

# mourning song

wendy woodward

*We are publishing Wendy Woodward's poem to mark the Federation of South African Women's focus on the plight of women prisoners. 'Mourning Song' was prompted by two newspaper reports of injustices meted out to women.*

*In May 1987 the **Weekly Mail** reported that a young girl, Emily Patel, had been stabbed to death in the back of a police van. Unable to pay a R20 admission of guilt fine for disturbing the peace in the squatter camp near Bredasdorp where she lived, Emily had been placed in the van with what the **Weekly Mail** called 'hardened criminals' - one of whom stabbed her repeatedly with a scissors. This man had already killed his girlfriend and had sworn to kill the next woman whom he saw.*

*In February 1988 the **Cape Times** told of the many women murdered in Kashmir by their new husbands when they failed to receive the promised dowry from the bride's family. Often the woman is burnt and the death is blamed on a stove that was knocked over.*

Emily Patel,  
your dowry was contracted  
in the back of those vans  
to Caledon and Kashmir

Found to be lacking  
you were beaten  
by primus stoves  
that cooked the evening dal  
stewed the potjiekos  
and boiled milk for the baby  
you didn't have time to conceive

But your aunts and mothers  
noted the stain you left (so  
domestically careless)  
as you splayed / unthinkingly  
against  
the sunbright yellow of the  
prison van,  
as you bled / unceasingly  
into the blackening floor  
into the dirt of Akbar's palace  
into the wheat of citadelled  
farms  
into the fountains of Shalimar's  
gardens

Pithed and gutted  
your scissoring body  
pressed, like last season's  
leaf  
veined,  
on the yellow wire

And you died -  
a fish out of its lake  
gills bloodied  
in the paraffined air  
on the floor of those vans

We remember you -

We mourn your deaths  
From Bredasdorp to Srinigar.

We have noted the stains.