

the island

remember those burnished weeks?
how we talked of never leaving for fear
we'd corrupt the intricate alchemies of paradise
but when our time expired we flew south on cut-price wings
comforting each other with plans for a swift return
'when we've sorted a few things out'

we never returned to the island
snatched by duty's talons from the greasy runway
tethered by obligations without relent
burned by bitter frosts of compromise
long did we rail against our folly
like those fools who expelled themselves from Eden

yet, despite manacles of gainful drudgery
come-hither smiles from covetous death
the sky so low, the stars so often swathed in cloud
those gleaming days do not tarnish
blue-gold dawns, incarnadine sunsets, you,
and by early light if I reach for your hand

we dive into surf foaming on the lip of an ocean
listen for early stirrings of an onshore breeze
watch infinity's fires flaring in night's vast cupola
sleep under moonlight filtered through tent walls
and breakfast on mangoes stolen
from a ruined garden at the edge of a coral sea.

Birthday

after Ted Kooser's A Happy Birthday

I'll not set flame to wishful candles
nor boast of mere survival to my
peers but in that final fading hour
of the afternoon when crows shriek
at a setting sun and crickets chatter
evensongs I'll sit by a corner window
and scribble on a pad propped upon
my knee until night's benediction
steals across my page. Then I'll switch
on lights and observe the sustaining
rituals of evening before climbing the
stairs to sleep until a trio of magpies
nested in the garden warbles matins
at the dawn of another numbered year.

Sad Songs

in memory of Glenn Chapman

On Friday mornings he performs in an alleyway
by the supermarket, a hard-worn man who sings
sad songs with splintered voice and plays guitar
with such phrasing, dexterity and attack to hint

at green years shrivelled in quest of bright lights
that somehow never shone on him. Old velvet,
once crimson, now paler than unrequited love
and much nibbled by moths, lines his battered

guitar case. His smile when I drop a few coins
is a solitary brief blooming in a garden of dead
dreams, while notes flutter from strings pliant
to fingers' caress and skitter across the surface

of a fathomless sink of sorrows. I give money
in hope he'll go on singing sad songs, not only
for me but for every wounded nobody who in
silence keeps the stern and lonely vigils of grief.

Unfunded Empathy

On Monday, 29 July 2019 the prime minister of Australia declared he would not engage in 'unfunded empathy' by raising the Newstart payment which, at the time, was \$277.85 per week.

an astonishing phrase from a believer
particularly an enthusiastic follower of the founder
who commanded us to love one another
even as he had loved us
it's more what you might hear from a Pharisee
or a friend of money lenders
those who made the temple a den of thieves
or perhaps it might be uttered
by an acolyte of the rich and powerful
a group as likely to pass heaven's gates
as a camel is to squeeze through a needle's eye
yet even such as these might shorten their paradisiacal odds
by dispersing their treasure amongst the poor
and let those hosannas in excelsis be fully funded
those hallelujahs in their thousands
be franked with the imputed dividends of love

expansive splendour

flesh tinged grey as if his core were shutting down
he boarded shuffling like his soles were smeared with glue
and died so discreetly a few hours shy of Abu Dhabi
he sat unnoticed until an attendant asked
what he didn't like about his untouched meal

a doctor (prised from economy, elevated to business)
felt for a pulse and shook his head
and I couldn't help thinking of Groucho Marx grabbing
a prone man's wrist and shouting
'either this man's dead or my watch has stopped'

then the cabin crew turned to mummery
eager to edit an unsettling final act
they fitted his body with oxygen mask and eyeshade
and made-believe he'd overslept
though fooling few as we filed away in Abu Dhabi

next day in the lounge of Madrid's Hotel Ritz
I reclined in expansive splendour
close by she who gives cause for me
to occasionally replace corks in bottles
and we drank to those who crave no lease on tomorrow

who know unkindly gods pour scorn upon our plans
that the dance always stumbles to an end
that the band packs up and slips into the night
that the dream rarely endures the rigours of the day
and then we drank to that grey stranger

who passed in high flight over the Indian Ocean
for him in his last ardent embrace
a winding sheet of opaque linen
to swaddle him from the egregious stares of the fearful
to him and to the whole damn mess of it *salud salud*