

## Ali Whitelock

Four poems, June 2018

...

### **so there's the woman with the white hair & the daughter called pumpkin.**

& she's got the shop that sells the lamps & the tables  
& the vases & she paints everything in gold leaf except for the replica  
louis XV side tables which she paints a creamy colour  
& she calls that french wash. i sit at the cafe next to her shop  
with my dog. i take him everywhere with me. she asks  
if i'm from europe i tell her i'm from scotland how i've  
been here for twenty years how i miss europe dreadfully.  
then the woman with the white hair & the daughter called pumpkin  
tells me gold leaf is very popular in europe. she comes from portugal  
—used to paint nails in a beauty salon. my sort-of-sister-in-law is a nail  
surgeon—it's what they call it these days. it used to be a manicurist.  
i went to a house once in greenacre where they have the drive-by shootings.  
i knocked loudly on the door when it opened the shimmer  
from the gold velvet couch the gold plated lamps the gold painted  
walls blasted out like an over-tinselled christmas tree that's lost its fucking mind.  
so the woman with the shop & the white hair & the daughter  
called pumpkin had a chandelier & she was selling it for eight  
hundred & eighty five dollars & that's australian dollars  
& that's not cheap. the crystal teardrops looked like glass but the woman  
with the white hair told me they were crystal, that she painted  
it with gold leaf—too much gold leaf in my opinion—and that shot  
the price right up. then she told me the crystal came from czechoslovakia  
& i have always wanted to go there—to prague—if you must know  
it got flooded recently too much rain it's happening all over the world now.  
i knew a man from prague once we waited tables together in sydney  
he was tall and thin wore milk bottle glasses & grey polyester  
pants full of static electricity, he reminded me of a test tube wearing  
a big red nose. he used to clasp his hands behind his back  
call women 'madame' & men 'sir' like proper waiters with manners  
might do, say, in melbourne or just outside the dandenongs where  
you can get a devonshire tea and breakfast all day if you've a mind, no wait  
he wasn't czechoslovakian but hungarian, that's right i remember  
now, so this woman with the shop & the white hair & the daughter  
called pumpkin didn't have enough customers so she had to close down  
she said her gold leaf may not be popular here but it sure as hell'd be popular  
in europe & that her gold leaf lamps & tables & vases & replica louis XV  
side tables would sell for double at least, if she set up in the likes  
of budapest or lisbon or krakow, well the europeans are more  
refined don't you know. the last day of her shop was sunday.  
i was passing by with my dog i always walk my dog on sundays  
& every other day for that matter. she was loading up her car  
with the last of her lamps & tables & vases & she offered  
me the chandelier for two hundred dollars & that's australian

dollars & that's certainly cheap. then she reminded me the teardrops  
weren't glass but czechoslovakian crystal then she banged  
on again about the gold leaf & how it's very european  
& yada yada yada and i gazed at that chandelier. imagined  
it hanging above my dinner table & how the light would refract  
through the czechoslovakian teardrops casting european shadows  
on my macaroni cheese. i took the dog home and got the cash.  
i can put up with too much gold for a price like that.

## the word cunt

my friend bronwyn and i discussed  
the word cunt on tuesday after it had rained  
non stop for seven weeks and my succulents  
were juicier than they'd ever been.

i described the colour of the sea that day  
as eucalyptus, a sort of smoked mint, an opaque sage.  
she asks me what sort of a cunt thinks like that?  
she reckons i spend too much time alone. then she says  
since you're so po-fucking-etic how else  
would you describe the sea?

a woman's heart i said. a cauldron  
of cold fish tears, a crone in love with the moon, the sloshing  
fluid of god's inner ear.

## **an arsenal of lidless tupperware in the parched prairie of your existence**

if you want to write a novel, novella  
or even a poem what you can do is, you can do a writing course.  
they are available on the internet. first you must click  
on the link then enter your details then you must pay your  
too much money using paypal or visa or american express.

once you have paid your too much  
money the course people will email you a receipt then  
they will send you a password and the password will come  
in a separate email for security purposes. when you start  
your writing course the course people will give you some  
tips and they will call these tips ‘techniques’ and sometimes  
they will call these techniques ‘tools’ and you will feel like  
you are a carpenter or a builder or even a plumber  
and when the course is finished you will not employ any  
of the tools and techniques you have learnt because you will find  
there are still too many other reasons why you are still not writing  
such as cleaning the caked-on grease from around the knobs  
of your cooker, hoovering the top of your wardrobe and sorting  
out the mountain of lidless tupperware containers that avalanche  
to the kitchen linoleum each time you open the pantry door.

if by some miracle you do manage  
to start writing your novel, novella or even your poem  
you may find, despite the fact you are applying your tools  
and techniques, that one day you will wake and you will  
not be able to write another fucking word and this will be called  
writers’ block. if you should find yourself with writers’ block  
what you can do is you can google on the internet again  
and you will find there is a course you can do which will  
cure you completely and there will be many courses  
to choose from but you will settle on the one called  
The Twelve Step Cure for Writer’s Block which is like  
they are making it sound like alcoholic’s anonymous only  
you do not have to be an alcoholic to do this course  
though some of the course participants may be.

when you are not googling courses  
on how to write your novel, novella or even your poem  
you may also attend too many sessions at writers’ festivals  
and one day you will hear paul muldoon speaking at the sydney  
writers’ festival and he will tell a room crammed full of people  
with colour coded tupperware systems that writing a poem  
is like you are building something or constructing something  
and because the room you are in is staring out at the sydney  
harbour bridge he will tell you that each side of the bridge  
was built at the same time and when the two sides met in the middle  
there was a two centimetre gap and he will say  
it’s in the two centimetre gap where the poem lives.

and paul will say many other  
things too with his lilt that soothes like someone is rowing  
you on a boat on a warmish afternoon after a picnic  
of ham sandwiches and a bottle of american cream

soda on the banks of lough mourne and in the q&a  
bit at the end a man in the audience will stand  
and he will wait for a microphone to come and when  
it comes he will try to be very fancy by starting  
with a quote from yeats then he will ask his question  
and he will be trying so hard to be fancy that no one  
will understand what the fuck he is trying to say including  
paul muldoon and the man will sit down with the shame  
that fills the room like a cheese-plant in a greenhouse  
in far north queensland.

and then there will be another  
man in the audience and he will ask about how to write  
a poem and paul will say many things. and the man will  
write the many things down and the tupperware people  
will write the many things down too and paul will say every  
poem he writes is an adventure that he never knows where  
it might end up and that sometimes when he reads  
back his work it almost feels like he's had no hand in its making.  
and he will say all of this looking out from the stage across  
a sea of hairy crowns and he will say unto the hairy crowns  
that when you are writing a poem, it is important to know—  
but it is crucial to not know. and the hairy crowns  
will write this thing down too.

and paul will say everything  
with his voice that sounds like caramel if caramel could  
be a sound and quavers and minims and semi-crotchets  
will tinkle from his lips like they were tinkling from cathleens'  
falls in county donegal and for forty-five minutes the people  
will forget about their greasy knobs and the tops of their wardrobes  
and their arsenals of lidless tupperware.

and when the session is over  
the people will feel unstoppable and they will step out into the sydney  
sun and they will see many people from the writers' festival  
jotting in their moleskin notebooks with the soft thick pages  
and cost thirty seven dollars a piece and you too will step  
out into the sydney sun and order your cup of tea in a cafe  
and remove your own brand new moleskin notebook  
from its packet carefully concealing the \$2 writing pads  
you normally buy at the supermarket and you will survey the people  
filling their moleskins with their dreams and you will know  
somewhere inside you, somewhere small a mouse might live,  
that it's possible to write a poem on just about anything including  
your greasy knobs the top of your wardrobe even your arsenal  
of lidless tupperware.

and when you get home  
you will put in a load of washing and fry up the mushrooms  
and boil the brussel sprouts and you will prepare the cheese  
and pickle sandwiches for the following day's lunches  
only you will tear your fucking hair out trying to find  
lids for your tupperware containers

many days will pass.  
your note taking will dwindle till the moleskin notebook filled  
with your dreams disappears down behind the couch of your longing  
along with the embryo of your novel, novella and even your poems  
and you will find yourself back in the parched prairie of your existence

with the tumble weed and the enio morricone soundtrack whistling  
through the canal of your inner ear and the poems whose breath  
you swear you could feel on the back of your neck  
will give way to the knobs and the wardrobe  
and the tupperware thing again

then one morning, early,  
like say five o'clock you will open the eyes  
that dared not dream your nose will twitch and the sure  
smell of your novel novella and all of your poems  
will be gone and all you will be left with is the ghostly  
whiff of hospital potatoes and low sodium chicken and other  
dying odours that linger in antiseptic corridors long after  
the dinner trolley is gone and the dead have been moved  
to the morgue and after many months you will be back  
on the internet looking at courses again clicking on links  
and forgetting the password to your fucking paypal account  
and you will know in the small place that you are searching  
for a course that will turn you into a writer without  
actually having to write

and one morning,  
early, like say *four* o'clock you will open the eyes  
that suddenly dare to dream and you will know  
in the small place if you want to write what you must  
do is pick up your pen and press the nib against  
the paper in the writing pad which is not soft  
and thick and does not cost thirty seven dollars  
and you will have to do this for many hours and days  
and the earth will orbit the sun many times and eventually  
things will appear on the two dollar page you never  
thought possible and each time you sit down to write  
you will feel more and more like indiana jones and sometimes  
when you read back what you've written you will be amazed  
you could write something so good and it will feel like  
you had no hand in its making—and other times you will  
read back what you've written and you will be equally  
amazed—but it will be for very different reasons.

## **who's a pretty fucking boy then?**

how is your soul? your unleashed fears that too  
quickly filled the corners of your mind before  
the too fast river of them burst into alcoves  
and crannies you didn't even know you had and budgie  
mirrors on chains swung violently from side to side with the chaos  
of your terror spraying bird seed from here to hell  
as your worn out beak tapped out an SOS on the cuttle-  
fish of your confusion and the tiny bells tied  
to your cage tolled as your justified despair  
magnified through the +10 lenses of your tears  
spilled over and filled the room like an oversized  
elephant saying who's a pretty fucking  
boy then?