**... always, homewoods bound**

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Publisher: xxx

xxx

xxx

xxx, xxx, Australia, xxxx

www.xxx.com

Ordering Information:

For details, contact the publisher at xxx@xxx.com.

Print ISBN XXX-X-XXXXXXX-X-X

eBook ISBN: XXX-X-XXXXXXX-X-X

Printed in xxxx

First Edition

Cover: “Burlands”, watercolour by Ann Flügge.

***for Chris Brown,***

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# ***foreword***

# ***acknowledgements***

# ***taking back bearings ...***

## unclotting

every night

comes now

a stranger

taking back bearings

as—lying between

moonlit sheets

among aching bones

drifting downward

through coffined feelings

burnt rainbow sensations

cares thoughts

diminishings—

self wings unclots

flutters soft

as eucalypt seeds

pittering

onto green-sleepy

Spring afternoon

## At the Orphanage

**i**

Inside:

urine fug

dawn cold

around thighs

Sister Michaela

parading kids past

turning ‘you’

into a meme

for disgrace.

**ii**

Outside:

asphalt dead

plants St Joseph

and child

one hand beseeching

grey walls

iron gates

sky

beyond dream reach.

**iii**

Inside:

concrete cold

against shoulders

white glare

of nuns’ habits

thighs aching

from leg weight

red flare

of bastinadoed soles.

**iv**

Outside? Inside?

long black hair’s

brown eyes’

silky caress of cheeks

callused hands

applying salve

to fevered feet

lifting into

weightlessness

body pains’

drift upon

white sheets’

coolness

moonbeams’

erasure of

shuttered memories

redolence of flowers

birdsong

the world.

## An Oliver Curse

May devils

take those

women in

black- white

robes and

whip tar

feather hang

burn them

under that

grey place

where dressed

in State hand-

me-downs we

starved near

to death

holding out

our empty

hearts enduring

Charity’s cold

gruel lives

never sanguine

while in

the care

of Fagan-

like nuns.

## Impulses

Impulses—

always dense with blood

short-lived as leaves in sere winds—

impulses arising shuddering

headless out from

nearfaraway labyrinths.

But sometimes—

from still deeper mazes—

warmth of laughter

kisses stroking fingers

soft as promises

in a basement’s dark mirrors.

## Lost Foundling



For you are forever conversing with empty shells. With time.

Know the smiles of fosterers or cops are inside out scowlings.

That you are lost. A shadow hiding under lowering roof lines.

A dreaming midnight creature keening before hard-mirrored eyes.

## Back Yard Shadow

He remembers cold nights in a sandbox. Gnarled eucalypts.

Recalls dreams of escape from a back yard full of rusty tins

sunny benedictions failing to stop horrors keeping tryst.

Sees himself offering daily masses with stale Eucharists.

Reaching for moon’s and stars’ far cooling from a rope swing

during cold nights in a sandbox under gnarled eucalypts.

Recalls shadows floating through, bringing clenched fists,

always too familiar fingerings and gross itchings

sunny benedictions that fail to stop horrors keeping tryst.

Remembers too, a picket fence, smell of Brylcreem,

sweat on unshaved cheeks, sound of boots’ soft scuffling

through nights in a cold sandbox under gnarled eucalypts.

Recalls too, daydreams in which he’s fleeing shadowy grips,

terrors leering from beyond front gates’ unoiled squealings,

while sunny benedictions fail to stop horrors keeping tryst.

Remembers dreaming he turned to grapple the ancient mist,

that his rage’s wild burning sharpened dawn’s petrichor

ending cold nights, cold sandboxes, gnarled eucalypts,

sunny benedictions that failed to stop horrors keeping trysts.

## taking off my face

at night he kneels

says his prayers climbs

into skin-slippy sheets then

taking off his daily face drifts

through furry clouds

high above Dark

River into star-

pocked dreams about

strange creatures gibbering and

wanting lipless kisses until in

the early hours still only half

awake he puts on his face

again and gathering bits

of his moon-pale self

rises into another

grey day

## Remembered Things 1

Two strangers mouthing gaseous

words in a musty parlour—come

to take him away from thin days

in a grey-and-white hump on wheels—

through dapples—under a high

cloudless blue on blue—

to a small house where pots chug

on a green Metters which smokes

spits sparks when he opens its door

stands with his back to warmth

to brick-sized eyes ever-watchful

of the outside where Land calls

and calls through cicadas’ clicks

the pock and plick of lucerne seeds.

## A Little Blue Fordson

*in memory of the blue Fordson*

He sits within an impression of a room

where most things are dull, unfocused

down at the end of a telescoping lens.

But some things are clear: fat sofas

books climbing walls a man wearing

thick-rimmed glasses each lens pooling

light rendering the man alien though

emanating a comfortableness with him.

But now from the corners of his eyes

he watches the man watching him—from

from the floor the man’s head seems high up

haloed against ceiling light—watching him

play with a toy farm: white sheep brown

cows a house white-walled picket-fenced

a track winding past a blue tractor parked

in a shed then on through smooth hills

toward sharp edges. Even now that toy farm

glows strangely close up shimmers like

a moonscape with stars blurring round.

And always now I’m watching the boy

watching me. Sense questions flitting about

or roosting like shadows before a storm.

I shiver. Feel a vague darkness swelling

and things inside me squirming.

The man called them emotions. Said

they’re normal. That he should not worry

if they scatter like frightened sheep

then return again and again to nose ideas

about living on a farm. Back then, the boy

left the man’s questions unanswered sensed

other things he can only now put into words:

that the toy farm was too new that the sheep

won’t ever wee their beds. Felt other stirrings:

wantings for the little house that blue tractor.

Then he settled again moved sheep about

took the roofs off house and shed filled

the hollows inside with shadows voices

until the man was pushing him gently out

into an outside where a grey world stretches

like a plastic undersheet stretches and stretches

until suddenly it tears and days are awash

with colour so that memories of dark hallways

of asphalt and beatings fade and a blue Fordson

becomes his favourite for careening across

paddocks potholed by sheep’s snouting

for ploughing soil killing weeds he didn’t know

then bound him to memories stopped them

blowing wild like the topsoil sometimes did.

## things forgotten

strange the things found in gaps

between memories’ unravellings:

scrapings of an iron bathtub

across a laundry’s undressed concrete

words that should not

or should have been said

silences gyring all about instead

love in a mother’s, father’s

callused hands smacks and tears

a nun chasing him round a classroom

beating with a straw broom

watching from school steps

as a Vauxhall Cresta fades into haze

a budgerigar singing to his mirror mate

then pining dying

purple achy pulse from a woman’s breasts

longings for the touch of familiar hands

caresses of lovers’ words

bits of a shattered crucifix

Autumn’s rusty petrichor cupped in a leaf

an unquenchable desire to be allowed

to remain where his heartfire burns

## Remembered Things 2

Her neck—rigid—reddening—continually

flickering from nape to hairline the colour

of paperbark.

Her astride Oaky—broad-hatted—with red

riding boots—banksia-yellow jumper—

silhouetted against tree greens.

Or striding through thin up-down grasses

in Spring fields. Pausing to stroke

wild flowers—especially Queen of Shebas

fenced from marauding sheep—seeking

reflected hopes—hearing only dulling thuds

through drying fingertips.

Her—cruciform—atop those Golgotha hospital

steps her ersatz child-apostles climbed toward

where He lay, bandages swaddling his blue-black head.

Himself striding through straw dust summers

when ochre-necked birds stooped dam banks

while he hid his face in dread of talons’ tearing.

Wandering long years while their love

palled and she dreamed of Jesus

and he trudged across rice fields

into red-columned temples she believed housed

devils. Both leaving in tatters words he heard

first while enveloped in the warmth blooming

from her breasts, from a Tilley lamp’s pink hiss,

until she found her smile again in the sun-and-jonquil

hugs of another’s child on a cold Sunday pew; and he

knew her yearnings as gapings only love could fill.

## Life Force

When he delves his darker depths

he feels that force which flows

and palpitates through his breast.

Some days it’s a stormy threat;

a blizzard’s icy blow

delving his darker depths.

Sometimes it’s like a gold seam

full of gems which burn and glow

palpitating through his breast

bringing rainbow liquescences,

a thrumming basso ode

which deep delves his depths

tingeing with a strange darkness

a light as pure as snow’s

palpitating his thirsty breast

bringing rapture, bringing sunsets

followed by dawns that warble low

as they delve his darker depths

palpitating the cells of his breast.

# ***... then looking out ...***

## Looking Out

He’s begun looking out again

 seeing how glimmers in new

 leaves can lift thoughts out

 from the darkness where

 they’ve been wintering.

 Nothing new in this. As a kid

 teen, youth there were always

 days spent hibernating. Days

 of wakings and looking out

 at changes coming slow or fast.

Though, back then, it seemed

 only strangers stared back in,

 now it seems even twilights

 seem different, more content,

 that daylight is more tremulous,

 its edges fractal as if viewed

 through dew. And yet, still,

 there is some *urgency*

 in the wind, and a hint all

 is becoming again, returning

to primordial rockpools where

 squawkers prey upon denizens

 while waves erase our traces.

 Yet nothing sad here either.

 Instead, just a message about

 how endings ebb and flow.

 How, after climate change and

 man, rain will breathe Spring

 again, rebirths devoid of cruelings

 for mastery, of quests for which

 Land needs no answers while

 absorbing all our bones.

## Of Dipping and Grey Aliens

Whatever colour things were,

whatever Dad put in the water

turned us then everything else scummy;

transformed sheep into grey aliens—

sleek-headed, snake-eyed, daring

to bare teeth. Though their grimaces

might have been from panic, from striving

to save themselves as Mum held each one

under to ensure a thorough soaking.

I don’t recall it ever raining

during Dipping Week when,

over-excited, I ran alongside

that murky baptismal trough,

sometimes into Dad’s arm

holding me back from slipping,

from learning *... what if ...*,

though, all the same, I’d check

his hazel eyes for ... *would he ever?* ...

but he never did, so I’d mostly

go back to shoving slimy forms

along with my bandaged straw

broom ’til they got to where

they could clamber up the ramp

into warm air, mill about with friends,

meander under shade, shaking

heads, gradually steaming

off alienness into yellow light.

Then came the circular dip

with all its prefab bits lying

haphazard in the grass

’til Dad had time to put them

together, following instructions

until frustration peaked

and he found his own way

to the end with only a bolt

or two left over.

But the *damned thing* worked—

though dipping became boring,

the aliens unconvincing;

probably would work again

if someone were to back in

the blue Fordson,

re-attach the belt,

set her to high idle

then let out the clutch.

The trough’s weeded up now,

and there’s just wind sighing

round the shower’s

cracked concrete—

*when did that happen?*—

suggestive of all those old sounds

and motions which are enough

to resurrect before my eyes

forms still so riotous in my blood:

Dad, Mum, us kids;

flipperty dogs;

those grey aliens

disguised as sheep.

## Encounter

It first came during that borderless child time

when somnolent winters, concerned with

parents sometimes godlike, sometimes trollish

and siblings as pixies or gnomes, drag into

rambunctious Springs, Springs into Summers

occupied only by drowse of flies, then into

Autumns when life becomes a canvas worked

by an invisible artist engrossed in abstracts

of trees and bleached bones.

On that day, walking the farm, drunk on

on dapples, birdsong, the rough lives of

leaves, everything fell silent.

Then he felt a metronomic thumping,

saw a fire snorting dragon bounding through

underbrush, transforming into a red boomer

coursing straight at him.

Blood froze, bowels clenched, too late

to prevent loosening of pungent smells.

Then it was on him! No. Veering an arm

span past, diminishing, becoming lost

in mallee, until from out-side sound

it bound into his head where, become

unbelievable, it fossilises until, memory

triggered, it bounds out again.

## Of Fruit, Parrots, and Mum’s Bum

*for the three of us*

 As a kid,

he often marvelled at his Mum’s bum. How her

jodhpurs accented it. Her long legs. At how it

spread when she—more surely than he, then so

thin-thighed—

 sat Oaky.

Watched—sideways mostly—how it moved as

she walked. Imagined it a creature, alien in origin,

clinging to her back. Slowly taking her over.

Seeing it

 shimmy

jigger, quiver, jounce, and smile. Loved, too,

plums, apricots, nectarines, figs and pears

growing in the back yard. A cornucopia of curves

he also

 couldn’t

touch until November, when he’d fall upon, caress,

gorge before the parrots flew in, sitting cheekily

just beyond reach, cawing *twenty-eights*, clutching

flesh in dripping

 claws,

cracking then discarding husks, feasting on seeds.

Then, sticky-fingered too, he’d watch dreamily

as they took off, low to the ground this time

like tiny

 over-

loaded bombers winging skywards, the whole flock

taking on the pear shape which so obsessed him then.

## Us Kids’ Languages

*for Michael and Margaret*

Not being etymologists,

and lacking shared womb-time,

we kids made up languages—

from phrases in books, or falling

from Mum’s and Dad’s mouths,

or drifting like paint dust which

made harlequins of shadows.

Covered up secrets until, hardened,

they became bricks just sufficiently

mortared with love to wall out storms,

prevent us using runed consonants

to transition via verbal wormholes

into future tenses, the universe’s

hullaballoo beyond our potholed

Home Track and over-taut fences.

Then, confused by our pasts’ ever-

present torsioning, and thinking it

progress, we took our stand among

mazes of interrogatives—such as:

*do you still love me*?

Or *why are you* *sending me away?*

*Again*?—became just psychedelic

participles of desire dangling over

crevasses full of drifting dreams

through which we quested after

some Shangri-La or other; always relying

on thin scaffoldings to maintain facades

among ourselves—ignoring parents and

aliens: cousins, uncles, aunts, neighbours,

acquaintances;

authorities (soft-handed Priests, Police,

hard-faced Nuns); salesmen; importunate

‘*others*’; all of whom we feared might

mirror our selves. But now, sifting

old photos, recalling those lost languages,

we can laugh tenderly at ourselves, those

small creatures still at times babbling

riotously in our breasts.

## Twinkle and Nanny

His parents named their goats *Nanny*,

*Creamy*, *Billy*. So it was clear

*Twinkle*—someone’s little joke

since she was totally blind—

came ready-named. As had he. His siblings.

Yet she adapted quickly.

Soon knew every post, hole, stone.

Where water troughs were. Then

in no time, though already old seeming,

birthed *Nanny*, a bundle of grey tints

and eyefuls of laughter. After which

it seemed both goats were always providing

self-propelled mowers to convert weeds

to milk, cream for scones, trifles,

plum puddings his Mum stuffed

into round sacks then hung in the pantry

until Christmas when his Dad’d light

them with brandy while he watched

awed as its blue-tongued spirit licked

then sizzled. But he loved *Twinkle* best.

For how she sat in shade chewing

cud. For how her ears perked up at

his approach until he was close

enough for her to nuzzle palms for oats.

Then *Nanny*: for dragging him faster

than he could run. Flying him over pot-

holes into blue on blue which rose

so high it seemed to stretch, thin out

until he floated free, tethered only

to her stertorousness until she’d jerk

to a stop at a weed too sweet to pass,

stand legs splayed chawing

while he strained on her leash,

cursed her with the latest he’d learned

behind the bike shed at school.

But she’d just grin, gradually unheaving,

then saunter on, let him tie her to the rusted

cog she’d spend all day dragging about

until, sated, she’d tuck legs under,

sit farting until frog call and evening.

## The Session

*for all* Argonauts*; commemorating* The Children’s Hour*,*

*ABC Radio, 1939 to 1972*

Granddad’s chiming five o’clock, so the time is hale

to leave behind all our games, all our worn-out toys;

to go with Tom Piper, with Jack ’n’ Jill,

with old Mother Hubbard and all the girls ’n’ boys,

then taking *a hop, a skip ’n’ a run*, set sail

across foaming oceans with loud *heys*! and *ahoys*!

Gathered round radios, letting go our cares

so that gentle, Fancy, can wrap her arms around,

we’ll ship to wild lands at ends of wireless ways,

and, with only dreams in hand, hail for distant bounds

where we’ll fight monsters in dark, terrible lairs,

become heroes on isles dotting seas of sound.

So, right on time, the whole world falls eerily still

as we remember the *Argonauts*’ achievements,

vow to be true to all that’s beautiful and brave,

to seek for far-off adventure and wonderment,

promise, most eagerly, to share whatever thrill

we find in loveliness, delight and merriment.

First, we romp gladly with *Muddle-headed Wombat*,

or *old Mousie* who’s too good to ever critique

the silly things he says, like how bike ‘*bit him*’

while doing repairs, or his *treely-ruly* speak;

but sometimes we get fed up with *Tabby the Cat*

who’s too vain, and, well, so neurotically neat.

Then there’s *Singos*, with old ditties like *One Fish Ball*—

all some poor old guy down on his luck can afford—

songs sung by *Orpheus*, who sings words so clear

we can sort of make out ones we’ve not heard before;

until here’s old *Stewed Soup*, bringing tales so very tall

we might pause to question even though our hearts soar.

But as we grow older, *The Club* comes in tops,

for now we’re all together *bending* *to oars*,

singing out, loud as we can, the team’s rousing song

as, advancing further *to yet uncharted shores*

we find there *Argos’* stories, some great, some flops,

and shout out big *halloos* to all the sick and sore

’til, from over waves comes smells of fresh bread

for Mum knows the Session is now nearly done;

so I sing *a jolly good night to you ’n’ you*

then flushed by an hour of such adventure, such fun

eat my dinner, do my homework, fall into bed

with my heart still rowing to the *Argonauts’* drum.

## Easter Eggs

It’s midnight. And Easter.

Though he’s given up on Masses.

Even so, gazing out his window

for the 60th year, he recalls weighty

Pascal Candles; wax burnt fingers;

gleaming monstrances; psalms;

exaltation; going homewards sweetly

exhausted gazing out from the back

seat of that grey-n-white FJ at a perfectly

rounded moon hanging white as a yokeless

poached egg, silhouetting cut-out trees.

Recalls how, due to hard staring, eyes’d

blur until the egg became a lively thing

dancing about, multiplying, coalescing

again, pulsing rainbows. Though

sometimes it was the moon man who

changed, becoming Her: silver-

haired, passionate, standing strong boned

over the Lightburn flapping sheets. Or

riding. Or laughing while sitting at table

nursing some delicacy in suds-wrinkled hands.

Or banging pots on the Metters then bringing

down the crucifix and hunching

opposite to interrogate the little thief about

which side of Jesus he thought he ought

to be crucified. Or Him: unshaved;

wearing daggy shorts; scuffed boots;

his smile, once gleaming white and gold,

now collapsed, become a constellation

made from second-hand things all folding

slowly in upon their own rust.

But sometimes now, seeing Easter eggs,

or FJs, he senses them both close beside;

imagines Endtimes when moons will raise up

white bones to embrace him one last time.

## About Shearing

*for Pop Ward, wool classer, and the shearers*

It always starts with phone calls:

Dad and the contractor hammering out

the details.

 ’though

he’s still refusing to take on the shearer

who hamstrung his prize ram years ago.

A week later we kids are hanging out

as the team

 piles out of

rust buckets into quarters Mum has just

cleared of dead flies.

 After,

it’s a race against dusk to fetch in, yard

and draft sheep. Usually, it’s Dad,

walking, or in the ute; or Mum riding

Oaky, ranging behind,

 skirting

the tail to herd would be escapees back

into the mob.

 Then,

for a week to ten days, it’s us traipsing

after the shearers to the shed, leaving

crooked trails in frost. Inside, it’s all

grassy breaths,

 and dust motes

floating through yellow slatted by jarrah

beams,

 high whines

from comb and cutter grinders; and

everything’s thrumming to the hard beats

of the Chamberlain hooked to leather belts

turning

 flywheels

rods and cogs, driving shears. Some

sheep panic

 when gates

slam back, but most just suffer the twist

of head, being dragged out onto the board

where morning, staccato as the rhythm

set by the young gun,

 races on

until his first fifty’s done. Then hand-

pieces

 fall as one

to the floor with dull clunks and shearers

unbend burning backs, wipe red mugs

with oily rags, head to where tea’s set

on bales,

 sit slumped,

chomping, slurping, rolling durries,

smoking,

 or,

if Mum’s here, sticking them behind ears

to smoke outside while watching Dad

does the count. So, long days melt

into dusks;

 into dawns

leaping crisp from behind she-oaks and

eucalypts while time

 flattens

and bales rise and rise, forming castles,

caves, aeroplane launch pads ’til suddenly

the last hogget’s done, the last bale’s

trucked, and silence

 falls,

drawing us kids back into humdrum

until the next season rousts us out again.

## Blue Hills

*for the ABC*

... *dah da da dah daaah dah dah daaaaaaaaaah,*

*hmmm mm mm mmmm mmmmmmmmmmmm* ...

*Blue Hills, by Gwen Meredith* ...

The intro fills the air, resetting time, our brains, and I, *The* *Outsider*, not yet so full of myself as to be immune to doubts, look round at our own versions of *Mum*, *Dad*, *Mabel* and *Dave*:

 Mike: sitting straight, with that intense Sunday look on his face, ready to catch any jokes, but still a little off-centre with regard to his gaze which seems to me to have tended toward the never-never since I batted a cricket ball into him;

 Marg: not quite able to carry off the Sunday look is still the photo girl—pigeon-toed, plucking at her dress as if at something icky, or pouting with wounded eyes, reminding me she looks just like Harper Lee’s *Scout*;

 Mum: wiping sweat from her face after setting custard aside; sitting tall, straight-backed, solid, though, unlike *Mum*, ageing, always simmering somewhere between a frown and a smile;

 then Dad: still our centre since this is before we learned there’s a black hole in the middle of the Milky Way and before his gunshot dragged our world down into it; still digging into his mutton as if it has some truth he needs to get at *right now*.

... *hmmm mm mm mmmm mmmmmmmmmmmmm*...

*Mum! Mum! Where’s Dad? I’ve got news. Real News! Where’s he got to? D’ya know?*

*Oh, I dunno Dave. He said something at breakfast about getting ready for harvesting. Remember? You’ll be needing to get a start at it soon you know. Anyway, what news?*

*Now hang on Mum. You know it’ll upset him if I tell you first.*

*[Sounds of a flywire kitchen door slamming, boots dashing across a porch, down steps.]*

For fifteen minutes we inhabit that parallel universe, those radio pocks and plicks mirroring our lives—but gently, comically, sadly, with flashes of pathos or bathos. A world of voices sounding just like ours, or the many others we know. Voices which have become as real as our own over the years; have gathered round our table, partaken of our lamb and three veg, then trifle with cream, followed by a strong cuppa to polish it all off.

## The Katanning Show

Past the babble from the CWA tent;

the Green on which town teams play footy,

or have a bash at cricket, or rural toffs

ride out for polo; past sweet-smelling sheep

dung and sour pig pens: Sideshow Alley

where, assailed by rides’ clangour and burnt

iron stink, not heeding dung’s reek

or sunburnt losers’ ire,

Carnies raucously hawking fantasies,

hollering at kids to come on, forget

the bloody picnic, try their luck on whorling

rainbow wheels that clack like metallic crickets;

or on popguns, or the hopes wrapped up

in Ping-Pong balls—their light weight

and many dents seeming just right for

dropping dreams into the ohing mouths

of clowns, then watching as they’re gulped

down woody throats to get stuck—*an act of God,*

*so no refund* the Carny’s hard eyes say—

or fall out along slots with numbers

which’ll tell if God’s listening, or confirm

life really *is* as twisted as that mirror maze

into which it’s said kids from the State School

disappeared one year. Come dusk,

bloated on hotdogs, toffee apples and fairy

floss, you’re trudging away from the Alley’s

fading magic, laden with showbags

you’ve dipped into already, apart

from the liquorice one, your favourite,

with that happy black boy showing all

his white teeth; bringing sticky-handed

brother-sister to where your Dad and Mum

wait—their lanolin and roses smells

almost over-powering—looking flushed

because Mum’s won a ribbon for her cake,

Dad for his ram, and all the time eyeing

Mike-n-Marg for scratches, finding only stains.

In the FJ, sitting slumped, drifting on

sugary refluxes, you think: *give the Alley*

*a miss next year; just check out the dog*

*trials, and maybe the Tractor Tent*.

## Wheat Harvest

*for my father*

I recall those long golden swathes,

the orange Chamberlain’s diesel-reek-

and-roar, the thick-shimmering haze,

the dozy nodding of hairy wheat;

how the dust on harvest days

filled my mouth, nostrils, ears,

inflamed my eyes, clogged every pore

until I couldn’t hear breathe speak;

how my sweat attracted the cracked husks

winnowed through the header’s beaks,

dug them into my pimpled skin

raising lumps hot with bile’s beat;

how scratching just worsened stings,

spread rage through my reddening meat

until every scorched breath of air

bit with a million small teeth.

Recall, too, that stoic, fore-shortened shadow

stomping mallee roots with big-booted feet,

hurling stones from the tractor’s way

unmindful of sweat or heat;

how, *at last*, that shadow nodded,

ending the accursed itch from wheat;

how dusk came, low and brown,

whispering about a cool shower salad *sleep*.

## At the Punchmirup South Corner

*for the three of us*

The old school still leans heavily against

the absence of pines at the Punchmirup

South corner where their Dad always crunched

the snub-nosed Bedford’s gears, floored its pedal,

then slalomed across gravel, building speed

to crest Holly Hill.

 Then

that ageing beast hared down, groaning phlegmy

cavils, bouncing us three kids on its hessian seats,

exposed springs pinching our soft thighs while we

hollered, gulped down scents of box gums planted

to shelter Mum,

 that

yellow-posted house with wings wide open to sun

and moon. Something dark in them loved dying

things then, so they Box-Brownied the school,

compiling jigsaws from which, during years

of self-exile

 they

extracted bits to aid remembrance of

brick bones, the small ghosts playing among fore-

shortened shadows at noon. But we three, aged

now, often recall how, sated on sunlight’s

boons, we blithely

 careened

around every risk until one by one, and too soon,

we left folk and school behind, then, separated

from the echoes of that so sweet valley

of the moon, shrank like memories unrecalled,

like drying grasses and yellowing years.

## River Swimmers

*for John Munro*

He was a dud surfer.

Yet every Saturday

 he trudged the miles

 to North Beach

 with his best mate.

Stood a while

 borrowed board

 towering over

gazing up at seagulls

 kiting

 on choppy winds

kicking sand

 gathering gumption

 for dumpings.

They didn’t stick it

 long enough

 to callus knobby knees

for embrace

 by the euphoria

 amped dudes raved about.

Took instead

 to swimming

 the Swan

just a bend upriver

 from steely screeches

 running the bridge’s bight.

The distance

 from bank to bank

 scared at first:

water’s grey rush

 no half-way island

 meaning it was all or nothing

 straight across.

So, laying out his towel

 he’d prevaricate

 chatter inanities

all the time pondering

 river mud’s sun-warmed suck.

But each time became easier

until soon

 they were hollering during run-ins

 careless of slips

 across slimy rocks.

And after

 they’d skateboard

 down rivers of asphalt

scream

 through rips

 of blaring horns

 until eyes

 blazed savage on high beam.

Now

 walking beaches

 riverbanks

 waiting at intersections

hearing sometimes

 dumping waves

 whining horns

 screeching trains

he loses himself

 again

 to that lithe innocence

in which exhilaration

 melts away time

 then everything else

leaving

 just light

 and a blurring of eyes

a whooshing in ears

 as of shells’

 or underwater’s wash:

other tumultuous currents

 fourteen-year-olds

 aren’t yet built to swim.

## Of Kids, Life, and Beheaded Chooks

For some kids life can seem crazy.

To dance like a beheaded chook.

Or to be stippled pale plucked

dressed cold like ideals

some parents espouse keep

hung in meat safes out of reach

of lively kids or dogs. Though

blowflies can still get in and die.

Leave greasy maggots to chomp

all night long. Some kids horrored

turn away. But others—entranced

by claws by guts glistening

so very redly in steel bowls remembering

with delight some nasty deed

feeling their breasts whumping loud

their eyes filling with grins—

press noses against snuffle sweetening

aromas’ cavernous riot. Maintain

long-stretched silences alongside

rebellious thoughts that after all Life

can have little to say to them about chooks.

## The Bannister Graves

*for my great-great-grandmother*

**Note**: *Two graves were established at Bannister in the mid 1880s: one for Trooper Thomas Knibbs, shot by a convict he was transferring from Albany to Perth; the other for Anne Barron, Edward and Johanna Barron’s 14-month child.*

The site is better tended since I was here last:

melaleuca cleared; grass lawn-like; bronze

plaques affixed to steles informing passers-by

about the murdered copper, the child. But here

reality bifurcates, for our family hand-me-down

includes that convict too. So now the graves seem

starker. Sadder. Farther off-road from occasional

cars dopplering past;

the steel barrier and concrete stele sterile

against rusty wire and bleaching wooden

crosses bent—weighed down by warding—

inside my head. More dead even than

the yellow grasses which hid the bones

from great-great-grandmother as she bedded

down with her son one evening while trekking

South to North to have him schooled in Perth;

then waking to a small hand reaching out,

*scaring her out of her wits*, she said,

though the way she stands so white-in-black

beside the skeletal header in those photos

in the army trunk under Mum-n-Dad’s bed

suggests she was an unlikely candidate for fright.

I’ve lost all the photos I took of those graves.

So some memories, unanchored, drift

while I forget sometimes to watch out for them

as I segue North-South-North. As I used when,

as a teenaged Janus always from one side wanting

the other, I refused committal to a single face

or place, preferring anonymity because being

unknown was more comfortable then,

as perhaps it was for her son while she led him

inexorably toward inevitabilities, separations—

from farm, siblings, friends—into turmoil,

questionable loves, boyhood’s ghosting,

left abandoned, unmarked by plaque,

unburied in any grave.

## What’s in a Name?

He’d often wondered why his Dad named his favourite dog *Tinker*.

After all, what did that guy who came once a year always followed by clouds equal parts dust and flies, hoping for pots or knives to fix, or at least a cuppa, have to do with a dog?

Like so many questions, this one remained unasked. But he Googled recently. Found out many folk think their Pomeranians have *Tinker Bell* charms. Which still makes no sense.

He’d also noticed that many dogs look like they’re on the verge of tears. Though he reckoned their *Tinker* had no cause since she was decently housed in a brick kennel, was fed fresh meat daily along with scraps from their table.

So he Googled this too. Learned it’s because some folk, liking

the idea dogs might feel sad for them, bred for the trait.

Then he got to thinking about how some men also habitually look as if they’re about to cry. Check out Howard or Turnbull. Even Boris. Or Trump.

Which led him to pondering how far back up—or is it down?—genealogical trees he’d have to go to find which great- great- grand started the tinkering. Which, now he thinks about it, is yet another meaning, so how come they weren’t named *Tinker*, too? Especially since at least some seem just like *Tinker Bells*, and with tinkerish tendencies too, at least as far as fiddling with laws and the economy go, leaving both scarred, or leaking worse, just like that old guy used to.

Ah, it’s a cockamie world. So now he reckons *Tinker* and her flop-eared pups, who probably didn’t understand naming conventions any better than him, must be glad to be out of it.

## A Parent’s Finger

No matter how callused, a parent’s finger never

forgets the tingle of a small hand’s clutch. Yet,

let go, we must watch our children walk

different paths, fade beyond life’s blare.

So his grandfather’s ghost must have watched

as his father was called down hard tracks to war,

farming, suicide, neither knowing the path

down which the bullet was dodged. Then too,

his father’s ghost, mired in war horrors that gurgled

like rips through tidal mudflats, watched as his son,

thinking himself an *Icarus* and free to fly high blue—

not having read enough to learn how fate wings

so predatorily out from pearling dawns—

came crashing down, alive, but badly singed,

onto earth death made alien. Watched still

as, life become too maudlin to bear, he left,

sought loftier things and low, in bars, in universities

too, all the while bearing unbearable longings

just to be able to clutch a parent’s finger again

before Land’s gullet, opening wide, draws

his unclotting in. And since, gazing

into night mirrors, feeling phantom tingles

from the clutches of children unborn, he mulls

the doubts that haunted, kept all off-kilter,

made loves and worlds beyond the farm’s tight-

strained fences seem so darkly treacherous.

## The Christmas Pudding

*for my mother, and Norman Lindsay who first alerted me to the magic, and mischief, of puddings*

There’s just a month to go. So Mum’s preparing shopping lists: flour, suet, sugar, raisins, ginger, lemons, cherries, mixed fruits, treacle or golden syrup. Watching out for bargains at the Co-op. Sticking notes on the bedroom mirror for Dad to keep aside thruppences.

Then comes washing of cloth squares. A thorough scraping of the top of the stove to ensure close seals with bottoms of boilers. Checking enamel pots to see if rusted-through pinholes can’t be managed by topping up.

Come *Cooking Day*, it’s triple-sifting of flour, kneading in of suet—and she’s sweating already—unclumping of mixed fruit, cherries, extra raisins and sprinkling in. After which it’s just a matter of nimble fingers and supple wrists mushing and squeezing, squelching and pressing, churning and turning with wooden ladles.

*Does being wood add to the taste?*

merits a silent stare. Dipping fingers a smart rap.

Then it’s letting the mush stand overnight. Putting the boilers on first thing. A remix then ladling of sweet gunge onto the cloths; moulding, gathering and tying off tops; letting bags sit an hour or two to seal, then lowering them gently into seething pots to steep until nose and quick prods tell her they’re done.

For weeks after, it’s impossible to pass the pantry’s still-brewing ambrosia without sneaking in to poke the sacs, looking now like

something a big spider’s hung. Until, at last, it’s Christmas. And magic: the changing of bread into Baby Jesus; bells and carols; the moon hanging fully dilated outside the FJ; opening of first presents; fitful sleep dreaming of opening the rest.

Then, all day, it’s food food food. Mains, of course, but mixed nut, chocolate and short-bread surprises, too, scattered on side-tables for in-betweens.

Yet nothing raptures as completely as The Pudding, which by now, like that magic one, should be walking about on thin legs wearing a bowl on its head. As the blue-green dance of flames after Dad’s poured on and lit the brandy; the depths of its colours; the nostril-flaring aromas bursting from first slices.

Later, tipsy on home-made ginger-beer, us siblings lie about burping, farting and laughing; watching the sun sink past frog song into deepening mallee.

## Viv

*for Viv Holly, and Doreen, Joan, Patricia, and Greg*

During our final encounter

we didn’t speak about the elephant.

Being a farmer, you coped.

Or ignored bad news. Knew

death’s sour grimace. How,

without a heart, so cold as

a corpse, it slowly squeezes,

leaving no space for breath.

But you must have seen

my eyes skittering

like water drops on hot plates,

avoiding how you’d shrunk

until, seeing you still inhabiting

your wrinkles, still young

my gaze could at last settle

upon yours, filled with fun,

blazing. Still ranging

through those beloved

unbound spaces you used

to walk and walk: green

or stubbled paddocks,

rolling hills, mallee. Draped

about with cameras. Ever

tending the delicate: children,

kittens, pups, flowers,

always flowers. Mostly

wild ones so frail seeming

yet robust right up

to sudden droopings.

All the time, too, capturing

raw tendernesses; vibrant colours;

furry petals; gleaming thorns;

spritzig nectars so attractive

to amber-banded bees.

I couldn’t make your funeral.

Spent time instead leafing

through photos you’d taken.

Thinking about how you

had never needed to name

elephants others didn’t see.

## President Kennedy’s Dead

*President Kennedy’s Dead!*

*President Kennedy’s Dead!*

Remembering that crier’s call brings back a world

suddenly more slippery, treacherously sloped

like that pebbled scree between classroom

and handball courts; a sky blue so hardened

above the court’s three walls that it seems

to reach even deeper within to finger the mostly

broken bits inside; make the concrete underfoot

even less yielding than usual; darken the echoing

smacks of that small black ball against the walls

to a thwangy complaint.

*President Kennedy’s Dead!*

*President Kennedy’s Dead!*

Amazement mixes strangely with the crier’s

triumphal pride in being first to spread the news,

causing players to break off from pursuing balls

whizzing from wall to wall, from following

their zig zag ways back to burning hands.

So that I wondered, then, whether his soul,

newly shot from his body, also zig zagged,

smacking from cloud to cloud seeking

a way back to the hand of God.

*President Kennedy’s Dead!*

*President Kennedy’s Dead!*

It became, then, an echo about the walls

inside my head, shattering for a time

the barrier between me and the world outside,

leaving me panting, sweaty, gape-mouthed,

caught up in a momentary wash of blue sorrowing

at the fragility of the great, fearful that even this place,

until then so safe seeming with its three walls and only

one way in and out, might collapse, assassinated

by a conspiracy of time and rain; leaving just echoes

of handballs’ thwacks and winded breaths.

*President Kennedy’s Dead!*

*President Kennedy’s Dead!*

Perhaps it’s because it was a first that like all firsts—

first smacks, first loves, first hates, first occasions

of parental carelessness—that crier’s call

and his death still echo so loudly down the years.

## Drought

*in memory of the bullnosed Bedford*

Some Summers bring only fire, then drought.

Leaving Land scorched and gasping,

and us with little to dream about through

artisanal Autumns, hoar-frost Winters.

So Springs make a hash of things. Birth

headless crops beside nectarless flowers.

And since long-range forecasts say nothing

about rain, farmers must sell ewes with lambs

still inside. Then it’s months of carting water

for stock kept for rebuilding in hope of that

reward old Mr Taylor says Calvin promised—

Mum says he’s converted, become Catholic

like us, but can’t let go of Scottish habits.

Months spent hanging dust curtains

along back roads all just like our Punchmirup

from here to Indinup where there’s a standpipe

in the line slithering silver but scaleless

across sandy paddocks. Months gouging up

roads I ride to the bus stop, smothering

box gums we’d planted along Holly Hill.

Smothering too any growth left in The Parkland—

my favourite with its coursing creek and sand-

papery mosses; for spying on barrelling cars;

on Ralph tinkering around his asbestos shack

for which banks won’t loan him money to white-

wash. Months when, regular as clockwork,

our bullnosed Bedford coughs round roses

dying in Mum’s garden, dragging dust behind,

layering all the house’s inner surfaces with silt

so fine it dances to the pounding of wheels

as the truck rounds the back-yard corner,

heads on out to dwindling mobs camped huffing

for a drink. Months too of masses so filled

with prayers for rain they make my tummy crawl,

so I want to *smack* something, instead recite

old Hanrahan’s *we’ll all be rooned* over and over.

After Mass it’s boys with men, girls with women,

and Terrence Noonan calling out something cheeky

to Mum who makes sassy retorts, helping us

forget dust until Dad reckons w*e’re dwindling too*,

that we’ve got maybe one more Summer

before there’s nothing left. Reckons too,

that by then the Bedford won’t be able to hack it

any better than the rest of us.

## Seductions

He doesn’t remember the names of those two aboriginal girls who came out of nowhere to clean their home. Too young to know of slavery, he saw only that their eyes mirrored a grinning darkness akin to that in his own brown eyes.

They may have come only once. During shearing probably. Or many times. Memories from then, only loosely categorized in the dusty library of his mind, have become decayed palimpsests, half unrolled scrolls half hiding secrets whose sibilances still draw powerfully.

So he can’t remember the when. Only that the three of them seemed to be on the same side of the divide beyond which lay the terrain of adulthood. That he was old enough to shiver at the smoothness of their forearms. To delight in their contrast to his white hand. To feel a rising itch when silky fingers linger on the back of his hand as they, self-appointed purveyors of strangeness, gleefully showed him the pixelated photos of vaginas in the musty medical text kept on the top shelf of his Mum’s bookcase.

To remember how a bird’s call from outside freeze-framed every second with clattery stutterings, inter-leaving shame with a sweat flush of delectation.

Which is why, perhaps, he came to like things dark brown and as soft-dimpled as the temptation they seemed to be offering. The reason, one rain stippled night, while a taxi driver showed him, then a knob-kneed schoolboy, his *special collection*, he became keenly aware it was rivulets down a brown man’s chest pressed against pale breasts reignited his itch. Kept him hard as car

horns dopplered past, as the wipers slowed their mad shalumping across the windscreen, as he stumbled out, vomiting up the slobber he’d seen in the driver’s eyes.

Why the memory of that girl in the orphanage who pressed his face beneath her dress—he can’t remember her name either—became precious. Why, even years later, he feels such strong urges to break glass in galleries, to caress the thighs of primitive goddesses.

Why, too, earth-mother Gloria sirened him so easily into brown-muffled sex. Inflamed such unquenchable desire to suck out her indented nipple. For them both to bite contexts for themselves into the other’s flesh.

Why, after each new seduction, he so profusely thanks those two brown girls for their cheery wickedness.

## Father and Son

At his boy’s first profession

we can see he wants to embrace him,

gently, as one does broken-winged.

Says only: ‘*You do not have to do this*’.

But this is not his day. Nor his place:

these lowering sandstone arcades

where already he has seen spiders

webbing traps for dawn; this swathe

of pines, so many lightning-struck,

and all, with lantana petticoats raised,

stepping down terraces, past broken

missionary graves, to paddle in turquoise

so bright it stings eyes too used to straw

and browns. But his words do not draw

the lad from his Capricorn billabong;

do not raise him out of his inertia—

so disproportionate to his few years—

to see the path he sees. And by then

he can see the boy is wearing life

as a hairshirt; while he, done in

by PTSD and the farm, maybe

by his family too, is ready to square

things away; box them for quick dispatch

along with words which, like grain

held in cracked silos, slither too easily out

and are lost. Years later, he dreams

himself floating as if through a treacle

of fuchsia iridescences beyond

their back veranda’s fly-stained windows;

of hearing his voice become an artesian

swell, his eyes wild creatures scarpering

toward a time when the farm—

*ah, was ever his?—*is sold to strangers:

believers on a promise who will farm

it far more efficiently than he ever could

with rusty headers, mowers, ploughs

bought at clearance sales. Dreams

those strangers re-fencing and planting

trees, turning Land into a smoothed

vellum scroll, or scraped palimpsest

upon which his life is rendered to just

some few black contours beneath new

scribblings, which obliterate too those ghosts

he’s been seeing ever since his son said

he could hear them hunting in left-over mallee,

along dry creeks he’d seen the boy bury

talismans in while root picking with that old Italian

whose olive- and-garlic whiff will endure

longer than his acridity. But, years

later still, his boy, become fat-bellied, grey,

wakes often weeping from dreams about his Dad’s

‘*you don’t have to*’, about his failure to respond

to a father’s enfolding.

## The Fiancé

*for Margaret*

Something about him raised hackles.

Obdurate, like that iron-hulled boat

in which he fished northern waters,

he seemed moored within hard eyes.

I did not want him marrying my sister.

Sometimes that something flapped

crazily, like those canvases of cliffside

Christo / Jeanne-Claude installations

revealing whickering crevasses.

She assured me she loved him.

So I could only watch as he bound her

with hawsers, leaving me helpless

unable to provide harbour.

But it whickered inside me, too, whenever

his gaze checked the effect his words had

as he plaited them into long ropes

as if to anchor himself to bollards.

So those hackles remained

while years creaked then wallowed

as their house, nested under eucalypts

in Chester Street, grew silent, hunkered.

## The Fisherman

*for Alan Munro, Fisherman*

On long weekends he’d leave the school behind.

The hated echoes and sandstone cloisters

smoothed by countless uncertain hands and feet.

Doss with his favourite Aunt. Wallow North Freo’s

sluggy wake with his best mate. Surf Leighton’s tang.

Skateboard through car horns and screaming winds.

Swim across the river into dreams of waiting

until Mr Munro’s morning bellows hove them

past Rottnest through hard churn and slap.

Callow then, he did not note leathering flesh,

or calluses sheened by ropes. Instead, seeing only

manly strain in sinews hauling pots of seething crays,

he ran about. Fouling lines. Upsetting tubs. Watching

always for harsh words. Catching only glints of smiles

as Mr Munro turned the patient boat about, erasing

his mistakes. Years later, seeking home woods beyond

gull-cracked dawns, remembering that salted hand upon

his shoulder, sea kelp’s long-stranded measure, he swam

soughing troughs, strode hills littered with empty shells

until he came at last to the hearth in his own father’s breast.

## My Two Brothers

*for Michael and Alan*

Mike came aged six months, and sickly. But soon*—*hearing Dad yelling out *Boy*!—was calling me *Bobo* as I towed him everywhere in his red-yellow *Diddle* (and, no, sorry, I don’t know where that came from).

My love for him was a wild thing. Fiercely protective as I learned to change his nappies without much minding his stink. To bathe him in the small tub with cherubs on its sides. After which, being blond, he gleamed in sunlight.

I’m not sure what colour his eyes were then, but they darkened as my teenage self poured draughts of doubt into his sweet-curled, ever-thirsty ears.

Loved him, too, suffering eczema down backs of legs he or their Bedford’s hessian-covered springs scratched bloody all Summer. For spending more years at home. Being most damaged by Dad’s suicide.

So now I prefer to see him bent over weeds in a garden more rock than flowers. Huffing with hay fever while we walk. Or, each morning, heading out to tend his disabled in his declarative, maroon HACC uniform.

And Alan? *Ah*, *Alan*. For years he was a cypher. A flickery baby-in-a-back-yard hologram which might have only existed in my head bringing fugues which burned too intense to be kept long lit. So memories of him which disappeared before becoming fully formed, sounded always like the clunks of an unstrung piano,

or the tired beat of a grandfather clock which, having outlived its years, chimes as lifelessly as the brother I eventually found limping as if club-footed along Graylands’ corridors.

I’ve been told forgetfulness is an effect arising from abuse or abandonment; from being turned into flotsam which sinks without trace in State care; which rots when left to thrive or not in desert dorms.

I’ve lost count of the years it took to arrive at the epiphany which revealed that backyard baby was Alan, dead some years now, although his imago still flits echoing throughout my head. Of the years it took to realise my adoration of baby Mike’s sun like form, my pleasure in being harnessed to his *Diddle*, were due at first to him being Alan’s avatar; a re-incarnation of memories swaddled in long silences:

Alan in my lap; or chortling as I offer sandbox masses to inconstant moons; or sitting in my arms entranced by the moon as I ascend on a rope swing toward stars too distant to draw poison.

But now I photograph Mike every chance I get: standing alone; or beside me in front of one of Dad’s second-hand headers; above the surging wash of Cheyne’s Beach; or in his garden, his hazel eyes trouble-flecked but glowing, smiling at me as they always have.

## Katanning’s Witch

Deep in cobwebbed mind-space:

an old shop, and him holding

sixpence, staring at dust-stained

jars as grey as the wrinkled woman

behind the counter. *Sixpence*.

A fortune. Requiring hard decisions.

Just like that guy called Caesar

he’s been reading about in a comic book

who right now is astride his horse Toes

at the Rubicon pondering dice that fly.

But this is his first visit to the shop,

so he’s fascinated by thick-glassed

jars, dusty webs, sugar-powdered

candies, even those blue-green gleams

which are dead flies.

By her, too, *The Witch* other kids

whisper about, though he can’t figure

why as there’s nothing Hansel-Gretelish

here if you don’t count ginger biscuits,

although that wart on her chin *is* hairy

and her nose does jut just a bit too sharpish.

Still, there’s no straw broom or pointy hat

in any corner. Then the doorbell’s jangling

so she’s turning to serve other kids,

giving him more time to decide if there’s

anything here worth letting his die fly for.

When she returns, he can tell she knows

his sixpence, stolen that morning, is burning

his fingers. But her eyes aren’t blooding

and her leathery hands aren’t weaving spells.

Instead look just like Grandma’s as she sits

among the cacti, waiting.

## The Shooting of a Duck

He’s been watching the mountain ducks for weeks. Each morning drifting down, skiing across, settling upon the dam.

Spending all his spare time practising with the .22, shooting up paper targets, tin cans; telling himself he won’t be quick enough to get both. That just one would make a meal.

At dawn, after fitful dreams he doesn’t understand, leaving behind breathy warmth, he heads across the empty Ram Paddock—the rams are out doing their thing—leaving a trail across dew.

There are no trees around the dam; no susurrating leaves. Only a husk of a moon lowering over the horizon. Creeping silently, he passes through tall grass; crawls up the bank, carefully, though the safety catch is on.

The pair—gold-necked, green-and-brown—are paddling below, rippling their reflections. So he’s steadying himself. His breathing. Remembering his Dad’s *on the outbreath* and *just squeeze the trigger*.

Stopping the catch from clicking, he lines one duck up in the sights; coughs to panic them into flight; follows his target as it ploughs across the water; wings into sky.

Then, on an out breath, fires.

There is no jerk. Instead, it is flying on, and he’s disbelieving he could have missed. But now its neck is drooping and, wings folding, it’s plummeting, whumping against the side of the dam, sliding into thick grass.

Close-up, feathers are rising, falling. It’s still alive then? And his stomach churns.

But it’s a zephyr, ruffling sheen; cooling sweat on his face. He can’t see where the bullet went in. Can’t see blood. Is bending and turning it over. Feeling silkiness of wings. Hardness of quills. Seeing mushiness where an eye should be. So little blood. Just a shadow pooling about grass stems.

Then a wall is cracking; dislike of himself torrenting out. And, from nowhere, Tinker, nosing.

Something else snaps then. The deafness that’s been upon him since seeing it droop. So now he’s hearing the call of its mate, circling. And thinking this is not my first kill. That he’d not been bothered, not even counted the sheep and chooks, the kittens he’d sent on before. That for rabbits, mostly sickening, bullets had been a mercy; a short leap into release.

But the duck had not leapt. Showed no sign of disease. Had fallen out of the air. Slithered bonelessly down. Into tall grass. Into death. As if to hide from the other, higher now, but calling still. From the orphaned shadows cheeping and scrabbling up the bank.

And now it seems the sky too is falling. That clouds are drawing daylight too close in. That though the last runes of the ducks’ panic are yet sworling its waters, the dam is too still. That the burn of tears is a useless thing. That, years later, lying on another dam bank, with another darkness, neck gold-ringed, stooping, it seems right he be taloned, left torn, bleeding out his shadows and sins.

## Burlands’ Kitchen

*for my mother*

No matter how much we scrub at them

home kitchens remain hearths for memories:

their mealtime sounds and odours encompassing

us; creating vaulted planetariums sunny

or staticky with lightning; thunderous

with dislikes; starry with affections;

laughter.

 Shiny

as burnished silver, they are the heart we return

to from salting paddocks, offices, factories;

from life; from lovers’ beds. Repositories for silences

which, if we’ve been lucky, are mostly comfortable;

soothe rough-edged memories, hard duties;

muffle

 ululations

from outside. So, gazing now so far back,

*Burlands*’ is your exemplar. There your Mum

still sweats over Margaret Fulton cuisines

while your Dad writes up daily notes about weather

and crops. There Blue Hills’ rural dream still echoes

peculiar

 quietenings

while thin salesmen come hanging off sharp-winged

cars; or neighbours in weather-worn floral dresses

or cork-bob hats breeze in unhindered by flywire,

just dropping by for quick cuppas with their gossip,

then sitting for hours, smiling over your heads

until

 your Mum’s

driven to catching flies with bits of newspaper,

chucking them in the fire. *Burlands*’ kitchen

weathered you all. Seems to be watching over you

even now through those brick-sized eyes either

side of the stove which gazed steadfastly eastwards

toward

 Top Gate

where one truck a day, perhaps, hangs a curtain

of dust, separating you from what’s beyond,

outside thick-strainered fences where lives seem

tenuous, like topsoils which look well-rooted

until drought drifts them across the hill separating

you

 from Holly’s

from futures which seem as unreliable as Punchmirup

trains yet are also deeply, opaquely thralling, like

those dots representing so many unknowns in that atlas

Aunty Gus sent you one Christmas during years

as unkempt as moulting chooks.

## della commedia di funerali

*for Father Mac*

Gazing down sandy, tree-arched tracks to when I was a kid,
it seems it’s always stinking hot at funerals. Though, despite horror movie exemplars, no sweaty pallbearers ever dropped coffins into their eternal rests, thus offering much looked-for opportunities to see cracked caskets reveal occupants either rictused against too early demise or, if elderly, with mouth pinched around final curses.

Back then, I thought funerals were like Carnivales. Know now all those faux mourners, nosh-seekers, bulbous-nosed drinkers, gossips, relatives too distant to ever have kissed the pure or powdered cheek, were Chaucerians, or maybe Boschians released from earthy holes to bring their tattle to these pilgrimages with The Dead.

Of course, there were always a few genuine grievers for the commedia’s Pierrot, if not by choice, then by force of circumstance, such as those who, risking all on long-range forecasts, cropped the latest fad—like canola whose flowers so yellow complexions in Summer—then lost the lot. But most were Harlequins bedecked in mourning’s blacks, like these, come now milling, gushing titbits and tall tales, followed by bearers—always a motley lot: tall, pimpled youths, ready-stooped for burdens; neighbours, straight-backed, or rounded by weight of farms, thinned by loss of odd things during drought-and-floods—like kids’ stamp collections, sometimes the kids themselves, or wives who think them too leathery, too crabbed for the job of living. Always just six of them bearing the casket wreathed with lilies, or wildflowers for kids, setting it on that thingamajig with wheels, standing around, casting about for what’s next, then disappearing through the nearest gap.

But even those who are most voluble become pious during Mass which goes off without a hitch—well, just a little wine slopping,

a few mistimed bells, occasioned by itches brought on by Mums’ over-starching of soutanes. Which I didn’t mind since cross-dressing as an altar boy seemed interesting, was generally accepted as just pageantry then, as helping Father Mac put on a good show—Benedictions being his best with, oh! the glitter, incense, robes; the Monstrance so golden gleaming.

Or Confirmations when we boys’d sneeze to cover sniggers at the Confirmands’ shock when the Bishop, up from Bunbury and looking grand in black and pink—a cross-dresser, too, I guess—slapped their faces harder than he ought because Mac’s shows annoyed him no end. But the Bishop’s high colour fades quickly from our minds while our love for Mac flourishes, with twinges, since he knows us all too well, and despite his eulogies—too long, so making everyone antsy or farty on hard pews—in which he lists The Dead’s peccadilloes, though, to everyones’ chagrin, being a stickler for Confessional secrecy, never their sins.

But, as always, it’s the wake that’s the big attraction, so it seems the whole town gathers in the CWA Hall, along with strangers down from Perth, or up from Esperance. Sometimes even a few oddities from across the desert at whom even The Dead might be expected to curl their lip.

Soon then, there’s rising din, and keg levels falling fast until someone, cursing, signs another cheque; and kids, jittery on sugars, becoming rowdier, occasioning smart smacks along with shrill cries drowned out by music so staticky it could be Country and Western, which would probably not be entirely out of kilter with the Irish’s liking for mixing rollick with a funereal mood.

Gradually though, madness falters as pilgrims depart, leaving floor tiles spattered with food and broken, spangling glass. Leaving too, the odd drunk waving an empty bottle, comforting himself with the thought that The Dead, content with such a grand shebang, would even now be dreaming about other wakes they’d attended, always with a full tankard or wine glass in hand.

## Aunty Elsie

*for Aunty Elsie, Phon and Peter*

She was his only gammy-legged relative—polio he thinks—and he loved her for it. Still sees her sitting—perpendicular—full of grit—black-tressed—regally Victorian in her Dean Street apartment—surrounded by glimmering crystal—lacy whispers—pink flowers on crocheted doilies—always it seemed facing homeward.

Still hears her clumping that orthopaedic shoe across wood floors—jangling cutlery in dark-wood sideboards—teacups too delicate for hooks—so the handle of the one she gave him snapped as he thrust his finger through—prompting only the slightest raising of a brow and no pause in her prattle—though she always brought out a mug for him after.

Later—infirm—she moved to Alfred Street to live with her grandson—who—being so bloodless—fascinated—became a meme for things left too long in the dark.

Pubescent then—forever raging between raucous and morose—between liking and hating the body morning mirrors reflected—once past ablutions he could admit to affection—for her—all those other women about then—Rita-Mary, Eileen, Joan, Lilian, Viv—all twinkly as candle-flames—as brown and smooth-worn as well-used broom handles—appreciative of hugs and kisses.

All uncritical of foibles—with hands smooth as jadeite which hid no darknesses—smiles which lit up his world like lighthouses—eyes—mostly brown like his—which—though they often mirrored sadnesses left outside—acknowledged—but not

invited in—unnervingly pierced his secrets—yet loved what they saw.

So he sometimes wished she was his mother—who towered over—daubed with broad-brimmed hats—scarves—talcs and colognes he gave her—occasionally tried on himself.

After matriculating he careened about—ratty as an unprogrammable missile. So the skein she had knitted for them both gradually thinned while his memories chipped—then faded—along with the mug his heart—for its own reasons—clung to—never forgetting how she held him so close with crabbing palms. How he loved her too—her copious nourishings. Held her leathering hands. Her glazing gaze. Held *her* as a precious favour—bestowed upon him again and again—a bouquet of Spring’s last wild flowers.

## Sheet Music

*remembering my Mother*

She lived much of her life

as though still a Loretto girl.

Sitting at her desk. Eyes

fixed upon deep azure

beyond high windows. Or

reading sheet music.

Stumbling over thick-clustered

notes too much like unruly

emotions. Lived as if conducting

concertos. Rendering Autumns

reedy with *pianissimo* clarinets.

Winters dark with *legato* tubas.

Breaking out into full *symphonic*

*chromatic* for Springs. Or, burned

by passions, crashing into the

*dissonance* of cymbals, then,

to counter enervating Summers,

or just wearied, transitioning

to *tremolo* piccolos. But throughout

all seasons, whenever black-jagged,

she’d veer toward *Gregorian* vigour

or *Znamenny’s* heartache.

All while sweating over stoves;

comforting bereaved; playing

with another’s child after church.

**Note**: *Znamenny* = Russian Orthodox liturgical chant

## Parent and Childhood Pains

Parents remember forever those first times

children bring them their pains. Fingers,

say, caught in doors. Lovers’ dyings.

Dreams’.

Catalogue the cold twinges which run down

their spine; those sickening, guilty surges,

as if it were they did the slamming; or might

somehow have prevented dreams’ dyings.

Filled with queasy acridity, they take

each pain’s digit upon their palm,

turn it ever so gingerly with finger-

thumb to inspect damage;

are amazed if skin is not broken. But then,

alarmed at how quickly red bruises blue,

blacken, swell to plasticky sheens,

they close their ears just a little to whimperings

so as to maintain that semblance of distance

required to function as healer. For the child’s

pain is theirs, of course, and they can still

recall their own parents’ salving lips;

how bandages too swaddle like kisses,

reducing pain to something able to be

shown to siblings or friends less sorry

perhaps than envious of attentions missed.

Recall too, how Grandmas and Granddads,

hugging then telling of scars from that same

hell they’re now passing through, made pain

genetic, opened vistas to shared pasts until

then only vaguely sensed, but now lived.

## The Endtimes

*for Doreen and Joan Holly*

He remembers Doreen Holly one time on the school bus calling out to him are the Endtimes coming? As the only Catholic she knew, he guessed she thought him an expert. Recalls too, that since he was going through a Poe phase then, he looked out thinking there’d have to be some sign leaking around the world’s edges; that, seeing no clouds, he yelled back not likely.

He said nothing to his Dad or Mum—they already thought him crazy since he’d begun spending his pocket money on Phantoms and Supermans. He’d even overheard his Mum saying she was worried about his moral fibre, which made him think of the molasses and salt lick his Dad put out for the cattle. Besides, he reckoned they wouldn’t think much of such a question from a little pagan like Doreen, even if they probably knew she loomed large beside her twin in his pre-teen brain.

But Doreen had set him off, so he wondered if his Dad and Mum were hiding the fact these were the Endtimes; that they dreaded the coming of The Four Horsemen (and there it is again: that weird, spacey music mixed with The Ride of the Valkyries). But the way his family seemed so hunkered in that sweet valley, with so many fences layered tight around; prayed The Rosary every night, his Mum wrapt in fervour for fifteen long minutes on the yellow lino before the stove; the way she spoke of the world outside as so full of sin, and so against Jesus, meant this wasn’t the first time he’d thought they should already be hearing the clopping of the horses.

Which set him to worrying about Doreen and Joan. He knew, of course, his Mum’d said, pagans like their Mum and Dad were good people. So why did she pray so desperately for them? Was she hoping for last-minute conversions to improve their odds of making it to Purgatory, at least, where his Mum’s prayers might

mean that once she was in Heaven God would allow his Mum to dip a finger in a bowl of holy water and drip a cooling drop on their scorched tongues.

Then he got to thinking about his own salvation. Started keeping a more careful track of his sins. Writing fortnightly Confession lists, partly for forgiveness, partly to impress Father Mac so he’d boost the penance to more than three Hail Marys which made his worst seem piddly little things.

He didn’t ever worry about his Mum and Dad. Just believed no matter how much she fretted about not being as holy as Mary, his Martha Mum’s redemption ought not to come from hard-praying, communions, or funerals, but the thousands of roasts, salads, and cream cakes she served up onto the kitchen table, along with countless packed lunches during seeding, shearing and harvesting.

And his Dad’s from the hard-earned he paid to widows at clearance sales for broken-down headers; the gentleness with which he shore sheep; the ute-loads of firewood; the way he had of wrapping callused fingers around dimpled hands and leading them, less wordily than his Mum, through childhood’s thickets.

And for both: from their care for one another; long labours at healing every acre of paddock and bush from salt and erosion, and him of the bruises he’d brought with him from the orphanage that still weighted like stones.

He never sorted what his Mum and Dad thought, but the date for the Endtimes came and went, leaving the world no different. And as Doreen said nothing his concern for the twins soon evaporated, though he kept on with Poe until he found his way to Hamlet and Romeo, to the ah, so exciting, Iago, Richard, Macbeths; the varied Australias of Jolley, Stowe, White and Astley. To that last season on the farm when he thought he could hear the Horsemen at last thundering from behind the thumping of the plough.

## The House Dad and Aunty Nancy Built

*for two voices*

That pink house Dad and Aunty Nancy built

*yellow and white not pink*

then my memories have been scorched by sunlight

*or blended with geraniums* half-dead fuchsias

*ohhh but don’t forget the grapes figs apricots*

*those satsumas soooo blood-sweet on our tongues.*

That house still occupies spaces deep in our minds

*as we once filled it with shouts and laughter*

made angular by familial constraints.

*But we revelled too* even in cracks spiders

crawled out from to web insects dreams

*snare deep sadnesses* cocooning all

*but not joyful emotions* we once believed dead

*or boxy sorts of happiness* though contentments

might have been better being more robust*.*

*More likely* *to exhale delights at dawn.* So we

smallsran all about *burbling* colliding

with Mum-n-Dad *efforts to contain our nonsenses*

leaving silences dense with blacks *as all silent*

*things become* *if left prisoned in words.*

As Dad and Aunty Nancy did after hammering

ceased ringing out to mallee *those palm-*

*pressed jam trees praying* *for daily risings.*

After they finished laying a gravity pipe

*so water* brown-muddied *might find its way*

*inside to pink :)* then green :) *our home*.

## Landscape

*in appreciation of Fred Williams*



## A Letter to Our Home

Countless the aeons of your stately progress: your incremental rise from ocean floor; tectonic advance through scouring seas; your moulding of faces for the world; development of life from molecular dabblings to lively flaunimals.

Then, in a heartbeat: First Nations’ advent; Uluru’s transformation from inselberg to song-line pivot; invasion and importation of convicts along with low-life gentry, disease, genocide, felling of trees; partition of West from East with rabbit-proof fences.

Soldier settlement farms from Albany to Meekatharra; huge stations across the Kimberleys; replacement of fauna with beasts which pulverise topsoil, suffocate with methane. Then came Maralinga; theft of First Nations’ children; circumscribing the Swan’s song with tar-lines and wheel clunk; gouging of the earth for guns; high-rises and weather-board warrens; glass malls for gewgaws and muzak.

Still you sang me out of orphanage greys; absorbed me into red-green-yellows. And even now, as I watch children’s futures burn, argue like a flea over who owns the elephant, you nest my dreams each night alongside thick-rumped numbats; baptize them in the moonlight off Mill Stream’s ghostly paperbarks; pixilate their wakings with dawn’s myriad colours; sing them along karri ways into ochre and azure; drift them through emerald-stooping gorges, across sharp cragged ranges; sail them as waterbird medleys on lakes, along rivers; daub them with kangaroo paw, wattle, wild flowers; wrap them in futures as tender as hope.

# ***... always, homewoods bound ...***

*for Chris Brown, Michael Mullins SM, and my seminary brothers*

## 1. Prologue

*Standing on the deck behind a red brick-and-tile*

*house, leaning close, forearms pinched by cracked rails,*

*they gaze out over brown-thirsty grass,*

*through clouds of small black flies, past thick-*

*trunked eucalypts with muscly limbs lifting*

*scimitar tongues to lick sun’s gold, sky’s blue,*

*through dark greening profusions of thorned*

*lantana into memories of youthful callowness*

*in times when they sought to rise, to glide*

*with zephyrs into bright ebullience*

*and unbound dreams; to fly prayer’s*

*tremolo heights, unburned.*

## 2. A Morning After

*Silence.*

Then a voice asking the time. He raises his head, but everything is bleary. There seem to be part torsos, part appendages at least, all about the place—scattered between bottles, cans, cigarette butts—overlaid by smells which could be vomit or shit.

*Silence.*

Then that voice—it could be John’s—asking the time again. It is answered by vomiting, toilet flush, floor creak. He can’t tell if they’re going or coming. A fly lands on his nose, so close up it’s enormous, and, as he can’t find his arms, it remains, cleaning legs, wings, then back of head so vigourously he wonders how come the thin thread connecting it to the thorax doesn’t snap, the head careen across the room. He thinks he sees flakes of dirt drifting from it onto his pores, tries to snort, ends up dribbling down his chin.

*Silence.*

He still can’t find his arms. Is beginning to feel legs far off, but still, it’s a good sign.

*Silence.*

Then John’s asking the time again, tiredly. He doesn’t really want to know. But a woman—someone’s mother?—the guy whose place this is?—Martin?—bangs on a doorjamb. He thinks: if we don’t invite her in, she will just have to stand there, like a revenant.

*Silence.*

But now an ache is shuddering in his head while John’s still asking the woman the time. *Time for Mass*, she says, to groans all round—how many guys are sleeping here? Then everyone’s rising, scratching balls, bums, taking pisses. Two run about shaking hard cocks at each other. Everyone else, like him half-blind, is laughing.

*Silence.*

It is later, and they are sitting hunched together at the back of a church. He can smell something—metallic? acidic? Thinks: my God, is that us? And: can the congregation smell it, too, being blown down the aisle by the draught? Wonders if it’s the smell makes the candles smoke tall black wisps, sharp-edged like the thing in his head.

*Silence.*

Again, it is later, and he is lying on a back seat, being driven home. The diesel stench is making him want to puke until he is, hanging off grapevines inside his own back gate where, from beyond red-limned shimmers, his mother is watching.

*Silence.*

And again, it is later. Two week later, and he is departing through the same back gate, heading to the seminary where he will discover silences other than that of an alcoholic stupour.

## 3. Pre-Novitiate

Come with me now to Bilgola’s backblocks

where, between the ever-restless highway

and the glintering Pacific, tall palms drop

hairy fruits onto a white-washed retreat.

Here, meet eleven youths, fresh-faced, raw-boned,

athletic or bookish; all impelled

by mothers’ glowing eyes or fathers’

contrary hopes, by still inchoate faiths,

to depart homes in half-asleep suburbs,

on struggling farms. To leave brothers, sisters,

friends. To embark on a lifelong quest

for spiritual heights, led by The Select

who will direct them toward transformation

of base urges through manual labour,

the thaumaturgy of high sacrifice.

See them surfing thunderous waves,

lying brown-bodied, panting, on star-flecked sands,

half-roused by salt and sun-soak. Or walking

wild-bushed headlands, along groynes, watching

speedboats snarl as they scud turquoise swells

beneath skies strained sometimes

to oppressive seeming heights by the screams

of gulls. See waves dumping kelp alongside

white-glazed jellyfish, laying waste

to castles and condoms all down the mile-

long beach. Hear fist-sized rain drops

slashing palm fronds, hammering fibro roofs,

diminishing heroic bluster to something

quieter, better suited to bolted doors,

a rec room over large for homeliness.

Yet, gradually, as each day passes,

they become becalmed; soothed by Latin chants,

prayer books’ musty scents; by hours spent

meditating upon salt-bleached pictures

instead of The Blessed Sacrament. Then,

stretched out under palms, reading hagiographies:

Jean Claude Colin’s, that most venerable

and blessed one who saved the Order

from a founder guilty of vagaries’

preferably not spoken of. Or Marcelin

Champagnat’s, the pragmatist who so loved

the poor that he transformed himself from

gregarious tavern frequenter

to a saintly and much-loved ascetic.

Then, at the waning of this interlude,

The Select, knowing them to be too red-

blooded still, decide they should be advanced.

So they depart Bilgola, each hopeful,

like a bud reaching toward its own new-

discovered sun.

## 4. The Novitiate 1

Train North with me now—beside potholed roads;

through grey-scaled suburbs slung low across

wind-braised hills; past cigarette-thin smokestacks—

to Armidale where white-and-black cows chew cud

beneath skies cerulean as the Virgin’s stole;

where broad boulevards sweep toward booming

hollows behind a cathedral’s bolted doors;

where, throughout crystalline Winters, purple Springs,

slow Summers, the sun vies with wind and cloud

to set each day’s mood.

Watch as, on azure or dour weekday mornings,

dog-collared and soutaned, housed behind

briared walls, our heroes harken to

the Virgin’s call for sacrifice. See them

sieving rare mysteries, quelling age-old

itches, midrashing saints’ lives, submitting

themselves to personality tests

and a psychologist’s deconstruction.

All while gazing out from airless lecture halls

onto verdant vales; spending afternoons

at manual labours crafted to numb

over-ebullience, their Saturdays

milking farty cows, playing bone-cracking

rugby, murdering the occasional sheep;

their Sunday nights, after a day spent working

the parish, playing billiards, dyspeptic

from being over-fed by geriatric women—

the only vines in the vineyard willing

to be tended by boys battling pimples

and night seed.

See them too, discovering rapture in prayer;

suffering doubt’s sour crazings; despair’s

shrivellings; confessions’ shrivings.

See some, alone in locked rooms, twisting

about, swamped by love for the Lord,

its throbbing eeriness just below

register of a howl. Or lying wonder

wrapt in silver dawn light after overnight

snowfalls. Or struggling to hold at bay

urgings of flesh and spirit become more

rampant after being informed even

a single hug might bring conflagration.

See finally, how distaste can threaten

love for a God able to allow death

by motorbike for a mate barely one month

after his departure to respond to

other calls: a family’s embrace;

Wollongong’s moiling salt-and-diesel winds;

the deep pull of surf; of guiltless sex;

Genesis’s charge that we multiply.

## 5. The Novitiate 2

Watch, then, as days segue, become unbroken

streams of light and life, study, work and play.

Then, looking deeper still, see how souls—

yet as green as Armidale’s smooth swelling

hills, or as bovine as the herds cropping

their grasses—take on prayer’s seasonal hues:

Summer’s quick curl and crisp; Autumn’s

slow purpling; Winter’s blue-tinged freeze,

and snows which fall silently at night,

turning dawn either misty white

or so diamond brilliant everything

appears newborn; until, of a sudden,

Spring bursts from the earth, re-greening trees,

brightening the air with lavender

and golden honeysuckle, the yellow

of impressionistic daisies, blooding

of roses; all with shimmering dewdrops

at leaf tips, or tears on buds’ still smooth

cheeks; fractals of light which dissolve

and reconstitute, deepens, then deepens

again until it is no longer possible

to distinguish between midday and midnight,

between words and the breaths within

which they reside, between intention

and act, lover and loved, the Divine

and those devils sometimes wearing His face.

## 6. First Profession

Wander, now, if you will, a golden day,

bright full of zephyrs breezing merrily

across the Novitiate’s beryl lawns.

Chat with the parents of these heroes

who already seem set apart, readied

for Grace’s diaphanous bascinet

and mail to be donned at taking first vows.

Greet specially that elderly couple,

those two children clinging fast to their legs,

gazing, shyly at first, then steadfastly

at their brother, their round brown and blue eyes

filled with light approaching adoration.

See then, a little later, this hero

seated by himself on a wooden bench

beneath a jacaranda gazing out

across the blustery vista he has

come to love. See, too, his father—stocky,

and, for now, coatless, so gleaming

in white shirt, bow tie, braces—quietly

approaching, standing, smiling, gazing

out, too, across the long valley, slow hills,

thinking whatever it is farmers

think when studying Land.

See him then, recollecting himself,

turn to his waiting, watchful son, saying:

*My boy, you don’t have to do this*.

Observe that son then: the panic running

briefly through his brown eyes; his mouth’s opening

and closing, leaving unsaid whatever words

shadow his face before it can close down.

Watch him rising, embracing his father,

feeling the bristles of that much loved cheek,

walking quickly to the chapel. Follow him,

but remain outside the tall, now bright-lit

windows. Smell the incense and candlewax;

hear the old organ’s clangour, bells’ tinkling

as, one by one, the brothers kneel straight backed,

their palms joined as they take temporary

vows: to live chastely poor, to be always

obedient to their superiors.

## 7. The Novitiate 3

Wing Southward, now. Roost among currawongs

across Hunter’s Hill’s asphalt riven greens

where ’roos once grazed through melaleuca.

Where, for sixty thousand years, First Peoples

camped while fishing from shores now gentrified

by brick-and-tile houses, gardens, a pocket-

handkerchief church—roseate as the light

of evening, a dollhouse for pastel

pigmented saints as pale as the thorned Christ’s

so strangely unblooded breast—buttressed

by sandalwood arches just now rediscovered

beneath plaster and thick-skinned paint,

beneath frankincense residues preserving

European spaces from the dross of time,

from humanity’s sweat and sin.

See here, too, that hero adjudged most in need

of supervised hard labour, assiduously

raising up out of rust-tinctured sandstone

upon a concrete swathe a grand new

Novitiate overlooking pined terraces

falling toward the unkempt graves of tropic

romancers returned to home woods to wander

moonlight freely a while before surrendering

their world-weary shades to being bound

about by weeds, broken down by roots,

by Land’s age-old promise of ever-

cyclical movings on.

See him questioning, yet obeying

his Confessor’s command that he burn

leather-bound Punches lest they be read.

Losing himself for week after week

in the sweaty euphoria of stripping

paint, pointing sandstone, laying the way

for his mates—eight now, since two have been culled

and speedily packed off to prevent taint

of others. Observe him meditating—

after a muggy September’s overnight

washing of paint off walls—on the need

to anchor faith against slip-slidings;

embarking with the Missionaria

upon candlelit contemplations

of Africa’s bloating and dying;

smiling at a sourly menopausal priest

holding just overlong to his epicene hand.

Or, after lights out, after occasionally

surrendering to breathy scrabblings,

falling into dreams about lovers

embracing among whispering mallee,

waking to gossamer sublimity,

wild orchid’s frail tremblings.

## 8. The Seminary

Trek again at the dawn of a cork-bobbed

New Year from the edge of this brown, smog shawled

sprawl to Toongabbie—a long stone’s throw, or

forty-minute drive, or much shorter, dead-

of-night-crow’s flight through shallow valleys,

down back tracks, across bone-dry creeks via

Old Windsor Bridge—*haunted*, some say,

*on moonlit nights, when mists cling stickily*

*to willows while wild winds moan gibberish*

*in Pentecostal tongues*—where once, under

the same colourless sky, farms supplied victuals

for rum-drunk troops and *slops*-adorned convicts.

See there, compassed by eucalypts as dry

as canonical runes, a two-storied, ironstone assail,

its streaked windows shut tight against Autumn

purplings, Winter blackbird calls, Spring hazes,

Summer cicadas’ crazed first principles.

There too, hear our heroes, still hale, singing

psalms before breakfast. Watch as, bent over

scarred desks, they strive to fit themselves into

the Scholastic Tradition by transcribing

the scratchings of sallow faced Masters

whose foreign words inspire a loud gonging

of the spheres until, although minds quail,

hearts take flight among the arcane contrails

of hieroglyphs while souls rise higher still

upon a holy nun’s winged words about

the Godhead’s hypostasis.

But see them too, becoming more clip-

winged and fearful of flesh’s Judas kiss,

bowed sweating over Gethsemane stones,

praying Holy Mary will intercede

for them with Nietzsche’s Dead God.

Follow too, as they troop out to suburbs

to teach Primary School children about

Divine Love. Or to the city to undertake

a census of The Rocks for St Pat’s.

Or to Matt Talbot’s where they will try

to convince alcoholics they really do care,

only to have their souls flagellated

by broken-toothed grins.

Or take a flight down to Melbourne with them

to attend the Eucharistic Congress.

Bivouac with Fijian Indians.

Get drunk on malty ale that alchemical

father brews in his laboratory.

Or, on Winter Saturday afternoons

see them—freed from their breviaries and

routine—gather round a half-fritzed TV

in a moth-eaten back room to submerge

themselves for a couple of hours in a haze

of gladiatorial lust, until,

come evening, and feeling light-headed,

they must troop in to Vespers, and after

to the Common Room for desultory

chats over cryptics about sports results,

or the expulsion of that Franciscan

for loving a nun, which imbued many

weeks with a twitchy delight. Then, hot

but numb, climb one by one to silent rooms

and lumpy beds.

## 9. Crisis

Now time passes, melting as it does

year into year; the rushes of Spring

and Autumn—where changes are glorious,

though too fast-paced perhaps—

into those long Summer and Winter stills

in which the Cartoonist’s graphic weightings

become blurred by shimmers, or sharpened

by leaflessness, all else being subsumed

beneath that ticked, inexorable momentum

stretched out by the watched hour hand of a clock.

So, let us forward three years, to a Summer

so dry that the scat shat by currawongs

lies drying undisturbed until footfalls

raise its acrid dust to float for a little,

then settle, float for a little, settle.

But come, we will leave the currawongs

to their trolling, their clumsy tumbling about

through leaves, and—as something other than ghosts

which have auras by which their presence

might be detected—let us this once pass

into the red ironstone assail, climb

quietly up the lime green stairs, walk down

the dim corridors, pass through this door

on which a tattered photo of Ggrorbll

the mini troll has been pasted.

Here one, still so young seeming, and just now

with little of the hero about him, stands

beside his unmade bed, moaning almost

inaudibly and hugging to himself

the pulse of a pain that threatens to burst

out from his breast, a darkness in the place

where light for these three years has fired his veins,

stencilled his heart with the face of that God

frescoed on the Sistine ceiling for the delight

and veneration of all.

From the tight lines and sheen of his forehead,

the dark pools about his eyes, the body

length tremours, we can conclude that his pain

must be both excruciating and exquisite—

that of a stiletto pricking nerves perhaps—

rendering the mood of the room so low

that the slats of sunlight become much dulled

and the air disturbed, neither able

to retreat or advance, to provide balm

against this inner onslaught.

And although we may suspect the crosses

marked on the calendar hanging above

the original Ggrorbll—standing almost lost

among the scatterings on the desk eyeless now,

and much worn, yet so alive and greeting

all with that indefatigable grin—

may be stations to some Golgotha,

some cup that must be drunk that he might die,

descend into Sheol, decide at last

whether to adhere to the way of the poor,

the obedient, the celibate, or to find

salvation in the more ancient ways

of the world thrumming so close—and so dark

excitingly—beyond the cattle pit,

outside the Seminary’s gates;

although we empathise, we cannot do

anything to salve his pain. For this test

of vocation must be his alone to endure,

so that, notwithstanding the fume-induced

visions of Michelangelo, perhaps

not even God may enter or touch him here.

So we may merely observe as will’s icy wash

and desire’s fevers rage and war, raising

hot flushes and cold tremblings, shed and unshed tears,

limb-leadening doubts at each step as he strives

to map a path toward a stability

in which something of the sacred, of immersal

in prayer’s timelessness is retained, along with means

by which courage might engender either

acceptance of the priesthood, or progress

along the road beyond the edifice

he has constructed against the flatlands

his heart might become:

a flatlands where thorns prevent unfettered

blooming and hope is numbed.

So, hardly daring to breathe for fear

we veer his stormed coracle from its course,

we remain silent, listening to the chitter

of his teeth as he sleeps, observing how

he hunkers, a prisoner in this room

even as he continues to choir Masses,

tend to those broken-mouthed Matt Talbot

atheists whose drunken jeers ignite even

hotter fevers in which words are seeds

that quickly shrivel among stony fears.

And although it is Summer, and dry outside,

he feels as if wrapped again in that September

when his fresco slid off its walls, revealing

water stains and the rancid smells of mould

too long ignored. Thinks too that, as a gardener

unversed in the cultivation of herbs

or winnowing of weeds, he is uprooting all

in his clawing attempts to find some swathe,

some pined terrace not falling toward unkempt

graves, upon which re-building might begin.

So here he stands, a young man wondering

how he, a creature more drawn to apocalypse

than redemption, could ever have been so

deluded to think he could shepherd flocks,

or vintner vines seeded as much as he

in stony soil. A young man become

frozen now to a dune in a vista

of desert and ice, caught stilled in the eye

of his own maelstrom, pecked by the sharp-

beaked birds he ought to be ward against.

## 10. Release

Yet, even as poor swimmers, fighting undertows,

discover flesh is not weak, that it will always,

however cumbrously, re-assert itself, strive

mightily for breath, go wherever light

can rebirth life’s green immediacy,

so he too eventually swims out

from under the claustrophobic kelp

of his doubt, and, hearing at last his father’s

‘*You don’t have to do this*’, knows that

the choice was always his.

See then, how his crabbed heart, unfolding,

now takes on man form, adjusting to its itch;

how his body relaxes, made supple again

by the realisation that the many themes

of his mind’s dark masques reduce to this:

that fleshed holiness becomes demonic

when desire’s purposes are maddened

by alienation; that the ‘God Call’

arises from Land and must return to it

to seed, to sprout its blooms and seed again;

that the world is whole, and all its evil

man’s alone.

So hover a final time among high-

circling, squawking currawongs.

Watch as, flooded with the hiatus of relief,

he wanders about stroking the cracked trunks

of still dry eucalypts, the bricks

of the ironstone walls we have, in siding

with him, perhaps too much maligned.

Observe him each evening as he pauses,

often with tears glistening his cheeks,

to nose the seminary’s complex, heat-

ravaged scents; as he takes leave of brothers

he will never see again.

Stand close on the platform beside the sleek

and tremulous *Indian Pacific*.

Start at the whistle. Shake hands. Wave as he boards,

reluctantly. Follow as he locates his cabin.

Stows his bag. Sits. Clench-throated, with face

become stiffened grimace, cock your thumb.

Stare in at him, staring out. Wave ... wave again ...

walk after the vanishing train. Feel how longing,

drawn by the turbulence of departure,

stretches out, filling absence’s inchoate void.

Wish him well, but wonder too, as he heads

homeward, this time the slow time round.

## 11. Epilogue

*Such they remember of those far off days, here now,*

*beside, so close standing, listening to rose bushes’*

*blooming peals surrendering their nectar*

*to unurgent bees; listening to a patient wife,*

*daughters, absent son, clacking dinner plates,*

*jingling cutlery. Both quieter now:*

*the one just as blond unkempt, just as white-*

*scarred of leg, with sidelong, elphin humour*

*still intact; the other rounder and more content.*

*Both—feeling again youthful innocence,*

*and holding to a faith become more human*

*perhaps, or all they have to fill gaps left*

*by wantings, lovings, severings—smelling*

*incense, hearing hymns echoing like calls*

*of mountain bellbirds. Both knowing too that*

*memories—and their strange enfoldings—*

*must be gathered as alpha into omega*

*into handshake and hug, then, yes, wry grins*

*admitting that these memories, like them, were*

*and are, ever and always, homewoods bound.*

# ... and considering transience

## About Soil

*for my father*

Even now, wedged into an armchair,

pen clutched in thickening fist, or, with fingers

poised over the computer’s stuttery keys,

watching weather passing windows

with sunny cheer or wintry scowl, I sense

memories’ stirrings brought on by black grit

blown in by Easterlies.

Feel soil under torn fingernails, or quavery

beneath my palm at tractor’s thrumming,

gouge of plough. Experience again

mallee roots’ rough clutch; their springy

endurance at axe’s hack, or spade’s.

Smell fires’ burn spotting Autumnal

nights; see their all-consuming, vertical

eyes flaring, dulling, going out. Feel, too,

my Dad’s grit; his sandpaper beard,

callused palms; see his profile ruddy

limned by low flames; his haunches

flexing at loosing lifting lugging

rocks, building cairns rain then summer

soon scatter down slow hillsides

while breezes laugh around and we kids

rollick, skinning knees on stony somnolences

we didn’t know were claiming us even then,

reaching deep into our rhythms, our rhymes;

know that they would bear us on and on

until all that’s left is soil’s quivery smells,

the petrichor fleshing of Land’s enveloping.

## Musings

Perhaps when we’re young it doesn’t matter so much

the way Time sometimes hangs about as suffocatingly

dense as prayers a mother scatters from a laundry

where a hunched Lightburn’s huge mouth,

after swallowing clothes, regurgitates her wrinkled flesh.

How It plays us as Tarot, solitaire, only occasionally

pausing to lay a wrinkled finger on a card, interpret

symbols grimed from years of being channelled

through vast spaces filled with the crackling static

of telephone lines ballooning nearfaraway futures

as persistent as that left over from the big bang.

So no surprise that all still seems to be racing

outward, like those laundry words still starring

my universe, dragging with them her slow accreted

blessings, paving ways, not with gold, but something

which, given time, may have come hobbling to nestle

against my heart, as that black daub of a raven

came out of the wind one wintry Vancouver morning

to squat against my foot, seeking, like her words perhaps,

to replace doubt with God, or something closer to a love

able to reach into higher planes of the breast to heal

the broken-winged, those small things I thought charred

by Lughnasa fires, remnants left breathing their last

tucked away from winds, revealing the thin coppery

spurs their lives were framed upon before daylight

brought ashing.

## Bluing. Going out

Something—the grey

sea ahead?—triggers

memories about his dead:

His Dad. Mum.

Earth mother Gloria.

Two Alans. Aunties. Viv.

The Billotis whose humpy’s

always driven past.

A kid mourned

at school. Sheep

he’s slaughtered.

That corpse he tripped

over in a Woolloomooloo lane

taking a midnight shortcut

home to nightmare

horrors intentions

never kept.

But now his heart

flares. Becomes

a candle’s flame. Then

its last wisp. Fritzing.

Bluing. Going out.

## Footprints

As a child, he ran barefoot all about. First around the back yard, then circling gradually wider—though centred always on the small house, as if a gyre rooted to its wings’ gathered sunlight—up to Top Gate where that granite mountain sang to sky, to him, about Land, about dreams and ages past, interpreted the secrets sheoaks share with the winds.

Then down to the shed—where the Blue Fordson lived, enduring swallows’ humiliations—out into bush where leaves’ whisperings brought fantasies alive; across broad-swathed paddocks, sometimes green, sometimes salt stained and grassless so that Land lay grey thin, vulnerable to flagellating plough, to sky’s high, white-blue suck.

On reaching the boundary, he sat a header left out to rust; observed the neighbouring world; pondered how strange sheep, even rocks, seem across an impassable fence; how his footprints—now overlaying those of the ones who camped there before the sheep—were less long lasting than the trails left by ceaselessly foraging ants.

How bird song times days’ rise and fall. How trees, alive or charcoaled by bushfire, seemed crazed by hot winds so their twisted fingers signed questions he did not understand, that Land absorbs year by year while leafless branches shorten then fade.

How distances—bluing beyond reach, beyond horizons’ interminable conversations with fences and rivers—stirred weird excitements in his belly, in deeper places only Land fingers.

Years later, returned to homewoods sated by peoples, wonders, other lands, he was drawn to pursue again that small creature’s footprints, gone now, absorbed by Land, by the call of it etched indelibly within his breast. Paused to caress particular trees. To sit gazing out over his life from the header left out to rust.

Drawn to wondering whether his ghost, become a wanderer, too, would be able to dowse traces of that child who jigged to inaudible rhythms, slow danced with willywillies. Whether it, like he, would be compelled to pursue inchoate longings, those wiry threads by which Land had stitched his flesh to root and stone.

## a rebirth

He journeyed South once.

 Camped in a rough-knuckled forest

beneath karris’ high hung foils.

Fried sausages on a slabby stone.

 Sucked burbles from a bong.

Crawled eagerly into a tree-womb

hearing only innocence

 grubs’ munching

much medullan longing

until he fell out—gasping—

 jiggering—gulping sky—

back into his horizontal life

though with part of himself reborn

 become elemental

lanceolate thirsty as a root.

## His Embedded GPS

No matter how many times

he flew from dreams baying

always behind.

No matter the boppy glitz

of cities he fled to

or pleasure cruises

down dark rivers accompanied

by scabrous ferrymen.

No matter lop-sided sins’

siren calls found in pubs

or clubs along the way.

No matter!

For now he sees—

across dry screes

past waterholes

where he used to drink

a beer with happiness—

that his embedded GPS

that fiery candleflame

not intended for burning

over-long, drew him always

down one-way tracks

past off-road lay-bys

full of hungry ghosts

back to the place

from which he flew

on emotion’s

unreliable wings.

## Mandala

After nearly seventy years
the farm still gleams nestled
within its east-gated mandala.
Against the foot of childhood
heights.

Here gentle Merus sloping
green in Spring straw
in Summer support a sky
so blue and high it pains
the breast.

For though hard-handed winds
or droughts at times erased
all colour leaving pestilence
bringing barrenness then death
untimely

breaking all our hearts
yet always all ways
came the rain.

## Mother in Cruciform

the call came
as he was
returning blear
through
whitening
light

exhausted from a night out shagging
on amyl and champagne
so the strange voice did not penetrate

nor words clarify until she
was there
her arms raised

with the sun
behind

a Byzantine
icon gold-black
atop those
hospital steps

and in an instant
as his father
died and her
cruciform
cracked

his entire world
shattered
for all time

## Post-funerary Pains

After the ground had settled, after

weighing him down with marble,

they went their separate ways, still

bound though, still drawn out

side by side upon post-funerary

pains. Then, years later, she’s

telling him: *He said* ‘*I saw*

*God in your eyes’*. Saying it

as though it were her victory

and leaving him wondering

about: *Dominion? Submission?*

Then she’s saying: *Our daily*

*Rosary kept him going*. And

he’s thinking: *Tied him down.*

*Way past the limits of his will*.

Then she’s recalling:  *Singing*

*psalms over the kitchen sink*, while

he’s seeing: *Her shadow over*

*that of her crucifix*; is reading

herface for signs she’d witnessed

his eyes’ darkening. His need

to get out from under the farm.

Then he’s hearing: *Her repressed*

*sorrow. A lightness too, and*

*relief perhaps at having avoided*

*return to the life she’d married*

*him to escape*. Thinking too:

*How long he’s known the slab-like*

*will living behind her moans*.

Yet even post-funerary pains, like

biodegradable sacs bleached by sun

and leached by moon, degrade eventually

until even blades of grass blades can

prick them, spilling pent up grief, images

as fresh as the day he was buried.

## A Father’s Worm

After a lifetime he ceased

sculpting the farm from granite.

Left his work—meant to be

his masterpiece—half undone.

Covered it with cloth of indigence.

Turned off his light. Focused on

the siren call of his worm.

Where did it come from, that

thing which grew in him year

by year? Filling his intestines,

his arteries, his mind, until

their flesh became coterminous;

its emotions his own. That worm

he conversed with thirty years?

That whispered dark things,

making them too sweet to resist.

Not soft or mushy It, but an iron

creature, full of teeth. So what

did he see through Its blind eyes?

What hopes montaged while

ironbark despairs danced in him?

While the Worm stole his tongue,

then thralled him with horrors until

nothing was all that was left for him

to grasp beside a gun. Until It pulled

the trigger that Sunday morning

leaving him lying bloody, but

quiet at last, behind their green

Austin for his youngest son

to find; to be driven into a mad,

querulous grief he was too young

to contain or understand.

As for you, after a childhood

spent listening to Its gurgling,

you grew deaf. Would not see

how, in death, Its scales took over

his face. How Its eyelessness

dimmed the hazel of his eyes while

his last smile took on Its waxy tinge.

## ‘She’s Lost Her Glow’

Your plaints against my sister still chug like slow juggernauts through the steam of pots burbling on my stove. Their whistles, having blown years before, so unheard now, still delivering body blows. Their lights’ glares leaving me propped like a rabbit twitching in headlights on ute roar and diesel stench nights, unable to avoid death’s rush out from the barrels of guns.

All that was long ago. A time when my sister presumably still *glowed*. When I didn’t have to unscrabble disbelief at what you said.

But then I remember other plaints: about aborigines, shearers, people living on the town’s ‘*other side*’ where, just the same as on our farm, rain refused to go sometimes; where hills sloped slow down to salt-wash; where tin humpies clung like old scabs to rubbish tips or mallee. Like the Billoti’s, which I always watched out for while Dad looked to see how full dams were.

I recall us pulling in just once. Being fascinated by its shambolic riot, its rusting pots, its dog pack. By how open the place seemed—to life, to embrace of sky so blue I thought it rang, looked to see if anyone else had heard but took it no-one had since Dad just kept on nattering until he got around to mulesing.

At which point Billotti stopped doodling with twigs, stood nodding as we coated him in dust. At which point, eyeing us for stains, chatting about Church things, you came alive again.

As I did in that far-off kitchen by distancing myself from your words’ clanging; by following my thoughts as they ran down to the shearing shed which still retains the ache of absent sheep, blood smells from that young gun’s hamstringing of a ram; by coalescing with dust motes hanging about the rafters, cocooning myself in a woolly, lanolin languor as you mouth your plaint, sure that your daughter’s lost glow can only mean she has got round to doing it.

## it might just be a sign

of ageing. But, well,

what the f\*\*k,

there’s still much

delight in running

around in the nuddy,

in swear words,

pissology.

So he still does

these things.

Well, minus

the running :).

Still, even images

of himself, from then

or now, bring

smiles to those eyes

in after-shower mirrors

where steam overlays

the years

misting between.

## Your Greening Chair

*for my father*

 Your

 old

 chair

 now

 sinks

 its

 leathered

 greening

 further into

 the mallee’s ribbetting

 its cracks grinning as

 first-light frosts draw azure

 from autumnal tears its springs

 retaining yet a threadbare bounce

 and our childhood’s

raucous laughter

##



## Attics and Dungeons

It seems we all come eventually

to a time when, over baggaged,

though still straight-backed, stiff eyed,

we must clear the attics in our heads,

the dungeons in our hearts.

The attics have skylights, more often

than not covered by leaves. Still,

for some, the sun, shines through, lighting

comfy chairs, scattered books, sheet music,

half-done quilts of words.

Yet, if we can, we’ll prevaricate; sit whiling

away time we don’t have trying to make out

shadowy shapes—faces of lovers and haters,

sons and daughters, shearing sheds—become

too wispy to be held down by drawing pin words.

Or we’ll try to keep pace with ideas we once

thought ours, some as old as us, some still

too wild for unkempt headrooms, some bound

to emotions we’re no longer able to enjoy

which yet shiver through our increasingly

amnesiac brains, drain out at fingertips. Or

we’ll sit with eyes closed, watching nothing

in particular while everything else swirls,

becomes whitely, pleasantly blank. We’ll

leave the dungeons ’til last, since they’re often cold,

apart from one corner where Hell’s gateway

burns and small imps we’ve known all our lives

cavort with flames, grinning toothily, at times

bringing solaces we should probably keep

under socks in bedroom drawers.

I used to think the attics and dungeons were not

real until I realised I’d constructed one of each

myself. Now I take them everywhere,

even on days in Autumn or Spring when

I wander about just smelling purpling and flowers.

## The Would-Be Vintner

*for my siblings and nieces*

 The accidental vines

near our back gate grew luxuriant. Produced

green and blue-black globes heavy to childish

hands. So we kids, after picking out worms

for Khaki Campbells

 wandering

about dropping green-speckled eggs, fell to,

gorging

 unable to waste

a single one. My father did not think himself

a vintner, but being everything to his adopted

brood became a secret one who, after quiet

tipples with Mum

 at dinner,

sat splayed in his armchair, watching the Stooges,

belly jiggering

 while we

hung out—breaths baited—joshing each

other as he flopped about, became a convulsing

heap—waiting impatiently for him to let us

into his cellared heart

 where, among

bagged up produce—some dark, smelling

not quite right—

 he allowed us

to nose his yeasty wit, taught us that

humour, like good reds, matures if not

exposed to withering by over-critical eyes.

So we too,

 unable to resist

the intoxication his laughter exploded through

our veins

 like sherry

at Christmas, weddings, funerals, momentarily

obliterating darker things, lighting contentments

until we glowed then also flapped about, calling

ourselves

 Larry Curly

Moe. So it is due to him that on Anzac Days

I can see

 beyond the pit

his death cast us into, in the rooms of our

collapsing home, in paddocks, in bush

owned now by someone else, countless nooks

and dells still sunned by his gentle grin.

## So Far from Home

*for my sister*

He thinks he’s always loved her.

From the time when she stood before the Box Brownie, pigeon-toed, eyes blacked by overarching frown, plucking at a homemade dress as though at skin she should be able to shed.

Both adults, now, they’ve rewritten their poems. Become ones less chaotic. Slower paced. With less jagged rhythms.

But her’s still has verses he struggles to read, able only to vaguely sense what lies within the densities, the depths of certain words he feels should be uttered carefully, considerate of the facet of her self each contains.

These days, they live around the corner from each other. Meet once a week for double Mac and Skinny Flat.

He drinks slowly; counting down his diminishing sips. She downs hers like an addict getting the day’s first fix; then sits drumming the table with eyes that can’t reach more than a handspan out.

They talk, as Walrus recommends, of many things; mostly of shoes and cabbages; foregoing ships and kings. Sometimes, peal back sealing wax to peer at things within little spoken of: abuse; love. But mostly they talk of Home, from which she’s come farther, swears she’ll not go back.

After working thirty years overseas, he still keeps his bits in suitcases: memories of the farm; the granite outcrop where he built castles for shadows; the fibro house their Dad rebirthed half-brick;

mallee he always thinks of as soughing; the rusty silo that’s now a Dali-esque grimace.

Retrospection seems harder for her. Maybe the hills between have become too high. Or perhaps her drumming frames other things; closer in, more urging.

Such as the neighbour who attacks her in the street. Curses her with a vitriol that confuses since she doesn’t know its source. The police seem to be waiting for him to kill before making a move. She fears it will be her.

Frames, too, images of the husband caught masturbating by daughters too young to know what they’re witnessing. Who admitted he’d bedded prostitutes while she was pregnant because he thought she was holding out on him. Did not admit to abusing their eldest. To prostituting her overseas. To abandoning her when she fracked her body, seeking a way, any way back along seams that glint brighter the closer to the bone she cuts.

Such, he thinks, drives the drumming that keeps horror at bay. Cools rage. Hones the power of the poem this woman, his beloved sister, has become. So far from home.

## Evening

After he’s closed

the Western venetians,

day’s sun drench

remains scattered

among careless chairs,

cushions harbouring

their lumps, clinging

to walls, clutching

at pot plants.

Then evening pads in

from Jenkin Street,

bringing sounds got up

in panoply, while others,

too fat to be drawn

so high, shamble off

down South Tce,

evading headlights,

farting motorbikes,

leaving Fremantle’s

*Doctor* to knock

plastic bottles off

shelves, scaring mudlarks

perched on his knee

for a chat and feed.

But soon all’s quiet,

so there’s just the fridge

chugging dumbly,

focused only on

functioning.

## Exploring Poles

*on reading Mark Strand’s* I Had Been a Polar Explorer

I too in youth explored poles blank spaces.

 Sloughed then regrew skins I thought my self.

Had visions where I met under trees

 in hostels and monasteries men and women

I felt I knew by smell or sight. Some were

 hatted some bald some raggy-haired.

But all were red-faced and clasping brash

 seeming desires. And although the hungers

they evoked faded in time they etched runes

 that kept me wandering circuitous paths

without ends where I might arrive. Then

 I feared dimming of those diamond strands

which bind life so returning home I too

 filled pages with excess ignoring the freedom

of having nothing to say until I came

 to where my father and mother stood

uncertain beacons in our farm’s halcyon space.

 This time they did not turn away or fade

but cleaving fast drained me of swampy vapours

 until only the talus of love was left.

## On Leaving

He remembers seasonal shadows

becalmed among mallee.

Their lanky silences.

How his then puzzling body was thralled

by feelings containing hidden alliterations:

warnings that nestled in his breast while furry breezes

caressed nakedness until urgency’s quick pleasures burst

heightening risk of becoming a silo for Dali-esque grimaces.

Remembers too, leaving chastened.

I was back there recently. Could tell him the mallee

still stands as totem pole convocations before which

he used to hunker afraid of becoming nothing

so offering stone talismans to disappeared hunters.

Trees.

Tell him we like the trees perhaps

may be made just for standing still.

## Considering Transience

Despite sharp cracks of the clearance sale auctioneer’s hammer,

and while eyeing the broke down header his Dad’s just bought,

he considers rust and transience, death and dolour.

Eying then, the poor widow’s so thin-elbowed reminders,

the widow herself, over-wrought, grey face shut taut,

wincing at each crack of the clearance sale auctioneer’s hammer,

he ponders how much like those folk in Alfred Hitchcock horrors

we are. Wonders if everyone else’s thinking dark thoughts

about rusty transience. Or about how death and dolour

mark not only this old header with such a blood red colour.

Muses upon how these four make just living so damned fraught;

accentuate cracks made by clearance sale auctioneers’ hammers.

After, such days stand out, as did those old Clydesdale horses

he saw leaning together beside their foal, both exhausted,

grieving, though the foal’s rusty death spared it transient dolours

those four horsemen bring, riding windy steeds which roar

instead of neigh, although even they will not, of course, avoid

that final clearance sale when the auctioneer’s hammer

ends all consideration of rust and transience, death and dolour.

## Visitants

They come now

as they so rarely did

alive, light-hearted.

Diffident, he

always left it to others

to tell me he was proud.

She, at least—

though ponderous

like Summer storms

shot through with

dark light—

could admit to love.

Of Jesus, first. Then,

despite our sinfulness,

him, Mike, Marg, me.

Looking back

I mostly see

three tropes:

his baldness,

her grey hair,

their moods.

But now

they bring rainbows:

smiles, and words

whose beams

bonfire my last

resistances.

## And so

Land too sparse

populated with trees

and scrub enduring

Autumnal mulching

Winters’ leaching

Summers’ scouring

while above—

so reduced by gravity’s

slow sludging—stars

too achingly far

for their chorus to be heard

barely twinkle

as lambs lie down

tremulous

before what will come

after dawn strides through

tattering night:

sight of what foxes

make of pastoral

innocence. And so

seasons cycling

as unforgiving

as thresher blades

winnowing all—

flora and fauna

loves and lives

greeds and ambitions

our ideas of ourselves

become fodder

for uncertain Springs.

## Cracked Bells

I see now sharp

focused decades distant:

Him—bald

plodding his bent

in daggy shorts

toward inevitabilities

wrought by

chittering corpses

brought back

from his war.

Her—tall grey

walking beside

straight-backed

as those strainers

upon which they strung

odd-shaped paddocks:

a home for kids

too soon away.

Us—gazing back

at home woods

as if through

love thick-lensed

hearing words which

though soft spoken

still sound like cracked

and clacking bells.

## Come let him go now

Come. Let him go now.

Let the child fade into mist.

Fall off world’s edge if need be.

Float into that ultimate

unknowing where light

may be reborn as rainbows

before all slows slows again

and time stops unlocks opens

that final door revealing the face

the embrace of a last an only friend.

Until then come let all the children

go. To live as winds forward and wild.

As cyclones torrential but still at heart.

Live free from being taken

or downtrodden. Live sprouting

and birthing. Live human.

Live loving with eyes wide open.

Live wondering. Live dying

as they must always homewoods bound.

But come. Let them go and live!