

**Layla**  
by Derek Sellen

My father said I'd be a good wife,  
and I would have been  
but for the poet.

I was young and flattered,  
with no defences against the words  
that spun me into their song.

Out of the dark of our yard at night,  
his wailing chant. It was  
a voice that pursued and possessed.

Even our dogs sat and listened in a circle.  
He woke the house:  
*Crazy curs! Madman stalker!*

By day he led a hermit life,  
lurking in the desert and in our minds.  
My husband fettered me with suspicion.

Now that my illness brews,  
the poet sings of *a heart that ails*.  
My thoughts reach out across the sands:

*Let me be!*  
*A tumour kills me, not passion!*  
but more night-lyrics blossom.

I sweat my sickbed black and close my ears.  
He wants to heal me with kisses.  
Or else immortalise my dying.

Two men's fantasies pinion me  
as my husband hovers, watcher  
at the pillow, alert for my death.

I think he needs to hear first-hand  
whether it's his name or the poet's  
that's last out of my lips.

*Layla!* I shall howl, claiming back my stolen soul.