

Silver Bell and Cockle Shell

for Irene Briant

This pretty maid in her Christmas-bell dress
just stepped from the pages of *Vogue*
and this small cabinet seems to be
a garderobe of some of her clothes.

There's a scratchy copper knitted dress
and a pink petticoat so stiff with starch
that even when dolly stands on her head,
despite the laws of gravity,
it stays around her knees.

But skirts that are bell-shaped, gathered or flared
seem to be more her style.

The pert pepperpot is a shiny skirt,
green satin patterned with gold;
and this one that looks like old-gold brocade
is really the skin of a gourd.

A fairytale Cinderella skirt
is of glass that's crystal clear,
another looks like white silk
with black embroidery,
and one that is heavily textured
could be silver-grey lamé.

I happen to know the green velvet cloak
with matching hat is garden topiary

and the dark purple, pleated shot silk
is the pod of a lotus flower.

Is that length of woollen homespun
a wraparound skirt or a shawl?

Either would keep her warm.

The Buddha-like figure seems to wave
the leftover scrap he holds aloft
and I see it's not a cloth umbrella or flag
but fungus that grew on a tree.

A bowerbird woman gathered these things
and has placed them carefully
to make this collection.

She knows where she found the pieces
and how they are connected
and each piece comes laden with memories,
the artist's, as well as its own.

The fragile skulls, for instance,
recalling the lives of wild creatures,
hold foraging, flight and song.

I look at the tree-fungus pattern
of stripes in moth-wing colours
and wonder what keeps that memory:
fungus-spore or tree?

I'm sure that upturned segment of cone
can recall an old striped animal
endlessly, hopelessly pacing

**the meagre length of its cage;
for the artist herself has told me
that that cone fell from a tree that grew
on the site of Beaumaris Zoo –
a tree whose roots spread in deep rich earth
and fed on the urine and dung
of the last lonely thylacine.**