

**OLYMPIC ALCHEMY** by John Taylor

The cauldron soars above the crowd.  
The river flows, as it sometimes will,  
From one side of the mountains,  
Into the red dust of the land.  
She stands there shivering now,  
In some darkened corner with the others.

We gathered on the other side.  
Our rivers always met the sea.  
Our world remained beyond the waves.  
Strangers, exiles, never pilgrims, settlers then, now conquerors,  
History is our possession with guilt and shame its legacy.

Our petty aims brought us to this.  
Fearful, we chased them into horrid stinking holes,  
Or over cliffs. Hostels and half way houses,  
Missions, were our answer to their flight.  
We caged the birds and fed them .

Hoping, we were hoping weren't we,  
That they wanted to be like us.  
To live in houses that face the rivers  
That flow towards the sea.  
To dream of homes beyond the waves.

Our refrigerated souls, comforted, weighed down,  
With the trinkets of our victory,  
Wonder why they waste and throw away  
All the new things that we give them.  
All the euphoria of our unhappiness.

They all hang now about our necks,  
These emblems of our winning.  
No crosses there for us to bear  
Just the guilt and shame of victors.  
Who will wear them in our place?

Now, Flash suited, she runs,  
Or flies, with us or away from us?  
Miracle or bird chasing golden handiwork.  
Melting trinkets in the cauldron  
Refining gold from all that's base.

Hoping, we were hoping weren't we,  
That this would buy forgiveness.  
That in all of them there would one  
Who stood for all. For all they were,  
And are and could have been.

She wins. A cheer, a roar more like.  
Grins and giggles, tears flow down,  
Down to red, red, red dust.  
The dust that drifts over every town  
And settles on the crosses  
In the graveyards of the lost.

**I wrote this poem shortly after Cathy Freeman, an Australian aboriginal athlete, had won the 400 metres at the 2000 Sydney Olympics. Cathy also carried the Olympic torch into the stadium and lit the Olympic flame in the giant cauldron. The title 'Olympic Alchemy' refers to the pseudo-science of turning base metals into gold and the central thought was to observe a national hope that went beyond nationalism to a plea for forgiveness and reconciliation. Yet in the midst of all that emotion I couldn't but reflect on the lives lost. JT**