



Tierra del Fuego  
by Jennifer Strauss

Teaching Notes prepared by  
Adrian D'Ambra

# ***Tierra del Fuego***

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### **Teaching Notes prepared for use by VATE members by Adrian D'Ambra**

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## Section 1. About the writer

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The poetry of Jennifer Strauss covers many concerns and experiences, amongst them, marriage and motherhood, relationships and love, loss and death. She also examines a number of difficult thematic relationships such as those between the torturer or tyrant, the victim and the survivor, between art and life, the personal and the political, the everyday and the academic as well as the official record of events as opposed to the lived experience of those events. These concerns are often viewed in the context of women's experiences of the world, especially when it comes to the ways in which women's voices have been erased from the public or the cultural record.

Many of her concerns and interests can be seen arising out of her own life which has shaped both the content and the direction of her writing. Jennifer Wallace was born in Heywood, rural Victoria in 1933 and educated at a country boarding school where she first began to write poetry. During her student days at the University of Melbourne, some of her early poems were published in university magazines and she was a member of a writers' group that included Barry Humphries and Fay Zwicky.

In 1958 she was awarded a scholarship to undertake a BLitt at the University of Glasgow, Scotland, a qualification she was unable to complete because she married Werner Strauss - whom she had met and fallen in love with just prior to her departure from Australia - who was then in Sheffield doing an Engineering PhD. As a married woman she was barred from continuing her scholarship or completing her studies. Their first child was born in 1959. Werner's contribution to Jennifer's career amounts to much more than the uncompleted post-graduate degree or the physical law appended to her poem *Conversing with Charity*; "It is impossible to transmit heat/ into a cold object from one that's colder". He encouraged his wife to return to academia and Jennifer Strauss soon took up teaching the third year Medieval Literature course at the University of Melbourne.

Their second child was born in 1963 and in the following year Strauss began teaching more varied courses of literature which came to include Women Writers at Monash University. A third child was born in 1967. Whilst it was a difficult juggling act, Strauss does not complain of being torn between the worlds of domestic responsibility, marriage, motherhood, academia and writing. Each of them has been a creative and enriching experience for her.

"... having the child released a certain excess of creativity - it has to go somewhere... For a very long period in my life I found it difficult to say whether I would define myself first as a mother rather than as an academic or a poet... I never would have thought of calling myself a housewife primarily. I actually quite like housework - that's probably because I haven't had to do too much of it! But it doesn't take psychic energy in the way that being a mother does. And it is from somewhere in the same area of the psyche that being a poet stems. In fact, the same area that being a good teacher comes from. I actually regard teaching as being a creative activity."

The conflicts were in others' eyes. One male Dean at Monash spoke against her being offered a promotion: "She doesn't need it - she's a married woman." Apart from this and

the appalling early episode in Glasgow, Strauss may appear to today's readers to have been a privileged academic and to have been fortunate in her career but she was also a product of her times. By the early 1970's education was coming into its own and there were more positions available in Australia than there were academics to teach them. Her initial acceptance of the Medieval Literature position was at least in part prompted by the awareness that girls had to be smarter and that she needed to be able to distinguish herself in a specialised field.

Moving between the academic and the domestic was not the sole focus of concern in Strauss' life at this time. She was also painfully aware of the Vietnam War. American and Australian involvement in that conflict raised for her the profound question of what it means to be the mother of a boy, of where the responsibility lies for the nurturing and education of the child that grows up and then goes on to learn how to kill. Whilst other poems such as *Songs Our Mothers Teach Us* directly confront the reader with just such questions, one of the most moving of her poems, *A Just Cause* was also unconsciously written in reaction to these concerns. It is a measure of her ingenuity as a poet and her breadth of understanding of the human condition that she is able in that poem to also register the psychic devastation of the young boy who is moving into manhood by participating in the slaughter of his leader's and his god's enemies.

In the 1970's Strauss was also greatly influenced by the development of feminist social and cultural critiques represented by Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* and Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*. These readings prompted a growing awareness in her of the neglect of women's poetry. Certain peculiar debates and points of view espoused by some of her male colleagues - such as the claim that you could easily avoid the mistake of publishing a masked poem written by an undeclared woman because their punctuation was different! - made her realise that there was also a process of deliberate marginalisation taking place in some quarters. In 1978 and 1979 respectively she compiled a bibliography of women's poetry and a questionnaire examining the relationship between gender and poetry. Apart from these scholarly rebuttals, Strauss seems to have been well able to laugh at the ridiculously laughable male posturing in much of the staff room sexual politics of the time. Most importantly she continued writing: "there is a blank,/ a space within creation... Outside the text. Which/ is where I ought to take myself... It is an early winter./ There will be no more poems... I wouldn't know, I've walked off/ The edge of the script..."<sup>1</sup>

Jennifer Strauss has never found it difficult to combine teaching at tertiary level with maintaining her output both as an academic writer and as a poet and her poetry has certainly benefited from the generous allowances then available for academics to travel and teach abroad during sabbatical leave. She has lectured in North America and Europe and she has lived in England, America, Germany and Canada, returning to take up the position of Associate Professor in English at Monash University. In the 1990's she edited *The Oxford Book of Australian Love Poems* and published her studies of Gwen Harwood and Judith Wright. Her own poetry has been published in three earlier volumes; *Children and Other Strangers* [1975], *Winter Driving* [1981] and *Labour Ward* [1988]. Published in 1997, *Tierra del Fuego* represents both the new and selected poetry of Jennifer Strauss.

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<sup>1</sup> From the poems *Discourse in Eden*, *In the Bistro: University House, Canberra*, *Sister Anne*, *Sister Anne! Where Have You Fled To?* and *Bluebeard Re-scripted, Version III*.

Since Werner's death and between *Labour Ward* and *Tierra del Fuego* she has travelled widely in Latin America. These travels may well have been inspired by the unidentified Spanish speaking lover of the title poem in *Tierra del Fuego*. They will be most remembered by the reader for their investigation of the nature of and our need for language as experienced by a traveller whose very notion of being is assaulted by the inability to communicate with those around her and for their further investigation and denunciation of political tyranny, especially her questioning of the sources of human cruelty.

The beginning and end of Jennifer Strauss' career as a literary academic coincided with the preponderance of significant cultural and intellectual ideologies and the debates surrounding them. Early on, she was surprised by the strong adherence to the exclusivist English-lit canon of FR Leavis at the University of Melbourne and its persistence even at the newly opened and much more pluralist Monash University. These were not values that were of any particular import to her but neither does she seem to have weighed too heavily into the debate, preferring to strengthen her own career and gradually broaden her options. The latter part of her career has, of course, coincided with the gradually consolidating orthodoxy of Critical Theory. Strauss prefers to advocate a degree of scepticism rather than the death of the author.

Between these two intellectual extremes, the most important social, political and intellectual movement to have influenced Jennifer Strauss' teaching and her poetry has been feminist theory and one of her abiding interests has been to investigate the empty spaces that should be occupied with women's voices and women's narratives. These poems are not usually intended to work so much as direct frontal assaults on patriarchy. [Some that are would be *A Mother's Day Fantasia* and the appallingly moving poem about childbed fever, *Ignaz Semmelweis...*] Rather, they tend to celebrate the wit of women who have had to learn how to preserve not only themselves but their own wits. What should Eve be doing while Adam names the animals for God? Why did the unnamed wife of the late Prince's friend name their daughter Ophelia? We certainly know why she taught her how to swim!

Some of her most memorable poems fall into two categories; those such as *Wife to Horatio* in which the woman's script is reinserted into the dialogue and those such as *After a Death* in which her own sense of love and loss, union and solitude are conveyed with true depth of feeling. Women of all kinds inhabit her poems, from the *Migrant Woman on a Melbourne Tram* through an artist's model in *The Red Divan* to Guenevere and Eve, so that she is reclaiming lost territory for women in history, culture and religion as well as in contemporary society. Having said that, her work is not necessarily written only for women or only out of concern for them, as the explicit love for her husband and her sons and the concern for the effects of patriarchy on males as well as females demonstrates. Writing for all of us, the "unrewarded,/ Unreproached, unforgiven,"<sup>2</sup> she is one of the most accessible voices writing poetry in Australia today.

Her writing also contains a richness and variety of cultural references, reflecting a lifetime of reading and teaching. The Old Testament is well represented by Eve, Naomi and Jezebel, the classical world by Orpheus, Eurydice and the minotaur. Shakespeare's tragedies *Macbeth* and *King Lear* are quoted for their efficient yet powerful turn of phrase. As well, other personal favourites such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary

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<sup>2</sup> From the poem, *Tending the Graves*.

Shelley, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, are referred to. Whilst her own poetry is not overly saturated with landscape and setting at least in an Australian context, Strauss makes good use of the visual arts in poems inspired by painters and she is at her most evocative in terms of place in her Latin American poems and her Pittsburgh nightmare *After a Death*.

Since bringing out *Tierra del Fuego* in 1998 the Melbourne-based publishing co-operative, Pariah Press, has disbanded. This has meant that at a time when she should be being recognised for her contribution to Australian poetry over the last quarter-century, Jennifer Strauss has now had to become a businesswoman, not only overseeing the distribution and sale of her work but also financing any further print runs. More significantly, it means that her work is not currently receiving the recognition and the readership that it so richly deserves.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For details of Jennifer Strauss' life and the quotation from her about work, writing and reproduction, I am deeply indebted to the interview conducted with her and published by Jenny Digby in *A Woman's Voice*, 1996. See Bibliography.

## Section 2: The Poems

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### ***Solstice***

Soon after the birth of their first child Werner Strauss encouraged his wife to return to academic work for her own fulfilment. The poem *Solstice* is strange amongst this current selection of Strauss' work in that the autobiographical, cultural or social experience underlying it is neither made clear nor alluded to. Its genesis lay in observing the exact opposite experience of her own in an acquaintance whose husband prevented her from returning to work and realising her potential. Strauss curbed her immediate impulse to intervene, recognising that her friend would need to act and decide for herself.

For the reader unaware of this background, two features stand out in this poem; its symbolism and its tone. The latter conveys a sense of loss or mourning verging on grief that we will come to recognise from the most intimately personal and despairing of Strauss' poems such as *Cold Anniversary* and *After a Death*. The symbolism, meanwhile, establishes the sense of something enigmatically both beautiful yet broodingly dangerous. "At the tulip's heart a black sun glows." At first reading the central metaphor of the black sun glowing within the tulip's heart might represent corruption or degeneration, much like Blake's worm in the rose, perhaps signifying an unnamed threat. But concerning that threat, what was to be made of the reference to the not so awful man?

Strauss would prefer a much more positive reading of the central metaphor as a symbol of potential, the great range of possibilities within all of us, even though that potential would now be squandered and denied in her friend's life that was destined to be disciplined, trivial, anguished and predictable. Notice how the tulip petals do not wither but become, "fire-bird plumage/ Tipped with black." The flower symbolism extends beyond the tulip's heart, the daffodils contrasting bleakly with it. Their tiring and deterioration is described in clearly traditional feminine terms, "Petalled skirts crêping", so that the principal movement of the poem is away from improbable yet fiery and winged potential or difference towards restraint and formality. The year may be moving towards Spring, but this is still the shortest, least promising day and little will emerge from it. Reality will defy expectation. The vivid and blazing give way in this poem of juxtapositions to a setting we will come to recognise in Strauss' funeral poems: it is a cold and rainy day in Melbourne.

We are not told what precipitated this meeting and gift giving. Strauss' refusal to reveal within the poem the actual story underlying it does successfully create a sense of crossed wires or purposes. From this point of view, we can recognise yet another hallmark of Strauss' work, her concern with unsatisfactory or inadequate communication. Not divulging the topic of conversation enhances this sense of inadequacy. Like Strauss we may be in need of a "vivid response" but must settle for the "Petty, predictable" as the wronged wife apologises for the unfairness of the treatment she has received. *Solstice* is a bleak introduction to Strauss' portrayal of the lives of women.

### ***Cold Anniversary***

The death and burial remembered in this poem is not identified in terms of relationship or gender. We have the poet or persona and the addressed "you", two of the most important ingredients for poems of contemplation and speculation in which poets embark

upon dialogues with themselves or their souls. And here, in the cold and rain of a remembered winter burial, the dialogue turns into an attack on that oldest and least honest of clichés.

Time, they say, heals -  
some slippage too from memory  
must be expected  
as natural.

Time,  
I say, steals and nature rots -

In this poem time does not ease the pain, it provides the opportunities for forgetfulness to erase even those details that one might most wish to remember, how a spouse or lover laughed, the touch of their skin. Time steals and nature rots. The gradual erosion of remembered detail in the mind of the living, the surviving, is analogous to the physical decomposition of the dead.

We are prepared early in the poem for this contrast between cliché and experience by the initial juxtaposition between the platitude that "death too is natural" and the untimeliness of this particular one. We then move forward to a further contrast between the poet's ability to recall the "sharpness of windy rain,/ the colours of clay" at the graveside and her inability to retrieve intimate and personal details of the deceased.

The poem moves from regret at the original loss - Jennifer's burial of Werner - through regret at the gradual loss of remembered intimate detail to an angry aversion against these processes of nature and the mind. Not only does time not heal, neither nature nor naturalness offer any consolation. Rebelling against both painful memory and regretted forgetfulness, the poet seeks to bury herself in the mundane, reversing the natural coldness of the day with heating, combating the sombre memory of her loss and the noise of wind and rain with music. That things, events, processes are natural does not make them more acceptable to the human sensibility. The wonderful metaphor of the, "sharpness of winter rain", is not made more pleasant by falling in its natural season. Forget nature, life and death. We, "turn the music on,/ the heating up", lucky enough to be able to recoil from the cold, wet realities of nature into the refuge of the artificial.

In *Solstice* the woman's role was to conform, to bend; in *Cold Anniversary* it is burial and remembrance - against the odds - of the dead. But at the same time, she must rebel. Mute acceptance, as represented by the clichés, would nullify all meaning, all value of the remembered love, the shared history, the surviving family. In this instance, rebellion may entail at first approach towards but then retreat away from, "the cold red edge", but it is rebellion and therefore life nonetheless. The poet may not be able to defeat despair but she can refuse to accept death, to be calmer on the anniversary of her husband's death or to accept those commonly held platitudes about nature running its course and time healing all wounds.

In *Cold Anniversary* the remembered awfulness of the actual burial and of the weather on that day keeps supplanting the loved one's living details. Under such circumstances and in the light of such brutal honesty we should not see this poem as a meditation on mortality. Instead, it is an angry repudiation of time, nature and our mortality, a kind of love poem in bitter reverse.



## After a Death

The loss, mourning and remembrance of *Cold Anniversary* spill over into this longer, more complex and layered poem. Instead of the graveside there is the nightmare reality of the Pittsburgh tunnels that are linked with the struggle to be born, the connection between consciousness and dreaming, dying and the imagery of Orpheus and Eurydice in the underworld: "To grope half-sighted in a narrow passage/ Shut by the grinding weight/ Of earth's bones and flesh.../ Walled by a dark and pestilential pallor..."

This poem is of many journeys: re-visiting the past in dream and memory, birth and death. Travel is not associated with discovery but with the experience of foreignness, clearly shown in the sense of displacement felt by the Australian couple living in America. There are numerous instances in Strauss' poetry of language as the central factor in her experience of the world. Even moving between two new-world, English-speaking nations requires, "A new language, to put out tentacles of trust,/ To touch, grasp. Patience", that echoing alliteration emphasising the attempts made at taking hold and settling in. As in the sensuous *Estancia* passage from *Tierra del Fuego*, when language fails to sustain we seek and grasp at other remedies, advancing or retreating into moments of non-language love: "At winter's end/ We started our third child."

*After a Death* begins with a remembered incident in Pittsburgh in the winter of 1967. Lorries thawing in the tunnel's foetid heat drop compacted black ice onto the roadway, creating hazardous conditions in an already claustrophobic setting. We return to this event first in dream rather than memory and the two processes become intertwined throughout the poem. Whilst returning to a remembered event in dream, Strauss, "was re-making history", attempting to change the past, transforming the dangerous driving conditions in the icy tunnel into something encountered, "joyfully, singing".

A much greater but equally impossible reversal is also hoped for. She dreams that her husband, since dead, "waited in light at the tunnel's end". Emphasising this theme of attempted, essential yet impossible reversal, Strauss makes radical use of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice in which the great musician Orpheus descends to the underworld to retrieve his lover, only to lose her a second time. Strauss reverses the roles, casting Eurydice as the heroic yet defeated lover, "coming to fetch you home".

Of course, themes, roles, images and ideas can be reversed. Past experience, lived history cannot. This impossibility is nailed down in the final line: "Our cycle's done: you will not come again."

Throughout the poem the spring and winter seasons have represented the relentless and unalterable cycles of life and death, both of which are also symbolised by the light at tunnel's end. The poem's diction doubly re-enforces this theme in the repetitions and alliterations of, "Let, let, let me/ (Panic of dying, panic of birth)/ Out." We also have one of Strauss' most idiosyncratic yet tellingly effective verbal constructions as Werner's ghost turns away to the darkness, "Unteachably", just as the street signs confront the *Migrant Woman on a Melbourne Tram* "ungraspably", such words strengthening Strauss' command of the improbable, the impossible, the unalterable.

## *An End to Innocence*

This poem marks a rare return to Strauss' childhood in rural Victoria. She is clearly not an Australian landscape poet but in *An End to Innocence* even the most urbanised Australian reader will recognise instinctively the bushfire horror of her father's, "ruined farm... a stock-count told in bullets." Unlike cyclones, the names of bushfires such as Ash Wednesday mark themselves permanently on the collective calendar of remembered events.

However, the young girl persona at the centre of the poem will learn a new kind of lesson that will mark the experience and the poetry of the adult to come; the difficulty of communication, the occasional impossibility of language.

Two people speak at loggerheads in this poem; the farmer's daughter in her almost inappropriately formal cadences and his rough, stoic kitchen girl. The daughter tries first to soothe a fretting bird stranded on the back verandah by the fire and then to calm her weeping father. She is rebuked on both occasions by the harsh, unloving matter-of-factness of the kitchen girl's, "Oh why do you go on?... Oh how you do go on..." Her entreaties to her father are as unheard and unintelligible as is her talking with the animals.

Language is the battleground between these two speakers, between the child's pathetic entreaties and the kitchen hand's cruel practicalities. There are three distinct voices in the poem; the child's formalised sentiments, the constantly alliterated rhythm of the narrative ["flowered in flame... Bursting and banging... Avid for water but wild to the sounds of speech... scorch-sore feet to the furthest edge..."] which seems to crackle and combust like the terrible inferno and the curt dismissiveness which is nonetheless not entirely devoid of truth of the kitchen hand.

In this poem the metaphor of fire - which will speak to us in one guise in *Tierra del Fuego* as the language of passionate, sensual love - is beyond control, a dialect of destruction in the crushing form of an Australian bushfire.

The moral coda - a significant, life-informing, although not necessarily positive or pleasant lesson - is not rare in Strauss' poems. We find it particularly in her meditations on the source of human cruelty, the origin of masculine violence and the responsibility of motherhood. In *An End to Innocence* it is set apart in the clearly enunciated, pared down lines of the final stanza:

Before that day  
I never knew a grief  
Could not be cried or comforted:  
My ears are ringing yet  
With the pain of the dumb and deaf.

Strauss' poetry echoes resoundingly with just that knowledge. Orpheus and Eurydice cannot be re-united. The vacuum of the stolen lives of the disappeared in Latin America cannot be filled. Empty television screens speak to us of conflict and brutality. Migrants strand themselves between languages. The jackboot of the future echoes in the bloodbeat of an infant. Here, the child's innocence is lost in the realisation that neither tears nor words can comfort another in their grief.

## *Son and Moon: Scenes from Maternal Life*

Not only can the personal be politicised in Strauss' poetry, but private lives can find themselves intertwined with the political. Set partly in Canada in 1982 *Son and Moon* is at once the recounting of several scenes in a domestic drama set against the backdrop of enormous political events. "No More Cruising" reads the schoolboy sign painted by fifteen year old Nicholas. NASA has developed the cruise missile and invited Canada to surrender itself as a testing site. The academic mother on sabbatical leave joins her teenage son in the protest march in Toronto against this threatened prostitution of Canada by the United States. This image of the client and the prostitute was cemented in Strauss' mind by the unstated fact that the protest route passed through Young Street, Toronto's sex trade street with its cruising customers.

The mother and son relationship is depicted in three scenes: the child's first steps in Melbourne that coincide with Neil Armstrong's first human walk on the Moon in July 1969, the summer of 1982 in Toronto and the boy's growth into a young adult protesting against American imperialism in Australia.

Concerning the boy's presence in the poem, the first thing we notice is the play on the homophones son and sun which is then ironically reversed as the boy travels deeper and deeper into adolescence: "his mood grows darker, darker;/ He is night without stars." Concerning the mother, the Moon acts as a metaphor for distance and strangeness in the first and last lines of this poem, perhaps implying an increasing distance between mother and son as time separates them.

The three episodes in the child's development from innocence to protest are closely linked with images of American influence and expansion; the Apollo 11 Moon landing, the cruise missiles which the Americans wished to test in Canada, Pine Gap in Australia, making this in part an overtly political poem.

In the first episode the infant, "Lurches unsteadily", into "a moment innocent,/ Absurd, weightless..." with a clever double meaning on that weightless, referring as it does both to something ephemeral and passing as well as the astronauts beyond gravity. The poem closes with lunar imagery which is linked to the other recurring presence in the poem: television. The moonwalk in the first stanza is televised. In the last two stanzas the mother watches the TV, fearing that she might see her son caught up in a violent clash between protestors and police. However, "The TV news being tired of demonstrations", the public appetite sated like the consuming beast of capitalism in *Migrant Woman on a Melbourne Tram*, she switches off. The open mind of the blank screen allows her to imagine the truth, "his angry banners... slashing hooves".

And what of women's experience and roles? The quirky juxtaposition in the first in the first line almost confers the female gender on the astronaut, but alongside the TV eye on the world the mother's role is cast as that of intelligent and responsible yet distanced observer of another life. She is witness and participant in three key scenes of realisation alluded to in the reversal and echo of Lear's, "Be your tears wet?" when the broken king awakens towards the end of the play to recognise his one faithful child. In the first scene, the infant's steps are the first moment of autonomy. "Shoulder to shoulder down a foreign street", in Toronto mother and son share a moment of rousing comradeship in the second. In the third scene, the young man has grown moody, angry; "She is afraid".

Her knowledge of the world in which her son is now moving unleashes the most violent images and language of the poem; "Riot gear, slashing hooves, his clumsy steps..."

*Son and Moon* is also concerned with the theme of rebellion. In the final stanza the son protests against poverty and waste, the space programme and militarism. The suggestion is that the demonstration will be violently suppressed by the police. This political violence of the state will be revisited in *The Snapshot Album of the Innocent Tourist* and *Tierra del Fuego*.

## *Songs Our Mothers Teach Us*

At first reading this poem seems to place a terrible burden of responsibility on women's shoulders. Mothers have the capacity to civilise and humanise their sons, to immunise them against the will to violence by setting an example of compassion and commitment. But if they fail, the poem seems to suggest, they may also carry some of the moral burden of their sons' behaviour as adult men in conflict and war. The domestic drama taking place behind, "Stirring the sauce, setting the table, running the bath" is linked thematically and syntactically with the masculine violence of, "Setting the sights, pressing the trigger, dumping the bomb".

Strauss, however, prefers to read the poem as one of her Vietnam period, anti-war pieces. Originally entitled *The Syntax of Alienation*, it is concerned with what enables us to go to war, with the mechanisation of feelings and emotions represented by, "Switch off... Switch on." She was also concerned at the time with the separatist strand of feminist politics which saw violence and war as entirely masculine pursuits within which women had no complicity or role. From this point of view she wanted to bring women back into the argument, reclaiming some responsibility for mothers.

Language is always a problematic area for Strauss and in *Songs Our Mothers Teach Us* she wanted to represent mothers as the first instructors of language, women as the transmitters of sentiment, so that her reading of the poem is far more positive than my own. Perhaps it is the possessive, exclusive, analytical nature of language in a patriarchal world which is being criticised here, but I am still uncomfortable with the woman's ears clenching to attention in the first stanza being mirrored by "the shattered town bleeding" in the second wing of this diptych.

There is after all a powerful connection here between what the boys observe in childhood and their adult capacity to disregard compassion and humanity. A mother is relieved because the child's voice crying in the street is not her own. Grown sons can kill and hate each other, destroying each other's towns in times of war because their dehumanised victims are not their own people. Just who is being commanded by that final moral injunction, "Switch on"?

## *A Just Cause*

Written in the same era as *Songs Our Mothers Teach Us*, *A Just Cause* is similarly concerned with the origins and nature of human violence and warfare as a reaction against American and allied intentions in Vietnam. The vehicle here is a dramatic monologue based on the Old Testament *2 Kings* Chapter 9 story of Jehu's murder of the Baal priestess, Jezebel, convincingly narrated through the eyes of fifteen year old boy.

The teenager's soldierly initiation begins with the promise of, "thundered glory... Rushing to battle" but ends in, "dirty work... ravelled stinking shreds" of human flesh, the boy riding home, blooded and weeping. Their so-called just cause is more akin to a tribal feud, ethnic cleansing or the revenge killing of an, "old - blue-veined and brittle" woman.

As we've come to expect, Strauss makes fine use of reversal and juxtaposition. The biblical account has Jezebel thrown down by eunuchs on Jehu's order. Strauss has her jump - the single heroic act in this part of the narrative - thus choosing the moment and controlling the manner of her death. The adventurous and soldierly tone of the opening lines is actually setting the scene for an attack on the, "unguarded/ Queen of a house of women and less than women".

Central to these reversals is the contrast between the lived reality of the boy's experiences that day and the official record of those events. Jezebel jumps, her bones are not picked clean by the dogs, she has been killed in the name of a just god but the boy's recollections contain a germ of doubt about the nature of this justice. Heroism has been unmasked as brutality, it has been reversed and subverted by the horrified recollections of a terrified and morally wounded boy who identifies himself as stone at the height of the action but then cries all the way home for what he has seen and participated in and for what he has become. Another contrast of images giving the lie to this just God and his cause is that between the hands of Jezebel, "In human shapes" and those of Jehu with, "blood in traces under the fingernails".

The, "Big-eyed, kitten-soft, pretty for a heathen" girl of Jezebel's household is of a similar age to the boy and participates in this poem as a "taut and hateful" yet heroic moral antagonist, condemning the action of Jehu's men; "'You have made brave war,' she said and spat..." Having earlier begged permission to tend to Jezebel's body, it is this girl who shows real courage, conviction and loyalty.

### *Migrant Woman on a Melbourne Tram*

An inspiration for the composition of this poem was the contrast in clothing between the ever-barer, mini-skirted 1960s Melbourne girls and the black-clad, often veiled matriarchs of southern European peasant migrant families. This visual trigger eventually gave rise to a portrait of nearly absolute displacement and alienation.

The migrant woman is trying to make her way to an address she cannot read by looking at street signs she cannot decipher. These words and letters leap both at and away from her, "ungraspably". The poet can shape and transform language to suit her meaning in an environment where the migrant woman has no language, retains no identity. But on another level we know from *Tierra del Fuego* and *An End to Innocence* that Strauss is well able to identify with the migrant woman's alienation, her isolation due to failed language and impossible communication.

Beyond "ungraspably" the most noticeable verbal element of this poem is Strauss' use and repetition of the word "impossibly". The woman's clothing is *impossibly* black, the voices around her are *impossibly* obscure, the unreadable words, *impossibly* dark and the key to her despair is that she has *impossibly* departed from all things familiar in the life of her ancient culture to which she cannot return.

Lost in such a labyrinth, Strauss connects the migrant woman's life with the myths of the Cretan Minotaur in several ways. First there is the monstrous shame of their dark foreignness. Next there is the labyrinthine displacement that they feel. Finally there is the image of sacrifice. To appease Crete, the ancient Athenians sent youths and maidens, "In black-sailed ships" to be fed to the monster housed beneath the Cretan capital Cnossus. In this poem "the blind beast now" is the industrialised new-world city devouring the newly arrived migrants, which is yet again a metaphor for the relentless cannibalistic appetite of capitalism, "Eating up men".

This poem gives a voice to the voiceless - something we will see again in *The Snapshot Album of the Innocent Tourist* - based here on a clear empathy with the woman's plight. On the surface we observe and feel isolation and loneliness as a woman obscured in black, unable to speak English, is confronted by a brash new vulgar Australian culture of the body and of youth; "the impudence of summer thighs/ Long arms and painted toenails". At a deeper level the migrant woman represents one of Strauss' strongest thematic concerns; a sense of impossibility, of not wholly being able to be, that is linked with the loss of language.

### *Wife to Horatio*

The interior, unscripted lives of women who've been written out of the picture is fertile ground for Strauss' literary feminism. This witty monologue, at once riotous and chilling, is narrated by the unnamed wife and mother who knows too well the price to be paid by, "ordinary men... a private citizen... ordinary parents", "when the great have problems". A prince's weakness, a noble lover's duplicity, a king's displeasure are the true disruptions to the natural course of events in "ordinary lives" when the powerless pay the price for the problems of the powerful.

In *A Just Cause* the unofficial version of events showed the moral shattering of the inexperienced boy. In this dramatic monologue the narrator speaks with the wisdom of the common woman, well versed in the real meaning of tragedy [Ophelia's and the other numerous and unnecessary deaths in *Hamlet*, Horatio's withdrawal from court] and the yawning gap between the avowed values of men [such as friendship and honour] and the reality and consequences of their actions.

At first this is a witty epilogue to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* at the end of which only the two youths, Fortinbras the soldier and Horatio the scholar, are left standing. Years have passed and the paparazzi, "vultures like you", still clamour at the doors of past and present celebrities, "To dig up all that buried agony". Fortinbras has sons. "Hamlet's skull whitens like Yorick's now". Horatio and his wife have a daughter, Ophelia, "Playing by the river... I've seen to it that she knows how to swim." Fortinbras has tired of Horatio's company, "he grew restive hearing Hamlet praised/ Perpetually", and retired him to the country, "To write the official life of the late Prince".

Who is our narrator? Certainly her personal account will differ from and shed light upon the official version of events just as the boy's in *A Just Cause* did. The late Ophelia's friend, she is bound to have an independent view on Hamlet's tragedy, of which Ophelia was one of several victims; "we/ laughed a lot... but she was dead". This friendship is lost, mourned, treasured, but Ophelia's death is not described or commented on directly. What remains unsaid conveys how her death is as significant as it was unnecessary. In

the words of men though, "I'm told that friendship's noble," even though hers is unacknowledged and Horatio's has been betrayed by Fortinbras.

In this previously hidden woman's voice Strauss gives us a fresh perspective on events in Denmark which is doubly ironic. As she contemptuously turns away the vulture-like reporters to protect her husband's privacy, she ends us giving a tremendously detailed and suggestive doorstep interview of her own which is rich in first hand observation and commentary. Secondly, as an eyewitness survivor unnamed and not participating in the official account [Shakespeare's text] she sums up the treacherous nature of tragedy and her attitude to it in some very brief and telling expressions; "... that buried agony... What miseries breed from talk."

### *The Red Divan*

Hamlet's tragedy is reflected upon by an unnamed narrator. *The Red Divan* examines the nature and purposes of art and the intentions of an artist through numerous speculations centred on the artist's model, "collapsed between exhaustion and despair". The French artist, Francis Grüber, was a severe asthmatic who specialised in studio interiors with red-clad female model and on scenes looking out through windows, a domestic painter of sorts, an expressionist painter of the interior world, perhaps linking him with women's interior and domestic lives. What made him choose, "the angry colour... and paint the world red?"

Strauss wonders if the model is suffering from exhaustion ["worked for hours non-stop"], abandonment ["heard her lover say it was over"] or starvation ["there is no food"]. The woman's role, at least in part, is not only to suffer in herself but to represent all kinds of suffering in the world as well as in other individuals, "as if/ all the blood of her body/ has gone to nourish/ the angry colour of dress, divan,/ carpet, even the walls."

The devastated woman on the red divan could equally represent the artist's attempt at artifice ["did he invent the pose"], his representation of Paris under NAZI occupation or the painter's own, "tubercular blood". Where do we look to find the meaning or significance of an artwork; to its historical context, the desire of the artist to represent something or to the personal condition of the painter?

What are the relationships between artist and subject, between artwork and viewer? The final stanza places the artist and the subject, painter and model together, "on the mortal verge," suggesting I am sure that whatever the answers to these speculations, the importance and centrality of art to human experience is undiminished.

### *The Snapshot Album of the Innocent Tourist*

How does one learn to behave in a dictatorship? We begin, I suppose, by acknowledging that every action we have previously taken for granted will now be invested with political consequences; photographing a palace, rising a grandchild. You re-learn fear. In stanza one Strauss naively wants to photograph the residence of Paraguayan dictator Stroessner in Asuncion. Whilst not recounted in the poem, it was her companion's anxiety more than, "the baby-faced boy/ whose gun was real," which made her realise the danger of her actions.

Photography. These six stanzas are deliberately shaped and set apart to resemble the dark empty spaces left behind by photos removed from an album. They are, therefore, at once about appearance and disappearance. "This is a space... This space" begins each stanza. We are observing the hollow empty places evacuated in people's lives by the cruelty, oppression and exploitation of their political tyrants.

In this most overtly leftist political poem notions of responsibility are handled as they were in *Songs Our Mothers Teach Us* but with far greater subtlety and effect. Strauss herself is the tourist, but the question is implied as to whether or not one should visit and photograph these scenes and cities of grief in Paraguay, in the Argentina of the military junta or Pinochet's Chile. We recognise not so much her outrage as her horror at the cruelty and the violence sanctioned by the powerful to keep the "Rather splendid palace" divided from the "Riverflat shanties" of the powerless. Another quality evident in *Snapshot* is its solidarity, its sympathy enunciated through implication with the victims and their families. The subject matter of this poem links it with one of the twentieth century's most important protest movements, the Mothers of the Disappeared in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

The title itself, the preference for *snapshots* over *photographs*, conveys a sense of brittleness and urgency, like shutters snapping or fingers clicking, insisting, look here. And what we look at are the boy soldiers, murdered students, blacklisted teachers, the bourgeoisie feigning ignorance, families, the disappeared. Some of them speak; "Prohibido!" yells the robot boy-soldier, "It's good to be back," says the teacher returning from twenty years of internal exile, "But nobody knew," pleads the elegant woman whose plastic surgery symbolises the hypocrisy of her class.

*Snapshot* is an eloquent denunciation of tyranny and state violence. On the one hand Strauss is the innocent tourist unaware of the bloody history that these sites and people have witnessed. On the other the poet is simultaneously the knowing consciousness of these events. The photo album is at once full of images and at the same time it is a series of blank spaces inhabited by, "the disappeared/ Who fade in other people's albums:/ ...things that don't show up/ In negatives." We have the victims who were taken away, never to be seen again, never tried, never released, detained, tortured and executed and we have the secondary victims, their families for whom nothing remains but their fading photographs.

## Tierra del Fuego

### 1. Burning Questions

The Old Testament Ruth's assertion of loyalty to her mother-in-law Naomi after both their husbands have died has become rich in irony. A pledge between women, it is one of our favourite wedding texts. Whilst Ruth's words represent absolute fidelity, a quality sorely tested for Strauss in this suite of poems, Ruth is willing to leave Moab and her family for Naomi's Judah where she will be forever a foreigner. Having taken her own demanding journey from Australia to Argentina to be with her lover, Strauss, "is full of questions/ and silence". We have that sense of texts returned to and juggled, of images reversed and official accounts revised in the light of lived experience.

*Burning Questions* is filled then with ironies. Anzac Day, a public holiday, turns Melbourne into a "silence-sodden" city of the dead. A journey from one continent to



another in the conscious world is mirrored by, "*the familiar dead/ ...absorbed in conversation*" in the unconscious world. Love leads to alienation and exile. Concerning Ruth's pledge, "*whose/ was the language*"? Can we ever know exactly what was said let alone exactly what was meant by another?

The predominant images are of water and fire. Things said and understood are "*homely words*" that "*flow over, round like cool water*". But foreign words that can neither be said nor understood are "the flame", they, "burn like bile". *Tierra del Fuego* is Strauss' strongest rendering of the centrality of language to experience and the pain of failed communication.

## **2. Dreaming of Hellfire and Damnation**

Carrying forward the fire imagery, the key text here is the New Testament Pentecost, declared by Peter to be miraculous evidence from Heaven of Christ's mission. The tongues of fire do not speak gibberish. Rather, they cause the apostles to speak the native languages of all the foreign Jews then in Jerusalem, languages they themselves did not speak. Strauss reverses this. Instead of miraculous communication, she experiences alienation and expulsion as she is the one outsider in a room filled with people speaking their language, not hers. This is not from Heaven; it is Hell.

Finding herself in a room of Spanish speakers, "ablaze with conversation, tongues/ of fire, darting flames/ dancing/ in disembodied mouths" Strauss reverts to the comfort of her own Australian vernacular, realising that, "She will never master the lingo." T.S. Eliot examined similar terrain in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* where, "In the room the women come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo" and the persona has, "heard the mermaids singing, each to each./ I do not think that they will sing to me."

## **3. In the line of fire**

In this foreign world Strauss experiences a moment of recognition through the power of drama and music as she watches the re-enactment of a political conflict; "the hunt of Mammon/ is more transparent/ in a foreign tongue". Therefore, " she comprehends too well/ what the music says:/ it declares hunger,/ defiance, guns..." all the tragedies she has learned of already in *The Snapshot Album*.

Conflict between the powerful and the powerless can be understood in any language; "But the workers had words/ the bosses guns,/ and the language of fire-sticks/ outshouted..." This is cosmic drama for which Strauss invokes Orion in the stars and King Samson reduced to blind slavery in Gaza.<sup>4</sup> This comprehension - a momentary break in her isolation - gives Strauss the courage to challenge her situation with, "a tough Ozzie smile" and a joke.

Any optimism is short-lived though. It will be crushed just as the workers and peasants will be crushed by their employers and their governments; "the burnt children know/ what the word and the world/ can do..."

## **4. Estancia**

Away from the city, the centre of these old and new conflicts, a retreat to the country, a ranch. Release. This moment is most fleeting and yet most vivid, a moment of release

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<sup>4</sup> see Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, lines 1-114

from anxiety, of love so sensual that all it requires is body not mind, desire not language. The beautiful richness of the language transports us to an imagined prehistory, a kind of Edenic Paradise without injunctions or duties or divisions of labour where only the senses remain. The first stanza returns us to a place "before" all such experience marked the world, the night, even memory, "with human occupation,/ night was like this, terrible and friendly."

But this is terrible in a different way, it is something so utterly unimagined, so fragile and pure yet overwhelming, it is, "such silence - warm and flowing" between lovers. *Estancia* is an impressive evocation of all-enveloping nature and night in which the hands and bodies of the lovers are blessedly allowed to return them to some pre-language, instinctive reality.

### **5. Tierra del Fuego**

In the first three poems, fire has been the metaphor for language, particularly language that divides rather than unites us: "the flame of your language" [1], "ablaze with conversation" [2], "the language of fire-sticks" [3]. In the wordless *Estancia* fire represented sexual love in, "the bodies/ that burn in this night of fireflies". Here, "love is the territory of fire" but this is closer to the failure of communication than it is to the pleasure of the senses.

If the poet cannot acclimatise to the complete alienation of living in a country where she has no language, can her relationship survive? Finally, the poem is an equivocal, uncertain moving away, closing on the minor key of a postcard.

The poem opens with the story of how Tierra del Fuego [Land of Fire] was named by Spanish sailors, "on winds of ambitious trade" who, thinking the land and sea at the southern tip of South America to be the most inhospitable in the world, were amazed to see Indian campfires on shore, "glimpsed through misty clouds". The sailors imagine barbarian firewalkers. Strauss thinks of these figures in their trance. Waking from it they will, "scream, clutching charred soles", a bitter metaphor for the cold light of day revealing the wounds, illusions and limitations of erotic love. No wonder real, "love is whatever/ survives sex" beyond the, "passion-tranced,/ dancing".

Are we moving towards disillusionment or realisation, a question one remembers asking of Eliot's great poems. Sailors no longer travel under sail, "lovers by metaphor." Is the poet moving forward or retreating? The suite deliberately concludes on an ambivalent note. Travelling alone, her plane refuels at Tierra del Fuego. "*it's cold and dark/ when all I'm wanting/ is one clear view...*"

## Section 3.

### The Unit 3 & 4 Literature outcomes

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*(Don't forget that a student can use one text for no more than two outcomes.)*

| Unit 3 | Outcome 1 | Text in Performance |
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Poetry in print does not seem immediately to offer rich opportunities for this outcome which requires students to assess a performance version of the text. However, the complete text of *Tierra del Fuego* is available on cassette through Louis Braille Audio [ISBN 0 7320 2430 7]. Students could be asked to write about the qualities brought out in the poems by hearing them recited as opposed to seeing them in print. More adventurous inroads could be found by looking at films [such as *Kiss of the Spider Woman* or *Salvador*] dealing with political repression in Latin America and comparing them with the representations of that material in Strauss' poetry. Similar tasks could be performed using extracts from Gabriel Garcia Marquez or Isabel Allende.

Another way of looking at this outcome might be to make an assessment of the selected poems in the light of the following comments made by Jennifer Strauss during a recent school visit:

"Poetry works by suggestion and imagination... Feeling and tone are as important as meaning... A poem is not a closed object... Paintings and poems stir up associations... A poem is as much real in the world for me as a flower, a child... A poem is fed a lot by the unconscious, poems are like dreams you should have had and didn't... Poetry is not exorcism, it can intensify feeling... Either endless silence or endless language would be Hell... "

| Unit 3 | Outcome 2 | Views and Values |
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This outcome requires students to address ideas, opinions or themes that are discussed, debated or endorsed by the author. Jennifer Strauss' poetry is a rich source of varied material for this kind of work.

Discuss and interpret the ways in which Strauss' poetry:

- ❖ allows those who are generally not listened to the right to speak.
- ❖ makes use of contrasts between the official and the actual versions of events.
- ❖ makes use of numerous cultural references to enrich contemporary concerns.
- ❖ raises the spectre of male violence, its origins and nature.
- ❖ gives breadth and depth to the lives and roles of women.
- ❖ places the family and marriage under investigation.
- ❖ places language at the centre of our world and our experience of it.

| Unit 3 | Outcome 3 | Review |
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This outcome differs from the others in the Year 12 Literature course in that it is done on an appropriate literary text of the student's own choice. However, teacher guidance or

direction can be given. Students might wish to select one or more poems from other prominent Australian women writers and review them in a way that allows for some comparison with Strauss' poetry. Judith Wright, Gwen Harwood, Judith Rodriguez and Fay Zwicky spring to mind.

| Unit 4 | Outcome 1 | Creative Response |
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This outcome is a unique opportunity in the assessment of Year 12 Literature as it allows the students to respond creatively to their reading. It would be unfair to expect that all students wishing to respond creatively to Jennifer Strauss should have to do so by writing poetry. Provided they are willing to experiment with the sorts of stylistic devices, use of voice and social and personal concerns evident in Strauss' work, there is no reason why they cannot write in prose and in genres that suit their purposes. A statement of intention or personal evaluation is essential for the student to explain how they have attempted the task and how they have made use of the original writer's style and concerns.

- ❖ In a series of scenes *Son and Moon* explores the differences and similarities and the paths of growth and awareness followed by a parent and a child. Write your own.
- ❖ *Cold Anniversary* deals with loss and mourning by exploding a popular cliché. *After a Death* does so by making use of an ancient mythological reference. One confronts, the other reverses. Making use of a similar range of approaches, write about the ways in which you've come to terms with a loss of your own.
- ❖ Select a favourite painting or portrait and speculate on the possible meanings and experiences of the subject and the intentions of the artist as Strauss does in *The Red Divan*. Picasso's *Weeping Woman* or a Rembrandt self-portrait might be a great place to begin.
- ❖ *Tierra del Fuego* and *Migrant Woman on a Melbourne Tram* deal amongst many things with the difficulties of language and the impossibility of communication. Recount and link some experiences of your own where language was at the centre of your difficulties.
- ❖ *A Just Cause* and *Wife to Horatio* are examples of the dramatic monologue, each with its own powerful moral imperative. Write a first person narrative from the point of view of a character whose voice should have been included in a famous text.

| Unit 4 | Outcome 2 | Analysis of a Review |
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Students are encouraged to analyse and respond to the assumptions and values employed by a reviewer. The following review by Noel Rowe at the University of Sydney could be used:

*What the Witness Spoke*, a review of *Labour Ward* by Jennifer Strauss, (Pariah Press, 1988)

'Anyone who enjoys a crisp and humane wit will enjoy the poetry of Jennifer Strauss and hope it will become more widely known. As her most recent volume, *Labour Ward*, shows, Strauss is writing poetry which is skilful, mischievous and challenging. She is reworking those traditional favourites, love and death, as matter for meditation (sometimes wry, sometimes sombre), destabilizing the self-satisfied distinction between the personal and the political, and rewording women made silent and receptive before patriarchal texts and readings. There is, throughout her work, a sense of poetry needing

to bear witness: to achieve an honest text, one that minimizes the deceptions which attend interpretation. This honesty is partly informed by a desire for moments of simple apprehension in which skin, mind and heart cease to occupy separate spaces. Yet spaces are what draw the poetry together: the poetry involves a decision to attend to spaces which embody internal and external dividedness, to testify to the empty spaces left after forgetfulness and political torture have done their work, and to exploit the perceptual and conceptual spaces which allow it to angle in on its subjects...

*A Weekend in the Country* takes the pastoral cycle of life-death-life and pierces it with a linear movement, a woman driving towards her mother's death, an absence first registered by the break between the two parts of the poem, then later put into words. But the verbalizing shows, in its change of register, the effort to be flatly honest: the image of the dead mother is abruptly present, confronting the cow whose "gravid belly's/Gross with life". The poem, then, catches itself between its desire for nature's cyclic and reassuring ritual, for the "patience of animals", and its unshielded awareness that its speaker is now more immediately in line with death.

With *Tending the Graves*, it is the dead who are found to be patient, indifferent to the anxieties of those who mourn them. Refusing the usual eschatological projections by which we keep the dead concerned with us (remembering us, punishing us, forgiving us), the poem brings death - the symbol as well as the experience - back to us, "heavy with life", leaving us to establish whether we are bearing freedom or carrying the comforts of false presences:

It's not reproach. They have no need to tell us "You  
Have given away my books, taken another lover into my bed,  
Made of my children something I do not approve" - all that  
We can say for ourselves. It is absolute absence.  
They are so engrossed by death they refuse even to haunt us.  
We must tend the grave and walk away: unrewarded,  
Unreproached, unforgiven; our feet heavy with life...

Love is also seen as union and separation. *Aubade* pictures one lover watching the other and reflecting on their different sleeping postures, one "Back to the womb", the other "On to the tomb", then considers "the combination of experience", the tension between complementarity and incompatibility which is signalled in the postures. At the same time the poem balances these terms, complementarity and incompatibility, in its procedures: it is trying to work its way back towards simple apprehension, as well as thinking its way out towards a metaphysical reflection, and, in regard to the latter, it is wondering whether writing about love is a form of betrayal, yet also realizing that it is a way "To try the combination of experience, sounding out"... In *The Nightside of the Holiday*, the speaker seems almost to want to unmake remembered experience, with its pains, guilts and expectations, and to make the mind as smooth as the sleeper's face: "I want/ To watch your warrior's face smoothed with sleep and love." However, for the speaker love is a "reckless destination" and sleep a locale for nightmare. Wishing for love's simplifying and sensual comforts, the speaker is yet involved in an insistent, intelligent duty to witness, so that pain does not go unattended:

And still it's pain I'm hearing, unattended, dragged to a dark corner,  
Whimpering and whimpering its way towards silence. Silence at last.

I lie here quiet on the night side of our holiday, cold,  
Waiting for sunlight and your voice to warm me.

Yet Strauss's poetry does not withdraw into its own lyrical and reflective activities...It prefers to keep the personal in contact with the political, and the political is itself imagined in terms of silences which must be resisted and absences which must be recorded, even if they cannot be rectified. *The Snapshot Album of the Innocent Tourist* shows the tourist losing innocence and photographs, becoming more and more implicated in political absences as an empty album turns into "a space for all the disappeared/ Who fade in other people's albums". Yet this conceptual play does not obscure or deflect the emotional substance of the poem, the combined sense of sorrow and protest with which it records the President's palace standing above the slums, the unremarkable corner "Where the student was beaten to death, the teacher imprisoned for twenty years", and the "dangerous child", the set of whose mouth still bears fugitive traces of his father, "Who died 'resisting arrest'", and his mother, who disappeared. If the voice, insisting on "This is a space", seems so consciously creative, even clever, this may be because it is so aware that only a careful creativity can snag these real and painful absences on its frames, allowing readers to feel the desolation of such injustices, but denying them the consolation of full-bodied words. In similar vein, *Collage: The Personal is Political* draws attention to "the eye of the camera/ which is non-interventionist" even as it is haunted by the famous photograph of the Vietnamese child who, burning from napalm, ran screaming, towards a news camera. The poem's stance reinforces this. It enacts a grim noting, as if determined detachment will lead it between indifference and horror, making possible an effective response to repeated patterns of child abuse. It calls for justice, but guesses that those torturers (the best) who know how not to leave signs will escape and continue. It acknowledges international and dramatic instances of abuse, but refuses to avoid closer examples, the children being abused "in quiet suburban streets/ where lemons glow on the tidy tree". It also plays ironically with notions of complementarity and incompatibility: the dominant image of a child's mouth open "in a rictus of terror" is related to an image of the speaker's happy grandson:

his mouth open  
in the widest of grins, it is  
a different arrangement  
of muscles, of circumstance,  
his round head is sleek as a seal's  
he is perfect he is unmarked

This is not a simple contrast. Somewhat like the "innocent tourist" we are confronted with an implication that innocence can at times be implicated in evil. While Strauss is clearly resisting those moral categories which are too simply dialectic. constructing a poetic perspective which builds up a series of deflections, she is determined to face the actual existence of oppression.

This is particularly true of those poems which involve a rewording of women. They embody clear refusals and strong decisions, but they also embody an intelligence which employs multiple refractions in such a way that it prevents perspective becoming itself a position of prejudice. It is their scepticism which liberates their commitment. This scepticism, in *The Anabaptist Cages, Munster*, knows how images of God, particularly when allied to dogmatic and political purposes, can become Idols - cages in both a literal and a metaphorical sense. Strauss exploits the familiar ironies: how "God" is often an

extension of ego, how Love justifies brutality, how the male God legitimates the Godmale, how steeples may signal phallic pride instead of piety. She deploys the familiar argument, that this sacred and hierarchical mindset has cast women as its sinners and victims...

This does more than make the world a punishment for a human nature perceived as inherently evil. It suggests we fashion a world and God consonant with our divided consciousness... It also exposes the vested interests operating in institutionalized language...

"Wife to Horatio" is also suspicious: the established discourse, that of Fortinbras, makes a sink-or-swim world, and her daughter is called Ophelia. In this wry monologue, wife and Horatio have withdrawn from court, Horatio having been "appointed (a neat move)/ To write the official life of the late Prince". This appointment appears all the more ominous when Fortinbras sends their children birth gifts - fencing foils for the boy, pearls for the girl - gifts that the survivors of *Hamlet* would hardly associate with birth. Yet the wife exercises a resistance and wisdom which is cautious: the title, after all, embodies the duplicity by which she survives, pretending to indicate her married role, but also implying that her speech is directed, not to her husband, but to the "official life" by which he is himself being written. She is appealing to the apolitical fiction, Horatio is "a private citizen,/ And ill", but she is also taking action to ensure her daughter will survive the words:

Yes, that's Ophelia  
Playing by the river. Aren't we afraid?  
Not more than ordinary parents are.  
Horatio, it's true, was rather anxious.  
And no, we didn't talk it out. Come, come,  
You've lived in Denmark, surely you must know  
What miseries breed from talk. We needed  
Action. There'll be no drowning here.  
I've seen to it that she knows how to swim...

Strauss' revisions of patriarchal myth and legend are among the best being written, partly because of the depth and skill of their literary awareness, but also because of their capacity to balance wit and argument, to realize theory in dramatic terms, and to refuse the covert idealism which ideology (of whatever season) can generate...

The poetry keeps its witness and it does, because of its measured care, effect a kind of catharsis. In its tending of graves, disappearances, and pages, it manages at least to honour and often to reclaim many absences - in the lives of women, political victims, and children, as well as in the records of history. It does this with a peculiarly honest attention to the strict proportion needed between the sympathy it offers its subject-matter and the scepticism it reserves for the evasive ploys of language. In this way, continually engaging in a play of perspective, the poetry knows that language provides no more than angles on truth, but it also determines to sharpen some of those angles and truths, by breaking open histories, memories, and silences, by employing its own fictive strategies in a manner which compels language to tender a more accurate witness.'

The Close Analysis outcome makes use of those skills most clearly associated with the end of year Literature exam; detailed contextual analysis recognising the stylistic features and content of a text from the extracts given and generating an independent discussion of the broader text. Therefore, it probably makes sense to deliver this outcome in a format as closely resembling the exam as possible. Three extracts are given with the instruction to, "Use one or more of these extracts as the basis for a discussion of the poetry of Jennifer Strauss." The three extracts could consist of the complete text of two of the shorter poems and an extract from *Tierra del Fuego*.

Strauss' work is wonderful in the Literature classroom for the ideas and opinions suggested and the discussions generated by the content. When writing about poetry, students do need to be reminded that their discussion should cover not just the meaning or opinion conveyed by the content of the piece and not just a checklist of the stylistic features being used but an appreciation of the ways in which stylistic features work together with the content to enhance meaning.



## Section 4. References

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