IN THIS PART OF THE WORLD
IN THIS PART OF THE WORLD
Kevin Brophy

Blue Tongue Poets
for Wendy Fleming,  
tirelessly there for poetry
We found ourselves driving on a little road we’d never even heard of.
—James Tate, *Return to the City of White Donkeys*
Contents

Here

3 Subsiding
4 Back Yard Ladders of Surrender
5 No Mistakes
6 Butcher Birds, Mt Buffalo
7 Dog on the Road
8 Driving in Central Western Victoria
9 Unremarkable Day
10 What the Finch Knows
11 Blind Men Talking
12 Flight Again
13 Stones

And There

17 The Red Truck
18 What You Want Me to Understand:
19 Red Balloon, Caracalla
20 What We Walk Towards
21 Forest Cycling
22 Mind as Hive
23 Appian Way

And Back

27 Love
28 On Reading that James Tate has Died
29 Answers can Sound
30 As and When
31 The Quiet Day
A World Beyond
For Judith
Taking the Horses Home
Winter
Ocean/Fishing

Acknowledgements
About the Author

Here
Subsiding

for Myron

You shake hands with me
the first time since your accident
(unexpected bowl of cherry pips at your feet)
split your arm open
as if your arm was a book to be opened in a fever.

Your puffy fingers go round my hand
and one of those fingers, you say, is numb
—cooler, softer, less pliant—
but for me indistinguishable from the others
that you deploy to lose at chess
with your late-blooming father
who seems to need you now as he has never needed you.

The spring garden needs me
to plant its seedlings and cut back old timber
catch glimpses of parrots in the frangipani
watch new leaves shiver as wattlebirds go after insects.

Your hand still swollen months after the accident
subsides by degrees
but will never wholly
just as neither of us can ever be quite over
whatever it was our fathers pressed upon
us in the slow-motion accidents of their lives
histories of the twentieth century screaming
along the veins in their foreheads.

Once you ran away from your father
who, you now say, you love.

And here I am appointed scribe of my father's tombstone
—instructing Loving and Devoted to be cut in stone
above his fearful (at last) prophet's face.
No Mistakes

Today the morning rang at 6.15
to tell me what I had done wrong
the day before
and what mistakes I must not make today.

Half an hour later it rang again
waking me again
with a story about the world as it’s turned out to be
and the cargo of sorrows we must stow in our heads.

You rose from our bed
to find a moth on your leg,
its touch, you said, feathery.
This could be the day I marry you.

This could be the day we strew
flowers around the house
(a spider escaping onto my hand)
and stack the fridge with champagne

because of the way the world has turned out to be.

Back Yard Ladders of Surrender

Ornamental pear and native frangipani, olive, fig and lemon,
they reach up and out
their tree-hearts beating
to the small songs seedlings taught them
in surrender so complete
parrots, bats and pigeons
go through their leafy arms.

The trees will never dodge the axe
for they surrendered long ago,
long before the last big war
that left my father tightly fisted
round his memories,
long before the roads found a way
into the forests
and long before the open-mouthed fires
could be heard eating hillsides and towns.

The trees surrendered long before us.
They said make weapons of our arms,
make stretchers and crutches,
make carts and beams and targets of us,
anything. We won’t fight you or anyone.

In every tree the knowing crows can hear
an ambushed whisper of surrender.
It sends them back into the air
laughing like old soldiers.

Climbing the mental ladder
of their fizzing sap-filled thoughts
the trees raise every arm in surrender
to their mirror sky and smoky horizon
at remembered moonlit gorges whose edges
they’ve teetered over for millennia.
Dog on the Road

The small pup, so small it is still shaped vaguely like an embryo and seems to be boneless, pushes its soft snout against your ankle as you cross the road. It makes a pleading sound. You know it is asking for its life. You find a tap and turn it on and hope the dog will drink from it. It doesn’t. It chases your ankles, whining, calling, bleating, begging, asking for its life. You shout at it and it shows no understanding of your tone of voice, your intention, your distress, your approaching accusation. It moves along behind you, then drifts away to another pair of ankles passing on the dusty road. This will not be enough, but there is nothing else to do. It is as if you are stuck in a dream with a dreamed dog that will never actually die but will always be dying up against your hard ankles. Your distant heart pacing away. You imagine picking up the pup and carrying it home and making a home with it, but you have no home. You are leaving this place very soon. The dog must be forgotten as quickly as possible. Inside you is a world where lives come and go like days, like wrappers, like novels, like meals, like buses, like birds, like seasons, like you. What is love without indifference, you say to yourself.
Driving in Central Western Victoria

Empty
when you drive through it
at this speed
in winter it's green
in summer it goes yellow
then by the end of summer
a lot of it's black
until it goes grey with tiny green shoots
it's a cycle
it goes round and round
the weather too
when's the next town
isn't it the one where the hamburger shop
has toy trucks in the window
and a cowboy theme for wall decorations
you know the one
maybe it's another town
I remember it was around here somewhere
what's that
what did someone around here do
to deserve a monument like that
no-one would ever stop there
people just throw cans at it
this town looks familiar
we could live here
how long would it take
to pack everything up
I feel as if we can see all the way
to the horizon from here
amazing isn't it
it makes you want to just keep going

Unremarkable Day

This morning we disturbed moths
from their dreams of a woolly world.
I let a cockroach back out into the garden
when it came in on my T-shirt.
The cat went out
on the balcony to be with the possum.
Three parrots talked among themselves
in the fig tree for half an hour.
David made us a cup of tea
and stood out in the yard
where he talked about his vision.
Wendy arrived with a box of magic wands.
Nadia and Ameel came and talked of getting a dog
if they can find a place to live
at ground level.
Then Sophie arrived in the evening to discuss
the mouse in her house.
What the Finch Knows

The finch knows mainly one thing. 
Its joy is full of it, body aquiver

The finch knows to keep each eye 
on each side of its world

as it splashes in a roadside puddle
of light and sand and broken water.

The finch knows mainly this one thing.
Its love is full of it. It fills trees

with twisting flight. The finch plays close
to others out of fearful love

and disappears into leafy worlds
when the near wind hisses

like a cruel husband frightening
his latest wife. The finch is loved

for being small, bright, neat, fast.
It knows every seed and spring

in every wrinkle of its fearful songful world.
The finch knows how to live

in joyful fright and fret, knows
every shadow in every corner of its world.

Blind Men Talking

for John

We shake out a few sentences 
between us like old men
remembering something
about what has been given.

The word love is mentioned.

We have shaken each other's hand,
shaking like trees
in a new wind. Possums
fall out of us for we are like
blind men throwing creatures
out of our heads.

We could be taking sheets
from a clothesline,
folding them routinely together
like two old men who might be blind
but can still count and counterpunch.

What has been given is this
reaching in the dark for each other.
Stones

so blue in the night
listening to the steps we take
—they have no wisdom for us

no-one puts an ear to them

shining after rain
they outstare every star
for they know stillness
is another way of moving
through the narrow throat of time

and yes, they call for cathedrals

to take them up
and bathe their faces

with all that falling light

Flight Again

As we stand thinking about bread and coffee
on the first morning of what still feels like
next year
the kitchen window glass stops
a rare azure kingfisher in its flight, knocking it down
onto the verandah
where its orange legs retract
into its orange-and-cream washed chest,
its wings closed over its blue back
and its long beak open quivering,
its eyes fixed on nothing as it lies
on Patten's hand now,
new honey poured out on fresh bread
on the kitchen bench,
fruit itching to be stolen
in the orchard,
potatoes bursting with themselves
in their dark soil,
zucchinis nosing around
in the new sunlight
and a kingfisher laid out
under the Linden tree,
a small bird fearful it might have been mistaken
in everything
it thought it knew about flight.
And There
The Red Truck

At low-enough-to-sit-on rubbled walls
of once-homes bombed seventy-five years ago
in a world war come to Palermo’s skies

as fighting planes—now gracing entrances
to shopping malls lodged into highway knots
out in cloud-soaked suburbs of traffic

(where three men sell fish from a cart in the rain by the road)

—we lie down beside Giovanni Falcone’s missing
childhood home to hold a book against the sun
or lean a shadow over phone screen,
sunlight silent over us like some supreme teacher.

Palermo’s Mafia needed four hundred kilograms of dynamite
to speak for it—its local earthquake a side chapel to Etna—
a lava mouth opening to corridors of web-grey catacombs.

Beside us a red truck with one torn and flapping tyre
reverses over flower pots, its driver trembling, shrugging.

Across the way a church without a roof, buildings given
over to those who can write and draw on their torn walls.
Red Balloon, Caracalla

We have loved and refused to love.
We will talk to our children of love.
We will say the future must be read
in the sky or among the stones
of weed-bright walls jagged and beautiful before us.

The resident cat creeps away.
A rabbit tips its ear outside the public toilets.
Roman walls still monstrous enough
to tear at a canvas sky
hold shy lizards, rodents, growing shadows
in their ruined empire. We keep to the paths
until a red balloon in a winter tree wants me
to read its message.

My faith is with a murmury of reading,
and this signalling balloon which carries a new message
in the bath of light that goes through everyone,
a message to emperors or no-one or some dear god.
It is salvation, we will tell our children if they will listen.

Everything crumbles back into the black mouth.
It eats us. Over and over it eats us.

Beggars build fires against night in the car park
hoping to be here still when summer returns
to its children with promised gifts from the east.

The balloon lifts itself from its tree
wobbles away unread into its high future
which is as blue and endless as love might never be.
**Forest Cycling**

We rode our bicycles of creaking parts beneath the pine trees deep among deer and wolves and walking families on Sunday strolls between the sea and a lagoon shadowed by those curving pines, followed by fumey seaweed, fish farm ponds, further salty stillness graced by pale flamingos, ancient sea walls, and the faint trailed songs of gulls, our legs going fast as fearful life, as any legs could go that day along the path rolled rough upon an earth of sand and stones and roots we know we will embrace at last.

We rode on. The wolves stayed in, the deer kicked up needles in the shade. We got ourselves outside the gate, wheeled our bikes uphill, leaned them back against their house and turned to the pulling in of curtains, lighting logs, our breath recalling barely creaking whispers from the smallest woodland birds and mice.

**What We Walk Towards**

We walk the sides of mountains above wild coasts of limestone cliffs laced into razor spires by winds, the sea colouring itself blue and bluer with wavering smoke-white boats upon it.

Spring waters from mountain sides feed on the paths. The sea face-down below us is rippling stained glass all brittle, gone-through with daylight.

Inside us and inside the mountains what lasts is dark, too dark to know about or dare imagine where the dark inner liquid rock might be flowing as we walk the paths.

The night like a cave lies ahead. It will take us in, no-one too homeless for it. We’ll enter and confine ourselves till morning returns as though it never meant to leave.

We’ll walk across the mountains’ rocks, squeezing high on a cliff past a pine tree of a species favoured by emperors. We will cling, dark specks, to the mountain’s side.
Mind as Hive

A dream of tearing pages from a dictionary and using them to soak up a spill of milk on a desk. In the dream this shows resourcefulness though the words on the pages prove to be distracting as I perform the task of tearing out pages. The several bodies in the room, some mumified, give off a dusty, hempish smell. They seem to see everything as if on a screen and unreachable. Later, rescued by daylight, I am in a restaurant where one wall is a TV set to a cooking demonstration channel. The beautiful hands of women toss fruit salad, spread sweetness on flat bread. Pairs of men appear in contrasting aprons, one always the expert and the other a clown. The chef of the restaurant comes out to watch his favourite segment. We are too early for lunch so we drink the local wine. Other bodies in further caskets were delivered to that dream-room from churches; these were mostly bones, possibly sacred. These bones must have felt envy, jealousy, anger, resentment, love. It had all gone through into their marrows. Here, though, weeds grow on the clock tower reconstructed after bombs from American planes. German soldiers once attended mass in the town cathedral while local people hid in their wine cellars. Under the restaurant the owner takes me through caves now home to dusty bottles lit by dim electric globes. He shows me a corridor cut through the rock. If you walk along there, he says, if you walk for twenty minutes, you will come up under the town hospital. He has walked it once in his life, he says. Outside, people on hillsides sound like goats. Goats on hillsides jump like children. The hill tumbles down its own sides while it’s still the patient witness to us scrambling over it. Even in this small hill town, there is the drawn-out siren of an ambulance. The heaped dried chamomile flowers in a tray at the town market are intensely yellow, their colour a dust of fragrance. For this, a hillside was mown down and pulled up in armfuls. We walk along a lane. Late winter trees think hard about how they might do this rebirth one more time with their coming leaves, their coming blossoms. At the top of the hill, we come to a rusting bare crucifix with a table beneath it where boys drink beer and kick a yellow soccer ball. It is as if we have arrived after the event.

Appian Way

...for there are no masses so obscure, even among the rocks and foliage, but that a little light may always insinuate itself.
—Chateaubriand, *Recollections of Italy, England and America*

Walking on stones with low rock walls alongside, we hear cowbells knock in fields behind the trees. The green minds of weeds are everywhere, their seeds pinned in warming cracks as the ground opens for a gentler season. Pines bring in the quick shapes of crested larks. Why does each step feel like a new sorrow left behind? We might have dreamed this place into existence. We stop and read about the quality of late afternoon light, try to find the lit edges of moving shadows. Without regrets we would not remember anything. Early wildflowers, careless of us, dab themselves about. Towns of hazy yellow ziggurats step down hillsides, the road presses into the land like an arm across a pillow. After our picnic ants take what they can into the shadows.
And Back
Love

… it is my body that you tear.
—Ovid, The Heliades, Book II, Metamorphoses

Once a young man fell in love with a woman. She fell in love with him as well and for a while they were happy in each other’s company. When they were no longer happy together the woman said she wanted to leave him. He gave her both his arms and asked her to keep them as a reminder of their love. Soon the man fell in love with an older woman of poise and wit. She fell in love with him, too, and even loved him for what he did not have. Eventually they became unhappy and the woman said she wanted to leave him. He gave her his feet and legs before she went, and he said to her that these would be a reminder of their love that was now dead. As the years passed he continued to fall in love with surprising women, gradually giving away his ears, his heart, and finally his eyes. After this he gave up hope of being in love ever again. He understood tears to be the useless gift one gives to the dead. Determined not to weep or grieve over what was lost, he breathed only in the name of love. He had many health problems and needed a carer twenty-four hours a day. Strangely enough on a rare excursion with his carer, a woman of his own age who still had her fiery hair and laughter in her eyes saw him and fell in love with him. She told him she wanted to live with him for the rest of her life. He told her he could not love her because he had nothing left to give. The fiery woman loved him so much she gave him her own arms, legs, eyes, ears, and heart. Her laughter was loud and strong in her throat. Once this fiery woman had given him everything he had lost, he stood up, looked at her, did not recognise her and went on his way.
On Reading that James Tate has Died

It could have been one of your sly poems
That supposed you’d died,
Proposing what might be said
By some New Yorker reviewer
About you after you’d gone:
‘Quietly gregarious
In the spirit of Emily Dickinson’
Would do for starters,
Then something about
‘Inner universes’
And the ‘crabbed beauty’ of your poems.

You the poet might have slipped away
But it’s as if you’re about
To return to us
With a new poem telling of your travels.
Your new poem will observe, in its crabbed manner,
That it’s always, we discover,
A return ticket we’re travelling on,
The dust at our feet at the end
No dustier than where we stood at the start.

But, quietly gregarious traveller, you won’t return
Without a new story
Of some miracle of coincidence on a train
Or a beggar who followed you from city to city
From continent to continent
Until you yanked off his shabby coat and old shirt
Convinced you’d find wings folded down his back.
Or a day you spent beside a lake
That longed for you to dissolve into it
And you did, after discarding a gum wrapper
Just to let posterity know you’d been there.

Answers can Sound

I can wear this she said
to her daughter
because I am a mother
and no-one looks at me

and I can say this
because it is said
in a small poem
placed obscurely
in a prestigious chapbook
unnoticed by anyone

though I did notice her
speaking loud enough
for me to turn to her
just as she went
across the crossing
her daughter skipping
beside her trying to catch up
to ask the next question
for there is so much to hear
about the way answers can sound.
As and When

There was no warning.

We were praying or thought we were.

We were walking along a street
as if streets were made for this.

We were at school
trying to do more than think
about lunch and what happens after school.

We were at a concert
eating something sweet and thinking,
yeah, music, it takes you out of here
into, well, into everywhere else,
yeah, music, wow.

We were picking up our children
from child care
as if the world needed us just here.

Oh, there was no warning
though all the signs were there
we realise now.

The Quiet Day

Yesterday, turning 97, he said on the phone
he was having
a quiet day.
He thanked me for ringing him.
The thought of years of what it might have been like
to be his son on days so quietly celebratory
flooded the lake just outside this town
until I could hear water lap up to the crumbling
base of my house, floating a generation of drowned beetles
and dead grasshoppers up to the front door.

The few trees left around the house
looked down over the water
up to their knees in amazement.
A quiet day, and probably nearly the last of them, he said.
Everyone has been so good to me, he said,
making a speech of it, tempting my lake to stretch itself
across two thousand kilometres and join up with an ocean.
A World Beyond

What if the world were undersea
and us with our fishy mouths against
a reef, taking bites of neon blue
as we pass on our finny wanders
through elkhorn, cabbage, grooved
and bouldered brains of coral
as deep in ourselves as the future
might be planted now in time?

We’d have no need for commerce,
news, or poetry. Reefs bring gardens
to our sleepy selves, monstrous
flowers, swift shadows and far sunlight
flushed over as if searching seas for us,
light that sends us into deeper drifts
of a watery endlessness
too strange to comprehend itself.

You know this place, you floated in it
long and breathless in your last long life
before this one—you knew the shadows
too and muffled prayers from another world
somewhere close beside.

What if the world were undersea again
and this the world around us, unaware
of that beyond
that only diving dreams uncover?

For Judith

I scan the tides, the rock-passages navigated,
the chasm, the narrows, the odds I slipped through, me.
—Judith Rodriguez, The Feather Boy & Other Poems

You write of the sea and the sea arrives
in lines swept across the world
to break their shapes against my reading self
holding on to the steady tremor of your poetry,

Persephone to speech, singing the tenacity of the fig
with citrus sting and pepper leaf, lemon and nasturtium,

though you always reach for the rose in each of us
and with the deep shock of the sea coming at us

you turn your face to the ‘slow politics of justice’
lest we lose sight of something beyond what we are.
Taking the Horses Home

Walking them across the road back
to their home paddock, Sweetie looked around
while Nellie kept her old head down

both content to take their two big brown
hay-dreaming souls clipping up the drive
and in through a narrow gate to their hillside
paddock of scrub wattle, apple box and peppermint
crossed by a sandy-bottomed midday creek
where, we’ve heard, a platypus moved in
beneath the bridge last winter to make its home
beside a dark old carp that rules this bend
and its fallen shade in this part of this world.

Winter

Vincent has his head down
like everyone else
under this knife of a night.

The rain spins a currency
of no substance
soaking the evening street
with silvered significance.

He looks for a cinema showing
a film of a deep winter scene,
maybe a war and a beautiful woman
who understands something
he can’t quite see or name

until he’s back outside kicking at the dark
to find his way to the patient car
whose lock only works
on the front passenger door
though it’s old enough now
for its failures to be what it’s valued for.

Vincent puts his head down
keeps hands in pockets
forgets for a few minutes
his life of noting and pointing at things
that point back into the soul or the heart

and allows himself briefly the sound
of cheap shoes slapping puddles.
Ocean/Fishing

*after a painting by Euan Macleod with the same title, purchased by the TarraWarra Museum of Art in 2013*

The sea is so taken by its waves,
building them so beautifully, wave on wave
without end and edge, from far away;
the rocks, they feel their way into this sea,
into its tumbled green and blue, the rocks, you see,
they would hand the fisher to the shattered sea,
throw birds into the sodden air,
hide crabs, anemones from the worst of it.

As a thrown mad thin line of strange fragility goes in,
the standing figure pushed up against this scene,
against this yearning for encounter with no way out,
no horizon certain, always something about to go bang

inside those waves, their fists of sound and sand,
a smudged and sketchy self stands, rod in hand.
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About the Author

Kevin Brophy has had nine previous collections of poetry published as well as collections of essays and works of fiction. He has received the Wesley Michel Wright Prize for poetry, the Martha Richardson Medal for poetry, and the Calibre Prize for an outstanding essay. He has been patron of the Melbourne Poets Union since 2004. In 2015, he was poet-in-residence at the B. R. Whiting Studio in Rome, and in 2019–20 he was poet-in-residence at the Keesing Studio in Paris.
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