

A Place on Earth

A young boy
is sitting by a fire
on the edge of the desert. There's a car
through the scrub behind him
pulled off to the side of the long dirt road
and a tent close by with his father in it, sleeping
already. It is late evening, nine or ten,
and he's long ago eaten: toast, baked
beans on a tin plate, burnt potatoes, tea.
1964 perhaps, or '63:
it doesn't matter what year.
He is sitting by the fire, stoked
earlier so that now it's burned back to the ancient
fire-gutted log he found and dragged there
before the sun set – burned back
so that, now the log is deep alight,
he can see a world in it: sees falling towers, forgotten
Alexandrias and Babylons,
the night markets of Wuzhou, Rangoon, Hong Kong,
sees Siegfried and the *Götterdämmerung*,
sees a huge, blood-orange sun
setting over the burnt, black
hills around him,
autos-da-fé, charred ruins, faces
staring from the flame
so beautiful they seem to scorch him,
sees the bombing and the burning of Dresden,
bodies in fiery graves, wild
midnight carnevales, sees

Moon-men and Sun-men in corroboree,
sees hearth-fires and bonfires and beacon-fires,
Etnas in their scoriac flows,
townspeople and villagers fleeing,
docks and homes and factories alight,
sees battered galleons, masts
collapsing, armadas blazing on the sea, radiant
sunrise breaking from the glowing embers
as if out of a phoenix-nest.

Something
rustles in the ti-tree, a
wallaby perhaps, night bird or
wild dog drawn by the fire,
and he looks up from his dreaming, sees the huge
darkness of the night and the vast
canopy of unknown, unnameable stars,
a night so infinite, this night,
it will never leave him.
Time and again he will look up
– for sixty or for seventy years, luck holding – and it
will always be there: before him
the fire, behind him
his father sleeping, that something
rustling in the undergrowth,
and about him the galaxies turning, the still
point of his being,
a place on earth,
gift beyond measure.

The Thick of It

I was standing there, washing up and
thinking about Baudelaire, how one might
give one's soul
to be able to write so well
but then the dog came down
to lap at his water-bowl and
sleep on the armchair
and on some obscure
impulse I went out
into the night air, for the
thick of it, the
hum of life everywhere – looked
at the stars, the
insects
swarming about the back-door lamp, and
coming in, stepped over first a
cockroach then a
slug, leading its
small family somewhere.

How can we
be so arrogant, to think that our
souls are worth so much?

Poem

Since I have come upstairs
on all fours to greet him, the dog,
for such is his wont,
licks first the top of my head and then my left ear, just as,
if he can catch me, he'll
lick any cracked or wounded skin as I
get up in the morning – it's
nothing that I can't wash off
and probably helps
heal some other, more ancient hurt, or
balms it.

It is
a warm spring day. The smell
of each of us
rises gently into the ether, yours
of lemons and woodsmoke, summer flowers, his
of grass and dust and beloved
blanket, mine – for such
is my own
ancient wont –
of you.

Rats, Lice and Historyⁱ

This morning, making coffee, I watched
through the kitchen window an old crow
settle on a low branch of a Blue Mountains ash and,
looking out over the valley, for no
apparent reason, burst into raucous song,
and I thought – I don't know why – of that other
late summer, so long ago, when,
full of my mother's death
I set out with five hundred new-
earned dollars and a haversack
heavy with volumes of Jack Kerouac
and took flight for the northern winter, to visit
school-friends of two years before – landing
in San Francisco, heading for Sacramento
to see the best of them, my namesake, then
betraying him, only five days later, when,
at her invitation, I went to visit his
girlfriend, two hundred miles south
and left sex-sore and sleepless the next morning
by Greyhound for Iowa and the parents
of the first girl I had ever made love with, whose
doctor-father (she was at school elsewhere) regaled me
all evening with *Rats, Lice and History* before
(in such perfect irony) I woke itchy and sore
in his attic guest-bed with new-
hatched Australian crab-lice of my own
and, confessing, was shown the door
with stony silence and a prescription for DDT, his own
attempt, I think, to kill me, though I went on, still

burning, physically, to see
and be rebuffed by his daughter in Milwaukee
and so hastened home to my once-
host-family in Chicago, for three days of rest
before heading for Rochester and the photographs
of Weston and Cameron and Minor White
and a once-dreamt-of night
with Miss Teenage Chicago of four years before,
who sent me, then, to stay with her cousin in Baltimore
who, undeterred by the thought
of her heart-surgeon husband,
would wake me each morning with languid
stroking on the floor – even her name now
lost in the subsequent embarrassment of my telephone call
from a clinic, in St John, Newfoundland, run
by Sadists of some Christian order
who had burned and scalded and punctured me,
to tell her of what was almost certainly (but
wasn't) a cousin-to-cousin STD, and then – my true
goal all along – after another five days' travelling,
to S., in Michigan, ten years older than I, who had once, in
Sydney,
held me so long and so gently, seeing
something I had not yet seen in me,
and we made love at last,
fumbling and sad, in the bleak snow-light,
while her army husband was out,
and she came, and sobbed, and since no-one
had ever come with me before, I thought
I had hurt or broken her. 'It's
alright', she said, 'It's alright',
but it never was, not for another thirty years yet, not

until you and I met, and the wheel
left me, here, in this openness, on a
morning like this one, trying like that
old crow to sing it out, let it all
go, the pain and the confusion and the
embarrassment of it, the regrets and the
damage and the stubborn, un-
trackable grieving, into this sudden light.

Looking for a Friend in the Mountains and Not Finding Her

parsley
shooting already, coriander
almost gone to seed, grass
lank and riddled with dandelion,
bean plants to the knees,
lemon in blossom,
banksia like a daylight lantern,
off to the north
the low, blue mountains
stretching for a thousand miles

No Poem for Weeks Now

No poem for weeks now, I don't know why – the
flood of things – then suddenly, tonight, just
after 1 a.m.,
from the other end of the house, you
singing under your breath, so
quietly that, through the rain, the
sound of the heater, trucks
on the highway changing gear, I can
barely hear but
do and
close my eyes, breathe
outward, slowly, a breath it
seems I have held for years.

Dust

When I came back
after almost a month away
a wild wind had damaged the roofs of neighbouring houses
and brought down the cherry laurel in our yard
and there was a fine layer of dust over everything: dust
in the cupboards, dust in the drawers, dust beneath the
dried, cut roses,
dust in the cups and glasses, dust in shoes,
the dust of our neighbours, the dust of the city, the dust
of last year's harvest, dust of the Simpson Desert
two thousand kilometres west.

What's there to say?

Sometimes, as I talk, I feel the dust
creeping through my sentences, thoughts
turning to fine powder
as they wend through the motes of it:
theories, philosophies, histories.

Our dreams
are dust, our loves
are dust, the things
we fight for
are dust.

In the Taj Mahal
they are sweeping the dust; in the Pentagon,
the Vatican, the Louvre. In Padma

Emiliano is ploughing the dust; in Hay the sheep
are straggling through dust; in Canberra
the Prime Minister is coughing
because of the dust; outside
the wind and the birds are crying
because of their burden of dust: crying
or singing, I don't know (the world
flows through our sentences, sometimes it sings).

In the evening, the dust
turns red in the sunset: there are
worlds up there,
and centuries,
great palaces, great temples, great
archives of dust

The past
is dust.
The future
is dust

coating
the tips of our fingers,
gathering
under the dry, cut roses

burning
as the world
turns away from us
angry beyond measure.