

The Told World

Also by Angela Gardner

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for

Laurie Duggan and Rosemary Hunter
Ian Friend and Robyn Daw

History Painting

It's the sense of emptiness
wind in long grass
square kilometres of levelling irony.

Out here in the grand scale
what price heroic death, in brushmarks
that indicate parachuting angels.

Across this alien windswept plain
as foreground intersects midground
sporadic housing makes way

for other figures carefully rendered.
While children are legging it away
into the picture plane, our sense

of past exhausting their every step;
until at the vanishing point, human
must give way to gods.

Add processional detail: a throat
of rocks, balancing acrobatics of gold
painted in small movements,

finally receding in saccades below
the clouds. Is it there now in your mind's
eye, the telling space of it almost grasped?

The painted body slumped while the mind
sings historic events. Yet it never was, this
vitrine of finger-pointing inside this frame.

The terrible choices you've considered
in witnessing the retreating figures fly
from death upon the almost naked plain

will disappear as easily as the plain itself
appeared before your eyes. Until
it is itself

no more than the usual neurons' trick
of light.

METAMORPHOSES

Metamorphoses

I

Street after street held back in unanimity
drowned in brick and tile containment
flat suburbs of white bread television stupor
droning and drowsing out to the rivermouth.

That paradoxical question from philosophy:
How to live?

Above, the sky is radiant with risk
turning shadows, luminous glances, break
throughs in motion, charge and discharge.

II

And if I was

without echo, the mirror in my skull falling
away — dimensions swallowed
sensation voiceless, stilled, diminishing.

The broken suitcase, the ladder,
a whole neighbourhood quieted
night forcing its way down nerve paths
to the eyes, full, lithe.

III

On the driveway of my own house
looking forward rather than back —

the car locked in its carport
lighted windows reach out
stars that compete with countless cities

with the spun thread of story.
Step back into the old self, jarring return
riven, expendable
hard to ignore the void
left behind.

Dawn loosens
— the day careless, brightening.

IV

Mount Coot-tha staked with television masts
a parrot, a flash of colour superimposed.
Pale-headed, its cobalt wings
rearrange to brief respite on a backyard fence
top wire quivering slightly.

The morning air held, like breath, expectant
not even a distant lawnmower.

V

Here,
where the river dawdles along pockets
shifts past the point
then out, out of sight, under the bridge.

You'll come to cliffs
with equipment laid out: ropes, harnesses,
other tackle and instruction
shouted from the rim.

But first you must stand on the river path
searching for footholds in your mind
for a way through
to a vision of self, climbing like morning
impossible, perfect.

VI

The pale-headed parrot balances
lacking the effort required
to lift from entropy

— gravity reaction sleep, poised on cyclone
wire in the misfires of its boundaries
all pleasures held a moment

VII

Or a map — alive
no different than forgetting
hurt held together by dust,
ashes mingled with spit and blood to carry
in our heads, to navigate the day

The body fails
there is no guarantee of semblance.

Biomechanics conceal rougher modulations
electro-chemical properties of matter
that fail to shape the poetics

Nothing
will alter absolutes
into flight.

VIII

The substance of the earth, the figuration of sky
the realm between

where we believe
all happens

cognate cloudburst
the indivisible self in disarray
as time erodes, disorders, without repair
pivot tipping, trapped by desire
to be of some other clay.

IX

I stare
at unbroken coastline an incoming tide
sea-edge at the moment of imperceptible turn
nothing is settled

Listening now for the wind to elide

instead it picks up. Stencil clouds jostle
within an empty frame. As if the body's interlocutor
is free from its own weight or responsibility
— until flesh forgets
to pressure surrounding air.

X

None of it need be

A wholeness ghost-limbed or absent
gets caught in the machinery

tongues fail or fade and birds in half-light
fly up
colourful, silent, hardly known.

XI

I risk my body to
a pharmacopoeia of change
blinded certainty that buffets against closure
deaf-mute acquiescence

the mirror searches for reflection
new-made — on water (in others' eyes)

light pools collect under cloud gap
rainfall already passing
the air in motion

XII

A man paddles past on a bicycle
a stream of cars
yellow flash silver flash
words spray paint under bridges

a differential is at work
skin shuttered against itself
a horizon few dare recognise

We take leave of ourselves
then cannot follow

Each of us unfinished will not survive
our own upheavals
our transformations

the rescue trace

of boundaries mapped by others.

I'm capturing pixels

photons as they hit the plane of the lens

an idea that shape-shifts
ever-absent, ceded to, and distracted
by event

— birds make song pathways in air.