I’LL TELL HER NOW: 1914-18  
(A Palimpsest for James, son of Cath and Bert)

“Yes, I’ll tell her!” His face paled slowly as the train rattled on to the sea, leaving behind vast scrubland that reaches out to reef gold and red dust swirling free. Her hand grasped his.

Both stared into blackness outside the carriage window. Australian night closed on the couple and their wakening bud of flesh, their changeling. Then the light of stations showed briefly. In dying darkness faces met one more time, as in a forest dim.

Five years had seen strange slow dawning of their love. In stark mine office under giant poppet-head she’d come, miles from ocean beach and harbour mouth, where sea mist rises at dusk. Past farms and quartz ridges her train had crawled.

But later, when he kissed her at the dance-hall, nightmares vanished, at least until sudden news was heard—his daughter, gravely ill at home. He wavered then. It seemed a deeper conscience stirred. Would he leave her? Love become vapour lost in the desert’s furnace heat?

His breast
had heaved, line of mouth hard, eyes darting
until turning to her, new with child. “Our nest
is made, “I’ll tell her now.” The reed-beds
by the speeding train became a sallow gray
but westward, over the river, a crimson
sky flared. Closer they leaned at closing
of the day.

THE WARREN WEEPS
(From: FOUR IRREGULAR SONNETS FOR
RICHARD WALDENDORP)

These wide white thighs of sand are parted here
so the acrid river’s stream can disperse
into the Southern Ocean’s chilling clear
waters, where sperm and humpback linger,
nurse
new calves, grow strong enough, turn south,
head
towards pack ice and grey storm waves
with spindrift and fume flying—plankton their
bread
as someone once said. A mission that saves
a beached school roused people. In a band