

The Long Paddock

by John Bird

-a haiku series celebrating the roles of Australian working women

dedicated to Alma E. Bird

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1. 50,000 Years

desert rockhole –
they sit down to listen
to her story

bush medicine –
he shows the spear wound
to aunty

digging honey ants –
children's laughter
from the billabong

canvas on red earth,
she paints the yam dreaming –
a tea billy boils

Koori mother and son
sit with their interpreter –
breeze stirs the dust

a Murri boy
presses his face to the bars –
scent of coolibah

royal visit –
the smallest piece of damper,
no goanna

2. Outback Selection

westerly –
the duststorm's shadow
reaches them

she fans herself
with a city catalogue –
beach fashions

shoulders his swag,
thanks her for the scones –
the long paddock

kitchen flyscreens –
the sheep farmer's wife
still flicks her hand

first school day –
at the train station a boy
comforts mum

cutting out the cheque –
she meets the last train
he might be on

wool slump –
she fetches the radio
and two cold beers

she straightens up
from docking lambs –
the kelpie wags his tail

the river comes down –
in bright sunshine she watches
fences go under

Christmas drought –
bird shadows criss-cross
a fallen lamb

earth trickles
through her fingers –
a far train whistle

3. A Cocky's Life

morning mist –
listening for the cows
she hears the creek

spring morning –
the plop of tennis balls
on an antbed court

ladies foursome –
she kicks cow pats
off the first tee

radio music –
footprints of a fox-trot
in the dust

dandelion ball –
her daughter's breath
sows a paddock

flooded farm –
bellow of the house cow
at dusk

hailstorm –
half their tomato crop
intact

city guests gone
she lets the old dog in –
glowing embers

a shadow cast
by the boarded-up bank –
on the wallaby

4. City Visit

spring morning –
unsmiling
faces on the street

autumn dusk –
terracotta rooftops
sink into smoke

breast clinic –
she parks their 4WD
between two jags

oncology –
reception room flowers
still plastic

the dress shop
stocks all shades of black –
endless smiles

blues festival –
sharing summer twilight
with new sisters

cloudbanks
on the sea horizon –
her tight bathers

city bus –
such skill in avoiding
eye contact

the subway train
surfaces in sunlight –
no one else smiles

her plane
climbs into clear skies –
that shrinking city

5. Timber Town

mill whistle –
she resists the urge
to count fingers

forest blockade –
she shares her thermos
with protesters

bush track –
she overtakes
a magpie

old growth forest –
her dog
runs through the silence

woodsmoke
on the evening air –
a mother's call

crack
of a whip bird's call –
the stillness

she picks her way
though smoking tree trunks –
a chimney

husband away –
their bedroom full
of one mosquito

6. A Chat With Friends

still digging, wombat?
you too
should lose weight

crossing this field,
I pause to salute you –
bravo! dung beetle

white cockatoo
I do not have the tongue
to hear your news

pheasant
why do you strut so?
ah, a new mate

a bittern's cry –
come, brave dog,
let's watch for bunyips

so, dingo,
who cast the first stone
at you?

shy, echidna –
only the ants know
your face

a bone
and winter sunshine –
you lucky dog

cane toad,
you too, are ugly –
let's jump on our reflections

7. Western Suburbs

pre-school playground –
the sparrows listen
in many languages

shirt factory –
she explains trade unionism
to an Arab seamstress

trying to decide:
mini-skirt or business suit –
first day as CEO

paling fence –
her pumpkins flourish
on the neighbour's side

Anzac eve –
sewing up her medal bar
she pricks her finger

after their quarrel
she goes to water
her nodding violets

spring sunshine –
the boom of her crane
sweeps the skyline

sunny verandah –
grandma's wheelchair
beside baby's pram

spring races –
explaining the cup sweep
to her Greek neighbour

shoots sprouting
on the old lemon tree –
this long life

Footnote by author

***The Long Paddock* won the 2001 *Spirit of the Outback Writing Competition*, judged by Barbara Ker Wilson and run to celebrate 'Women in Australia's Working History'. It was published in *Songs of the Unsung Heroes*, 2002, by the Australian Workers Heritage Centre.**

I chose haiku as the most suitable vehicle to address some of the vast range of womens' contribution to Australia's working life.

My forebears were pioneers on the Hunter, Manning, Tweed, Nerang and other rivers up into Far North Queensland. The "Bird women" were the glue of their families and my mother is an exemplar of the spirit of the outback.

Many of these haiku are based on close observation of Mum's life, particularly her interaction with the natural world. I hope that all women who read it will find something of themselves in *The Long Paddock*

john bird