



*Judith Rodriguez*

# JUDITH RODRIGUEZ

## INTERVIEW

CT: I'd like to begin with a few questions on background. Tell me about your family — how did it influence you, as a writer and as a person?

JR: My father's family were farmers from the English Midlands, cousins worked in banks and the P. & O. I sort of clubbed with my father — I admired him very much. He did cabinet making as his hobby after the war. I loved being in on that, and I admired him because he told little stories about his childhood in a way that my mother just didn't. My mother was extremely reticent about her family, which was Russian Jewish. She was the one who urged me to read. I think the respectabilising process in her own childhood of having to justify herself by getting scholarships, and going on to becoming a teacher, played a part in that. For a very long time she had known that education was the only portable wealth. And indeed my mother was very successful with me and with my brother in pushing us into every kind of education that was available. My brother was an all rounder who has now become a nuclear physicist — fusion not fission. I've always liked teaching very much, and that was the natural way I went into academic educating. I've not regretted that, but I think perhaps I held on to my addiction to it too long. I still have the greatest respect for good scholarship, but perhaps I didn't see that in my own case there were other priorities.

CT: What about geographical background? Do you think of yourself as a West Australian?

JR: Perth has always been very alive in my consciousness. Though I moved from there at four and was schooled in Queensland, all through primary school I regarded West Australia as a proper place for my family and a place that was special. My mother emphasises the intense local loyalty of the people in Perth, and the togetherness and frankness and propriety of life there, which she, I suppose hadn't yet found in Brisbane. She had moved round a lot behind my father's career as an Electrolux man, and she was still extolling Western Australia, which they both very much liked.

CT: So has Western Australia rather than Queensland been the background to your poetry?

JR: No, but Western Australia's beginning to be a background to the background. I was brought up in Brisbane. I was there from age four to twenty-four, and that's really very decisive.

CT: Do you think of yourself as a Queensland poet or as an Australian poet?

JR: Well, I'd been living in Melbourne for sixteen years, ending June 1985, when I took stock of this question. It was clear that my life, like my mother's, was going to be rather mixed in location. I think I've always thought of myself in an Australian framework, because I like travelling and I like to see a lot of my own country as well as others. My childhood, my bringing up, all important childhood experiences were in Brisbane, but I'm an Australian poet. In Melbourne I felt like the peripheral poet, because Melbourne is a place that "clubs". There's a "Melbourne School" attached to Melbourne University. I definitely didn't belong to that. I didn't belong to the opposition to it either. I just write my own stuff. I suppose that, added to the fact that sooner or later in the seventies you had to take a position as a woman poet, means that I am my own person and I don't find doctrinaire positions very convenient, except the one as a woman.

CT: Do you think of yourself as a feminist?

JR: Oh, I'm a feminist. I feel that it is absolutely necessary to put one's strength behind feminism. I'm not a screaming feminist because I'm not a screaming person. I think I was slow in coming to firm opinions about lots of things, whereas I noticed that, say, David Malouf, who's an old friend, had realised what the Vietnam war was doing to Australia and Australians and human beings when we were in London in 1966 to 68. I couldn't understand his strong feeling about it. I'd found politics very hard to form opinions about, to imagine in a way.

I think coming back to Australia was extraordinarily formative in that respect. I was away for eight years, partly in Jamaica and partly in England, and travelling a lot in Europe and the Near East. A lot of tourists when they come back to their native country, especially after a long absence, have the perspective of an outsider. Though they wish to retain pride in their country, they're disgusted, and I was disgusted. I've seen this terribly strong over-reaction in other people too. I spent a long time in culture shock, and a lot of the poems in *Nu-Plastik Fanfare Red* emerged from that; also from the shock of a much fuller domesticity than I had to undergo before then. In Jamaica with one

very small baby, and then living in London in a kind of student attic with my husband and first one child and then two, we had been migrant birds setting our feet upon a lonely bit of rock. But when I came back to Australia we bought a house, and I suddenly found myself standing at a sink looking out on this unending vista of tiles and small trees in a newly built part of the suburb, with my parents not that far away, which further ironed one into a pattern of domestic happening. Without knowing it, I was very impatient with that. I was very impatient with suburbia as such. Suburbia is very healthy in Australia; it's rooted and grows like the green bay tree. I was very annoyed too with the public picture, very sick of Liberal governments, even with my lack of definition politically.

So all that was very formative, and it gave me enough to push out poems. The early years of my marriage more or less suppressed my writing, as I think happens with many women —partly very busy and partly because of going through an absolute cataclysm of upheaval —which would supply a lot of material, but not perhaps at the time when it was happening.

CT: Then why are some of your poems about domestic life so cheerful?

JR: Well, I like houses. I think it needs recognising that modern man, as well as modern woman, spends a terrific percentage of time in a house, and that the shape of it, the shadows in it, the decor —which has long been disrespected as a feminine, light, unimportant activity — all speak of hopes, and disappointments and compromises. Our house, the space we live in, declares us, and we have to interact with it and go on living with our tastes; and that's a terrible thing when you're changing. I find I'm changing. I've begun to love the bare uncluttered flat or transient motel room — I don't know about a tent yet.

CT: I notice that so many of your poems have women as their subjects. When you're writing, are you conscious of yourself writing as a woman?

JR: I can't do otherwise than write as a woman, but I don't know about being conscious of it from word to word. I think like many women in Australia I was rather late in arriving at the recent surge of feminism. When I did I was very much swept up by it. This may have been helped by a Sabbatical in 1975, spent partly in Colombia with my first husband, and three months in New York in close friendship with an American-Swedish poet called Siv Cedering Fox. She'd visited Australia the previous

year and together we read a great deal of U.S. women's poetry with a view to anthology. You don't start wide reading unless it's for personal development, and this did develop me. It was fascinating to me too that my taste was different from hers, as a partly American citizen. There were a lot of women, whom she considered central figures, that I was completely unaffected by, and there were people I liked that she couldn't quite get to.

Then when I came back I thought to myself — let me put it broadly: this should not be left to ratbags. Feminism is going to do a lot of good for everybody, and I'm going to be in it, not out of it. So in Melbourne I got involved with a lot of feminist workers, and we organised readings at Latrobe for women writers, not taking notice of the time-worn idea that to prove their worth women had to stand on a stage with men. And my particular recent interest was in Salon A-Muse, a women's monthly conversazione organised by a collective for women's performing arts. That was fascinating, because Melbourne does tend to take up doctrinaire positions and then work on them. Its tendency to club and to get magazines going and to form discussion groups is very helpful when a new idea springs up, because they set out to give it a form.

CT: A lot of your poems are about writing poetry. How do poems usually come to you?

JR: I sometimes put away ideas or write notes and those are often the hardest ideas to bring through to any kind of realisation. Then there's the idea that taps you on the shoulder, and you can immediately feel that there are words there, and you do it. So I can't say how the poems come, I honestly can't say. I was recalling a minute ago, standing at the kitchen sink and looking out at the suburban roofs — something about that occasion really hit me — bang!, and everything came together in some metaphors and images. That was the basis of a poem in *Nu-Plastik Fanfare Red*. In another case a colleague showed me some translations of Eskimo chants. I thought, "I need something like that — that activity and energy," and so I waited for an occasion when I felt like that, and it took off.

CT: So that was the origin of "Eskimo Occasion"?

JR: Yes, that's how it happened. There are actually some more attempts at Eskimo lore in the little collection, *Shadow on Glass*, where I was using a book on Eskimo sculpture. The introduction said that the Eskimos conceive of the soul as a sort of homunculus inside the body, which at night leaves the body,

except that it hangs on by the big toe. That fascinated me. I want to write a poem sometime about the Eskimo heaven, where there is a kind of twilight land and the Eskimos who've come there play football eternally. (This seems to me to be a Melbourne poem, by the way.) They kick a walrus head, and they have to kick it so that it falls with its point downwards in the snow. That's so incredibly zany to us — and so beautiful in a way.

CT: How would you comment on this quotation, "Poetry this century has learnt to write in just about every way we speak and write." What's that from, by the way?

JR: I just thought it up. I'd even amend it to say that poetry these days has learnt to *talk* in every way that we speak and write. I think the speaking voice is absolutely crucial. I don't suppose anybody knows how Tennyson spoke when he was just grumbling his way round the garden, but when he recited his own poem, you could see that the bardic intention was strong there. It's strong in some of our own poets of course, like Les Murray, who traces his to a Celtic tradition. People now have a tremendous respect for the intuitions you gain from ordinary speech, and often very informal speech. I think that's become one of the greatest treasure troves of tone and energy in modern poetry.

From long habit of teaching I myself speak quite formally and fully. I must have done even as a girl, because Eunice Hanger, the playwright and drama lecturer, got very irritated with me once and said, "Judy, I can't stand it — you're always talking in sentences." She meant sentences that are finished and complete. As a dramatist she appreciated that very few people do finish sentences in conversation. Well, I think that knowledge is a source of a lot of the richness in modern poetry, and it took the Americans to tell us about it. (When I'm in control I always say "United States citizens", but since that's something I think we ought to be grateful to them for, I'm calling them Americans for once — which is unfair to other peoples from Punta Arenas to Baffin Land.)

CT: In your poetry you use words in a very radical way, in quite daring and way-out ways. Did any other poet influence that? How did it come about?

JR: I don't know. I get very excited by poets who use words fully, with a consciousness of all facets of their meaning. If we looked at examples in my work, I think we'd find that the word-usage is because I'm very conscious of etymology and accurate etymol-

ogy. I often think about what words meant in the past. For instance for years I've been tantalised by the fact that "implication" from Latin and "employment" from French are the same word. When you're employed you're implicated. When you're implicated maybe you're being employed. Now I'd like to be able to use that in a piece of writing. At the same time, one thing I do not believe in is being obscure, and when I read Peter Porter's poem, "Mort aux Chats", I never read that title — I always read, "Death to Cats". I wouldn't use a quotation from another language in the text of a poem, if I had any English equivalent. For instance, I've used *carpe diem* in a poem, and I sort of disapprove of myself for being unable to find the English for it. I know my hearers and readers probably haven't understood it, so what's the sense?

So that's what I think is behind my use of words. I don't believe that one should put words out casually without some thought of the depth behind them, their history. But readers shouldn't have to work to unravel that meaning; I think that they should be able to glean something straight away, that it should be meaningful, that it should fall into place. But if they want to go further, I don't believe they should find that the word's been carelessly stuck there. I believe they should find it means all that it seems to mean, and perhaps more. I don't believe in surface difficulty, and one direction in my poetry is towards simplicity. If you are a clever kid, your first poetry is often just so snarled up with obscurity and complexity that simplicity is the only direction you can responsibly take, and I hope that does sometimes happen with my poetry.

CT: Does this quotation from Beverley Farmer apply to your poetry: "It's important not to mirror life accurately, but to exaggerate just that little bit, so that people are shocked into seeing something differently."?

JR: There are two sides of things, which I approve of and would like to draw together. On the one hand I like things which are plainly and strongly written. At the same time I love the arabesque, particularly when it suddenly wakes you up anew to looking at your life. I'd instance things like the elaborateness of Furphy's circumlocutions — when you've got yourself round them they are remarkably clear and plain speaking. Or say, the wonderfully awakening South American novel, and not just Garcia Marquez either. Since I married a Colombian, I've read quite a lot of South American literature, some of it in Spanish, and the writers seem to have an open road into surrealism, or at least

into a monstrous use of metaphor. By monstrous, I don't mean "wrong". I mean, they're mirroring what they see as a monstrous reality. If you like, it's a different way of making absurdist literature. I admire that tremendously, and just once or twice I feel I've done something that's akin. I believe it's something we shrink from as Australians, because the respect for the home-hewn, strong, well-cornered, bevelled product is perhaps too strong with us.

CT: "Mudcrab at Gambaro's" and many of your poems capture a dramatic situation. Would you say that occasions have often inspired your poetry?

JR: Yes, somehow occasions are illuminating things, aren't they? They're meant to be celebrations often enough. That happened to be a rather drunken lunch over white wine and mudcrabs with Tom Shapcott.

CT: That poem's full of drama — it's almost like a play.

JR: Well, you could tell I was as high as a kite — not when I wrote. I don't understand how people could write that way, but I was feeling fine, and I suppose it kept going long enough to write the poems. The first two or three were written fairly soon after, within a month, maybe. I've never been able to imagine any non-existing person to whom I might talk, and when I started writing I envied those people who had a secret interlocuter. For *Mudcrab at Gambaro's* I kept a book in which were poems that Tom wrote to me and poems that I wrote back to Tom. At about the third or fourth poem I decided to enter the sequence in the now-deceased *Artlook* Shell Competition in Western Australia. I had quite a clear idea of what the remaining poems would be, so I wrote them against time. Provided there really is enough time, it isn't a bad thing, I found — and so I finished the sequence and it was rather fun. More occasions than one there — it was a kind of occasion just writing.

CT: I've heard you talk about a writer's obsessions. Do you have any obsessions?

JR: I have obsessions about using words responsibly, which goes with what I was saying before. I do have an innate priggishness and primness about Louis Zukovsky's use of words, say taking a foreign text and using it for its sound alone, like "Humpty Dumpty", "un petit d'un petit", because I think that's just stupid illegitimate stuff. And meaning doesn't seep across from a language to someone listening to it who doesn't know the language. Probably this priggishness about words comes from

academic training. What else? I suppose when I talk about obsessions, I mean strong feelings, stronger than preoccupations, held over a lifetime. I believe the value of human beings has been constant with me right from the beginning. I've written some poems of distrust and disappointment, but I hope that I'll never write one that's straight-out contemptuous of anybody.

CT: Some of your poems are linked together in sequences by key motifs, such as water, the most obvious example. Why water, in particular — do you have any explanation for this?

JR: Someone once explained to me that water was particularly akin to women — that it was Jungian or Freudian or sexual. If I had to study those theories, because I wouldn't understand something without them, then I'd do it with tremendous interest. But it's never come my way like that. I do believe that the artist has to have hands out, eyes open; every sense open, and every intellectual pore open too; but I don't believe in trying to incorporate schemes of symbolism and mythic depth in my poetry, unless they've come to me as personal myths. The house you live in assumes those proportions. The first poem I ever wrote was about the bush, and I think it was my paradise place because I went to it so rarely. I was a town child, you see, my mother having no great taste for the outdoors or country living.

So I wrote a lot of poems — the second part of *Water Life* — and I was really very pleased with where they were going. They seemed rich, they flowed, they came in a magical fashion almost. The first few poems in *Water Life* are about a part of the water system on the Latrobe campus, what used to be a river. I used to go down there before the harrying day's teaching, in my little red car, and sit by the lake and observe it — sometimes I'd be trying to correct papers — and I'd just watch the birds. Then there was the Eskimo poem, then another one about washing up. Then there was the big long poem about Borges, which I somehow connected with going on Heron Island as a child, and seeing the coral withdraw — and it very slowly came out again, and his bald, bony head, looked like coral when everything had gone back in. All the unending labyrinth of the coral reef got together with my consciousness of *his* image of the library. Then there was one about a woman drowned in a lake — Lake Placid in North America. And I suddenly looked at all these, and I said, "Why are they all about water?". I wondered if it was from sitting in the bath late at night writing, to keep warm! When the book came out, people, as they kindly do,

told me that the water image was to do with womanliness or something, and I said, "Great, great, great", but I didn't go and study it. And then what I did find was that I wasn't done with it, and that the images in *Mudcrab*, and then a lot more in "Land-falls" (part of a group now titled "The Mahogany Ship" for a *Selected Poems*) go on with the interest. I think the intellectual reason for this is that we live on borderlines; we are creatures who have to put our feet on earth, and yet at the same time we really clearly live in the air — in the ether. Once when I was a kid I made up a penname for myself. I called myself by the dreadful name of "Peggy Aetheris". That's how high-minded I was. Also, brought up on a coast and most Australians *are*, with a continual feeling that a proper person goes and dips in the sea and is competent in the water as well as on land — and that seemed to me perhaps one reason why one thinks about water.

CT: Do you still associate creativity with the ether? Where does creativity come from?

JR: I don't know — I suppose it comes from conflict, friction, something like that — with what there is about you. I feel a tremendous respect for the energy that there is in reading other people. I suppose that is why I was a bookworm as a kid, and that gave me my most lively feelings, but later on one comes back to the things that surrounded it, the life you were living. Energy seems to me to be the name of it. If you choose between two books, it's because one makes you live more, and I think that's why people create — so that their lives can be extended on to something they can look at, hold, indeed show to people, and say, "Look, you may not like me, but that's me". Then maybe they can pull the insides of their heads out and say, "That's me", back.

CT: Your own linocuts often appear in your books. How did you get into linocutting?

JR: There was a degree I suppose of escape route about it. As a child I had a marked talent for art, and only very recently I remembered that I had taken classes at the Queensland Art Gallery with Vida Lahey. I remembered this when I saw on the cover of Janine Burke's *Australian Women Artists* Vida Lahey's picture of women doing Monday morning washing. The only pictures of Vida Lahey's that I'd seen as a child were some floral still-lives at the Queensland Art Gallery, and like most children, I didn't think much of them. I could see they were very well done, but they didn't give me a zingo, like that tragic thing, "Evicted",

with the whole family walking out of the house looking done in, and the hard-hearted neighbours, and so on . . . Well, I went to these classes, and then I even went to the Technical College to try to learn oils, and they set me to painting colourful African cucumbers in black and white. Finally they permitted me to paint a skull in black and white on red velvet cloth. But I gave up, and I'm sorry I gave up. I really wish my mother had insisted — and I keep on doodling — it's the only way I can endure long talks.

The thing is that I wanted a form, but it had to be simple — I was living in a house with four small children. So I went along to a two-week class in print-making. I first got this fellowship from the Literature Board in 1974, and in the flush of that I felt able to say to my husband, "Okay, I'm going to be away, for ten out of the next fourteen days, because I'm going to this class." He was a hard person to demand this of, naturally kindly and taciturn, and a dear person, but that was quite a step. I'd been teaching one night a week at the Adult Education, just to keep my right to get out. Well, in the two weeks I studied various kinds of print-making, and realised I couldn't do lithography, because the equipment wasn't there, couldn't have acid baths in the house to make etching plates, and linocutting was just it. It was simple; you had a tussle with the material, which I liked. I liked gouging out the lino, and liked the simple clear outlines. I liked the economy of black and white, though since, under pressure of a different kind, I have done colour work. Right from the beginning I thought linocuts might make something of my poems, and they marry very well with print, and, as it turns out, they're quite cheap. The publisher doesn't have a lot of expenditure as long as they're only black and white. He's engaged with the perfectly ordinary simple plate; so you see it all worked.

There's another wonderful thing: once you do graphics for your own book you have a much larger say than most writers ever get, about the format and layout of the book. I found this early on, that they actually consulted me about the shape book I might like, and the UQP did me a more or less square book, because the majority of my prints are square. And so I got into a very good relationship where I actually picked the order and placed the linocut opposite the poem. Very few of them are at all like illustrations of the poem — they're quite different subject matter, though they often have the same feeling. When I went to Colombia in 1975, I said, "Right, I'll do a print a week",

which is very fast work when you think over them. So I used to get up about ten in the morning cross-eyed, and that night, after everyone had gone to bed, about half past nine or ten o'clock, I'd start working, and I'd work through until about two or three, with crazy music playing from some party down the road, and it was terrific.

CT: The first poem in *Water Life*, "About This Woman", is a self-portrait, presumably true in 1976. Is it still a true portrait, would you say?

JR: "About This Woman" — well, going on from what it says about husband and wife, a separation of bed took place in 1978 between me and my husband. I left home in 1980 — a slow and I suppose distressful process; and in 1976 I was becoming aware of the various confusions and problems in my life. I had had one little book out, and I was beginning to see that I really wanted to develop that, even at a certain cost personally. And I began to perceive too, that there was a cost. My husband described my artistic or writing friends as rubbish, and it had become increasingly difficult even to have anybody over to stay the night, so there really was a problem of the difference in our tastes and our styles of life. So I think that poem might have a lot of that in it. At the same time, it's *me*, obviously.

CT: What about "Bivalve", in the same collection — how does that relate to you?

JR: Well, the linocut's interesting because it doesn't look a great deal like me. I was aware of it as a psychic portrait, and it was done very late at night, when you are beginning to phase out, and you are beginning to feel, oh pretty ragged. You know how you get a double image sometimes at night, looking in a window lit by the room light? — I was looking at that in the kitchen window. And then there was that blobby background, which wasn't actual, but I think registered the dark-light, dark-light feeling about a room very late at night. I felt strained, and it's a fairly strained-looking portrait.

"Bivalve" — I looked at my face about that time and realised that it was a very uneven face, with the right side larger than the left. I'd been brought to look at this, because I'd studied my son in a photograph, holding a little plant in a pot — and he'd held it with the stem right in front of his nose, and one of his eyes simply was on a different storey from the other. So I looked at my own face, which isn't so extreme, and realised this shutness of one side, and the open side, the other. I realised why people

have “best” profiles. That’s where “Bivalve” came from, thinking about the clam shell, looked at from the side, how there’s the open side and the shut side. It’s the same creature, but it’s just so utterly different in the fact that one side is made for eating and gobbling in experience, and the other is meant to hold it together, and they’re essential parts of the same thing. So both the linocut and the poem were, I suppose, aware of potential disintegration, the strain, pulling away, of different forces — just as I said before, about the tightness on the one side and the preference for energy and freedom on the other.

CT: Can you talk about the background to “Parenthesis”?

JR: “Parenthesis”, which I’ve clarified a bit by re-naming it “Water-life”, was written on the way up to the American Bar Association conference in Montreal. I went there with an old friend from Cambridge, David Albenda, a New York lawyer; we stopped off at Lake Placid, and since we were there, we went up on a boat trip. I was thinking rather bitter and sad thoughts about the fact that our younger relationship, which had been close, could not re-establish itself. We took the boat trip, and there were the scissors on the bottom of the lake, through the brown water. While we were out there, the boatmen told us a story of the pulling up of a corpse from the bottom of the lake. It was, they worked out, a person who had disappeared from the college in which she was Principal in 1929 — or was it 39? When they found the body, it had the hands tied behind it, and the boatmen said that the hair had grown enormously, that it wasn’t just the normal growing after death, but something to do with the rich mould of the lake bottom — enormously, they said — eight feet. They showed us the deepest part of the lake, which happened to lie right under the highest part of the shore cliffs. The police had been forced to call this murder a suicide, which was wicked, when you come to think of how suicide, the idea of it, can hurt those who know a person, thinking what they could have done to prevent it, and sometimes thinking shame of the person who did it. They didn’t even call it misadventure, but suicide, mainly because they don’t like cases that they can’t close. It was not possible because of the law of limitations to pursue the matter. They couldn’t convict, even though they had an idea who did it. So there was this whole tangled business, of how this woman needed, *needed* exoneration, needed her murderer to be convicted, and this didn’t happen, maybe because she was a woman, maybe because everybody’s forgotten; but there she is, growing, leading a kind of

secret life underwater, and not being allowed to finish her life properly up above. These things all went into a kind of mix.

CT: What are you working on now?

JR: I'm working on putting a Selected together, which has been difficult, because I've been very doubtful about my direction — not so much now as three or four years ago. Partly, I think, my life underwent an upheaval, and I moved through a couple of houses, married Tom, and then we got upheaved again by his present job. I had cancer back there, and am emerging quite safely — and all this unsettled me. It didn't stop me writing, but it unsettled the direction of my writing. I thought, "Well, it's time to breathe and think, anyway". So now I'm giving thought to the very few stories I've written; and wishing to write more, and I'm embarked on a couple of longer prose things. So lots is happening, in a fairly undefined way.

*This interview with Cheryl Taylor was recorded at the Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature, in Townsville, 10 July, 1986. Judith Rodriguez visited North Queensland to conduct, with Alma de Groen, a Writers' Workshop sponsored by the National Book Council.*