

Chapter 2

1 *metamorphoses of brain damage*

The man who mistook his wife for a truck
they had a similar stress gradient
she bore her load of life badly
he lacked all emotion; his frontal lobes
had worn away like a brain-shaped
eraser; he'd lost that pencil with which we write
out the chorus of everyone else's responses to life
and sing along. I can't love you anymore she wrote
to him while in hospital, ever grinning
it's like you're there and not there
I don't care, he told the camera of his accidentally caused
lack of empathy, and she cried
on camera, and no one lied

the doctor looked on kindly
the camera and film crew watched
and so did I - in whose shoes (dress,
fingers, accident, blank screen or eyes)?

'Rate your sadness for me,' she said to the woman, who was
trussed in a plaster cocoon like a broken leg
sensors and receptacles suspended from her to the ceiling

('I want to make you sad,' said the scientist
in her white like-a-slightly-longer-dress lab coat
'and to measure your frontal lobes')

'About a six' came a voice
whose bruise was real, if practised
large eyes staring out of old fruit sockets at the screen above

her, her words hanging spiders of text, set pain
'I'm a monster. I hate myself,'
the depressive wrote, with her fingers

typing out her saddest thoughts, quote unquote)
then while she was looking back at her thoughts
they radiographed the sadness of her brain

'I'm sad that you're sad,' the scientist then said
in her wordlessly-white, paper-white lab coat
'but I'm glad that you were sad for us';

like a child, the monster woman was still
sad but pleased to be pleasing, a little
healed, you could feel the plaster wearing lighter

and the power of science

There in Russia they keep their herds shut in stables, you'll see
 no grasses in the fields, no leaves on the trees appear.
 But the land is mounds of snow, shapeless and deep
 in cold, it rises as you walk all around you. It's always winter,
 the North-west wind is always breathing in frost.
 His horses from morning reaching for the far skies, the Sun
 never succeeds in scattering the paling shadows; his car rushes
 to bathe in the red mirror of ocean. Night the shadows revives.
 Bridges of ice congeal, of a sudden, from flowing rivers. Whose
 waves
 then carry wheels bound with iron on their backs. Having
 once served ships, they now pave a way for open carts.
 The cold causes bronze vessels to leap apart, clothing stiffens
 when put on, they cut off blocks of frozen wine with an axe.
 While pools, in their depths, turn solid ice, fierce icicles
 make caves of uncombed beards, and the snow
 all through the air, is all this time falling.

Virgil, Georgics III

Some God's elbow escarpment holds this town in to
 its azure seascape, its fresh mown green back yards,
 Hill's hoist, sea-saw waves and sky-blue time

a shivering pall over the death of our dead friend
 whose loss we have gathered to forget, whose loss
 to forget, bright eyes embrace me, you've arrived

Dean wanted a cigarette. I suggested
he watch *The Curse of the Phantom Limbs* instead:

They're interviewing a woman and her stump
which feels, which she feels, pain
in the fingers, though she lost it from the elbow

A hand typing in the distance, next door, on the computer

An artist interviews her too, takes photos, digital
images and then virtuals
the woman's imagined pain in, pixelling a massive swollen hand
(the hand that grasped the wheel - this is imprinting)
on a stick-thin arm attached to the stump: a map of pain
an artist paints

*

Another is a man with no arm, but his phantom
body map has a huge thumb, a thumb for an arm

The typing stops
Dean didn't need a cigarette. He wrote a letter instead
touch-typed like us

6

A man lost all sensation in his right arm
from the motorcyke smash, but his phantom hand still gripped in
pain.

The eyes. Their phantom pain. The arm ungripped
(its ghostly impossible grasp. What else are phantoms
but. And so is art. This is imprinting the scientist said print. The
homunculus in your brain is more you than you. Which remaps)
when he placed the one left in the black mirror box.

In a mirror your right arm is your left
a reflection of the left. So you see

both limbs, one virtual, one real, move perfectly now, as if the
motorbicycle

had never cut the other off. And patients start to cry
And to lose all phantoms float away pain

*

a cigarette
paints phantom lungs

7

The body of Bethesda: the tain of sky that floats overhead
and the walking tracks vein the land with life

inroads, humans, ring up in the mind
their binary codes, the lizard beside me, DNA-determined

he motes in the eye my *silence of nature*
as if the divorce I'm getting over meant as much to him

as the light at each tick of the clock of the sun
on the pool of Bethesda, silence settles, no one
was or ever will be at home

8

Walking around a
corpse makes
the path of our
conversation
difficult, trippy, little
jumps in grammar
excuse me

9

Can the plastic plastic surgeons

cut out ugly successes, make faceless

a clean canvas, skin smooth as paper

10

Cleaning my teeth with a truck

11

I ate the best minds of my generation rot dribbled
down the sides of my chin and not throwing up
To what sight
do you shut that eye off
do you dream it to death
do you drink it all down
to one black painting
that swallows the frame

Chapter 4

I

My father died
three years to this day
or another like it

I could have jumped into the grave
like Ophelia's pond, like Hamlet

Frogs leap and play in the mud the rain

I had a coffee instead
with someone I hate

2

Son, I want you to have my
so cattle are branded
so one dreams of foreign lands
through these windows
one day we'll fly
and find you again
leaving the relics behind
and ahead and all in pieces

And the cursed father, no longer a father, said 'Icarus!
Icarus,' he said, 'where are you? Where am I to find you?
Icarus!' he kept saying, till eyeing the boy's wings in the waves.
Deploring his own creations, the father buried his son's body
in a mound on Icaria – that's how the island got its name. And
while

Daedalus was placing the bones of his poor boy in the grave,
a chattering partridge looked on from a muddy ditch,
applauded with his wings, and in song testified
to his joy. Only recently transformed, he was the sole
bird of his race still, his fate an everlasting reproach
to you, o inventor. For Daedalus's sister, unaware
of how Fate would call, had apprenticed her son to him:
Partridge, a boy of twelve years, his mind open to learning. Already
he had cut rows of teeth in sharp steel, taking for his model
the backbone of a fish. Thus he discovered the saw. He had
bound with one knot two steel legs; one would stand fast
while the other, at a constant distance, would draw in
a circle. Daedalus, jealous of his nephew, threw him
from the holy citadel of Athens. 'Partridge fell,' he lied.
But the boy, whom Athena adored for his mind,
was caught by the goddess and returned as a bird:
feathers formed in mid-air, the force of his mind,
already birdlike, slipped into feet and wings, his name
alone remained. Not quite. For the partridge, despite his wings,
does not trust himself to heights, nor lodge his nests
on the tips of tall branches. Near the ground he flies,
lays eggs in hedges and, ever a memory of his ancient fall,
fears heights.

Ovid, Metamorphoses VIII

4

snakes
because we don't have hands
to control
over anything
not even our language

rivers
which are the same
as serpents sinuously
shifting surfaces over time
and land, and sky

the rainbow
and its refractions
is the subject
of a scientific treatise by Spinoza
these words too

5

I lay down my loss by the Elwood canal

whose memory is long
whose lines run to ripples
whose tide is all time

I lost my father here, or somewhere like it
he had words for all weathers
he had time for low tides

The moon reflects on my loss, this dark night

6

Photos take on words and speak
for the dead who took them. He left me
a camera, single lens
reflex colour film inside, that I
remembered, three years later
to open and bring to light. The next
day returned twenty-four prints
in a surreally damaged pink light
stained as if sun set and I
cried, when I saw none of him. Thus he
had documented, for
insurance purposes, the last house
in which we lived, twenty-four
photos, light-damaged, of a Perth house
that wasn't home enough to -
setting chemicals images things so
cruelly; then I felt my eyes
hold him in its frame: *You are my house.*

7

An average suburban sowing among fields of houses,
cars, concrete, occasional trees, eyes sewn up, gently
unsewn once more, cyclically, on the road past sorrow

But how high is the city of Melbourne?
the tallest building?
and if I lose the law of gravity, going up

just when will I stop living here
The sky begins at our toes

but words presume that you won't disappear
how do you die?

8

The orchestra, dressed the colour of night
floating on black water

immersed into a wall on the back of my throat
in Novosibirsk on the twenty-third of August 2002

Hold it to your chest, your absence
invoke it at all moments

a life-saving cavity
an instrument around it resounding

when life is missing
and he comes running through your chest

his eyes, your aorta-broken heart
(giving up reading, listening to music,

playing)
he becomes your death. Now sing

9

The dispute between Summer and Autumn
entailed much suffering

The heat burst back with ripe fruits
twigs hardened and pointed

A brilliant day seemed
to fall too soon

Like Autumn it will pass
as leaves rustle, old papers
drift past, pass us by

10

(Here
optic nerves
dangle
they are open poppies
in the evening
air)

I must have blinked

Teach me the meaning
of the simplest words
without using an
example

11

Telescope the dark heavens in
to a dark star, five hundred watts,
eye-light burning

A tongue plummets to this Earth of death the rock of Lazarus.
Swelled in his
throat it speaks

All this time melted over morning
tea and
my dead

Row boat no it won't
like silence oars words
You



Chapter 5

I

Few botanists are fluent in both Chinese and English which is why some of the plants are not fully identified in the South China garden, though the *paeonia suffruticosa* first grown in imperial gardens, are known and named for their showy flowers. A national passion, they bloomed from 700 AD at the Festival of Ten Thousand Flowers, perhaps rivalling *oroxyllum indicum*, One Thousand Papery Seeds, whose pods grow to one metre long, in ostentation and display while the seeds (each pod contains thousands) would become fans for emperors, for the wealthy, for the memory of you that now unfurls as I chance upon this winter garden soon to become spring (as will the Californian garden, the rainforest, the basil plantings, the Chinese windmill palm used to make coats).

You need the warmth
of the untranslated to survive the world. That tree
there has no name, it just grows, like a day we chase
to keep up, it's a tombstone – contrary to appearance
tombstones are never inscribed, words fail us
we just pretend to have names

2

Merri Creek is she happy, washed-up, plastic?
The aftertaste exists it's real
It was some other bridge
mirrors, daily

Put a knife
through the eye
of the Sun
with a twist that says
you're not real
but your death
the real recyclable
floating garbage

that you could build a house on
and swing from the rafters
like a creek-jumping child
with bottle-top treasures for eyes

3

You're distant
in the distance

or up close
next to me

Your eyes are worlds
as this Earth
is an ocean

You glance away
to watch the sea

4

So many, over so many lands, through so many bodies of water,
I've travelled, my poor brother, to attend your funeral
and present you with the final gifts you'll receive. I've come
to speak to your voiceless ashes in vain, now that chance
has snatched you from me, o my brother, o poor brother,
so unjustly torn from me. In the meantime, but that's all there
can be
and by the beautiful custom of our forefathers, accept what
was given to the dead: these lonely funeral gifts of wine, milk
honey and words, they're dripping with a brother's tears.
And for all the future, my poor brother, fare well, but you've gone.

Catullus, Carmen CI

5

A bleak question mark
(suddenly shifts
in response
to your reading
takes on tone
colour
complexion
sunrises
confusion
then
semantically
sunsets)
Time grows
in circles
by the hour
as a suicide
or stone in water
sets off rings of
phone call rings
in circles

6

how I
the town crier, proclaim grief
how every table I set it on, disappeared
how people die now and then, they're no support
nor are trees, nor even leaves, the bare books just outside
how do you bring a dead person up to life?
with your teeth you eat

7

My body was racked by demons for a long time
they stretch you by the fingers
ever so slightly as you're writing
forking love on your soul
sharpening up the pencils in your eyes
entertaining suicide an
instant stage, bright lights, train smack through you
that threw you into this traffic with life
and I realise as I'm writing this that I'm rewriting
my sister's suicide note that she never left

8

Chick peas are older than beans, than trees with
edible leaves, than all other domesticated crops.
Hummus tastes back to the first farmers, chance discovered
I suppose – it's before history – you eat it
with a paprika garnish and a sprig of green leaf,
something modern like parsley, a tablespoon of olive oil
and all of human life; it's just a symbol, a story,
tombstone teeth, and the memory of breathing
the last thing to die, is to die

You suicided all my poetry was written on your skin first
 line
 second line
 third line a tight rope tight knife

At the private hospital they hid their ailments
 from each other
 bedside tables
 bursting with tears

The hospital library is little
 but the books expand beyond the shelves
 drowning lips kiss through the page
 and open worlds in your palm

I walked in to the locksmith
 who speaks Russian to me: как ты поживаешь?
 I'm fine, thanks
 I was unlocked

by the memory
 of the teeth
 of the lock
 I became when

my hand drawing close
 was released from its scream
 faced into the day
 I opened doors your death lightly

And her hands are kneading our love
 a doughy bankruptcy that smiles
 lumps of love in the face mixed up
 she hurls us like clay malformed



My eyes went missing in action
my sister
talked computers, possession, dogware, love, commitment

only to be told that if she was well enough to commit herself,
she was well enough to look after herself. Beds were needed for
the involuntary cases. Perhaps for cases like herself, involuntarily
committed so often in the past

and I all of thirteen handed her to the police
I'd like it all back
Have you ever betrayed someone?

Once, after I had spent hours convincing her just to stay in
the same room with me, to put the scissors down, that the dog
hadn't been programmed by our parents to spy on us, that I
wasn't squeezed up against the wall like an eggwhite eyeball,
that the television was our friend, that the police now arriving
weren't the police, Bridget knowing full well by now that I
had been deceiving her, that I was handing her over to them
- that's called commitment - stopped on the threshold of the
room from which she was now being led, the prospect of yet
more months in the sick heavens of psychotropic drug stupor
ahead of her. On the threshold she looked back. I was a mess
in a chair, my face in my hands. 'I love you, Paul,' she called
back to me, like the ghost she now is, 'Do you love me?' And I,
like the ghost I am, couldn't answer.