

New Poetry

Robyn Rowland

The night you came

for Maurice

I've seen it before: Mannin coral strand
shining ivory cream in late day,
amber wrack on the pitch-black rock
whiskering around the bay;
Bens caked in snow
their quartzite veins pumping water
under a tarred and boiling sky;
that *curragh* in Seal Bay, strangely
painted bright wode-blue, listing under a gale
before it's hauled up to dry shelter.

Air so translucent on a still day
there was no need for breath
suspended as we were
in the very heart of it
in the plenty of it
in the exhausted contentment of it
after tramping between spooks along the bog road,
light a medium of clear mist,
angels' breath
sky to loch to land, as we sat.

Or summer's glaze at Grace's kitchen window
so bright it burns away
all thoughts of any other place;
sea beyond, blue as a feather off the
peacock on Pat's cold chimney top.
For some reason unknowable to us all,
it cries and gazes towards the sea
from the half-stoned house below.
We never know what that means:
a peacock on the roof in the wild west of Ireland.

But the night you came,
when I hoped but did not know why,
or for what;
the night you went,

when I did not weep but fell quiet;
the moon was all gold
like never before,
big as old currency, doubloon fat, pirate rich.
A Midas moon, dripping with Minoan gold.

Maybe it had slipped
inside the sun's skin
dropped as it disrobed for sleep.
Maybe it was real as a necklace
from Crete's hoarded past.
Maybe it was only plate, fit to peel and flake,
enlarged reflection of a small candle flame
distorted through old pane glass; a bulging fake;
or a daisy-daft trick-of-the-eye.

But I never, never saw it like that.

What we made

for my father

Look at you, wood-dreaming,
palms smooth around the rosewood lamp you turned
deep in your cave beneath the house
full of the dust of years, red with the hearts of cedar
and as full of whorls and rings and whispering deep-grain tales.
Its shade will be Pegasus in leadlight.
Hooked on the story, you made a dozen
trying to get the horse alive and leaping
and he does, galloping off the mount,
every feathery wing-flutter a word,
a line to hold us above the rush of earth flying.

But we need few of those buoys.
We talk the language of lime tree, lawn and basil,
of boats past and fish to come,
of the untangled lines we hold now in our hands
when the past was so littered with knots and fraying cloth;
with the dead eye of the fish cold, you gasping for breath
against the hopeless arguments of youth.

Look at us, at 88 your life brim-full
and me in the middle of years,

our own visions tossed around
in an autumn too warm for comfort,
sprawled on the deck for lunch, glass in hand
the sea spread before us, a delicate
glittery window into the blue of everything.
Old jokes, old memories are turned and papered smooth as time
and just as quick, both coming, and going.

Everything has been this rich for nearly two decades,
Mum gone to ash and the polish on her flaws
working away all indented scars, all bruised hurt.
Last night the sea was silver lame
like Merle Oberon would slink in,
and clouds were pushing up in meringue crests above the scarp
or cream on top of sponges she made for endless fetes.
We still walk her track along the shine of rocks to Shelly cove
and I sit, as she did, to run my fingers through the grit,
raking over all the small things the sea rolls up
collecting the moment.

Look at us – really Dad – each likely to stumble now,
each with our hand already cupping the elbow beside,
faces glistening with the salt that wind and waves
might bury us with, or wear us away.
We part these days always anxious, in hope of meeting again soon
and I journey back south to my sleep in that boat of a bed you made
me,
timber gleaming in the dark night, its centre a dolphin
plunging into indigo glass waves,
a blue topaz you cut, set like a third eye into the bed-head
'so I'll always be there to look out for you', you said.

Dr. Robyn Rowland AO has published 9 books, six of them poetry. Silence & its tongues (Five Islands Press, 2006) was runner up for the 2007 ACT Minister's Judith Wright Poetry Prize. She has won the Catalpa Poetry Prize and overall Writers Prize from the Australian-Irish Heritage Association, and the Jean Stone Poetry Prize. An Honorary Fellow, School of Culture and Communication, University of Melbourne, Robyn was previously Professor of Social Inquiry at Deakin University, retiring in 1996