

## BARN OWL (1969)

by Gwen Harwood

Daybreak: the household slept.  
I rose, blessed by the sun.  
A horny fiend, I crept  
out with my father's gun.  
Let him dream of a child  
obedient, angel-mind-

old no-sayer, robbed of power  
by sleep. I knew my prize  
who swooped home at this hour  
with day-light riddled eyes  
to his place on a high beam  
in our old stables, to dream

light's useless time away.  
I stood, holding my breath,  
in urine-scented hay,  
master of life and death,  
a wisp-haired judge whose law  
would punish beak and claw.

My first shot struck. He swayed,  
ruined, beating his only  
wing, as I watched, afraid  
by the fallen gun, a lonely  
child who believed death clean  
and final, not this obscene

bundle of stuff that dropped,  
and dribbled through the loose straw  
tangling in bowels, and hopped  
blindly closer. I saw  
those eyes that did not see  
mirror my cruelty

while the wrecked thing that could  
not bear the light nor hide  
hobbled in its own blood.  
My father reached my side,  
gave me the fallen gun.  
'End what you have begun.'

I fired. The blank eyes shone  
once into mine, and slept.  
I leaned my head upon  
my father's arm, and wept,  
owl blind in early sun  
for what I had begun.

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## **ABOUT THE POET**

**Gwen Harwood, born Taringa 1920 – died 1995 Hobart**

*The post-war era in Australia was a period of economic recovery and the ideals of the 'suburban dream'. A wife and mother like Gwen was expected to embrace her domestic role. However, Australia was also exposed to more international art and literature in this period of European migration, stimulating the Australian literary scene and encouraging her to write and publish.*