when you see a pencil, lick it,
taste the splendour of its lead,
its owner may be a critic,
the kind who knows what you've said,
even if you did not say what
he knows you said. sign your receipt.

JOAN DAVIS

REVIEW

Silvana Gardner, *The Devil in Nature*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1987. $7.95. 64pp.

The title poem, "The Devil in Nature" (p. 63), is beautifully balanced technically and thematically: this is characteristic of Gardner's work, and the collection does not disappoint. The eye of the artist informs the voice of the poet, evoking nature in its vital movement of light, space, the sea, birth/death and regeneration. Gardner's voice seeks to confine only the reader — inescapably — to an awareness of the present in nature.

The contemporary world provides Gardner with images which are almost disarming — "the dispossessed bitumen" (p. 4), a new-born litter "encased in vital slime" (p. 42), "the parchment of an old woman unscrolled" (p. 40), and her observation of a dragon fly which "zips the air / open and shut" (p. 9). It is, however, "the intangible enigma/ of what lies beyond the bone" (p. 41) which the reader is pressed to explore. Gardner's "beyond" appears as an awareness of a cohesive past and future projected everywhere from the vital present: a concept from Asian spirituality. Hinduism, in fact, surfaces in "Order of the Lotus" with the poet referring, ironically, to "*Sister*" Vishnu and "*Sister*" Maya (p. 15). All is part of the "pliable riddle of NOW" which amuses the children until "Suddenly, time does not matter . . . " Nature is the poet's anchor:

> Out of the window, a rain forest
> hangs already framed. Oh, to take it home
> where the wind blows and trees sharpen
> the year's angularity!
> "The Year's Sanctuary" (p. 23)

Irony also underlines a traditional Christian preoccupation with spiritual Time; an idea from Revelations is explored as a "rousing canticle of hooves" invades in "Country Town" (p. 34).

Gardner's use of irony, often leavened with humour, for her purpose of illumination rather than condemnation, is a poetic strength. Her examples come from living: nest-building wasps have "stoppered shut with new life" the mouth of "The Idol" (p. 30); the poet notes "the limp condom knotted in spokes of a pram wheel" (p. 6); a broken phone line and frustration are relieved by savouring the fantasy of

> a hurried procession
> of warriors in Lilliput,
> bull ants in the lead
> nipping the linesman to look my way.
> "Telephone Wires" (p. 24)

The original Adam is also humanised:

> Adam's rib was congested
> with blood and crushed vessels still pumping
> from turgid muscle, the blade tip dissecting
> his innards and how he must have howled!
> "The Rib" (p. 46)

"The Devil in Nature" sums up the feelings of woman, a self-assured Eve conversing with Satan at a surburban service station. She perceives the Devil to be a "bush seducer" who lures "cosmic migrants tired of buying shadows" (p. 63). The artist Gardner has set Satan in the branches of a grevillea in sunlight, in wattles, in eucalypti (p. 62, 63).

The title poem (with "Dialogues" (p. 64) following) concludes this collection, and in this the author's instinct is sure. The poems in the final quarter lack a little of the earlier established intensity, but are nicely framed by "The Devil in Nature": there are a few well realized individual poems which I feel do not complement the overall tone, e.g. "Nighthawk" (p. 1), a dramatically beautiful piece. "Hereafter" (p. 19) and "Then" (p. 20), companion pieces, also appear intrusive when the work is read as a unit, one chapter in an ongoing exploration of spirituality-and-nature.

Gardner succeeds by confronting the human in nature with nature, and the result is a rewarding collection.