

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.

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.