I read this line in Gwen Harwood's first collection, Poems (1963) when I was seventeen, in a poem titled ‘Group From Tartarus’. I had it memorised long before I even knew what Tartarus is—it’s part of the underworld, where the wicked are punished—and I puzzled over the dichotomy. I understood the concept of being too young to die, but I wondered how you could ever be too old to love. Now, in my thirties, I am beginning to understand what Harwood meant, just like I understand George Bernard Shaw’s quote—too late—that ‘Youth is wasted on the young’, and long after I did not heed John Cougar Mellencamp’s warning to ‘hold onto sixteen as long as you can’. I am determined to learn from Harwood before I grow any older.

Aging and loneliness are two important ideas in Harwood’s poetry, and photos of Harwood, which survive in the public domain, feed this sombre image. The pictures show a benign-looking grandmotherly figure in a Peter Pan collar; it is the photo circulated on the entry form of the literary quarterly Island’s annual poetry competition, named in honour of Harwood, that shows a vivacious redhead with slightly prominent front teeth. She looks beyond the frame of the black and white photo of Foster in the centre photo spread in A Steady Storm of Correspondence, and publicly is the sepia-toned image on the front cover of A Steady Storm of Correspondence, the second selection of her letters. In this photo Harwood is very lined. Her hair is cut in a no-nonsense bob and down the coast or ‘limericks’ and steers clear of anything romantic. If anything, Riddell seems quite asexual. It is Foster’s naivety that makes reading her letters uncomfortable. In them, she creates herself as the heroine of her own romance, a romance that the reader, with hindsight, understands will remain unrequited. Riddell never married.

In 1967, Harwood addressed the possibility of a romantic interpretation of their friendship in a letter to Riddell: ‘I can imagine some Freudian clownish PhD trying to make a vulgar fatalistic love affair out of our abiding love.’ She tries to manipulate readings of her letters twenty-five years after they were written. However, comments to Riddell such as ‘hours and hours with the one human being I love above all others, more than the children to whom I have given life, more than anyone I have ever loved, anywhere, anywhere’ seem to point to more of a confession of love than a friendship. So, I willingly take on Harwood’s label of a ‘Freudian clownish [post] PhD’, if it allows me the space to read an early crush into her epistles.

Stephanie Tigg, in her monograph, dismisses any readings of love into Harwood’s letters as idle gossip, contending that “[I]nformal, unpublished speculation about the nature of her relationship with Riddell is rife, though this says more about readers’ projections than anything in the letters themselves.’ If this is true, I guess I am a romantic Nancy Drew type who empathises with Foster. We’ve all been on the wrong end of an unrequited love.

My next discovery as a teenager was the Bulletin scandal of 1961. I gave a presentation on it in my final year of school. But because I attended a small Catholic girls’ school I wasn’t allowed to say ‘fuck’ when discussing the scandal; I felt cheated, because it was such an important word in the hoax. I wasn’t even allowed to show the sonnet that included the word.

Harwood first achieved notoriety when she made headlines in Hobart: ‘Tas Housewife in Hoax of the Year’. Defined as ‘housewife’ rather than ‘poet’—or even ‘woman’—Harwood claimed that, once again, she was not being taken seriously as a crafts person. This claim was precipitated by two sonnets she wrote titled ‘Abelard to Eloisa’ and ‘Eloisa to Abelard’. The hoax sonnets were first sent to Menzlin, and when they were declined by Menzlin she submitted them to the Bulletin where both sonnets were published under the pseudonym ‘Walter Lehmann’. Read acrostically, the sonnets spelled out ‘So Long Bulletin’ and ‘Fuck All Editors’. Harwood believed that the sonnets were ‘poetical rubbish and will show up the incompetence of anyone who publishes them.’ If we take Harwood at her word, then the poems were written as a literary test. She had become disenchanted with her bona fide poetry being published in the Bulletin alongside poetry she considered of ‘marked inferior quality’ (poetry written mainly by men who were maybe only being published because they were men, and/
or perhaps undeservedly lionised; her hoax would not only prove her point, but also make her famous. In a letter to her friend, Alison Hodddinott, Harwood concluded, ‘Iforebear to say that those who couldn’t tell poetry from a bunyip’s arse might well be laughed at.‘

In time Harwood has chronicled two further reasons for concocting this hoax: the first, she outlined in an interview:

[Image]

The second reason is much more practical: Harwood believed that ‘lady poets’, as she quipped, did not receive the same reception as male poets. Thus she published under at least three male pseudonyms—‘Walter Lehmann’, ‘Francis Geyer’, and ‘Timothy Kline’—and many times these pseudonyms were more popular than Harwood herself. Several poems were submitted to competitions with far more invitations and favourable letters than she ever did herself.

Once, when I was discussing at home my delight in discovering a poet who had a great sense of mischief, my grandfather piped up, ‘I doubt it, youngster.’ He was referring to having added, ‘ladies shouldn’t swear anyway, it’s vulgar.’ If my grandfather is any indication of common sentiment at the time, Harwood in the late 1980s truly was fighting against the stereotype of the gentle lady. ‘Perhaps you do keep that the famous one was returned,’ I said to him. ‘It’s probably worth a fortune now.’

Harwood and I parted company for a few years after this first pronouncement of mine petered out. I was completing an arts degree and had taken time spending with Anna Sexton, Adrienne Rich and other band-up American poets. But when it came time for me to decide on a PhD topic, I met with my mentor, Chris Wallace-Crabbe. When I found out that I knew Harwood I settled my topic. Like many PhD wannabes my first idea—to analyse all of Harwood’s poetry—was much too large for the bounds of an 80,000-word thesis. Instead I scaled it back, choosing to focus my analysis on her pseudonymous poems only.

Harwood published under a number of pseudonyms during her lifetime, the most famous and successful were the male ones mentioned earlier (‘Walter Lehmann’, ‘Francis Geyer’, and ‘Timothy Kline’) as well as a female nom de guerre, ‘Miriam Stone’! Each of these pseudonyms has a definable set of interests and a ‘personality’, one that is evident in the poems—as well as preoccupations that are obvious in each pseudonyms’ oeuvre. Walter Lehmann is the suave European hoaxter; Francis Geyer the passionate and melancholy lover; Miriam Stone the disillusioned mother and housewife; and Timothy Kline the angry young man. Kratzmann also unearthed what he believed to be two more of Harwood’s pseudonyms: ‘Alan Caruso’ and ‘William Berry’.

I have brilliantly documented, possibly a programme for a radio performance, that Harwood had sent him before her death. Harwood also wrote poems as ‘W. W Hagendoor’, an anagram of her name, as well as a female nom de guerre, ‘Miriam Stone’—and said many times that these pseudonyms received far more invitations and requests at readings. Perhaps Harwood dreaded the poem because she had to justify it numerous times in interviews, often having to disentangle herself from the infamous narrator.

People read [In the Park] directly as by Gwen Harwood of 18 Pine Street, saying that my children have eaten me alive. ‘What rubbish,’ I reply. ‘It says, “she” sits in the park, “her” clothes are out of date. Mine are not. So why should you take this to be me?’

And,

I am horrified at the tendency of people to identify the ‘I’ with the author... I keep saying that the ‘I’ of the poems is not the ‘I’ making jams jellies pickles and chutneys.

What is particularly interesting about such scenarios is that the scrutiny ‘In the Park’ attracted could have been used by Harwood to discuss more openly issues like postnatal depression and the confines of domesticity for women. I am not suggesting that Harwood actively wanted to write like she made love; that she waits for a demon whilst simultaneously transcending it.

And,

... we have so few friends we can’t afford to lose them by parking the atome-breaths.

By publishing ‘In the Park’ as Walter Lehmann, Harwood perhaps invited suggestion that the sentiments within the poem were something that needed to be hidden; the fact that she herself, a known female poet, couldn’t publish a poem that acknowledged such pejorative thoughts is as good an indicator as any. Similarly, the poems written under the pseudonym Miriam Stone are wonderful manifestos about domestic entrapment, but she didn’t publish them as Harwood. Yes, she may have wanted to protect her children from biological interpretations of her poetry, but if this is the case she might never have chosen to sign them under this pseudonym. It is clear Harwood felt the shackles of housewifery: she was constantly referred to as ‘Mrs’ Harwood, and was known as the woman whose husband secured an academic post in Tasmania. Harwood’s poems as Miriam Stone are vitriolic; her narrators cry out for liberation from a life of domestic obligations. The poem ‘Burnings Sappho’ is among the most savage. Two different copies of the poem exist: the first is a little more confronting.

Sappho, the 7th century Greek lyric poet and whose poems express her affection for women, became a personal myth for Harwood; she even created her own ‘Sappho card’ with Wallace-Crabbe, my supervisor, I gave me a few of her Sappho cards as mementos of my completed PhD. They are postcards she sent to her friends black and white pictures are set onto cardboard with the words ‘A Sappho Card’ printed vertically down their spines. She inserted speech bubbles into the pictures, using quotations that capture her own acerbic or witty thoughts. The cards are Lichtesteenique and often focus on women’s liberation from the confines of the domestic sphere.

Harwood was diagnosed with cancer in 1976 after dreaming about a crab, the astrological symbol for cancer, and she predicted her own demise. She wrote about the experience in Bone Scan (1980). In her lifetime she published more than four hundred poems, and although she was eventually recognised as a serious poet, rather than a part-time ‘lady poet’, her work was not able to label her, she seems to have had difficulty separating her poetry from discussions of her gender, something that contemporaries and friends like Vincent Buckley, Wallace-Crabbe, James McAuley and Thomas Shapcott have not themselves had to endure.

The work of pseudonyms Lehmann, Geyer, Stone and Kline have all appeared in a number of esteemed Australian journals, demonstrating that unlike so many poets today, Harwood didn’t simply trade on her name, but instead created new poets and new challenges for publication. She received countless prizes for her poems and she was a Victoria’s Royal Diademy of Letters winner, my PhD, and also in 1986 was bestowed with an Order of Australia.

Yet even now, after she has been recognised as one of finest poets to come out of Australia, she is still virtually unknown in international contexts.

Still, esteem for Harwood’s poetry continues to grow nationally; whilst some other Australian poets have receded from the public arena, Harwood is constantly considered at the forefront of the genre. This is in part due to her recurring inclusion on secondary school syllabi, but more because she wrote about women’s experiences, and still greatly relevant. She once wrote that she wanted to write like she made love; that she waits for a demon lover; that she writes poetry from inside the domestic sphere whilst simultaneously transcending its limits.

I never met Harwood. I like to tell myself that I would have been one of the few interviewers that she wouldn’t have run rings around, but I’m not sure that’s true. In most of Harwood’s judgements to her students, she would have been the most conventional and presumably would have avoided her habit of identifying the ‘I’ with the author. Of the hosts of the competition asked me what I was writing my PhD on and I replied, ‘an Australian poet’ I won’t answer. But given her hatred of ‘the PhDs’ as she called them (despite accepting two honorary ones herself) my questions would most likely only have elicited her queries about the woman in the park surely wouldn’t have had答案 muster.

I did once meet Harwood’s daughter, Mary, when I was adjudicating an adult tap dancing competition. One of the hosts of the competition asked me what I was writing my PhD on and I replied, ‘an Australian poet’ I was wary of someone who goes on and on about their thesis topic when given the smallest opportunity). When pressed, I said, ‘I’m not sure if you will know of her, her name is Gwen Harwood!’ The tap dancing competition host smiled, and pointing at one of the tables near the dance floor, said, ‘Her daughter is just over there, if you’d like to meet her’ Mary was one of the competing dancers.

The entire experience was surreal. I had only ever seen photographs of Mary as a white-blonde toddler or even younger as a baby, with her twin brother, in her mother’s arms. Sometime during the whole episode I was jokingly warned that as a competition adjudicator I wasn’t allowed to be biased and give extra points to the Canberra team because of Mary Harwood, and her relation to my first and longest literary connection. In her lifetime she published more than four hundred poems, and although she was eventually recognised as a serious poet, rather than a part-time ‘lady poet’ her ‘I’ of the poems is not the ‘I’ making jams jellies pickles and chutneys.

My husband calls me, rich in peace.
To bed. Now deathless verse, goodnight.
In my warm thighs a fleshless devil
Chops him to bit with hell-cold evil.