

## WOMAN AND DOG

A woman and a dog walked all day  
beside the non-moving canal.  
People who walk dogs displace themselves:

the dog sniffs and leads, harnesses  
a human soul, spirit and flesh  
willing or not. Its human-dog eyes

cradle the walkable world – a happy place –  
a brimming here-and-yet. The canal  
neither followed nor lagged behind.

There was the simplified world, on either side, green  
fields and red houses. There was the little pub  
they always got to.

So long they trudged, two bodies and one  
soul, so many miles,  
the paws began to bleed.

Little flecks of ruby blood glittered the black  
rubbery pads, as if the dog was inking out  
all the sadness of the woman.

And the woman, being just strong enough,  
gathered up the dog (not a small one)  
and carried it all the way home, wherever that was.

## OLDER SISTER

Deputy-mother of her maybe rivals,  
love swings on and off.

Mary Poppins, Miss Hannigan,  
spit-spot and slap-slap.

When parents say, she is shot like a comet  
into adulthood, to govern babies or keep  
the ship of housework sailing.

Larger than adult, smaller than child,

chore-hungry and chore-fed,  
a machine-child sweating at the iron.  
Her fingers fly, her eyes are stone;  
a ghost to herself, she body-and-soul becomes

the order that sorts the washing,  
shyly perfecting the nappy's origami,  
pressing the fatherly hankies  
into high-piled civil squares.

On the floor, four toddlers sprawl  
like dropped grenades: stilled by *Babar*,  
that delicate French family of bourgeois-  
monarch elephants and mint-

green apple-studded trees that float  
through the screen and fill the timber house  
that noses at the sky like Noah's Ark,  
its cargo more than all the world.

It is like an order she has made:  
four sisters, their hair still gleaming  
in the braids she yanked into shape that morning.  
Their future tantrums wait inside her throat,

she swallows them and keeps the peace.  
The house teeters, creaks.  
She slips out, climbs the voiceless apple tree,  
squats quiet as a dove that ate the olive branch.

The babies drift by like clouds, their smiles  
strung with cosmic spittle: she crouches,  
a monster, hardened and un-hardened,  
forming and re-forming,

eyes red with metamorphosis,  
deep in the smell of feathers, wing-wax,  
whirring breath,  
she leaps from the apple tree,

lands in the kitchen, an angel,  
and like four little kittens, the children  
curl around her silk-slippered feet:  
she pours them 'baby tea' – six sugars, all milk.

## THE WEATHERBOARD AT MENZIES CREEK

*The painted partrich lyes in every field,*

*And, for thy messe, is willing to be kill'd.*     Jonson, 'To Penshurst'

You, Peter, showing me how to build  
a bonfire expertly,  
miraculous as a Monet haystack,  
the rubbish ordered (loved) into form:  
the ten-year-old holiday farm lad  
near Salisbury in Wiltshire

sixty years ago, learning in a single day  
to make a rick. Apprentice at dawn,  
master at noon, knowing exactly  
the pitch and catch, you shrank  
time into workshape, small mastery of matter  
loosening the spirit:

the flame rapidly, thinly  
teething up through an igloo  
of ash, and smoke steadily  
shuffling outwards, not sideways to neighbours  
but out across the valley to the clear  
space your stark cypresses guard.

The local animals aren't suiciding  
into your hands. But, fluent in the semiotics  
of the French butcher's window's  
'beef anthology', you could use  
'every part, except the hair in the ear',  
almost justifying the kill.

If sick or self-engulfed when I come here,  
my devils are deflected  
by a stronger joy:  
yours and Nóirín's, who, closing seventy,  
left Cardiff to marry you here. Beloved  
as a woman out of Hardy,

she matches you in gusto and attack;  
keeps viable this humble living.

The morning bread  
swells in the truck-red aga,  
your making hands  
smoulder through arthritis.

## THE POEM

One doesn't want to end up  
like one's mother.  
(One says 'end up'  
as if that would be the end.)  
Mother never wanted  
to be like her mother,  
nor did her mother nor hers . . .  
You shall inherit,  
the mother-mother spirit says.

Whether or not  
one becomes a mother  
(in the end),  
mothers  
exist for daughters as surely as the hills,  
being both hill and hill-shadow  
there with the sun,  
cosying up with the night.

They will come with helpful tea,  
digestive scones,  
years of advice,  
anxiety that unravels like intestines  
to cover 60 tennis courts,  
splendid as a family fleece  
inscribed with gems for every worry,  
every joy, every how-to-muster-love.

And no mother is wholly mother.  
That is the splinter: the still-there self  
longing to be other, to be whatever  
new thing a child is meant to be.  
I dreamt I looked after  
my child-mother in the park,  
marvellous little likeness  
with the family violet eyes:  
how foolishly she trusted me,

not knowing how I'd change her,  
not seeing how my fingerprint glowed  
already on her forehead.

Not being a mother,  
I wonder where my spirit will go.  
Perhaps into that aged blue that sometimes  
is the sky.  
The instant my grandmother died,  
in another city,  
I fell into bed with a god-splitting headache.  
Later learning of her death, I went outside  
teeming with her secrets,  
wrestling with the little mad gene-parcelled demons  
that light up the brain and  
harrow-vanquish the soul.

## TRAMPOLINING

*for Chris*

The fattest eternity is childhood,  
minutes stuffed with waiting  
and the just-there world  
deferred to an afterlife of joy  
where magically we outgrow  
what could tell us what to do:

we sat cross-legged on the floor, quiet  
as the glad-wrapped biscuits on the supper-table,  
a summer school-night boiling over  
with nightmare prayers  
in somebody's Adelaide livingroom,  
fed air by a cooler on rollers,

our pastor bellowing at the helm,  
hell's ore in his flame-cheeks.  
Gorby, Reagan and Thatcher went  
chasing round his head with bombs:  
*explode the world* and bring  
the roaring-back of God-the-parent!

The grown-ups stamped their thonged  
and sandalled feet on the carpet:  
the mortgages and what they worked for,  
the chip pan bubbling every night at six,  
the hand-me-downs all forced to fit:  
*oh take it Satan, it's all yours . . .*



Any day we'd be whooshed up to heaven;  
and the kids at school, their parents,  
cousins, dogs,  
sucked up and funnelled  
into hell's gated suburb, far out  
where no public transport would travel.

But my brother and I were saving up  
for a trampoline: its coming required  
every cent of our faith  
that we might be allowed to remain  
in the human world a bit longer,  
to have it and jump on it: to believe

in the leaden feet sunk in the cool summer grass,  
the springy canopy shooting us up  
above the apple trees, all day and well into dusk,  
touching heaven with our hair,  
our tongues, our fingertips, then sommersaulting,  
shrieking and tumbling

back down into the miracle, or whatever  
it was: the thing not yet taken, the present-tense,  
cast off by the adults for the kids to play with.

## NOTES FOR THE TIME BEING

*How many sonnets must we write  
before the great gong sounds in Heaven?* Peter Porter

Relieved like a criminal  
at last apprehended  
and tricked out of daylight.  
Will I be you again?

Too much freedom  
is not enough.  
How large or small the world  
where time fits.

Terrible thing a head  
from which no thought escapes.  
As the world said  
good-bye to you

it grew small and glazy,  
a thing seen beneath tears  
as when a child says good-bye  
to a too-much-trouble pet.

~

Soul frees itself  
(from something),  
or tries to imagine  
it gone, the heavy –

still carrying  
what's precious  
– the gold, the old –  
and the fuse hope.

Thrown into light, thrown into dark,  
etc. Where does illness live,  
what does it want?  
And sits before the Sybil,

begging for speech.  
Describe your fear.  
How do you feel out of 10?  
Out of 9?

~

Soul is confused, sad for no reason,  
can't remember;  
sits in her chair and stares  
like someone much older  
who'll never again remember.

Weeps, as if out of the corner  
of humanity's loose mouth;  
her tears are lost coins, spilling down  
the loud spiral of that machine,  
somewhere in eternity, that codes them:

Grief 1, Grief 2, and  
how unusual: Griefs 11 and 19.  
And sometimes, of course, there is joy,  
also for no reason – here you ask  
what has reason got to do with it? –

## DESCRIPTION OF A RITUAL

*Freeling Cemetery, SA – i.m. Valda Ince, 1935–2008*

Life a mere flash, or flesh –  
coins-as-headlights winking in the daylight,  
and we are all in Charon's dinghy.  
Our creeping vehicles fog up  
with family gossip: then our car-sized groups  
dissolve into a clan, semi-strangers with like faces,  
attending the secular comforts of religion.  
Nobody is damned or redeemed.

We're flowers that open and shut, we endure  
shiftily in memory. And the dead  
have afterlife in local habitation and a name.  
This place she chose for herself, the burial  
modelled on her friend's, last Winter – the cemetery  
fringed with cypresses and a caravan park,  
its modest frontier of headstones  
facing out miles of unborn suburbs.

Her graveside is formal as a picnic, a row of chairs  
along the edge for those who will most  
weep, her grandmother-daughters,  
seeding her down with tears  
a water-holding grave can hold. They are bowed  
by afterlove that the dead, leaving the world's cold,  
drape around the living like a coat,  
but the sons and grandsons, flanked behind them,

bearded and pony-tailed,  
are inscrutable as the Pictish ancestors  
we may or may not share. Green slithering hoists  
unravelling to its fathom, its *this-far-no-further*,  
the coffin goes one finite down,  
and a pungent, non-descript hell  
remains above, digesting *love-never-enough*,  
embryo losses hatching in the open air.

Adopted to child a marriage, she  
knitted herself into new blood,  
then seven came by birth.  
She was their principal Sister from the elsewhere  
of First, keeper of all goodness and terror.  
Her toddler brothers shadowed her to school,  
she smuggled them in and fed them  
what she knew of the world.

And in death she is adopted again, the first  
(as an adult) to die. Her ageing brothers and sisters  
carry and bury her, their own in words of stone,  
and scattered in anecdotes.  
How glad she would be to zip away,  
gripping the wheel with hungry speed  
as my father does, for once at peace with GPS,  
the slightly-rights and worldly lefts.

## THE ORCHARDIST

*Renmark, South Australia (Riverland)*

In the bitten dusk, his lemons  
gleamed their own light, too much, too rich for harvest.  
He was blacklisted, we later learned, for cheating workers,  
the wretched flesh, unpredictable as weather,  
he hated to need. Two kids aged 9 and 10 had spidered  
words in Romanian on the bedroom wall  
in the derelict fruitpickers' house.

At night we walked the river, following its curves  
that wound us out to where a redgum  
stood marooned at water's edge, fossilised in thirst;  
a sliver of silver still flashing  
in the cavernous bed, eluding, for now,  
the underground stealthwork of pipes tugging the river  
out of itself, into the ticking sprinklers.

At dawn we were into the fragrant avenues of citrus,  
dreamily caught in the strangeness of labour.  
Throwing our ladders on the mass of a laden tree,  
lunging blind into the leaves, we learned  
by hand instead of heart; our finger-muscles  
rippling up, reaching and grabbing, tearing the fruit  
from its branch as if from a painting.

All day the farmer circled on his tractor, mad as a bull-rider,  
lurching on thick dry mud-tracks braided yesterday  
and yesterday, shouting *Truck coming tomorrow!*  
as if to say, *The end of the world!* On our last day  
his neighbours mushroomed in the avenues  
to help; sauntering past us, he glinted in defiance: *I hire  
a million dollars and grow this up from nothing!*



## ODE TO COLERIDGE

Feeling around in the human,  
as if inside a sack, soul fends for itself,  
fends off, prunes, cultivates,  
eliminates,  
makes itself up, says  
'is this right?'  
(and tries to be reasonably consistent)

tending itself, lurches like Sisyphus  
into forwardness, backwardness,  
urges itself to form a comma,  
something next, next,  
please move along now, please,  
same again thanks,  
as usual.

Dialogues of Soul and Body  
seem bureaucratically polite.  
The one complains of being chained by the other,  
much like the married,  
each certain of its own bounds.  
What is darkness,  
where does it come from?

Heavy as our fleshload,  
weightless  
as petals.  
Here comes the train in the tunnel  
(a cold blasty wind comes first and stiffens us)  
will you step in front of it by some  
sleepwalking whim?

Nature's anti-depressants:  
some trees, blue blue blue  
a three-legged dog  
running as if on four,  
a pet pigeon on the windowsill,  
feet planted on the tired old clay of its own shit,  
or a lone goat, tethered to a field it eats tidy,

skies and delicious rain  
there on brain's doorstep.  
Wordsworth climbed Mt Snowdon,  
setting off at couching-time to meet  
the climbing sun  
'forehead bent Earthward, as if in opposition set  
against an enemy'.

Stepping up,  
grimly, grimly out of primordial self,  
bearing what can't be left,  
skull's cargo, hellbent thoughts.  
What does he want?  
To survive, a wandering human,  
by some 'fit converse with the spiritual world'.

Nature his accomplice.  
To climb a mountain is to climb himself.  
His childhood is a looming rock,  
silently glided towards  
by the man remembering,  
the child approaching,  
then one or the other or both

oaring away in terror.  
He cannot know who stole the boat.  
'There was a boy',  
he mutters to himself.  
Nothing much happens.  
The naked moon  
pleases with a tricky light, the mist

rears up and writhes  
its 'ocean' about his shoes.  
His mind, greedy,  
opens its trap.  
Magician, he breathes free  
the soul he keeps chained  
like an animal inside him.