

Ode on Love

What he has taken of me
I don't even want back,
I don't want to want back.
This new happiness holds up
a novel mischief that waits in the near.
Why so indispensable?
Before I knew him I did not need him:
if he goes I must replace him,
as if I could. And that circling body-mashing doubt.
How he throws me
into dark and retrieves me!
And with gazes like little rifting flames inhabits me.

What does the bottom-most soul know of this –
that basin of us
concerned only with survival,
collecting residual passion
and washing clean,
shining up that bit of us
that cares nothing?

That idea that every lover is the same,
that there's a template, a type,
that what I orbit
is an all-man man
likely to be just like my father,
many desires folded into one bright
bouquet of obsession that springs from the heart like Spring.

He is coasting along his own midnight.
The trapping of his breath, the only outward sign,
I devour it like meat,
as if it were him,
tenderly and watchfully in all love's creepiness.

Love is a thing, the self's
undoing that it begs for.
He twitches out hot shivers of love he shifts away from,
exalts and voids me
with the economy of a waiter emptying a whole table with one hand.

Power to love draws the long breath from me.
Petrarch made this a joy, an Other queening distance,
love never shaken by reality, never
whittled by exchange.
I fear whatever we have will puff like a thistle.
And if not?
Mutuality, mutability, love nuanced and grappled, hard.
This seam of encounters can't peg itself down,
it is or isn't, it is high or low, a scythe swinging in, or out.

The self tries to locate him, and itself
in all the moving signifiers of love,
lover and love, meaning and feeling,
thing that says, love this one, not another.
I lie in bed scratching at the night.
Absent, his beauty
evaporates. He flickers before me,
knowable-unknowable, central lover, man-figure
skating so sweetly at the edge of a beauty.
How I hope against. How I want to know if he.
And love dares the self.
To risk what there is in hope of havocking more to risk.

Trying not to try to purloin him whole
but keep him near – to tell my heart so stupid!
The drawbridge clatters up.

The Ecstasy

He is square in his suit again, the same man
in the same package, striding into the present,
meaning whatever a man can mean, a billion
years of male shoulders, male hair, male eyes,
shaking all that off, being only himself,
secure in the tight shell of his otherness,
glinting outwards and inwards,
his hand smooth as a long hill, his kindness
pocketed everywhere, let loose like singing coins,
his love, such as I know it, there in every breath,
light as a word on his lips, heavy as his body
on mine, love, about the size and shape of a man,
an embrace like the potter's hands around
the spinning clay, spinning and spinning.

Selva Oscura

Hogging both time and world,
soul of another's
body, making us
as we make it,
no fighting for it,
it blasts doubt out.

Some lovers live each other out,
their love
stretches
beyond their years of beauty or keeps
their beauty, an old woman
wheeling her husband in a chair,
her love, his, flickers
through human cracks
and finds
its way to survive, alive as life, death-bound
no more than they,
sex still in them.

It is early,
we have not crossed each other,
we keep love on our dinner plates, and horror
that rips the mind out
doesn't come.
What is love
if we can kill it?
Ourselves obscure us, we obscure ourselves,
there is no distance –
love
the small chunk of light by which
I almost see you.

Ode on the End

For thou hast girded me with strength unto the battle Psalm 18

I

A hackled old mind
crawls in its darkness,
a story-telling crab
cracking the shells of night-hours
tries to stretch itself
out of its thoughts like a person
praying for sufficiency-in-God's-eyes,

so teasingly almost possible.
All worlds must
end, begin, end,
the rap at the door you half-hear,
half-dream, will come.
A gun, a god-wrecked man.
You sit silent in your bed,

upright, two cats at your feet:
they will die at a stroke.
The curtains will fall,
the money all gurgle away,
you will live on the street
in a trolley,
in the hide of a horse.

The bed is not wood enough
to hold you up, the solid walls
are not enough.
God pulls on His shoes
to run along the pebbly shores of fear.
He will not love but save,
poor-wretched-soul-I-made-you.

In the Psalms He is outlandish and vicious
as Napoleon. He gives
you the necks of your enemies
(fear must have foes).
He draws up a battle
where perhaps there was only a soul
staring terrified at nothing

in a souped-up sky of its own.
Oh blessed enemies!
Oh troops marching towards us –
such is the beauty of omnipotence.
Oh be at peace and sing (says God).
It is true that everyone wants to kill you,
and true you will be saved.

And when this dread recedes,
what will be left? Myself or another?
Everything is covered in dirt, my hands,
my face, this room.
Whatever will happen has:

Begin with love: my lover who tries to keep
me safe, take him,
then take the windows, the sunlight, the doors
that hold me.
The certainty from my hand that grips its object.
And my mind, what is left of it, this mind
hardly mine,
its words and images I don't understand, take them.

The fear of death:

not mine but his.
Oh that someday he
must die is
nothing my life or death
can answer to.

Gilgamesh
sat by his friend
until a worm fell out of his nose!
So I sit
by him, uncomprehending.

He is alive,
and well and will return.
But I sit,
my lifelong love
sucked up into his heart.

Fear grasps nothing,
practising its little song,
its rattle of flies,
slow shrink of mind
and heart

to a field where love can't live.
The future has passed,
the worst is here and worse,
you glut your teeth
on the tiniest bones of the banquet.

Feral Cow

Great Western Highway

She tap-dances on the edge of the road,
entirely her own beast. Who knows
where she sleeps, unfenced from dream
of herd, field, and farmer,
redundant on the rim
of a dayfull, then a nightfull of thunder trucks,
some carrying her kind
to the solidarity of slaughter,
skin to skin in the rattle
of metal, dull together-stench of fear.

Here she is ringed around and around by the air,
and nothing but freedom yokes her neck as she leans
to the right and the left.
Infinite cry of road,
tongue-spiking spinifex.

After the Fires

Marysville, 2009

After the blazes, among the voices
that can never be silent, and voices
that were extinguished, white as possibility
the portable houses. A stubbornness
of town, its histories burned
in a truck packed ready to drive.

The bristling juvenescent leaves
wrap up whole trunks, people
carry future and past in equal
or unequal parts. Vans of rental ski gear
wait on the footpath,
pointing the way to the mountain

where high-piled snow
clads branches, separates
dream from memory, heat from light,
and slides and sifts
with the screams of tobogganing children
for whom the world is snow, only snow.

The Sound of Work

I

In their fleshfolds, in the office's
light-eating light, our lost skulls
orbit one another. We are here
to be here, reliable as mustard.
Work smoulders,
a not quite urgent urgency
– human voices quench it,
my colleagues, my brothers!

Our voices grind the air, our tales
are the tales of the world, boyfriends
shovelling backyards for love,
the self-jeers of too-skinny, too-fat.
(We know our place in the hierarchy of weight.)
With a wish that our efforts didn't slide
around forever on a shelf in space
but were noted and added to a garden of local meaning.

'The meaning of work?'
It makes us a mask, a shell,
builds us a house, it is ours.

And the department believes, as it must, it can adjust
human trajectories, beginning
with the smallest seed of birth.
What we want from work is almost love.

How our spongy brains in infancy are worlded,
forests of voices, the moving light
touching and tickling us,
the love that sets us,
never to change, forever.
We are made by what loves us:
our thought-paths grooved by the terrible
thumbs of those who try their best.
Adults, barely changeable,
we long for change, some quick
suddenness in the veins.
Here we think ourselves wasted,
stepping each day off the elevator
into a day-world farcing as whole-world,
saying never-enough-hours-in-the-day
exhaustion almost spiritual,
change, but not sleep –
the thing given up, never to be returned
except inexactly,
already gone, already changed.

I used to have a freedom that was poverty.
Once I fled from house and home,
clothing, writing, furniture, friends,
to amble off with a troupe of hippies,
people with their souls in the air, their feet nowhere,
and we drove, in battered vans
over the Nullarbor to Nimbin,
festival to festival, dole cheque to dole cheque,
and at every turn the country let us pass,
we gave nothing a world and nothing
worlded us save sky and road we hurtled through
outside all outsides, willingly homeless,
running half naked in a dress ripped to shreds
in the desert storm, through the staring country town,
content to sleep with the others in an easy random ditch, to wake
by the calling of the sun or the singing of Edgar.

The familiar fears are there to greet us
morning and evening, our nameless dread
cannot go unnamed for long,
but needs a suitor, a human form, a mirror,
a bible and sceptre
to lounge with by our side, watching as we dress.

To carry self as one carries a fear, across water or sand.
Who dares hope for goodness or a safety?
That ever-oncoming:
the sack, destitution, dream job or
a lifetime left of working just like this.
And what's wrong with 'this'?

At the interviews, flint in my ear,
a peculiar pin of light cracks up, the questions
compell me into sentences, belief
in what I do, bright semblance,
gathering the work
into a bubble of dream.

I will pull all the plugs
out of my soul
and do this job better that I might
be observed to do it better and invited
to do it better somewhere better
and be better.

Our human idea of having a Self,
this bulky thing, this grandeur – it must grow
like a plant, must be watered with love, it must
have fashion, holidays, poetry, a body
gleaming with fitness, a job
that is challenging without being stressful,
it must advance, grotesque,
into some state we can regard with satisfaction
when we look back, on the slow and happy decline,
grey-nomading through the Pilbara, collecting
grandchildren as a Medusa collects heads.

Anxiety reigns in the office. One boss, not hated, departs
to an unimaginable otherworld,
and replacements swim the pods, will it be her, her or him?
All movements are made from within, we shimmy up
to the next level, hover there some months and then
slip back down.

There are those who have been here thirty years, always
at the same level, their jobs changing only with the government,
technology and so on, always working smilingly or whingeingly.
Some say they have no ambition; I say
they are the survivors, eclipsing redundancies,
performance management, boredom,
thirty years of train rides out to the suburbs,
their semi-god children outgrowing them,
plastered all over their pods like purpose.

At the meeting to generate work, which must
be conjured as water with a stick, the manager
waves her hands and refuses. Better
she says, to do nothing than let
work fly up of its own accord and roost in a high nest up there
and lay undirected eggs – we will crouch down and wait for
direction to come.

A new state manager, a new government,
an entirely permissible partridge.

The bureaucrat shines like a sword, like a word, he or she
can do no wrong, can be sacked
for little less than murder and yet is terrified
of error. Who more upright
than the bureaucrat fluttering along the steady line
of obedience, exactness,
gobbling boredom in neat bright folds? The near-guarantee
of security is a cold
shiver of love. Governments the wild wreckers and thrashers
we serve politely as we can:
soul is unfurled, a picnic rug, and all life's condiments
are propped securely thereon.
All jobs grip like this, not one will ever circumscribe
the jigsaw familiar, your
soul, there is no boss who'll love to hear your truest thoughts.
And to keep yourself complete
in that world, you must learn to perform with all your soul.
And soon you'll believe the things
you say, 'strategic delivery outcomes' will sound
right and meaningful, your speech
will no longer grow just from the heart but from a brain
your childhood self never dreamt of.
We have to give ourselves to something, whether it feels
right or wrong, we flow out into

otherness, so we have something to step back from, come
home from, return to again
next day, and if we're lucky we'll achieve things and feel
at home in this strange world where
we can flex a power, be recognised by forces close
to mini-gods, who in turn
one day make little gods of us. There are holes in life
you have to find them, creeping
through the night in a breathing country town with headlights
blazing at the dawn, moments
when soul spreads out its canopy, and fear is not near,
and future, terror-laden,
curls back. To discover a peace so strong it must belong
to us, sing from our veins, be
sprung out from our own hearts. Who are we to give ourselves rest,
permission to pause – as if it
were possible? Such tiny power is ours to transform
the world with. And yet we go on,
whingeing and mumbling up the elevator, each day's
bitter present, fixed as teeth!
Impossible to take it off us! Bright Southern
Cross once glimpsed on holiday
in the Simpson desert: not to forget you: To stand!