

Labour and Capital

I worked with a man who could hardly breathe:
a chest like a forty-four gallon drum,
shoulders three pick-handles across.

Used to being a big man his voice was now two sizes too small,
and his body hung like a droughty scarecrow's –
they had put him in charge of the sweepers.

He told me. Wheezing. Coughing. Eyes watering
like it was the first morning smoke. About relining
the blast furnace with high temperature bricks.

Good news for the share-holders, down-time
got less and less (a pause for air) as the boss
found ways of getting back into the furnace sooner.

Two sugar bags, fore and aft, dripping wet,
a steaming sandwich-board
as soon as you stepped in the oven,

your breath cooled from dry lime-kiln white
into scalding fog. He hawked the memory from his lungs.
And then you laid red-hot bricks with leather gloves.

The smell of burning hide as you picked out bricks
told you what your feet knew through your boots,
this is what sunday school had promised,

and now you were in it even though you hadn't
broken any commandment except covet
your neighbour's new fridge and car.



Five minutes before you were relieved,
though that went up to seven when
the credit squeeze was on, and ten off,

for four hours, then a break, and back
into it, week after week, all through
the prosperous fifties when all was well.

Dockyard

Mother's sewing room but run by men

filthy with rust and dust, steel fabric is cut
by flaming scissors, sparks, blobs of hot metal
glue the gusseted bits, and seams of rivet pins
run round the paunch of the belted keelson

and over there is a mangle bending
crusted sheets, wringing the last drop out
before the steel sets into complex curves
hung out to dry on a bony bush of ribs

dark and dirt, mazes with red-lead hedges,
companionways and three-storey heights
inside the nave of the engine room,
sphinctered hoses, chalked graffiti, mother

is another world, of ticking treadle,
damp comfort of a hissing pot,
the lavender gloom of linen presses,
a footfall in the hallways of sleep

away from the suck of poppet valves,
the stamp of steam hammers, the stink
of flux and electric arcs, somewhere
beyond the slipway where in months

this inert metal with its fields of force,
steam, fire, oil, water – the womb of men,
will slide into its proper world,
launched at last into that other sex.



Pastings

Someone, and it's not you,
has the ball,
and that's bad news

it means a red rising weal
on back or leg
from a wet tennis ball

anything above the shoulder's out
too bad about the rest:
sectioned like a butcher's chart

you try the shadow of a tree
anorexic star pickets
pure speed, shameless pleas

to no avail – the executioner comes
for a crime you've never heard:
point blank, strapped in the chair

tied to the post, trapdoor hung,
this is it: pain then release
and of course no tears

and free again, absolved
bashed into you
that flight and submission are a game

Making hay

At Hay itself

where the outback backs out of the tentflap of desert
I saw a dead tree fruiting with galahs
pink in a winter sunset
each a lantern lighting this
'vestibular Hesperides'
big words for the narrow neck
of seeing something you want others to see.

I wonder if that is the point of poetry
to reach some stage of journey
to enter Hay and see some emblem
of your life and hope it is for others too
or whether it should be the opposite:
pass through the door of those pink suns
and enter that other world
everyone knows but you are blind to:

the poet not as seer or prophet
but the vacuum-cleaner that sucks up
all the dried-out thoughts of others,
watches the galahs roost and waits for dawn,
and that fresh incarnation of who we are
lit in a new transfiguring light –
the poet transformed by others into himself,
by language pumping through the conduit
of the self, the spear sunk deep into the spring.



Load the car
pack the lunch
and fill water bags at the bore
we're off to find the western limit
where even this new sun will die.

Dragons

for Bobby

There must be a deep need for them
for although Nature in all her experiments
never got round to dragons,
there they are:

winged like fruit bats, serpent-scaled,
cats'-eyed, owl-wise,
and talking in parrot-tongues,
but most of all imbued with human breath
capable of razing forests,
turning ice mountains to melt-water
and making deserts from ungulate savannahs.

They are us:
virgin hungry,
solitary but necessarily social,
full of mysterious destiny,
but never fully in control.

They are our other:
extinct, before they're born.



Making waves

it was good to wake up this morning knowing nothing except
there was a seep of light under the lids, someone had lifted the lid,
just to see if anything was living inside yes – here I am: real and
unimagined just like yesterday, a pearl still in its shell, globular,
perfect but jet, ink, dark and sequestered, not pierced and strung
by hours around the neck, unnatural, the real being what is known
when the box is opened and the wave collapses into a sphere of
dawn light grey, pink, cyan, blue, then white
the eye

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a lake, lacquered crimson, smeared with an algal bloom of light
shallow in mud then sand flats where whiting wait
or leatherjacket slouch round weed, proof against hooks

where jetties tiptoe in morning mist, boards bleaching,
piles askew thigh-deep in mud, scabbed with white oyster ulcers,
and waves are cat-licks at the lawn where the sleep-drowned man

lolls in his deck-chair, hears the faint scratch of tongue on
the bank,
suck, suck, unstoppable, mincing up matter and years, waves
hungry to be flesh, to get to a point, consuming themselves

*

in a bay you need a long line to catch anything, long and wavy like the old metres used to catch the attention of the dozy and drunk, a line for story-telling, which says the bay

bowl-deep is perfect for eye-drinking at sunset and salute to the day which has gone, and perfect for making the soft susurrations of the deep ocean heard:

it babbles through the night window open to summer holidays with that old story, how's it go? this way will do
i am the sound of all things, the sum of none for i am everything

i am your blood, the flux of atoms and the freeze of things:
the fall of a wave on a silver beach is the first thing you will hear, and the gasp of its relapse the last:

and the story – the sine curve to climax – is waves laid over interfering and fitting, humped in chaos, slumped in order until there is only one line you hear

clear as the mosquito in the dark, but yours alone seen and heard by no-one else, as it follows your blood-beat:
the bay to a ten-year old is the way to fifty and will be here

when all the points which make you up are scattered,
but what you heard one night will still be heard as your wave propagates into that deeper bowl, the southern lights

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surf, on a reef, on a beach, even in open sea, is the wave
made visible
that's surf, toppling in white caps when force breaks out of
the skin,
pure threads of energy mazing across green-marble flats of sea,
as clear from the 'plane as webs of ejaculate from
supernovae to unblinking cameras,
it's the hiss and spit of tumbling particles
thrown out of the first moments
white sound out of a terrible darkness,
it's the crested and plumed fore-runners
of the most ancient of kings racing in to meet you,
passing you in turmoil
sliding around you, touching, teasing,
throwing you to the heavens,
but only once taking you with them,
it's the sound of disaster, sudden hard rock in the sweet yielding,
tooth aground on a foreign shore,
it's the ever-present talk of adults through the night wall
to those who live near it,
it's presence at a distance,
remote and consoling as submarine cable calls,
it's surf,
the moody mind more real to us than ourselves, surf –
ocean speaking,
the only god to speak to all of us, maker of prayers.

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a thrown stone, tide over a bar, a tap drip,
are syllogisms of a sort,
a particular become a universal,
where energy passes from one state to another
the camel drives through the eye of the copula to become
something beyond categories,
and the verb 'to be' predicates itself:

a thrown stone hits the surface of water
as a word passes into your mind hurled
there by someone else breaking your order

and the waves ride out solar systems on the water
and the word sounds out the edges of your mind
then reflects inward, coming back but changing

that's the verb 'to be'
protean but still the same underneath it all
just as a wave hits its own reflection
cancels and amplifies into
the complex sentence
which unwinds
here on the still
surface of the screen
advancing argument
retreating qualification
until it disappears exhausted
in the static of a point

