

First Love

Titian's Young Englishman with a Glove, circa 1530

It happened in Physics,
reading a Library art book under the desk,
(the lesson was Archimedes in the bath)
I turned a page and fell
for an older man, and anonymous at that,
hardly ideal –
he was four hundred and forty-five,
I was fourteen.
'Eureka!' streaked each thought
(I prayed no-one would hear)
and Paradise all term
was page 179
(I prayed no-one would guess).
Of course
my fingers, sticky with toffee and bliss,
failed to entice him from his century;
his cool grey stare
fastened me firmly in mine.
I got six overdues,
suspension of borrowing rights
and a D in Physics.
But had by heart what Archimedes proves.
Ten years later I married:
a European with cool grey eyes,
a moustache,
pigskin gloves.



Seascape with Young Girl

for Eve-Marie

The heat seethes dragonflies,
their sheen, the exact colour of flight;
pink orchids stretch on wispy stems
not-quite rope tricks.

She pauses for a moment on the path
where tangled tea-trees shine
with Old Man's Beard;
two skinks glissando through her hands
and a stumpy-tail, lichen-patched, in the sun,
recognizes her with a long Jurassic gaze.

She thuds at any hidden snake
and a pair of blue wrens split the air,
splice it up, disappear.

At last – a spill of sand,
the first steep slope, a slap of wind
and before her the smiling sea.
Left and right, the dunes loll
lion-colour. Below,
the light bleeds silver on water;
a rainbow sail windsurfs the inshore green
and cries of gulls and children thin into air,
pure as the notes of a pipe.

Suddenly on the next knoll, in one quick leap,
there's a boy – slanting eyes, curly hair –
capering, he slings a stone,



whistles and swoops and rolls and will be seen.
Her eyes fine to horizons,
the line of her throat and chin
is smooth as the headland and as remote;
she will not notice him.
And just as suddenly he's gone.
Her neck acknowledges an absence.

The rainbow sail is down;
wavelets fawn, bright-fanged, on the beach:
the day's a haze of white noise,
tinnitus of tomorrow.
Everything's far away,
is within reach.



Honey

When I return
to the pine beach house
the bare end room reeks of honey:
hundreds of bees
drowse in the ooze of light
below the blind.

A large one still alive
is urgently spiralling out
the *Apis mellifera* seventeen-point
Survival Plan.

My two sons slept here once
in a chaos of Scrabble and paperbacks.
And now my daughter has gone
to a land whose ways
are formal and precise as bees.

When they were very young
excess of anything was wealth –
pebbles, acorns, summer days.
So I am rich in redolent air
and peaceful bees.

As I sweep them up
they lift and whisper,
hushing me with their
black-gold word of autumn.
By morning the remaining one
is curled on the sill.
So much the better.
What could be done
for a small obsessive queen
without a realm?



The Treacherous Hour

The Pyrenees Highway, Victoria

Colours are questioning the night.
A dam's sheet-metal.
Now is a foreign land,
pure direction between
the fiery markers and the dotted line.
Brief as smears,
the small towns seem misspelt:
Moolert, Bung Bong.
The local signs say
Cemetery Road, Madman's Lane,
Nowhere Creek 2k.

I have been East
to read the books of friends.
Passing the power lines at the city fringe,
I thought of their solid bodies,
the particular smell of their skin.
The forked pylons
that shoulder the lines
stride the countryside like Siamese twins.
Something I read has thumbed a ride,
is making a home from home –
at the autopsy in 1951
of a hydrocephalic child,
five foetuses were found
nested in the swollen head
of their stillborn brother
as in a womb.
Little shadows, come in from the cold.



Possibility's strangest music
fills my head.
The derivation of 'monster'
is 'show, portend, warn.'
Darkness is rising now,
I ease my speed,
bearing my friends in mind.
I do not know what world I am within.



Rock-buns

They sat in the kitchen on their own.
Their grandparents' house was growing dark:
shouting, slammed doors, tears
down their mother's cheeks,
their father striding the hall,
'They've locked themselves in.'
Three sharp knocks.
'We expect an apology!'
'I am instructed to say (Aunty Glad at the keyhole)
Mother refuses!' (A bang like Grandma's stick).
The boy peeled a corner of lino up off the table.
The girl counted wallpaper flowers to thirty-seven.
There were spots from the porridge missiles of long ago
(their father had never missed once).
Over the shadowy stove the canister family
recited their names in a row:
FLOUR SUGAR SALT COFFEE TEA.
The scissors hung open from a hook.
'Come on, Girlie.' Footsteps away.
A listening quiet. The click of a lock.
Brink brink (the tap). *Tut tut* (the clock).
Their Grandpa came in through the laundry
and shut both doors.
He made his eyebrows go up and down
and boxed the air in a make-believe fight
but they didn't laugh.
He went to the dresser and found the rock-bun tin –
two each and he didn't mind about crumbs.
It was turning grey outside
but they didn't switch on the light.



The Kashan

for Tina and Paul Kane

I saw it years ago.
Known at a glance,
it was like insight,
a keyhole to heaven:
framed skies of endless fall
brimmed azure and violet and indigo –
contracts from other worlds
whose terms I breathed
like incense trails
or a pattern of thought
to get by heart.
Its two dimensions
turned me drunk with blue –
I was no more
than the Kashan's waking site,
just slippage in and out
of length and breadth.
I found myself
and asked the price:
wishful thinking from Persia
at 400 knots to the inch.
So now it's memory –
a 10 by 15
target for words
whose pinpricks into 4D
make flatlander stars.
But memory's the bargain of the bazaar.
It's stuck perception –
a slick of past



for which you thumbprint then,
both cost, both gain.
The commerce between is quick
as the shimmering sex of light
or how we pulse from particle to wave,
short-changing be with have,
ghostly offspring of chance
and a small star patch.
Faster and faster now,
going nowhere I know,
I've a rug's blue map for the trip
and habit's recurring dream:
hurriedly packing
love and sadness and shame
into the family's one suitcase,
this quantum of time.



Room

Say, what went wrong
was what went right: the question mark
reared up against the word
and down that sinuous vertical doubt
abstractions slid to elbow out
visible angels, solid gods.
We're all now amateurs of what and why,
more happen than who –
instant precipitates of time
whose infinite spaces cradle us here:
nothing and everything
make us the question between,
oddly trying to touch pure thought
then falling, weary, back
to this world's grasp and loss.
We're given a little room, a little scene
to reason reason out and guess
dimensions surging from the other side.
But is there 'side' beyond its word,
what deepens the abyss when we say 'fall'?
Why ever call such shadows up?
Look how the night sky wheels around –
Antares, Fomalhaut, Achernar, Sol,
time-lapse traffic grave with light
like our slipstream of love and fear.
And a human hand held out is half a star.



Horizon

is gentle geometry, the ghost of Euclid.
Not quite time or place, it boasts no deity,
is democratic but elusive,
we never see our own.

What of tomorrow and all your line?
The margin moves as they sail in –
the least mast tip's all you'll discern
for it's round as second chance
but holds none.

Even dreams embrace no final rim,
waking is just meniscus.

But the stranger's smile returned
is a shared border, a lifting of tariffs.
Some wear their threshold like a cloak
or suck it dry.

Some turn theory edge-on
and push their people over:
Argentina's beaten silver,
Rwanda, Srebrenica, ploughed under,
Cambodia's stacked-up grins.



The Given

Five short-trousered verbs
are whacking the orange piñata hung from the gum
with an eight-foot pole, 'My turn!'
Two frilly nouns-in-arms are shrieking to join in.
The little horse succumbs with a shower of sweets.
It is Christmas Day. I have been given

a soft-bellied basket
striped pink, purple and cream,
a brightness out of Africa,
and under the chocolates and wine, a scoop
of emptiness, the faith and purpose shape;

five silver lights
that turn stored sun to firefly green at dusk,
sentinels to limn the curve of the path
where I stumble from time to time
following daydreams into the night;

a digital wonder-box whose eerie trick
can snap such transience at play,
us looking back at us
in a dry suburban park
from tomorrow's past;

and this in special:
my younger son
(uncommonly patient with nephews all day)
catching the eye of his twelve-month wife
then smiling so broadly up into the sky
that I guessed.



Freesias

Two sceptics at odds may cancel out
like minus signs, to say Why doubt?

See where I've planted the Snowdon corms
between the stones. Too shallowly: the leaves
splay out, bent to a world of wind,
we tread the green flames unawares.
September will turn us – Ah! Japanese,
the air round their creamy cups spreading a covenant,
Sadness-Joy. Like wind chimes touching the edge of song,
or a small high window's mouthful of sky.
Breathe in their fragrance now,
the rush of yes but, if, maybe,

till the ghostly sacs of the lungs swell out
and airiest Other floods the brain. You too, Martin,
come back into the sun, I have picked you a percept, here –
a straggly bouquet of Being, quite unconcealed,
and it knows you, bronchiole and cell,
it is soothing the labyrinth to a safety net,
calming the rivers of blood as they leave and arrive.
Would you say it's beyond the play of beyond,
this scent – the hint of a universe drifting apart
like philosophy's fine dissolve?

Almost unbearable sweetness anyway.
Almost thought.



Our Lady

Notre-Dame, Paris

She was sitting one row in front, to my right,
oddly angular in a bright red dress.

In that ornate half-dark, stained shards
of lucent rose, azure, emerald, and gold,

melted down through the air
and over the heads and tiles like angels' blood.

She was weeping silently, eyes fixed on the altar:
not crying, weeping, that slower, fuller grief

as river is to rain. And rivulets were coursing down
through her thick and careful make-up

so the close-shaved stubble showed
like tiny wounds. Or splinters of wood.

One way to bear your cross. If the soul descends
from truth, it is male and female, turn and turn about,

with all its disguises and dishevelments
so lightly worn it is the world you had

before your face was born.
She blew her nose and stood with us and sang:

the organ notes and colours streaming down
were throw-backs to the muted light,



paths diverging to rejoin. I followed him out
thinking to say *Trés chic, Madame,*

(while meaning brave) but lost her in the crowd
and sat down on the low brick wall

fifteen metres from the portico
by a crisp little hedge just in front

of a cobble-stone carved MARGUERITE.
I've no idea why or who. For whom.



Port Lincoln

The endless white ah-ah-ing of the sea
is the sound of forgetting
and the touch of it too:
the sea-line laps our footprints back
to the clear broth of first being,
the littoral of find and lose that is
the moment remembering itself and letting go.

Here, in six clear feet of water below the dock,
starfish dozens, such kindergarten creatures,
stud the sand with random rivets,
anchor earth itself with gravity clamps,
imaging their element as blue-gold heaven.
Each pliant clutch spreads wide its private pink.
That one – so fixed! And yet it moves.

Its flow is a sort of flight,
a placid hydraulics with every direction forward
following any cosmic compass point
it signifies and is – five fingery feet
fringing a mouth in search of the other,
a ruthless purity that stretches and contracts,
elongates to a manikin secreted in a crack,

or pulls food in to centre's firm conviction.
Somewhere right now someone may be
sliding a thin soup under glass,
tracing this cell stuff to an essence
recalling tomorrow as genome,
the future tense of space:
a circular shortcut, like the sea's



great mirror of hope, star looking back at star.
Symmetry seems safe – like question and response,
the way that axon leans to axon,
coaxing metaphysics by caress.
Lucky the atom has its own world view,
so a starfish is at finest resolution
electrostatic No respecting difference.

As I watched Lachlan watch one on his palm
it stretched and curled
and struck a questioning pose –
was his hand sea or sky or sand?
Later, rolling plasticene to five-armed orange blobs,
he sank so starfish-deep within himself,
the making remembered him.

