

Inspiration

Lying beside my daughter as she sleeps
I listen to her hodgepodge bedtime sounds:
kitchen clatter, cars revving up the road,
the spooling hiss of a story cassette at its end.
Her stripling body is a tree, lips whispering
like leaves. I hear her stomach stirring milk,
her indrawn breath, think of its name: *inspire*.

She thrusts a hand out, holding back the dark,
flings a sapling arm across my neck.
Feet scuffle like mice in the sheets. Her eyes open
sightlessly, and look me in the face:
dark gaze of numen, fierce and strange as loss.
I hear the truth: the risk of life is death.
I have breathed her in; I can never breathe her out.

Roy, 1932

Mick and I break into bushmen's huts
hungry for bread or cake. We are never lost,

the bush and the stars have seeped into our feet.
Neither are we found. At home, our mother's welcome –

there you are you little blighters, a few hits with the stick.
We trap snakes, practise birdcall, suck at the teat

of someone's cow, follow a creek or a twist of cloud
for days. We sleep furred in the cold hearts of trees.

When I reach the team at each week's end
it's smoko. I am nine. I stand with the horses

as men gather packs, set out for weekends
of clamouring children, oven-hot stew,

the taut embraces of stalwart wives. My father
slaps my shoulder in passing, doesn't look back.

The crunch of their boots over leaf-litter fades,
there are only the sounds of the forest closing its fist.

I feed the horses; they all have shoes. My soles
run red, apprenticed to bracken and granite,

ants, razor-edged rocks, dry-ice frosts.

I pee on my freezing feet, clamber up a horse

to knead them under its mane's patchy blanket.
If ever I cry there are only the mares to hear.

The fire in the hut is dying again, the bush
hunching itself into the knot of night.

Soon enough I am broken in: tough as old boots.
I am a child workhorse, shod with scars.

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Along the dry creek-bed the log is gaining
on the hard-bitten shoe-horse.

My father shouts, fast and fricative,
time yawns open like the mouth of death:

a stone to feet of clay, the iron-shod log
grinds hoof and hock in a scream of chain.

He grips the victim's head,
speaks into her ear with a nurse's calm.

Perhaps he will take the needle from his kit
snap a long hair from her panicked tail

scald it in the billy, skirl boracic powder
into the wound, and stitch, the way I have seen him

stitch many horses, and his own injured body.
He does not. He reads in the mangled achilles

the limits of care brooked by death.
No exit from the bush except on one's feet.

He slits the jugular with a barking axe,
helps the horse lay down. I gather branches,

sit with my feet to the pyre's heat.
That night my father quickly snuffs

the lantern, orders sleep. In dreams he owns
a sunlit paddock, filled with broken horses.

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After two days I run away from school
and follow the well-worn track to the logging coupe.

I can read everything I need to
in the steep topography of Father's face:

his nose as straight and hard as a eucalypt,
the eyebrows' firm horizon, wide, bare paddock

of browbone, an extravagance of hair –
his fullness of yearning, tucked under his hat.

His face has hardened with each of the thirteen children
who grow inside our weary mother like weeds,

with each of the makeshift houses we live in and leave
as the logging team tracks further down the coast.

He is a field harrowed down to the stones.
Only his eyes are still soft as a yearling's

as he cradles the head of the horse he killed today,
as the iron vice of the bush clamps shut around him

and we read the spreading bloodstain in the dirt,
a map of some red-bright life he couldn't afford.

Liminal love songs

The way of an eagle in the heavens

Reflected in an eye, the dizzy paisley
of earth laid out for miles, the fiction
of early warning. Tallest bluff,
wind-chill written in the hunch of trees.

I cling to rock, stare at the arc
of wingspan longer than my body,
clutch at the theory of a home always
in this nest, this lover. Time

and unforeseen occurrence. Eggs
blotched like a hunter's moon. We kiss,
draw barbs and hooks to smoothness,
fit closer than feather. How long

can this slow pattern – caring,
paining, forgiving – take flight
and return? I trace the cliff
of your brow with my finger,

your temple's shallow chalice
the shape of a stick-raft nest
of exposure, the drop-edge
of cheekbone, imagine waking

beside you on the tallest
cliff, to the shock of height
and a hooked tongue, unable to tell you
I'm sorry. Below us, everything.

The way of a serpent on a rock

Come on then, sweet-skinned creature –
love's not one of the human rights
but something one learns

in the intricate sting
of shedding, addiction to skin
and pattern, each scale mirroring

the contour of its mate,
half-hidden, half-exposed, the memory
of my hair coming down in a certain light

coiled into the pocket of your heart.
Or instinct, the draw of sun-hot granite
to the slow belly, urge to roll back

the clenching cold; my hands
in a nest of questions. I cannot
grasp what makes a predator,

divide love from craving when we find
each other in the reptilian dark
of our separate selves,

eyes full of scales,
blood racing with sinuous hunger
to bite, to be swallowed whole.

The way of a ship in the heart of the sea

Hatchway of a vessel, the shower door
shudders on its runner, takes us inside

I face you under the hot hiss of water, skin
plumping like soaked fruit, exhaling

like leaves, wonder where in this water
we meet, what things your skin

might breathe to mine, what things are
washed away, and whether I could name

what familiarity erodes, or whether
these points of reference –

breakers of foam on your razor, smooth
river-stones of your shoulders, shining

whalebone of your hip – have slipped
into unconscious seas, and my skin is the fish

which no longer feels the waves, my senses
are faithless as sand, and this is why

I scribble charts of you, haul in shoals
of your words, sketch the precise drape

of sheet when you sleep, why my fingers
log the swell of a blue-soft vein, why,

when you tell me you love me
I sing to myself in the roiling dark:

I am in the heart of the sea

I am in the heart.

The way of a man with a maiden

You pluck a poinciana, walk me through humid rain
around your childhood block. Thank you,

you say, for coming here, and the flame tree's bloom
is a blood-rush to my cheek. I can't explain

why fertile chance delivered you to me,
why until this journey I have not acknowledged

your uprooting. In every story you are alone.
I tuck the flower behind my ear, stoop

to a kangaroo paw's black fist, send seeds
rattling like departing trains: clumsy on your trail

I make a mess of spoor, and can't tell
what it is that I have broken underfoot,

how to tread down the past. At the lawn's edge,
locked out of your home, you are as weary

as a man grown used to desert. I cling
to your hand, don't have the words you need.

In the hotel I stroke the petals' bruises,
mesmeric as wounds. Beneath the sheet

your hands are the flower
 a displaced heart, aflame
you track me seed me tell me you will never
 go away