#### The Hazards



Sarah Holland-Batt was born in Southport, Queensland, in 1982 and has lived in Australia and the United States. She is the recipient of the WG Walker Memorial Fulbright Scholarship, Yaddo and MacDowell fellowships, and an Australia Council Literature Residency at the BR Whiting Studio in Rome, among other honours. Her first

book, *Aria* (UQP, 2008), won a number of literary awards, including the Thomas Shapcott Poetry Prize, the ArtsACT Judith Wright Award, and the FAW Anne Elder Award, and was shortlisted in the New South Wales Premier's Kenneth Slessor Prize and the Queensland Premier's Judith Wright Calanthe Award. She holds an MFA from New York University, and First Class Honours in Literature and an MPhil in English from the University of Queensland. She is presently a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at the Queensland University of Technology.

#### Also by Sarah Holland-Batt

Charles ale Charles ale



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www.uqp.com.au uqp@uqp.uq.edu.au

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# for Mavis K, Chattor resale who taught me the names of things

Charles ale Charle

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Denn alles Fleisch, es ist wie Gras

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## Medusa

I have always loved the translucent life, the concentricities blooming around me in a ripple-ring of nerves. If I let my shadow cinch in, whatever the soul is billows out like hollow silk. Needle by needle, I plume into the rays of an underwater moon, climbing pure and poisonous in the drift of marine snow. Nothing hangs quite so empty. See how my mind skates, vain and clear as melting ice. It contracts with a heart's pulse: selfish, selfish. I glide savage, a stinging chandelier, a brain trailing its nettles through the anemone swell and forests of stiff sea fir. Malice swarms through me in a surge. I know that flare, that bitter reason. And I will float and flower in my season.

# This Landscape Before Me

Is unwritten, though it has lived in violence.

First the factory stood, quiet as an asylum. Then the annihilating mallee with its red fists of blossoms and the mountain ash creeping over it like a stain.

I have no proof, but I tell you there were leadlight windows here once, barred. They cast a little striped light on the women.

Now in scrub and yellow broom I stand on a history braided and unbraided by stiff Irish wrists. The rope and span and carded wool are unpicked as are the faces and names.

Londonderry, Cork, Galway, Kildare – as I say the words they are sucked away to a hemisphere in darkness.

I will not presume to say what suffering is or how it was meted out in this place. At what point it breaks a body I cannot tell.

But this morning I saw a young rabbit hunched in brush and shadow. I saw its lesioned face, its legs too thin to scramble, the blood-berry red and pink scab of its eye.

It had caught the disease we brought here for it and wanted a quiet place to die.

And it was lucky, or as lucky as it would get -Aght.

Charles ale

Charles ale there was time and light, the hawks and dogs

## The Orchid House

Pegged under banana trees our backyard hothouse was fixed summer that boiled all year, a green humpy breathing gauze in meshy sheets. Indoors it poured artificial rain.

Under that slatted sunlight
I crept the spider-heavy shelves
where exotics festered in their Latin names.
I torqued the twist-wires tight
around each trumpeting neck,
chivvied longlegs from potted dark
as outside the clouds blew back like years.

My grandfather spoke a strange pidgin there, knew Cat's Face from Queen of Sheba, Snake Flower, Soldier's Crest, Sulphur Tail.

A decade late, I found a wrinkled block of newsprint under the orange crucifix, six men waist-deep in the Mekong where the war's end could never come.

Death never reached those suburbs, not really. Bodies in their Sunday best never lay on our kitchen table stiff as celluloid dolls, and last goodbyes were told by nurses in chemical code.

When Grandad died, the wonky shack grew wild, and creepers curtained over. Through walls thin and threadbare I heard them hissing, the cold wet tendrils that could strangle, and grew on air: Chairbries ale teatree, tangle root, tongue.

7

# Tropic Rain

Elephant ears like serving plates stagger under it, tropic rain lashing sideways, tripping like flapped tarp on tree palm, lush, symphonic, no image in it. Embers sparked from the water-forge hammer fern brim and fling starwards into mango leaf. Rain I have known like music, a tin oratorio stammering like a frog into full throat then overspilling to pinewood soakage, crotchets quickened to a Cuban beat, whipcrack on windowpane, slashing down pawpaw skin, sledding in the green eaves. Rain shuttering a suburb's eyelids, rain in slant to louvre grain, sliced rain with tinctures of iron in it, monsoon rain so sheeted you stop at the verandah's brink by a blurred world, all detail drummed, tempered flat like the verge of sleep. Then comes outpost rain, audible only to insect ear, a trickle through weed thicket, rain you might miss in an intermittent mizzle like the stutter of magazine fire that starts and stops and starts again.

## Botany

After the rain, we went out in pairs to hunt the caps that budded at night: wet handfuls of waxtips and widows, lawyer's wigs, a double-ringed yellow.

We shook them out onto gridded sheets, the girls more careful than the boys, pencilled notes on their size and shape, then levelled a wood-press over their heads.

Overnight, they dropped scatter patterns in dot-and-dash, spindles and asterisks that stained the page with smoky rings, blush and blot, coal-dust blooms.

In that slow black snow of spores I saw a woodcut winter cart and horse careen off course, the dull crash of iron and ash, wheels unravelling.

All day, a smell of loam hung overhead. We bent like clairvoyants at our desks trying to divine the message left in all those little deaths, the dark, childless stars.

# A Scrap of Lace

My grandmother used to make Kenmare lace,
her hook a metal burr
dragging the world slant,
the chains noosed and trussed,
her patient-handed trickery
niggling our fates into place.

Like a froth of seafoam or spittle
it wreathed our handkerchiefs.

Dripped from hems and collars.
Sat in scalloped rounds
under our blue jardinières,
perfect and inconceivable as snow.

I used to hate the lace, fuss
at the prickle and itch,
feel it scratch around my neck
like a ring of fine-haired
arctic fern, a sheet of lichen
shot with ghillie brogue holes.

Sometimes I have lifted a piece
of that lace up to the light
and tried to unwind it with my eye.
I have never found an opening
in the lashes and loops of it,
the cobwebbed knots.

But today I read the history
of John Mathew Cox,
ferried in 1787 to Botany.
Seven years' hard labour
for thirteen yards of lace.
I imagine his plain-scrubbed face.

And wonder at the weight
and heft of those soft boxfuls.

And their usefulness then.
To pluck a man from his country.

And flog him. And school him
in justice. And the price of lace.

# An Illustrated History of Settlement

Begins with a frame, as if to say here is the finished, the complete.

Then the last thing on the crosshatched horizon is a smudge of centuries-dead parrots in the shining black fruit of cabbage trees.

Above it, a turbulent bluster of cloud. There was weather. The sky boiled. And there was water – a choppy wedge puffed with cutters' sails.

This to introduce the idea of bay, coastline as opening or entry.

On a far headland, two black men stand warily, one holding up a toothpick spear as if to puncture the clouds' drapery.

Colourless stretch of saltgrass and sand, middleground as featureless filler.

Closer in, a deckhand unfurls the rose of a flag in the wind, and two soldiers squat on a dune, flintlocks cocked off into the distance, their heads knotted with tidy black ribbons. And here in the foreground, a Rubenesque swell of redcoats tumbling over the beach like a flock of exotic birds. Faces fat with apple-cheeked Englishness. Thighs bulging in white breeches.

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## The House on Stilts

Through weaved air, that wedge of darkness chocked beneath our weatherboard

was no man's land – a fretwork of lattice checkerboarded the sun, and a fernery

of maidenhair and bird's nest drifted like sea grapes, tinting light green.

An underground exile, I would cup my ear up for the thud of clipped heels

knocking like ghosts through the floor. Now I am the ghost, back down where

the heron-house, the crane-house dips its white sticks into mud, where black rats

scuffle at night in old fuel cans, where fishing line frays on copper nails

and film-eyed possums howl and steel their claws. Born between the wars, between the grey fringe

of scrub and the glass scrawl of reef, this white ghost-crab tiptoed a century, metal-backed,

and now is history. The gulf yawns – a lifetime since cyclone rain rattled the venetians

like a handful of thumbtacks, discord of a continent, but I am there still, midden-deep

in that beetle-black carapace, and the light flickers in and out like radio static.

Outside, a salt breeze has withered the passionflower: it hangs dead on the vine. The moon flattens to a crisp.

Hang, we will all hang. Night comes early here; midges jag in the sky like anxious stars.

## Galah's Skull

I find it in a field of feathers, pink-crested, a knuckle of bone picked clean by the wind, a pale mohawk mounted on stone.

I bend down. Zeroed out of its head are two sockets, two airy planets full of sun, and taking asylum in one

a millipede is coiled, a slick black hypnotist. Polished, it spirals in on itself like one of Saint Hilda's fossil snakes

we studied in the school chapel's stained glass. As if the eye could dig itself into the earth then extend a curled feeler out, like a fern.

I turn the skull round in my palm like a pebble – it will not settle. Otherwise, all is still: the grasses claw in, the world does not tilt.

Even the blue stand of scrub grows over; it has nothing on its mind. But the skull will outlast the summer, a thought cut short,

and I will pass it every day as I walk and stop just here, where the air hones its teeth on bone, where the mind remembers itself as a shell, and mourn what was once a world: one eye rolled to the daylight moon, the other pressed down into the earth.

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## Desert Pea

Like the pursuit of fire a wind stirs the rocks,

summons into heat a kind of cardinal calm.

This is the violence of distance.

No end, no horizon. Only desert floor,

henges of red and the absolute artifice of sky.

I cannot stand the certain world:

rock grass and thistle, animal thirst

invading my eye. Give me night, the stars

streaming past me huge and soundless.

Give me the silence of the mind.

# Approaching Paradise

Here in the white, white wing of a gull you may glimpse paradise. In the flensing sun. The prodigal sea, bent back on itself, has the rough green mind of paradise.

Paradise is in the breadfruit's low sling, the purple scrawl of bougainvillea up a wall. It is in the yachts' clatter and wheel, the fishermen's nylon stringing the wind.

You will find paradise in a whiting drowning in a bucket of freshwater, in the jammed blade of a fishscale like quicklime under the thumb.

Women roast themselves in coconut oil and children run bare-legged in paradise. Praise them. And praise the black-faced bat travelling even in sleep through paradise.

This fringe of storm-streaked shacks with genuflecting surfers riding in, this line of Norfolk pine. Wet dogs nosing the muck of a king tide.

Praise the bloated body washed in, the gentle nibbling of baitfish and bream, bikini-clad tourists jerked out by rips, the summer and violence of paradise. A shark's slit corpse gapes pink on the jetty, its head yanked on a hook like a sacrifice. Its shank is smooth and black as paradise. Men with knives kneel down like seraphim.

Chat for resale