



Compound Eye

Louise Oxley

NEW POETS
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For my parents, Helen and Denis Hawker

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Night, Connelly's Marsh

a plover is grating the dark
into stars the cry springs
like blood along a scratch

I trip on a loose plank
on the jetty the wood is tense
the moon askance

who lied first to whom?

your letters have become
mere shoals of fingerlings
small change

a cormorant will pocket them

I'll wait here for a while
between breaths
spanning tides

Paper Nautilus

A finger would fit in the channel
along its hunched back

Shelved with sea urchin lanterns
their longitudes riveted with stars
and the smooth short-horned cursive
of shark egg-cases it was

a seaworn lexicon

whose lost definitions
gave us our first longing
for secrets that can
not be given up

Now I think of a spooked mare
tucking her tail under
or a fair-haired girl in a french plait

Every seven years they come, you said
a rumour spread along the yawning beach
from shack to shack

and we were off in half-known myths
on another quest
for this calyx of unearthly flowering,
argonauta nodosa

Folding octopus unborn
in placental arms
close as metaphor

she sings to the surface
rising surely as a phrase long practised
the sea's dark lyric

never failing beneath her

At last one year they came
on a southerly buster

a porcelain flotilla

We found them in seagrass dunes
trellised in skinny driftwood
kelp holdfasts
and the dulling hides of cowfish

Turning them to the light we knew
a tentative tracing of absence
the rare orchids of loving words
that are true

Somewhere offshore
these ceramicist-musicians
had left their vessels
striking out for Cape Raoul or Tasman Head
arms floating from the coracle
like a magician's scarves

Here you are at fifteen
leaving the water
a wonder of lengthening limbs

seeing the camera
your head on one side
those childbearing hips that have
so far as I know
remained empty

Undoing

It was slower than she'd thought
getting the wedding dress off;

a fret of buttons in ivory silk
worked the length of her spine.

His fingers were thick with haste,
not for the V of silent skin deepening

beneath them, but for the party
he was missing down the hall.

Halfway through he left her where she stood
in a flinch of light from the street.

Still as icing, she saw how roses
blotted colour from the bedroom walls,

how it was not possible to do herself up again,
the fabric at her back opening like doubt.

Compound Eye

- knowing that God geometrizes eternally - De Quincey

The swallows are back in Patpong One.
They have closed their annual arc and sit

huffing on highwires over brothel and foodstall,
shitting on windscreens.

This morning it makes the news.
Yupin is arranging papaya and limes
on two white plates

though you have not come home.

I cannot describe the odd heft of cloud,
the colourless colour of every morning so far
from the penthouse window.

Among the birds above that street
there must be one fearless astronomer

that knows weather fringed with feather itch,
that can pick from the infinite girths of the world
the one to follow.

An eye veils and pixillates. A fractious wing
flicks open like a knife. The skywatcher

flexes twiggy elbows
lifts off from a thornbush in Kenya
and heads south where sun is vertical

and earth still warm enough
for insect-darkened air.

Its cortex full of geomagnetry and dreams
extravagant as stars

it preens into the scope of a wing
a square of gold leaf, a double-sided map

scored with this scabrous accretion
hived in a loop of the Chao Phya,
sinking into its klongs,

and beneath
the Village of the Wild Plums
whose pure fantastic contours

once were these: crenellated spires,
cobra-headed pagodas, the rim of a chedi
and real cloud.

We are new in town, and to each other.
Time hangs back,
a stranger approaching in the dark.

At home a fly would be ramming
the fists of its eyes into this glass. Here it is me
stunned, sealed up, air-conditioned –

though even the blowfly
has a many-chambered heart.

Out there, flat swampland. A temple
raised on earthfill and demolition dust
hides three of the Buddha's teeth,

rooves make scorching space for frangipani
and the paddles of banana trees,
rice-barges ride low through Thonburi,

a palmist opens a briefcase hung with amulets
and takes his magnifying glass
to a hopeful hand,

for five baht at the brahmin shrine
merit-makers offer the release of sparrows

not knowing that they too
return to their cage,

in a klongside slum a squatting girl
winds jackfruit-yellow silk
on a bicycle wheel

and – unless they are blown
off course like us –
swallows arrive on a path of inclines

to the day, the hour, the same two wires,
slipping easily as twilight
from world to world.

A pinion tilts in aerofoil, the body swings upright
and they beat back air

in a small pant of wings.

July

July, and this is the longest silence yet.
Only a raven's caw trails in the low sky
and falls among winter's waiting perfumes.

What will the word be, when it comes?
Every silence means a different thing
yet none gives any sign to know it by.

Rock is worn to sand in tide's tireless pull,
a swathe of dark is cut by stars, a late leaf
wITHERS on the path, a hooked fish cries.

To cling to hope's a desperate metaphor –
if someone were to tell me you were gone,
the news would, after all, be kind.

Summers

Summers she spent at Lemon Bay
the sand a ring of pith
bent to the sharp rind of the sun.
In the warm shallows fingerlings fled
her trailing feet, nightblue mussels
clung to rock. She let the salt
of memory tempt her tongue, threw
open her window to the one who drew
melodies curling like ribbon
through his slight hands, notes as thin as wind
that rose and fell on the ruffling sea,
rippled the quiet circle of her daydreams
and held her, while cicadas whirred continuo
beneath the paths of all her summers.

Leaving the Room

Back from the beach, they've fallen asleep
with the light on, cuttlebones and driftwood
on the windowsill. A blond twist of hair,
an outflung arm as smooth as shell insides
and still dimpled hand
name me Mother and bind me to this name.
Beside one convoluted ear
an hourglass pile of sand has formed.

How many times will this head
turn on the pillow, this small sweep of lash
surf the cheek's eroding contour?
I must refuse such questions. The word
goodnight is a familiar smell
that fills the room like orange peel.
On the floor is strewn a spill of counters.
Just one last game, they begged, and I said No.
I see their faces bright with disobedience
and kneel and sweep up colours with my forearms
as my mother knelt and wept once, scrubbing
at a stain my sister left on brand-new carpet
while I watched wordless through an intervening
door of glass. I drop the counters in a jar,
turn out the light. The hall's a long retreat
and every day the dark is newly made.

Each time I return
I am farther back, more ebb
than flow, out beyond the rocks,
the lighthouse and its light, trickling into crevices
crazy with barnacles, chitons razor-tongued,
the bloodblisters of mussel shells,
soft anemones and weed.

Anzac Day, Hobart 1981

The chill slid off the mountain,
unsettled hems and made collars of wind.
Women stretched gloved hands
up to their hats, jamming them on
with their convictions.
Wreaths deserted, scuttling away.

During the address it rained
and the rain stung like there was sand
in it. With his light drawing in
behind *these blessed cataracts*
I couldn't handle grandpa, never having really
touched him as a child.

But I steered him timidly by the elbow
of the Good Suit, because
didn't you know, dear
you can't wear medals on an overcoat,
finding instead leather-patched tweed
whiffing of Drum, how he would lower himself
wincing into chairs. To think

he carried round shrapnel in his spine
for sixty-odd years. Somewhere in France
they'd repaired it with silver
and without anaesthetic.

The hatted women watched him
clinging coatless to a metal chair,
dismasted in the swell of seats,
and clucked their disapproval at me
from a safe distance. I hoped
he wouldn't die just yet. Lost in those rows
he might have been still searching for names
in a Flanders cemetery.

The last post cast its grieving intervals
over the ghosts in the grass
and the witnesses. And trailing behind it
two minutes that weren't silence at all
but grandpa's version
of *Look for the silver lining*,
a chin-wobbling tremolo from the driver's seat,
while we took our chances
and scuffled in the back.

And here beside me now
was the always-old, that age had wearied
at eighteen, thinning to nothing in the wind
like a lie when the truth is out.

Magpies

What are magpies, if not the words of poets
lifted from the page and thrown into the air?

They scribble all that could ever be written
on the wind, fold it on high boughs.

Those pitiless beaks could run you through,
that beady approach, too close for comfort,

could stop your blood. Subversive, nuns in negative,
they garble their arpeggios – crescendo, decrescendo –

dripping cool discords along the arc of daybreak, dusk,
where light and dark compose the world.

What are magpies, if not the words of poets
lifting from the page and swooping on the heart.

Pattern-singer

Of the birds of Bismarck

she names the grey shrike-thrush
that shared a mountain corridor with exiles.

While their countrymen in the fatherland
were told to find paradise

in the shadow of swords,
they made it in God's honour

in the shadow of a mountain livid
with old rifts, sheltering their faces

from ignorance and a grazing wind,
where snow slipped from the roof

as it does in the Tyrol, and valley walls
rose impossibly around them like nostalgia.

The sure contralto of this pattern-singer
filled their heads, its repertoire a measure of distance

from the desired, pitch-perfect for the season
and with no need for practice or applause.

When they heard the lifting end-note,
nightingale-memory dimmed

They tuned the soundpost of their bodies
to the new world's melodies,

learned their fingering on the trellises
and broad carthorse reins,

planted swedes in ever straighter rows
and apple trees for the fruit that ripens last

to see them through the winter.

On the other side of the mountain
having bled dry in the trenches

fighting the exiles' kin,
my grandfather, like them, placed a grid of trees

where fruit would be swollen by creeklines

and, like them, softened when a shrike-thrush called
or skittered on the windowsill.

So it is not a question of taxonomy, she says,
offering a bulky nest of bark and twigs,

see how it is strung
on the veins of the forest like a heart.

Note: Bismark is the former name of Collinsvale, a village suburb of Hobart situated in a northern corridor of the Mount Wellington Range. It was settled by Germans and Danes in the 1890s. Its name was changed during World War 1.

Masashi at the River Kwai

Flimsy and feathered with lines, Masashi is blown
like a spent leaf, yet his footfalls silence cricketsong
that pulsed from lawn green as ricepaddy.

Pillows of thundercloud collude to smother him
where he falters on the buried in numbers
too big for names. The knobbed bamboo is strained

and fleshless and grows hollowly against itself
like the legs and the mere shadows of legs
of men who were bones at his feet even while they lived,

wasted by cholera and lies. The bridge is for nothing,
the border closed. Lotus rise like begging bowls
in the hands of children, moored to their questions.

Masashi asks forgiveness, but the dead are many and mute,
the river long as regret and sluggish with rumour and forgetfulness.
He comes to the graves for the hundred and fourth time,

but the living answer no. Some things, they say,
must never be offered. So he walks through the resolute
crosses, dying of blossom like the bamboo.

Voice Over

After so many days trampling a sea
heavy as his home soil,
reduced to a single intention
like a bottled message
and able to recognise
ten distinct patterns in leeward foam,
he began to draw comfort from the swell
turning to him like the shoulder
of his sleeping wife. Rescued,
he lay on a narrow bunk
treading water, his fractious limbs
still scrawling the urgent translation
of need into action. Submariners
planted their cable-hard hands
on his pillow, leaned over him
with a tenderness they thought
they had forfeited to war, whispered
all was well. Hollowed by the cries
of those left reaching for hand-holds
as they dived for cover, they took turns
to smooth his legs with oil,
drew the blanket up
and crooned old songs.
It was the doctor's silvery
potion of reason that broke his stride.
He was walking now, uphill, along
the line of argument
and it was growing dark.
Someone had ploughed the home paddock
in his absence; breakers of loam
clung to his boots. Upstairs a light was on.
She would be bent to her sewing.
He raised his eyes.

European Wasp

vespula vulgaris

One shot of spray.
Startled in treacherous air

the gaudy misfit bumps and skitters
down the perverse glass,

drops with the sound of a twist
of wasted paper on the floor.

Antennae wave like fists,
the black and yellow stare -

the yellow of weeds and rampant things -
is fixed on my indifference,

then yields in a lurch and tumble
of fretted abdomen and useless wing.

Bellyup, the epileptic pirouette
is the bitterest reproach.

You see, says the intruder, I am you.
Who is stung when you deny my sting?

The wasp begins to drag through cleft
mandibles each fine spurred leg,

as if a mad routine would fend off death.
To catch the moment, I approach.

Passion Play

[Gustav Mahler 1860-1911]

'I am three times homeless'
he said, 'born
between Prague and Vienna
Bohemian and Jew
everywhere an intruder'

His father tricked the family
with the long mirror of ambition

- seven out of fourteen
died before their gums
could fill with teeth -

so he marched
with his lunging accordion
behind the village band

and for the little dead siblings
all his pieces mixed polkas
with funeral marches

To contain his imaginings
he built composing huts
which he lined
with parched woodwinds

but through chinks in the harmonies
heroes emerged
who were born to their graves

Just once an *adagietto*
in an interlude of bliss
when he met Alma

who was luminous

She begged him not to write
Songs on the Death of Children
fearing his tragedies
his crushing premonitions
clutching their daughters

and when he did
not even a knife through the throat
could draw death out of the eldest,
his four year old darling

He didn't even go home to Alma
writing 'sell the house'
pacing the cloud-swabbed mountains

his symphonies climbing
out of their keys
never returning, for
how can you?

Now marked *pesante*
the three hammerblows of fate
fell in the first hand
of experience

and more and more
dissolutions of metred time
so that hearing them
you join the ether
centricity is shed

dissonance after dissonance
is piled one
on top of the other

until you understand
that you have gone beyond
the bearable

and are only this:
unbalanced, a human being
and still alive

Peonies

Flowers are reverie and lament – Tim Storrier

With that falling diphthong
and mop of pinker-than-pink chintz whimsy
ballooning from the vase
you might have given your name to girls.

Heavy in the hand as a breast
and veined minutely with this colour
that could be flammable,

crammed as audaciously
as a British museum with the spoils of the world
you air the room
with the green-scented dust of ancient jade,
temple floors and tea.

Here between the skin soft frills
blood falters, sinks to its centre.

After the party
these vestiges of empire
are shredding from the whole like dreams,
lost with their pollen on piano keys.

Greek Roots

I have wrong words to meet you with;
the syntax of our once-love
is mistranslated in the heat.
A year apart unpatterns
and re-patterns us and agapanthus
come at me again.

What airs they give themselves,
dervishes whirling in the aisles,
the heavenward jostling for bees.
Stonewalled in the garden
we have left behind,
good intentions overgrown
and hot with spite,
I felled their wedding-white aerography,
tossed those worming roots
varicose and roiling to the sun.

Agapē means *love*, the priest had said,
slurring a hand to join us,
and maybe so.
But these fierce flowers and I
have other valencies. Like *stubborn*,
bitter-tongued, *concealing snails*.

The Straight Pews

after a story told by Greg Leong

You're not invited to the funeral,
his mother said. She blinked me away
as if the eyelid of justice were hers
to close. *At least, not in the front with us.*

I took off my shoes and paced the beach,
the sand collapsing at my bitter heels,
his green eyes beneath my eyes
swaying like parrots bringing down blossom,

clouds stacked with the untellable
secrets of our bed. Ten years we carried
the same skies, wore the seasons
to a fluent joinery of disease and hope.

From my feet to the horizon
ran line upon line of windplucked wave

and over this harp of grief, the blue beat of an idea:
to weave myself going-away clothes,
three garments in all; to send out the shuttle,
my veins running warp and weft, warp and weft.

White for a Chinese mourner, white
for a European bride. A veil, a winding-sheet,
a shroud. Silk through satin, satin through silk,
pearls against teeth, a flute against gongs.

Through the loom I raised with every stroke
a banner for the straight pews,
INVISIBLE INVISIBLE INVISIBLE appearing
from below, as would, under a child's pencil,
a rubbed coin of unknown worth.

Glove

for PXB

Because the steering-wheel was hot
you passed me your glove,
an act as commonplace and small
as a bee changing flowers.

The fine Italian calf was split
from forefinger to thumb,
by repetition sheened
across the knuckles and creased stiff
behind the joints.

I put my hand in yours.

Intimacy's slow cocoon is spun
on the underside of things;
you offered on its threads
a single glove that leaves no trace.

Except that I wished,
very much, not to take it off.

Bearing a Name

You are called *son*, a pattern cut from between my hips
in a blaze of quiet knives and commands that summon

- even in mute signs - the purest dichotomy: life or not.
I meanwhile, senseless and stranded under lights,

opened and splayed like a frog in biology class,
bladder pushed aside in the rush,

am imago, assuming my own new name,
mother, amid the mad traffic of hormones.

From this need for naming there is no escape,
and for its complications, no known cure.

I am called *prima gravida* and you,
placenta praevia-deep transverse arrest-

-failed high forceps-foetal distress-
emergency caesarian section. These are not

the names I had in mind. How could they be?
Before your coming to me they did not signify.

At the bed-end, resting the clipboard on her neat white waist,
the morning sister looks over her bifocals and says

'oh, you've had *one with the lot*, I see'.
A century ago we were called *died in childbirth*.

The Weight of Apples

for Karen

In blood-beaded elderberry, starlings clatter
like teaspoons in a drawer, while underfoot,
loosed suddenly by heat, apples are strewn.
Their fall has been as surreptitious
as the fall of years, the death of birds.

These early Gravensteins could be
the first apples there ever were,
a smear of red on hollow green, as youth is,
misshapen and with lesions where they fell.
Lanky with neglect, and bramble-draped,

the tree gropes everywhere for light
but still, it's knotted tight with fruit.
I follow wraiths of cloud that push
eastward, as usual, to the coast,
to where the longest Januaries passed.

Some days, tired of the beach, we'd go
round to the pickers, out on ladders thinning
Red Delicious, MacIntosh or Jonathans
in the big orchard by the coolstore.
While back at the house the Gravensteins,

that wouldn't sell, were ours alone.
Remember Danny? His Italian eyes,
as fierce as summer, narrowed against us,
the sullen muscle of his arms pulling at shade
that slides and shivers over them?

Those practised hands, reading the tree like braille,
could pinch an unripe pear into his palm,
turn treacherous and pelt in a tantrum of bravado

or lust for the boss's girl. The one that
hit you in the growing breast, that doubled you up.

And us escaping bareback on the shambling pacer -
good enough, your thin-lipped father said,
for a daughter - the handspan of waist
flaring in my grip, the synchronised
last-minute duck under low branches

on the home corner the horse cut every time.
Once at the Gravenstein he snatches rein,
wrapping bristled lips around each globe
and slobbering the pulp, while we too
bite and suck, shushing our inklings of desire,

loll along the horse, fritter and trill like wrens.
You, last seen, were catching my bouquet.
Now we're in our second flowering.
What we said then - the words we used -
are long gone, and not regretted,

but apples are much heavier than words.
Each year each windfall holds whole summers
in its scheme of things: sea and sky
that borrow and return their blue,
the smell of girl-and-horseskin in the sun.

Love in Three Movements

For GRM

1. After *Lantana*

When we got to the car park, we kissed.
We were sixteen again.
I stood in your path - our bodies barely touched.
You leaned, closed your eyes and pursed your lips
like a dutiful child. Your mouth was chaste:
giving, withholding. You said
I like you because you seem to like me,
and I stepped closer and put one hand
in the shallow small of your back.
That's when, I think, the trembling started,
so manly, unmanly, such intricate pain.
My other hand went up to your chest,
as if I could make it stop. I was there,
inside out with desire, my palms
pressed against you, and I went away.

2. Present continuous

You say *I am loving you*
and generations of embrace
flower like anemones on rock.
Kisses swell and open redly
in our mouths. They wave.
They bristle with every tense.

3. Entering Apollo's Breast

After Rainer Maria Rilke, 'Archaic Torso of Apollo'

From my bed you watch me undress,
then offer your arms, their tender undersides,
your defenceless belly. This is a welcome so weightless
I cannot name or understand it. I slide in beside you,
irretrievable as sent mail. You fall so easily asleep,
your just-asthmatic breath intimate as whalesong,
a rough cheekbone pressing on my ear,
the soft-shelled bivalves of your hands
closing on my smaller flesh. You hold me
against our separate pasts and this short present.

Night opens to the moon. The estuary lies still
as a road, as if there were no undercurrent;
she-oaks trail untroubled at its edge.
There is no place that does not see us;
our secret selves have vanished
like the words they were confessed upon.
You fall so easily asleep. Or, perhaps, are rising.
The light-filled canopy is hung with mist and visions.
Everything is altering. You have opened your arms.
They will be large enough to carry me.

Lagging Behind

Fumbling in the tartan lining of my old coat
for the armhole, settling the calm oilskin of the hood,

I see my mother's brief profile before she turns
back towards herself in the mirror,
pressing her lips to spread the lipstick.

Don't forget to hold your sleeve.

Beneath the sharp pleats of my tartan kilt
my round-toed leather shoes are brown, buckled
and shining like butterscotch.

Don't suck your fingers in town. Don't dandle.

I did lag behind and suck my fingers,
developing the useful habit of silence
while my sisters ran ahead, begging for everything.

Now when I walk in tartan, a shell in my pocket,
always furled ready, replaces the rhythm of sucking.

So that stranded inland, I can turn and turn it back,
a fractal's infinite twist against my forward steps,
purplish and secretive as a newborn's thumb.



Louise Oxley was born in Hobart in 1955. She has taught English as a second language for many years, both in Australia and overseas, and holds a masters degree in Applied Linguistics. Her poems and articles have appeared in a number of Australian publications. *Compound Eye* has been assisted by a grant from the Australia Council and by a residency at Varuna, the Writers' House

Louise Oxley's poems are insightful meditations on the natural world, and how we interact with it. Her craft has been forged from years of pure observation and a layering of the rhythms of the body and the head into marvellous music.

Anthony Lawrence

In *Compound Eye* Louise Oxley undergoes a moving personal search through word, image and line to find the essential shape and texture of her experience and understanding. Not only does she succeed in giving her work an elegant, graceful cast, but she also brings the reader into that search, allowing them to apprehend the enlargements that occur when language and sensibility are so deftly connected.

Judith Beveridge

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