This is the published version:

Campbell, Marion 1988, Not being Miriam, *Westerly*, vol. 33, no. 2, pp. 121-123.

Available from Deakin Research Online:

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30056934

Reproduced with the kind permission of the copyright owner.

Copyright: 1988, University of Western Australia.
Not Being Miriam

The hangers are hooked away from Elsie. Here's the set of wooden ones with their knitted coats still on, survivors from her primary school days when coats were knitted for everything — hot water bottles, tea pots, the little red maid with the holes in her head which was the ironing water bottle, and the family dog. He has quite an army of trousers, navy serge and grey flannel mainly. Why he keeps them all, heaven knows. Some of them date from way back when cuffs were in fashion but they all have the razor sharp pleat. He insists on that. Meticulous is Roger. His lip sits like a satisfied worm in the shadow of his nose, waiting to curl. His sarcasm! She gives him the chance often enough.

The hooks slide along smoothly. She's done it so many times that the metal is polished. There she is. There's Miriam. Her black eyebrows are arched as if the universe owes her something. Roger had the photo blown up poster size. There's like a breath of rouge sitting on the dusky cheek bone. The way he's never let up on the skin she had. Wouldn't hold a candle to Miriam, he said about Bess next door. Ogles her enough but. No, that one's starting to get that weathered Australian look already, he said. But Miriam had the finest skin, not a flaw, not a single flaw. Always says everything about Miriam twice. He still puts the entry in the In Memorium column every year. And the wedding photo with the veil foaming all around her, he keeps that one on the dressing table.

The scissors are in Elsie's hand. This time she has parted the trousers with a purpose. The scissor blade caresses, tracing out spiral lacerations on the glossy skin of the poster. It doesn't break the surface.

Your untimely passing dearest Miriam
Put Roger's mind into delirium
Though later, with the years
A harsh sun dried his tears
And he's made his home with another
Deep at heart, he's still your lover

That's to a word, the notice as it has appeared each anniversary for the past years, at least ever since she discovered the letter he was sending to the paper. It was funny how quick she was when it came to reading that one. How suddenly, that's what she was: another. And he's made his home with another. And Roger talking about himself like that: he. Well. Now the scissor traces spiral lacerations on the skin of the photo, on the skin of how she looked. Actually her lips were quite thin — they make a straight line. As an old woman, she probably would've got a profile like Punch, nose jutting down to the up-thrusting chin. She wouldn't have looked so regular featured then.

But here's Elsie with the breakfast scraps again, her foot on the lever to pop up the bin lid, scraping off the bacon rind and egg smear and the cereal bits left in
a soggy soak at the bottom of the bowls, mopping up the milk puddles from under the toaster cord, picking up the shoes they shook off under the table last night. She sinks onto a stool. What's the use, there's nowhere to stack the dishes anyhow. All the appliances that Roger gets on discount and seem to be jinxed from the word go, that's what takes all the space. There's the juicer and blender, the kitchen whizz and the soda-pop machine and the jaffa maker and the electric can-opener and the sandwich toaster and the greased up micro-wave and the vertical grill. Or did they all fall off the back of lorries too? She never really knows with Roger. Still, he does try to please her with these things. He's not like that with Kevie. He even reported him to the cops for taking the Cobra for a spin before he passed his code. And do you think Roger was willing to go with him to read out the test? Kevie still has a thing with the reading like his poor old Mum. Roger help him? No, not on your life he wouldn't. So there's Kevie still riding the old bike to the surgical bed factory in O'Connor. He won't cut much of a picture with the girls; they expect the boys to at least have a licence. And all the kids have the cars done up with mag wheels and fenders and chrome plated exhaust pipes and the baked enamel repaint jobs these days, that's what poor Kevie says. But do you think he's got any sympathy out of Roger?

The dent in the side of the micro-wave, that's when he pushed Kevie out of the way when he asked him for a five dollar loan till pay day. Well, he got his reply straight away, a lump on the back of the head. Whereas Julie's all right for the moment, for as long as she's Daddy's Little Girl. You've got your Dad's brains, haven't you Jules, he says. Oh yes, nothing but the best secretarial college for Daddy's Girl. That's what he's decided he wants for her. As long as she accepts that and as long as she keeps away from the boys, she'll be all right. He's already put a lock on the phone: she's not running up my bill for boys, he said.

The handles of the jaffle iron are kaput too. That's from when he threw it at Elsie for asking what the pink cardigan with the pearl buttons was doing in the back of the car; that was the time he was hot on Ruby.

Be careful Else, she says. Don't go back into the bedroom. Do without the Miriam session. Don't go to his wardrobe. Don't part the trousers, don't look at her, don't pick up the scissors. But the other voices crowd in: Let them see what it's like when the work isn't done, with milk puddles under the toaster cord and the soggy flakes in bowls and the shoes under the table and the bits of nibbled toast that missed the tidy and the washing and the beds and the vacuuming and the shopping . . .

A bit of the old sherry, why not, it's rare enough she has a drop and a mogadon, that'll take away the panic. Play some music, let the mind wander off. That can't do any harm. You've got to fix yourself up a bit old Else, she says to the face in the mirror backing of the drinks cabinet, get yourself a perm, what about a blonde rinse this time?

Maybe even the Organ Demonstrator will be there at Garden City, the lights above him like dandelions blowing out the colour. Like an aerosol spray, sticky droplets of pink and green light hanging in the air, reflections playing in his brilliantined hair. There'll be the constant blaze of teeth shaped like . . . That's what it was, like the grill of one of those old Anglias. He trained his black eyes on the plant display in front of him, rotating his smile through the half circle and back, never once looking at the keys. What a smiler. He pulled out the percussion button. That was when things really started to move. The brass. And then he did it. He smiled directly at Elsie. She sagged at the knees but he was beckoning and patting the bench next to him: Come and join me, m'lass, see what sounds this thing'll make for you. Eh? Try some musical magic for once, no obligations! She hadn't felt obliged . . . The high gloss on the monsterias and phyllodendrons in front was all she could see then but the feeling of his thigh pressing alongside hers! See, didn't know you could get such a sound out've them fingers, did yer luv! There had been the money Mum
left her, that at least was hers. Didn’t prevent Roger flipping his lid, though. He
didn’t like the idea of the five free follow-up lessons in your own home.

Since then at Garden City there’s been the Staghorn Fern Society and the
Booragoon Ladies’ China Painting Association and the Skate Board Champions
from the U.S. of A. and the Kung Fu Demonstrators and the Estonian Dancers
and the Match Stick Model Builders’ Association and the Nativity Plays but never
Sammy Schulz the Organ Demonstrator with the music in him. Back she comes
all the way along Leach Highway on the 105 bus with her plastic K-Mart bags full
of compensation shopping.

Of course there are other photos of Miriam she could be looking at. There’s the
one from the Raffles up in Singapore. He’d taken her there on the honeymoon. She’s
standing, her face half in shadows, one knee slightly bent in the pencil skirt. Talk
about slim. Or there’s the romantic one with the Spanish lace fan at a restaurant
somewhere. There’s an open packet of cigarettes on the table and one long one
burning in the ashtray. You can tell she wasn’t a serious smoker or she wouldn’t
waste a good puff like that. That’s why Roger has to switch the light out as soon
as he hits the mattress. He has had his peek at her just before and has to keep her
secure, right behind his eyes, so that it’s all he sees as he moves in the dark towards
Elsie. Even that he’s doing without these days. How she longs for a good cuddle.
Sex, well, his style, the quick poke, wham bam thank you ma’am, she’s never cared
for but a real affectionate hug would go a long way.

The scissors trace a spiral laceration on the poster. Of course, it isn’t a crime written
anywhere is it? Or would this rate as vandalism? Could he have her charged like
he tried to do with Kevie: It’s not like public stuff, not like painting graffiti on bus
stops and that. And after all, it’s only a photo. There should be a law against this,
anyhow, having the first wife hanging about everywhere. She can cut up the
photograph; she can try to do it like peeling an orange, all in one piece for good
luck. She can wear it like the bandages those mummies from Egypt have on. She
can get under the cover with the picture of Her face wrapped around another’s
features. Just to bring him to his senses.

When he stoops to kiss his sleeping beauty Miriam, he’ll find something else. She
laughs a raw laugh. Silly bitch! The dressing table mirror holds her smile as she
turns. Now she’s unpeeling Miriam: this’ll give Else a cosmetic job all right. She
can swallow the cocktail and dream awhile. What was it she put in the sherry now?
Was it valium or librium or serepax or mogadon? Not to worry, she'll give him the
bleedin lazy fat cow under the skin he so admires. How’s this for packaging, Rod-
ger Dod-get? This is really somethin Else. She gurgles at her joke.

Who cares anyhow? Who spoke one word to her this morning? He’s made his
home with another. Oh yes. Does he even give her a peck on the cheek these days?
Does he give her one kind word? Even Kevie’s stopped talking. He’s got so moody
since that car business. And then Julie comes to breakfast with her Walkman headset
on.

Who has a word for Elsie then?