

# Prelude



I remember her skin  
weathered rough  
on my childish forehead  
wiping fever-  
dreams attenuated  
by work then time till it is rice-flour mochi  
sweet and soft as memory,  
so slight a wrapping for such sharp regrets.

In grief  
a queen forbade her king's removal  
sat him up at table.  
ate with him,  
slept with him,  
waved from the royal carriage at his mouldering side.  
Imagine  
the temptation to touch what was once  
warm, cold now on a pillow damp with death  
folding into itself, going to ground.

I dig  
a hole  
for what remains.  
A hollowed earth  
to swallow  
grit that might be bone or rock or salt.

I pick a grain of her, stolen from the urn  
place it on my tongue.  
Her body.  
My blood.

She lodges in me.

Now  
in dream.  
in breath  
in all the painful trudge of days ahead I grow  
    in grit  
    in earth  
    in death.

# Fugue



i

The carpet is an underfoot irritation  
the bedspread, nauseous,  
peering up each day  
at a cliché of dolphins leaping from their printed waves.

We are near the ocean.

Beyond the frosted window I  
watch the empty car park  
but for a utility parked  
at an awkward angle.  
Beyond, a scant town sucks  
the last from a poisoned land.

Cars rust.  
Plumbing crunches over with salt.  
There is no sound of ocean  
but the crow flies there more easily than four-wheel drives  
scraping airless hours down a potholed strip  
of dirt to dip their tyres in water.

This motel waits for decay  
to tick over into retro chic.  
Rotted linoleum, stylish at a squint,  
hugs the crusted basin. I squint,  
not for the linoleum,

the cloud puffs up as I pour  
her body,  
decanting part of her into a vessel.  
Clear, water-tight, half-priced from Bunnings.

Keepsake.  
Her burned and ground up bones,  
her gritty breath,  
her dehydrated blood.  
For keep's sake.

What part of her have I secreted away?  
Her hand?  
(which struck out to show affection  
eschewing hugs for slaps?)  
Her legs?  
(which she was proud of,  
admired in tiny shorts till she was 85?)  
Perhaps I have the ground up  
thigh-bone,  
knee,  
ankle,  
skull.  
mind (sharp as splintered glass)  
eyes (tattooist's needle.)  
I have her fingerprint on me  
in hot black ink.

Breath shudders in,  
wetted by unshed tears.  
Acidic, a chemical sting at the back of my throat.  
This is not the taste of human flesh.



I wonder in that breath if I am holding  
a plastic vial of  
air freshener,  
toilet cleaner,  
a potpourri of chemical equations.  
I wonder if one taste will harm.  
I wonder about death  
for the first true time.

I know death in the abstract.  
I have followed a slippery eel of consciousness,  
tracked its path  
onward – into darkness – the earth – another living thing.  
Here now, this acrid taste of death is something else.  
This granular piece of her  
good-for-nothing more than cat piss  
or  
to gravel-line the bottom of aquariums  
sanitised with poison.  
Fish floating bloated belly lolling.  
She might kill me if I ate her  
tiny stone by stone.

I pick a fragment of my grandmother, balanced.  
I swallow without thought, or taste.  
I wait to see my death.

When she dies  
I die

This simple sum, one thing equal to another,  
A=B  
because I have always believed it  
to be so.

When she dies  
=  
I die.

Because it is only her indomitable will holding  
the world in place.

When she dies  
I die.

And yet here I am.  
They tell me she is dead and here I am  
undead  
numb  
heavy.  
Yes.  
The world has stopped or I have stopped.

Like a chicken, running round a yard  
still trying to escape the fallen cleaver.  
I am upright.  
Perhaps A does not equal B,  
or I am as dead as Jules Cotard.

My feet  
reek.  
My cunt

is fragrant  
with decay  
or dying.

I take another grain and put it  
on my tongue  
And swallow.

I must save some of her.  
I must bury some of her  
for mother, aunt  
for my mother-aunt,  
for their loss which is my loss.  
I will die from this.  
Blood sacrifice, falling on the death  
pyre of my queen.  
I am already dead.

I feel the scratch of her fingernail tracking my trachea.  
This weight of chemical gravel is not all of her and what I  
take  
is part of part,  
but I will eat what I have been given.  
I will eat my grief into a stone that will stick  
in my gut.  
When I have feasted on what remains  
Of remains  
Then  
what?

ii

Flowers are for funerals.  
My grandmother would never let us keep cut blooms.  
I snuck weeds into my room.  
Meal moths of colour hatched from grass,  
scentless wings straining towards flight.  
Death is banished from our home  
no –  
flowers;  
black cloth;  
couscous,  
which is to her the food of death  
a myth invented or mistranslated  
from her Alexandrian youth;  
no mourning;  
no spirit talk to wake them.

We shall not grow old.  
Death is a trick of the mind to the unwearied.  
My flowers made more precious  
by those who are forgotten,  
graves untended,  
elders obliterated

I send my mother flowers

Small stab of guilt.  
Funereal flowers for her  
and against her.  
A many-petalled challenge,

snuck weeds into a bedside glass.  
Spirits rustle like grass.  
She is dead and yet I speak of her.  
The mind has tricked her.  
She has wearied.  
She has moved from this world to another  
or no other.

I type her name into the Internet  
my mother's name, my aunt, our family  
name written in our blood.  
Sorry for my loss and yours.  
Our loss.  
Maternal.  
God.  
Reason.  
Now without her  
the world is unreasonable.  
Laws of matter,  
physics,  
morality,  
unbounded  
without her barbed fist.

Here are the rules I have broken;  
flowers;  
remembering;  
believing in a final end.  
I eat my couscous but I cannot swallow for thickness  
of breath.  
I lie in my bed without sleep  
for fears.

And here  
in the wind and the stars and the sudden rain at night  
She is ghosting.

iii

If I can't feel love I can see it  
in the sweat as he swings the hoe,  
in the way he makes me drink when I would rather fall  
and vomit in the dirt.

If I can't feel love  
I can see the muscles of his thighs standing out stiff  
as desire used to be.

We  
he / me  
dig.

Because death is of the earth,  
because they point  
here  
in the ground where death belongs.  
We dig to spare them  
mother-aunt  
who took the final labour on their hunched backs  
the lift and feed, excretions, nightmare trudge towards this  
grave  
that we must dig to pay for absence.  
We dig because I am of their blood.

And we plant  
flowers  
hated flowers and more flowers.  
She stabs at me with her rose-thorn  
Of memory.

We pour a part of a part of her into this most hated grave  
a floral tribute of dishonour, disrespect.

And love, here, against my shoulders  
his arms a circle.  
Not the kind of love that she taught with a pinch of fingers  
a bowl of something slapped roughly  
*eat it*  
down,  
but his love real and felt,  
heart that I cannot feel  
but I see.



iv

This place  
is not what it would be.  
Not the prize  
promised  
when they won the lottery  
all the numbered balls lined up.  
In lieu of whoops and punches into air  
the family fell silent with a reverent  
hush.

This land  
not the lush  
forest of  
promise,  
fecund,  
mushrooming tall trees  
and towering dreams.  
A swampy primordial gazpacho  
of cow shit and Tordent  
mixed with salt-spoiled  
water from a table  
you could never eat at.

My grandmother scribbled plans  
on envelopes  
that scraped the skies  
with dragon's teeth  
and witch's eyes.  
Mud-maps of grandeur

built on mud  
turn to mud.  
A besser brick shed  
stands for a castle of glass  
and in it  
their art,  
their dinosaurs  
their fairy tales  
mythology.

Anubis  
and my grandmother  
guards the underworld  
of Dragonhall  
where all dreams  
die.

Dragonhall.  
A sign,  
Fading, as a thought left  
to dwindle before her.  
Decaying into salt-soured ground.  
Dragon Bone Hill  
where the ancients ate their brothers.  
Bones split, skulls  
like bowls for sticky soup

*You will dig all the way to China*  
she would say when I was small  
amusing myself with pick and spade  
digging then as now.

Her migrations had confused her  
for here we are shoulder to shoulder  
with Dragon Bone Hill and China.  
Thick as thieves,  
Peking Man and me.

And if it were hyenas that cracked bone  
and sucked brain  
then I am alone with this  
sepulchral degustation.

I read  
the original conversations  
between a man who would eat  
and one who would be eaten.

The internet was a new uncharted wave.  
You needed a machete (pick / hoe)  
to dig down through the tangle of coding  
to unearth the ugly chatter hidden within naked text.

He would kill and eat the willing victim  
the fulfilment of a long held desire  
intensified after his mother's death.  
That singular maternal end  
hers  
that leaves me hungry for another grain of her  
genitals,  
womb.

I did not spring from her loins as my mother-aunt did  
and yet she picked me up,  
bloodied, bleeding  
and put me to her own breast.

Perhaps this fragment of her I consume  
is the place of birth, the beginning,  
the part whose name she would never speak.  
I eat unspeakably,  
swallowing whole as one might an oyster  
the unnamed part of her.  
Today's funeral offering

v

We sit to take tea  
Aunt Mother Me Lover  
This is all the world now.  
Conversations which skirt around  
she who is not  
she who we all collectively  
call Mum.

Jealousies safely corralled like their peacocks;  
dogs, ducks, miniature horses,  
guinea fowl, cockatoo;  
their emotions;  
bodies;  
spirits.  
Not a pot  
as she would make  
steeped in leaves and lore  
and cosied to bitterness,  
this tea we make  
from bags and garish crockery  
will stand for service and ceremony  
without a word spilled to mark her passing.  
She is here invisible.  
Lest we forget.

She is in the rain coming  
and the sand filling us up  
bagged against flood.  
The cyclone thundering off an ocean

littered with other people's dead  
is hers.

I name it so.

Cyclone Lotty, Cyclone Dragitsa, Cyclone Carlotta  
she has ducked and weaved  
kiss-chasey  
and here she rests  
unkissed  
and ever-chaste.

My love and I have dug to China.  
Our limbs are sore with it.  
There on Dragon Bone Hill  
we have hidden half of her.  
Mud under our nails and two grains of her inside me  
undigested

I can't drink this tea.

*I love you* we say  
leaving so much more unsaid  
undrunk  
cold on a tray.  
We hug once.

Drive away

vi

We three  
fight like a mess of kittens  
bickering sisters  
hungry for one suck  
of mother love.

Four  
not three  
but memory adjusts to present circumstances  
the fourth is lost  
and furious.

Throw my actual sister in the mix of  
we who are left  
and you have  
sharks,  
not kittens,  
and the strongest of us  
gnashing to consume the other three.

So with this erasure  
we have  
clawed cats  
sisters from  
(dis)similar generations,  
Mother, Aunt and me.

Aunt  
had style  
a working girl from some  
40's rom-com Technicolour Egyptian print  
blouse and slacks  
smoke travelling the long stretch of cigarette  
holder.

A cloud of spray  
to net her short swarthy hair.  
Perfume perfect and a waxy  
breath of lipstick  
red.

I see Aunt now  
as then  
leaning  
to the ghosting of musique concrète.  
The cry of a chainsaw  
slowed to a banshee weep  
orchestral pluck  
of a door groaning open.  
The back and forth  
of magnetic tape  
and her ear  
pressed to the reel-to-reel  
the hot ash at her fingers  
trembling  
threatening to fall  
just another soft *plk*  
to add to the thoroughly modernist  
symphony of my aunt's all.



Aunt who barely remembers the heat of Alexandrian sand  
underfoot,  
who speaks in affectation,  
mannered,  
*damn* and *blast* for tempered tempers  
*haha* for toilet  
*sweetie* for a sister's child  
for shark sister  
for me.

My aunt  
who collects skulls and shells  
who reads manuals  
plays supplicant for surround  
sound  
music of the spheres.

My aunt  
and her mother  
a conjoined tedium of shared life  
one night apart  
at the start  
and never since.

I will remember  
each reiteration of my aunt  
and this most recent –  
proud, sleepless weary  
radiating an unexpected certainty  
beside her mother's hospital bed.

I watch her housebound  
for more years  
than not  
caged by fear and pride and  
animals  
and mother.  
Here, now,  
statuesque  
sure.  
As I am never sure  
frighted,  
but certain.

Should we resuscitate?  
It seems straightforward,  
live or die  
and yet the question comes with a surfeit  
of peripherals.  
Should we  
thrust down against her chest  
till her ribs crack?  
Should we  
then repair her lungs that have punctured?  
Should we  
inflict this pain for what may be  
one week  
one month  
one year, or as it turns out, two?

But we were not to know this  
then.  
My aunt clung to the bedframe  
radiant fragile dignity  
and almost shouted  
*of course*  
and *yes*.

vii

I am a lump of flesh.  
I am enough of myself to give  
the illusion of life.  
Heart beating  
smiling on demand.

He drags himself away from  
regional TV  
and scratches his way across the bedspread.  
Hand on heart  
beating  
with the rain (her rain) starting on the tin roof.  
She will drown us.  
I know.  
As he dutifully kindles the spark of an erection  
where there was nothing but ashes.  
I am wondering what must be saved from flood  
when the cyclone with my grandmother's name  
heralds the end of things.

End  
times  
My hand reaches down but the vessel  
with its velvet bag  
is gone.

Dragitsa pounds on the roof  
and only the promise of sex can wake the blood  
pooling  
as it is like the blood of a corpse.  
I flare to life briefly, breathlessly, the drowned resurrected,  
and in the tiny bathroom there is the last of her.  
Once more  
on the tongue  
with the skin still flushed  
the heart still thudding  
his seed spilling  
drop by sad drop  
like tears from my earthly body.

viii

And so it rained most of the night  
and through the day  
as if we had stepped off the world  
and into the tissue soft pages of a bible.  
Rain begetting rain  
and somewhere  
on an island  
displaced survivors discovering disease  
plague  
pestilence.  
she is barely perturbed  
by the perished rubber of a windscreen wiper.

We are leaving her  
with a part of her  
and she gives chase.

Stopping now.  
What passes for coffee,  
what passes for food.  
I take the tablet for my stomach.  
my vitamins  
my zinc  
the little granule of her that I have secreted into  
my fist.  
My mouth howls silently  
the wind picks up,  
there is no way back to the car  
without getting wet.

Despite love  
there is a lack of people  
in this crowded place.  
Despite rain  
I am dried to jerky  
sold in packets near the register.  
I feel like I am missing someone  
who should call me,  
a friend  
a letter received in the mail  
some extraordinary resurrection or retribution  
that refuses to surface from our biblical plummet.

I want her storm to spill its wrath  
to thunder down and sweep away.  
Instead there are stodgy muffins  
thick sugared bread.  
My mouth is empty of her  
my phone is empty of the messages  
that might extract me from the mire.

We race the deluge  
and it is nothing.

We wait in damp silence  
And we drive.

ix

I called someone on the first day  
someone I had met  
some relative.  
It is impossible to track back  
who begat whom.  
Who are you  
who seemed so young  
when I was a child?  
How old are you now? 60? 70?

I had painted eggs and together we stood with coins  
(we could not afford coins)  
which would be gathered up to pay for bread, milk, coffee,  
ful medames,  
the essentials.  
He handed me coins.  
So many that my hand felt heavy as a weapon.  
I could have swung my fist of coins and floored him.  
We were uneasy, even then, with strangers  
and extended family.  
He held my hand and showed me how to throw  
the coin, edge forward  
but I already knew.

He didn't know  
my skill with balls and stones and rolled up paper.  
Coins were better  
faster  
and my first shot stuck straight in the coloured rind



obliterating all my work.  
He gathered fallen cash  
which was my prize  
and praised me  
(never before)  
praised me.  
(like they had never before)  
me.

His voice on the phone  
older  
unrecognised.  
*Can you let people know?*  
I said.  
*An aunt in Italy*  
He said.  
*An aunt in England.*  
*An aunt in America.*  
These strangers  
blood  
strangers.

*Is there a funeral?*  
And when I say *no* it catches,  
*No.*  
*Nothing.*  
*She wanted nothing.*  
Which is far from true.  
She wanted everything  
and would not compromise.  
Everything or nothing  
till her last breath.

x

My friend ate her placenta.  
A piece of her child  
fried with garlic, oregano, thyme.  
The first one.

The second placenta was frozen  
transferred to our freezer  
beside the breasts of chicken and the leg of lamb.  
She didn't like the taste  
and the second would be planted to become  
a tree that died one day in the wet season.

Two births.  
One death.

My friend's children are tall.  
Beautiful women  
succulent  
as we  
(she)  
once  
were  
(was).

I strolled through an exhibition with the oldest one,  
eighteen, standing shoulder  
to shoulder and her placenta thick as tongue.  
The most beautiful girl we had seen  
but so young

as I was  
when I first fled house and home  
to distance myself from her.

I don't fear death. I don't fear  
the sudden fall, the wheels  
spinning out, the engine loud and hot on my face.  
I don't fear the step and plummet  
a moment before gravity takes me  
suspended there  
I have time to know,  
before the mass of flesh takes over, obeying the rules  
physic's bitch  
and taking me to ground

I fear instead  
the slow trudge  
an unwavering step by step  
striving towards mediocrity  
mid-list  
and the mundane.

In short, I fear  
the life that I have left.

Her last year or two  
sat in a chair  
and all the good work behind her  
which was always nothing  
and no good  
anyway.

I lie in bed –  
she, dead –  
my eyes held wide  
by what is just a fear of life,  
my present crisped to perfect focus,  
inevitable future,  
lacklustre past.

Sleep-chased  
by the horror  
of Oz in all his dusty-faced facade.

I will never be  
more than she.

xii

Mother is  
the young woman on a spoiled  
lawn, weeping  
into geraniums  
flowerless roses  
all thorn  
and aphid.  
The bitter hips of unpetalled pink.

*One day I will run away*  
I hear this  
*and never come back.*  
A thought which stuck with  
(to,  
inside)  
me.  
And shark sister  
regrouping for the next attack  
empty as an urn  
in our shared room  
stares to nothing.

My mother  
moulds her body to an empty hug  
me-shaped.  
Spends hours  
fighting off alien craft  
kneels on pillows.  
Teaches me

to draw the shadow and not the thing itself.  
Takes me to a graveyard  
where we draw the dead.  
The shadow of a life  
and not the life itself.

My mother  
smokes weed  
in my shared house,  
breaks her toe  
on my stairs,  
tastes  
her first rebellious steps  
away from home  
in my care.  
Goes back home.  
Stays back home.

My mother  
who is made of heat and sand  
made of pyramids  
made of lost friends  
made of lies and disappointments.  
My mother  
who is made of all the love  
my grandmother withheld.  
A love-starved hollow  
stuffed to the suffocating brim  
full  
of longed for mother-love.  
Her heart  
a fragile broken thing,

heart trouble  
attack of the heart  
her heart  
which had never been shored up  
when needed.



xiii

*If this were the apocalypse  
who would you eat first?*

I ask at the workplace  
coalface.

The menu shifts and changes  
Bitter, sour, sweet, salt, umami  
and all the skills that might  
save a person  
from a moment on the lips.

We would not eat our sisters brothers.  
And yet we might  
if days dragged on towards starvation.

Die with a dog  
and he will protect you  
till he himself dies.

Die with a cat  
and he will eat you  
before your body  
cools.

At the end  
she would have been  
last on the menu  
bag of bones  
empty heart  
that was never full in the first place.  
Her young flesh as bitter as the old.  
Her bones too steely to gnaw.

Her blood like ice.  
She would have frowned on this game  
as she frowned on most things  
shaking her head  
narrow-eyed  
tut  
tut.

A letter in the mail  
from a relative  
I never knew  
damning her.  
*She is pure hate.*  
I know  
and yet he also  
tells me so.

So many lives  
tainted by the bitter on her fingers  
*Umami.*  
I might say.  
This other thing  
this pungency  
this complication of flavour  
that must be eaten in context.  
And yet  
I never reply.

Her ghost  
is playful.  
She is in my dreams again.  
Always laughing

all the feint and flirt  
that she reserved for boys.  
the cheeky monkey  
that was the mould that I was poured into.  
In my nightmares she becomes me.  
I become death.  
She laughs and whips  
the world with her cyclonic mirth.  
I brace myself for floods  
and drownings as the storm splits  
and passes.  
A disappointment.  
leaving too many alive.

The weather clears  
Storm ends  
but in me  
rain.



# Requiem



i

Softly  
around me  
because of grief the world is muted.  
People tread carefully.  
Don't chastise when perhaps they should.  
Cars dip their lights politely  
when passing.  
even the cat  
asks with a quiet mew  
before stretching  
across my knees.  
I am living in a pause.  
Between beats?  
The song, till now  
has blared out its steady rhythm  
and there is more than a breath  
to catch  
before a new heart will be established.

I am not dancing.  
As I'm quietly side-stepped  
I am standing,  
seeing, like a person entering a rural pub.  
All conversation stopped  
all eyes wary  
and even I am unsure how to proceed.  
What should I order?  
Where would I sit  
to drink?

There are some templates  
things to say  
that will be heartfelt but unoriginal.  
Sorry for your loss.  
It sucks.  
Sorry to hear.  
It's sad.  
And yes,  
sad.  
Or something else.  
Some subtle pause  
as I digest another grain of her  
and wipe her ashes off my fingertips.  
and head to work.

Lug chairs,  
sell books  
work  
in pointless service  
of nothing  
that matters.  
Now.

And every time I stop  
to rest  
there is the watchful silence  
as they wonder,  
I wonder,  
what will happen next?



ii

They call it pica  
the inedible things that I have eaten.  
The eraser  
at the tip of a pencil  
that smelled like bubblegum.  
The paper, torn and softened in my mouth,  
swallowed.  
Chasing pips and dirt  
and charcoal  
crunched in my back teeth  
in my mother's art class.

In a graveyard  
I grew to love  
the sculptures of the dead.  
I thought each sadly lowered eyelid  
was an faithful representation  
of bodies made stone  
moss  
snails,  
ivy.

These things I loved with my fingers  
clutching a blackened stick,  
the concrete cracks,  
the raised brass letters  
on the headstones.  
The roots of the trees,  
digging up the dead.

Art and death  
fused  
with each new page of cartridge.  
The smell of turpentine.  
The smell of linseed oil.  
The smell of my mother's  
funereal perfume.  
Lily of the valley.  
Violet blue.  
Now  
I taste charcoal  
when I think of her.

My grandmother wouldn't teach.  
She painted.  
She sculpted.  
She drew.  
Always her strong hands in motion.  
The bones of her fingers  
Hard and sure  
Under skin.

She picked proficiencies for her daughters  
/ daughters'.  
That one will paint.  
That one will use powdered colours  
in a pastel stick.  
She picked me  
to see the world in three dimensions.

That one will be a sculptor.  
Unmoved by my leanings towards  
ruining my eye  
with books.

She picked my skill and locked me to it.  
I struggled against her as children do.  
Yet now,  
I don't know where to put my hands.  
I buy a packet of plasticine  
and press it between my fingers till my hands ache  
turning colour to brown  
hard, soft  
flexing memory into some representational form.  
My mouth waters at the smell of what I've made.  
A shape with scales and arms and teeth  
to make the dead proud.

And it is all my will  
this effort  
to keep the model of a dinosaur  
from the gnashing of my own teeth,  
and swallow  
nothing but another  
scrap of bone.

### iii

This is the eye  
watching the calm  
and it seems she will return  
the world  
to normalcy.

A flat expanse of mediocre  
ochre  
like her desert-scape,  
waterless  
tearless  
landscape.

And yet, at the first glimpse of rain  
death springs to life  
rivers run down red rock  
renewing  
parched eye  
painful at a blink.

Other bodies, other living beings, blood sacks  
beating  
firm in their skins  
as drums.

A child fumbles in his nose  
and sucks salt from fingertip.  
An old woman bites her nails,  
swallowing.  
My stomach eats itself.

I swallow a camera  
for  
a look inside and imagine all the tiny bits of her  
bone  
rearranged into a statue,  
hugged over  
small  
plump and calcified.

I wake, dazed and sobbing  
anaesthetised  
sorry for my loss  
*I know*  
the doctor says  
*it is the last thing*  
*you said*  
*before sleep.*  
Did I sleep?  
Between one second and the next?

What happened at the moment  
of exhalation?  
when life became death?  
Conscious, unconscious?  
What strange sinking fall?  
*A little sleep*  
she once said  
all dropped  
full stop.

Through waking sobs  
I struggle to remember the fall  
but there is nothing,  
wet emptiness  
and the photographs  
the doctor hands me  
are livid with  
scars, hernia, inflammation  
but surprisingly empty of her.

iv

Dreams since she died:

Storm.

Flood.

A frantic search by kayak

abandoned

for a workshop.

My phone ringing and ringing

in my pocket

silent but shaking.

And I know it is her

calling me.

But when I answer

finally

watched by a crowd

of would-be writers

it is the rescue team.

*He died.*

*He died searching for her.*

*Now we have her body*

*as expected*

*and we have his too*

*for you*

*to identify.*

And then the dream of my skin;

cracked to chalk  
and flaking off  
because I wouldn't stop to moisturise  
even now  
in sleep  
with her bottle of Nivea  
in my hand  
and too busy to dip my finger in.  
Too busy to rub the balm  
into my skin.  
And now it flakes away  
leaving me skinless  
raw  
naked and bereft.

And

The apocalypse.  
I wake  
and chide myself for the cliché  
but dreams are uncontrollable  
and in this one  
I alone know that the end  
is here.  
Bread on every countertop  
*We must buy bread*  
*Not yet* My husband says *Not Yet*



With empty pockets then  
I wait  
till the mob see the end as clear as I.  
By then  
too late  
all bread will be gone.

All the weeks  
I knew and could have visited  
to say goodbye.  
All the weeks  
waiting  
and the end times nigh.

v

Every cubic meter filled with things collected.  
Shiny blue piles  
tipping towards what little space is left.  
Like bowerbirds,  
bowing to  
a need to mate  
when it is late.

*What will happen when I am gone?*

My grandmother's sad eyes  
knowing for the first time  
of a time without.

*They will fight.*

I answer  
and we both shake our heads without denial  
knowing it is true.

Two men, I read about,  
and one  
needing his brother to clothe and feed him.  
Nothing leaves the house  
and newspapers become another structure.  
Building in, layer after layer  
a wonderful, chaotic balance.  
When one brother crawls  
with medicine and food,  
through an ever narrowing tunnel  
hallway  
tunnel

a catastrophic collapse.  
The able-bodied twin left dead.  
the other, without medicine, water, food  
doomed  
starved of what he needs –  
his brother.

I remember  
the two of them  
mother, aunt  
Mother-aunt  
Sipping tea.  
*Dirty people*  
She says with the casual racism of an immigrant  
*All the streets full of their filth*  
As I watch the mice climb the curtain  
behind her  
eating dropped seed.

I come from this  
and this is what I go to.

vi

My grandmother collected  
fairy tales.  
A thousand careful translations  
each one  
as similar as Chinese operas  
repetitions underlining every word  
differently placed.  
She never bored  
of a poor girl frozen to her last match  
lighting it and knowing that  
this little flare would be  
as her last breath.

Grandmothers eaten by bears  
virgins eaten by a crone  
woodsmen chasing down  
a lost child  
all the threat implied.  
The maidens fall  
all.  
Bluebeard's wives  
are better left interred,  
girls are caged,  
feathered into down  
or drowned,  
a sleep like death  
and flesh  
ravaged in her absence,  
children born

from this pale corpse  
these fairies' tales  
collected in her bone-rattle hands,  
re-told through her snag-tooth mouth  
a cautionary tale  
in her  
self.

Locks and keys  
for daughters  
and the time when the brown snake  
made thudding circles  
against the four walls of the lounge room running  
this way and that  
in a single ribbon  
of anxiety.  
And I stood and stared  
knowing that  
this too was me.

These things remain unlearned:  
How to read bus timetables;  
How to cook a meal  
How to abandon the useless and unwanted;  
How to talk to men;  
How to say yes  
and no;  
How to ask for help;  
Share secrets;  
Retain friends;  
Read a map;  
Know where our ancestors are located;

Their faces names and vocations  
lost.  
How to  
Trust  
Rely on  
Help  
Know how to grieve  
And release  
A ghost back into the wild.

vii

*She told me she loved me for the first time.*

mother said

77 years later

than one might expect

this small concession

towards the one who birthed me if not raised me,

gratefully embraced, not with open arms, but at a distance

over a scratchy land-line

at the remove of a hospital

a moment of truth.

*I don't resent her for it*

showing love like weak tea

and my mother

grateful

for this tiny offering.

I tell them that I love them

so effortlessly that it might be love-confetti

never just this one word

reserved for last

strengthened in value

by its rarity.

Pull the string to start me and a rain

of love dampens the ground

without wetting.

I remember her confession to me  
at the hospital  
her hip crushed  
her arm askew  
and through the pain  
this one word

*Love*

surprised from her lips by surgery  
and the shock of seeing me  
so recklessly displaced.

How it felt to be loved.  
Not grateful as my be-  
loved mother.

Angry  
for the years wasted  
for her disappointments that I carry  
angry that I have come to nothing  
and become no one in her estimation.  
And also in mine.

And it is not enough  
To be  
belatedly  
loved.



viii

Why do we offer  
a last meal  
as if our appetites  
will suddenly increase  
in the shadow of our end.  
We know the cliché  
of a table, heaped  
with fried chicken  
burgers  
chips and dipping sauce  
an un-healthy appetite  
as if to gnash our teeth in the face  
of death.

But what of the fatal electric jerk  
the injection in the vein  
the nauseating walk  
from cell to stop  
full  
stomach  
churn  
we learn  
that life cannot be swallowed  
in too great a haste.

Dead man eating  
pizza, foie  
gras, fried chicken, lobster, chocolate chip. Fuelling  
a car

that has no engine  
and only one short push  
toward its destination

Her last meal  
taken with an enforced regularity  
just after dark.  
Her carers'  
blood of blood  
long since  
exhausted  
from turning orange, green, red  
to brown,  
taste to a conglomerate  
of bitter, sweet, sour, salt,  
umami.  
Water thickened to a gel  
and her grimacing to the last  
thick drop.

Food for babies then  
extracted from a can  
this final taste of  
life's disappointments  
blend together  
to sustain an adult infant  
at the end or the beginning

I remember  
begging  
too old for such baby food  
yet some strange

nostalgia  
overtook toddler  
me  
crying for the salt of memory  
baby pap  
to stand for  
cut grass summer  
Play School  
father  
sweet as milk on the tongue.

Savouring an awful disappointment  
balking at  
my babyhood.  
Bland  
not in memory  
but in practice.

Spat back into the can  
as she spat  
then  
just as the end began.

My last meal  
I squint through years  
age and apathy  
an oven crusted over with neglect  
to the last loaf of bread  
heavy, thick, inedible

a fleeting ghost  
of something soft  
as air  
as memory.

Her bread  
from the oven  
from her strong arms  
hot with her beating fury  
hot with love  
fierce as strangulation.

The sense of it  
flowing from my stomach  
to my veins  
this poisonous injection  
of her care.

In this last loaf I taste her fear  
of age, of winding down  
(eat it)

her anger when I,  
fat girl,  
would not eat.

When her culinary control began to wane  
and

(eat it)  
tethered children went unleashed  
into a kitchen  
gone to seed.

And then that time  
still so present on my tongue  
when birthday gifts

were a surprise  
of custard  
piped into  
a breath of pastry  
that would never be repeated.

Year for year I asked for choux  
Receiving  
plastic figurines  
(Princess Leia leaning  
candle close  
and sent to flame)  
books  
(with the kisses snipped tight  
off their sordid pages)  
soft toys, pets, a seahorse  
on a silver chain  
that struggles against my chest  
catching on my clothing even now.

My last meal then  
would be pastry  
kneaded by her hand  
and filled  
as if by magic with her love  
vanilla scented  
soft on the tongue

Did she long for  
her own mother's hand  
on her last meal  
when her time had come?

I remember  
when her mother died  
there was no bread  
fresh from the oven  
no tea  
no sympathy

St John's Blessing  
shared  
between the condemned and the executioner  
Tlacatolli stew  
of maize and human flesh  
an Aztec sacrifice, a strengthening,  
an honouring of those who fought to death.

The last meal  
I shared  
with her.  
the sauce  
we brought  
of meat and vegetable  
cooked and carried  
blended fine  
my flesh. My blood.  
And passed between her parched lips  
chased by  
jellied water.

And the pale  
hopeful wave  
*When will I see you again?*  
I thought of thickening the wine

with powder  
imagined the food  
I could strip down  
to thick soup  
on a spoon  
but left her then  
with nothing  
but her tins of baby food

*Soon. We'll be back soon.*

So soon  
to take her from the hands of strangers  
and place her  
like a sacrament  
upon my tongue.  
Like Jonathan Wayne Nobles  
who chose to eat the body and the blood of Christ  
instead of a last meal.  
Dead man eating.

ix

She walks  
free from bodies piled beneath the earth that vomits blood  
volcanic  
hot with death. She walks free  
from a Jewish name that might have spelled her end.

She sails free  
from the burning of her birth certificates,  
two dates of birth  
two documents, neither one  
authentic.  
Lie upon lie upon a missing truth.  
Migrant papers, lost.  
Slovenia  
fled.  
Egypt  
fled.  
All the burning buildings piled with  
smoulder  
coals of hidden history  
taken to the grave.

My grandmother  
(mother aunt)  
arrived in England,  
opening a suitcase  
empty of everything but



a skull  
gifted by a doctor.  
No papers, jewels, clothing, but a grinning  
face of death.

Shoes peel from her feet  
as these strange streets fill with rain  
she plants a seed of divination.  
Her grandmother had powers  
she, with her hands  
and heat and half remembered words.  
In the shock of white at my forehead  
her finger curls and she nods.  
A gift.

She plants a seedling tree,  
this life for Canada,  
watches and knows  
as it grows root side up  
and down and under  
which way her family must go.

x

In case  
death was a sham  
they tied a string onto a cooling foot  
and watched or listened  
as the body curled  
shifting with each subsequent decay  
ringing into night  
tolling  
such a wasteful loss of life.

In case  
he were to wake alone  
they gathered wives and little girls  
and buried them at his side

*So recent*  
they told me,  
gesturing across the land  
this island, Tanna  
with its whispered secrets  
underground.

Her fear of the macabre began  
with death, with fright  
at what would come if death was sleep.  
On waking, scratches  
found, clothes torn  
fingers bitten back.  
My grandmother opens disembodied eyes

or consciousness  
(flesh is gone)  
but still she finds herself divided here  
and part of her  
interred  
in me.  
Warm coffin  
soft as the first pulse of life  
dark as a tomb.  
She claws me in the night  
at two AM  
restless in her tomb

I wake  
and pace  
and place a hand here  
on my chest  
hot acid of her death  
burning for her sake.

Perhaps I should have left her  
in her urn, where she would look up to a plastic sky  
wondering  
is this heaven?  
or sleep?  
or hell?

Instead,  
flesh tomb,  
she tears and burns  
from tongue to liver  
through my organs  
which have swallowed her.

xi

A walk to work  
measuring the weight of life  
in passing bodies  
walking corpse.  
Each one  
traipsing towards an inevitable grave.  
A blink  
a second  
when compared with dinosaurs.

How are we then to be measured?  
Is it by the number of days assigned to grief  
as in the prescribed keening of a funeral march?  
If your body can be tucked up in a basinet  
or hefted onto six heftful shoulders  
is it more or less?

The boychild worth his weight in yuen  
the girl child signifying with her cry the family's end.  
Those names on spines of dusty tomes  
or those remaindered  
struck in black  
pulped  
on sale  
returned.  
A gold watch.  
A golden handshake.  
Golden child.  
No dawn service,

midnight vigil  
sales figures  
rare named new moth  
will keep us all alive.

She is worth more  
than all  
the lycra-clad on bikes.  
Worth a thousand times  
the woman in her  
purple jumpsuit.  
Her sun  
to my familial solar system  
I continue  
to circle.

xii

Soon  
or later  
much later  
the eye will pass.  
I know this as I trudge  
on  
with  
each  
new  
day  
of forgetting  
And remembering.

I wake each morning from the turbulence of dream  
wondering if this will be  
the day I fail to wake  
or wake  
and drag myself out of my bed  
with her skin heavy on me  
knitted in the night  
a shroud made flesh  
by grief.

I stare into the mirror  
and she is there  
hidden behind the fat,  
in shadow of my  
breasts and thighs and jowls.  
I carry her.

Monkey on my back.  
Monkey in the sad, strained dark of sleep  
beneath my eyes.  
Her eyes.  
My hair.  
Her hair exactly.

This changing of the guard  
is yet to come.

Calcium  
Zinc  
My grandmother's bones.

There is so little left of her immortal body.  
A cloistered museum of her art  
three fogged and unreliable memory banks  
one plastic vessel  
on sale  
from Bunnings  
to carry her.

The flowers that we buried over her  
fill up with water  
before they brown and die  
and all the muscle that we toned  
by breaking ground turns now  
to flab.

xiii

I buy a locket  
to lock it  
this last  
grit of body.

I am hungry  
obesely  
empty.

Opening  
her tiny silver mouth  
and snapping  
silver teeth  
tight shut.

She swings around my neck  
withered  
dehydrated  
eye  
I.

She will  
protect  
and gnaw at me

thumping against my chest  
a sharp silvery keening  
full of her  
and without meaning



This is the disappointment  
we trudge  
forward  
united  
into the furious days  
ahead.



# Cadenza



In Coles  
in the picnic aisle  
a packet falls.  
Inside  
there are plastic knives.

The pointless sound  
of nothing  
hitting ground  
  
is what breaks me.

Picnic aisle  
Knives  
Fall

And here I am undone.

Now is the time  
for you or them  
or someone  
to save me.

Now is the time.

I wait.  
grounded  
with plastic cups  
at eye level.

The rattle of a trolley  
death rattle  
wheeling by  
unheeding.

A high heel  
with a foot in it  
nails perfectly pinked  
a band-aid peeking  
out beside the little pinkling toe.  
An ankle chain with a metal disk and a word on it.  
Her name  
perhaps? A number I should call?  
I should call.  
My grandmother's name still  
on the number in my phone.  
But she is trundling,  
pushing against an errant wheel turning one way  
then another as if unsure  
if it should turn back.  
These  
things  
now.  
An antiseptic smell  
like hospitals.  
A stickiness under cheek.  
A single grain of rice  
brown  
in close up.

And who will eat my bones?  
Will you?  
I wonder.

And what will your dreams be  
if no one comes  
for me?

## Acknowledgements

First thanks to my family and in particular to Wendy and Sheila Kneen (mother/aunt). Mum was special to all of us and although I have presented the many complications of a life (both good and not so good) in this tribute to her, I hope you see that it is told with love and gratitude to her and to you both. I love you and thank you for being the best kind of family, unique, a little crazy but full of love. I hope you can see that this book honours you too. Thanks also to my absent sister who grew outward but away from the same familial space.

This book was written whilst taking valuable time granted to me by The Australia Council for the Arts. I will be eternally grateful.

Thank you:

to the judging panel of the Thomas Shapcott Poetry Prize for believing in this book when I was still dubious.  
to Felicity Plunkett for teaching me how to make this work a better thing with your careful eye and edits.  
to Emerald Roe for providing me with a space in which to write this book and to Barry and Denise Elphick for stoking the fires and providing sustenance while I worked.  
to Fiona Stager for her support of me and my work. Fiona, Australian literature owes a great debt to you and I, personally, owe you my career.

Thank you to Anthony Mullins for being there for me in my grief and for forcing me to enter the Thomas Shapcott



Award when I doubted myself. I am so glad you printed the manuscript out despite my instructions to not bother.

This book would not have been written without the encouragement and critical eye of an awesome bunch of poets, writers and artists, Katherine Lyall-Watson, Ellen Van Neerven, Trent Jamieson, Michelle Dicoski, David Stavanger, Kristina Olsson, Ashley Hay, Kasia Janczewski, Jason Reed, James Butler and Sam Wagan Watson. This work was completed because you told me to just ignore my self-doubts and keep going.

Thanks also to Tania and Cory Guest for helping me support my family through a very difficult time.

Thanks also to UQP for continuing to support poetry when many other publishers do not.

Thank you to my grandmother who always pushed me to be better than my best self, who taught me that art was a great and noble job and who insisted that I never ever give up. I think of you every day. I miss you dearly.

