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Position Vacant

I lost you to the Pleiades
seven years between us, eaten up in the big bang.
That empty seat still talks
and so long as those stars keep resurrecting,
my black hole will bottle up the invisible drive
Casting you as a genie; spelling out
enough cosmic theory to fuel galaxies
Between us
bickering, whirls of radiant creatures, pantheonic
battles for space on my page
Your hair taunts, falling white on dark
ink scorching the road between us.
I clutch for some arterial destiny
as those bright lights beckon, rippling your name
Out from the shining glade
The dream burst shifts; your wings closer.

Enchanting fiction helps to right some wrongs
Between us
I can invent my own stars, attempt to upstage
the consternation of missed cues
After years of pressing your flesh into my hollow plots,
absent characters plunge to depths lyrical
The sisterly bond I forge with friends
is no accident.
I'm trying to fill the vacancy you left.

Jonquils

She was surprised by the pain. She hadn't expected it to be like this. When people talked about the pain of grief she thought they meant a dull ache like a headache after crying, not this twisting stab that made it hard to breathe.

After the first weeks, she got used to living with his new hurt. Like a limp, or a squint, it became familiar to her. When, long afterwards, it faded to a throb in the background she didn't notice, until, years later, she was reminded by jonquils.

A stem of flawed petals, brown-edged from the rain startling in the grey weather like crocuses through snow, their perfume making her suddenly lighter in the damp air, threw her backwards to a memory. She could see herself

Walking for the last time to the weatherboard house where she knew he'd be writing or listening to music, or both. Beside the path a clump of jonquils grew in the stony ground; she bent to smell them, carrying their scent with her to the door.

And now, here, when she wasn't expecting to feel anything hurrying along the footpaths to catch the train to work as she had done every day for almost a year, the scent drew her quivering and, for a moment, her breath ceased.

Casting the Bones

I'm with the wattles, and I'm breathing
the freshly painted air.
My father wears an overcoat
to hide the fuschia slips he stole
from the Botanical Gardens
when we were young.
His ashes smell like calcium.
Now, leaving chalk on my hands,
his breath flies into trees
that creak like old doors.
There's a hint of pipe tobacco in the air,
beeswax, leather and suede.
The wind picks up
as I hook for a speck of him
from underneath my eyelash.
Today, I'm casting out for my father.
Catching early morning light
through my bones.

Taking Its Measure

Don't ask when it will be finished.
She was my habit for too many years.
So even in moments when I let myself
pretend the thing is conquered
it will strike me with a fury.
Some nights need sucks me out
till I am only empty skin and craving.

Don't ask how it feels.
I'll take a word and add it to another word,
string together something
that means no more than beads mean.
I'll drape it around my neck
so you can see the size, the shape,
so you can say There, now,
there is the colour of grief.

Every morning
is an effort to forget.
The grief runs up to
my eyes in a black current.

I scrape the strength
from my feet
to push it back.

Where will I go
when my soles
are washed away?

S.M.

In between tourist guide books,
the view from The Peak you were Heine,
a name on a column: Hong Kong Standard
Correspondent in Cairo, out of focus
until some marriage photos arrived
late October revealing two pensive smiles
haunting your mother-in-law.

Slowly, she turned your snaps over,
a Doc Holliday dawdling patience.

You were shuffled with your Nancy
in our family album and opened one year later
in steamy Manila, where you widened
any filmy negative, made us news
for two weeks, a scoop in your house.

Seventy-nine in transit at Subang Airport
saw you drawn, dirty water in your veins
carrying Hep C intrusion,
a Trojan horse we all dismiss,
bar our gates to its repeat performance.

Our tiny flat expands with reminders
of your fight with illness, correspondence.
You are larger than some scrambled words
can make vain hope breathe life to memory.
You once asked if I had lots of friends,
even an all seasons wilts in your shadow.
One comes to new countries for all the wrong reasons.

From the pages of your own creation
you look out on our age: a world edged
on itself, pitch and toss of fragmented tribes,
village squabbles over jigsaws. You seem
to have an answer read between its lines.
We need more like you to piece the picture.

Selection

life's upfront
in my garden
whether wanted or not

(natural selection/chaos
vs
the species designed for rule)

In the lab
at my sterile bench
I assemble the bases
for a cabbage over which
snails and slugs may
slime in vain

A growth in its fifth month ripples
the surface of my stretched belly
Today - deemed defective
no right to be

no right
to waste resources earmarked
for those - deemed fit

A woman rational
doubtless I shall survive
to see the rising of
standards for humanity
now the code's
been cracked

Morning

She wakes to the cry of peacocks
her womb struck dumb anew
(the casket so small) *Nothing is lost*
they say *merely transformed*

Already the clothes bundled up
the soft shoes that have not touched
the ground and deep in a drawer
the photographs

And still the abundance
of her breasts a sour, dead weight
they whimper plead innocence
apologise

On the window sill
everlasting daisies in a shallow bowl
their severed heads
just above water

one turning slowly
in the breeze like a compass
towards the idea of North
or the sun

Date with death

I prepare for death
like a date
with my lover.
I destroy old letters
bits of me
that I do not want you,
or Him, to see.

But I have learnt
something of death.

He arrives
on his own terms.
Exposing the myth
of a complete life,
the scars and wounds
of an unfinished life.
Unraveled in the end
for the weeping wife.

15 & 1/3

for Janelle Parker

Shitty micro church you spent how many Sundays in
trains crashing past, fibro walls, coloured plastic windows
and now you're leaving, the six men and boys
dancing with your body, side-stepping the pews, aisle too narrow
don't they have funerals here and your's so small and white
the minister read out passages you marked in your bible
he said you were like a sailboarder caught in choppy wind
leaning with it, flying, then the next day dumped
you were always welcome here, always asked about others
your family crying but your street-kid, junkie friends are louder, wetter
and next, the school uniforms, I remember one day, you and Matt
in grade four, the bell gone and there you came
your shoes sliding along the footpath, bag dragging. Janelle
that photo out the front is how I remember your face, twisted with a grin
or else mouth-edges dragged southwards by the words
they invented especially for you, the stories I heard from Matt.
Mouths are open now, eyes squirt tears, heads are shaken
but there are only questions, fluttering all around us
like a swarm of butterflies.

Father

Death came before breakfast,
greeted him with a squeeze of the heart,
choked his reply. In the last moments,
weakening, he knelt beside the bed.

I passed the bedroom doorway, wondered
'Why is Dad saying his prayers?'
skipped along the corridor,
heard my mother crying, 'Speak to me.'

Now years later I think of him again.
Did he pray to be given a second half
of life, or ask forgiveness, glimpsing
his wife alone, his children's wordless grief?

Detritus

I excavate your scuffs
beneath a pile of sandshoes

Hold them in cupped palms, use them
like DNA, to reconstruct you

Brown leather buffed to a shine
they wait by the bed at attention

You slide into them, avoiding the floor
your feet - innocent until the day you died

Mine calloused now
as if I were the parent, you the child

I hold the scuffs a moment longer
stand them side by side in the bin

Letter to my Brother

His bed made, clothes folded
In an ashtray a stubbed cigarette
A coffee cup in the kitchen sink

From the back window
I watch the plum tree he planted
Ravaged by blackbirds

In my hands his last letter
Memories of setting sail
The salty taste of summer

He jogged to the jetty, they said
Climbed the rock and dived
The sea hugged him for hours

Every day I write him my reply
Of dreams and plans we shared
A letter I begin and never finish

He alone knew
How to put the final touch
The perfect length of his stay

At Last

I have given
the jacarandas
permission to flower
again this spring

and the moon
may carry on
teasing the tides
as usual

bees are encouraged
to fumble the jasmine
twisting its blossom
outside my kitchen

the grief I thought
would never end
has
ended.