

Women's Business

When my mother married for the third time,
I gave her away in Cairns.
She had run off with an ex-alcoholic
fourteen years her junior
who'd served his time in the South Pacific —
plantation manager for CSR —
now thin, jaundiced, and smoked continually.
With a hint of boyish good looks and a twinkle in his eye
Rick could still tickle the ivories (and my mother).

On study leave in Brisbane
we heard she was flying from Cairns
for an operation.
Women's business, said Rick.
Cervical cancer, Mum said.

I visited her in a public ward
at Royal Brisbane Hospital.
We talked, as usual, about the weather in Cairns
memories of Wagga
how my brothers and sister are getting on.

Mum asked if I wanted to see her photo album.
I turned casually through the first few pages of happy snaps
bougainvillea and hibiscus in the garden
puss with her three kittens in Rick's overnight bag
then page after page of men
her own rogues' gallery
smiling, neat, older men.
On the last page
a full-colour, large-format photo of

Mother
standing on a beach
facing the camera
laughing
a mess of brown straggling seaweed in each tanned hand
her bleached-blond hair blowing in the wind
and utterly
naked.

Who was the photographer?
Where were her clothes?
Did she walk over the sandhills?
My eyes looked back at me from her face.

After the operation Mother went back to Cairns,
RSL clubs, senior citizen's concerts
her old Pearly Queen stage clothes and Cockney songs
a familiar enough romance.

Tattooed Man

Back in England
Sunday mornings
in bed with Dad
we'd sing

*Hunting tigers — out in India
they scratch, they bite, they make an awful noise
there's no use stroking them and saying
puss, puss, puss.....NO.....*

I could see the jungle behind his singlet.

My dad's a walking picture book.
On his right arm a snake with diamonds on its back
winds itself around a dagger.
On his left a man melts
under a solar topee.
On his shoulders little birds
flutter around the word "mother".
Amongst the grey hairs and pink skin of his chest
glowers a huge Britannia
the flags and ensigns of English imperial splendour
emblem of his service to king and country in India.
Over his shoulder, covering his whole back,
George V in swirling coronation robes —
bearded, formal, fierce, with sword and military regalia.
When he walked my dad carried the Empire with him.

I wondered did it hurt.
He said the scabs had taken weeks to heal
the pictures scratched in with dozens of needles
on several visits in Calcutta.
Probably with his mates

beerily blissful the whole while.
Unaware of the backstreet smells of curry and cowdung.

When we migrated to Australia
long sandy stretches of Cronulla
coconut-oiled bodies of sunbathing Australians
where were the muddy pebbles of Southend?
Dad was embarrassed about his body.

On our second visit to the beach
Dad was dumped by a wave
and lost his false teeth in the surf.

Dad was a gummy shadow of
his usual self.
For two weeks the brilliance of the British Empire
remained modestly shrouded.

Shoe Shine

In the rush before school
I polish the children's shoes
with Dad's shoe shine kit.

Nine different black brushes
pyjama sleeve cleaning rags
a half-used tin of Kiwi "Parade Gloss".

And something I had forgotten —
my first shoe brush,
one end blacked for polish.

Dad left our shoes
a kind of blessing beside the fire
shining, newly-laid, black eggs.

He'd work wax into the scuffs
coax a shine into bruised toecaps
breathing like a masseur in a boxer's corner.

His brown Julius Marlowes
came up like leather furniture:
whorled scratches, mahogany heel-rubbings.

In evangelical adolescence I'd spit-
polish my school shoes.
But no matter how hard I tried
I could never see up the girls' dresses
even when they stood
legs apart, over my foot,
taunting.

Phil

opens our presents
from last year
two shirts
wrapped as then
he didn't turn up for
birthday or Christmas

what do you give
a schizophrenic
in and out of gaol
and psych hospital

I don't see him much

he finishes his jam donut
and tells me what he's going to do
with his share of Dad's estate

deposit on a small unit
some furniture
a second-hand car

he's already on the priority list
with the Housing Commission

you know, Dave, he says,
I don't think I'll get married
relationships are tricky for me

once he rang me in a storm
from five hundred miles away
close to tears he asked
where can I sleep tonight

Hay Fever

Nothing clears my sinuses
quite like sexual arousal.
Not that my wife is persuaded by this
of the therapeutic need for
frequent sexual intercourse
even when I point to its value
as exercise
pedalling through imaginary landscapes
an aid to relaxation
and better than a glass of milo before sleep.

She's not convinced.

Don't get me wrong —
as a doctor, her bedside manner's fine
gentle and caring
but husbands are a little lower
on the priority list for acute treatment
and anyway
medical ethics require
a little distance.

Jamming

Back in Wagga after ten days of Christmas travel
I begin in the heat my annual act of conservation.

A carpet of mottled greengages gluts the yard
its contour mirroring the tree's broken circumference
soft yellowed marbles sinking into sweet oblivion

Three trees of plums rake up to three barrows of rotting pulp
sour jam for the garden's ragged bread.

The mower slices off plum-smearred grass tips
vacuuming them to a vinegary compost.

In the kitchen my unfailing recipe says: Use only firm,
barely ripe fruit.
Hardly to be squared with the end-of-season damsons and
greengages
shredded by starlings and drilled by wasps

But after radical surgery — bruiseotomy, stonectomy —
the fruit simmers — aromatic pulp
absorbing pound for pound the white, transforming dust of
sugar.

Later, on the bench, sixteen jars gleam red and burnished green
promising a palatable spread for the New Year's toast.

Sunday Matin

Autumn light spikes viridian cushions
filtered through screen windows.
The family's gone to Mass. The house
declares itself.

From the kitchen radio Allegri's *Miserere*:
a single counter-tenor
abseils an empty house.

Straddling the wine-rack
Rowena's cabbage-patch doll.
In Tim's colouring book
jagged in blue and orange, a clown. Outside
purple bougainvillea bracts
sprawl across the pergola
like National Trust sightseers. Suddenly
the washing machine finishes its cycle.

The one-eyed rocking horse,
having leaped over the Blue Mountains
and thirty years
is still.

Praise them for their brief absence.