

1994

Going over the Bars

Janice Kulyk Keefer

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Keefer, Janice Kulyk, Going over the Bars, *Kunapipi*, 16(1), 1994.
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol16/iss1/79>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

Going over the Bars

Abstract

Breathe out, breathe in, breathe out, breathe in. In must always follow out for the whole business to go on at all. Even if it feels like rubbing your lungs back and forth along a grater, even if you have to throw yourself into the effort, the way you once threw yourself into an office assignment or a piece of housework. Out, in, breathe out, breathe in

JANICE KULYK KEEFER

Going over the Bars

Breathe out, breathe in, breathe out, breathe in. In must always follow out for the whole business to go on at all. Even if it feels like rubbing your lungs back and forth along a grater, even if you have to throw yourself into the effort, the way you once threw yourself into an office assignment or a piece of housework. Out, in, breathe out, breathe in

For a moment it feels as though she's swinging, abandoning her body to a plank of wood, ropes burning the palms of her hand – a surge of air. *Oh I do think it's the pleasantest thing/ Ever a child can do.* An old rhyme, misremembered. Once she knew it by heart, one she'd spent whole afternoons swinging at the park, hanging her head back till her hair swept the ground; the whole world upside down as she aimed her toes at the sky.

Up in the air and over the trees/ Till I can see so far. Words going back and forth, in and out of her head, as if she were eight years old and swinging so high she gets dizzy. Never so high that she'd lose control, and go sailing over the bars. Some mornings she'd find the ropes of the swings wound crazily around the crossbar – someone's gone over, she'd think, and back away, avoiding the swings for the rest of that day, and perhaps a whole week after. Byrd Ellen went widdershins around a church, and no one caught sight of her again on God's good earth. Going over the bars she'd fly right off, and never come back at all.

Breathe out, breathe in, breathe out, breathe in. Dizzy. It's because of the medicine, fraying the links between nerve and brain. But how can it stop her from feeling the scrape of their feet down the thinning tunnels of her blood, the way they jostle against her bones? Her bones, bitten to a coarse, harsh lace. There are holes under the scars which were her breasts, yet still they keep on, voracious, insatiable; racing from one watering hole to another. But they are nearly done for, those indefatigable travellers. Soon they'll find themselves without a destination, never mind a road to take them there. Her blood and bones will suddenly give out, like a bridge suspended over a gorge, swaying, snapping as they rush across. *Breathe out, breathe in, breathe out, breathe in*

Who decided it was best for them to bring her here? Her husband has arranged for her bed to face the window; he's arranged for the window

to look out onto a garden, but when she does manage to open her eyes she can only stare at the ceiling. At home she'd look up to find rivers crackling an endless plain; the canals of Mars were there, and bruises from the Moon's sallow face. A map, a reassurance, like her doctor's jokes, the press of her husband's hand, the trusting incomprehension of her children. But here the ceiling is a mirror; bones that feel like lumps of powdered ivory, snagging bleached-out skin. The travellers themselves are white, devouring her with stiff, colourless lips. She thinks of plagues passing over the face of the land: locusts, sirocco winds. There is a drought inside her: arteries, veins turned into skeleton leaves, a fringe unravelling.

Trees, she thinks, have the best of death, their flesh compact, burning clear and dry. She remembers them in winter, black-haired skeletons against a blank of sky. Or well and truly dead: branches polished beyond all possibility of bud or leaf: petrified lightning against blue summer air. And the way the leaves slough off – the leathery smell, the not unpleasant sourness of their decay. Flesh is a nicer word than meat. Once she'd felt shamed by its sheer, sickened sprawl inside of her; now there is almost nothing left of it, they have worn it down with their rats' feet, rats' mouths, rats the size and speed of tigers. *Breathe out, breathe in.* It's this shifting an iron bar from one hand to the other, the weight of air that makes her lungs ache. It's the funeral scent of the flowers: iris clogged in its caul, tulips reeling on worm-soft stems. Today he's come in unexpectedly; he should be at work, he should be with the children. He's here, now, because he knows the flowers make it impossible for her to find her breath; to throw it out again, lift up her hands to catch it back.

He takes the flowers and the vase away. Now she won't have to hear the noise the tulips make as their petals distend; the hiss as the iris shrivels. Now she will be able to hear her breath coming in, going out, the slow, unsteady creak of a swing... It takes him a long time to get rid of the flowers and return to her bed; to his waiting. Once he'd waited for her at airports and hotels; waited for her to finish dressing the children or undressing herself. Now he waits for the moment when a line fine as a hair will sever his life from hers; her dying from death. *Out, in. Breathe in after out, out after in, or the swing will stop, altogether.*

Death may be an accomplishment of which we're all capable. Dying – at least, her kind of dying – is another matter. It is loss of control. Not surrender, but loss; progressive, irreversible; absolute. Out of an infinitude of cells all perfectly ordered and obedient, one becomes malignant: *disposed to rebel, disaffected, malcontent*. One cell deserting the ranks, changing itself, creating an other in its own likeness. And that other spawns another, and another. Functions not so dissimilar to her own: to eat, to reproduce. To journey: *metastasis*. Her body an unknown continent discovered, devoured

by travellers who burn so many bridges that there's no road back, nothing to go on to. They trespass on the routes of her blood and brain; they tunnel her bones. And her body answers back by closing shop, boarding the windows, locking the doors of whatever's left unvisited. They call it failure - her kidneys are failing, her liver and spleen. Her body an examination paper with X's piling up.

At first she'd dismissed the disaffected and rebellious cells. 'I'm not giving an inch, not half an inch - you think you can do as you please, change as you will, but I'm not letting even one of you get your way.' Her friends had applauded her spirit: she was a fighter and a winner: she wouldn't walk but swagger through the shadow valley. But something - not her friends, not her family, not even her own bravado - let her down. She'd had to switch tactics, lecture them the way she might have lived to lecture her children in another ten years: 'What you're doing is stupid, useless - can't you understand? Like it or not, I'm the one in authority here - you have to play by my rules.' At last, she'd tried reason: 'Don't you see that you're eating the hand that feeds you? If I'm gone how will you travel, where will you go? It's completely illogical - in nobody's interest, surely you must understand.'

And then she'd refused all parley - they were no longer rebels, but an invading army. *Exterminate all the brutes!* They had been scalped, torched, drowned with chemicals. Five, three, perhaps only one escaped the assaults that poisoned her, as well. Fleeing to undefended ground, pitching camp and recruiting forces, sending out vanguards to occupy still further reaches of a land lush, helpless as grass. That was the point at which her doctor had stopped joking, and her husband's hand had not seemed quite so firm when it grasped her own. Her children's clear and perfect faces became smudged when they looked at her: how could she help them, when she couldn't even save herself? She'd spoken one last time, not to rebels, or a victorious army, but to an unimaginable horde of travellers. 'I see, now. You're not invading me; my body sent you, it has even kindly provided you with an itinerary. You may not even know that you're destroying yourselves by killing me - you may not even care. It's not you who are making me die. My body's committing suicide, and I'm given nothing at all to say in the matter. My body has simply stopped talking to me.'

After the first operation he'd brought her home, put her in the spare bedroom, the one where they'd hung the old, bleached-out curtains with their tenuous patterns of gazebos, lovers and gardens. She was content: here she could rest; here she could save something from the wreckage, knit up the forces of something she could now call, with all formality, her soul. This was the occasion to read Dante, to listen to nothing but Bach. But the print scratched her eyes, the notes blurred into one inchoate adagio. Very well, she would shut eyes, shut ears, draw the curtains so that the lovers drowned in the muggy light that struggled through the

lining. She would lie in a square white bed, enwomb herself, unfold the truth of everything she'd been taught, everything she'd wanted to be true. All the birthing and growing and coupling for which the cells first joined themselves: whipcord sperm, moon-faced egg – this counted for nothing. Only this malignant birth was real, parthenogenesis of rebel cells. Born to die, this was the truth her body uncovered under all its layers of skin, muscle, bone, grown fragile as tissue paper.

Yet it meant nothing. Knowing brought no peace, no certainty, no end of wanting. When her children came into her room she still stretched out her arms to hold them. Holding them too long, too tight, breathing in the bread-and-butter scents of their skin and hair. They were very good, they let her hold them – they were afraid of her. It was the truth, though her husband denied it. He wasn't concerned with what was true, only with the angles of belief, measured by love's geometry. He was quite clear, quite confident on this: he wasn't dying.

Everything she'd known and felt, watched and thought through; everything she'd expected to have to hand, a rod, a staff to keep her place, guarding whatever ground she'd gained – she'd lost it. And her dying brought no revelation, only confirmation of obscurity. But she wouldn't give in to it. If she'd lost control of what was happening to her body, and why, she could at least dictate the how and where. She would *not* be taken from her home, dragged over the border from pain to stupor, dumped into a gleaming terminal where strangers would speak to her only in charts and graphs, syringes, intravenous bags. But in the end she was taken, dragged and dumped. Then *she* was lectured to and reasoned with: *You need special drugs, special care. Your husband can't cope any more. It's become too hard on the children.* The ambulance attendants were angels, substandard issue: they lifted her as clumsily as if they'd been wings, not hands. She couldn't refuse them with her body, which had refused her orders for so long now; how could she refuse them with her mind, bumbling slow, soft circles round a wick of morphine.

Once out of nature I will never take/ My bodily form from any living thing. What made the poet think he'd be given any say in the matter? Metempsychosis, her soul sidling into the body of a dog, a cat, a rat, – or perhaps just such another one as she, a body that will suddenly, and for no reason whatsoever, turn on itself after thirty years of working perfectly, the cells unfathomably obedient, so many of them reciting their messages word for word, relaying the codes through blood and tissue and across placental seas. Her children carry her body inside them the way she once carried theirs. Her body, and its switch, the mind, but not her soul, psyche, *pneuma*, whatever it is that lifts her onto the wooden plank, pulls it back, back, and then releases her into an arc of air. *Breathe out, breathe in.*

Those who hold that the soul perishes with the body are consigned to fire, on the authority of a great poet. And yet she could never acquiesce to an eternity of bliss, that potpourri of rose and fire. She cannot even think of angels except as white cockatiels, talons and tail feathers clipped, twisting their heads to the side of short, arthritic necks and croaking *holy, holy, holy*. She has read about accidental Lazari, expiring momentarily on operating tables, pacing vestibules of foggy light before their lives click on again. Do we at least get the afterlife we desire? Or does it depend on whether we perform our deaths the way we should? She is as nervous about this as she was about piano recitals, passing exams, taking off her clothes for her first lover. And yet it seems so simple – all she has to do, when the time comes, is to assume transparency. Her soul will weigh no more than a scrap of cellophane, than breath on a mirror. It will float out of her body the way paper rushes up the flue of a chimney, the way children jump off a swing in full sail.

Breathe in, breathe out... Her husband visits after work, every day – he has stopped bringing the children; they are staying with their aunt in a different part of the city. He brings her their crayon drawings, stick figures drawn with the simplicity that certainty inspires: a circle and five lines = a body. Crayon lines cannot be erased, but only scratched away, and even if the colour's gone, a line will remain, like a cut that's bled dry. She has held her daughters, sung to them, bathed them, scolded them for their four and two years of life: they will remember her, at worst, as a stick-figure pinned to a square white bed; at best, as a temporary cradle of arms and breasts and lap. She told him, as soon as she knew, that he should remarry. They were drinking the bottle of *Liebfraumilch* he had bought on the way home from the doctor's (Chekhov's physician had ordered *him* champagne). 'A wife for you, a mother for the children' – she'd said she didn't want him to play Heathcliff to her Cathy. He'd made a face that was not even a passable imitation of Olivier.

I am incomparably above and beyond you all. These will be her last words, if she has voice enough to speak them, and if anyone happens to be there to hear. Such things happen – everyone dies alone, though some are fortunate enough to have an audience. For it will be a show – of confidence, or unconcern, of panic or simply transformed energies: the effort her body now expends in crumpling and uncrumpling the paper bags of her lungs, sending her blood on its sluggish rounds, dispensing endless hospitality to footsore, hungry tumours, will go into lighting sure, slow fires of decay. Malignant cells and healthy – *All are punished.*

Breathe out, breathe in. She'd thought to go about her dying with a certain style. At first she'd entertained illusions the way you do the kind of guest you're certain to impress. But it came to nothing. She remembered a film she once saw, an image of a large, moon-faced woman cradling a death's-

head in a muslin bonnet. But no *magna mater* has come to offer her the breast. Death and the maiden? He's stood her up – she hasn't caught so much as a glimpse of his spindle-shanks, a twirl of his scythe. Perhaps because she has no flowers to give Him, having twice rolled the stone away to bring her children out. They haven't yet learned to mourn the death of a pet – now they will be marked for ever: 'Their mother died when they were very young.' A letter of introduction to *Herr Angsi*.

Her husband holds her hands. They are an arrangement of bones – doesn't he fear they will fall apart in his hands, a game of pick-up sticks? Her husband pays his calls and she knows his presence in the way she knows that Saturn and Jupiter orbit the sun: invisibly, at an incalculable distance. *Breathe out, breathe in, swing up, swing down, hold tight to the ropes, hold tight* – He is holding her hands and bending his face towards her, eyes wide open, like the tulips she made him throw away. Murmurings, measurements, a trigger of morphine. Shaking out the long, fine hair she no longer has; running to the swings at the end of the park.

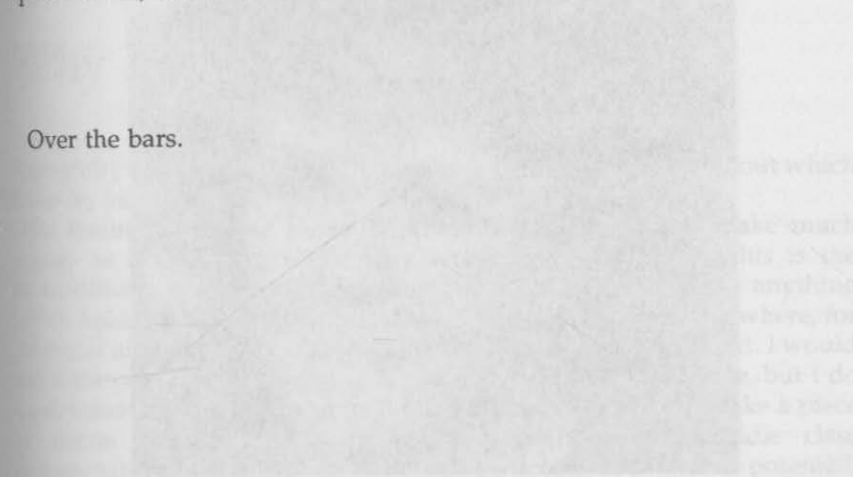
Incomparably above and beyond. He leans in over her, asking her what it is she wants, can he get her anything, is she in pain? How to tell him she feels nothing save the rush of air against her face as she swings higher, higher. She is somewhere between body and mind – it is too difficult to explain, and she has lost her voice, just as she's lost the ability to curl her fingers round even a child's hand, to return a pressure. *Breathe out, breathe in.* But she wants him to understand this being in-between. It is something like looking at colour transparencies whose outlines haven't quite meshed, so there's a gap between where the line is drawn and the colour begins. A gap. Not absence, and certainly not an abyss, but just an unexpected space to slip through. Like that possibility, high up on a swing, of pumping so hard you go up and over the bars.

She'd never been able to do it, as a child, and she'd forbidden her own children to try. Because they would break bones, smash skulls, end up in hospital. *Swing up, swing down, swing harder, higher.* She's been so stupid to have left it behind her, left it so long, as if it were shameful; a childish thing. When she'd taken her own children to the playground she'd avoided the swings, sitting instead on a corner of the sand-box, or patrolling the rim of the paddling pool, trying not to get splashed. Now she doesn't care if anyone sees her like this, alone and free, head down and her long hair brushing the ground. The world turned upside down, a sky of packed earth, with stones for stars.

Swinging back and forth, higher and higher till the bars creak and groan. *Over the wall, and up in the trees/Till I can see so far.* She can see everything now; the cracked ceiling over her head pulls back, like flesh from the sides of a wound. It shows whatever it is that lies in the gap between outline and colour. Dante, Bach, *Mehr Licht*, but all that fills her

head now is a children's rhyme. *Out, in, out.* The swing comes up to its highest point; she's gripping the rope so tight it tears her hands. Something splits inside, a hairline crack; something fiery, clear as glass spills out. *In, out. Out.*

Over the bars.



[The following text is extremely faint and largely illegible, appearing as bleed-through from the reverse side of the page. It contains several paragraphs of text.]