

FIGHT: A BAREKNUCKLE PLEDGE

ROUND 2

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a poem as big

A poem as big
as any pandemic
and small as a virus
curled like a pangolin
packed as any cruise ship
reading itself in poised isolation
exercising with resistance bands
its well-crafted lines outside Centrelink
endless media frenzied updates
bushfires all but forgotten now
this poem turns so inwards
self-focused as a diary
a poem just for one
small as any virus
staves off panic

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Sonset

There's a slit
in the couch's red fabric
and its white stuffing stares
at me from across the living
room.

Nanna emerges
from the kitchen with a plate
of Scotch Fingers and a glass of green cordial
offers me both
grabs her own and together
we wash down the sins
of her son
in silent unison.

(Neither of my parents are
in the country right
now but I'm seventeen
years too young to understand
which half of that
I'm sad about.

) I tell Nanna
around a mouthful of Scotch
Fingers about the recurring dream
of expanding clouds of white
that spill from the couch's open
wound and swallow
the living room
whole.

She tells me to drink
up and I lift
a glass of Scotch
to my mouth with green
fingers
tell her I don't know
whether I'm more afraid of staying
in that dream or
waking up.

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A decade from now
the gentle voice on
the other side of the suicide hotline
will tell me that eighty percent
of children with at least one
alcoholic parent will turn
to drinking themselves.
I don't know why
that feels more like
claustrophobia than victory
 don't know whether this home's
open wound is more
eye or mouth
 whether I'm more afraid of being
 seen or swallowed.

In that dream
the couch's white intestines pl u m e
like a mushroom cloud into the
vacuum of this home
 calls me son
but I don't rise
only set into its darkness
tuck myself behind that
fog of fatherhood
like a shirt pocket
try to hack pieces of it
off but its hydra
flesh only grows
back
faster.

And Dad's pouring
scotch into the green cordial
and I want to offer it to
the couch's gaping mouth
 want to cut
one thousand eyes
into the red fabric
just so I can
close them again
 want to
b l e e d a l l o v e r i t
 so everyone
 and no one
would know

I was here.

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They call this a living
room but this is
where the boy comes to die
—nothing quite like a boy to remind you
of all the things a man
ain't.

The last time I was
in that room my
father passed out across
the full length of that couch
: I don't know how many
open mouths lay hidden
beneath him.

I next saw him two years
later at Nanna's funeral as
they lowered her
into the open mouth of
the Earth's red fabric
: I hope she didn't have to carry
too much of him
with her

a hundred hundred mouths holding
a hundred hundred bodies
their white stuffing overflow
ing

like heirlooms
like a garden in spring
for all the ways a graveyard
and a living
room are one
and the same
—nothing quite like a boy to sacrifice
to make way for a man

so call me graveyard born
call me winter mourn
ing breath
call me in the eye of the storm.

'cause I don't know whether
I am that expanding cloud
or the boy
in its wake
don't know how
many times you can cut
into a thing
before they stop being wounds
but simply the thing itself
—nothing quite like a man to learn

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how to hate itself
so tell me Dad
 what language will talk
 my way out of this flesh?
 what abrasion syntax must I learn
 to call this

Home?

I used to dream I was falling
and would hate when I woke up
 would flail my arms like breaststroke
to stay afloat in that white cloud
to swim toward some distant
shore that calls me son
even though I don't shine through it
am only p u l led underneath
 through an ocean of green cordial
 through Nanna's cupped palms
 through a childhood
 living
 room
 across red fabric
by Scotch
Fingers.

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Cement Mix

My father had feet
hard like concrete
, would brag tales of gravelled paths
 tread over
and in the same stride
 step over
a wife
and three kids.

My father knew
how to worship coarse skin
and bruise soft ones
, held a heavy-handed heart
the kind of cinderblock love
only a man could know
how to offer
 —this man
gifted with an iron grip
 : how careless must he have been
 to let a whole family slip
 between his fingers?

And on the cold tiles of
a broken home
what strength was a seven-year-old
boy supposed to find to
pull things back
together?
 What terrible adhesive
 a childhood makes.

And when I was thirteen
and my grandmother asked
if the bruises around my neck
were love-bites
I—should—have—told—her
that a father's love bites
down
hard
like an alligator
and I swear this one could have
s t r e t c h e d h i s j a w wide enough
to swallow me whole

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would have washed down the aftertaste
of parenthood with another drink
—and a throat is not a carry handle

Dad

this is not the correct way
to hold a child

Dad

lifting a boy above your head
does not suffice for
raising a son.

And these feet are
not concrete jungles like yours

Dad

they are feet
and they cut on the glass of
the family portrait you shattered
: won't you let me down easy dad?
: won't you pick up after the mess you made?

I've been told I come from
a generation of men raised
by their mothers and I
only wish I had been
so lucky
only wish the
cement mixer of manhood
made for a better foundation
and if I stacked myself high enough
what kind of man
would I become?
What love is to be found
on the pavement of fatherhood?
Do all boys' feet harden
when scorched
this way?

I hold my hands out
palms upturned

—mother
please
lend me your shoes.

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two prayers

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I wrote psalms about the way you looked at me.
chanted to the moon for your favor.
I carved my lips into the likes of your mirror..

You weren't a poem until I made you one.
I was-
praying for you while you were preying on me.
we were never the same,

And today,
I am not sure if I am atheist
because of religion as a whole
or
because you had become my God.

Either way,
last night I had a dream.
that demons could only be casted out by speaking in tongues.
&that you were still dripping off my skin.

swinging moods under the same lamp light we made love under.

&when I woke up.

I missed you.
(amen)

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II.

I never stopped asking the sky to bless your face.
Your eyes- the softest hue of timid.
Your hair- stretching wildflowers in bloom.

Your cheeks- rose petals.

Or

When you look at me, I can't seem to shake the thorn inside my throat.

I still want you to smile,
Even if the sun has left my eyes.

I still want you to grow,
Even if it is a different direction from me.

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Old Man Pain

In a body that often malfunctions
I carry pain
as a grizzled old man wrapped around my shoulders
sometimes heavy
sometimes light
but always with me
pinning my wings.
I visit alternative pains to escape the familiar
new pains
of my own choosing
a piercing
a tattoo
my own teeth
digging into my skin
or
full immersion
lending my body to be tied and twisted
sharp nails scoring down my back
belt snaps across my behind
firm fingers
curled around my throat
tighter
tighter
ready to release at my signal
but I send none
because this is the pain that I choose
a fortress from my constant companion
tight around my shoulders
pulling
dragging his heels
clutching my wings when I desperately want to soar
But I refuse to be earthbound
determined not to let pain define me
I hurl battered self into the air
crash to earth
rise again
and though fresh bruises bloom
and passenger clings tight
With awkward grace
I fly

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The Gorge: Launceston, Tasmania

Beginning

She sits on a bridge with her sister,
legs dangle over as the flowing water below
froths with the white spit of mouths,
teasing her to jump.

She buys an ice cream from the cafe
with two-dollar coins –
not called Toonies –
big 50 cent pieces heavy in her pocket.
Gorging without guilt for once,
her spine and ribs blanketed
by a hug of softness,
her feet feel heavier,
and she grounds herself to this place,
digging in bare heel, then toe.

Middle

She sits on a chairlift with a man,
legs hovering over the shapes of ducks and green grass.
Holding then unclasping clammy hands,
Hoping this is the place she should be,
with the right person.
The wind shakes the seat.

“Get me out!” but she and he are over the basin.
The tourists are taking pictures of peacocks below.
He hugs her tightly, asks if she’s okay.
It feels like a strait jacket.

Now, a pool of water - they float.
No legs: just two glowing jellyfish.
Laughter is shaking the dark ink,
tilting the world on its axis.
He clings with tentacles,
as not to spill onto the grass
with the droppings and night-time dew.
Hair wet and stringy,
she could have tied it in a bow
and gifted herself to him then.
Above them, the stars swirl like cream in coffee,
taunting: make a wish.
They reflect galaxies on their translucent, squishy bodies.
She’s tripping over meteors to get away from him.

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End

Everyone always holds their breath
until it falls.

Okay they're right, there's always more to tumble out to surprise,
but she deserves to keep something to herself,
squeezing a love so tight it turns into a diamond.

Walking in silence over streams,
mud, roots that cling to the ground,
she bends down to inspect the fungi:
black, orange and red.
Jumping into cold waterfalls,
her lungs constrict, gasping like
a newborn as her head breaks the water.
She tastes bush tucker:
briny sea spinach and sweet pigface fruit;
trekking along the coast on trails, boots full of sand,
she smokes cigarettes under the stars - *what would Dad say?*

She sits on the edge of her mind,
tying a string around everything that happened,
trying to weave it into something:
A spiderweb, a ball of yarn, a story with a beginning, middle, end.
Or just tying that string around her finger,
a reminder of why she came back.
People always ask when she's leaving.

At the end - she's present.
She hovers over that heart shaped state.
Her lips quiver to imagine the day.
How many bottles of Tamar Valley wine will it take
to scrape herself away from that gorge
with the bridge, and the chairlift, and the pool at night?

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You won't go to Italy

I'm what they call grasping at straws:
two hands full of them from the cardboard box
upstairs in the office; I'm filling up that little black
plastic holder for you.

You remember those kids at the restaurant
while you stood behind the bar?
They were grabbing straws, wasting them.
Didn't they know those things were murderous?
Poor sea creatures, poor ocean full of plastic.
You met my eye through a circular peephole and knew
these damned straws had me fuming.

I can see black plastic, shiny, smooth, deadly
but what's on the other side?
Is it us hugging in an alleyway?
It is me running a red light on the way to yours?
Is it you, snoring loudly; a freight train in the night,
warning me to *get the fuck out*?

I've always thought we should get rid of straws completely.
We only put straws in cocktails for women; perhaps
it is to restrain them.
Sip, be delicate, don't drink it all too quickly.
Take it slow.
It's my duty to say no.
It's my duty to stop on the yellow,
precisely on the line,
hands on the steering wheel at 10 and 2,
foot on the brake, eyes on the road,
don't run the red.

I prefer tequila in a shot glass.
I want it all and I want it *now*.

I think I pulled the short straw somehow –
I saw them there - on your coffee table
laid out bare beside one another.
I thought we'd agreed to pull equal straws in the end.
That we were friends.
When did you cut them?

There was a Sunday,
with your head leaning back on the couch,
my legs swung over you,
my underwear under only a jacket -

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you said you were moving to Italy
to write and drink wine all day.
What happened?

And before that Sunday, in the office
with the cardboard boxes of straws,
you hovering over me - there was a word
on your tongue. I could almost taste it -
but then it was gone, swallowed back.

Why don't you ever say what you want to say?
Why don't you ever say anything?

And now, the last straw.
It sits in the black plastic dispenser on the bar.
I'm not filling it anymore. My hands are empty.
You can do it yourself.
You, standing there, eyes lowered,
blubbering bow lips pursed, swollen now -
you look more like a fish than a man:
straw stuck
in belly.

You won't go to Italy.

You won't do anything spectacular.
You'll sit and smoke on that couch
in your backyard with some other girl,
one you'll think you love
for a few weeks.

You have the last straw. Keep it.
I touch my lips to the glass,
take a sip, and it's never tasted
so fucking good.

Keep the last straw;
you'll be the one trying to peer through.

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STRONG SUGGESTIONS

Let's touch all of the paintings
 until they kick us out of the museum.

Let's run naked through the woods
 until the stinging nettles skin us from ankle to kneecap.

Let's mark our territory with a beer piss
 that would knock the paint off a lamp post.

Let's take all the world's glass eyes and play marbles
 until someone wins Sammy Davis Jr's.

Let's replace all pacifiers with cannabis edibles
 and expand young minds.

Let's take control of the anarchy
 and set the bar for the kids.

Let's melt every candle in every Catholic church
 and mold a wax sculpture called the Devil's Cumshot.

Let's dig up and rip open all the time capsules
 before aliens extract them from a war-charred earth.

Let's DVR our dreams, screen them at red-carpet galas,
 and save all our nightmares for the Grand Old Party.

Let's pump that hard bop into the atmosphere nonstop,
 anything by Mingus or Monk will do.

Let's howl at the sickle moon,
 because the full moon gets all the glory

Let's replace all the bullets with French ticklers.
 Ready, aim, orgasm!

Let's wake the horses, ride them hard into the decaying sunrise
 like we were riddled with poison arrows.

Let's befriend the ghosts who eternally waltz to broken Victrolas
 and make forever bearable.

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