fixed in the act  
of always going nowhere, though right on the edge,  
wings nearly brushing, like fingertips.

## ***‘May Townsend, 1893’***

*‘And all that was death  
Grows life, grows love,  
Grows love!’*

May Townsend, I have your Browning now,  
price 20p from a second-hand bookshop in 1980.  
I am aware of your eyes on this page,  
place my thumbs in your thumb-prints, see  
where you once spilled your tea  
and tried to wipe it off, and where  
you turned a corner down.  
You were not too particular  
May Townsend. I note  
the only poem you marked was  
‘WANTING IS — WHAT?’

## *Bonfire*

That night of the old moon  
when clouds and leaves flocked south  
and tattered honesty rattled in ditches,  
November caught us and hurled us  
round and round in the mad wind  
like witches at a Sabbath,  
and everything went in the fire—  
old leaves and shoes and furniture  
and finally some mouldering books of poetry  
found on a rubbish dump in summer  
and carried home to rot.  
That night the wind reclaimed them  
and in one quick lick of flame  
they were gone.  
There should have been some sign  
to mark their passing,  
but no phoenix rose, no  
strange phenomenon of any kind  
occurred in the torn sky.  
Nothing happened and nothing remains  
except a stain of blown ash  
between the rows of cabbages  
and one small oval of paper,  
blank as a moonflower.

## *Engagement Calendars*

Some calendars are inhuman,  
designed, I think, by existentialist  
philosophers to prove a point.  
I do not like ripping the months off  
and dumping them, regularly replacing  
each rusty moon with a new one.  
Such built-in obsolescence alarms me.  
I prefer the months that fold over,  
out of sight but still there, just in case  
I ever want to look back in December  
and piece the blanks together.  
Five-year calendars are even better:  
such thick wads of time give you elbow-room —  
a past, a future, a structure —  
at least until you have to trade  
the whole lot in and start again.  
I'd like a calendar with space for  
new pages you could go on adding forever,  
accumulating continuity by courtesy of  
birthdays, dentists, coal-men, rates and meetings,  
things you make a note of to remember,  
all strung together like markers  
above a place where many ships  
have sunk in deep water.

## *Night People*

They keep their distance in the daylight  
when the skull flattens to a purpose.  
But at night they come and I have found  
no way to purge this head of all the people  
who cross here, troubling and mumbling.  
They do not treat it as they should do  
(floating by in veils and quietness).  
It is not, after all, a market-place  
but my cathedral dedicated to  
long, pale silences and space.  
The entrances are barred but somehow they  
get in with sticky faces, arguing and shouting,  
or speed through beating gongs,  
unable to control themselves, and crash  
and chatter till the place becomes a *carrefour*  
of shrilling brakes and traffic lights  
(while up above my little gargoyle  
representative contorts and  
twists its fingers in its ears).  
They ought to leave my head alone  
unless invited in on padded feet  
to whisper or to  
meditate, or sleep.

## *What The Butler Saw*

Quite slowly at the outset  
the pale girl with doe eyes  
undresses to her bodice and her titillating bloomers.  
She doesn't know who tiptoes to the door  
and watches through the keyhole, but she shivers  
as the villain twiddles his moustaches  
before he sneaks back to the servants' quarters  
past the aspidistra in the passage.  
And that's the end of that  
though we could speculate  
what he did and she did afterwards.  
Perhaps he married the cook  
and she lived happily ever after . . .  
Here the pictures start to flicker quicker than ever  
as years pass in the blink of an eye—  
a child here, a child there, funerals, weddings,  
summers, autumns, winters, Christmases—  
decades slip out of sight like silverfish,  
the pier begins to strip off bit by bit  
and then speed up, its planks and girders,  
slot-machines, keyholes and aspidistras,  
shivering girls and wicked butlers  
intermingling in the winking waters.

## *The Boat*

Tonight again, another chance to see  
the same dream played over on video,  
even though I always know the ending  
from the start, and on the way which buses  
will be missed and which tyres will burst before  
I finally reach the departure point  
and the wicked ticket man who twists each  
simple journey into complications  
of visas and knotted tape and makes me wait  
until, when I get through, it's too late.  
No matter how I fiddle with the landscape  
in between and try to speed the whole thing up,  
in the end there's always the little gap  
of water widening as the bright red  
painted boat slides out of harbour with her  
passengers who look as if they know  
exactly where they're going, and what for.

# The Tenth Muse

## Poems by Sylvia Kantaris



**Sylvia Kantaris** was born and brought up in the Peak District of Derbyshire. She studied French at Bristol and spent much time in Paris. In 1962 she set off with her Greek husband on an extended overland trek to Australia, where she worked as a tutor in French at Queensland University, had two children, and wrote M.A. and PhD theses on French surrealist poetry. Since 1965 her poetry has appeared in major Australian periodicals and anthologies, including *The Penguin Book of Modern Australian Verse*. She was joint winner of the *Poetry Magazine Award* in 1969 and her first full collection, *Time & Motion*, was published by Prism/Poetry Society of Australia in 1975. Sylvia Kantaris won an award in the National Poetry Competition, 1982. She is also co-author, with D. M. Thomas, of *News from the Front* (Arc Publications, 1983). Since 1974 she has lived in Helston, Cornwall, and is an Open University Tutor in Twentieth Century Poetry. Her poems have appeared in *London Magazine*, *Poetry Review*, *New Statesman* and *Times Literary Supplement*.

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‘*Time & Motion* is one of the most generous books of poetry I have read in years, not only in its quantity of poems, but even more in its humanity ... it is a book of poems portraying the spiritual life of a woman, not as a creature apart from others, but as a thinking, feeling and suffering creature among other creatures ...’ **Cal Clothier/Orbis**, 1977.



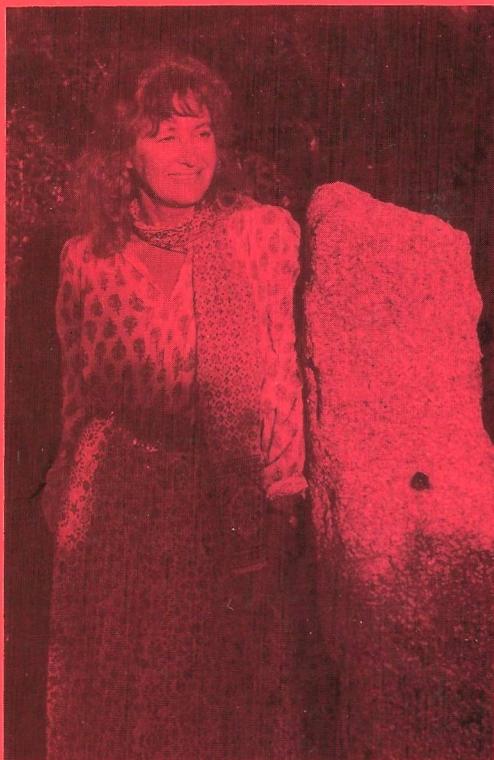
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From reviews of *Time & Motion*:

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