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NOTES ON CLOUDS

Imagine clods released to weightlessness,
 loft-drifting in a dream, greeting light
like tulle. Or else—still fanciful—sea's breath
 rising like a delivered soul. Then delight
for their hold on all four elements. Take rain,
 how moisture globes around a speck of dust.
Or fire, kindled in air's skein,
 it cracks against an anvil made of mist.

I used to watch that mirrored ocean foam
 float in slow motion over plains vast and rambling
as a pelagic vista, the crickets' metronome
 set largo fortissimo, the Goulburn untangling
north to the Murray—the valley's one clear border.
 The clouds moved east and drew your eye in their flanged
wake like a lure in whose shine you saw Dookie, Benalla,
 and a sweep of land to the Dividing Range.

Later I loved the high-rise fleece in old
 Venetian oils: your gaze drawn up tiers
of rough-hewn fog that angels scale
 like go-betweens. They bridge the stratosphere,
freeing the bounded eye to rise like Dante
 when he glimpsed the whorls of the empyrean,
or Armstrong breaching the Karman line to plant
 a leaping empire's footprint on the moon.

Seen from gravity's slant: hulls in ether,
 courts of quintessence sailing earth's personal
space. You look up to ask what's in the weather—
 watching them bank and breach,

or spread like locks on a barber's floor,
 or lour like a lid of slate. They can glow
with the longing of soft-fleshed fruit
 or the petals of a loose-stemmed rose.

The colours of clouds speak loud at dusk,
 and the omens you hear tell of uncanny squalls
as Gaia reorders her patterns of water and dust.
 Tonight they burn like windows in a banquet hall.
Hermes leans out, his head heavy with drink,
 and marvels at his bygone urge for human form.
That I have seen him is due to clouds:
 these mid-air inklings, clusters, constancies.

BODY'S KEN

As songs without words
run loose in the mind
and thoughtless as light over matter

so unruled lines will slip their moorings
and carry the eye on a current
that laps the shape
and crease of things.

Sometimes language lags
in the wake of body's ken.

Look how a sketch set down by hand
will draw you out like a walk
and into the park of flesh.

So still-life bottles talk to a bowl
and get the gaps between known things
as air takes shape in shadow and light.

So singing is good
when the sense of sound
comes divined in the throat

or the ear's chamber lets you float
half-buoyed in a fathom of waves.

To follow the threads of sight and sound
you're swept like a plumb
from the boat's hard rim.

So laughter will burst and sighs seep.
And breath is always there
as a breeze flouts frontiers.

A PENNY FOR YOUR THOUGHTS

It's a sluice whose gate is hard to shut, a stream
that has no source or mouth and buoys the rushing
ego in its wake, or else it's the ease
and glibness of the id. I love those leaps
of logic, like rapids over rocks, when the sound
and shape of words let slip new schemes of thought.

It's that monologue where all the head's a stage,
the chorus that foresees the worst, the run-through
where your wit enchants the empty stalls.
It's the homily that's preached each day by Doubt,
the waterboard debriefing with Regret,
that whispered invocation in a prayer.

It's a thread let drop and snatched up heedlessly,
it's the only outlet shyness will permit,
also known as the coward's stumbling block
or hurting no one but yourself. A broken
bridge, or a brackish well you cannot trust.
It's wind that stirs reflections in a pool.

THE CAMPANILE

Old stairs pitched steeply round an open heart,
rigged to walls by worm-holed traves,
girders and joists as thin as stilts, and landings
like the platform an acrobat might use. Trusting
to each hung step as though we trod on unlit
yards of air, we climbed alone, with hunched
and blinkered gaze set on the rung
below our feet. My bearings spun
like an arrow round a wheel. Rare slits
flashed on a foreign world. It was like a well,
this stair, built not to arrive somewhere, but to mark
how climbing we ascend out of ourselves.

And then above our head the door.
We rise where four arched openings gape with wind
and glutted light. No words but steadfast awe
at what sustains our weight and floods the swimming
eye—the tower's long-held poise, a hand
held up to test the air.
There, heedful as a statue that commands a room,
two bells hang like weightless rock
absorbing light's tide in downcast crocks,
storing it like a vessel from where
song breaks and expands
evening and morning and at noon.

WRITING SOUNDS

First the sound graphite makes drawn across paper:
a rustle like a dog circling in to nestle, or a tight-lipped
whisper as trance-like a child traces her name. The pencil labours
onwards but keeps manically crossing itself, as it plots its pitching

tracks in snow, or shuffles insect antennae into drift lines.
Then the bristles-sweeping sound, the rub-of-rosin sound, as the side
of the hand jumps like a wren in dead foliage, frightened
by the apparition of each new word. And finally

the swish of fingers tugging or run through hair.
Sounds like a eucalypt's new growth stirring and other such holds on wind,
or a clock's mechanics, but scuttling and erratic, like air
exhaled of a sudden. Sounds of the quelled set free,

of something quavering into shape. Psalms
to mark small victories.

IMPROMPTU PARADE

Scored for syringes
shrill as the screechy end
of an E string

a fanfare of semiquavers
by the local escadrille of eastern rosellas

coming in low in
full-dress dreamcoats
on a feast-day fly-by.

ACANTHUS

Without truss or strut beyond the base the stem
has surged upwards like a guyless pole.
The stele braces growth as bone depends
on sinew's give to lift a walking soul.

The flowers round that spike spread like a chorus
of suckling mouths. The petals grope
at light or gape like angels in their orders.
They shoulder out from elongated caps

as dark as mussel shell. Inside, each stamen
writhes like a wave or a whip caught on the rise.
And there, hovering in shadow, without strain
the anthers wait. They need no eyes

or memory. They hold no thought
of gain, but are the host that must be sought.

IN THE PO VALLEY

Rising after a troubled night
I stood by a window at dawn.
Two persimmons that gripped a leafless branch
above old ground a farmer had turned
so fallow earth might breathe, were set against
a snowy range that shone like an altar in lace.

No more. No less. But as if arranged
by . . . what, the light and its brief grace?
The blood pulsed and the mind came clear
like a nest in a winter tree. I wonder,
was I right to let such things declare
last night was just a dream?

THREE POEMS AFTER FRANCO FORTINI

Flames

I wish you could see
how the sky has cleared here, and the way
the roof tiles just abide, and the care
of the creek whose water is warming.

This is the word: spring exists,
perfection joined with imperfection.
The hauled boat's hull
soaks in the wood oil, the spider spins.

We'll save for later all that must be said.
For now, look at the shape that oleander makes,
and the flames of the magnolia.

27 April 1935

I would have been staring at a rose bed from the window of my high school.

It was thirty-five years ago. That day eighty thousand workers were inaugurating the metro they had built in Moscow in splendidly-lit rooms.

An author who's dead now once sung their praise.
I've read those poems. I've translated them.
I used to ask those white roses for love.
The white and the yellow roses. The city was clear.
Yearnings in the air. Horace sharp and bitter.

O eighty thousand workers of Moscow,
History has a foul way of laughing.
You didn't know. I didn't know. And the roses?
They don't want to know anything. The idle roses.

Response

He was lying on the trunk we kept in the corridor,
curled up like some wounded animal.
My mother was trying to help. Dino, please
get a grip, your son's watching.

While his eyes sought me out to ask forgiveness,
mine I've always kept open.
And I hadn't heard those voices again.

Now they call me
—not gently, not cruelly—the grey voices.
In answer to their whispering,
in the calm that follows weeping,
I offer this my response.

THE SUN IN THE DOOR

As gum trees seen through morning fog
dispute for us the fate of Job

so Roman ruins stay the sky
and animate our inner eye

the plum branch leaves the trunk behind
to stretch within a frame of mind

the hawk that's lost behind a hill
speaks to vision's mounting will

inklings jolt the ordered brain
like water struck by heavy rain

and riddles and linked rhymes set free
reason's hounds to chase a key

so nursery rhymes and playground games
allude to death by other names

and wits that come unmoored in sleep
ride heady currents out to sea

as light and shadow cross the floor
so archways frame an open door.

HEADING NORTH THROUGH THE GOULBURN VALLEY

I

It's summer's end and you're led back home
down tracks as plumb as higher laws.
From the carriage you scan colour-sapped
stubble—the wreckage of fields
that plot ground cracked as a bare heel.

Omen-wary, eager, you skim inexorable
lines. Lookout and helmsman, you sniff
familiar weather. After the far
meander routes you full-circle like the stock
of fate, you lap at memory rock.

Crossing the wracked and shadeless stretch,
the sweep of sun and sky-dropped
heat gulfs—your eyes tight reins—
you seek relief in horizon clumps
—the brakes of box and river gum.

The bush is a hobbled pre-settler aegis,
river's buttress, hanging on, hoping
to fill it all with fish, this cove of parched air,
to turn it to loaves, this hard-loamed valley,
till all's wed to the customs of shade.

II

The arrogation of greenness, elders
smile, inured to miracle.
The wide-eyed here soon learn to squint.
But still at journey's end that bosk
is sky prop and soul squat.

Later you'll sit on those banks, the heart
calming like a cup skollid in homage,
as if manumission might lie
in letting clutched weight fall away.
You'll rise, then, appeased and stiff as fashioned clay.

Crossing the last bridge into town an offhand gesture
loosens longing. From the train you watch a pitched core
plummet like a sinker. The thwacked
water will settle. Apple trees grow
wild along the tracks. Windfalls see us home.

VARIATIONS ON THE WALK BACK FROM BUSHRANGERS BAY

I

From headland rock
we'd watched up close how water can charm its own weight,
and the racing suck of foam over basalt.
We'd plundered the mirrors of stiller pools,
and roamed the clash and heat of the shore.
Now they were calling us in.
Above the wind they urged us for home,
spurring our march up the scarp,
up to the forest rim,
and in through the keeling facade
where stands of banksia and manna gum
guarded the spoils of shade.
It was cool inside
and held its scents like a room.

If you stride on ahead, that's a vanguard of one.
You can run under shoals of foliage.
On gums, leaves hang like the shreds
of canvas sails above a shipwreck
of fallen sticks and ribboned bark
that are pitched about the bole;
or where there is loose new growth
they catch the light like a crowd
of scimitars in the breeze.

II

The land that bound the bush
was bare and undulant and rose
from the ocean with furrows
and waves still on it.
Sheared and fenced, it has
the folds of corpulent flesh.
Erosion has carved out gullies
so each rise
curves on itself like a limb.

Looking out as the path skirts
the forest's edge
you can see how cleared earth
unrolls its acres of chroma
like a patchwork.
Then you turn inward again
to the intimate world of manifold
things. Here, in the bush, each floodlit
break in the piggeldy
tints of taupe and sepia
is stark as a spotlight. Better
to dash across gaps like cracks in the world.

III

Halfway along was an old eucalypt,
a black gum, with branches too stout for the trunk.
They grew parallel to the ground, twisting
like wrist joints in an artist's folio.

This tree has a hive in the mouth of a lost limb.
Bees fly from that seat like envoys embarking
to far reaches where she-oaks rouse
when their branchlets get tipped silver and yellow;

or through the fern and muttonwood that formed
the thicker undergrowth. There spilt light
falls and skitters like beads of water
over a sheen of dark green oil.

This gum had the gravitas of a well-climbed oak
and kept its watch and ward on a secret store.
Passing, you felt subject to its sovereignty,
and the onus of making wonder known.

IV

To reach the car
in fifty steps
will mean I'm meant
by fate to be a poet.

That was the lot
you dealt yourself, at what,
thirteen? Top of the last slope
you gauged the distance down.

Then leapt. Each stride
propelled by the hill, each foot
fell with a jolt
too wild to call iambic.

It kept the count, though,
like an earthen knell,
as you toyed with setting
whim in stone,

keeping delight
alive beyond
the bitumen
that breaks good spells.