

FINAL PROOF EDITION

Slack Tide

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Sarah Day

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First published 2022 by Pitt Street Poetry
PO Box 20584 World Square NSW Australia

First published in Great Britain in 2022 by Pitt Street Poetry
BM Box 6558 London UK WC1N 3XX

An Entirely Beautiful book

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Series design by Richard Knight Design
Layout by Kylie Mulquin
Author photograph © Gordon Harrison-Williams
Printed and bound in Australia by SOS Print + Media Group

ISBN 978-1-922080-04-2 (paperback)
978-1-922080-05-9 (e-book)



A catalogue record for this
book is available from the
National Library of Australia

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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Tempo

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Slack tide, also known as slack water, is the brief lull in a body of tidal water when the tide is neither coming in nor going out. It can be a deceptive term since, although the surface water may appear to be almost stationary, it is no indication that the same is true below the surface; the various competing forces may give rise to a diversity of currents, some even flowing in opposite directions.

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Transhumance

Plague Year

It happened more quickly
than anyone might have expected,
we were unsure whether
we were shifting from mountain
to plain or low ground to high.
There were false starts,
many reluctant to leave
the familiar old terrain.
Then suddenly we were all
on the move in both hemispheres
and in every continent,
bar the coldest. Goodbye
to road, office, city, and sky;
we circled and ox-bowed
like cattle or deer or sheep,
clockwise and anticlockwise,
wondering who among us
knew the way. The air smelt
different, birds and all winged
things were the first to notice.
Rats, snakes and centipedes
felt the hush that seismic instruments
recorded. In the absence
of the city's noise
we learned to hear the rumblings
of the most distant volcano,
the gentlest earthquake.

The planet it seemed
possessed an interior life
which might always
have been there. Out of the chaos
the dimmest rhythm
might be sensed—
or is it direction that emerges
in the pricks of light—
the earth's magnetic field
like a map—as we follow one another
out of the old into the new.

Slack Tide

for VHD

As if existing uncertainty did not suffice,
now, in the depth of night, this stepping
from firm ground into mud; from the blackness
of air into blackness of water. Already
level with the road behind us, water quietly
steals to meet itself across the gravel causeway.
Barometers will not be disappointed
tonight. The familiar is strange
as an underwater garden in lamplight,
an arrangement of star-struck shrubs
and tiny trees, idealised metropolis
for a myriad fish for whom the enchanting
is quite normal—neither are they troubled
by our turbid wake.
This was a world we thought we knew
by daylight but it resembles nothing that we know,
insists we think like water at slack tide—
ambivalent, sensing whether to come or go.
The smell of salt bush, mud with its life
and decay, as oystercatchers fill the moonless night
with urgency. The city's glow a dim unease.
Water's insistence grips the thighs,
disturbs and pacifies; deep mud
reminds us we were never invulnerable;
silver eels with intelligent faces examine ours,
assess our aptitude. The swoosh of waders
draws us into a primordial past, and,

in the watery iridescence, towards a vision of sorts—
precarious, illustrious as the ontology of glasswort.
Let the sea roar beyond the dunes—in the stillness
of the tide's departure the saltmarsh breathes.

That this new world is lit up by the light of our lamps
does not mean it was not here before.

Falling

Today the world draws itself in
 from the news. On all sides
 the field of vision shrinks—
 coastal headlands, one and then another
 vanish, the beach, the turtle island too.
 Snow's momentum blurs
 the tedium of fear.
 Near hills to west, north, south
 are giving up green in favour
 of whiteness that pours from above
 like feathers but faster than feathers fall.
 Though the radio is off
 the presenter's voice can still be heard
 calling out for stories
 as if the testimony of hardship
 is going somewhere that might help.
 Instead, hardship just seems to grow itself
 and to grow the hunger for such stories.
 The wonder of the small pieces
 of white sky falling and falling—
 perpendicular, then, at a signal
 from the wind, diagonal, whirling briefly
 now and then into a double helix.
 Snow brings with it the faintest sensation of lemon.
 I could stand at the window all afternoon
 switching focus from the single feather
 to the torrent that comes without end or beginning.
 Snowflake, snowstorm—the finite, then eternity.

Gnomic

The crescent honeyeater
 on the other side of the glass,
 caller of the highest chime,
 is too busy for song
 intent as he is just now
 on the nectar of red fuchsia flowers
 and on the act of balancing—
 upside-down, side-ways, right-way—
 to reach into each slim recess
 with that improbably long,
 quick, tongue.
 For a moment, a second really,
 the relentless statistics
 on the day's news
 blur behind the intimacy
 of the beating wings, the tiny flower
 relinquishing its sweetness
 to the busy tongue.

Lockdown

An Edward Hopper interior
behind each window of each apartment block
uptown and down;

light projected through glass
with the force of cross examination—
the seated woman in *Western Motel* alert

to something impending, bed made,
bag packed; in *Office in a Small City*
a worker in rolled sleeves and waistcoat

surveys the silence of an empty street,
the same interrogation of light
in *Morning Sun*, and *Room in Brooklyn*,

solitary men and women gazing at the present
through past and future over sun-seared vacant cities,
streets in which no dog barks, no engine impinges.

Light Boats

The expanse of darkness was illusion,
like the land, the ocean is frenzied with industry.
In all oceans and seas, nets draw their hauls,
lights disintegrate darkness.
It's my own silence that's confused.

Out of the night sky from somewhere beyond the law
comes dawn. Strung over the bleaching day,
exhausted now, six pale suns rise, define
a fanciful line between grey sky and the emptied offing.

Aldinga Cliffs, South Australia

For GS

There's no getting away from things.
There is driving, then walking miles
along a quiet coast on a rising tide—
with the back-of-the-mind consciousness
that in an hour or so the sea
will have reached the cliffs of shale
with their pebble threads to denote other epochs
of Earth events and that you will be wading in water
on return. There is walking the distance to see
the Monarch butterflies mating, their wings
like stained glass windowpanes, and you wonder
who is upside down, the male or the female,
and do they notice, and you think of the fine detail
of pleasure that such creatures achieve in coitus,
assuming there is allure and pleasure
for them to come together at all,
the western light of the sun going down
over the ocean lighting up the orange mosaic
inside the black craze and you have to draw
attention into that feral beauty and not notice
it is sea spurge and invasive weeds that are
their lover's beds in the cove in the cliff
and that the cliffs themselves
are being eaten away by the ocean and wind and rain,
by runnels and rivers that have not soaked into earth
because the land for miles has been razed of its trees
and scrub and native grasses, and overgrazed

so that topsoil has followed rainwater down to the sea.
Again, you give your attention to the mating Monarchs,
and when the light evaporates them, you look instead
at the shingle beneath your feet, a sacred ground it might be,
with its volcanic stones suffused with coloured hieroglyphs,
the embossed, the smooth, the Japanese, the expressionist,
the Fred Williamses and Clarice Becketts, meanwhile
the sun sliding close to the horizon like a Beckett sky itself,
and you try to appreciate the way it lights up plastics:
drinking straws and bottle tops, nylon strings and frayed ropes,
hairbands and bits of bags. At all times
there is this living with what some of us have done,
there is this under-the-skin knowing
and a constant trying to say that it will all work out,
trying not to let hope crack like ancient stones,
like the lead lines in the stained-glass pattern
of the Monarch wings—

Fish Market

with apologies to Kobayashi Issa

He gestures to the dark mud
that the oyster farms have fashioned
from white sand—
What can you do,
I don't want any more fights
I've had enough—
behind him blue sky and blue sea
meet in a single line,
the canal like liquid glass
races to open water.
He gestures with the fish and chips
he's just fried, they are wrapped
in the right-wing headlines
of last week's news.

Ivy

1

Something is taking over the bush
and the woods and the forests,
the walls of the cities, the markets,
the crèches and the prisons,
the hospitals and the homes of the towns.
Down by the railway embankment
in the spokes of rusty bicycles,
in the springs of lost mattresses,
among bins behind outhouses,
in the urine-smelling alleys,
in the churches and the old factories
and in the snow-white pebble gardens
of the new estates, it prospers.
Life flourishes on the red brick
and pale stone of manor walls,
it worms its way through the ruins
of poor houses and pigeon houses
and into the cracks
and chinks of life and the marketplace.

2

Old dependable of ancient myth
 and legend, symbol of fertility
 and love, the clinging evergreen,
 loyal, unfailing profiteer—
 Ivy on the house kept witches away
 and rain. There is nothing
 for a wall to fear if it is sound.
 The evergreen entrepreneur,
 provider of goods, labour and resource
 occupies collapsed homes
 and roads and vacant paddocks,
 enters by way of broken windows,
 is not averse to force.

3

The holly and the ivy
when they are both full grown . . .
 and the butcher and the baker
 have long since closed shop
 along with the haberdasher, her cloth,
 her tape, and zips, and reels of thread,
 and the corner shop with its pies and sweets
 and its kitchen fridge for milk and Coca-Cola,
 it too has gone.

4

The imposter that is the familiar
 thrives on all six continents,
 has founded a lush new social order.
 It knows neither diplomacy nor democracy,
 only how to look after itself.
 Exploiter of space and sunshine,
 expansionist over earth and root,
 seeker of fissures in soundness,
 it is impervious to bramble thorn
 and claw. Look how tenderly
 its lattice insinuates itself around
 eucalypt, oak, ash, and conifer
 then how artfully it hardens.
 The vine with its glossy leaves, twists
 around tree, house, street, child,
 old men and women in MannaCare
 & MercyCare and Bupa dining halls,
 the prisoner, the doctor with her bag,
 and the highways and the train-lines
 as the umbels greenly flower
 along communications networks.
 The overgrown towns have lost
 their edges, the leaves have climbed
 the drains and the gutters,
 muffled the roofs and the chimneys.
 The hosts have been beguiled
 by the winter baubles for the birds.

Sacking the City

Like hot fat false truths flow,
seep through asphalt and grass,
insinuate themselves to light-pulse
along land and undersea cable,
occupy crack and corner,
make language their lackey,
inhabit seductive speech and erotic ad,
bond to whispers in the street,
find their level, solidify
into something to believe in,
something with a smooth, unsullied
skin, that floats on water.

Penstock Lagoon

Central Highlands, Tasmania, February '22

We wake by still water
to what sounds like a large pearl
dropped from a great height,
it breaks the surface tension
with a resonant nasal tock
more than a splash.

This lake is nine hundred and sixty-three metres
above sea level. It is a metre deep and sheltered
on three sides, from a distance at least,
by what has come to be known as Wilderness.

Up here, in the tent at night
by an effort of will, the world's troubles
shrink from the mind's large screen
to something smaller, that glows dimly
in the dark as I sleep: for the moment
it features a satellite image of Russian troops—
gathering on the border of Ukraine.
Snow settles more heavily
where the razed Yelnya forest
has made way for lines of trucks, artillery, tanks.
The impression from space is monochrome.

At dawn the rising sun
sets the tent's orange interior ablaze.

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In the silence, the pearl keeps dropping
from the sky, with now and then
the added nuance of flustered water.
Black swans are waking
in the distance with dented bugle calls.
Still, from time to time,
the pearl falls and *tocks*
and still the small screen flickers
at the back of the mind:
young men, boys, in great-coats, cold-faced
to the camera in freezing trenches.
I remind myself that this is not 1914.
I think of the rubble of Homs,
and wonder at the satisfaction victory brings.

It is not a falling pearl but a musk duck.
No-one else—least of all the morning—
is startled by the oddity:
the black galleon of its profile,
the grotesque lobe beneath its bill,
the pure, surreal music of its one brief note, falling,
the spirals of waterdrops from wingbeats.

Nearly two and a half thousand years ago
Thucydides wrote: *It is a common mistake
in going to war to begin at the wrong end,
to act first and wait for disaster to discuss the matter.*

Despite the vagaries of good and evil
the imagination insists on connections—
with the Ukrainian soldiers, for example,
the Russian soldiers, the Ukrainian people.

Mirror-like, on its ancient glacial plateau,
the lake is non-partisan in its view of civilisations.

Mayflies are hatching on its surface for their single day of life.

To Hassan

and to the other men from Afghanistan,
and Iran and Iraq, who prepared a feast for me
one midday, years ago on my way to work,
laid the clean sheet smooth
on the worn carpet of the furniture-less house,
placed dishes of spiced rice and chickpeas,
and slid a plate towards me—
there were not enough plates
to go around—and with upturned palms
urged me to eat first,
I want to thank you and say
I'll always remember that meal,
your hospitality and kindness,
the cool of the empty room
as I stepped off the busy street
and out of the sun to join you
for what I thought would be
a glass of black tea.
I want to say sorry though
that I left too soon,
that I let my job call me away.
I'm sorry, Hassan,
that by the time I returned with the paper
and pencils and tubes of paint you needed,
the house was boarded up,
you'd been moved on; I'm sorry to say
I've forgotten your friends' names;

I'm sorry that my imagination
could barely grasp that deep water
and fearful waves could look like hope,
most of all I'm sorry for my ignorance
that statelessness in this country
might also look like the view
from a small boat on a hostile ocean,
except with no coast to train the eye.

Prince of Wales Bay

Ali and his bride, who prefers not to be named,
are out walking in the early winter evening,
sleeping ducks murmur as they pass.
The old dockyard ripples upside-down
in the light from the few streetlamps.
A drunk appears out of the night and scruffs his shirt
tearing it—‘You think you are tougher than me.’
‘No’ says Ali, ‘I think you are tougher than me.’
He is serious but maybe the drunk thinks
he’s being smart and bites him hard on the arm.
The ducks have fallen silent, the awkward ring
of tooth marks slowly fills with blood. The drunken man
wanders away somewhere in the dark out of sight.
So, thinks Ali, a man in his new country
has tried to take a piece of him. It hurts,
but he can live with the red and purple bruises
made by one man’s teeth. He has lost a father
to gunfire, a young brother and sister—
the pain that is imprinted on his biceps
is only the size of a man’s mouth.

Utopia

Sea foam’s behaviour is flawless,
each macaroon island waits its turn
to break from the mass and form a line,
no shove or jostling to join the slipstream
where the tannin creek runs full tilt at the blue sea.
To signify the need to split they gently spin,
a social courtesy exists within
the even intervals—this smooth
continuum of time and motion soothes,
enthrals, with its radical equality.
Then whoosh—the tidal bore runs in,
the scheme reverses—lands sail back in to join
the frothy continent. What do they learn,
these patient little tubs, pupils of Traherne,
that opposites may coalesce?
the buoyancy of simple truths.

School Strike for Climate

They hold our planet in their hands
the way that I once held an orange or a ball.
In Dhaka, Funafuti, Juneau, the thinking
of children moves outwards. From shopping mall
to Arctic steppe comes a shift in point of view—
first person to omniscient; above all
home is broader in its scope than tent, village, street
or council flat, aromatic souk, urban sprawl.
A young girl beside me at the busy crossroads
grips her placard: *Save Our Earth* its letters scrawl
unevenly. The way she presses it against her chest
on the diagonal, makes me want to howl
for her skinny wrists, the neat side part,
the simple clip. To the precocious wise
I fall on my knees. It's too close a call.

Kissing the Cobra

1.

*But what did we not do
to bring about the dark times?*

A full moon in a day blue sky,
the unruly tide is high. Within the folds
of hills beyond the river's distant shore,
a callow bay, a coastal town, a road sign
standing on one leg in water.
Slow, it says, less command than
appeal, to passing ducks, boats,
the twenty-first century ocean.
Along the spit, houses are unreadable,
their row of concrete driveways lapped by
waves might be mistaken on this day
for quays. An email calls the scientist
from the window back to climate algorithms
and this western shore.
Truth's become a cobra's tongue
that flickers, tests, and tastes the air.

2.

He's spent his life recording exponential trends.
Must he reproduce his evidence
ad nauseum in order that
the arbiters identify at last, a known known?

What do we know we know?
—let go the keys and they will fall—
the law of gravity is not contested.
He knows that methane burns the throat.

3.

The broken glass in clean sand by the sea
is glinting in the early morning sun.
The oil rig floats upon the estuary.

What's this appearing now on the horizon,
top heavy with a list? An ocean liner—
floating universe of fundamentals—
Which cocktail will you take tonight?
Which bar/ quartet? Which band?
And where to dump the matter from our bowels.

On the seabed
sunlight writes its messages in hieroglyphs

while in the shallows
empty bottles roll and sway
oblivious to which way's up or down;

empty intent cocks a snook
at meaning and liases with a nylon driftnet
scarcely visible to human eye
or eye of albacore.

4.

Curious how the slowly boiling frog
endures as science, not parable.
In the wide-eyed innocence he sees
ignorance suspended in the prickling water.

5.

Let's talk then of the warming earth.
Joining up the dots is what he does.
A scientist, he verifies, corroborates—
the hesitance of others to take on
this information—there's the rub—and makes
it ultimately just another story.

 If you have a wishy-washy
theorem: you saw a vision in the sky—
you saw a thylacine across the road—
some will always pin their faith in you,
will sing along to your fantastic tune.
But having done the work and sums
to be found accurate he hopes
for validation, action. Change.

6.

Words, words, words;
truth takes on a motley disposition.

7.

Sometimes you fall in love
with something you should fear—

a snake charmer
flutters the fingers of one hand

but the cobra poised to strike
only has eyes for the man's.

Its forked tongue tastes the space,
the charmer's face moves closer,

still closer, to inherent fear,
open lips embrace the reptile mouth,

what is one willing to accept
and allow? There is no black and white.

Human, reptile, heartbeat, heartbeat,
warm blood brushing cold;

man, snake, each yields
to danger in the kiss

that speaks a truth:
love transcending fear,

your eyes in mine appear.

8.

Against the curvature of space
as everything beyond us moves away,
a politician stands with coal in hand

in parliament. He could be bringing in
with salt and bread the bounty of new year.
But here instead a showman sells a narrative.

Along patient coastlines
saltmarsh kidneys
sift and filter, nurture infant fish;

Now and then tectonic plates adjust
as Earth, like an impatient locomotive
waiting at the station, emits a blast of ash.

Hollow boxes blown about the empty streets,
the things you think you know
it turns out you did not.

Looking up, scientists of the sky are seeking clues.
Through the valley, like breath blown across a glass vessel,
the whoo whoo of the bronzewing . . .

9.

The ends of streets have disappeared,
a pall of forest smoke descends.
Wallabies have lost all caution—
their first defence—are trying on
the cloak of visibility.
They watch, unmoving, people pass
on either side the dusty track.
We can only hope for rain,
or that the wind swing eastwards
and that fire consume itself.

10.

There's a varied character to truth
in the backlit clear obscurity
of moving leaves. There is light,
shade, and all the shapes
of our own making
in the restless alliance between
truth and business, truth and politics.

Quod es demonstratum,
a scientist observes and tests
and tries to minimise the variables,
views ignorance as a gap to fill
but in the half-light of rhetoric,
between untruth and truth
a checked fact may become a gun.

11.

Dogwoods hang their withered leaves,
the ravens mute in parliament all week.

12.

And so, the tipping point is reached,
the grains of rice that tilt the scales,
a virus prospering to an epidemic,
an ice shelf breaking free. The idea
detonates into collective consciousness.

13.

In a sky uncannily devoid of cloud
or visceral din of thunder,
on a breathless night that parodies

the absence of everything
dry lightning to the north and west unsettles
with its flicker of possibility.

Even the night birds are silent.
Red Mars hangs in the lens of the telescope
its extant life an augury of what we might become.

Will the little birds, the silver-eyes
and wattlebirds, the honeybees
all recall we left out bowls of water for them?

Ouse

Norfolk, UK

In the glistening flats
when the emptied river has poured
into The Wash and the broad-bottomed fishing smack
rests its matter-of-factness on mud;

in the silence
of the incoming tide, its meniscus stealing up
the mud, rising before your eyes, and the muscular eel
of the river's energy driving inland;

in the king tide under a full moon,
water's spreading wide from bank to bank,
then climbing the quay wall, its silent mass lifting both jetty
and fishing smack with its slung nets flush with the dock

tensing the town to within inches
of the warning bell and the floodgates closing,
lies the weighty drama with its huge rise and fall,
its quiet heft and shove, day and night, year after year,

the bass salt pulse like the tempo of slow breath
bringing oxygen to the blood,
the rhythm holding sway
never letting up, rising, falling, finding its way.

Ouse (Celtic from *Ūsa*, derived from **udso-*, «water,»)

Undertow

Always an outgoing tide,
ocean or river-mouth,
and a quiet swell that tips the balance
lifting the heels and balls of the feet
until suddenly that moment of awakening
to the sense that water not earth
is bearing human weight
and that water has a mind and will of its own,
that a current or rip—neither word fit
for a force formed by ocean wave
in league with wind and shore,
a force that is going on all the time
beyond the mapped boundaries of land—
has a life and intention of its own.
But panic is overlaid by a voice that says
if you get into an undertow don't swim against it
and after a flailing stroke or two
you note the flotsam drifting alongside—
a ship's rope frayed in tree branch,
a dented Coca-Cola can, a bleached plank;
and the body that is now the water's,
succumbs as the shore pans swiftly by.
There is more to time than the moment,
the planet spins with its fleeting human news,
the evolution of its life and rocks, its air.
Water finds its own momentum—
there are different words for letting go:
relinquish surrender yield

The Bathers

The wind had swept their boat off course,
they steered landward making for
a sheltered island cove that seemed
at first deserted. A sight undreamed

of floated slowly into focus—
lazy bathers, yawning, rolling
in the sun—a dozen pigs—all sows,
lounging on the crescent bay,

parting with luxuriant boredom now
and then to rise and amble to the sea to swim;
warm indolence of skin and flesh and heft,
no elemental borderline for them

between clear water, air and sand,
or animal and human joy of life;
they lolled, nudged, bobbed, rubbed—
guileless, hoof-swimming, loving, and loved.

Camel Train

Be prepared for the shock
that the fabulous can be ordinary
and that the thrilling might be familiar,
atavistic as a camel train
stepping with insufferable soft-footed
and exquisite slowness
past your urban door, off the pages
of the Sahara, the Silk Road,
recognisable as the beasts of the Magi
on their long journey away from the known,
slack rope looping nose to tail,
the tin-pot clink-clunk of the bells
about their necks out of time,
devoid of melody, uncertain,
each chime truncated—
the ear straining after arcane rhythm.

Aix-en-Provence

Her climax, when it came, was operatic,
the whole marketplace hanging
on rising notes
that flew through shutters
to join the blue blue sky.
Saturday morning shoppers,
begonias, sunflowers blazing
in tall buckets, brazen watermelons,
the patient hands of the townhall clock,
all arrested as one. Scarlet chrysanthus
opened themselves like sea anemones
in a warm current.
Women touched the blooms,
handled ripe tomatoes, smiled at one another,
tourists and old women in aprons alike.
I don't know what others felt,
but perhaps women felt opened,
released, perhaps we were exposed.
The bananas looked yellower, the grapes
more purple, the marigolds bolder.
People glanced shyly to the open window
on the first floor of the cobbled square.
Did they expect her to appear?
Then a large man in a tiny three-wheeled truck
entered the scene, revving hard in low gear
as if everything depended on his heavy load
of something green. Above the crowd

a strand of cloud tidied the sky back together;
and the minute hand of the inscrutable clock
moved on, as custom required.

Snakes and Ladders

You take the road, I take the winding track.
I climb, you walk, it's hard to see if we
will ever meet. This journey that we make and back

each day—our maze, our Escher almanac.
We navigate hill, forest, hour, year. We never disagree
that you'll take the road, I the winding track.

You make distance, I gain height, two axes
of the four in which time freely
plays its part on the journey that we make and back.

The zig-zag levels out, a cataract
between us as your road tips to forty-five degree,
you toil uphill, I take the winding track

that now runs horizontally. Our pact
if we have one's to walk on, to see
if we will ever meet. This journey that we take and back

takes us on quite different paths, the knack
is sometimes hard to crack of you and me
as you take the road and I the winding track.
How is it that we meet, we make it? There and back.

House Like a Folk Tale

For Glenbrook

A Chagall painting—
there is no goat in the night sky
or fiddler on the roof
but hens roost in vines round your porch
and murmur like sentinels
in trees along the dark path.
In this ink canvas
narcissus stir under earth
on which wallabies and horses graze—
our skin feels the chewing and tearing
of grass in the blackness. The bowed house
rests comfortably on earth,
itself a resting hen.
Behind the crack of light under your door
the phantasm of an Arab mare,
luminous in her whiteness.
Her trusting eye
in which we are all reflected
takes up the living room.
She turns on slim ankles
careful to disturb with nose and tail
neither the furniture, nor the Wurlitzer,
nor poetry books on shelves.
The hand that pollinates the perfect flower
paints too the frieze of daffodils.
Steep bush on the mountain
sifts the wind in this surreal painting

of the floating poet, his sisters,
niece, cousin, fish just hooked
from the deepest sea.
There is no corralling—
hens in trees, fish far from the ocean,
muscled horses checked
by a twist of baling twine.
Rules are what people think,
they aren't a law of nature.
Words, art, moon, horse, narcissus—
outward projections of the mind, the heart,
perhaps we come looking
for what's behind things in this place

The Pig's Tail

was coarse as hemp rope
in her child's hands.
It fought, a living thing
that curled febrile round
her wrists and asked
for pardon in
a question-mark.
Its wiry hairs
gave her the willies
and the steel to hold
her grip and hang on tight
to dodge a father's
wrath. She knew the deed
was better done without
a qualm, that speed
would bring an end
to its and her own woe;
the sooner his blade
undid the pig's pale flesh
and red blood gushed
into the bowl,
the sooner the squealing
would be stilled, the sooner
she could sink her hands
into the clear, cold water
of the kitchen trough.
Absolution came

in puffs of steam,
the kettle boiling on the hob,
a tidy cup and saucer
on a tray, the chance
that in her bed upstairs
her absent mother
might wake or speak or smile.

One Thing and Another

Bit by bit he packed up his working life.
Crops halved, then quartered,
and so forth until there was just enough
to feed the family.
Greenhouses, deconstructed,
became flatpacks again of glass and steel.
Each structure left a shadow
of bare earth and pale, suntanned grass
like rows of vacant tennis courts.
He sorted tools, sold a tractor,
pumps and generators,
the life blood of his last vocation.
Then he started to lose my mother too.
Very quietly she set off
on her journey without him.
Inside for lunch, he'd find her
standing at the window not at home.
He dug out apple trees, rose gardens,
grevilleas and lilies. Lawn was easier.
She watched him from the window
erasing what she'd made.
He raked and burnt leaves.
She was a little further still
each time he came inside.

Some years later he went back
but could not find himself there

on the land between
 the spent volcano and the river.
 A stranger, he had to introduce himself.
 The dry wallaby-grass
 rustled in the south-westerly.
A man's days are as grass,
 he might have murmured to himself,
he flourishes like a flower of the field.

Everyday Losses

My grandmother lost two thirds
 of her long life to an asylum,
 so my mother and her siblings
 lost a mother early on;
 their generation lost a world to war
 and gained a different world—
 the oneness, of a sort,
 that comes with threat and deprivation.
During the war—so many of my father's
 conversations started off this way.
 He lost his first fiancée
 to a minor operation on her nose,
 a small incision turned into a lethal clot,
 she took too many tablets for the pain.
 He motorcycled round the British Isles for years
 trying hard to lose her easy laughter,
 then found my serious mother on the Isle of Man.
 Later, as the ports of Egypt, Yemen, and Sri Lanka
 passed between them and their mutual losses,
 my parents watched as hawsers pulled
 figures of eight round bollard horns
 that held the ship's resistant bulk
 to each new anchorage,
 until, reaching their new home,
 they were to find they'd made a loss
 to lose a loss, and that the losses from the past,
 even under clear blue skies, *are never*
quite as lost as one might fear, or hope.

FINAL PROOF EDITION

Standish

For Alice, my missing Grandmother

1

Back at the beginning—
the familiar rooms of northern vowels,
grey stone, its ancient roads and childhood ghosts,
the undulating pitch-faced terraced rows
once home to millworkers and miners.
The cow and pig smell of farms
in the precincts of the towns,
the cellular under-the-skin green,
its sweetness cached in the brain
side by side with memory,
a green born of rain and more rain.
The names on the graves
and the names of the villages and towns
are the map coordinates I once called ‘home’,
like any childhood home it lives inside me.
I’m back again to realign the lens of left and right
to find the focal point—
the sandstone grey, the green of moss
on graves, inside the DNA, and in your lost story
from which our ship set sail through oceans and seas.
But stories don’t stick to islands and continents,
stories sail in the bloodstream, in the bone marrow
across millponds and teeming waves
and need at times to find their teller.
My plane circles Manchester again,

each time the story older but not wiser.
Here are grey skies above and below
the plane’s long wing.
Beneath the clouds the subcutaneous green.
Dressed in their drystone walls
the Pennines spiral round again,
the pilot holds our place
in the aerial queue.
We bank, level out, prepare
to land on a runway beside
a wood with its ancient river
and Roman donkey bridge,
a rusting Concord like a broken bird
careens by as we brake.
Welcome, again, to Manchester.

2

The story lies to the north-west.
The ear’s stylus
follows the rise and fall of accent,
inflection, like a river running backwards
to its narrow source,
the slimmest stream in which
each vowel and diphthong blend
with memory’s tuner,
to a village in the present
that is not a village from the past,
close enough for blood
to hear its own pulse—
a common enough theme

the past's hunting ground,
 with its missing pieces.
 You were missing
 all my life, one name
 of thousands on the national register
 missing in action
 from kitchens and bedrooms—
 daughters, wives, and mothers.
 After years of searching
 I find I was knocking
 at the wrong door. You were
 further in your exile than I knew,
 your asylum the size of a town
 with a station all of its own.
 You were far away
 but wouldn't have known,
 as you walked through its doors,
 just how far. I wonder
 was your wedding ring
 removed on that first day,
 was it sold or stolen later?
 Or did you one day roll
 its glinting band into a noxious drain?
 A husband then could lawfully erase life,
 could eliminate a woman
 so completely he might efface her
 from language itself. In the dim
 privacy of grey stone walls
 he might declare his wife,
 cocooned in her post-natal dusk
 a thought crime,

instilling such guilt that a name
 could not move to a child's mouth
 from the throat, lodged behind
 the swollen obstruction of shame,
 stuck fast from childhood
 to old age. Even dementia's
 lawlessness might refuse
 to loosen the clot in the craw.

3

This new-made rubble
 is where my grandmother's living ghost
 breathed, she of the once defiant gaze
 and eloquent tongue,
 married in a flapper suit
 and cream-strapped shoes.
 She passed here from young womanhood
 through what—
 half a century of tedium at best?
 domiciled at worst in purgatory
 inside the mind's dark places.
 Like all the faces
 hers at a distant window on the world,
 keeping or losing count—what was worse—
 of all the many sunsets,
 five living children dwelling
 in the parallel world
 inside her mind.
 Each year each birthday
 must have passed like rosary beads,

the loving names
a living sweetness on the tongue.

4

Google lights up
the corridors
and dormitories of Hell
in your real time . . .
Is that you in your bob and smock,
your shuffle and your slack ECG face?
Did anybody lead you gently by the elbow
to the refuge of piano keys?
Was there anyone who knew you played?

5

A blogger,
on the eve of demolition
records gothic feats by torch-light,
trawling vacant halls,
graffiti, broken mirrors;
naked light globes dangle
over iron beds and dirty bathrooms.

For now, the crunch of shards
of crockery and broken brick
beneath my feet. Everything—
the whole sad, mental, madhouse town
erased, your world made flat, razed
by bulldozer and conscience.
In this place, at least, time's just begun.

6

Beneath the nettles in another town
I've found you. Here you are.
Here we both are
in a corner of the graveyard
below the church with its pointed steeple.
A stranger in his ill-fitting suit
lingers, waiting for dusk
and for me to leave,
a blanket over one arm
and a plastic bag of worldly goods.
My fingers read
your name and dates
inscribed in stone, material proof.

7

Your children learnt the lesson early on
that disappearance and oblivion
could be at odds. Lost from view
you taught them all the depth and shape of love.
I have no memory but your strength
lives in my bones and blood.

I write these words in anger
and in tenderness. A harm was done.

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Disruptors

Wattlebirds gate-crash the euphony
of whistlers and honeyeaters
with saucepan lids and wooden spoons.
Not for them a part in this
sweet, well-orchestrated, optimistic fugue.
Forget for now it's all a territorial row.
Acacia leaves split into strands
a ray of early morning sun.
Iconoclasts, subversives, their orange wattles
fall like burning tears—they must defy!
as the diamonds of departing tails
cut hard-edged against the anodyne blue sky.

Art for Art's Sake

A red traffic light.
On the car radio 'Claire de Lune'
makes me think about art,
and my uncle's long thin fingers,
nicotine-stained, reaching
for the next cigarette,
physics, university, a world away
like Verlaine's dreaming birds
and sobbing fountain
conjured in slow piano notes
from a cassette player
on a vinyl Health Care table
in an asylum common room.
My uncle leans in to listen
through the hubbub of psychoses,
the smell of disinfectant,
the discord of those lost for words.
Could Debussy have wished
for a temperament more capable,
an imagination freer, more receptive?

Whipsnake

Barefoot in the sand, you're building a ladder
for the little white-lipped whipsnake

that struggles against the heat of early sun
and the steep angle of the dune,

and the loose grains that make progress a backward slide.
The snake is a fine black hieroglyph

against the glaring white sand.
We think it was making for our pile of clothes

while we swam. Its tongue flickers, tasting the air,
you, the situation. Your ladder is made of driftwood

and dried seaweed, already the wind has begun
to conceal its crude anomaly, speck by untiring speck.

The snake seems to understand your intent
finding refuge at least in the ribbon of shade.

It is black, venomous
as cruel actions born of old sorrows.

You turn without waiting to walk along the beach,
your gesture light as innocence.

The Mud Layer

The swan is teaching her cygnets that there is another element
for which nature has designed them.

She upends. And upends again.
All that can be seen is black under-frill.

Her young are unconvinced that a yellow-brown world
through which light struggles might be theirs to claim,

or that wormed adversity and the unknown
through which her bill harrows at the end of that snake-like neck

could offer much to fortify.
For now, they will ignore her entreaties to sample the mud layer,

they will keep to sunlight, skud freely
and right way up, across mirrored clarity

of liquid blue sky, cumulous, green shoots of rushes,
and the flawless reflection of their blithe, unruffled selves.

Spider Crabs

We are the republic
of flesh-eaters
moving with slow tides
and ocean currents.

Swim near,
we'll turn our bright
attention on you.
On the periphery

of your watery lens,
we might be
algal mass
on orange rock,

but, come closer,
we are many,
we are marvellous
and fascinating.

Come closer still,
let us examine you
with the little black headlamps
of all our eyes.

Our hardware is dextrous.
We are keenly interested.

Hedge

It was a roadside corridor really,
a memory with business of its own,
the hedge meant a lot to me—
I wasn't the only one.

It was a relic ribbon,
a cornucopia of shrub and tree,
creeper, moss, fungus, stone—
annals scrawled in correa, black gum, daisy-

bush, dogwood, sag. The hedge made fearless company
with the missing forest—not its ghost but living on—
bee hum and birdsong held the oral history
that fringed the bare hills. But that's all gone—

before, forgiveness seemed a possibility,
now, unseen, unheard, abundance has gone to ground.

Laying the Bait

Did it come down to money,
supply and demand,
a scam that paid the rent
or mortgage for years?
Did it start as a joke
or a board game of strategy,
laying the scats of fur and bone
among the tacit sedge
while others searched
in all the wrong spots.
The system looked like
a snake biting its tail.
For some heady years
we were 'first on the scene'
like fire-addicted firefighters,
the Department conspiring,
importing the turds to train the dogs
who shared the joke of course
and knew the complex rules
of this game. We helped ourselves
and started to believe,
out on the old kangaroo plains.
Slipping the evidence
beside a loose stone,
we began to feel heroic,
we were the sleuths
in an island drama

in which, behind the scenes,
we also played
the villain's part.
We made headlines
while the wraiths bred,
their amber fox eyes
glancing over shoulders
as they retreated
into farmland scrub.

People of the Dunes

On Indonesia's Refusal to take More of Australia's Waste

The village of Bangun is disappearing,
plastic is the new ecology—
within the lungs, beneath the fingernails,
it sticks inside the mouth, adheres to words,
the new vocabulary. A shifting dune,
the means of productivity, of food
and schooling for the young, plastic
has become the very flow of life.
My neighbours who have sorted through my filth
bare-handed—how can I look them in the eye—
whose gardens, paddy fields and waterways
have drifted under rising sands of waste?
Defeat begins with the fear that one has lost.
Cities, empires, have been swallowed in the past.

Aral Sea

The loss of a sea somehow reminds me of my missing kidney.
Its absence has a lasting place, size, a tender shape;
a silver cicatrix remains, a helix round my waist.
The missing sea has also left a silver scar
its outline clearly visible by satellite;
the ancient Amu Darya, Syr Darya,
which used to flow from Paradise
are stemmed by desert cotton. Turquoise
and rust, boats lie on their sides like panting fish.
The name translates to sea of islands, but toxic dust
and salt are all the same today. I've never been to Kazakhstan
nor have I been to Uzbekhestan. This does not mean the Aral Sea
has not lived in my imagination or that I have not felt its loss.

Pathologist

Called in to diagnose a pathogen,
he plucks the feathers from the penguin's breast,
inserts the scissor tip beneath translucent skin
and snips along the keel, but now undressed
the bird reveals its actual cause of death—
and all its fellows' too on their rocky island in
the ice, hapless, fractured, bleeding from within,
found dead and dying on their nests.
The melting sea ice rippling on a tidal surge
has crushed each innocent swimmer-tobogganist
unaware. From errant waves emerge
a few survivors limping home from fishing trips,
broken clues with which to join the dots for passing ships.

The Lizard's Eye

Masquerading as a god,
all-seeing, all-knowing,
the water dragon on its rock plinth
by the lake listens through holes in its head
to the din up the hill.

Police have entered the grounds
of the university again, striking poses
in twos and threes on the lawn
or beneath sandstone colonnades,
feigning an indifference
that's at odds with holsters and batons.

The sky is blue, the grass well-watered,
the lake beside the lizard is a reptile's eye.
There's a hegemony going on
the students think their own;
the state, in uniform, would disagree.

The eyes of the water dragon tilt intelligently
towards the human ruckus—the upward lift
of dorsal ridge to ancient spiny head.
Behind powerful telephoto lenses, other eyes scan, snap,
pan. Masks hide the face but not the eyes.

Laughter

His eyes crease in the corners,
as for one long accustomed to laughter,
and his closed mouth smiles when he is serious.
Over a festival lunch with wines from the region,
he tells me of the misfortunes of his country,
and of a series of events that surrounded
his receipt of a prestigious international award.

Upon word that he had won the prize
he commenced the slow journey of acceptance.
He knocked on doors which never opened
or, which opened to the faceless, behind towers
of documents that needed to be read,
filled in, registered, witnessed, authorised,
certified and stamped. Eventually he returned
to a locked door and a sign saying
the office had moved, or no longer existed.
Time passed in the fulfilment of this process.
The man across the table from me laughs and laughs.
His crooked glasses mist with his laughter.

He laughs at the steeples, spires, belfries and high-rise
of paperwork on desks. He laughs at the clerks
and ministers who signed or declined the documents
that would enable him to reach his prize,
he laughs at the next locked doors, the memos,
the peripatetic offices, and the offices that disappeared.

One day, he received a letter from the state officer.
The paperwork was ready, he could come
at his convenience to such and such address.
The officer was as good as his word.
The document awaited him.
My companion leans forward.
He looks as though he has not seen the sun
for some time.
In his country making money is a slow process.
He tells me how many more months passed.
Whenever he alludes to the passage of time,
he laughs some more.
Jetlag is pulling him under the table.

Eventually, with the help of friends,
he saved money for an airfare, packed his bag
and the documents
that had at last been released by the ministry.

As if for the first time, he saw from the window
of his moving train, the great length of his country,
sometimes under grey sky, sometimes under blue.
He disembarked at the city in which he would embark
for the country of his destination, the country
which would issue the celebrated honour.

At Departures, a woman at a desk in uniform,
looked at his ticket and met his eye:
'Passport.' A statement rather than request.
'Passport?' My friend half under the table laughs
so hard he has to mop his eyes. 'Passport?'

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What do you mean? I have documents.’
‘In order to fly,’ said the woman, this time
without looking at him—she was already on
her next task—you must have a passport.’

I look at the man across the table from me.
His mouth is wide and generous. He laughs.
His laughter overwhelms the room, it is almost
contagious, you almost want to laugh with him.

DDT

Was invisibly everywhere in childhood,
it was dusted in the seams of upholstery,
hidden beneath cushions, mixed into paint pots—
gloss veneer on doors, cots, cupboards, shelves,
building blocks, and glass-eyed cats and rabbits
pulled along on wooden wheels.
Beneath the lid of the piano its powders puffed
around the felt of wooden keys,
the eggs for breakfast laid by hens whose cages too
had all been purified. Ponds, waterways were sprayed,
benches in the parks, classroom mats,
schoolyard bins and drains. At night we children slept
as children do the sleep of illusion, cheek to pillow
breathing in a world unambiguous as friend or foe,
patent as the vibrant hues on wall and window frame.

Headmaster

Headmaster preferred his hand to the cane,
 liked the feel of a boy's buttock
 beneath his palm—draped his favourite
 for the day across his knee—he'd rub, savour it
 round and round as if polishing a bloom,
 teachers made to quit the room
 when, like a school inspector, he cut through
 the lesson—no warning and no reason due—
 just a tilted chin toward the door,
 a yellow index finger for the more
 recalcitrant. He had a penchant for
 bookends—the biggest and the smallest boy
 in class. We'd watch transfixed. He'd toy
 with our attention, then surprise us
 every time as his smooth caress
 turned to a tremendous blow—
 we'd see the abject face below
 redden with the effort not to roar
 or cry. Since there was no cause for
 just deserts, we children sat
 and wondered if this boy was pet
 or object of anger? Our gavel hung
 unsteady between chosen and wrong-
 doer. Down came the hand and down again, to say
 that children will squeeze normal from the everyday—
 we were uneasy though, alert. Ranked in grades, heights,
 we stood each morning, state school military cadets,

stepping on the spot we swung our arms
 and crunched the cold gravel, young gendarmes
 who bore with detached and guileless
 air the Colonel Bogey March or Semper Fidelis
 until the time came to peel away,
 troop inside, bear silent witness to another day.

Menhir

It was spring, cold.
 Outside, city trees had not yet woken up;
 inside, the pollard shadow on the wall
 was a fingerless hand. The great poet, old now,
 chased me slowly round his oval table—
 schoolyard Catch-and-Kiss was what he had in mind,
 anticipated by a trickle of saliva on his chin.
 I'd found him on the shelves in Gallimard,
 his words fell easily into my hand.
 I was young, new to Paris and French literature,
 the white editions took me by surprise—
 chaste, sober, to my eye.
 The cool assurance of blank bindings
 was seductive—no contents page
 the poems lay simply in the landscape of the book:
 bell, well, tree, canal, cliff, nothing ,
 they took up living space as elemental objects do. Or air.
 I found him in the pages of the phone directory,
 his name not difficult to spot—a fluke
 of courage driven by brazen hunger, curiosity.
 A woman served tea
 then shut the long disdainful doors.
 There are a number of things to consider
 in this story: there is the clash
 between what is foreseen and what occurs;
 there is the imagination itself,
 the art of the marvellous, and the meaning of art;

there is the obscurity of a young woman's mind
 in the eyes of men; there is absurdity;
 and there is growing old.
 We never got to talk of poetry. A living menhir,
 grotesquely doubled in the bevelled mirror,
 his unsteady tread jiggled the teacups in their saucers,
 the cut glass on its tray sang gently too.
 Cohort of the Spanish Civil War
 he helped with publications of the underground.
 He said once he had a wicked mother,
 an obituary described the hard mouth
 of an unloved child. I recall it as a loose mouth
 puckered ready in pursuit.
 The tea undrunk, I stepped onto the street again
 and crossed beneath the empty branches.
 It was hard to tell his window balconies
 from all the rest of that Belle Epoque façade.
 Later on, to my surprise, the granite of the poems remained—

 the fabulous—compressed as rock, voluble as sea or sky.

Man Sleeping

Backdrop—a beach pontoon,
promenade, lawn, shimmering river
in the freezing early morning light.

Centre stage someone in his bus-stop shell
arranged, among his bags,
as if for a still-life;

the vacant pontoon, careless,
flush with water's serene plane
against the gradient of the seated man

among his many plastic bags,
the early rowers skimming home,
the lovely harmony of oars.

The leaning figure deeply sleeping
as the rising sun evaporates
the cold of the long night.

Across the road the audience
of plate-glassed balconies. Windows blank
and blazing in the morning sun.

Nation

The boy on the platform
under his large school hat
is twitchy before the train arrives,
he checks out the passengers
through reflecting windows
as it slides screeching steel on steel
beside him and measures his pace
to the final door. Inside the carriages
he is an atom in motion, drawn
to clusters of different uniforms,
bouncing away again just before
contact. Back and forth he enters
and departs through sliding doors.
He cannot find a seat
that is right, a seat to hold him still.
Now and again green and yellow,
eggshell blue, maroon and white,
break away to sway down the aisle,
lean over him, return to base. The boy
in the hat has found a tennis ball
to toss up and down, up and down,
a magnet of course
to yellow and green who pop up
out of nowhere to play pig-in-the-middle.
The uniforms are well-trained,
nothing is said that a fuss could
be kicked up over, this argot

has no words and the rules are too subtle
to identify. The adults mostly
look away.

Broken Promise

I don't know what I'm expecting out there in the Mulga
but it isn't human teeth—on that patch of sandy ground

by the moving river—half-uncovered, as if by a light wind.
Arcs of white teeth in the dusty earth.

Ancient burial ground says the landowner in undertones.
Silence, he thinks, is the best way to preserve the sacred.

The wind moves the specks of dust around.
I am compromised by myself, by that place by the river,

by the stranger, by my ambivalence,
by the request for silence as an exchange for something.

Where Sheep Safely Graze

A flock of sheep assembles to watch the spectacle
of a human eating breakfast on the other side of the fence.

Morning rises over the sea lighting up their silhouettes in gold.
Some jostle for the front row, some peer behind the ears of
others.

Chewing, they watch the human chew,
faces and expressions varied as any in a crowd.

Bach is playing somewhere. Sheep are known to identify
human faces, and to remember each of their own in a flock.

And Then a Dog Barked

And then a dog barked –
I thought nothing of it until later.

It was late summer – the still, settling time
of evening, sun reluctant to go down.

We were eating dinner.
Two cows passed close by the long window

like billboards, or slow-moving freight trucks
with monochrome jig-saw motifs.

They rolled along, tasting everything their mouths could find,
high on the chromatic variety of our garden,

so dazed they hardly saw us ward them off.
They tugged at this and sniffed and sampled that.

It seemed a shame to turn them out
back to their paddocks of rye grass

though they left in a mood of beatitude,
as if it were sufficient to have glimpsed paradise.

They smelt of milk and grass and warmth
breathed through soft nostrils.

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They were placid.
They made me feel very small.

6

Long Clock

The poem is in the machine
but thanks can go in words
to the designer of the long clock
that ticks just once a year,
and whose large hand clicks off
the passing of each century,
and whose cuckoo only strikes
the dawn of each millennium.
Thanks for its subterranean chimes –
the idea is enough –
for the steady and ponderous
cogs and wheels,
for the unerring faith of the long vision.

River Pans

Think of the river's waters
stirring stones on bedrock
round and round and round
into a geometry of perfection,
pans deepening over millennia—
the permanence of moving water,
the permanence of loose stones,
being the only essentials
for water to shape unyielding
dolerite to its own ends.
In such a way, a poem, fluvial,
may run through time to move us,
finding itself briefly in the present
like the clear water with its pestles
at the bottom of this round hollow
in which you almost disappear.

Awakening Stick

The hollow space on the border of sleep
where small sounds magnify—
the last light switch clicking off, a floorboard settling,
the door's resigned creak with the cooling fire.

Supine, we were drifting off each on our own canoe
downstream into comfortable darkness
when the wind hit—a sudden blast on a still night
that shook each house in its frame.

The Callitris scratched its branches in terror
down the window, walls shifted with the impact,
the whole house hung on by its roots,
uplifted leaves took a while to clatter back down to asphalt.

Then calm again. The wind had lain an awakening stick
to the city's back. In Zen stories
this is said to bring on realisation,
a different attentiveness.

White Cliffs

Commercial television dins all day,
an imbecilic loop of ads and shows
to entertain the adult child, while
over the Pavlovian PA sings Vera Lyn,
blue birds and Dover are a rallying call
to lunch; the motor chairs along the hall
respond. You flicker at the poignant key
of wartime tunes you recognise, beguiled.
What's in your mind now? Heaven
only knows, perhaps hard-earned acuity
eclipsing platitudes emitted from the screen.
So, this is where it all was heading then?
Inside your valiant century,
dream on, *tomorrow, just you wait and see.*

Mother-in-Law

Not people die but worlds die in them.

Yevtushenko

On your brave, calm journey
out of life
the objects in the room have lost
all substance:
the water jug, the wafer biscuits,
the artificial orchid that I watered.

Your oxygen machine keeps time
with loyal breath and beat:
strong, soft, soft, soft . . .
Within the hospice ward we are
back inside the womb again.
A mother's heart and lungs
are counting our slow time.

At first we hear the notes inside our heads,
the hummed harmonics of a distant choir,
a sonic quirk
behind the automated beat,
the four slow notes
that count your gentle monody.

The door's ajar, the air outside is warm,
the flimsy curtain billows
to the one melodic line,
our breaths honed now
to a single dot in time,
the precious cargo of your human life.

Iambic

My father's heart
 his solitary drum,
 his well-spring,
 life companion,
 keeps his time
 all day, all night,
 has kept his time
 one hundred years,
 his stalwart pump
 unswerving in
 its constant task.
 An engineer
 he listens to
 its thrum and beat
 within the vessels
 of his limbs and chest
 and ponders
 its efficiency
 as darkness stills
 the din and hones
 each note
 through shortening nights
 and ever speeding days,
 the rhythm from which all
 else flows,
 and love's
 a beating drum
 a burning sun.

Paradise

Each garden is a replica of Eden
 as if the story were engraved in DNA,
 the patchwork parts make up a green cohesion

round the world. It's generally agreed on
 that plants appease the soul, that is to say
 each garden is a replica of Eden—

railway plots of ribald leeks or tree-sculpted and
 water-mirrored heavens, maize in dust—each shows the way
 the ad hoc parts make up a blithe cohesion.

A row of cacti on a windowsill fed on
 sunshine and neglect; suburban lawn and everyday
 roses—each garden is a homage, a throwback, a bit of Eden—

they all connect. Time is never squandered in
 green thoughts, green shade. Today and yesterday
 the many parts make up a weird cohesion.

Sunflowers on a nature strip—how we succeed in
 this accord when we're in such disarray,
 who knows? Each garden is a replica of Eden.
 The many parts make up a green cohesion.

Santiago

Among gold leaf grapes and vines,
 cupids cluster in their throngs,
 sensual minions of the centrepiece—
 the glittering colossus of St James,
 Iago, high on his plinth, half veiled
 behind the ornate screen.
 Step by patient shuffling step
 the centuries' long queue ascends
 the narrow bench from which
 all the loving pairs of hands caress
 his brow and hefty neck.
 I watch, enthralled, an envious bystander
 to devotion of the ritualistic kind.
 From a shadowed pew towards the rear
 the untranslated Spanish liturgy
 is so much music to the ear
 and from this distant vantage point
 the many-coloured sleeves and arms
 that slip about the chin and shoulders
 of the saint are like little children's,
 he, a tolerant parent gazing
 neither left nor right but on some
 enigmatic point above the crowd,
 undisturbed by the smoking censer,
 huge as a whaler's cauldron, swinging
 its vast, slow-motion arc
 along the transepts of the church.

Solace

To steady the mind
 there is, as always,
 the moon—whole, quartered,
 halved—and the many stars.
 Space, deep blue by night
 paler in daylight
 comforts. We might almost
 think our great mistakes
 inscribed onto land,
 atmosphere, ocean,
 were minor, trifling.

In the Air

The music on the radio was composed in Naples
four hundred years ago.

The sun at its rising point is sprinting south
along its equinoctial race towards summer.

People ask what it takes to be a good ancestor,
to offer something worthwhile for the future

like this music whose notes keep me
from getting out of bed.

So much is to do with prevention just now—
prevention of the plundering of rivers,

removal of trees, forests, farmland,
the poisoning of long sleeping aquifers.

And then there is what we do to animals,
to each other.

Currency, even seashell or flint,
was always bound to whisper and insinuate,

to rouse saliva under the tongue.
Renaissance Naples was no idyll.

Today though, we need a new word
for the scale of the hunger for profit.

Bruch's violin concerto is playing now,
for which, the presenter informs me

and all of those who are listening,
he was payed a small lump sum

and died in penury.
I have not talked of oceans, skies,

what we have done to them.
Somewhere in Naples though,

notes were made on a score—
the compassionate moment hangs in the air

Voyager I

This might in the long run be the only evidence that we ever existed:

Frank Drake, Nasa scientist.

1

The digits on the NASA site
flash by too quickly

for the eye to read. Voyager I
is speeding away from home,

from you and me.
I try to read the miles out loud

but fail, Voyager is moving faster
than the speed of sound,

toward the beginning,
toward the incipient end.

2

Above the bed the skylight,
like a screen itself, records

the illusion of rotating stars,
their depth far deeper than

the night itself. The more
you look the more you see

that in the windowpane's infinity
the Milky Way is smaller than a speck,

a mote that floats across
the lens of comprehension.

3

Could the lifeless feel
a hint of existential fear

Voyager might compute that
Laika's solitude just glimpsed

the brink of the abyss.
Alone in orbit round the Earth

the canine cosmonaut
was leashed to home by gravity,

though as her keepers
gently sealed her fate

standing back to watch the engines
launch her into hell,

cosmic space would shrink
within the void of betrayal.

4

The orbits of Uranus, Pluto,
now traversed, vast loops

like vinyl record grooves
within diminishing memory,

the latent sounds of Earth
sublimely sprint across

the outer reaches
of our solar system's gravity

toward the icy cloud of Oort.
Somewhere in interstellar space

Bach's Brandenburg Concerto
number 2 in F

or ancient songs of Arnhem Land
will call dark space to bright attention,

the polyphony of Georgian mountain
song set each star to quiver

in its hall. And what will space make
of a river running over stones,

a human baby's cry? The skewed
but graced diversity of life on Earth;

our best foot forward
to the wondering universe.

5.

So far away in distant time
the twelve-inch disc,

much smaller than the mind's imagining,
the tongue's capacity to shape,

reflects us in its brave gold plate—
a compact, well-tempered race.

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Notes

Some of the poems in this collection quote or allude to other works. The epigraph of 'Kissing the Cobra' is from Marilyn Hacker's poem 'Ghazal: The Dark Times', the poem also references Shakespeare and Donne, and was impelled by Kelly Richmond Pope's statement that: 'The people who are trying to warn us are suddenly placed under more scrutiny than the people committing the fraudulent act'. 'The Bathers' was inspired by an image in Roger Deakin's book *Waterlog*. 'One Thing and Another' quotes from Psalm 103. The last lines of 'Everyday Losses' quotes Adam Phillips in his review 'What Can You Know?' *London Review of Books*, 2007, 'People of the Dunes' alludes to Abe Kōbō's book *Woman in the Dunes*. 'White Cliffs' quotes Walter Kent's 'There'll be blue birds over, the white cliffs of Dover', sung by Vera Lynn during WWII. "Long Clock" pays homage to The Clock of the Long Now, concept of American inventor, Danny Hillis. The epigraph to 'Mother-in-Law' is from Yevgeny Yevtushenko's poem 'People'. *Paradise* alludes to Andrew Marvell's line 'a green thought in a green shade' from *The Garden*. The term: 'the good ancestor' in the poem 'In the Air' is from Roman Krznaric's book of that name.

Acknowledgements

A number of these works have been published in the following journals: *Australian Book Review*; *Australian Poetry Journal*; *Axon Journal ACT*; *Island*; *Mascara Literary Review*, *Overland*; *ROAM Journal*, *Lisbon*, and *The Australian*. 'Aix-en-Provence' appears in *Oasis Women's Poetry 2022*. I would like to thank the University of Queensland for the scholarship that has enabled me to write these poems, and to Bronwyn Lea and Martin Duwell for their support during that time. Thanks are also due to the following, whose time and conversation have led to the writing of some of these poems: Dr David Obendorf, Barbara Worsley, Violet Harrison-Day, Ali Anvari, and Bruce Chambers. Thanks to Dr John R. Hunter for his definition of slack tide. 'Laying the Bait' was read in the Tasmanian Parliament by Ivan Dean, MLC, 2020, as part of his valedictory speech, in his summary of the years' long government fox investigation. Finally, this book is dedicated, gratefully, to Gordon, Violet, and Beatrice.



Since Sarah Day's first book in 1987, her works have received a number of awards including the Anne Elder and the Queensland Premier's Awards and Michel Wesley Wright Prizes, and have been shortlisted for the NSW, Tasmanian Premier's, and Prime Minister's Literary Awards. She has taught creative writing to year 12 students over the past twenty years, has collaborated with musicians, and judged national poetry, fiction, and nature-writing competitions. She lives in Hobart.

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