

Bill Cotter

MOLLY AND THE VERMIN PROOF FENCE

in memory of three young Aboriginal girls
who
walked home

Against the heat and the battering surf of mirages
Grinding through the plains,
Three bodies, slender as rock daisies,
Girlish feet, black upon the dust pans.
Like knotted swarms of flies, fear
And the constant smell of sweat.

"Better for your children.
Away from the tribe."
Voices from the bureaucratic past.
Starched collars, white hands coaxing.

By day the sun,
Bloodied like an animal round their necks.
At night the polished moon, their tears
And their dark eyes ever turning to the north.

"You do understand, I am sure. As a mother.
We can help them become like us."
Moore River Settlement: windows with ribs of iron
Erect and pulsing in the heat: a prison
With whitewashed walls and hymns.

And with each dawn the minuscule foot prints
Like beads in the sand,
Black, halting entries in some vast, purposeful ledger.
The bodies, thinner
And hope delicately parting the fears.

But they are coming home,
North on the dingo track,
North on the lizard track.

And the old woman remembers it all:
The wrenching apart,
The linking of hands,
The vermin proof fence guiding them home,
The sixteen hundred kilometres crossed

And again the wrenching apart.

Years and the grating sands have covered their path.
The waters of the milky way are choked,
The helplessly heaving breasts
Stilled.

But the old woman remembers the silence,
The women's wailing,
The small hand, her hand
Moving like oil
Along the vermin proof fence.