

Story and the effacement of story: Beverley Farmer's *The Bone House*

My essay's about *The Bone House*, but I want to start in Beverley Farmer's mid-career, then go back to a couple of earlier stories, then return to the contemplations she invites us to share with her in what is, as I write, her latest book.

A Body of Water (University of Queensland Press, 1990) combines two modes of writing. It contains five short stories, of the sort we know from Farmer's earlier collections, *Milk* and *Home Time*, and it also gives us her writer's notebook, kept over the period from February 1987 to February 1988, with stories occurring in the months of April, May, June, July and the second February. Her notes refer to books she's reading, things she's done, interaction with friends, and of course, thoughts. Here's part of an entry that catches my eye. She's talking about 'Vase with Red Fishes', the story for June, and it leads her to reflect on the *trompe-l'oeil* art of M.C.Escher:

To have (the two characters) behave like an M.C.Escher drawing, modulating from plane to plane, form to form, dovetailing ... In his *Reptiles*, lizards rise off the page in the picture and crawl in single file over the items on the desk to re-enter the page; in *Drawing Hands*, two hands rise off opposite ends of a pinned sheet of paper, each holding a pen with which it is drawing the other's cuff, having by implication just been drawing the other hand.

Escher, as many readers will know, is a master of this sort of thing; he manages to persuade us that water can flow around all

four sides of a picture, down, sideways, up. How? Don't ask me. To represent things is possible for anyone who follows the rules, but rules can be subverted, and it always comes as a shock, because most of us have absorbed the rules, not the thinking that produced them, which is where the subversion takes place.

So much for Escher, for now. Beverley Farmer too, as we shall see shortly, devised ways of subverting the 'rules' of story-telling, but let us stay a little longer with *A Body of Water*, five stories and many pages of notebook. Here's how she starts.

My forty-sixth birthday, and no end in sight to the long struggle to come to terms with this isolation, this sterility.

What follows is instructive.

Tide coming in, a stiff wind. A black ship out, a white ship in. A flash out on the grey water – a pilot boat catching the sun. The dunes have grown fine long green hairs all over – their skin shows through.

Beverley Farmer lives near Port Phillip Heads, also known as The Rip. This is where the ocean encounters the bay, at the head of which sits the city of Melbourne. But when you are at The Rip, the Heads, Melbourne feels far away; out of mind, almost; an idea enforcing a certain deference, but minor in comparison to the drama of water clashing with itself under the influence of tides, inflows and outflows, varying depths, with the added drama of danger. Ships have been lost along the coast, and at the entrance too. Pilots guide visiting ships through the Heads and up the bay

to Melbourne. Vessels stick to channels, which means they have to be guided by markers known to the pilots, not so well by visiting captains. The pilots have quarters in a low building near the Heads, and they are forever going out or coming back as the ships of the world come and go. That's the primary drama, and then there is the endless cycle of birds and creatures of the sea, things to be found, explorations to be made, observations of wind and water, moon and fog, and most sonorous of all, of course, the foghorns and sirens of ships, still coming and going when visibility's low, by night and day, all year round, for years on end – eternally, really, as rhythm is eternal: ever repeating, ever moving, ever there.

The place where Beverley Farmer lives is present on page after page of *A Body of Water*, and it's there, too, in *A Bone House*. It underlies everything she writes, and if you think it's an intrusion, you've got it wrong; it might be more true to say that the stories, the writing, are intrusive, except that they're not. They're a growth, no, *an arrival*, that comes just as naturally as the birds, fish, kelp and shells, the sounds of ships' horns making the writer's house shake at night. And yet, in February 1987, she despaired of being productive again. She turned to two things to get her mind going – the place underlying her existence, as described above, and to thoughts of language.

By a path that, in its own way, is also negative, the poet comes to the brink of language. And that brink is called silence, blank page. A silence that is like a lake, a smooth and compact surface. Down below, submerged, the words are waiting. And one must descend, go to the bottom. Be silent, wait. Sterility precedes inspiration, as emptiness

precedes plenitude. The poetic word crops out after periods of drought.

Octavio Paz: *The Bow and the Lyre*

Her book, then, is waiting, and so is she, although, being human, she's despairing too. She thinks there might be money to be made by writing for Mills and Boon. Half the world thinks that, but few can write as she can. Few of them have thought about writing as she has.

Marjorie Barnard is on the cover of this year's Literary Calendar – the August writer, grim-jawed in profile, thin white plaits looped on her head, her hands very large and knotted, foreshortened. A tabby cat sprawled on the table beside her, by a vase of flowers. A remark she made about humanity's "basic cruelty" is printed underneath. And now she has died, before "her" month came up. How we are diminished by it! Like when Olga Masters so suddenly died last year.

This thought leads to another, straight away:

I read "The Persimmon Tree" for the first time three or four years ago and was puzzled, when my joy in it died down enough for thought, to realise that the story in fact contained no persimmon tree. There was a row of persimmons put to ripen on a window sill, autumn persimmons though it was spring in the story. But there was no tree; and at last I decided that the tree of the title was the shadowy solitary woman behind the curtain in the flat across the road, holding her bare arms up to the sun, in the spring.

On she goes, talking about Katherine Mansfield, Marjorie Barnard again, and then Virginia Woolf, who drowned with her pockets full of stones. They are a great continuity in her life, a continuity to which she herself belongs. Here's Marjorie Barnard, described by someone as she lies naked on her bed, frail and white ...

I thought she was asleep and made to leave but Vera propelled me forward and with a chuckle said, "Well, now you'll be able to go home and tell your folks what a queer old woman she is," at which Marjorie piped up and said defiantly: "Why? We're all GIRLS."

And Virginia Woolf:

My writing now delights me solely because I love writing and don't, honestly, care a hang what anyone says. What seas of horrors one dives through to pick up these pearls – however they are worth it.

I've drawn these quotes from page 26 of a book that begins in despair! Recovery was underway whatever the writer thought! This wonderful strength she dips into as she waits, preparing herself for what's to come, providing her with an under-level, a preparatory layer for what's to come. It will, this layer, as I hope to show, produce a layer of its own, or, better, become the other layer that she always needed. This happened in *The Bone House*, but it began in *A Body of Water*.

More of those books anon. I want, now, to turn backwards to *Home Time*, where we can see the Escher-side of Beverley Farmer's style making itself apparent with amazing ...

... grace? Force? Strength? Revelatory power? What's the word I need? I'll take a leaf from her book, and let it write itself. 'A Man in the Laundrette' is about a very nasty encounter in an American city between an Australian woman who is writing the story – which makes the narrator more or less equivalent to Farmer herself, or that's how I read it – and an intrusive black man who forces himself on the visitor. This woman in the laundrette really shouldn't be there, because she is in ... New York, is it? ... with a man from her own country, they've agreed to take it in turns to see to the washing, but, even though it's his turn, she's doing the job. 'They were scrupulous about such matters when she first moved in,' the story tells us, and then it follows her to the laundrette, leaving him at his desk, holding a mug of coffee in his hands. There is something unbearably smug about this, to my reading; if the woman is, as people in the story accuse her of being, a victim, then the first of the story's two victimisers has been identified. The man she's with, her man, the one who should be most on her side, behind her, supporting her, is taking advantage, knows it, and will turn on her, as we see him do at the end, when she gets back. There is a little of this, a hint perhaps, in the way the story starts.

She never wants to disturb him but she has to sometimes, as this room in which he studies and writes and reads is the only way in and out of his apartment. Now that he has got up to make coffee in the kitchen, though, she can put on her boots and coat and rummage in the wardrobe for the glossy black garbage bag where they keep their dirty clothes, and not be disturbing him.

The laundrette, when she gets there, is busy, because it's a Saturday. She hasn't got American coins, but gets them after a while, and then a machine becomes vacant. She tips her clothes in, and when the washer's churning she sits on a chair and starts to write:

She never wants to disturb him but she has to sometimes, as this room in which he studies and writes and reads is the only way in and out of his apartment.

The laundrette's attached to a bar, a door opens and a hefty young black man, drunk and objectionable, as we soon find, comes in. He's 'full of attitude', as the saying goes, he's quarrelsome, and he notices that she's writing. The story gives us her words.

Now that he has got up to make coffee in the kitchen, though, she can put on her boots and coat and rummage in the wardrobe for the glossy black garbage bag where they keep their dirty clothes, and not be disturbing him.

The story's declared itself by now. It's being written as it's happening. The writing is part of the happening. The printed story, on the page before us, has taken to itself a peculiar power because it's two strands of consciousness pretending to be one. The situation in the laundrette rapidly gets worse. The drunken black wants to assert himself over the woman from another country whose yellow hair he claims to admire. In fact he hates her ... for? We hardly need waste time on reasons ...

'My brothers they all gangsters,' he shouts, 'an' one word from me gets anybody I *want* killed. We gonna kill them *all*.' He is sweaty and shaking now. 'We gonna kill them all and

dig them up and kill them all *over* again. Trouble with you, Miss Australia, you don' like the black peoples, that's trouble with you. Well we gonna kill you *all*.' He drinks and gasps, licking his lips.

It gets worse, but 'Miss Australia' manages to get away. A Puerto Rican man escorts her to the street where her apartment is. She thanks him 'fervently', but he 'stands guard in the wind, his white face uneasily smiling whenever she turns to grin and wave him on.' He has told her, though, as they walk towards her home, that she has handled the black man badly.

'He was so drunk,' she says. 'What made him act like that. I mean, why me?'

His fine black hair flaps in the wind. 'You didn't handle him right,' he says.

'What's right?'

'You dunno. Everybody see that. Just whatever you did, you got the guy mad, you know?'

This is clearly true, but it doesn't help. The Puerto Rican seems to accept, as 'Miss Australia' cannot, that when someone's being impossible, others have to take responsibility for getting him out of the situation he's hell-bent on creating. The woman, the one who's writing the story, gets home. She tells her partner what happened in the laundrette.

Halfway through she sees that his face is stiff and grey.

You're thinking that I brought it on myself.'

'Didn't you?'

A man, he says, can always tell when a woman fancies him. She can't seem to help it, he says. He's seen her in action. Whenever she talks to a man, it's there. She pushes him to explain, but he turns without a word to the lamp-lit papers on the table. The narrator of the story is being brutalised, accused, for the second time in a few minutes, but she is far from helpless. Quite the reverse. First, there is a photo on the front cover of the book, which, a note on the back cover tells us, was taken by the author. It shows a lamp, table, chairs, coffee mug, papers, just as they're described in the story. Don't be in any doubt, the picture tells us, that these things happened. You're getting it in the form of fiction, but if you treat it as such you too stand accused.

The man in her life, the man in the apartment, says no more in the remaining lines of the story ... except that he does, because she repeats a few more lines from the opening. When she offers, at the beginning, to take their laundry – and it's nearly all his – to the laundrette, he queries her. 'It must be my turn by now,' he says. It is. Instead of questioning himself about this, he questions her. 'I must get out more,' she says. 'Meet the people.' She wants to see what she can of life in the States, after all. He's quick to accuse. 'Not to be with me.' There's not even a question mark. It's an accusation made in certainty that a woman is always robbing, always cheating, a man. It's why, an hour or so later, she sees that he thinks she must have encouraged the man in the laundrette. The certainty of her partner is as unbearable as the black man's hysterical performance. But shame can be turned into victory, if those who have been and are forever the accused are smart enough. The narrator, though her

hand is shaking, sits at the table with writing pad and pen and adds the last four lines, lines we've already read once before:

'Not to be with me.'

She smiles. 'Of course to be with you. You know that.'

'I thought you had a story you wanted to finish.

'I had. It's finished.'

I think this is one of the most decisive condemnations I've ever read, decisive because it's such a sweetly savage reversal of a wrong consciousness being imposed, and I link it to 'Home Time', another story in the collection of the same name. As in 'A Man in the Laundrette', we are with a man and a female narrator, clearly the people already described. They decide, at the beginning of the story, that they'll watch *Casablanca* at a local bar that evening, then have dinner afterwards. She dozes on the couch, warmed by a radiator; it's cold outside. There's an innocent-looking reference to a table where they eat, and she writes:

Three times a day she pushes books to one side and turns papers face down, since this is also the table they eat at. The kitchen is next to it, bare and icy, smelling of gas. She pulls her radiator over by the couch and lies curled up in the red glow with her head on a velvet cushion.

These domestic arrangements, breaking into her routine, rather than his, are indicative of what's to come, I think. They go to the bar, they watch *Casablanca*, they talk to another couple, he to him, she to her. The middle section of 'Home Time' is a monologue delivered by the nameless American woman who's moved by the famous film to talk about her first marriage, her second – current

– marriage, and the way she sees her life. In all its wretched and sometimes humiliating detail it's a response to the love story they've been watching. Hollywood doesn't create for nothing and nobody. Guidelines for American living are handed down via the screen to the humble followers of the stars, and I mean movie stars, not those in heaven which were once thought to provide guidance if they could be read aright.

Do you remember the first time you saw *Casablanca*? Mine was in 1943, when it first came out, on my honeymoon with Andy. That's reason enough to cry. Bill knows. It's something he can't stand to be reminded of. He pretends it's only Rick and Ilsa making me slobber. Men – you tell a man the truth about your life, you end up paying for ever. Remember that.

The nameless American doesn't know that she's talking to a writer, who will remember what she's saying, and write it down. It will be written that same evening, after the visiting couple get back to the apartment where we met them. The American woman, twice married by now, with a twenty year period of being alone, tells the woman she's picked up about the days and nights she shared with Andy before he went to war. They saw *Casablanca* and they cried.

We were such babies. He was going to be a hero and I was going to wait ... We danced around the room like Rick and Ilsa did. We sure didn't sleep much. We didn't even know how to do it, you know. We were scared. Oh, we soon got the hang of it. And then his ship sailed.

He came back, oh. He came back. He'd won medals in Italy,

he was a hero. But he wouldn't ever talk about it. Whatever happened over there, it finished Andy ...

She looks across at her now-husband, this American woman, smiling, talking and drinking with the writer's partner. Her monologue continues. She's pouring out the pain and the stupid acceptance of her present situation.

I love Bill, I love him a lot. I've known that man thirteen years now, I could tell you things ... I'm not blind to anything about Bill, I love him anyway. He loves me, though it doesn't feel like being loved much of the time. He needs me. He has to punish me for that. There he is, an older man than he acts ... he's affable and a bit loud with the drink, everybody's pal. Well, when we get home there won't be a word out of him. Under the skin and the smile he's a bitter, fearful man and nobody gets close to him.

She's getting painfully close, this American with a few drinks inside her, to the situation of the visitors. They too will go home, and the writer will write down what she's been given in the bar. It's a common story, one feels as one reads it, much more likely to happen, much closer to home, than the events of *Casablanca*, famous though they are. Hollywood's escapism can only be escaped through truth, which must first be found, and then admitted. The last section of 'Home Time' begins with a line space, and then a shock.

'Can I read that?'

'Read what?'

Her hands have instinctively spread across the pages of blue scrawl. He raises his eyebrow. 'What you've been

writing half the night.'

He reads the other woman's monologue about humans' need for each other, men's inability to understand and provide the loving security women ask for, all the time, and rarely receive – unless, perhaps, they're Ilsa and Rick. He accuses his partner of being a scavenger. She ought to have '*Beware of the scavenger*' branded on her forehead as a warning (!) to people who would then know they would be fair game if they told her anything. The man, who's been in the bar with the other man – Bill – refuses to face the implications of what Bill's second wife has told his partner. The writer. The one who treats anyone who talks to her as 'fair game'.

The reader is outraged by this point, but Beverley Farmer, the admirer of M.C.Escher, has a trick left. The man who hates and fears the insights of writers stands over the woman sharing his apartment and lays down his law.

'I am not to figure in anything you write,' comes the smooth voice again. 'Never. I hope you understand that.

Hardly breathing, she cranes her neck forward to have a sip of coffee, but he grabs the mug from her and slams it on the table, where it breaks.

In doing so, of course, in losing the argument, he allows the story to end in the way he told the writer-woman that it was not to end. It is as if one of Escher's ducks has turned to fly in the wrong direction, despite duck-shooters up to their thighs in water blazing at the recalcitrant bird. Brave ones take a chance, and they get through, sometimes at least. The man in 'Home Time' is presented as an academic doing a thesis on an unnamed writer, but it's clear

that his manhood – sorry, Patrick – his masculinity is so compelled to grow in a certain direction that it's turned itself away from truth and can only exist by compelling everything and anybody else onto its own terms. This is, if one thinks about it, the very opposite of what Farmer's asking us to do when we read the reflective notes in *A Body of Water* or the meditations collected in *The Bone House*. In this sense, it's quite correct to think of Beverley Farmer as being a feminist writer, the categorisation for which she was acclaimed in the 1980s. The experiences and viewpoints of women were asserted in her stories of that period with astonishing power, and yet, like many members of the women's movement, an assertive period was only a stage on the way to using the freedom and self-respect they'd claimed.

It's time now for *The Bone House*. It would seem to be a book like no other, but I think it revives, and re-creates, a tradition which once was common but now is far from modern readers' habits. In searching for a comparison, I think first of the Anglican companion to the Bible, mentioned earlier, *The Book of Common Prayer*. Anyone whose faith leads them to this source can search in its pages for thoughts appropriate to their situation, whether personal, or social. *The Bone House*, however, is a secular book, not so much of prayer as of consideration. I think of it as a book that is meant to be left open, to be referred to, or read, when and as people have a need for it. The churches of my schooling had a lectern, a stand where the Bible was left open between readings, as if it was natural for a tome of such importance to be forever open. When would you close a sacred book? Only when there was nobody in need of it, and that would be never.

The force of the Bible is fading today. People open their minds in front of screens. Listening for meditative purposes is a greatly reduced activity! And yet, there was, for centuries, a combination of oral and written traditions inside churches. People listened, and they went home and thought. Or so it was hoped. Let's open *The Bone House*; you can open it anywhere ...

The spider's self, or sense of self: the weaver, the hoarder, the hunter, the furry one escaping across the turbulent river with strong strokes, and the fine one swinging itself and hanging up its geometric harness, so brittle, jointed with dark beads. How well they know their body's way.

The next thought's this:

You must have been seeing things, the saying goes, there's nothing there. (Where, then?)

Turn the page ...

Ancient time went round and round as visibly as the moon, earth time and sky time unwinding, a cosmic harmony. All time in a spool.

Another line space, then:

Or see the story as spun out of the self, spread it out as fine and wide and as close to invisible as may be, since it is meant to be seen through, not seen.

A story that's meant to be seen through, not seen; I feel a reverberation, here, with what Beverley Farmer's doing in *The Bone House*. She's looking for, she's expressing, she's using an alternative to story as a binding thread for what she wants to write. At once we

wonder about the way that stories affect and control us. A story has to be followed. When it takes a leap, we, the readers, leap too. We have to. It's either that or let go the story we're trying to follow. And of course we can always give up on a story, but we have to follow for a while before we can be sure that giving up is what we want to do. This other mode of writing that she's introducing, however, gives us back our freedom. We can put it down whenever we like, and pick it up on much the same terms. We're not bound to read page 37 after 36, it's simply one of our options. Let's take another leap. Page 215, in the second meditation, called 'Seeing in the dark'.

Wayfinding, wayfaring, seafaring, landfinding. For thousands of years of prehistory a people with no written language, no metal, no contact with what we know as the known world, built canoes and sailed them across the open Pacific by memory alone, the mind's eye. Nothing was left to chance, they had to know their waters ... they learned by rote the long skeins of chant in which the lore of the sea and the sky had been woven and handed down. The way to steer a course was ingrained in them over a whole lifetime of watching for zenith stars and horizon stars, bearing in mind the behaviour of cloud, wind and water.

Let's jump again:

Nous choisirons Ithaque, la terre fidèle, la pensée audacieuse et frugale, l'action lucide, la générosité de l'homme qui sait.

We will choose Ithaka, the steadfast land, audacious and frugal thought, lucid action, the generosity of the man who knows.

ALBERT CAMUS

When Beverley Farmer quotes French, and, more often, Greek, it does more than give variety; she's pulling us across boundaries of language which are also markers, fences perhaps, between ways of thinking. Her mind is extraordinarily open to the ways that things were thought about, and therefore enacted. Contrasting, always, with the waters where she lives, the Port Phillip Heads of Melbourne, are the thoughts arising from her excursions into other lands, frequently cold, in the north of the world.

The black ships that went to war on Troy were horned, fore and aft. Just such a horned black ship has haunted me since I touched her in the flesh in Oslo years ago – in the flesh, because the wood, softened and blackened with age and over a thousand years buried, flaky, butter-smooth, was like the peaty skin of a bog body, the past brought to light, patiently put back together from chips and scales of wood in their thousands: the full flesh of a ship on a light skeleton of ancient oak.

Ancient things are full of ancient thoughts, and these can enter our minds too, if we consider closely enough, as Farmer's book makes us do. Something stirs her thoughts to fly to Orkney, its kings and the spells that shaped and sometimes ended their lives.

Over three nights of Holy Week in 1014, as the Viking fleet gathered behind Earl Sigurd of Orkney, the ships of Brodir were drenched with boiling blood. It was Brodir who would be the one to behead the victor, Brian Boru, by stealth at the end of the battle of Clontarf outside Dublin, paying for that with a gash from throat to groin and the living guts dragged out of him and twined round a tree. On Good Friday morning at Svinafell in Iceland splashes of blood wet the stole of the

priest, while the priest at Thvattwater saw in the floor by the altar a long abyss of sea full of such horrors that it was some time before he could say Mass. That same morning a man in Caithness and another in the Faroes had seen the Valkyries ride up to a hut and sit chanting at the loom while they wove a web of all the men, Norse and Irish, doomed to die, a web *as red as the heart's blood, as blue as the corpse.*

So the writer's mind ranges far and wide, looking for fundamentals. This is tricky. Fundamentals tend to be whatever you think they are. It can be that something's fundamental today, unimportant tomorrow, trivial the next day and forgotten the day after. Farmer's book falls into three meditations, called Mouths of Gold, Seeing in the Dark, and Stone Age. To my reading, and this is no more than a personal reaction, with no claim to objectivity or even much discernment, the first is about death and the need for ritual; the second's about darkness, light, seeing, the camera, and being aware; and the third, centred as it is on stone, is about permanence, insofar as we can have it, and its opposite, the swift and awful nature of extinction.

I wonder how far you will agree with me, and how far you'll differ, when and if you make the effort to leave this book open inside your house and let it be a partner, an ally and also an intriguing combatant, perhaps, in your processes of thought. You may be surprised, I think, by the processes it will force you to undergo, if you give it leave to affect you as it intends to do. I compared it, earlier on, to a book of common prayer, but said that it was secular. *The Bone House* blurs the distinction between secular and sacred, not least because humanity's drawn the line in

many different places down the years, and some societies haven't imagined that such a line could exist at all. There's a challenging thought. Where are we? Where are you, and where am I? Is the sacred something that cannot be bought, and what would that be in a world of stockmarket falls and rises, where everything's got a price, and has to have a price if it's to exist at all?

Let's open the book one last time. However did it come to be closed? Here's Goethe, making us think about seeing:

I had entered an inn towards evening, and, as a well-favoured girl, with a brilliantly fair complexion, black hair, and a scarlet bodice, came into the room, I looked attentively at her as she stood before me at some distance in half shadow. As she presently afterwards turned away, I saw on the white wall, which was now before me, a black face surrounded with a bright light, while the dress of the perfectly distinct figure appeared of a beautiful sea-green.

This is one of many contributions to our reflection – our thinking – about the business of seeing, one of our most important activities, surely, one we all rely on, but mostly take for granted. *The Bone House* is an upsetting book, not in the sense of making us feel distressed, but in its way of pushing us away from clichés towards some questioning of our minds: what is it we think we see, and what explanations are we using to deal with this incoming evidence of our senses? Kepler next.

Kepler wrote his own epitaph:

*Mensus eram coelos, nunc Terrae metior umbras
Mens coelestis erat, corporis umbra jacet.*

*I scanned all heaven, now I scan the shadows of the Earth.
The mind was of heaven, the body's shadow lies here.*

Two more thoughts:

They are all protean, the gods. On the wheel of the year they rise and fall, flesh into soul into flesh of the world – this *kosmos*, lit with many lights, in the words of Plotinos. Dionysos, son of Zeus, was born a horned boy in a wreath of snakes. The Titans dropped a mirror into his lap to snare his other self, his soul and, undaunted by his frantic changes of shape, ripped him to shreds and ate him boiled in a cauldron or, some say, raw: a pomegranate tree sprang up out of his spilt blood. But Rhea, his grandmother, brought him back to life. Plotinos, speculating on why any soul should ever want to take flesh, a lower form of being, blamed Eros, Love, and used the mirror of Dionysos to show how souls, falling in love with their own image reflected in the round mirror of the world below, yearn so ardently to be united with the beloved that they fall to earth. Another kind of Fall, into Eden.

So, despite my comparison of *The Bone House* with the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer, it treats all sources, all notions of our place in the ways of the world, with an even respect; Christianity isn't favoured, though it's considered from time to time:

In the Byzantine icons the Christ Child is a grown man in miniature, a doll enthroned in the sombre lap of the Mother of God. Their eyes are sunk in shadow. She is old, he in his first youth, a homunculus with an ageless face, never a baby, let alone a Renaissance bambino. What incongruity! Surely the iconographers knew better? They did, as did the

worshippers. They knew that the ikon is for lifting the mind's eye to the mystery beyond our earthly reality, to the divine. To such an eye the chubby *bambino* is the incongruity.

I suppose *The Bone House* is an incongruity in a world full of journalism, for I often think that the job of the modern media is, first, to grab our attention, and second, to divert it to something that either doesn't matter or only matters for a day or two. That way, we can be endlessly diverted from things that the mind is endlessly drawn to consider – its own nature, its fate, its origins, destiny, forms, and the things that affect most deeply its own behaviour. Mind, soul, body, the conjunctions thereof, the births that bring each into being and the infinite number of ways by which the three of them, mind, soul and body, will reach an end ... these are the preoccupations of Beverley Farmer's book, and I think I have said enough to show that its themes are best treated, not by a story or collection of stories, but by her chosen collection – the book took about ten years to assemble – put together as a stimulus for us to think about things that matter, however much we choose to ignore them. They will still be around, long after we are not.

The following books by Beverley Farmer are referred to in the above essay.

A Body of Water, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1990

Milk, McPhee Gribble/Penguin, Melbourne, 1983

Home Time, McPhee Gribble/Penguin, Melbourne, 1985

The Bone House, Giramondo, Sydney, 2005.