

THE QUARRY

Amanda Midlam

Pervasive Poetry

*Memory Poem, Watching Life Go By On Twofold Bay, and a Suite of Three Poems:
Quondola, Flotsam, and Community Soup*

QUONDOLA

It begins for me with the news
of a body found floating off Quondola
an ending for someone else.

The police say there are no suspicious circumstances
which means an accident
or suicide.

The body is unidentified
and uninhabited
dressed in jeans, belt and boots.

It waits for someone to claim it
not the rightful owner of course
but someone else.

In rough seas fishermen are swept off rocks
and drown
but the sea has been calm.

Uneasiness flows through the streets of our small town
was it a stranger, or one of our own?
No-one knows.

It is several days before
identification is made
and waves of grief drench the town.

FLOTSAM

He drifted into Eden down the highway
and floated out of town
five years later on the tide
if Reece looking for humpback whales
hadn't found him
would we have ever known
he hadn't hitch-hiked off again
to try his luck elsewhere?
No-one knows why
speculation rises and ebbs
like the sea and waves
of rumours water the community garden
where he worked
and where he ran the monthly market
where people sold goods
and swapped gossip.
But no-one knew his story
and as speculation eddies
his face floats haunting behind my eyes.

COMMUNITY SOUP

The market is cancelled this month
and all work has stopped in the garden.
But the community lunch must go on.
Some people, like June and Phil, rely on it
and others may not have heard the word
Now that Greg has gone.

Peter and Pam can't be there
and Glenda has gone to ground
Community service has been suspended
so there are no workers to oversee
until there is time to think what to do
Now that Greg has gone.

But Monday lunch must go on,
the door needs to be open, says Pam.
Old Kenny may need a feed.
And others may turn up
We don't know what to do.
Now that Greg has gone.

I offer to open the door and make community soup
In the hall Pam has left a loaf of homemade bread.
Alan brings apple crumble, Shannon makes pasta
and Suz brings fruit
Nine adults and two children arrive for a feed
Janice washes up now that Greg is gone.

MEMORY POEM

Mud and mire as I patter down the path
the more the mud, the more the mire,
the more my hopes go soaring higher
then I awake
and ponder how mud can hold so much pleasure
when honestly I hate the stuff
and why my waking spirits stay so high
but the answer flees as my muddled mind awakes
and shakes off the memory of this dream place.

But on another night I find that other world
and my feet skip and slip happily down that muddy track
There's a road nearby but the mud is quicker
and I am in a hurry and my feet slither-slather
in mud, anticipation, joy and hope.
Then I awake. Where was I going?

I try to remember details but they flee my waking mind
sleep images crumble into cornflakes
muddy path into highway as I drive my car to work
but feelings work their way into my city-cluttered day
I can't help feeling concrete constructions block my way

Shreds of dream shroud my pillows and lie in wait
taking me back at night to the twists and turns
and the descent of the narrow muddy path,
the ragged edge of my long dress drags in the mire
but I don't care about mud on my clothes
because I am going to see them all again!
Then I awake.

During the day I dream of this other realm

the smell of mud and horse manure and salt from a not distant sea
the feel of my rough dress, the leafy greenery along the path
at night my feet fly faster trying to reach the end before I awake.
And one night I make it.
I am there in the open glen and it is market day and everyone is there.
Then I awake.

I have discovered how to take myself there, to find myself on the path,
the mud and the mire, sweet harbingers of home,
I come to the glen where the market is held,
where people come from far and wide
and I look and remember and recognise each face.
Then one night they see me too and clamour in surprise
Sarah! When did you get back? We didn't think we'd see you again.

Then I awake.

I remember the horses and carts and old market stalls.
My name is not Sarah, not in my waking world
but I search the family tree and find seven generations past
Sarah, aged sixteen, stealer of silver spoons, sent to Sydney in 1792,
She survived as a washer woman purging clothes of their past.
And never went home. Not in the flesh.
But at night Sarah and I go down the muddy path.
We come to the open glen in glee, it is market day and everyone is here.

WATCHING LIFE GO BY ON TWOFOLD BAY

Sleepy-headed, coffee-handed
on Cat Balou as mooring slips
and catamaran slides
on glassy sea
fur seals on end of breakwater wall
fat-bodied, flat-flipperd, sleek-headed,
slumbering cumbersome clumsy on land
then one slides silkily into the sea and
sylph-like glides away
while another, face like a wet dog, pops up
beside us and beckons us to play.

We chug on towards the further shore
dolphins hear the chug, chug, chug
and answer the catamaran's call
the game is on
I lean down and see through the sea
dolphins racing in the boat's bows
three, four, five, six, seven
shining silver bodies thrilling me
we hear a shout, we see a splash,
a white explosion in the blue
a whale is breaching, belly to the sun
splashing back down
in a crash of water
then a smaller one hurtles from the sea
and reaches for the sky
mum and baby humpbacks
on the humpback highway heading south
to Antarctica.

Gordon cuts the engine
he's not allowed to get too close
but whales don't know the rules
and surround the boat and spy hop
standing upright
behemoth heads rear from the sea
whale eyes regard us
as we hold our breath
then *pahhhh* the blow from a spout
casts a rainbow
as water from whale lungs
shimmers in the sun.

A black ribbon of mutton birds
threads through the sky
migrating from Siberia to Tasmania,
an albatross soars
there's a bait ball ahead
dolphins circling
seals sharing and whales wallowing
as gannets rain like arrows
from a mackerel sky
diving for fish.

At Snug Cove passengers go ashore,
to lunch on fish and chips
assisted by sea gulls
while pelicans glide overhead
with pterodactyl beaks
feathered bodies full of air,
light enough to float,
graceful in flight, clumsy on ground,
best of all coming in to land
webbed feet tucked behind

then pushed out suddenly in front
aquaplaning with a swoosh
nearby more pelicans squat on lamp posts
growling deep-throated at my yapping dogs
flapping their wings in warning
others jostle with gulls in shallow water
below the tables where fish are cleaned
and scraps are thrown
but a seal decides he wants the scraps
and birds flap and scatter.

A pied cormorant and a shag on a rock,
feathers-in-law,
hang out their wings to dry
the winners of bird world
able to fly, dive and swim
watch as a snake bird swims by,
with such skinny head and neck,
I once mistook one for the snorkel
of a friend
and swam after it out to sea.

Time to go home up the hill where
pink and grey galahs crop the nature strip,
a slow way to get the mowing done
but they eat the weed seeds
(then redistribute them)
while most birds hop, galahs prefer to walk
waddling like ducks left, right, left
while they graze, tiny feathered cows
and overhead crested pigeons
coo on the power lines
and one pair have a budgerigar friend,
a feather-bed menage-a-trois

and beyond the front fence the bird life changes
but the border doesn't stop the immigrants
and a fat-bodied cuckoo from New Guinea
perches in the mulberry tree
watching the wattle birds
watching and waiting,
waiting to lay an egg in their nest
as mud larks lark in the bird bath
minding their own business.

Time to take the dogs for a walk,
they missed their morning stroll
and we amble across the road
and down the track to the cliff
a white-bellied sea eagle soars
in thermals, corkscrewing in the sky
a masked lapwing, one tenth its size,
follows its flight and nips with beak
a sea eagle feather floats from the sky
another lapwing squawks as we walk by
because they lay their eggs in scrapes
on the ground then panic
and dive bomb anyone walking near,
the yellow spurs on their wings
inflicting pain and fear
I realise the sea eagle must have spied
eggs or chicks and the assailant lapwing
screams another feather falls
the sea eagle soars off as
we walk on to the pine trees
where yellow-tailed black cockatoos feed
their tough beaks tearing pine cones apart
hungrier now their forests in Victoria
have burned to ash.

Home again and time for evening wine
I raise a glass in the sunroom
lorikeets with tongues like brushes
lick nectar from the bottle brushes
on the other side of the pane
soon as pissed as parrots
on nectar that has fermented
hanging upside down
from branches flying low chattering
laughing as a cacophony of cockatoos
scream through the sky
sulphur-crested sulphur-tempered
destruction-tempted big white cockies
bosses of the birds or they think they are
but the lorikeets don't care.

Darkness falls, dogs and I fall into dreams
and possums fall from trees onto the roof.
Ready for the night shift.