

from HIGHWAY

Kangaroos

The idea of a desert is somewhere beyond our little camps.
Some kangaroos watch until I get very close, their nucleic eyes
slipping down the other side of the incline,
their slow heavy silent mechanical
hindquarters clenching, unclenching them away.

All along the roadside their bodies lie open like fruit,
stiff legs in the air, the puddling fur going khaki in lifeless grass,
a long fence of skulls saying *do not enter this desert* . . .

But each death looks momentary, one wrong leap against
thousands of right ones; thousands of hours
lived hurtling through space with no notion of obstacle.

Quick-jumps, paws dipped, their tail-sailing
walloping gait a conqueror's dream, their gestures
so almost-human, almost-comical, we might think
they saw themselves in us, answered us with *like, like*.

Always turning to leave, wider to go –
they emerge in dissolving light as if they carry
the Earth in their skins, as if they are the land they inhabit . . .
it stares at you through them, looks through you
in the shared-breath stillness, their telepathic heart-stopped
group hesitation. As if something's deciding
whether to let you in, or through. As if there was an opening,
a closing. Then turning away again, loping off
into that open where death stands to one side (you imagine)
and each leap is a leap into deeper life, deeper possession.

Southbank

I

When the system crashes, and the screens,
and palm-hugged
beaches that saved them,
crinkle out
the office tilts like a ship.
Small murmurs
of surprise, voices like children
who'd been playing in the shade,
shocked by sunlight,
flurry and subside.
The thermostat
shudders its seasons
of freeze and sweat;
furry square windows
seal in the boredom (a little man,
I've begun to suspect,
tweaks the levels each hour).

The quiet settles, doing nothing
settles, the sister of work.

The mind rises from its bubble,
and eyes unscrew from their
mid-screen float.
You rise and walk down the hall
like someone freed:
the woman who comes early
to work late sits darkly in her glass
as if waiting for a traffic light

to change, or an eclipse
in which nothing
is remembered, to end.

Time with nothing to smother it
creeps up like a mist from the river
and cuddles the office friendships,
emails caught mid-send, the million strands
of life rich as Pompeii.

Three women whisper in the kitchen.
Somebody laughs, someone else
cracks his finger joints.
Nobody stands and declares
All this was a dream, well, thank you, I'm off now!
Why should they? Over there a man,
pacing in his pod, has a deadline
as real to him as his wife.

So it starts again, you slip back
to your chair, the hard-drives
rev up in chorus, their
engines mingling with the rise-again joy
of humans working
with our without-purpose:
happy if we remember
whatever ten minutes before
fulfilled and/or consumed us.

2

Implanting our unique vision to be the market leader
going forward we will pursue organic growth

drilling downward, a Smithsonian-wide effort
a whole-of-Smithsonian approach

It's key
we be a team, global as atoms,

preserved from poverty, counting the days
Wednesday, Thursday, Thursday-and-three-quarters

3

Alchemies,
time into money
that flits through our hands
faster than a solitary wren, faster than time;
houses, children, cars, dogs –
the self's empire of proof,
menagerie of power, *I am here.*

Our time sold not hired,
our names as simulacra
show us up in our absence
on semi-partitions, brass-plated.
We forget, like monks, and serve
an abstract we must

not care too much for.
A prison of light, it dissolves
in the mind as you fork
home through traffic,
each former workplace that had you once
a sketchy edifice of neon,
you can't quite remember
what was I there?

Our little day is rounded with
a commute and a sleep
a spend and a keep.

4

I am pleased to announce that *Wayne Loy*
joins the *Networks &*
Infrastructure Team to give cover
until Jill returns
from maternity leave. Wayne reports
to me alongside
Jill, April, and Tarquin Dobrowski
(in Sydney). Many
of you know Wayne already in his
contract capacity;
I'm sure you'll agree that he's proved both
able and helpful.
I welcome him to the team and ask
your patience while he
learns many facets of his new role.

5

Out there they are bombed-to-nothing,
fired to one-sidedness, starved,
ejected by outrageous floods,
earthquakes with no sense
of timing or propriety,
but often a preference
for children in rickety schools.
Ears press down to speaking debris.
Is work a 'necessary evil'?
Office workers lose approximately
two hours daily
reading news websites, ebaying,
chewing up email, fending off
fidgety distracted colleagues, scoffing
pink and yellow cupcakes.

6

Following on from the death of Bob Smithson
last Monday, Smithson employees world-
wide have been escalating messages of
sympathy, prayers and condolences, all of which
are moving and on a global basis I thank you personally.

Aptly described by one employee as 'an icon of integrity, leadership,
philanthropy and business acumen', Bob Smithson will be
sadly missed. The family are currently progressing options
for a public honouring of Bob. A nine-minute webcast
of the funeral will stream to your inboxes on Thursday.

7

The receptionist
who chills everyone is suddenly
being terribly nice, baking cakes, everyone
is suspicious –

8

What privilege
to put on a suit, walk upright –
since childhood
shaping ourselves
to be in the world: flourish up and work,
as the parents, the toaster,
house not falling down,
the family itself spun whole by years
of making, desires tamed and made to flow
in single file.
Each day a threat
by human rage,
a mother in the garden
smashing the family pottery –
and Heidegger said
only when things break down do we begin to see.

The paramedics come into the cafe –
 jaunty in their blue and red uniforms, their solid black
 police boots. Two espresso, their phones on the table,
 antennae like the half-listening ear of a dog, they
 dangle from the emergency that hasn't
 yet happened, that is less than a hum in fine air, she
 with bright auburn hair, laughing.
 He sits back, arms folded, legs outstretched like a man
 who has the whole morning newspaper before him.

Skill tugs at the muscles, drives
 the bones, the mind keen,
 the child perfecting her scales,
 blocking the din.

The child understands the adults,
 ignores them, thinks she is innocent,
 making herself. She reads
 the dictionary, the bible,
 dinnerplates of language,
 at school dwarfs herself
 with long words.
 Priggish, pigeon-toed,
 she walks her book in the schoolyard, stalks
 blind through netball.

The thing we work for (rarely
work for its own sake) vanishes;
work persists, then too is lost:
the black hole of energy burns
through hands and minds.

A heaven somewhere,
a palm tree, a beach, a child, an apartment,
the quiet hum of one's power
of being that flexes around days,
carries futures, saying
world is made for me as I make it:
small enough to garden by hand, large
enough to outscope me,
for I must not lose surprise: this illusion
I with my labour can sustain.

II

Elevators dim-lit, dark-polished all day
by a woman from Bosnia, cheerful as Sisyphus,

who greets you with a suicidal smile, her trolley
of rank cleaning products makes her sneeze,

fills her eyes with red wires; she apologises, grins.
She scales her never-done job, a moonwalker

trailing her cargo through the semi-mirrored
obsidian tangle of offices, herself glowing back at her.

You ride up with her, pin-prick halogen lights,
mirrored walls you vanish into, she polishes.

12

Through a fifth-floor window you can watch
the new tallest building in Melbourne being built
one gold brick at a time.

The city sprawls
in late-mid-morning, the workers
housed inside their work: time
is everywhere engaged.

The office a portal,
point of stillness from which the world extends;
a kind of sublime.

On the seventh floor the company director
muses on his monthly
email to all staff.

Three slabs of sky behind him, he faces
the fourth wall.

*The football season is upon us
and business too progresses . . .*

MUNICH

i.m. my grandmother, Vivian Johnston, Staffordshire 1933 – Adelaide 2001

Strange to pass through a city as through a lens.

It isn't whole – I can't see it whole –
a shop display-window, everything fur,
animal or bird, steely-eyed mannequins,
people streaming past in furs.

The city glued back together, the marionettes
in Marienplatz kicking their legs;
dislodged from time, inventing time
as she – just-vanished – seems everywhere.
She didn't entirely want to be remembered,
no grave, no plaque.

Her memories, freed from her head,
swarming in mine, or some of them:
the child I was who sat on her knee
and the child she was in blackout Stoke-on-Trent
step awake, two slippered ghosts,
past houses blasted to rubble and bones
or three-walled like stage-sets,
a clock on the mantle ticking, grown-ups
alive on the footpath, marvelling in the daylight
How could we have painted the kitchen that colour?

Then her own bedroom ceiling crashed open
to the night where we both dissolve
Mother – it's snowing on my bed! – Well move the bed!

She bared her teeth, bit my foot,
snapping my vacant stares, my
(she thought) anger at being.

The bleaching heat of Adelaide, the hills there

visible from her house, puddled with lights.
White lives, drifting and folding
around pegs. My 'head-in-a-basket',
a pottery-class disaster – keepsake,
gleaming pink and yellow in her lounge.
It mocked the sudden growth
in her lung, like a trick thrown up from girlhood.
The eye, wild as a bomb, explodes on the present,
its glittering air washed of the dead,
the neither-soul-nor-body light
of a city moving into its future.

How it is to glide (she sailed)
from one half of the planet to the other,
a full moon floating on the rounded window,
face to face with you anywhere on earth
like a watchful parent. She feared
coming undone: couldn't will herself safe.
Our 'psychic connection', half game, half true,
sparked in the silences, her depressions
and mine. I imagine it unbroken.
Even in Munich, a place removed from Adelaide
as one mind from another: strangers
folded up in themselves, mutely intelligible
as shades tripping out of the dust
of a once-vanished city
muttering along the ordered snow and ice
of the Englischer Garten. I can't be certain

death satisfies her. She glints and promises
in the small sphere of the watch that was hers –

Of course I knew you were looking for one

– Think of me when you wind it!

She died alive, her last words on waking,

It's not a dream, is it?

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