

A GLASS OF WATER

Un seul verre d'eau éclaire le monde Cocteau

Behind the wedding couple, a mirror harbours
their reception.

Outside, from the verandah, the harbour mirrors
the exception
of city from sky, hills snug with houses

and a glass of water standing on the railing,
half empty or half full. In the failing

afternoon light
brightening buildings counterpoint the darkness,
glinting upside-
down inside the glass, and the newly-weds,
seen from outside

joining hand to hand for the wedding reel,
glide under its meniscus, head over heels.

PHANTOM LIMB

My enemy reminds me of my father:
the smell of smoke and newsprint, and the eye

behind the lens. I cannot understand the likeness:
my father was kind,

but he, my enemy,
deceives me from his empty office;

besides, my father has been dead for fourteen years.
I haven't seen my enemy for one,

but a semblance persist. He is a length of mind
which has no end. He harvests anger

and his name is myth.
His limbs hang loose and powerless,

his reasons, features, falter into word-mist,
but still he hurts me with his snarling smile.

I dreamt of him the other night
— wood is ash's dream of being whole —

and when I woke, the only clue
to what I'd lost, like a tingling nose before the lie

was an itch where nothing itched before,
a phantom absence: the limb I never knew I had, excised.

SOIL

The earth is growing in me, clump by clump,
a butting fastness, anchoring but intimate
as a scar, an out of bounds moving in.
Perhaps that's why dreams take longer,

lately, to wander out of, as morning tilts at noon
and hope resumes its blind battering.
Soon orbs of wet clay, once eyes
will scan and frame in this cave of bone

but until then I'll keep on losing balance
as if half of me were air, the other ink
for a small obituary, or a small grimoire,
a B-grade movie prop scripted to burst into flame.

VELOCITY

A dying man's eyes alive
with the light of television.
Mushrooms, banished by light.
Shadows prop up capped roofs
or fall from gill-ribbed eaves.
A man dying, watching mushrooms,
Swiss browns like ragged penises,
the light of the television flaring
bluishly around his head: a halo
sprouting in the dark, invisible
to his gaze, caught up as it is
with mushrooms. A former boss appears
on the screen in an advertisement
for laxatives. He appears
not to have aged at all, the ex-boss, that is,
although television adds kilos,
subtracts years and scatters spores
of information in the dark.
He's still bald, the ex-boss,
although the man dying is not
that flush with hair either. From underneath
a dirty white toadstool scalp
the ex-boss tries to impose
his authority on people he can't see,
feeding them his image in the dark,
a straw mushroom with no hair
and a dirty beard, bear arms
a little like the prophet Elisha.
On the table is a letter
from another (only just!)
ex-boss, the form guide, the remote.

The man dying alone in the room
no longer feels entirely alone
even though nobody objects to
or remarks on his rapid transformation:
enoki toes, monkey-headed,
two Jews' ears, scaly teeth
and a flicking, russular tongue
and rolling around in his stalk-necked
head, two eyes like black diamonds
scan the screen which scans at twenty-four
frames per second, a single line
from top to bottom flinging
pixels to the four corners of the room.
He is all flesh, a springy cloud
flecked with points of green, red and blue
alone in a room with a television,
a table and on it a box bedded with straw
budding rapid globes, the whites
of upturned eyes. If he lives
long enough, he plans to change
his name: Morel, he thinks, or Mirabeau,
Teonanacatl or possibly Boletus.
He would walk to the registry office
in the shade of his parasol, wearing
a coolie hat, but given the speed
of his decline he must be content instead
to wait for the sudden flare of trumpets,
yellow chanterelles preferably,
which will announce his last vision:
a forest of upstarts burgeons out of nothing,
each trying to overshadow the other.

LAGOON

This is where I come from if it's true
to say I come from somewhere not just
anywhere south of the Imagination,
where they came from, ended up,
warty hills of the Monaro
or an Irish quag.
It's Lagoon, with wind-tussocked, wrinkled
hills worn down to a murmur
that claims me.
Flat skied, convict-shaped
earth, the barren sweep
from Tannas Mount knuckled
with Bathurst quartz, small and obedient
noon shadows: this is where justice
jammed them, impatient and impenitent
forebears transported for a brace
of crimes: possession
of a stolen lamb,
highway robbery
and other, nameless filchings cancelled
by oblivion.
It's hard to tell exactly where
it was: the lagoon has forgotten
itself, drowned
under Chifley Dam's
green skin brailled by metallic rain,
or a mired bend in Campbell's River
where dragonflies whirr in a spectral frenzy
like solid drops of petrol darting in the sun.

I have inherited their future
born of silent massacres,
patient weathering
of the cold fastness of hills
and endurance of each summer's baked mirages.
They mastered the art of sticking
to the narrow furrows of their lives
whereas I have learnt
only the art of streets,
sailing between their guttered shores
on that new ocean, traffic.
Every trace of them has vanished.
There is a school there now,
where children, yet to learn
that dreams are what make death real,
play in the stark sun.
Horse studs
gather along the creek
and they stand there, fluid
flanks shiny in wintered light
chewing and staring down
impostors in their midst.
Time has stolen it,
evaporated family mysteries
like the slow death of a photograph
of the old farm,
like neap days
pinched of history.

DEATH BY WATER 2

It's little wonder I write about water.
Seven generations ago, having shot his load
of rum and sperm in Sydney Cove,
Stephen Tuckerman, Captain of the USS Carolina
disappeared off the coast of Chile with all his crew,
Lieutenant Neil McKellar of the NSW Corps,
despatches from Governor King and the sword
of Captain John Macarthur.

He left behind
an illegitimate son whose daughter,
Mary was widowed in 1856
when her husband, Thomas L'Estrange
drowned while attempting to swim on horseback
across the Cudgegong River then in flood.
The man who tried to rescue him
drowned as well. A raft was built
and eight men were awarded medals
in 1857 'in approval of exertions
made to recover the bodies of persons drowned.'
One of these eight was Harry Albury
whose grandson had Joe Wilson tell
of how he'd 'helped drag two bodies
out of the Cudgegong River in a flood,
and they weren't sleeping beauties.'

One hundred
and eight years later Thomas and Mary's grand-daughter
nursed me, her great-grandson, in her arms.
That's what happens with death by water:
fiction flows into fact, fact into fiction
and rising up in a flood of words
the past spreads out beyond the present,
carrying into life its drifting dead.

THE BABY BOOMERS

It is the present. The stars are almost as they were, unnameable constellations imperfectly identified as bears, a Pontiac convertible, a celtic cross, a seagull or an albatross, by four friends gazing at attention from the balcony of a holiday house on a nameless river near the coast. It's where they've come to stay after the wedding of some other friends, 'joining in early autumn light' despite the summer heat. Temporary, fragile derricks pump red oil from their uncovered limbs and then take off, syringing around their ears. The Hunter Valley cabernet is almost gone; whiffing up from the river, the therapeutic sound of tiny waves shiatsuing the shore. Property is their new religion, they are its breathless acolytes; the cogwheels of their conversation, negatively geared are running back towards the day's quiet revolution, sleep.

Morning ploughs the living room through blinds.
They surface like pink bathyspheres and float around the house.
The birds zoom in and out of trees, cicadas fume noise.
Midriiffs, thighs, creased earlobes, whiskered jowls: municipally pink.
Grey-timbered trees erupt in vivid, yellow-throated song.
Julie flexes, stretches studiously, sexually important.
Sounds without name move among the forest-floor leaves.
Tinkle of spoons on plates, the slamming fridge, the toaster ballista.
An osprey gathering up the day, lifting it higher, motionless.
After showers patinas of sweat keep on returning.

On stilts: the timber holiday house sounding
the steep escarpment down to the morning river bank;
flavour walking through their midday meal,
a Julie special, she cannot judge the quantities;
Tony almost walks on water, sagging in the rivermud
as he attempts a circus crossing, a rehearsal
to impress the kids later on; their conversation —
they haven't been together, in a group,
without children for quite some time.
So alcohol's their lantern, over Pictionary®;
inspiration bulbs and dims, invigorates the old
alliances, the new conceits, the rediscovered myths.

Every now and then a thought occurs to them:
the sky is in pieces (it must be something
a witchdoctor said) with nothing in between.
How do they know this? Because they remember
the fitting apart, the falling together
decades ago, which is another country.

Barry lifts the lid on past invention,
the masses' stoichiometry, the city's ravelled streets.
It sort of all coheres, as cold air gathers
underneath the fridge, because it leaks
and cobwebs billow slyly at its back.
There's a recipe for depression,
tailored just for him. How did they know?
His heart is in the right place, so they tell him,
it's his eyes . . . cross-eyed and clueless,
'the people' cheer him on! In an avocado suit
he braves the waves, thinking 'what if
money were see-through? The emperor's new notes?'
A thousand gulls are recrudescing on the beach.
Where will it end, the waves' instinctive violence,
the sweep of galactic arms into nothingness?

Debbie lobsters lazily inside all afternoon:
is it super that she's worried about or the complement
of what they do not have? Barry promised everything
and almost got there. Almost: that leaves out gravity,
against which she's been waging war for years. Horizontally,
or lifted by a wave, she's shackled by it and, what's worse,
she knows she's in the wrong, and it is right. That's why she smokes,
she privately admits, that and monumental boredom.

Barry cannot read. He used to, but no longer. His brain refuses, point-blank, like a mule. He'll put it out to graze on newsprint, novels, channel-surfing, traffic signs and menus but it demurs, skips to the end, seeks out the passing cleavage. He doesn't even read his own reports, they're fiction anyway, and have a growing readership: he hates the demographic. From time to time he'll hover over the paper, skimming the stars.

Tony *is* technology, he sometimes thinks aloud, in the third person. That's why Julie's carnal empire interests him, he thinks of it as one long line of code:
SetConnect = Julie.CreateObject Connect.Open

 'IntimateConversation'

Intimate.Conversation.SetName = 'Luscious Pie'

Query = "SELECT * FROM Luscious Pie"

Query = Query & "WHERE Mood = 'concupiscent' AND Light
 = 'Candle'

Option Explicit On

Option Strict On

INSERT into 'Luscious Pie' VALUES 'yes' 'more' 'please' 'again'

Response.Write "aaah"

She can't understand how they have suddenly grown old. The Julie thing was its peak when kumera was king, pesto its prince and sun-dried tomatoes were almost de rigeur, the currency of chic. Pediments were pastel, 'postmodern' was a seasoning she used to spice her works: buildings the shade of eyeliner and blush; the neo-, pseudo-classical porticoes, non-primary colours. And plinths.

Now it's all passé; the flavourings have changed, the money is the same and she looks young, despite the fact she isn't. Design is a drug, it cures the future of banality: that's what she does; her ageing edifices keep her young, and hungering after clean lines, she architects a world where holidays are R&D, or so says her accountant.

Debbie lights another gold-tipped cigarette and lies back on the foam mattress. It's so hot, Barry dissolves ice cubes in his beer. The sky is bubbling like a spoon and there's a war in the Gulf. Again. This time they're not sure whose side they're on or even if there are sides. Tony says his Volvo has a cold. Imagine that! Girl in Coma Writes Novel, the radio seems to say, or maybe it's a line from a Latin American poet without subtitles, or something like that. Once they used to walk about naked but an avalanche of flesh means that history now repeats itself, like that blimp recurring through the palms, saying, Mozart. Is that a liqueur, Julie wonders, or just a tropical whatever, himself or cosmic radiation, she's so out of touch. Even here they are in the suburbs. Who cares about the wedding cake or the religion hidden between the jokes? Like furry scabs, flies encrust the drink-rings on the table and a periscope impales the air. Is it Nemo on the verge of surfacing or a swizzle-stick out of all perspective? Like tattered underwear, too many questions hang limply in the air. Cornelius Toad to Secret Squirrel, are you reading me, over? But Tony's leaning sideways as he slaloms around a bend and doesn't hear (Dirtbox Megadeath III, the Final Reckoning) and Barry's off

on a tangent anyway, his chest hurts from reading far too much
about cigarettes or the sublime 'again' in Heidelberg
School light, or maybe it's just Debbie giving him a hard time
about his deafness. When did everyone learn to speak Russian?
Poems lie around the room, stiff as ruined joints.
I was beautiful once, says Julie, and quite probably sane.

The river keeps rebooting. An empty crate rebels against
the tide. A yellow scum plaques the river's banks and glides,
like a future thick with disappointment, downstream. The present
has been smoking for some time without any sign
of dissolving into flame. Photographs without colour
pulse on unctuous water. The question is not, 'is it
art?' but how much it is worth, so Barry reckons. An opal
irritated out of clouds, the moon drops into their drinks
and Julie, agape at the stars, starts to get quite sentimental
when she thinks how violently they burn, how long
they've blazed before they all were born and how, despite surviving
them for several billion years, even the stars will die.
Debbie, stalled above a chessboard in her fat bikini,
sarong and sandals, stoops to conquer Barry's white — it's mate.
He's saddened there's no antidote for perfect beauty.
While they go on waiting, Tony's aliens respawn.
Like another 'situation' years ago, they're younger than they think.
He coughs and a cloud begins to weep on Julie, on the deck
a shiny rash appears, becomes a beating film advancing
towards the double doors, and still the children haven't called.

THE WELL

for Bill Dunbar

Not choked yet, the well persists
 in a flurry of unbecoming
leaves and sinews of a baroque
 vine whose pendant harmonica-
ribbed pods rattle and scrape
 the shelved neck of river
rocks like lobes hanging heavy
 with jewellery; surmounting
the mouth a hipped party-hat
 roof dangles a streamer
bucketed metres down with water.
 May flies obituarise
themselves in busy lines and summer
 foretells its own demise
in dense explosions of chlorophyll.
 Floored by the heat neither
frogs nor pleasure prosper
 but, busy trapping light,
spiders transform leaves
 from outside to interior
with a predatory intricate curling.
 Aiming for the stagnant mirror
of the garden pond the sun
 misses and instead strikes
the horizon. Mosquitos mass on the border
 of night and day and launch
their sorties through the heavy

lingerie of elephant's
ear, the phosphorescent wake
of snails and their faint
fury. Over it all the moon
presides in its high black bench,
blind and stern and fattening
on what it keeps
for itself, its cold and necessary
justice. Otherwise
nights would bleed into sparse dawns
and the sun would rise
like a guillotine, only to fall
at noon down the deep
pit of the well. Strange, isn't it,
how the well is always
full and how the spray of cicada-
song leaves you perfectly
dry; stranger, though, is how
the bucket, like the pre-
dawn sun, seems to come up
before it has risen, ablaze
with subterranean glistening,
clearing the snarled throat
of the well with a slight wobble,
a slight splash of the new.

THE EYE

sits on an idea
like a city on its contours,
sharpening lights and slanting shadows.
Inside it lurk dark pockets:
its blind spot clouds the sky.

This city plays the fool; a nasty fool
with loaded fists and sullen flesh
who's hatched an ugly starburst on my face.

The inanely beautiful world goes on:
trees bend and flutter, plums draw the future
into swelling wholes,
taxis graze the streets.
My eye, a hungry nomad,
ranges through the shadow music of the city,
mind-shaded and flat,
cloud-brewed and vengeful,

searching lachrymal corners,
leaving an eye-shaped hole
wherever it lights, hunting
a vision into its socket.