

In the artificial cool of the hospital we shuffle the days like packs of cards. I spend my time between the water fountain and leaning one hand on the back of the chair to take the weight off my feet.

I pose beside a statue in the Square, tipping my head back and crooking one foot forward like they do in the papers.

In the Egyptian world, the Museum says, Osiris married his sister Isis...

The Egyptians took out the heart and weighed it on a scale before placing it back in the body.

At the hotel we watch 'Homicide' on the television, sharing the common room with a group of old men, and my mother cries as George Mallaby is carried out, feet first, covered with a white sheet, from a mine accident. On the news they show another photo of Vicki Barton, and Vicki's mother pleads with the kidnapper to bring her back. Police investigate a lead in Adelaide.

We tell each other how much we hate the city, we are country people. We are just waiting until my brother is well enough to take home.

Every day, the white bed. Everyday the same conversation.

We are afraid my brother will lose his heart. He lies under white sheets all day and the nurses come and wait on him. My brother's foot shrivels underneath the plaster, yellowing at the edges.

We go to church again and this time we drink the wine and replace the cups straight away.

In the museum I put 20c in a slot and hear birds calling to each other in a forest. The stuffed hawk, perpetually swooping over the stuffed mouse...

*Only the heart was left in place. It was thought to be the seat of intelligence and feeling, and so must remain intact within the body.*

For fifteen days we sit by the white bed, until at last the doctor nods, a nurse smiles, and we are allowed to take him home.

On the tarmac at the airport, waiting to board the plane, two of the nurses come to see us off. Someone takes a photo of my brother sitting up on a stretcher on the ground, wearing a check shirt and a black cardigan, a pillow propped behind him. In the background are the boarding steps, and beside him, a pair of knee-high brown boots, and another set in pink sling-backs; a handbag on a long strap.

We fly him back across the border, pale now and much thinner. Swathed in plaster.

My brother has become soft and white, all his bones broken and reset. He grows darker and paler: his skin bleaches to the colour of the plaster casts on his legs, his hair and eyelashes grow black and thick like the row of stitches that line his jaw.

We talk about the taste of the Adelaide water as the plane hits the runway at Essendon.

March 1969: An Australian soldier is killed in South Vietnam's Bien Hoa province. Susan Atkinson sings her way through the Manson trial. A diplomat warns on coloured immigrants. Lil Abner is appointed official custodian of the statue of Colonel Jubilation T. Cornpone.

Disaster strikes at Violet Town. And the girl seen in Adelaide is not Vicki Barton after all.

(Have you seen her?)

My parents move rigidly and carefully in this city, on the alert for danger, always careful to brush the dirt of the city off their clothes at night, to wipe the rim of the glass, to keep wide of building sites. Adelaide is a city of death and accidents and close shaves, a cursed city. My grandfather's pneumonia; my baby sister's camp bed split by a fallen branch. We repeat these stories to each other as we drive across the border in a convoy of concerned relatives.

City of museums and hospitals, city of churches.

In the hospital, the doctors stride swiftly through the wards – their white coats, their stethoscopes. The bodies laid out for them in rows. We leave meekly at the sound of a bell.

We photograph each other in parks and beside the river and in the Square, and we wear our best dresses on weekdays, because there are not enough second-best to go around.

In the great hall of the museum there are hundreds of stuffed birds in bits of trees from their natural habitat. In another section the white bones of dinosaurs fill whole rooms right up to the roof. For twenty cents you can hear the sound of bats in a cave.

Next to the mummy's foot is a small parcel of rags which x-rays have revealed to be a cat.

We take back cartons of freshly squeezed orange juice to our room and drink it from the tiny vegemite glasses on the dressing table that taste of dust.

*The man who was to perform the next task stood outside the tent waiting to be called in. He held in his hand a fairly large, flat black stone, one edge of which was honed to razor sharpness. His job was not a pleasant one, and gruesome to watch. Hence the other workers and the priest held him in abhorrence.*

The sign outside the church says it is the same as ours, but inside they drink the communion wine from the little cups one at a time as it is passed around, instead of all together at the end like we do.

## Poem for Jessie

Thinking about those people  
who read the last page first  
and today I met some on the bus.

We had a friend  
who wrote letters  
to Althusser,  
drives a tram now.

And I remember things like Julie  
from MOD SQUAD  
and a dog that ate apple cores  
(the motel blue of my uncle's eyes)  
and playing EVIE PARTS 1 and 2  
and HIGHWAY STAR  
on the juke box  
at Matt's Blue Room.

I keep this ashtray  
as a weapon  
and this one for guests.  
I use the tv guide  
to tell the days of the week  
*Wednesday*: my favourite American program  
*Thursday*: my favourite English one.  
(I save train tickets  
and bits of cane)

On one side of me  
the small cockroach noises  
of the backgammon players.  
And in the space outside,  
just there beside my left ear,  
a man calls to his dog  
and taps a stick against the wall.

## The Mummy's Foot

(This Girl is Missing)

1969: 'Beggars Banquet' is released on the Decca label. Boris Karloff dies. A \$5000 reward is offered for nine year old Vicki Barton and the State Library refuses entry to a man without shoes, he writes a letter to the paper.

My brother's accident occurs somewhere just over Bordertown. The green car and the white car collide. In the white car a child breaks her leg and is motherless.

In the hospital we wait in the hall and as the walls slide I rest my cheek against the floor, which is cool and solid like so little else. I focus on a sheepskin rug, a bent straw in a cup.

Later I walk out into the night air along a ramp, holding my father's hand. We take great mouthfuls till our lungs hurt. He steers his bulk like a ship and I lean in to his wake.

My brother's accident is like a small furious hurricane, lifting us up in little shocked groups and transporting us, windblown and dishevelled, over the dotted lines on the map. Unseating the wedding plans and the savings for the new car.

We find a motel, but it is too expensive. My father spends a day searching while we wait at the hospital, and after that we sleep fitfully in the unfamiliar dark of the People's Palace Hotel.

We visit the museum in the mornings, and in the afternoons we sit by the white bed. My mother says it is rude to ask questions.

I get bored with the water fountain, even the tiny cups.

*A specialist, highly skilled in his work, approached the head of the corpse. In his hand he held a long, slender hooklike instrument. Deftly he pushed this up one nostril, and working in a circular movement, he broke through the ethmoid bone, up into the cavity of the brain.*

## The Family Man

That weekend you kept getting electric shocks from my car, and when we chose herbs at the neatest nursery in the world (white lines painted onto the swept dirt for the cars) you get furious all of a sudden because I think of the box first.

Feeling bruised all along my arms.

'You are so predictable,' we keep saying and then laugh anyway, as if it's something new.

We laugh at everything, even things like your desire sometimes to hit me, which in the cold light of day isn't funny at all. We get annoyed, exasperated, then laugh.

I talk about war and grief and pain and oppression and you say, 'Yeah, but wouldn't be dead for quids, eh?' We buy stubbies at the Manson Family Hotel in Katoomba, decide to give the Fleetwood Mac cover band a miss and drive up to the pub at Mount Victoria where all the men look the same.

Later coming down the mountain we are surrounded by a bikie gang – a bearded ocean surging around the sides of the car, with the occasional woman pillion bobbing into view.

I hate the way I need to ask you to come with me when I want to go to the cliff edge at night.

I hate the way I can't go into a pub alone. We play pool against friends and you get furious because I start telling funny-family stories when we're on the black, but I pot it anyway.

Another day I make you play Sydney rules, no penalties, and when I snooker you you simply aim at my ball and pot them both. 'You can't do that!' I cry, shocked. 'Why not,' you say, 'There are no penalties.'

## Love Poem

I woke up this morning afraid of the world  
then a man threw up at the bus stop.  
I stared the other way, he had tears in his eyes  
and so did I, but all I could remember  
was Bobby Brady saying (at 5.25 last night)  
that if it worked for a girl  
it might work for a *donut*  
–or was it the other way around?

This worried me: and it worries me too  
that I'm the only one in aerobics  
with hair under my arms (the only one to sweat)  
Even the postman forgets to call me 'Little Blossom'  
He leaves bills and a pair of rowing oars  
too big for the hallway  
(what'll I do?)  
Like my feet, always a problem  
always a search for the perfect fit  
But nothing does. Outside:  
someone is knocking slowly on a closed door,  
Inside: things fall from the wall (posters, cockroaches)  
My pockets are stuffed with dead matches  
it always takes at least three to light the stove  
and the video shop is a nightmare!  
I grab chocolate bars and run home  
My feet have holes and there are holes  
in the curtains as well  
Men in suits ride by on bicycles  
Their knuckles rap on the glass until  
a crack forms along the outside of my skin.

Everything is *too big*, or *too small*  
(the oars/my shoes) everything matters!  
I want to tuck the universe into bed,  
reduce it to the size of my fist.  
I want to be made under Mr Cuisenaire's guidance,  
full of order and colour  
like the lady with the purple broom.  
But nothing fits: the day is a pair of gloves, a clock

## We Are the Rejected

The rejected in love  
come down to sigh in the park  
at Glebe Point

The rejected drive down late at night  
crammed in a yellow two door sedan  
radio blaring,  
arms flailing out of windows  
hair a mess, mascara running

We shout  
'We are the REJECTED!'  
across Blackwattle Bay

and wait

and the shark coloured water  
creaks against the bank  
'Hmmm... Hmmm...'  
like a \$90 shrink.

'We are THE REJECTED!'  
again, just to be sure  
because it is comforting to be something  
even if it's only this

and up on the other side of the bay  
the cars cruise by  
headlights politely averted

But we are everywhere,  
in the dark in the bushes, on benches  
kneeling or leaning against the white rails  
resting our foreheads against lamp-posts  
bumping them against fences (boop, boop)

As dark falls on Glebe Point  
you can hear the rustling of the  
grievers, the deceived  
listen to the  
'Hmmm... Hmmm...' of the bay  
and see the cars drive away  
(the unrejected, with places to go, busy schedules)

and sink balls of icecream  
into glasses of Coke  
and watch them fizz.

It's like *Being There* I guess  
(but not funny),  
cheaper than the Olympics.  
Ash from one part of the world  
comes down on the alps of another.

I check the windows and lock the doors.  
Switch the channels, quickly, when no-one's looking.  
(Richard burns the toast.)

Then we *dream of Jeannie* and travel a *Big Country*.  
Visit *Burke's Backyard*,  
get a warm glow  
watching kelpie dogs run across the backs of sheep.  
Laugh at the *Goodies* doing everything wrong...

I am Pandora's daughter, you see  
and this is my task:  
to keep the world safe  
in a box.

I rearrange the chairs and tables  
when things get messy;  
put out the garbage;  
grow potatoes on the couch.

I am green fingered (red where I bite the ends)!  
I grow my hair over my eyes,  
I like its softness  
the way it spins around when I shake my head.

I leave little droplets of blood  
when I tap on the furniture  
(Richard follows me with Mr Sheen).

& I keep my sanity,  
while the world goes mad.

## The Museum of Fire

'Time is the substance I am made of. Time is a river which sweeps me along,  
but I am the river; it is a tiger which destroys me but I am the tiger; it is a fire  
which consumes me, but I am the fire.'

– J. L. Borges (*Other Inquisitions*)

'A Person Looks at a Work of Art,  
someone looks at something.' – Peter Tyndall

'You never look at me from the place from which I see you.'  
– J. Lacan

(How can I express this?)

Beside the railway line

- 1) a small brush fire  
on the edge of a hill
- 2) in the middle of a green oval, a woman walking  
along the 100 metre sprint track one way  
with a man in a suit walking the other
- 3) a series of concrete pits  
covered in graffiti  
flame colours, a private secret language
- 4) a burnt out house in an estate

The woman next to me, carrying an enormous white panda,  
falls in the aisle as she gets up to leave.

Schoolchildren discussing sex and probability,  
the girls twirling their hair.

- 5) the boys game enough to sit with girls,  
and the boys too afraid

*I am coming down the mountain to see you.*

## Pandora on the Eve of Destruction

(For January 1991)

There's a rerun of *Homicide* on morning tv:–  
milk bottles clink,  
a coffee pot boils over (blurp blurp)  
& a housewife gets red streaks in her hair.

In the kitchen Richard throws open the cutlery drawer  
and tosses the knives  
one by one  
at the fridge

(too many trips to India, and too many trips).

I turn up the television;  
he begins on the pencils in a jar by the phone.

Later we sweep the knives into piles  
and while the Chippendales dance on *Donahue*  
he gently stacks a bowl with weet bix,  
pours milk slowly up to the edge &  
sprinkles it all with a fine even powder of suger.

The house surrounds us like a set of sheets  
(continuous coverage),  
we make love on the floor  
(young, bold, beautiful & restless).

In the night sky, far off, cameras follow a little light  
endlessly, obsessively, their talk fills the airwaves  
(click click).

I reach out and touch the fine tuning.  
*Wheel of Fortune* spins into the living room  
tongues of fire from every spoke,  
& questions answered weeks ago  
(a delay button for everything).

I grip the remote and pass it to Richard,  
who runs to the kitchen to get some coffee.

If you wanted an *artistic career*, the  
career guide said, you could be a  
*window dresser*. If you wanted to *help*  
*people*, you could be a *social worker*  
or a *youth worker*. If you liked *outdoors*:  
*fruit picker*. If you liked *indoors* and *dealing*  
*with the public*: *shop assistant*.

Another excursion:  
Making an Exhibition of Ourselves II  
(bold as brass)

waiting for the bus beside the Yarra, hanging around the BBQs,  
and the Scotch College boys rowing for their lives  
with Jenny and Susan Butler yelling obscene suggestions  
in their wake.

Our teacher said,  
'Those boys have probably never  
*seen* girls like you before.'

Exhibit B:  
(Making an exhibition of *someone else*, or 'eyeing someone off')

...the *dreamy* young man on the train with *gorgeous* eyelashes...  
We'd search the carriages until we found him then sit opposite,  
staring.

He tries to avoid us by taking a later train;  
we caught him out one night when we missed ours.

Then there was the time  
(Spectacle 2)  
we stood on the desks  
in the portables to get a better look  
at the girls from Swinburne Tech and  
their cool city haircuts.

And the time we stood on the toilet steps at recess

To  
my mother, Iris Vera Florence (Steele) Spencer  
& my father, Walter Collings Spencer  
with love

she practiced *so hard*,  
& won the Sportswoman of the Year Award  
*every year*.

I wore spiked shoes and flew.  
(see the tracks: my tears?)

We did cross-country runs:  
from the school, around the cemetery,  
down the hill, through the sewage farm...

(running in circles)  
(bound for somewhere)

*Industry Integrity Ingenuity*

Our school motto was emblazoned on our pockets.  
Everyone knew what industry was (factories),  
but the rest was as mysterious  
as why Mr Roberts always said  
'I appreciate your difficulties.'  
(*'I thank you for your difficulties'* –? Doesn't make sense.)

And everyone knew Tech kids were factory fodder,  
but it seemed a bit rude  
to embroider it on our blazers.

In assembly each week,  
Mr Parker warned the girls  
not to kick the boys in the balls.

The English room smelt of masonite and shavings  
from the woodwork room next door,  
of mud and bananas and the bottoms of schoolbags.

We had lots of Franks and Tonys and Enzos and Vinces  
at our school.  
Susan Tait was the only Aussie girl to go out with a wog.

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Are you intent upon..?  
Unmindful?

This record, document, diploma, seal, witness, reference,  
(finger prints  
carry weight, speak volumes) speaks for itself,  
depend upon it.

(The tracks  
behind me)

In the tunnel the windows  
become mirrors.

I want to pick up the lobster phone  
and call you.

(What should I say?)

I want you to *listen*.

(Jenny wanted to run.)

The museum is a glass house.  
Highly inflammatory documents everywhere.

In the city I will go shopping at Grace Bros &  
envy the schoolgirls with their father's credit cards  
and neat clothes

I'll try on lipsticks and expensive shoes  
& wearing my invisible red socks, I'll hold my head up.

I go to the Art gallery, through the Domain,  
and see you waiting for me there.

(you'll over-look the way I'm dressed)

