

NOTES ON THE VICTORIAN NOVEL  
three poems

1. The Orphan of Good Family

When she has won through, the dogs  
have ceased to bark, the elderly wigs  
are nodding at something else, the warm core  
is peace, and love. Acceptance posts the banns,  
and soon the orphan girl is sitting straight  
of back, meticulous needle at petit-point  
in an eastern room, with terraces below,  
and roses, paths her uninherited feet  
won't walk. But the reader, it seems,  
is still on edge, expects a natural grace.

Then the weave of circumstance expands,  
truth of her birth revealed (speeches and tears).  
The snared manipulator will not spend  
his tale to cut through class and cant;  
he yields, and blood finds breeding, as it should.

2. The Use of Chance

Empire as backstop helped: a mine  
of unseen fortune working potluck plots  
beyond the chapters. Probability  
strayed across diamond finds, and farms,  
the glitter and glut of profit sprung  
out of the unguessed sea. Wrecks  
and cannibals moved to widowhood,  
palpitation along the unquiet streets.  
They had a double-knived device,  
legacies out of Empire's sweat, that cut  
across the logic and ethic of life.  
The timing was magic; opportune uncles  
knocked, or cousins died. They cast  
their oafs upon the waters, cold despatch  
of family reprobates, easily out of sight.

For colour and interest, one brown boy  
holding a horse. He can be plucked  
from Africa, coughs fog, and has no name.

### 3. The Honourable Lover

She bore pinched feelings enough; knew  
the lover waiting (celibate, such austere  
restraint) could whisper in curtain-corners,  
break surreptitious breath, and bread,  
while the invalid grew old upstairs,  
and weak. Sometimes, carefully,  
touched his hand, merely tendered skin  
against his skin, leading to nowhere  
but vigil and a husband stubborn to live.  
Thought fed on unfleshed evenings alone,  
cold ash came flakes, and Irons hunched  
grimly, suffered the heroine's patience,  
piety, and care. Outside, unrealized in night,  
the scribbler moved to set things right.

The magic accident, the reader's awe,  
and stricken Florence dressed in black.  
The virtuous hero waits the time prescribed,  
allowed the final chapter, tears and all.

## DIANE MENGHETTI

### DAWN IN MOUNT ISA

Could I but taste a sunrise,  
Could I but taste it  
thick-packed, layer on layer,  
But red and rose-petal light  
in flavour.

I am a part of this town,  
seeking the vision  
Coming from under the ground  
to fumble for Eurydice in the dance-hall  
To cry for a revelation in the pub,  
To taste the daylight.

From the four corners we come,  
to look for the rest of it.  
In the cotton-wool, blood-flavoured dawning  
seek copper-gilt consolation  
for foreign children.

Over the slag-heaps and chimneys  
the sun once more rises.  
And echoing Cerberus howling  
we cry from the under world:  
'Lord just a sip

That we might know this sunrise  
And this day.'