

A hummingbird in Italy

There are occasional reports of hummingbirds in Europe, but these would have to be cage birds that have escaped captivity.

Sailing sedate, dolphins in our wake,
 we come to Ancona singing *Gaudete*.
The clatter of silver on wood;
 my first fresh-picked pomegranate.

Europe's unquiet cuts into dreams:
 Dresden's dead, Jewish dread. I wake first.
Beyond our window, a hummingbird,
 brain the size of a grain of rice,

wings a blur of back and forth.
 Form follows function, this creature dedicated to flight.
How does my body tell me what *I* am for?
 The pillow stuffed with Spanish Lace,

its fragrance mingling with dopamine.
 The things we don't notice:
motion eight milliseconds behind colour.
 You glimpse my crimson coat, leaving,

then sleep on, sleep of the innocent.
 In the north of our country, hot air rises;
monsoons race in to fill the void.
 As with us. If you give up one thing,

you must replace it with another.
 I smell trouble the way kangaroos smell water,
and set out to find it. The bird hovers
 at the glass of a French door left ajar.

I find a bar and, although it's morning,
people are drinking. I join them.

A glass of wine before breakfast:
I'm breaking all the rules,

enjoying that thin edge of the wedge.

I was tired of the brand of hit-and-run loving
available down my street,
the fine line between rake and rent-boy

and was counselled that marriage had the gentle strength
of mushrooms pushing up a sack of shit.

Birds follow ultraviolet paths of urine,
understand chemical conversations in the streets.

They hear infra-sounds of thunderstorms.

Intuition: our senses working overtime
but we never trust it. 'It's the lore of the jungle', you say,
spelling it out in case I don't get it.

I try to tidy up my mind:

hippocampus for mental maps, amygdala for fear,
cingulate gyrus for attention, thalamus...

I was never good at housekeeping.

Oh, where is my hummingbird harbinger?

'Friends, freedom and reflection', you said. 'It's Epicurus.'

So many 'f's, I thought. What's that about?

Words I love: *eros*, *thanatos*;

a thing I love: a carob pod from Patmos.

The man who gave it said his father died

spreadeagled on an olive tree, taken in the act
of picking, and everyone thought he was meditating

on the olive caught between finger and thumb.

Elephants never stop growing (like whales);
free to be as big as they can be.

My love for the world is like that.

You say I'm a coelacanth, *the fish that time forgot*,
remembering details like some non-literate.

As though gathering evidence.

What if, like the bees, we danced our meanings?

Like Zorba? Whirling dervishes?

My memory is as long as the ever-growing elephant's,
touch remembered in the body.

I think of Cleopatra and Julius Caesar:

was it love, necessity, compromise?

Or Sheba and Solomon, together for three years,
composing riddles to test compatibility.

The hummingbird appears outside the bar window

and hovers, seeing a strange creature

with ultra-violet hair and fingernails

clutching a swirl of light.

Ghosts from other times also grow upon me:

I am their private caryatid, a pillar of flesh.

Maybe the bird sees them, too.

Or does he mistake his reflection for a mate?

This also happens.

Today I'm feeling the weight of Noah's coupledness;
why *does* everything have to come in twos?

How to be as unerring in love as the Wandering Albatross
with its gentle gift of grass and hooked caress?

But that's as absurd as the hopes invested in a dress.
Remember the one I wore when we married?

It was cream and green with roses.
Words line themselves up like children in a schoolyard.

I say to those children, *young hearts run free*.
When I return and wake you with a kiss, I will try
not to tell you that three hundred kinds of bacteria shared it.
Too much detail! And no god in sight.

History weighs into the present: I no longer say I love you,
part of my diction forever parenthesised.

Perhaps if I find a song with heartbeat minimis and quaver kisses,
I'll remember how to sing it.

There'll be a sift and sort of telling pasts,
plain arrangements for the future.

You are already building a black pearl
around my misdeeds. This is one.

Drawing life

We are out of our comfort zone, well out;
if we were swimming, we'd be over our heads,
in the deep end; it's a baptism of fire.

Oh let's mix our metaphors, since everything's
up for grabs; I feel my brain cells realigning.

Really, we're drawing portraits.

But we are very afraid.

We have been drawing this woman's body
for days, noting the ways her hip creates a line
towards her waist, or her scapula foreshortens
from the side. Her pubic bone juts
at an angle if you are in the corner,
under the street windows. A twist here
and a whole different set of shadows arrives
as if the sun itself has shifted.

She has us entranced:

the way her lashes lie against her cheek,
the way, every few minutes, she wets her lips
with her tongue.

She has posed like a statue, but her head is teeming.

One day, there are tears in her eyes.

What if we could draw her thoughts?

It's all an impossible task,
like trying to parse butterflies.

All we can do is begin.

and see how things turn out.

The GOMA man

At GOMA, I see a man who looks just like you
and I follow him all morning.
He walks like you, leaning a little forward into life,
up on the balls of his feet, as if on a rocky boat.
I follow him to Bharti Kher's *The skin speaks a language of its own*
and we stand on opposite sides of the sleeping elephant.
I wonder if this man knows that about skin.
I don't approach him; I only want to savour his likeness.
He is nearby when I sit to eat Thai food as part of *Lunchbox*,
a tableau which mimics our Saturday lunches,
you with your dark ale and us sitting in courtyard sun.
Back at home, I take a friend and stay at your house
one weekend when you're away with your new lover.
I still have a key, remember; for years this was a home to me, too.
I want to finish the book I was reading about the history of numbers.
I want to see if the chocolate-coloured peacock feather is still beside your bed.
I want to see if you have replanted basil in the blue pot I gave you,
if the photograph of your wife is where it always was
and if you've completed the song to the Chinese girl you wish you'd slept with.
I want to light a fire in your tall hearth and sleep in front of it.
I want to stop your cats from straying at night and killing skinks.
I want to sleep in your bed and breathe in your smell.
But there is no smell, and there is no feather.
The pot is desolate, the photograph gone.
The cats do what they like.
And the sun in the courtyard has turned a sour yellow.
If only someone told me it's bad luck to keep peacock feathers in a house;
that giving knives as a gift spells the end of a love affair.
If only I'd asked all the right questions and you'd been able to answer any of them.
If only your thoughts and my feelings had coincided.

If only you'd loved me.
I've been reading a book about wisdom
and I understand it is not wise to break into your former lover's house
or to think of him every single day when you wake
or to continue in your heartbreak for as long as grief
or to try to understand the inscrutable emotions of another.
I know the wise thing is to be kind to yourself and move on.
Wisdom can take a long time.
At the end of the weekend, we discover you in your study.
You have been there all along, listening as we played your piano,
cooked in your kitchen, lit your fire and drank your wine.
You preferred to stay there the whole time, sleep there,
than come out and look at what you've done.
I traipse after the GOMA man all the way to the escalator.
At the top, an artwork on the wall above him, in hot pink neon:
I never stopped loving you.
I let him go.

N.B. GOMA: Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane; *I never stopped loving you* is by Tracey Emin.

The glass frog

The glass frog's crimson heart beats
forty times a minute.

And I can see it.

Light shines right through her
and there is the heart beating.

She is the size of a human fingernail,
lost in forest understorey.

A single footfall could crush a hundred
of her kind.

I wish I'd known sooner about the glass frog,
that something so transparent and crushable
lives extravagantly in the midst of lush life.

Fear never enters into it.

Climbing Bishop and Clerk

Listen for the sound of a thousand butterfly wings readying themselves for flight.
Tread quietly on the forest path and leave everything else behind.
Concentration is required, and a quietness of mind. These wings whisper

on the warm breeze of an Indian summer, open in unexpected sunshine.
They lift as I pass, a delicate cloud of white-spotted browns, and jink across my path,
dusting pheromones about my head. This short span of time is everything:

fulfilment of that awkward metamorphosis from cocoon into wild, brief life.
Their wings whisper what butterflies know and I am listening. I am breaking
from my cocoon and climbing mountains, giddy with space and light and movement,

giddy with wonder at everything I see: butterflies; wedge-tailed eagles
hunting overhead; wombats intent on grass; forester kangaroos leaping through scrub;
Cape Barren geese on the wing or strutting prehistorically; whiting in spangled shallows.

ancient rock formations; hundred-million-year-old fossils; the great unconformity.
Giddy, too, with everything I feel: the love, even the losses and hurts, which tell me,
harshly, I am alive – alive right now, on this scrap of severed land

pushed up from the sea floor, encircling ocean aglitter with sunlight.
How good that we evolved among these creatures, came down from trees
in a distant past, the way kangaroos did, and developed a sense of what is beautiful.

The mind wanders as the path does, up through open forest, snaking among stringybark,
hakea and native mountain pepper berries. It spirals with the white-bellied
sea eagle on thermals over limestone cliffs, rises into sunshine and blue air

till it becomes nothing, dissolved into atoms of everything else. The mind drifts as this continent will, right up into the northern hemisphere, smashing into continents and civilisations. Molten rock will rush upwards, again, new horizons of dolerite

thrusting into sky, eroding down, cracking with cold into polygonal columns. And here is joy. Joy welling up through layers of sadness, the way Bishop and Clerk's dolerite rose up through buckled sandstone, limestone – unstoppable, inevitable.

That dolerite teeters now in high columns, cracking my view of the Tasman Sea, of Freycinet Peninsula, Schouten Island, Ile des Phoques. Everywhere is gleaming ocean. Beyond that eastern horizon you will be hiking, too, striding your long-legged strides,

walking your way to a kind of calm, but one which surrounds calamity. At dusk, the sky turns some painter's hue – cobalt, or phthalo blue. Venus is already there, shining like a star, big enough to reflect in daylight. Other stars arrive so surreptitiously

I can't say if they're in the sky or in my eyes. I like to think you will be looking upwards, too. You'll notice Venus. And soon you'll see the later stars come on like fiesta lights, and the Milky Way stream across us both. No moon. How we loved our moons. But now,

so many have gone by without you. Perhaps, it was just our love's allotted time in the world's unfolding. Something ordained, something transient. But unlike Bette Davis, I will continue to ask for the moon, for the stars, for this one brief beautiful life.