

## TWO POEMS



*Jamie Grant*

### THE CONVERSATIONS

The smell of barbecues in the sunlight.  
A formation of racing cyclists,  
like an eerie squadron whose noiseless flight  
creates a cold sensation which persists  
long after they pass. A middle-aged woman  
in walking shoes exclaims to another  
dressed as she is: "He bought my affection;  
he *bought* it." She could be someone's mother.  
Birds on the grass like a fungal disease.  
Splintered beams of light among the trees.

At the car park there's a post-and-rail fence  
where a florid-faced man, who is clearly  
a drinker, has taken pains to balance  
an empty bottle on each post, nearly  
a dozen in all. And then he climbs up  
on the fence and walks its length, teetering  
dangerously as each leg sways out to keep  
from upsetting a bottle, metering  
his progress like a drunk forced to walk a  
white line. Could he have been a tightrope-walker?

A girl replies to a muffled question:  
"Most", and her interrogator laughs. They  
are walking by the lake where reflections  
of their surroundings seem, on this still day,  
to multiply the brightness surfaces  
hold: a palm-crowned island glows with a green  
more intense for the glimmering nearness  
of its duplicate on water. Obscene-  
looking carp hover beneath that sheer grain,  
like half-submerged thoughts at work in the brain.

There are tree-trunks with mildew which has grown  
overnight; it looks as it would if hushed  
on its luminous paint, reminding one  
of the moonlit clouds last night, which rushes  
above the house, then paused as the wind died,  
seeming for a time like a scene-painter's  
backdrop, daubed with the same brand of dye.  
Passing, a bow-legged woman in rainbow-  
patterned tights tells her friend: "I couldn't take  
it anymore, you know." Soon the calm must break.

#### THE SALUTE

At a beach near peaceful Cape Town  
as the war's storm raged around,  
a Catalina crouched at anchor,  
awkward as a crippled swan.

The flying boat's Australian aircrew  
swimming unclothed in the bay  
saw a thunderstorm approaching,  
knew that when it blew their way

the plane could be capsized and sunk,  
knew that there was nothing for it  
but to take off from the swell.  
No time to dress. The squadron's pilot

swam out to the mooring-buoy  
and swarmed aboard. Lightning-strikes  
lit up the sky like tracer fire.  
The engines, loud as motorbikes,

began to roar, before the plane  
lumbered off the deep green waves  
and climbed. A shelf of clouds  
dank as walls in limestone caves

loomed up ahead. The pilot turned  
and hugged the eastward-bearing coast

toward the nearest airforce base  
a hundred miles away. With tanks almost

dry, he cleared the storm and found  
the harbour he was looking for,  
then taxied in, and moored the plane.  
He dived and swam toward the shore,

marched up a beach and through a gate—  
still clothesless—passing guards who looked  
astonished as he nodded to them,  
past the mess where airmen cooked

last meals for other airmen who  
would soon fly off to cruise the lanes  
of shipping in the U-boat-prowled  
linked oceans which embrace the Cape. Lines

of door ajar in passageways  
led him through an office block  
where the commandant, at his desk,  
glanced up from some paperwork,

a stack of files and documents  
and orders he was executing:  
on the carpet there before him  
stood a naked man, saluting.

# HOUSE OF RATS



*S.K. Kelen*

They're up there all right,  
playing scrabble in the roof, listening to  
scratchy old Fats Waller records.  
They started out as desperadoes  
escaped from a laboratory,  
arrived via a garbage truck  
up overhanging tree branches,  
elbowed their way in & soon  
the colony was an empire of rats  
who eat the insulation batts  
chew wires and chew through the ceiling  
to ransack the kitchen,  
take bites out of everything  
& carry off furniture. I can hear them  
scurrying with bits & pieces, hammering & sawing;  
they're building houses—a model rat town—with  
imitation garages to park stolen toy cars in.  
After munching down another box of double strength poison  
the rats are back at work with a vengeance, thump  
around the rafters insulating the house with rat shit.  
Or hard at love writhing, squealing  
like sick starlings or kicked puppies. The weaker explode  
and TV screens fill with rats' blood but there's  
more where they came from. Teeming over  
mountains, down valleys, jamming highways, falling  
off bridges to scurry ashore up storm water drains.  
Exterminators arrive dressed as astronauts and poison  
the house for ten thousand years. It's time to move out.  
But the rats have laid eggs in your pockets, stow  
away, follow you from house to house.  
The curse enters its exponential phase.  
Tentacles unwind from the ceiling, dirty great moths  
and leopard slugs take over your happy home.  
Soon you are a trellis. That's just what the rats say.  
I'm down here listening to radio messages,  
oiling automatic weapons, building rockets.  
Living in a rat's belly.