

ABR

***STATES OF POETRY* SERIES ONE**

<https://www.australianbookreview.com.au/poetry/states-of-poetry/states-of-poetry-victoria/3057-states-of-poetry-victoria-the-book-of-interdictions-by-a-frances-johnson>

***STATES OF POETRY* INCLUDES:**

The Book of Interdictions

For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come ...

Song of Solomon, Verse 11-12

Tow

Lo, the cell phone sleeps in its cell.
The raven deactivates the horizon.
There is water for everyone,
but not the kind you can drink.
The interdiction crews bring slabs
of plastic bottles and one-syllable words
deployed with biblical clarity:
no, ton, flow, go, foe.

Lo, watch the oil on the water
shimmer, a miracle of evidence.
Wounded iridescent rainbows
leak from under the hull. For two days,
the hawk drone has shadowed
its nest of wood, dreaming of
the time after rain, flowers appearing
on the earth, the singing
of birds, the time come.

Fuse

Wire was once a useful thing.
Piano wire brought song,
made the piannola in the desert
unspool melodies to support
a soldier's farmblock optimism.
Wire brushes cleaned the mud
from workboots, penned animals
inside their stalls. Fine gauge
fixed the porcelain fuse so a light
globe shone over air-conditioned
Bethlehem. And here, razor wire
taught children what to expect.

Photograph

He avoids dining out
on his award-winning photograph;
its forced correspondence nags;
the camp's hall of mirrors looks
nothing like his shaving mirror.
He has seen this room before,
filed many versions of the same shot.
He knows how the poem goes
before the poet has written it:
war, movement, hunger, displacement,
incarceration, hopelessness, suicide, image.
He will not dine out on it; on the one of many.
But the next night he books a restaurant,
a good one, eating past life.
When a little death on a plate
arrives, he cuts the image
away like an army surgeon.

Birds

Do not alight the old way.
No longer seek boughs bending in the breeze.
They do not recognise a non-segmented sky;
nor sing in the face of obstacles
Overall, the sighing cloud
is less trained, less *orderly*
than the Hummingbird would like.
This does not stop it moving close to the wire,
behind which, disorganised families
prepare meals of goat and bitter greens.
Radio Afghanistan can be heard far distant;
lovesongs fit the desert city like soft shoes.
The bird does not care. It tracks and targets.
And where necessary, drops its payload.
The young corporal on headsets listens in,
Discharge, a pure lyric.
He and his birds are never fooled
by the ghazal in the aviary.
After some days away, the bird flies back,
lonely at 18kph, whirring perpetual dawn.

JOHNSON, A. Frances (2015), 'The Book of interdictions', unpublished suite of five poems. Winner of the Griffith
University-Josephine Ulrick Poetry Prize

Soar

It began with structural analysis of a dragonfly wing.
The first task was to create
flow in the DelFly II.
Wing flexibility in ‘clap-and-fling’
and ‘clap-and-peel’ were tested.
But what of appearance variation cues
and obstacle avoidance?
In the end they took a sky segmentation approach,
while others dealt with complex tail effects
in flapping flight. Even so, after years of work,
hear-and-avoid problems beset
indoor and outdoor dragonflies.
All parties were insisting on micro air vehicles
quieter than any insect that ever hovered
over a lake (‘water source’).
One bright spark solved it,
You want quiet? I’ll give you guys quiet, he said.
This is gunna be the quietest bug on the planet,
quieter than anything we’ve done before;
quieter than any soft-spoken woman at a well
shielding her eyes from the glare,
from dreams of water
in the insectless heat of high summer.

Shrine

Some distance from the great white shrine,
city goers appear blindsided by cephalagia,
fingers delicately cradling handsets to crania.
The fighters, Tunnerminnerwait and Maulboyheenner,
only differentiate this from grief or sickness
when thousands thread the city streets,
making and remaking identical Goyaesque gestures
as wrenched vocabularies of laughter, loss and symbol.

You are no slouch; you became like them long ago,
having moved here voluntarily after the great fires ceased.
You have forgotten to draw the Dandenongs’ petrol blue
haze about your shoulders; your feeble memory
of fired country, gone. Thus you link in and disappear,
cradling your burning white head just like the others,

as if it were a precious thing to be carried to market.

The settler streets are new but always ancient, in the way
of being crowded with users, usurpers, lovers of usury.
High above the city, the gull's red eye reads the city
as a gridded history painting. Real scale outdoes the Great Masters
but not the dreams of the fighters, returned from the dead,
an army of fear: *Peevay, Napoleon, Jack of Cape Grim, Tunninerpareway,*
Robert Smallboy, Jemmy, Timmy, Tinney Jimmy, Robert of Ben Lomond, Bob;
strong-armed, yet not yet ready to lift
their own monuments into place.

But when Tunnerminnerwait and Maulboyheenner return,
swooping down without warning on borrowed grain-fed Pegasus,
they too are caught unawares by asphalt kerbs and curtain walls,
by the stale air, the absence of a river once known
and forded with great losses on both sides.
For a moment the famed warriors are nonplussed;
the source has been built in and built over.
The burning stations and Mornington rides
rate no plaque in the victor's museum,
the tired white pamphlets – bloodless, blank.

Slowing to a canter on a stolen horse is to admit defeat.
And so, hooves clacking *fortissimo possibile*,
they raise their guns the old way
to glass and steel, briefcase and broolly.
The makers of this hooved ordinance,
deaf to the mobile pleadings of women,
to the white kerb of history,
are swift to recognise the indivisibility of old and new,
the cringing mouths and eyes of European
history paintings they have heard about but never seen.
And then they see you, hands lifted,
cradling your burning head *en tablean*.
They have come for you, to burn down
your great white shrine and take you home.

Note: Tunnerminnerwait and Maulboyheenner were brought to Melbourne in 1839 by the protector of Aborigines, George Robinson, to 'civilise' the Victorian Aborigines. In late 1841, the two men and three women stole two guns and waged a six-week guerilla-style campaign in the Dandenongs and on the Mornington Peninsula, burning stations and killing two sealers. They were charged with murder and tried in Melbourne. Their defence counsel was Redmond Barry, who questioned the legal basis of British authority over Aborigines. Thirty-nine years later, Barry would sentence Ned Kelly to hang. Tunnerminnerwait and Maulboyheenner were the first men to be hung in Melbourne.

Sea Level

For Anthony Lynch

You can't see water beyond the highway hoardings, but you are told Jesus walked on it.
This is your best clue. Signs for dinner settings, security doors, viagra and tractor parts flash
past like miracles.

But you feel something pull, not daintily at your sleeve, but with tidal will,
pulling blood into stark equations of space and gravity you cannot hope to solve.

When you get there, sea fills out the world beyond the wildest hopes
of plumbers and drinking fountains, the dramatic imaginings of poets. Stop there.

The salt order threatens but that is what you wanted, that genius rise and fall,
its white-noised repeat; the fierce marine gull as priest, chanting agitprop.

Why is it that only solid things insist as civilisation?
All architectures house a vacuum, await the pourer, the pouring in.

Whether this is ocean or something molten, earth, an infil of words – you must decide.
Swimming against the tide won't help; new speech quickly becomes lack of speech.

You've learnt the lessons of containment: skyscrapers and houses, banks and zoos.
In the city, people press their hands against glass and feel the pulsing tremor of curtain walls.

You are like them; this is part and parcel of your day-job, listening to life moving through
encryption. Knowing that, in the end, all your resolutions will melt.

On the way back from the coast you notice cavernous shops selling light fittings,

acres and acres of lights, a confusion of Bethlehems.

In the distance the city skyline glows with penthoused unbelief.
You shift in closer now, you have come back – strong, certain as tides.

Australian awe

for Marcia Langton

The rock-art guide, combusting
in 42 degrees, back to image.
His sloppy dreamtime,
a melted ice-cream,
far from refrigerated sublime.

Some whites reckon

*pre-contact was one big
happy black campout,
lasting millennia.*

*That's so's they can conveniently
keep Aboriginal people in some
pre-modern place.*

It's a quote, I said,
as people lowered their cameras
heartwards, like Jesus
snapping a selfie.

We all want the fridge.

Country is no caravan park.

The guide wiped his brow
with a neckerchief of

ochre-tinted dots, the rest
pixellating behind him.

What's wrong with you?

What did art ever do to you?

Anti-elegies

Anti-elegy 1: Poetry

Even poetry demented in the end;
fatal attractions to dank earth
and ash albums don't fool or buy time.
Poetry always cherry-picks memory
for its own ends; yet that's a
medicated narcissism for some.
Earnest elegies are often rejected
by dogs and children. Listen to them howl.
Voting for life outside of ritual.
I'm on your side; I'm with the hounds
and the kids. I won't let elegy
make you over into a bad oil painting,
don't grief's cloth pantomime.
Next time I see you walking
down the street, checking for spot fires
in unseasonal autumn heat,
light fidgeting up the shape of you
between drunken ghost gums
I will laugh and say: *the death*
of my father has not made
a poet out of me, no, not yet.

Anti-elegy 2: You are here

I read 'you are here'
on a map and think of you,
limned under tar and earth and clay,
directing slowed traffic
and weighted thought by day,
turning your face by night
to rowed council moodlights,
as to star, battery torch,
and the lingering fust
of autumn burn-offs.

You are here, constellating wonder
in light and routine and soil,
still eternally, supremely confident
in the maps and grids of the living:
cemetery map reference,
44 E 19. Row Seven.

Anti-elegy 3: First Xmas

If you must do the clanking chain
and sheet let it be pure sight gag.
The quiet wit of the dead is yours.
We expect nothing less
than theatre-restaurant ghoul.
Our task, to entreat you
to turn up late to an unwrapped
Christmas of bad bon-bon jokes and
recycled gifts. We will be waiting,
patient in sodden crepe crowns,
drinking from someone else's
warm stem glass, rare cooked animals
pressing down on First World intestines.
All of us vying to claim you, memories
competing like rich courses
which may or may not be good for you.
When it's too much ha-ha, too rich or too sad
I will bang my glass, watch
my beloved, ageing relatives
pause in confusion, clutch
tiny, fluoro-toned party whistles
in the hope they'll be first off the sinking ship.
Before they jump, I confide flippantly:
*the death of my father has not made
me a joke teller,
no, not yet.*

Anti-elegy 4: Spade

We thought about burying you with your old spade.
But you'd have hated that, considered it waste.
No need for a *Great Escape*, though you could
have easily whistled yourself through
to the other side like Steve.
But then, soil ended up more comfort
than you thought, a Jason Recliner for life.
How you wished the same for everyone, a leather luck.

Someone else can use the spade now, you said.
I've limed the clay mound, bedded down
the summer succulents and dug out
that brutus agapanthus on the west wall.
It's all ready. Thanks for your help.
Yeah right. Help. Take it. Go on. *Take it.*
It's yours. Hose it off after use, rub olive oil
into the handle. Don't forget. I'm resting now.
Good work. Dig deep.

Anti-elegy 5: 'Light and water'

Even with a plain pine box,
the burial cost a bomb, authenticated
lightness a clear and quick return.
Death's a quick diet in that respect,
though the anorexic spookhouse
cheapens – neither sums you up
nor summons you. Most days
light and lightness refuse to pun.
Meanwhile daylight's broken projector
screens your old movie in fits and starts.
I guard my ticket jealously,
fighting the light to scratch
you out of faded Kodachrome.
At any moment I might catch you sweeping
leaf litter down the coppery tow paths
of late afternoon. But forget ethereals.
What ifs. You always put a plant in the earth
the moment it was given to you.
Weighted it in. Now I am putting you in,
not as swiftly as you would have liked.
You have no technique I hear you say.
Build it up around the bole. Water it in,
pat it down. That way it will flourish.
I laugh and say: *the death of my father*
has not made a gardener of me,
no, not yet.

Weight

It is a kind of sleep we must learn,
seasonal as spiders, our bodies
weights no web can hold.

We watch, stupefied as we grow
elephantine, fill the house
until tired shutters are shucked

open. We drag thickened ankles from
room to room, astonished at the sentence,
the lead suits that won't be neatly hung.

In the unmown afternoons, cars park
across us, seeking tarmac. We wake
as we sleep: heavy as roads slept on.

But what if weight was our intention all along,
the deceptions of stylish elegies
traded for glad, frightful earth?

In the kitchen, the broken radio preaches
static, weight loss, instant gardens;
the spider takes up its annual position in the hall.

The riotous spring is here and the dead
are industrious, mowing grassy
underworlds, light as gravity.

A. Frances Johnson