

## Still

The scar, plump as an almond on your wrist;  
the bowls of your nails;  
your blue bicycle against the pink wall of our room.  
Will they know it is hard to be angry with a man who  
    makes me laugh  
and that you know this?

I dream you old;  
I dream you suck clear soup from my spoon,  
spill blood onto our pillow.

I dream you stand in the centre of our house and  
sing to me,  
and all the magpies in the garden fall still.

## Speaking chrysanthemum

The specialist speaks chrysanthemum.  
All about his head, the window  
grins dumb, white.  
I remove my gloves, lay out my hands.  
He leans his elbows on his desk,  
rolls a pen between his fingers  
the way my mother would roll dough,  
the way I once could.  
His head is a shaggy explosion of light.  
When he squeezes each of my joints he names it,  
his breath beside me tough, measured and  
green as a plant. He speaks chrysanthemum,  
drops the odd word, unfurled, in my lap.  
I leave with a fistful of curt white petals. I speak but  
I don't speak chrysanthemum. I don't  
speak at all.

All the way home I smell them. Their  
pungency cuts a path into my head.  
Other people's houses hurtle by.  
The afternoon is mild and smiling.  
In the kitchen, you sniff.  
You take my fist, put it to your wrinkling nose.  
I won't open my palm.

Imagination is the enemy.  
When I was five, a steam roller came to make our street.  
Clay glistened behind it,  
perfectly flat fabric.  
It wasn't size or noise or even smell  
but flatness that sent me shrieking.  
I remind myself.  
There is so little of me between that day and this,  
my clothes a mere pocket disease slithers into.  
When I die, someone will fold them.  
Someone else will try them on.  
I'll slide away, a scrap of paper.  
Milk. Bread. A list of tasks.

Don't ask me to unclench my fist or eyes  
or any part.  
It is all I can do to contain myself,  
my borders all kicked over.  
There is mutiny.  
Even my bones can't tell enemy from friend.  
What future this war, war, endless war?  
I close myself and fight.  
I will fight myself to death.

## The boat

You are as cold and still as a stone.  
I will pick you up, press you to my face.  
I will pocket you.  
There you can be,  
a tiny thing,  
curved as a sleeping finger,  
a lock of hair, an idea.  
I made you once and I can remake you.  
When I take you out, you will feel my breath.  
I will sing you up and you will become a girl  
and you will be perfect and unafraid.  
I will put my hands to your skin and rib,  
I will put my hands in the place of your heart.  
I will press that place into its shape.  
You will have a heart.  
You will become heartbeats.  
I will put your own hand to your chest and say: here.  
I will cover you with blankets.  
I will make my arms as strong and curved  
as the hull of a boat that you, little and bloodied,  
can crawl into, and my breath the wind that sails us.  
I will sing  
I will sing you  
I will sing you so far out to sea.  
We will find another continent.

## Zero point four

The nurse speaks, soft as any other mother.  
The syringe is a canary of a thing.  
She places it on the clean white table  
as if she'd just wrung its neck.  
I stare at it: zero point four mls and  
yellow as piss.

You were cool and jagged,  
a glacier of grace and madness.  
How long will I reach to phone you?  
I wake at night, stumble about, calling *mumma*

I stare at the nurse-face, the fierce haircut.  
She calls me *sweetheart*, says *just a little prick*.  
I want to quip but she's heard it all.  
So I turn to the wall and she  
pops my skin like a plum.

You were a long, tough summer.  
When you entered a room, you claimed it.  
We never spoke about pills or needles  
so I never said *sharps can bounce off my skin, or  
they blunt so quickly after just one use*.

I report the side-effects and the specialist's order:  
*Survive through this*.  
She offers me her soft-nurse face and  
leaves the room.  
So this is what life is: nausea, vertigo, migraine, cramps.  
Obedience. Endurance.

## Death certificate

So I see myself diminished in  
the marble floor, the glassed-in foyer, the  
mirrored elevator doors.  
They squeeze shut like love does.  
I am shot up silently.

You were so flat, the sheets a white envelope.  
*My head*, you stammered, *whirs loud, eeeeeee, like an oven.*  
You asked for your *wheelchair wheelchair garden* until  
I stroked your hair and face and arms.

I follow the sign to ‘Certificate Applications’.  
The women behind the high brown counter speak loudly.  
I have forgotten the relevant date.  
They call me love and I’m grateful.

You wanted to be again beneath that  
large, symmetrical, bright green tree,  
to watch a scatter of ducks skim silver on the pond,  
magpies clump and chortle on the lawn.

The form is green; I don’t understand the questions.  
I want to explain myself:  
It was Tuesday, the end of Spring;  
I put my phone beneath my pillow because I thought.

What she hands me at last is thin and blue in  
a white envelope.

The magnolias were blooming, pink and magenta.

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I am not a wife.  
I am a glacier, drifting.  
Once I imagined myself a galaxy.  
Aliens spun in me, small silver planets.

I am not a wife.  
I am a glacier, drifting.  
Once I imagined myself a poem.  
Lines spun in my head, straw to gold, gold to straw.

I am not a wife.  
I am a glacier, drifting.  
Once I imagined myself an Ophelia.  
Men spun in my wake. I trailed my fingers, hems, hair.

I am not a wife.  
I am a glacier, drifting.  
Once I imagined I broke. I slipped away.  
Most of me bobs, silent, beneath the deepest, bluest sea.

## Therapy like fish

He has eyes like a sky he wants me to fall into.  
On his wall is an illusion, an invitation  
a shutter that opens over miles of sea.

Squalls come and go all afternoon,  
light pales yellow and mauve, an old bruise.  
I doze and wake from dreams of a storm and a shuttered room,  
my tongue thick as a page.

Somewhere, I know, there are lines of notes.  
Oh, saviour, let me cut them up  
re-arrange them for you, into poems:

they. Will read. like suffering.  
Also. Sometimes I have. hated. you.  
At the beginning.  
All night. I think. of. edges. and  
how close. Can she. I get.

(For once – just once – hold out your hand.  
Let me touch you with one finger  
the way – did I tell you? – I was alone and  
someone touched me)

You are unreadable as the surface of the sea.  
Still I have seen the shadow of a single sentence  
swim a dark leviathan across your face.  
You are witness to the words I haul, one by one,

into the glistening palms of my hands.  
Such small offerings.  
How they twitch there, naked and translucent  
as fish.

How many times will I long to fall  
through the sky, into the deep pool of your arms  
to be weightless, still  
an unasked question?

## writer's subject

forgive my paradox  
of course it should be so:  
step through my door  
my myths my skin  
(each cell bloody with memory)  
as if my birth is not  
a miraculous random act

let me steep rose petals for you  
halve eggplants    set yoghurt in a cloth  
& swing it in a window  
let me teach you how to dance  
& read you poetry by Tekeyan  
let me take you to my mother  
bring your questions your curiosity  
watch her creased brown hands  
work frantic at the patterns in her tablecloth  
watch her eyes meet yours  
full & brilliant  
with the most appalling courage

come bright postmodernist  
we are your writer's subject  
claim our borders as your own  
for what is truth?  
you are our turk  
exile us again  
again  
we will march for generations into mesopotamia  
our family shod like horses  
& let loose

## an astronomer speaks to his wife

I once  
a botanist I know  
told me he was  
using small blue-handled scissors  
cataloguing photos of his wife  
the bikini shot  
the wedding  
birth  
the first ride on a unicycle  
face to face with emus

when he was interrupted  
by his children & their  
tearful holding out to him  
a gecko they had stepped upon

he took it gently on his palm  
saw  
with his swift eye  
its mortal injury  
the impact of their shoes upon its skin  
its slow work  
the tremendous hauling of itself  
saw too  
his children's faces  
turned towards his faith in science  
so  
with as much care as  
that with which he gathered specimens  
he snipped the gecko's head  
clean from its body

2 truly  
my love  
I am simply a photographer  
each day I search my negatives for  
pattern & for roguery  
& each clear night  
record again  
the data of our isolation

I know  
that sometimes you wish I just made tea  
that a spoon of leaves was  
only that to me  
that I didn't hold it  
out to you & say  
this much dark matter  
is as heavy as the world

*kondinin 1964*

these roads are the longest I have ever seen  
way ahead this blue one trembles in the sun as if it  
    knows something  
I wait for us to hit the water it promises  
for the tyres to swish through  
for it to steam off the body of dad's beetle in the sun as if  
    it were  
a train rushing across a country they're afraid of  
I've seen a train on the littlest hobo  
this is the first time we've been anywhere but mum says  
we came on a boat  
& she was scared & she can't buy coffee here & she  
    can't swim  
& the shops are always closed

in the front she feeds a baby in a small white shawl  
sometimes I stand up & look over at the baby  
it has a red face & sticking up black hair  
my brother sleeps in the back with his mouth open & his  
closed-in sandals flung out from his feet along the shiny red  
    seat  
all the windows are open  
the wind is so loud nobody speaks  
I sit in the space between the backseat & the window  
I have a day old chick  
I push it into a matchbox to sleep  
it's hot but the view is good so I keep watch  
I don't see any trains or aborigines with spears

sometimes there are kangaroos on the side of the road with  
their legs  
sticking up sometimes when we pass them you can see inside  
them for a second  
I say look but nobody does  
when we get there the house is dark inside & cool  
I open the matchbox  
the chick is dead  
I lie on the red shiny lino  
I put it in a hole in the garden  
I feed a joey on the back lawn with a bottle  
I test it on my wrist the way mum does  
it's watery & blue like the skin is there  
there are so many flowers & vegetables outside that I can't  
work out where I am  
there are horses across the road  
when they shake their heads & snort dust flies off them  
mum says stand back they might hurt you

# shattering

*for Lex Hamer, 1957-1974*

1    although I don't recall the precise colour of your eyes  
I have come to see them as green & encyclopaedic:  
did you think I didn't know it was your turn  
to take me from that party  
turn me belly up beneath your hands?

forgive me: I have learned things in the dark  
are not always what they seem  
but that night I was full of visions  
the porch light through the trees didn't really  
disassemble you  
the high socket of your eye  
the long bone of your jaw  
pale veneer of skin between

2    at first in your sister's face  
I saw nothing of you:  
the surprising redness of her hair  
her eyes flat as a cat's pressed on me  
our faces like boards

& then  
in the particular tilt of her head  
was the proud structure of your bones

& I imagine them  
unhinged  
the fragments of your hair & shirt & teeth  
flying out across the calm blue sea

3 but peace:  
even if you'd called me up (like some goddess)  
there would have been some other stone  
to drag for decades  
to weigh me down in the cool impartial ocean

4 if you had lived  
I would have missed  
the sharpness of your lashes  
the shattering line of your cheek  
the certainty of meeting so obliquely

if you had lived  
you would have gone from me  
anonymous as character  
emerged tardy & vague  
in some familiar narrative

if you had lived  
I could never have been sure of you

## other country

I have been told  
silk will stop bullets and  
if we wind words from our mouths like thread  
pass messages from lip to lip  
we will learn the salt of distant throats

& one night  
flying up from sleep  
still open-mouthed &  
weightless as a breath  
in thin blue air  
will see ourselves beneath us  
sure  
& shaking  
like the needle of a compass

unsure of my science  
you simply name me moth  
the calligraphy of wings  
means only  
that I am your slender alien  
that my shape is quick as panic

feel the dark disturbance at your neck  
as I slip by  
or perhaps  
(if you prefer) I am amphibious  
& slip down into a fissure  
along the close damp walls  
the cold streams

at night I am ferocious speleology  
tunneling this continent  
in search of other country  
all the chambers of this earth  
resonant as skulls

## gastronomy

this day she eats:  
a cornflake-icecream-peanutbutter-pizza sandwich  
& then  
this day  
she starts to eat herself  
slowly sucks the fat  
beneath her skin  
(till her tongue could  
lick along her bones)  
& smiles  
buys bathers for herself  
gift wraps them  
plucks her body hairs  
one by one  
stares naked into mirrors  
& is very young again  
no more tugged blood

but she can not close the holes in her  
fill up & polish scars & pores  
knit hymen  
stop up arse & throat  
her fingers find their own way in  
& penises  
& spoons

this day she eats  
an allbran-jam-cheese-sourcream-olive-fruitcake  
fruitcake  
& squats & squats before the toilet hole  
thighs wrapped around the pedestal

wanting love  
offers contents of her belly  
to her thin thin lover woman  
offers fat & blood & hair & tongue for love

## immigration

*Being born of those who have fled oppression means being born with acute, cellular knowledge of such oppression – knowledge that is as physical as blood.*

father we arrived decades too soon  
refugees from wars too ancient and mundane for speech

like errant guests we set up camp  
on this new country's steps

how we learned stealth  
memorising floor plans through the keyhole  
wearing australia like a dressup  
our tongues split as timbers salvaged from some other place  
each schoolyard taunt another hammer blow

I can not write it now  
wake from a feral dream:

    a child cries under rotting wood and tin  
    my mouth is filled with brand new nails  
    I hammer them all in

## reflexology

1    remove my shoe

    this flesh is glutinous  
    heavy as gardenia  
    puckered  
    like a kiss

2    you hold my feet  
    as if they're lovers  
    soft and wet from leather

    they fill your hands  
    like rice  
    like offerings  
    that women lay  
    at shrines for gods

3    the points we press  
    are sore  
    & irresistible

~~

the success of our baking  
lies in the balance  
but can we measure  
tenderness like flour?  
(are the heaped cups ever full enough?)

I don't know the ancient ratios  
that slip from other women's tongues  
my mother kept a secret kitchen  
believed that – if she taught me –  
I'd marry young            have kids  
(my schoolgirl wedding sent her  
to the stovetop with a hammer)

so now I heap spoonsful of lust  
still sprinkle too much fear  
hold steady hands that never  
add as many drops  
as I would like to give  
afraid to fill the bowl too soon  
& drown us both

I teach my sons to sift  
blend gently  
to hold soft dough inside their palm  
& feel the weight