

Blood Work

Sheep and cattle arrived by lorry,
the lorries were like yards on wheels.
It was a big deal, my father's work, the smell
was stronger than the brewery.
I took wide paces in my gumboots,
matching his steel-toed stride, I followed him
into the killing room
and spoke my name to the other men.

Nothing stopped, the chain ground on,
sheep hung from hooks, each man with a knife
had his own bit of flesh to deal with.
My lungs ached, my eyes watered
as if there was a fire, the blood everywhere,
red and red over their white cover-alls.

My father handled the aftermath, the sheep
with no head, or feet, or skin, or gut.
Dead cold carcasses coming down a ramp
like fallen angels. He shouldered and stacked.

When the whistle blew
we sat drinking tea from tin mugs.
I was spoken of as his girl,
strong as his strong,
that's when it started
in the blood: *this was his life*.
I felt the join no knife could part
and I couldn't see
how I'd make the journey
going away and away from him.

Distant Fields

ANZAC Parade

Medalled, ribboned chests, an effort
carried through them, the war
still going on inside their heads,
gathered up for roll call.

Where all the flowers had gone
came a quiet of ash,
line after line after line.

As if the grainy footage played above the leafy street
my father lifted me on to his shoulders to see.

My uncles looked to the back of the one in front,
marching to the heart-beat drum.

At end of Mass the bugle rose,
life unto life, a single breath
took flight into the bird-light zone.

The Wash House

The turning on was slower done — the firebox stoked,
the wooden lid the copper had, gilded shine of its deep pan.
And side by side two great stone sinks
for suds and rinse, could hold a muddy child.

The place became a store — chook mash,
pig grits — housed a mat and dust of wares,
played host to mouse. Cat found a hide for bed
and laid her kittens there.

One small window choked with web,
light gave way across the floor; each step
softening to listen hard
though you could never say what for.

Warped tracks of tallboy teased, opened to a world of finds.
A jar of pennies turned to bank. Rust crept
along the blades of knives. And each oilskin coat, from its nail,
stiffened like a corpse impaled. The kittens ended in a sack.

The shedding held small lost endeavour, walls with cracks
poached by the weather, dissolved the meanest acts of time
where garden slept in seed sachets, the mewing
ghosts, the lynching strength of binder twine.

My Sister's Country

Your first cry broke,
barely touching earth
you turned back through the veil
and were gone.

No other girl but you
out before me, almost
weightless, you would not have burdened
an angel's wings.

Sister, what could I be
but an outlaw
against your legacy:
petals unbruised, relentless purity.

You'd scaled to a place
higher than the high country.
I had the crazy dance of a body,
my bones were not ether.

My Sister's Dead Perfection

You were up in the sky,
an absolute star.

You had the ear of God
they said — my God
nothing matched their love
for you dead

nothing on earth
was as pure;
you were the prototype
of girl making good

so I practised reaching
your infinite tall,
jumped from the roof
and the walnut tree

to be perfect too
I thought, I can
be as dead as you.

My Sister Remade

I drew you
back on the blocks of the start,
made you up, filled you out.

In my scheme
you could swear
and say 'no'. I adored you.
My leader

stomping the earth.
You were tough and sweet
and wonderfully mean.

I tugged on your hem
with my questions, I rode
in your slipstream.