



Selected Poems from

'By Way of a Vessel'

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Taking a Nap in the Afternoon

not every afternoon,
but some slide down into this level space
where you know you're alone and safe
cradled away from the need to do anything
except this

on top of the sheets,
but underneath the cover you can lie
for an hour or two of perfect privacy
where even your own thoughts just nod
as they pass you by

time goes so quietly past,
you listen for it and grow quieter yourself
until the cluck and flutter of chooks outside
just reminds you of feathers and feathers
remind you of pillows

there is a hushing sound,
of air surging slowly through gum trees
there's a flicker of light on your eyelids
and on your face the moist menthol breath
of autumn

the swallows are enough for now,
the way they slide past the open window
with a silken slithering sound
the way they pierce through your silent dreams
like silver arrows

Don't Strike a Match, Sylvia

Did you really believe you were a Jew, then?
But the Jews burned, you know, in their ovens
and the ovens were huge,
big enough to roast millions and millions
so the smoke spread around the world
like an eruption from Vesuvius or Krakatoa.

Cities were buried under the ashes, and people
are still being discovered
in strange poses,
withered like bad seen
inside a husk of stone-cold lava,
shaped forever and ever by a single moment.

Doesn't that sound more like it? Like yourself,
I mean, still a victim, of course,
but not a Jew,
and besides, you weren't religious
or political either, until you met your Hitler,
which brings us back to this thing about the oven.

Was it really just the easiest thing to do?
Couldn't you get any pills?
Or wasn't it planned?
Yes. You were scrubbing the floor maybe,
another floor in another flat not your own home,
and all the fault of that man that you were so down.

We all know that feeling, and who's to say why some
decide to go and others stay,
but you've got to admit
one way you keep on living
and the other way you're finished with it,
and it's a fact that corpses don't get any poetry written.

I just want to get it straight whose altar
you thought you were kneeling at
with that pillow
under your cheek and your nostrils
sniffing for that fine perfume, the gas,
to come seeping out of the unlit oven.

Yes, we're back to the oven again, it's important
the way you put your head in there
like a meatloaf
or one of your favourite
Betty Crocker perfect peach pies, Sylvia,
but this time you didn't strike a match.

In Tasmania

The spuds all have names
like pinkeyes, Kennebecs, Brownells, Tasmans,
and different uses, too,
like boiled & buttered whole, or fried as chips,
or mashed & buttered alongside mushy mounds of swede or pumpkin.

The seasons are known not only by the football & the cricket,
but by the progress of the apples,
their pruning, thinning, spraying, and picking
into the canvas bags of people young & out-of-state or older & local
whose children say, "Me mum is on the apples".

In August you can say that your pinkeyes are up
or your broadbeans are in flower
and everyone knows you're just boasting,
but say the same thing in January and they'll smile at the joke
or think you're a bloody queer gardener.

If you talk about the weather
or firewood or snakes or just about anything like that
where the same several comments
can be made to anybody, anytime, anywhere, without too much variation,
no one will ever find you boring.

Even in the towns the weather still sets the pace for everyone,
the teachers who commute
in lolly-bright-coloured credit-union-financed cars,
the fishermen & buskers and lunchtime shoppers,
and all the tens of thousands of laundry-hanging housewives,

because people still live outside,
if only at the weekend game, the barbecue, the rotary clothesline,
and you can see
the drought-bleached or rain-greened hills just over there,
right from the centre of the city;

and even in the city you can smell
the smell of gumleaves green and glittering,
the smell of gumwood charred,
burning in the fireplace or burning wild and scary out on the hills,
a smell you never notice until you go away and miss it.

Here is where you've lived for seven years
and still they ask, "D'you reckon you'll stay, then?"
And you wonder, too,
the next time something takes a month to get here & costs too much
because it's all the way from Melbourne.

Something has got to be said

something has got to be said
about all these squashed animals on the road
how the guts get squeezed out of them
like gory toothpaste from furry tubes
how gobs of bleeding meat
get flattened into a stain
covered by a tatty fur mat

I mean the pressed cats of all colours
the slouched hulks of possums
pelts still weirdly rich and the fists still curled
like babies' when they're sleeping
& I mean the scrawny sprawl of native hens
still on the run with necks stretched out
toward the ditch never reached

once there were two swans
flanking the banked curve of the highway
black monuments with heads flung back
and wings fanned out
looking so much like graveyard statuary
it gave you the creeps
to pass between them

somehow the wallabies
are usually off on the side of the road
it must be the final leap
dead or alive of the long springing haunches
that carries them over at last
to crash among the beer cans
and bottle glass

it's just as well too
because you wouldn't want to drive over such a bulk
of dead weight
swelling out already the belly distended
you'd be lucky to clear it
and you'd rather not hear that wet mucky smack
bad enough just to imagine it

eventually everyone gets
the thunk of a bird who swung too low
the plump of a rabbit whose dodging didn't work
or what is even worse the crunch of a bandicoot
they are so brittle born senile
poor little stripey-rumped ditherers
their corpses are plentiful

thank God for the crows
and other carrion eaters who clean up the roads
it's all under control
you tell yourself nothing really gets wasted in this world
meanwhile you drive like through a minefield
because you hate the feel
of meat sliding under the wheels

Halley's Comet

I come from out of nowhere
from where you think you've never been
and where you think you cannot go
but I do not think
though it could be that I'm a thought
because that is how I come and go
and none of your thinking
can tell you what a thought is
or how it comes and goes.

I am like a bird that was hatched beyond time
and there is no tree
on this or any other world where I will perch.
I build my nest on the wind
the wind that moves between the stars
the wind that is flung back
from the whipping manes
and from the sparking hooves
of the great horses that gallop through space.

I build my nest on the wind
and my nest is made of starlight,
sunlight, moonlight,
it is made of stone, earth, flowers
and the shimmering dance
of all ordinary things
when they know themselves
to be made of light coming and going
through darkness.

I am the magic messenger of your dreams
and the message is this: I am.
From out of nowhere I will come and go
just like a thought
just like a dream that you had long ago
when great horses galloped from beyond time
and sparked the stars
from their hooves
and you built your nest on the wind.