

Cynthia Troup first met Jennifer Strauss in 1996 while a postgraduate student at Monash University. In this interview they speak about Jennifer's new, unpublished collection of poems titled *Album*—about photographs and ancestry, innocence, and the arc of time.

'Every Image Interim' An Interview with Jennifer Strauss

Cynthia Troup

Introduction

Jennifer Strauss AM is an Australian poet, editor and literary critic who has published four volumes of poetry, including the collection *Tierra del Fuego: New and Selected Poems* (1997). She grew up in Victoria's Western District, and has spent substantial periods of time in foreign countries, such as Argentina. A pathfinder in feminist literary criticism in Australia, Jennifer is well known for her studies of poets Gwen Harwood (1992) and Judith Wright (1995), and a two-volume edition of *The Collected Verse of Mary Gilmore* (2004–07). Jennifer is a member of PEN Melbourne, and has long been an advocate for women's education and scholarship: she is currently President of Graduate Women Victoria, having become involved with the organisation that preceded it, the Australian Federation of University Women, in 1956.

Album and Origins

CT Jenny, the title of this suite of poems, *Album*, makes clear that the poems are based on photographs. In this case they're images connected with your family history, yet is it true to say that photographs have long been a source of inspiration for your poetry?

JS Yes. In my first collection, *Children and Other Strangers* (1975), there's a very early, melancholy poem called 'Clearing Out the Photograph Album' which is perhaps the beginning of my obsession with photographs—the strangeness of photographs. That poem ponders a photograph of my fifteen-year-old self. It's not incidental that the six poems of *Album* are chronologically ordered: they sprang from the project of writing a factual family history for my children. It's an interesting family history, because there's an English strand, a Scottish strand, a German-Jewish strand, and then the Australian context that draws them together.



Jennifer Strauss, photo by Jenni Mitchell

My father came out to Australia before the First World War, and his mother thought it fairly dreadful that he should have 'gone into the wilderness'. I was told that she came into some money, and paid for him to travel back to England, where he arrived in 1914 just in time to enlist in his father's regiment. During the same war, my father-in-law fought in the German Army, and it intrigues me to think that he and my father might have taken potshots at one another. Yet I don't know that my father-in-law was ever on the front. In 1916 my father was blown up and buried by a shell, which burst his eardrums, but almost certainly saved his life: he was sent to work behind the frontlines.

Of course while working on the history I've turned over many photographs. Some I already knew well, others I came across in the collection of my parents-in-law. In my experience, certain photographs twitch at the imagination, or they twitch vividly at a memory; I feel moved by awareness of human vulnerability, a sense of how much the people in the photograph can't know about the future. In fact, in the second poem from *Album*, 'The Voyage Home', the opening lines just arrived, so to speak (as lines sometimes do): 'What's in the album but time's / Shocks and shadowings, / Every image interim? /'. To me such pathos, in the sense of emotion, is simply there in some photographs, a stimulus to try to reconstruct what the individuals in the picture were thinking about—it's as if there's something scratching at my imagination, saying, 'go on, let me out'.

CT Is there also sense that you're in conversation with existing members of your family through the poems?

JS I don't think so. The family history is for the children; in the first instance, the poems are written for me. I write a poem to be heard, even as it also drops into a well of silence. The family history is sprawling, and involves a certain amount of repetition. It will need to be shaped—although the shape is not nearly as crucial as that of a poem. The shape of a poem is everything.

CT The line in 'The Voyage Home', 'every image interim', evokes time's flow, but also indicates an omniscience that comes from writing in the present. This emerges in each of the *Album* poems. As you've mentioned, you have the privilege and burden of hindsight with respect to the life stories of these forebears. The sense of omniscience is stark in 'The Voyage Home', and the opening poem, 'The Major-General Retires'. In both it's highlighted in the last two lines; with regard to shape, these lines form the shortest stanza, an ending that returns the reader to the poem's beginning, while conveying the abrupt finality of your knowledge of later circumstances.

The Major-General Retires

Bangalore, 1879

The Major-General is having his portrait taken.
In full regimentals, his gaze
resolute as if surveying alike
an Afghan pass, a riotous mob.

In fact he's seeing the low green line
of Malvern hills, their soft glow
under a westering sun. He's tired
of brutal mountains, savage light,
imperial duty done, he's going Home.

His wife is sad. She's seeing
the three small graves that no one now will tend,
their last trace, their alien names
conceded finally to Indian dust.
But the General's chosen England.

He cannot know
It will be the death of her.

JS The Major-General had served in the British Army in India for years, now 'he's going Home': who can tell what the consequences of a particular choice will be? During the process of composing all six poems, I realised that they share this theme of choice. It's possibly emphasised most in the last poem, 'A Black and White Photo', which was actually written before 'The Major-General Retires'. I enjoy the related question of where facts belong in a poem. Poems such as these raise the interesting problem of writing with respect for fact, without being bound by fact.

CT So 'the facts' imparted by the last stanza of 'The Major-General Retires' are two, at least—his unavoidable ignorance of the future, and the story of his wife's passing. 'His wife' is linked to your family heritage through her death. Hence the last line of this poem is the first line of the next, unwritten poem.

JS That's right. The poem stops with the death of my grandfather's first wife, even though my father was born from the Major-General's second marriage. It's very poignant studying the family tree, which was kept fairly extensively for that paternal line of my family. Three babies died in India.

On returning to England, the Major-General's first wife died, probably from pneumonia; two tiny children survived her death. The Major-General married again and fathered six more children, the last when he was seventy-two years old. He died two years later, leaving his second wife with eight children to raise on an Army pension.

CT The line 'But the General's chosen England' acknowledges the hazard and responsibility of choice. Yet your willingness to identify with women's experience, and some of its unchanging conditions over time, points to a lack of choice for 'His wife'.

JS One person's choice impinges on those of everybody else. Always I've been empathetically interested in how human beings deal with life. I feel strongly about literature in general—but perhaps most of all about poetry—that they're not abstract: one of the functions of literature is to create empathy with other lives, drawing on imagination with this aim. The humanist ethic values empathy above all, and as such, ethics has a place in poetry. That's why I support an organisation like PEN, because it seems to me that PEN is about the writer's activity of offering some kind of consolation. We may not be able to make sense of the whole of human life, but some sense can be made of some of it. Really, then, it's the human psyche that I'm concerned with in these poems.

Innocence and History

CT 'The Squatter's Daughter, The Dairy Farmer's Wife' is the third poem of *Album*. Here the farmer's wife addresses a former self through a photograph of 'the squatter's daughter / pictured on the wall [...] / being innocent as yet /'. She does so with a feistiness characteristic of many of your women's voices. Is she actively resisting the sadness you attribute to the Major-General's wife?

JS The wife in this third poem—my own mother—is central. She's someone whose life has turned out utterly unlike what might have been predicted from the substantial bluestone homestead displayed in the photograph, but she's not sitting down and crying. As she lies in bed reflecting, the bank's 'foreclosing grasp' looms large. Again, this is based on fact. My father's dairy farm was failing, and right at the beginning of 1939 the bank foreclosed. The property was forcibly sold. If he'd managed to survive just a bit longer—well, dairy farmers did very well during the Second World War.

I was very close to my father; not so close to my mother. This poem is a kind of reparation for having to some extent excluded my mother from the recognition that I should have given her as a child. However, we all fight clear of one parent or another, probably.

The key phrase in this poem is 'innocent as yet'. The squatter's daughter is invoked, but she's also being dismissed, relegated back to the past, without nostalgia. 'Innocent' is a word that fascinates me, because it can mean both 'purity' and 'naivety', and I love words that look both ways. If I now subscribed to a god, it would be Janus, god of entry and departure. Words like 'innocent', 'dream', and 'myth' are wonderful, conveying ambivalence, things looking two ways: it's possible, for instance, to regret and not regret at the same time.

CT The dynamic of feeling two ways at once begins with the title of this poem, which brings to mind two photographs, 'one in each hand', and an ambiguous relationship between them. The dairy farmer's wife simultaneously recognises herself, and doesn't recognise herself, having, as outlined in the poem, moved from the Edwardian homestead of her childhood to an old weatherboard farmhouse.

In 'Only a Decade', the theme of home and displacement from home is foregrounded through direct reference to two photographs: one of 'the engagement party' in Heisterburg 1928; secondly 'the passport photographs' from Hannover 1938. The images are separated by a decade—and, equally, would you say, by the forces of history?

The Snapshot Album of the Innocent Tourist

This is a space for the President's
Rather splendid Palace,
Standing above
The not-so-picturesque
Riverflat shanties.
'Prohibido!' said the baby-faced boy
Whose gun was real,
'Prohibido!': I got the message
If not the shot.

This is a space for the corner
Where the student was beaten to death
And for the feet of workers
Stepping, they said, at morning
Round a pool of blood.
I couldn't focus it
For Christmas traffic
And besides it looked
Like any intersection, anywhere.

This space is for twenty working years
Erased from the centre
Of a teacher's life.
'It's good to be back,' he says
And smiles as if believing
The text can be restored:
All its pages,
The ungiven lectures, the burnt books,
The silenced words.

This is a space for the disbelief
Of the elegant woman
Whose perfume is charming
Like her apartment.
Only the tiniest hairline scar
Betrays the facial tuck, the will to deny:
'It was terrible,' she cries
'But nobody knew. Nobody spoke.
How could we know?'

This space is for the grandparents
Who hid a dangerous child,
Unregistered,
Infected by his father,
Who died 'resisting arrest,' his mother
Who left for a meeting
And never came back,
Except in the set of his mouth
When the boy is angry, or laughs.

This is a space for all the disappeared
Who fade in other people's albums:
This is a space for courage
And for love,
For things that don't show up
In negatives.

JS Looking at the pictures that were the basis for that poem, I was struck by what the world can do in ten years, the effects of ten years on individual lives. In the situation of war there are people left with what might be termed 'no choice', but my parents-in-law weren't entirely choiceless. I know they said they left Europe in 1938 because they had a child. Anyway, they were extraordinarily lucky; 1938 was already very, very late for Jews to escape from Germany under National Socialism. My parents-in-law had a chance to obtain entry visas to just two places in the world, Uruguay and Australia. Having some knowledge of English, they chose Australia, and a friend in Amsterdam helped to pay for the visas. Australian culture of that era came as a severe shock to so many European immigrants. Hence, in part, the reference to 'strange hemispheres, / [...] the great South Land. /' ...

CT ... and the closing biblical imagery, expressing that these people were 'cast out': 'their visas valid, but still / they will be held at the border / a full seven days, then / randomly allowed to pass, / to follow Hagar / into the desert [...]'.
With regard to the arc of time, this collection of just six poems brings together the First World War and the Second World War and its aftermath; it joins India and Europe to Australia, therefore to the legacy of colonisation, and so on. Each poem is such a compact telescope into the influence of larger conditions on individual lives. This seems to be an aspect of the task you've set yourself: to acknowledge the momentum of human history's larger stories as a force perceivable in every photograph.

JS I like your phrase 'the arc of time', yes. Below the titles, the poems all include dates and place names, and they are, as you say, snippets from a greater, interconnected story. Nonetheless that's rather arbitrary, really, in that I decided the scope of the family history. I don't yet know, you see, whether there's another poem to be added to *Album*.

The last poem of the current six, 'A Black and White Photo', brings together the Anglo and the German narrative strands, playing off a limited present against a past of infinite potential gain. The possibilities in such a past immediately contract when a choice is made—as it must be made, or else, paradoxically, none of those possibilities can be realised in a lived narrative. But the lived past is forever a lonely place: it's the past of an individual, a past that never entirely belongs to anyone else, because we each conceal or reconstruct certain things about our pasts, as I've done in this poem. The 'whole story' can never be told.

CT The phrase 'every image interim', from the second poem, 'The Voyage Home', is so pungent because it declares that neither a photograph nor a memory is capable of telling the whole story.

JS That's exactly the idea behind a poem in the collection *Tierra del Fuego*, 'The Snapshot Album of the Innocent Tourist', which is based entirely on photographs not taken. I think it's probably one of the best poems I've ever written. Travelling to Argentina just after the 'fall of the colonels', the collapse of the military government in 1983, was a very powerful experience. At one level innocence is ignorance—by derivation 'innocence' means 'not knowing'. Of course according to certain theories a person can't be tarnished by what she doesn't know, hence 'innocence' as a state of purity or not sinning. That also means innocence can be a state of 'not acting'. (By the way, the squatter's wife is saying: 'well, I did act, and that's it!'.)

JS The photograph is both a loss and a gain.

CT Inevitably it fades, becoming, to quote from 'A Black and White Photo', 'sepia-stated'.

JS And anyway the reality of the subject is absent from the photo, can't be there. The reality can only be imagined.

CT The squatter's wife, your mother, acted by choosing marriage. 'A Black and White Photo' is about you choosing marriage. Once more the poem's shaped by an omniscience about what lies ahead, 'hidden around the corner'. Later lines of the poem contrast a heightened, private memory with a family's ordinary relationship to photographs, stating 'Not for the children this – / they can have the wedding snaps, / baby pictures, paraphernalia / of family life. / This one's just for her, / that moment everything was possible— /'. The poem communicates a great deal of compassion, not just for your partnership, and your husband and his story, but also for yourself as a young woman in 1958 with so much before her.

JS All that sense of possibility brings her to choose: in time a person can't live on endless possibilities. Later, and it may be much later, there can be astonishment in speculating—'if', 'if', 'then my whole life would have been different'. Consequently I think there's a constant tension between the randomness of life, and the desire for pattern. Just as every poem is mere possibility until it's put it into words, which, as we've been saying, also involves loss and gain!

CT Jenny, I sincerely hope that *Album* is published in a form and at a time that you desire. It's been a delight and a privilege to be able to engage with this work while it's still close to you, and to speak with you in your home, thank you.

JS Thank you, Cynthia. I haven't shown these poems to my offspring. Maybe, with *Album*, 'this one's just for her'.

'The Snapshot Album of the Innocent Tourist' is reprinted here, with full permission, from Jennifer Strauss, *Tierra del Fuego: New and Selected Poems* (Altona North: Pariah Press, 1997).

An extensive selection of poems by Jennifer Strauss appears in the Australian Poetry Library, www.poetrylibrary.edu.au.

Cynthia Troup serves on the Committee of PEN Melbourne. More interviews and other writing can be found at www.cynthiatroup.com.

Jennifer Strauss Bibliography

Poetry Collections

Children and Other Strangers: Poems, West Melbourne, Thomas Nelson (Australia), 1975
Winter Driving: Poems, Carlton, Sisters, 1981
Mrs Noah and the Minoan Queen: Poems, Carlton, Sisters, 1983
Labour Ward, Kew, Pariah Press, 1988
Tierra del Fuego: New and selected poems, Altona North, Pariah Press, 1997

Non-fiction

Stop laughing! I'm Being Serious: Three studies in seriousness and wit in contemporary Australian poetry, Townsville, James Cook University of Northern Queensland, 1990
Boundary Conditions: The Poetry of Gwen Harwood, St. Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1992
Judith Wright, Oxford University Press, 1995

Works as Editor

Family Ties: Australian poems of the family, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1998
The Oxford Book of Australian Love Poems, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1993
The Oxford Literary History of Australia, with Bruce Bennett, associate editor, Chris Wallace-Crabbe, Oxford, 1998
The Collected Verse of Mary Gilmore, St. Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 2004–2007

Source: www.nla.gov.au