

RICKETTS POINT

A slim girl playing by herself in the shallows,
like someone who's never been to the beach before
and suddenly marvels at how the world
tips open to broad deep space, not fearsome.
Seawater cool as milk intimately swirling her.
Sand hospitably absorbing and releasing her feet,
her mounting dance of being, luminously alone
on the sea's hearth, its hissing welcome mat.
Two bearded men, perhaps her father and uncle,
identical as Kafka's lodgers, further out in the waves.
A third man out there with them hurls them a ball;
they miss and laugh repeatedly, rolling like seals
under the waves and up again, under and over
their joy that won't stay under, and mirrors and magnifies
the separate joy of the girl, her not-to-be-tested trust.
Smiling at strangers perched on their towels
who can't help watching her, and smile back as if her world,
scribbled and wiped from soaked and pre-soaked shore
and flung from her hands in effortless wave-sprays,
was large or real enough to include them.

SISTER

for Ellie

Her axolotl dips in his cage of water,
his polite uneraseable smile swanning
him upwards, the rubbery, tail-heavy dragon's
body tilting down. The tiny golden
Aztec eyes, blind, lidlessly slumber
through the waters of his kitchen aquarium
like never-quite-sinking coins, or beacons adrift,
with scarcely the ghost of a reference

to the mythical flicker of the salamander
he genetically sidesteps, even surpasses
by his own more modern brand of indestructible
– his species kept alive by scientists
for a keen ability to regenerate:
his limbs, if lost, will soon resprout; even
some parts of the brain, if chewed off
by a sibling, grow back. Only the crude lungs

connect him to a world outside him;
once a day he noses the surface and breathes –
then free-falls back down into depths of swirling
grit. Ever larval, babyish red ragged
gills fronding wildly round a blunt head,
sealed by water in the jewel of himself,
he survived the pumping of his stomach
after gutsing seven lumps of gravel.

Descendant of the Aztec dog-god
Xolotl, who with mangled hands and feet
guided the dead to heaven, his once trans-
lucent form refuses catastrophe; more
than the ailing tabby, the timorous
and watchful high-heeled dog, or the rented
fireprone house, he guards our dangerous
childhood pledge to never change.

ONE WALL PAINTED YELLOW FOR CALM

Job Network, Prahran, 2004

And should there be a fire, we simply go out
this door to the left
up the stairs and out the door you came in, but
if for some reason
that door is blocked then don't worry we go back
along the hallway
and then down to the end where another door
swings through to the street.
Where we can meet and I'll be holding this list
of all your names to
check off against you and everything's fine, yeah?
Breathe out. Consider
simply that your hitherto cold, doubt-riddled
Quest-to-find-a-Job
has gained a sudden cosiness. Oh I am
cognisant of course
you're not here by choice. Some of you might think
that you have other
things-to-do or lives-to-lead – that's natural and
all I can say is
it will pass. I know you're probably thinking
I'm just some geezer
who'd be like totally unemployed, if not
for the unemployed –
so we're all in this together. I always say,
we are each of us
individuals, to whom anything can happen.
Last week I had a chap
determined to be an Ambassador and

spoke six languages.
I said cool, you follow your dream. Only bear
in mind that dreams can
bend like starlight. Then a tailor rang me up,
quite sorely in need
of an apprentice and located quite near
where Pete lived. I thought,
I'll just offer it to him on the offchance.
And off like a shot,
he was working the very next day. Just being
in this room he found
himself a life. It's the life's the thing – the dream's
just vapour waiting
to be coughed into any shape. I know this
room isn't pleasant
– someone said it's like being in hospital! –
but think of these walls
as holding your chances up. It's ok to
yawn. Standing up here
I can't get a true sense of the temperature;
please sing if too hot.
And when you leave it's natural for me to say
'see you tomorrow'
or 'have a good weekend' but – and I do mean
this in a good way –
I hope you find what's looking for you, and the
future will take you
with swift undeniable closure. I won't say
see you tomorrow.

SOUTHBANK

I

When the system crashes, and the screens,
and palm-hugged
beaches that saved them,
crinkle out
the office tilts like a ship.
Small murmurs
of surprise, voices like children
who'd been playing in the shade,
shocked by sunlight,
flurry and subside.
The thermostat
shudders its seasons
of freeze and sweat;
furry square windows
seal in the boredom (a little man,
I've begun to suspect,
tweaks the levels each hour).

The quiet settles, doing nothing
settles, the sister of work.

The mind rises from its bubble,
and eyes unscrew from their
mid-screen float.
You rise and walk down the hall
like someone freed:
the woman who comes early
to work late sits darkly in her glass
as if waiting for a traffic light

to change, or an eclipse
in which nothing
is remembered, to end.

Time with nothing to smother it
creeps up like a mist from the river
and cuddles the office friendships,
emails caught mid-send, the million strands
of life rich as Pompeii.

Three women whisper in the kitchen.
Somebody laughs, someone else
cracks his finger joints.
Nobody stands and declares
All this was a dream, well, thank you, I'm off now!
Why should they? Over there a man,
pacing in his pod, has a deadline
as real to him as his wife.

So it starts again, you slip back
to your chair, the hard-drives
rev up in chorus, their
engines mingling with the rise-again joy
of humans working
with our without-purpose:
happy if we remember
whatever ten minutes before
fulfilled and/or consumed us.

9

The paramedics come into the cafe –
jaunty in their blue and red uniforms, their solid black
police boots. Two espresso, their phones on the table,
antennae like the half-listening ear of a dog, they
dangle from the emergency that hasn't
yet happened, that is less than a hum in fine air, she
with bright auburn hair, laughing.
He sits back, arms folded, legs outstretched like a man
who has the whole morning newspaper before him.

10

Skill tugs at the muscles, drives
the bones, the mind keen,
the child perfecting her scales,
blocking the din.

The child understands the adults,
ignores them, thinks she is innocent,
making herself. She reads
the dictionary, the bible,
dinnerplates of language,
at school dwarfs herself
with long words.
Priggish, pigeon-toed,
she walks her book in the schoolyard, stalks
blind through netball.

The thing we work for (rarely
work for its own sake) vanishes;
work persists, then too is lost:
the black hole of energy burns
through hands and minds.

A heaven somewhere,
a palm tree, a beach, a child, an apartment,
the quiet hum of one's power
of being that flexes around days,
carries futures, saying
world is made for me as I make it:
small enough to garden by hand, large
enough to outscope me,
for I must not lose surprise: this illusion
I with my labour can sustain.

II

Elevators dim-lit, dark-polished all day
by a woman from Bosnia, cheerful as Sisyphus,

who greets you with a suicidal smile, her trolley
of rank cleaning products makes her sneeze,

fills her eyes with red wires; she apologises, grins.
She scales her never-done job, a moonwalker

trailing her cargo through the semi-mirrored
obsidian tangle of offices, herself glowing back at her.

You ride up with her, pin-prick halogen lights,
mirrored walls you vanish into, she polishes.

12

Through a fifth-floor window you can watch
the new tallest building in Melbourne being built
one gold brick at a time.

The city sprawls
in late-mid-morning, the workers
housed inside their work: time
is everywhere engaged.

The office a portal,
point of stillness from which the world extends;
a kind of sublime.

On the seventh floor the company director
muses on his monthly
email to all staff.

Three slabs of sky behind him, he faces
the fourth wall.

*The football season is upon us
and business too progresses . . .*

from HIGHWAY

Night-driving

The highway strung between borders, naked and whole
as a planet. Stars and comets, rumours of UFOs.
Mauvish lights flash on either side of us. Thomas, awake,
suddenly trusting himself, is the driver, lurching the Bedford
from the storm at a trick of the keys. He trembles in the warm
pink of his body like an infant dreaming,

all his confessions – middle-aged flight from home, his
shouted-down need for a laundromat – swirling inside him.
Riveted, he leads the convoy as if it were his life just grasped,
four vans behind him. The road sheer as the path of the whales
who sailed straight down from space to shape
the plains with their bodies, their starry visions

rolled in sand and crusted in salt. I rattle by the door,
perched on a jerry-can; the edge of the road eroding darkness,
small eyes nibbling. He trembles in his roly pink warm body,
in the public servant of his mind. Time and night and day
hurtle by us, through us, in a clear wind, and then: the border,
morning, two rainbows, a wedge-tailed eagle circling us!

from HIGHWAY

Kangaroos

The idea of a desert is somewhere beyond our little camps.
Some kangaroos watch until I get very close, their nucleic eyes
slipping down the other side of the incline,
their slow heavy silent mechanical
hindquarters clenching, unclenching them away.

All along the roadside their bodies lie open like fruit,
stiff legs in the air, the puddling fur going khaki in lifeless grass,
a long fence of skulls saying *do not enter this desert* . . .

But each death looks momentary, one wrong leap against
thousands of right ones; thousands of hours
lived hurtling through space with no notion of obstacle.

Quick-jumps, paws dipped, their tail-sailing
walloping gait a conqueror's dream, their gestures
so almost-human, almost-comical, we might think
they saw themselves in us, answered us with *like, like*.

Always turning to leave, wider to go –
they emerge in dissolving light as if they carry
the Earth in their skins, as if they are the land they inhabit . . .
it stares at you through them, looks through you
in the shared-breath stillness, their telepathic heart-stopped
group hesitation. As if something's deciding
whether to let you in, or through. As if there was an opening,
a closing. Then turning away again, loping off
into that open where death stands to one side (you imagine)
and each leap is a leap into deeper life, deeper possession.

MUNICH

i.m. my grandmother, Vivian Johnston, Staffordshire 1933 – Adelaide 2001

Strange to pass through a city as through a lens.

It isn't whole – I can't see it whole –
a shop display-window, everything fur,
animal or bird, steely-eyed mannequins,
people streaming past in furs.

The city glued back together, the marionettes
in Marienplatz kicking their legs;
dislodged from time, inventing time
as she – just-vanished – seems everywhere.
She didn't entirely want to be remembered.

No grave, no plaque;
her memories, freed from her head,
swarming in mine, or some of them:
the child I was who sat on her knee
and the child she was in blackout Stoke-on-Trent
step awake, two slippered ghosts,
past houses blasted to rubble and bones
or two-walled like stage-sets.

A clock on the mantle ticking, grown-ups
alive on the footpath, marvelling in the daylight

How could we have painted the kitchen that colour?

Then her own bedroom ceiling crashed open
to the night where we both dissolve

Mother – it's snowing on my bed! – Well move the bed!

She bared her teeth, bit my foot,
snapping my vacant stares, my
(she thought) anger at being.

The bleaching heat of Adelaide, the hills there

visible from her house, puddled with lights.
White lives, drifting and folding
around pegs. My 'head-in-a-basket',
a pottery-class disaster – keepsake,
gleaming pink and yellow in her lounge.
It mocked the sudden growth
in her lung, like a trick thrown up from girlhood.
The eye, wild as a bomb, explodes on the present,
its glittering air washed of the dead,
the neither-soul-nor-body light
of a city moving into its future.

How it is to glide (she sailed)
from one half of the planet to the other,
a full moon floating on the rounded window,
face to face with you anywhere on earth
like a watchful parent. She feared
coming undone: couldn't will herself safe.
Our 'psychic connection', half game, half true,
sparked in the silences, her depressions
and mine. I imagine it unbroken.
Even in Munich, a place removed from Adelaide
as one mind from another: strangers
folded up in themselves, mutely intelligible
as shades tripping out of the dust
of a once-vanished city
muttering along the ordered snow and ice
of the Englischer Garten. I can't be certain

death satisfies her. She glints and promises
in the small sphere of the watch that was hers –

Of course I knew you were looking for one

– Think of me when you wind it!

She died alive, her last words on waking,

It's not a dream, is it?

31.12.01

FOR DOROTHY

i.m. my grandmother, Dorothy Marchesi, 1908–2005

Ninety-six, and nearly dead of a snapped hip, but they bob
in the shrinking pool of her vision, her seven children.
They peer into her as if into a plug-hole, grasp at her life
where it trembles in her moth-eyes, and sprawling ears;
and mouth that rustles words to each, as if to let them know
they are known. She sleeps and turns them over to themselves.

The shared ghosts that can't be elbowed away
bind them in the hospital corridor. They re-banish
a dead-banished father, 'a man who could not carry
his burden in life', who was war-shocked –
his violence simplified all memory of him.
A painter of watercolours, he carried the 'creative'

glimmer in the genes, and fled periodically to Melbourne
from the flat unblinking pragmatism of Adelaide
and family; and died there. She couldn't pay
to return the body; he's buried (she said) 'in Flemington',
where there is no cemetery. The fierceness of lack,
always the same old enemy, unchewable meat

in her children's teeth, all escaping school
to rope sausages, froth milkshakes in long tin cups,
grow businesses miraculously as beanstalks.
Her adopted eldest daughter fills like concrete
the bedside chair, spilling a lemon spawn
of knitting for her own great-grandchild.

Through the glamorous atrium and up
the twin steep escalators then down the dingy inner stairs,
her ward at the end of the crackling
yellow-tape path. She peters in the small
web of her breath, strung to the fuzzed
elms outside, the puckering fluros above,

the alien titanium hip sleeps in her body, immortal,
the morphine insects dance on the walls.
Cheeks white as cuttle on the plastic-sheathed pillows,
she fish-stares upward, steely and appalled
as the grim, red-haired single-mother-of-eight
who never smiled in photos, and at seventy married

a forty-eight-year-old man who failed to notice her age.
They drove to country music discos, their silver-furred
space-age garb shuffling them back and forth
in the slow revolving light. By his quick death at fifty-nine
she was polished as a river stone, a woman
shunning all further men. The family

freeze themselves around her and endure each other
as if none now can change. My father and uncle
dream of living to be her age, and cheating age,
and they want her mythical motherly strength,
theirs to inherit; not the frailty
and dependence she bundles into with steady eyes,

but the furious hands, wheeling their twelve-year-old
brother in his hospital bed on trains, down windy streets
in the last stages of leukaemia. They watch as she becomes
less than they can grasp, and leaves like a word
on everyone's tongue the fragile pink of her non-kiss,
her body pure milk beneath the gown.