**Equinox**

By [Matt Rubinstein](http://www.mattrubinstein.com/)
November 16, 2004

[1] 22/9

A harbour city lies becalmed
at midday on the equinox.
City and citizens are charmed
to silence by a paradox:
that time’s unending arc, which flows
between eternal highs and lows,
is built of fragments so discrete
that their extremities don’t meet.
Between these bounds, the air is warm
as blood. The sky, half-cloud, half-clear,
shows equal parts of hope and fear.
The times and tides reflect the norm:
an average day of average days
proceeding on its means and ways.

[2] 23/9

Today the Sydney Morning Herald
has very little to report:
no wars, no coups, no lives imperilled,
and just a smattering of sport.
Fortune has beamed upon the city,
removing it from care and pity
(no lives disrupted, no blood spilt),
but makes a fairly meagre quilt
for Arthur as he tries to sleep
beneath the much-depleted paper.
Watching the daylight dim and taper,
watching the pinholed curtain creep
across the sky, he knots his scarf
and adds a sheet of Telegraph.

[3] 24/9

Now morning floods across White Bay
and traffic hurtles past the gym
that Arthur guards: a castaway,
ragged among the tanned and trim.
Marooned two years on this deserted
peninsula, he’s disconcerted
whenever bleary daylight finds him,
for every dawning day reminds him
of better days—before his fall.
He never thought that he might drown
when moving from his smaller town,
but now it pains him to recall
the moment when he stepped beyond
the beaches of this biggest pond.

[4] 25/9

Each morning, Arthur meets a chorus
of sirens, foghorns, engines, birds
and dockside workers—a thesaurus
of onomatopoeic words.
The splutters, splashes, rustles, rumours,
hushes and hums disrupt his humours.
The roars and rattles, clangs and clatters
and twitters tear his sleep to tatters.
A foreman megaphones a warning.
Shipping containers swing and drop.
A lorry’s air-brakes hiss and pop,
and car-horns argue. Every morning,
on waking, Arthur feels his head
and chuckles if he’s still not dead.

[5] 26/9

Each morning, he collects his hoard
into two sturdy shopping sacks:
a roll of foam, a Scrabble board,
a hip-flask and some candle wax,
some cigarettes to share or trade,
a roll of bandage for first-aid,
a dozen bootleg pantihose,
a beanie coloured for the Crows.
He slings the bags across a pole
and hefts his personal estate
across his shoulders, where its weight
feels comfortable and makes him whole.
Secured, he sets out with his yoke
to mingle with the city-folk.

[6] 27/9

Each night at sunset he returns
to White Bay as it shifts and blurs
and fades to shadow. Arthur spurns
shelters and hostels, and prefers
that nobody at Talbot knows him—
he doesn’t feel this city owes him
a bed, or anything at all.
In fact, he finds St Vince de Paul
the most bewildering of places:
the catalogue of whispered dangers,
the huddles of exclusive strangers
with grimacing, unfriendly faces
and stone-cold shoulders—it’s enough
to drive a man to sleeping rough.

[7] 28/9

At night, the blazing skyline scorches
restless reflections in the water.
A precipice of tungsten torches
drifts on a hulking car transporter.
Each night, another day has passed,
and none too different from the last.
The search for food and entertainment:
seek succour, and avoid arraignment,
then homeward as the light grows old.
In all, a passable existence
between the tide-marks of subsistence,
perhaps forever—but it’s cold,
and Arthur shivers as he slips
asleep among the passing ships.

[8] 29/9

Suspended voices fade from merry
to melancholy, and the chatter
grows quiet as the night’s last ferry
makes weary up the Parramatta.
Workers return with spirits sunk
and drinkers find themselves undrunk
and soon forget they ever drank.
The mansions on the riverbank
drift past like glowing honeycomb.
As couples clean up after dinner
and go to bed, the lights grow thinner.
Joanna can’t wait to get home:
when Charles Street wharf looms in the dark,
when she can shout, “All disembark!”

[9] 30/9

At dawn, she cracks her last two eggs.
Watching them whiten in the pan,
she pours her orange juice’s dregs
and calls, “Are you awake, old man?”
Her blonde hair is tied back. She’s tall
and has to stoop: the kitchen’s small
and somewhat stingy on the headroom.
She gets no answer from the bedroom,
but when she enters, Stan’s awake
(though bleary-eyed, unwashed, unshaven),
hidden among a hurried haven
of pillows. “Dad, for heaven’s sake,”
she urges: “Aren’t you getting up?”
Stan takes the tray and mutters, “Nup.”

[10] 1/10

“And what about today?” asks Jo
across this morning’s jam and toast.
Stan smiles at her: “You never know.
Later perhaps. An hour at most.”
“Don’t you have work?” “One job. It’s small.
Soon there’ll be nothing left at all.”
Joanna frowns. “What will you do?”
“I thought I’d sleep the morning through.
At lunchtime there’s TV to watch....”
Jo shakes her head and backs away,
but not before she hears him say,
“...This afternoon I’ll drink some scotch.”
She tells herself it’s just a phase,
but it’s been going on for days.

[11] 2/10

Riding the emerald waves to Manly,
working the good ship Collaroy,
she can’t distract her thoughts from Stanley.
Her father, as a handyboy,
was (she’s been told) both proud and mulish,
and, stubborn to the point of foolish,
refused to work for other men.
Not very much has changed since then.
A small-time handyman out West,
intransigently self-employed,
he’s lately growing paranoid
that his kind may have obsolesced—
and Jo’s afraid that fortune might
be labouring to prove him right.

[12] 3/10

But Sunday on the harbour leaves
no room for these mundane concerns.
The Friendship sparkles as she weaves
from shore to shore; the Fishburn churns
the water into mist. When Charlotte
cries, “Lady Herron is a harlot!”
Supply is shocked, but Alexander
is quite delighted with her candour.
The clear spring sky, the sun, the flurries
of spinnakers towards the sea,
the Bridge and Opera House and Quay
revive Joanna as she hurries
from Watson’s Bay to Sydney Cove,
a deckhand on the Golden Grove.

[13] 4/10

She pulls the gangplank from the wharf
and twists the hawser to a rail.
They skirt the MV Düsseldorf
and tugboats: steam gives way to sail,
but everyone gives way to liners.
This morning’s passengers are whiners.
One grumbles, “I’ll be late for work.”
Beneath her breath, Jo mutters: “Jerk.”
Morning and night, she ferries suits
from city jobs to home addresses
seething with salaried successes
where Jo’s own family had roots
until the suburbs curled and died
(officially, “were gentrified”).

[14] 5/10

At six o’clock, the Quay is quiet.
The city breaks a clammy sweat
of dew. The doorman at the Hyatt
exhales a lonely cigarette,
billowing bravely in the dark.
Some bums are sleeping in the park.
The ferry wharves smell sharp and sour.
The sole advantage of the hour
is that it lets Joanna think
that Stan, asleep in bed, is rather
like everybody else’s father.
Searching the sky for hints of pink
she shrugs her jacket close, feels surly,
and wonders who’d be up so early.

[15] 6/10

Outside the MCA, Natasha
waits for the day’s first 431.
She’s tired. An early morning flasher
attempts an open-coated run.
She shouts, “I know it’s cold, but that’s
ridiculous!” A cloud of bats
flaps overhead to the Domain.
She feels a drop or two of rain.
Things are confusing and disjointed.
Her feet are sore. Her ears are ringing.
Her throat is dry and strained from singing.
She’s lost a heel, and been anointed
with vodka at least once tonight.
And, worst of all, it’s getting light.

[16] 7/10

Now, late again, the crowds are thinning.
The strobes are looking pale and wan,
the music muted. Nat’s beginning
to wonder where her friends have gone.
There’s Barry in the corner, snoring,
and Debbie’s in the toilet, scoring
either a line or a linebacker.
Nat’s dancing as a well-dressed slacker
approaches with: “I’ve lost my number...
do you have one that I can borrow?”
She twinkles: “I’ll be here tomorrow,”
and spins away, beyond the slumber
enveloping the nightclub crowd:
alone, electric, laughing, loud.

[17] 8/10

It’s Friday night. The music’s pumping.
The air is full of smoke and noise.
On Oxford Street the crowds are jumping
like overheated clockwork toys.
They slam and flail; they stomp and pogo.
At retro clubs they wake and go-go.
Some spin and flip like acrobats.
And somewhere near the centre, Nat’s
enraptured by successive waves
of tone and rhythm. Bearing gifts
the music enters her, and lifts
her body on its twisting staves.
She dances with a wraith of air
as those around her stop and stare.

[18] 9/10

Before she sets alight the floor,
Natasha works behind the bar.
She likes to mix and shake and pour,
ignore philanderers, and spar
flirtatiously with lucky locals
(gay dentists squinting through bifocals;
her girlfriends’ boyfriends). She can warm up,
using the time to get her form up,
feeling the music build inside her.
The policy that staff don’t dance
with patrons never stood a chance,
and no one has, to date, denied her
the right to leap the bar at one
and conjure the returning sun.

[19] 10/10

Sunday’s a day like all the rest,
another equal episode
far from the worst, far from the best.
Nat takes the bus up Glebe Point Road,
past calloused feet and matted hair
and medieval underwear,
past students gummy-eyed from dope
and legions of the antipope.
She loves its plain and hidden quirks,
its freaks and families, old-timers
and upward-mobile social climbers,
so near and far from where she works.
Her dancing feet may nightly roam
but always bring her gladly home.

[20] 11/10

At home, Natasha’s getting dressed.
Her hair is straight and dark, and falls
protectively about her chest.
She wears a skirt and what she calls
her “you-don’t-get-to-fuck-me” boots.
“Enhance your natural attributes,”
she mutters to her push-up bra,
putting it on. “Ah, there you are.”
A suitable décolletage,
foundation, lipstick and mascara
and (just for fun) a glass tiara
complete this evening’s camouflage.
She nods, approving her reflection:
a mask of bulletproof perfection.

[21] 12/10

Natasha wakes as night is falling,
and wanders, half-dressed, to Glebe Point.
The traffic is already crawling
to some kebab or pizza joint.
Looking across Blackwattle Bay,
a latticework of cable-stay
between two Anzac wishbones bears
twin streams of red and golden flares
between two aspects of the freeway.
The park is filled with lonely hearts.
Nat has a while before work starts
and takes advantage of this leeway
to gaze across the speckled waves
where rusting hulks await their graves.

[22] 13/10

Looking across the bay, the eye
is tricked by column-painted silos
where billboards urge the world to buy
selected goods from certain Bi-Los.
Beyond the bridge, Glebe Island teems
with grids of cars—and Arthur dreams
behind the silhouettes of cranes,
beneath the lights of stars and planes.
He dreams his body is suspended,
immobilised in thickened air.
Falling from panic to despair,
he thinks, asleep, “It’s time this ended.”
He kicks and reels and tries to shake
the shadows—but he cannot wake.

[23] 14/10

Glenn, in a late-night taxi, sees
the man asleep behind the gym,
lit by a flash of streetlight. He’s
convinced that he’s encountered him
somewhere before, but doesn’t know
the reason for his thinking so.
Where would he meet a Sydney bum?
Some street or railway station? Some
request for change that he’s assented
or disregarded? He can’t say.
The cab continues on its way
to Glenn’s dilapidated, rented
one-storey terrace in Balmain;
he doesn’t think of it again.

[24] 15/10

Glenn spends his days at desk and easel
battling with deadlines and typesetters
to raise “Unleaded”, “Leaded”, “Diesel”
and “LPG” in foot-high letters
at every Ampol in the land.
His steady and well-practised hand
grew out of painting and cartooning:
combined with mathematic tuning
(affinity with curve and arc,
function, proportion, set and sine)
his rational, romantic line
is almost sure to make its mark
at Marshall, Marmaduke & Mates.
Until it does, Glenn works and waits.

[25] 16/10

Past midnight, Glenn’s still working, waiting.
Tonight’s cascade of urgent jobs
discloses no sign of abating.
The other, older office slobs
are sinking pints at Irish pubs
or crashing trendy city clubs
with hundred-dollar bills to bouncers.
The late-night radio announcers
are now Glenn’s only live companions
as he reads yet another memo
demanding yet another demo:
they ride with him through lonely canyons
of crossbars, pixels, points and serifs
abandoned by absconding sheriffs.

[26] 17/10

Glenn rises, rested but still full
of sleep, on Sunday afternoon.
He hopes that he won’t have to pull
another all-night effort soon.
Since starting work at Mates, he’s kept
such melancholic hours, and slept
so little, that he isn’t sure
quite what sustains him anymore.
Perhaps a job in mathematics
would have provided better pace;
would it be better to embrace
the artist’s life of bread and attics?
Perhaps Glenn’s choice was muddle-witted,
but now it’s too late: he’s committed.

[27] 18/10

It’s not too bad. He wouldn’t trade
all the late nights and early deadlines
for living back in Adelaide
with all its sleepy small-town headlines
(“Football game won! New pie invented!”).
Intolerably discontented
with life as dole-bludger or waiter,
he had to leave. Now, six months later,
at least he’s squandering his talents
instead of leaving them to waste.
Although he feels, at times, displaced,
he also feels he’s found a balance
disrupted by a single failure:
Rebecca’s still in South Australia.

[28] 19/10

He calls her almost every day,
and though his work devours his time
he’s never short of things to say.
“How’s the Ironic Paradigm?”
he asks about Rebecca’s thesis,
enchanted by her exegesis.
“I haven’t read your letter yet.
I’m working on my alphabet.
I’m thinking I should eat more bran.”
He calls at work when time permits:
“Sorry, I can’t talk now—the shit’s
already halfway to the fan!”
Sometimes there’s phone sex (“First, I kiss you...”),
but three words dominate: “I miss you”.

[29] 20/10

The ferry wharf at Darling Street,
half-sunk at high tide, shifts and groans
beneath the weight of shuffling feet
boarding the Borrowdale. Glenn phones
Rebecca on his mobile: “When
do you think you’ll be here again?
I haven’t seen you since I moved...
I can’t—until things have improved—”
The distance reaches out and chokes him.
The ferry sluices on its way,
slapping the waves: a sheet of spray
rises across the bow and soaks him.
Glenn curses as the mobile dies;
Joanna smiles and rolls her eyes.

[30] 21/10

She scans the foreshore for the place
her great-grandfather planned and built
from local stone and iron lace
before a tide of debt and guilt
washed him forever up the river.
He had to sell the house, deliver
his shipyard to a grim receiver
and move out West. Some basket-weaver
now calls Joanna’s birthright home—
but how delicious it would be
to resurrect that legacy:
to throw out hangings, crystals, gnome
and all the squatters, and reclaim
her castle in her father’s name.

[31] 22/10

But that will take both time and money.
For now, she stays where she’s been banished,
far from the promised milk and honey.
Her house is empty: Stanley’s vanished.
The television set is cold;
his half-drunk cup of coffee’s old.
He isn’t on the couch, or lurking
in the back yard: he must be working!
Joanna skips from room to room,
feeling her withered hopes reflower
and smelling in each passing hour
the scent of an averted doom—
until she meets the stench of beer
and, some time later, Stanley’s here.

[32] 23/10

Next morning he explains: “I thought
that if I’m going to be a loser—
there’s no point arguing—I ought
to spend some more time down the boozer.
And if I’m going to do it right
I should be down there every night.”
Jo’s flabbergasted. “Dad, you can’t—”
“You’re sounding like my sainted aunt.
This is the perfect thing for me.
I’ve met some great new mates. Time passes
more speedily between the glasses.
and every seventh drink is free!”
He takes his hat and wallet, then
walks out the door: it’s half-past ten.

[33] 24/10

Jo doesn’t have to work today,
but, disappointed and distracted,
she rides the ferries anyway.
The nervous shimmer of refracted
sunlight reflects her state of mind.
The other deckhands, long resigned
to dealing with Joanna’s moods,
indulge her silent interludes.
They’ve seen her sigh and drift and moon,
a melancholy figurehead
draping the prow with thoughts unsaid,
and know that she’ll be talking soon.
They leave to wave and wind and water
the worries of her father’s daughter.

[34] 25/10

And, sure enough, the wheelhouse deck
provides a confidant tonight.
“O Captain—help me. I’m a wreck,”
she says, proceeding to recite
her wretchedness to Captain Steele,
who creases brow and clutches wheel
and says, “Despite all vitriol,
the careful use of alcohol
combined with nurture and support
is not condemned by current thinking.
How long since Stanley started drinking?”
“Three or four days.” “That’s only short.
He’ll be all right. There’s nothing to it.
Just stick around and see him through it.”

[35] 26/10

The night before her late-shift start,
Jo takes Stan drinking in the city.
Emotion weighs upon her heart:
not disapproval, much less pity,
but some concern at Stanley’s thirst,
his joy as he becomes immersed
in alcohol. They both get drunk.
Stan tells a joke about a monk
ordering at a hotdog stand,
laughing the whole way through. He’s happy.
Their conversation’s fast and snappy.
The evening goes just as she’d planned,
but Jo’s alert, and counts her beers
should happiness give way to tears.

[36] 27/10

Tonight they’ve chosen Taylor Square,
but Stan’s half pickled when they meet.
“Jo, there you are. I thought we’d share
some cocktails as a special treat.
I worked this morning, so I’m flush.”
“Dad, let’s go home.” “Why? What’s the rush?”
“It’s all this drink—can we afford it?”
“Why, this is no time for an audit!
What do you want? I’ll have another!”
Joanna’s resolution teeters
between two lemon margaritas
(“I used to drink these with your mother!”)
and though her faith in Stan is stronger,
she hopes that this won’t last much longer.

[37] 28/10

Natasha spends her time observing
the spectrum of relationships
among the customers she’s serving:
the couple welded at the lips,
the models with the same fake tan,
the blonde girl with the older man
who drank expensive drinks till closing,
the losers who end up proposing
marriage to her. She likes these least
because she has to get involved:
she’s seen too much; she’s long resolved
never to let herself be fleeced
by letting anyone’s persuasion
anywhere near her life’s equation.

[38] 29/10

Instead, she watches from a distance,
a step removed. Her friends rely
implicitly on her assistance—
to pour a liquid lullaby
or counsel in a bathroom stall
or answer any late-night call
by leaping in a late-night cab.
She’ll listen to her girlfriends’ gab
with equanimity and poise,
and gives relationship advice
(careful, constructive and concise)
to overwrought and wistful boys—
but she’s determined to deter
any analysis of her.

[39] 30/10

Enough of that. There’s work to do.
Natasha takes a stack of coasters
and wanders with a pot of glue
to decorate the bar with posters
of black cats, witches, phantoms, ghouls
and maniacs with power tools.
The owner-manager, John Stanton,
has changed his name to Jack O’Lantern.
He balances a pumpkin head,
preparing for tomorrow night,
when every spectre, spook and sprite
and member of the living dead
will vie to be the king or queen
of Oxford Street this Hallowe’en.

[40] 31/10

The night arrives. The bar is crowded
with cats and corpses; banshees wail
and harpies howl. Natasha’s shrouded
in gossamer, and deathly pale:
the victim of a recent murder.
Behind her opalescent purdah
the shadows of her body writhe,
bewitching, bending, liquid, lithe.
An attitude of ancient sadness,
as if both heart and back were broken,
reveals a story which, if spoken,
would drive the listener to madness.
The dance floor watches as she wrings
her hands, and shivers as she sings.

[41] 1/10

All Saints’ Day breaks, and Nat recovers,
abandoning her grim demeanour.
She watches tangled pairs of lovers
with charity, and buys the cleaner
a palette of his favourite schnapps.
She spends the night in fitful laps,
past zombie, changeling, monk and mourner,
carefully skirting past the corner
where deadly nightshade substitutes
for mistletoe. Her friends are here.
They gather round as dawn draws near
and drape her head with frogs and newts,
give her a nose of plasticine
and, raising hands, pronounce her queen.

[42] 2/11

The back page of tomorrow’s paper
is livened by Natasha’s photo.
Framed by a cumulus of vapour
it shows her regal form in toto:
each stretch of skin; each shrouded curve.
Nat thinks they have a lot of nerve
reporting on her coronation
with such unsubtle titillation.
Abandoning her garments gaily
is fine at work among her friends,
but none would say that this extends
to posing in a metro daily.
That said, she sees herself half-clad
and thinks she doesn’t look half bad.

[43] 3/11

Natasha’s photograph is creased
and folded, sitting on Glenn’s desk.
This empress of the Inner East—
aristocratic, statuesque—
embodies Glenn’s dissatisfaction.
An irresistible attraction
for her, her friends, her life, her scene
infects him, but his Hallowe’en
was spent, depressingly, right here.
His former unabashed ambition
is suffering a slow attrition,
and, in its place, a growing fear
that lifelong manacles and chains
will weigh his limbs and crush his brains.

[44] 4/11

His mind progresses through a playlist
of yearning, loneliness and lust.
He looks upon the city’s A-list
with supercilious disgust
(and, being such a staunch idealist,
he wouldn’t touch the city’s B-list)
but envies them their glowing lives,
their trophy husbands, wealthy wives
(as commonly as vice is versa),
their days and nights of public pleasure
and—most of all—their hours of leisure.
He curses his computer cursor
for making him its wretched slave,
pointing it pointlessly at “Save”.

[45] 5/11

But, if not bound against his will,
and free to flee his underground
confines at any time, he’d still
remain deliberately bound.
His dedication to Rebecca,
glad as it is, can’t help but chequer
his introduction to the city.
Sydney’s notoriously pretty:
although Bec’s certainly pre-empted
the chance of romance with a local
(on which he’s vehement and vocal),
in truth, he’d rather not be tempted.
Natasha’s picture casts a spell,
but frightens him to death as well.

[46] 6/11

Glenn doodles to express his thoughts:
his scraps and pads and notebooks read
like psychological reports.
Today Rebecca is his seed:
her slender body, spiky hair,
the T-shirts and the Docs she’d wear,
her green eyes rendered as black dots.
But things evolve each time he jots
another version of her figure:
she wears a haughtier expression,
an attitude of self-possession
and sexiness; her breasts are bigger.
She flashes Glenn an evil smirk,
dancing, inch-high, around his work.

[47] 7/11

Whenever his attention wanders,
he finds himself compelled to draw
her figure by his Cokes and Hondas.
She’s not Rebecca anymore
but someone else of his creation.
She’s captured his imagination:
she pouts and poses, wields a popgun
and recreates a scene from Top Gun.
She owes a fair bit to Natasha:
a solo girl who loves to dance
and doesn’t give a second chance.
She’s rebel, dissident, gatecrasher.
She’ll leap through windows, dance on roofs
and strut across Glenn’s final proofs.

[48] 8/11

Glenn falls into the sand at Bronte.
Last night he finally completed
his elegy to three-card monte:
today he’s battered and defeated,
but has a day off to recover.
The beach is like a long-lost lover,
protecting him from care and duty,
surrounding him with warmth and beauty.
He grinds his face and shuts his eyes.
The sun beats down, and in his head
he’s sleeping in Rebecca’s bed,
feeling the smoothness of her thighs.
He drifts off as his restless hand
draws lazy figures in the sand.

[49] 9/11

This morning, Martin Mates himself
is standing outside Glenn’s workstation,
browsing the contents of his shelf.
“My most sincere congratulation!”
he offers with his usual thrift.
“I loved your girl—you’ve got a gift!
The three-card monte people hate it—
it’s not their image—but I rate it!”
He takes Glenn’s hand and shakes with vigour,
handing him back the Monte File.
Glenn stares in shock: it takes a while
to understand his wayward figure
has found her way onto the plates
he’s handed in to Martin Mates.

[50] 10/11

Glenn lunches with a major client
high on the forty-second floor,
feeding him drinks to keep him pliant.
“Glenn’s masterpiece is perfect for
your alcoholic ginger beer,”
Mates murmurs in the client’s ear.
“She could be the next Fido Dido—
famous from Hobart to Hokkaido!”
The brewer’s face contracts and hardens.
Glenn gazes out across the harbour,
the waves and wharves, the stretching arbour
of far-below Botanic Gardens:
he feels he’s dining with the gods.
At last, the brewer smiles and nods.

[51] 11/11

Arthur’s excursions have explored
a wealth of Sydney’s neighbourhoods:
the city’s twisted chequerboard,
the spices and grey-market goods
of Chinatown, at least three bridges,
the business district’s warps and ridges,
the freeways. He agrees with purists
that Darling Harbour’s just for tourists,
but condescends to Cockle Bay.
He knows the city’s steel and stone:
its skeleton feels like his own,
familiar. But until today,
lost in a maze of urban darklands,
he hasn’t known the city’s parklands.

[52] 12/11

Botanic Gardens and Domain
reach eagerly towards Hyde Park,
opening up a verdant vein,
tracing an interrupted arc
into the city’s sunless heart.
Its trees are few and far apart,
its open spaces torn to tatters,
but it’s got parkland where it matters.
And, thanks to Phillip’s intervention
two hundred years ago (a truce
to keep the land for public use)
its lifeblood has escaped attention
from urban planners, and bewilders
developers and high-rise builders.

[53] 13/11

Now Arthur wanders through the trees,
reads nameplates to improve his Latin,
and feels, at last, the city’s ease.
The stretching lawn, as smooth as satin,
supports a colony of readers
lazing beneath the native cedars.
Guarding its tranquil treasure trove
the sea wall circles round Farm Cove,
white with the sunlight’s mirrored glare,
holding in panoramic thrall
what progress may demand we call,
in future, Ms Macquarie’s Chair.
Art leans against the famous shelf
and feels contented with himself.

[54] 14/11

Exploring, he’s surprised to find
a battery of golf umbrellas,
the massive, multi-coloured kind
preferred by savvy city-dwellers.
Though some are tattered, too thin-skinned
to stand against the Sydney wind
and thrown away, some, whole though rotten,
must have been stolen or forgotten.
They seem to make a makeshift camp:
beneath them, dirty sleeping bags
and furniture derived from rags
are guarded by a cyclone lamp,
together with a shelf of books
and chessboard, missing only rooks.

[55] 15/11

Arthur’s a man who loves his friends,
but hasn’t had a chance to meet
with Sydneysiders yet. He tends
to be defensive on the street,
fearful of swindlers, cheats and scammers,
and trusting no-one. But the glamour’s
gone out of his secluded status:
after an overlong hiatus,
he misses being with the fellas.
He checks the camp, but it’s deserted;
so, disappointed and diverted,
he walks away from the umbrellas—
until a voice says, “What’s your hurry?
No, make yourself at home. I’m Murray.”

[56] 16/11

Murray’s a man of Arthur’s age.
Although his clothes are just as ragged,
he seems a wise, if fractured, sage:
his beard is combed; his teeth are jagged.
He bids Art welcome to the Starlight
Hotel. “Don’t mind the smell of marlite—
It’s fertiliser, as you’d know.
The view is grand; the rates are low.
As long as you remain outside
the definition of a structure,
they’ll let you stay—if not, they’ve fucked ya!”
He gestures at his home with pride:
“The finest hovel in the nation,
consistent with the legislation.”

[57] 17/11

Art whistles as he’s checking in.
He picks his keys up from the desk,
receives a complimentary tin
of beer, admires the picturesque
and unobstructed view his room
affords, and feels all trace of gloom
dissolving from his unyoked shoulders.
He fishes from progressive boulders,
talking with Murray, drinking, smoking,
greedily breathing in the air
and feeling like a millionaire.
He washes in the cove, backstroking
until his body richly aches
across the bobbing ferry-wakes.

[58] 18/11

At sunset, Jo’s surprised to see
across a sea of summer suits
that Stanley’s waiting at the Quay,
hopping between excited boots.
He beams: “I’ve waited here all day—
I knew you had to come this way.”
“You could have used the shore-to-ship,”
says Jo, beneath his eager grip.
“I know you thought I shouldn’t drink,
but maybe this will change your mind—
only by drinking could I find
my brand new job. I’m tickled pink!
I’m in the black! Buy up my stocks!
Next week I’m working on the docks!”

[59] 19/11

With every subsequent retelling
Stan’s story grows a little clearer.
Jo finds each encore more compelling.
It seems that, haunting The Chimera
(a pub on Parramatta Road),
Stan met a man: “My car’s been towed,”
he said. “I’ve left my wallet in it.
I need a phone for just a minute.”
Shaking, sweating “a bloody sauna”,
he begged of everyone in range
a petty coin or two in change
to use the payphone in the corner—
he’d asked about the hotel phone,
but: “Busted, mate. You’re on your own.”

[60] 20/11

The stranger wore a tie and collar,
unusual in a local pub
whose decor ranged from squat to squalor.
Absorbing a collective snub
from everyone who propped the bar,
he’d all but written off his car
when Stanley broke the silence: “Here.
And use the change to buy a beer.”
They got to drinking and to talking
and Stanley shouted round on round
until the cavalry was found.
“If not for you, I’d still be walking.”
He gave his card: “That’s me. I’m Norman.
You should come see me; I’m the foreman.”

[61] 21/11

The candy-striped container cranes
tower above White Bay, and dwarf
the visitors as Stan explains
the history of the working wharf.
“It’s Sydney’s oldest occupation,
and water is the town’s foundation.
The Market Wharf, the Rose Hill Packet—
even my grandpa’s shipyard racket,
which used to be just up the road....”
Stan dreams of hauling piles of dollars;
they listen to the clanks and hollers,
watching container ships unload:
the swinging boxes hypnotise
their leaden limbs, and seal their eyes.

[62] 22/11

This morning, as Joanna plies
the gleaming waters of Port Jackson,
each of the dockside’s cheerful cries
is Stanley’s, and each piercing klaxon
rewards him for a job well done.
Each loaded or unloaded tonne
is shifted by a single man.
Aotearoa and Japan
send vessels laden with his gifts
beneath the Bridge, each plimsoll line
straining beneath the sparkling brine.
She hears his laughter as he lifts
the cargo with one handy hand,
and swings it, dripping, to dry land.

[63] 23/11

At night, the floodlit cranes are looming
like huddled rows of sleeping giants.
Glenn’s customary cab comes zooming
around the bend, fresh from a client’s
engagement featuring martinis
and how to market string bikinis
(“They’ll sell themselves,” said Glenn, too weary
to listen to the client’s query).
He notices the empty bench
behind the neon of the gym,
recalls the bum, and misses him.
The mystery’s enough to wrench
his curiosity a second—
but not when bed and Bec have beckoned.

[64] 24/11

It’s after twelve: a little late,
and Glenn had vowed to be home sooner.
He kicks his shoes off, staggers straight
to bed, and curls beneath the doona,
holding the phone. He lets it ring,
now wanting more than anything
to hear Rebecca’s sleepy voice,
to tell her that he had no choice.
Each ring grows smaller and more quiet,
and each ring amplifies the distance
between them, mocking his persistence
in even daring to defy it.
She must be out, or else asleep.
He leaves his message at the beep.

[65] 25/11

At work, he finds his stocks are soaring:
the barrage of congratulation
is almost bordering on boring
as pilgrims finger his creation
and gush “She’s great!” or “Wow!” or “Dude—
you’ve got to draw her in the nude!”
They treat the ginger beer account
as if a sermon on the mount.
Glenn’s happy with himself, and flattered
by all this favour and attention—
“What, this old thing? No, please, don’t mention—”
as if the whole thing really mattered—
but his mind’s on a different track,
waiting for Bec to call him back.

[66] 26/11

She calls, at last, on Friday night.
Glenn’s instantly apologetic:
“I tried to catch you—” “It’s all right,”
Rebecca says. “I’ve been frenetic.
You won’t believe the week I’ve had—
this chapter’s driven me half-mad.
The Paradigm’s now Post-ironic—
or was, at least, till my demonic
computer wiped the fucking lot!
I bundled it into a cab
and rushed to the computer lab.
It had a stroke—some data clot—
so I’ve been causing quite a scene here.
It’s all right now. I wish you’d been here.”

[67] 27/11

She wishes? If Glenn had five cents
for every minute that he’s yearned
for distance to be less immense—
or ten cents every time he burned
to be with her—he’d buy a flight.
Homesickness hunts him every night,
making him hold his head and groan
whenever he hangs up the phone.
Although he knows he couldn’t stay there,
he wishes he could take time out:
enough to prove without a doubt
that everything was still okay there;
to make sure Becca wasn’t blue—
and let her reassure him too.

[68] 28/11

His small success has made it harder.
He’d gladly hold his failure close,
letting its drizzle damp his ardour—
but this invigorating dose
is something that he’d rather share.
Instead, he’s won at solitaire.
He winces at the Sunday heat,
kicking his toes at Darling Street.
The cafes and the pubs are teeming
with cosy groups of twos and threes
hanging to catch the Sunday breeze
together, and Glenn can’t help dreaming
of screaming in a stolen car
back home to Bec—so close, so far.

[69] 29/11

But all things pass. By Monday, Mates
has reasserted its position:
work fills Glenn’s time, and dominates
him comprehensively. His mission
is now to polish his creation:
she undergoes a strange translation
from character to corporate logo.
She’s ultra-modern and à gogo.
Her lines are thicker, angles surer:
she goes from sketchy work-in-progress
to beautiful, alarming ogress,
the mannequin of Glenn’s bravura.
He works her further every day;
at night, work smudges into play.

[70] 30/11

They book a table at the Basement
with vodka and potato wedges.
The band tonight is Hip Replacement;
the music seems to have no edges.
The bassist slows to treacle pace
and waltzes with his double bass,
cradling its neck with loving fingers,
stroking its strings. The music lingers
like heavy blossom in the air
as he sinks deeper in his solo.
Tugging the collar of his polo
he sweats and winces, unaware
of anything beyond the dance
of man and bass in mutual trance.

[71] 1/12

Tonight, the bassist and his group
return by popular demand,
mixing their trademark blue-note soup
whose fame and following have spanned,
in two short nights, two lengthy seasons.
The crowd has come for many reasons:
some like the smoke and hooded candles;
some come in search of office scandals;
some bite their lips as notes unravel
and tie themselves back into knots,
and some eat lamb with apricots.
But what would hasten Nat to travel
far from the march of Oxford Street
to hear this syncopated beat?

[72] 2/12

In short, she had to take a break.
For weeks, her bar’s been packed with punters
all dancing for Natasha’s sake,
adventurers and fortune-hunters
wanting to share a happy snap.
She’s put up with all kinds of crap
from talentless and drunken dancers,
propelling devastating answers
at countless ill-advised requests.
She’s done her best to keep her distance,
maintaining a well-armed resistance,
slapping the arms that nudge her breasts,
spraying cologne at the perspiring.
She doesn’t mind it, but it’s tiring.

[73] 3/12

It seems that word of mouth has spread,
with further help from fax and e-mail.
It seems the chance to bed or wed
an eligible, royal female
has been decided by consensus.
They come with various pretences
to Jack O’Lantern’s bar and club,
some costumed as Beelzebub,
some armoured head to toe in Prada,
some clearly missing their computers.
In all, a motley group of suitors,
each uglier, each trying harder
than anyone who came before,
laying their tributes on the floor.

[74] 4/12

Tonight, a stringer from the paper
has come to try and build a story.
Nat picks him for a barrel-scraper;
her friends have caught a glimpse of glory
and bustle to reveal their names.
“...And Nat we know,” he says. “I’m James.
What do you think about all this?”
“I think I have to take a piss,”
Nat answers, but on her return
she’s blinded by the camera-flash
and finds her friends, for drinks or cash,
have told him all there is to learn
from infancy to adulthood,
assuring her it’s for her good.

[75] 5/12

The story’s in the Sunday rag.
Natasha gets her own subtitle
(“This Queen of Hallowe’en’s no hag!”)
within a slavering recital
of Sydney’s Bachelors and Babes,
in which rust-ravaged astrolabes
are set against the rising stars
of Sydney’s brasseries and bars:
In days of old we called them brats;
now everybody wants to be them.
Visit the right spots and you’ll see them:
they’re Sydney’s new aristocrats,
and everyone, it seems, is pleading
to get a bit of noble breeding.

[76] 6/12

“Our new aristocrats, my arse,”
says Murray, reading the report.
“The triumph of the brainless class,
is what I’d say.” He gives a snort:
“What have these people done to be
more sought, more loved, than you or me?
They put out, or play hard to get.
They haven’t learned what life is yet—
and never will!” But Art is silent.
For thirty years he’s known that life
is certain to be marred by strife,
and thought it brutish, cold and violent.
But living here with Eden’s kings
his mind has turned to better things.

[77] 7/12

Now, walking through the canopies
and living in a world of green
as sunlight glints between the trees,
Arthur reflects he’s only seen
the underside of life’s tossed coin.
Now racks of screeching fruitbats join
the consternation of his thoughts,
as, clean and warm in shirt and shorts,
he traces webs of giant spiders
weaving between majestic branches
and leaves that fall in avalanches.
He feels the envy of outsiders
who taste what they have never known
and want to catch some of their own.

[78] 8/12

He shares his ponderings with Murray:
“We’ve struggled to get half-past nowhere.
But don’t you wonder? Don’t you worry
that others effortlessly go where
we’re banished even in our dreams?”
Murray demurs: “My self-esteem’s
not built on such a sandy shale—
but if yours is, then don’t just rail
and rant about it. It’s all luck,
it seems to me: you have to stand up,
be in there with your bony hand up,
and hope that fortune deigns to pluck
your sorry arse and smelly feet
into our mindless new elite.”

[79] 9/12

Art spends the morning deftly shaving,
giving his hair a spiky cut.
The hotel shampoo he’s been saving
smells pleasantly of coconut.
He trades a portion of his loot
to buy a torn and stolen suit,
employs a nimble-witted ruse
to win a pair of matching shoes
and finds a pair of glassless glasses.
“I think I might have understated
the ways that fortune’s dice are weighted,”
Murray advises as he passes.
But Arthur’s in no mood to listen,
washing his hands until they glisten.

[80] 10/12

He minds his posture as he strolls
professionally to the Quay.
Although he feels he’s treading coals,
he’s well-composed. “Please pardon me,”
he offers at a paper stand.
“I wonder, could you use a hand?
I’m looking for an occupation.”
“This is a one-man operation,”
the newsie says. “I’m sorry, mate.”
He gets a similar response
from kiosks, bottle shops, Alphonse
the baker, and an overweight
dry cleaner: “Sorry, I’m retiring.”
“We’re fine.” “There’s nothing.” “We’re not hiring.”

[81] 11/12

But Art delights in each rejection.
In each apologetic spurning
he feels a growing resurrection.
His tide is obviously turning:
it doesn’t frequently occur
that people deign to call him “Sir”
or even speak directly to him,
preferring to look past or through him.
But now they meet his supplication
with proletarian remorse.
A member of the labour force,
he’s treated with a veneration
he’s always managed to avoid.
He’s not a bum, but unemployed.

[82] 12/12

Even the ferry ticket booth
refers him to administration,
where, far from calling him uncouth,
they offer him an application.
He takes the form, although he knows
that it will ask him to disclose
telephone numbers and addresses,
neither of which he yet possesses.
The ferry folk are warm and cheerful,
exchanging amiable gripes
and wearing horizontal stripes.
Art listens for a while, but, fearful
that they’ll begin to think him strange,
he wanders safely out of range.

[83] 13/12

The ferry-workers’ Christmas party
kicks off the Christmas party season.
Historians and literati,
they orchestrate a festive treason:
mutiny on the Borrowdale.
They hijack Captain Steele to sail
all day around the inner harbour.
They dress as Blackbeard, Ali Baba
and Long John Silver, singing shanties,
giving each other pirate gifts,
returning to the Quay in shifts
(though sometimes not, it’s said, in panties)
as Jo proficiently lassoes
bottles of unsuspecting booze.

[84] 14/12

Today the harbour wears dark glasses.
Jo, comprehensively hung-over,
is waiting till her headache passes.
Somehow the pirate Casanova
who helped her to anoint the prow
seemed far more dashing then than now.
She groans, and hopes he’ll have the sense
never to speak of these events.
The Borrowdale is being detailed,
attempting to regain her pride.
Ferries are late, and far and wide,
hangover snake-oil’s being retailed.
They’ll gladly wait another year
till next their harbour runs with beer.

[85] 15/12

At last the ferries sink in sleep.
Jo feels like she’s been through a shredder
but has a midnight vow to keep.
Stan’s just come off a double-header.
She meets him at a worker’s pub,
where workers come all night to rub
cold beer into their shift-stained faces.
It’s one of Stanley’s favourite places,
but everything’s his favourite now:
he’s finished with his dockside training,
and now the only thing remaining
before the payroll will endow
its newest member is Probation—
purely a formal stipulation.

[86] 16/12

When that’s done, he’s an employee.
It won’t be long now. In the entr’acte
he’s being paid a higher fee
under his temporary contract.
He works hard and is well-rewarded;
he loves the place: “Some say it’s sordid,
but they don’t know a thing about it.
They’re all good men.” Jo doesn’t doubt it,
for Stanley, now, can do no wrong.
Between them, Stan and Jo can make
enough for wine and even steak
when both are home. Before too long—
marking a thrilling, brave new era—
there’s even talk of moving nearer.

[87] 17/12

Stan wears a shirt and brand-new tie.
Jo fidgets, listening to the man
who Stanley calls the Mortgage Guy.
“This is your best repayment plan,”
he says to his computer screen.
“Your credit check has come up clean.
We’d lend you up to half a mill.”
They both sit up in shock. “You will?
That much?” “No problem. Just one thing.
You’ll have to get yourself employed.
My managers are paranoid
about the risks these contracts bring.”
“I will be, in a week or two.”
“Come back and see me when you do.”

[88] 18/12

Glenn wears a new designer suit
into the old bank, where a cheer
welcomes him to the launch of Root,
the alcoholic ginger beer.
Singers and dancing girls sustain
the slogans of the Root campaign
(whose depth of wit is constituted
by “Have a Root” and “Hey, get Rooted!”).
Glenn’s vision is made buxom flesh
as scores of spiky-haired Root girls
performing pirouettes and whirls
proclaim that Root is new and fresh
in sultry tones that guarantee
that Glenn, for one, can’t disagree.

[89] 19/12

The party jumps till half-past four,
when Glenn’s had one too many samples.
He blearily surveys the floor,
bewildered by the massed examples
of what he once naively sketched
and now stands multiplied and stretched
before him. One says, “Boy, you’re cute.
I don’t suppose you’d like a Root?”
Glenn’s mouth hangs open, and he blinks
as other Root girls throng to cater
comparably to their creator.
He guiltily accepts their drinks
and stumbles to the moon, which, waxy,
conducts him safely to a taxi.

[90] 20/12

At work, Glenn finds he’s been promoted
to almost-legendary levels.
He’s earned an army of devoted
(though rumoured) Root girls at the revels,
including one so badly smitten
that she was whispered to have written
her number deftly on his head.
These things can only lead to bed.
Glenn turns a deaf ear to the jokes
and lets the gossip run its course.
But in his mind they reinforce
the only part that isn’t hoax:
the name and number of one Pyrrha
he’s had to copy from a mirror.

[91] 21/12

Today it’s Magnus Marmaduke
who pays an unexpected visit.
Glenn steels himself for some rebuke.
Instead: “Your Root girl is exquisite.
All media are rating well;
they can’t brew fast enough to sell.
Now there’s another job to do,
and Martin’s recommended you.
We’ve signed up with the city council.
We have to represent the city.
The Bridge, the Harbour—something witty.
It’ll take work, but every ounce’ll
be compensated when you’re done.
You’ll be the city’s favourite son.”

[92] 22/12

The summer solstice sears the land,
washing the dawn between the Heads,
spilling the sunrise on the sand,
tearing the gloom of night to shreds.
The earth tilts gladly to the sun,
basking in light, and everyone
can see that winter’s far behind,
almost as far from sight as mind.
The distant dawn and dusk are framing
a golden day of widespread joy
when every Sydney girl and boy
is dancing on the beach, proclaiming
(more as a triumph than a threat)
that things are good as things can get.

[93] 23/12

Natasha wears resented swimmers,
embarrassed to be up on stage.
A sparkling sea of flashes shimmers.
The other girls are underage
and haven’t grown Natasha’s curves.
But she, if anyone, deserves
the prize tonight. She’s calm, serene;
she’s Sydney Babe and Witching Queen.
She’s stood before the public sight,
withstood its lumbering advances
with grace and poise. Tonight she dances
and glows, and beams, and vows to fight
diseases that affect the kidney—
till finally she’s crowned Miss Sydney.

[94] 24/12

As tourists cram the deck with poses,
Joanna wills the boat to speed.
She clutches a bouquet of roses
to give to Stanley. They’ve agreed
that both will work on Christmas Day
and dedicate their extra pay
to feasts and revelry tonight.
The Opera House slips out of sight
and East Balmain drifts into view.
She scans its bustling, built-up face
to find her great-grandfather’s place.
She spots it, and—could this be true?
A sign in sun-drenched black and gold:
“For Sale.” For sale! And not yet sold!

[95] 25/12

Arthur and Murray celebrate
with Christmas chicken in the park.
Their clothes are washed; their hair is straight.
Their sea-scrubbed skin is pale and stark.
They look like seasoned promenaders
from country homes with well-stocked larders.
A ranger passes by, inquiring:
“What are you doing here?” “Admiring
the Alternanthera dentata.
Hymenocallis caribaea
is wonderful this time of year.
As for the Phoenix reclinata—”
The ranger grins: “You’re pretty good.”
“Maybe you need a hand?” “I could.”

[96] 26/12

On Boxing Day, Art studies boxes,
and bottle trees and lazy dates.
A patriotic spray of phloxes,
waving its arms, congratulates
the student on his new success.
For Arthur’s managed to impress
the ranger, and persuade him to
receive Art in an interview
as soon as his vacation’s over.
Rehearsing each surprising bud
that struggles from the Dragon’s Blood,
Art mutters at the creeping clover
and dreams of working here all day
and taking home his weekly pay.

[97] 27/12

“I hope you’ve thought this thing right through,”
says Murray, fishing from his rock.
“What thing?” “You haven’t got a clue
of how it is out there—they’ll shock
the stolen pants off you, my friend.
You can’t begin to comprehend—”
“Enough!” says Arthur: “Can’t you see
that this is hard enough for me?”
“I’m trying to help you.” “Well, you’re not.
I know you say it’s all the same,
but if some fairy godma came
and offered you a better lot—
a home, a decent livelihood,
would you refuse her?” “Yes, I would.

[98] 28/12

“I used to think I had it all.
An up-and-coming architect:
a stadium, a shopping mall,
a wife, two kids, a dog. Respect.
It only ever takes one shove
for everything you know and love
to bend and turn and somersault
away. It was the builder’s fault;
the plans were fine—I’ve got no guilt.
But when that office block fell down
they almost ran me out of town.
I could have stayed on and rebuilt
the business—but no matter what
you’ve got, they’ll always take the lot.”

[99] 29/12

“It was the opposite for me,”
says Arthur as their thoughts continue:
“I’ve been at this since I was three,
always half-starving, skin and sinew,
from orphanage to home for boys.
I couldn’t stand the bloody noise
from all of those unwanted shits—
and that turned out to be the Ritz
compared to any homeless shelter.
The only life I’ve known is street-life,
and now I want to taste the sweet life
before this crazy helter-skelter
decides to bottom out at last.
Time’s running out, you know—and fast.”

[100] 30/12

The gardens are beset by campers
lining the lapping shores to strew
the flattened grass with tents and hampers,
eager to gain a bum’s-eye view
of New Year’s fireworks display.
They multiply throughout the day,
piling against the trees in drifts
of shade. At night, they sleep in shifts,
and those assigned the graveyard watch
bundle themselves in overcoats,
whistle a few dejected notes
and fortify themselves with scotch,
thinking that it’s romantic here,
but glad it’s only once a year.

[101] 31/12

By noon, the harbour’s getting packed.
Farm Cove is filled with tilting masts;
from shore to shore, a cataract
of colour flows. The warning blasts
of signal flare anoint the dusk
as drinkers drink and buskers busk.
The first explosions fill the night
with fiery blooms of coloured light,
soon put to shame by each successive
barrage of blue and rush of red.
But Arthur doesn’t raise his head,
finding the water more impressive:
its blood, its green and purple dyes;
it shifts and burns before his eyes.

[102] 1/1

At twelve o’clock, the Bridge explodes
and floods of fiery colour douse
the faces crowding parks and roads.
Natasha’s at the Opera House.
She holds her crown and waves her sceptre,
the decorations that have swept her
into this dazzling New Year’s ball.
The other guests are drunk, and maul
her body with their clumsy grabs
more seriously than before
until she can’t take any more,
propelling slaps and elbow-jabs
at legislators, actors, dames—
and even her reporter, James.

[103] 2/1

She’s woken early in the morning;
the telephone arrests her slumber.
She staggers up and answers, yawning.
“It’s James.” “How did you get my number?”
“I called to give you some advice.”
“I don’t want—” “Shut up. Just be nice.
That’s all.” “Get lost.” “That’s not polite,
and nor were you the other night.
I made you everything you are,
and I can easily undo you
with one more story.” “I can sue you
for libel.” “Try. You won’t get far.”
A click, and the connection breaks.
Natasha holds the phone and shakes.

[104] 3/1

Tonight, she dances in a cluster
of old and trusted girlfriends, raising
all the defences she can muster
against the accidental grazing,
the secret grope, the artful nudge.
Entrenched by friends, she doesn’t budge,
looks only inward, never out,
to raise no hope and leave no doubt
that she’s emphatically off-limits.
Although James was the final straw,
provoking her to all-out war,
it isn’t just to do with him; it’s
a liberationist campaign:
a bid to own herself again.

[105] 4/1

At first, men think there’s some mistake,
and pace around the barricades
impatient for their ranks to break.
Natasha and her merry maids
ignore them as they shift and loiter,
and each attempt to reconnoitre
is met with resolute refusal.
Protected from the crowd’s perusal,
Natasha feels herself returning,
united with her one true love:
the bass below, the lights above,
her liquid limbs, her muscles burning,
the safety screen of fog and smoke,
the music falling like a cloak.

[106] 5/1

She’s dancing more and working less.
The fruits of her success have ripened
into this hairstyle or that dress
and, naturally, her royal stipend:
she can afford to spend more time
in pirouetting on the prime
side of the bar. But all this booty
is tied to an attendant duty:
because she’s Sydney’s public face,
she’s not entitled to refuse
appearances or interviews.
She’s whisked from place to far-flung place,
from shopping malls to motor shows,
blinking and tripping as she goes.

[107] 6/1

From Outer West to Deep, Deep South,
suburbs whose names she’s never heard,
far from the Parramatta mouth,
houses and shopping centres blurred
by similarity, and roads
flattened by never-ending loads.
People who spend their days commuting,
sitting in traffic and polluting
their quarter-acres to ensure
that inner Sydney shines and glitters,
dines out, and pays its baby-sitters.
While the two cities, rich and poor,
both need each other, one must feel
the other gets the better deal.

[108] 7/1

The morning Rivercat starts slowly,
sneaking along the Parramatta
as if approaching something holy,
leaving the dawn-pink river flatter
than glass. Behind the merest ripple,
angles of early sunlight stipple
and banks of lovesick rushes sigh
as jetties drift serenely by,
a pelican on every pile.
The ferry engines feel Poseidon’s
seduction as the river widens,
breaking the peace, but for a while
Joanna rides the city’s charm
along this corridor of calm.

[109] 8/1

She glares at the container docks,
cursing their smug and pompous cranes,
their ostentatious piles of blocks.
She hates their forklifts, and disdains
each stuck-up, hard-hat-wearing man—
because they’ve been unfair to Stan.
He’s still on contract, and each reason—
first they invoked the festive season,
and then some bullshit with the union—
is ever weaker than the last.
What next? The Feast of Mizzenmast?
The foreman’s nephew’s first Communion?
They promised him the job last year;
now auction day is drawing near.

[110] 9/1

Stanley’s not helping. He’s so thrilled
at working there on any basis,
at seeing all his dreams fulfilled,
that he’s completely locked in stasis.
He’s happy going with the flow,
ecstatic that both he and Jo
are working on the waterways.
It’s more than she can do to raise
even one discontented note
about his present circumstances.
He trusts their idiotic answers;
he doesn’t want to rock the boat.
Jo slaps her head and can’t believe
her father could be so naive.

[111] 10/1

“This means so much to me already,”
says Stanley. “I can’t ask for more.
The pay is good; the hours are steady.
I like the people, and I’m sure
that Norman isn’t out to screw me.
We’ve got no reason to be gloomy.”
“It’s more than that,” says Jo: “The loan,
the Balmain house....” “We’ve always known
the house was an unlikely shot.
We should be proud; my grandpa would.
His dream’s alive. When things are good
you’ve got to cherish what you’ve got,
and not be greedy—otherwise
it disappears before your eyes.”

[112] 11/1

Jo tries to borrow Stanley’s faith.
She’s proud to be a wharfie’s daughter,
watching a wind-distracted wraith
of grain pour from a bulk transporter,
the labour of a cargo-mover,
the tugboats helping ships manoeuvre.
She sees the navigation tower,
the tidal swell, the ocean’s power
here at the bottom of the Earth,
and smells the trade winds, and is glad—
but whispers from her great-grandad
have ridden in her mind since birth
like barnacles on rusted metal,
never allowing her to settle.

[113] 12/1

Glenn starts his research at the foreshore
behind the wharves that line Walsh Bay.
He can’t remember being more sure
of his abilities: to say
he’s hot would be an understatement.
His confidence finds no abatement
as Dawes Point meets the Bridge’s shade.
He can’t go wrong; he’s got it made.
He’s cool, he’s calm, and he’s creative.
This is the paramount assignment,
demanding rigour and refinement:
to go for Glenn, and not a native,
bestows a comprehensive honour—
Glenn’s feeling quite the prima donna.

[114] 13/1

With confident, decisive strokes
he draws the Bridge’s tangled girders,
finds in a sail the winds that coax
the fleets and flocks like faithful herders.
The water sucking at a jetty
is strewn with islands of confetti.
The Quay is lined with seafood diners
and scrubbed and gleaming ocean liners,
drawing from Glenn a heightened fervour:
he sketches proud and grimy funnels,
enjoys the streamlined sweep of gunwales
and labours on a life preserver
applied with interrupted stencil.
An ocean tumbles from his pencil.

[115] 14/1

But every scene is slightly spoiled
by something out of place. It jars.
The waves are glutinously oiled;
the Quay is overrun with cars.
The Walsh Bay wharves will soon be flats,
replacing plaguey water rats
with plagues of television crews.
They come in search for harbour views
but somehow scuttle them instead.
Along the shoreline, chains and anchors
are overwhelmed by merchant bankers:
ship’s biscuit falls to plain white bread.
Glenn shakes his head and leaves the coast,
concluding that the Harbour’s toast.

[116] 15/1

The Tank Stream flows beneath the streets
as if a deep subconscious urge.
Above, a pulse of life repeats
the ancient lifeblood’s secret surge.
Granite and steel foundations bring
the beat up soaring spines, and fling
them high into the crowded air,
resounding like a call to prayer.
Glenn draws a disarray of skylines
with lines as jagged and as clean
as rhythms on a heart machine.
But blueprints, diagrams and dyelines
show nothing but a wealth of parts:
a city with a hundred hearts.

[117] 16/1

He climbs the Sydney Tower’s mast
to find a more inclusive vista.
A fractured circuit stretches vast
below, each building a transistor,
capacitor or vacuum tube,
a sphere, a pyramid or cube.
Beyond the city, all directions
are endless maps of bright connections,
a body packed with distant nerves
feeding an electronic brain
with messages of light and pain.
A helicopter dips and swerves,
keeping the peace, and now Glenn sees
more woods than he’d imagined trees.

[118] 17/1

He puts his problem to Rebecca:
how can he summarise the town?
The colony, the nation’s Mecca,
the feet of clay and plate-glass crown?
Can he evoke the Sydney Push?
Or is it Sydney and the bush?
“Just draw a loaded tourist trap,
a wingtip in a pile of crap,
a giant turd spray-painted gold,”
are just a few of Bec’s suggestions,
so Glenn refrains from further questions.
He knows that Sydney leaves her cold,
but now, for the first time, he finds
a narrow rift between their minds.

[119] 18/1

He worries at the slip of paper;
it feels like microfilm, a prop
in some contorted movie caper,
and every passer-by’s a cop.
Eight digits disconcert and chafe:
the combination to a safe?
More like the password to a danger,
the number of a skilful stranger.
He stares into the looming portal
but can’t perceive what it portends:
farewell to family and friends,
or ticket to become immortal,
stepping beyond the world he’s known?
He reaches for the telephone.

[120] 19/1

Tonight, the gardens are translated.
Each simple stem or shock of shoots
seems suddenly sophisticated,
sprouting selected attributes
at Arthur as he wanders past.
How tall they grow, how long they last,
what species they are, and what genus.
The transits of the planet Venus
could not have been observed more closely.
But Arthur’s nervous and uncertain:
he can’t see past the night’s dark curtain
and so walks slowly and morosely,
as tangled shadows lunge and loom
and every nameplate spells his doom.

[121] 20/1

The ranger meets him in the morning.
Art’s bleary from a sleepless night
and scratches at the stubble dawning
across his cheeks. His throat is tight,
catching the corners of his Latin;
his eyes confuse and blur the pattern
of veins and limbs he knows he knows.
The ranger wrinkles up his nose:
a garden smell, but Arthur panics,
and blinding paranoia thwarts
the struggle to control his thoughts.
He stutters through the bare mechanics.
“Sorry,” he says. “I’ve not been well.”
The ranger nods: “No, I can tell.”

[122] 21/1

“Forget about it. So you froze,”
says Murray: “Happens all the time.”
“That doesn’t help,” says Art. “Suppose
it’s just the same on Monday. I’m
so nervous that I can’t rehearse;
I’m bound to make it ten times worse.”
“You will, if that’s you’re attitude,”
says Murray trenchantly: “You’re screwed—
unless you’ve got a scrap of pride
beneath this torrent of self-pity,
this self-indulgence. Find that gritty
kernel, and put the rest aside.
At least you’ve got a second chance:
so get out there and count those plants.”

[123] 22/1

Art charges up and down the hills
as Murray plays the sergeant-major,
putting the greenhorn through his drills.
“You flabby, spotty-faced teenager!”
he cries. “You make me want to puke!
You blockhead! Goon! Bashibazouk!
I’m rich and fat and middle-class.
I own you. Come and kiss my arse!
Now name those trees!” “Look, this is silly—”
“Do it!” “That’s paperbark.” “That’s woesome!”
“That’s Syzygeum oleosum.”
“Which is?” “A kind of lilly pilly.
There’s spider lily. There’s—” “That’s plenty,”
shouts Murray. “Drop and give me twenty!”

[124] 23/1

Art struggles to suppress his doubts,
takes cuttings from a jacaranda
and heals a palm as Murray shouts
slogans of bourgeois propaganda.
He names eleven kinds of gum
and chants om mani padme hum
while thinking only of the lotus
and not the jewel. He doesn’t notice
as Murray speeds him through his paces,
firing machine-gun rounds of queries:
he rattles off botanic theories,
finds he can place names and name places,
remaining calm and staying steady
no matter what. At last he’s ready.

[125] 24/1

This time he wakes up with his wits
and meets the ranger fully firing,
delivering a lethal blitz
that borders on the awe-inspiring,
nailing each answer to the letter.
“I guess you must be feeling better,”
the ranger says. “I’m quite impressed.
The office can sort out the rest.
Now, where should we address the offer?”
Art feels a sudden surge of fear,
but boldly answers, “I live here,”
and points. The ranger seems to cough: “Uh,
you haven’t got a home?” “Not yet.”
“I didn’t know. I’ll have to get....”

[126] 25/1

He didn’t even stay to finish:
“I’ll have to get” just tapered off.
Art listened to the words diminish,
the volume sliding to a trough
from which it never would escape.
“Get” was the last word to take shape:
no “back to you”. No “confirmation”
or “luxury accommodation
arranged for you this afternoon”.
Art sits beneath the fading sky,
watching the dawn, and wonders why
the ranger’s words dried up so soon:
what sudden and severe repentance
could interrupt so bold a sentence?

[127] 26/1

This year, Australia Day provides
a gladly interrupted week
and memories of genocides:
a celebration and critique.
The harbour wears a beaming face,
and in the First Fleet ferries’ race
Natasha’s on the winning boat.
The old, green waters are afloat
with dark-stained timber, a revival
of barques and clippers long since wrecked
or hulked, and some pause to reflect
upon the nature of survival.
But conflict’s one of Sydney’s quirks,
and there are always fireworks.

[128] 27/1

Today Natasha’s shocked to read,
beneath a picture of her ferry:
Not pictured is Miss Sydney. She’d
vanished below, and came up very
bashfully. Was it mal de mer
that laid her low and helpless there?
We hear that a distinctive sound
suggests the poor thing almost drowned
and owes a great debt to the saviour
whose quick resort to mouth-to-mouth
prevented Nat from going south—
or did it? And is this behaviour
appropriate among our leaders?
We launch a phone poll for our readers.

[129] 28/1

Natasha’s rage and indignation
build in a gathering crescendo
as, following the publication
of this obnoxious innuendo,
this poor excuse for journalism,
her life is held up to a prism
of grubby puns and cheap asides.
The gossip in the rag provides
a golden goose for stand-up comics
and nasty knots of blokey blokes:
a rumour’s worth a thousand jokes
according to their economics,
and people everywhere she goes
are shouting “Arr!” and “Thar she blows!”

[130] 29/1

The phone poll numbers are released,
and show that eighty-two percent
of callers think that, while a priest
(and certainly a president)
deserves a little understanding,
Natasha’s earned a public branding.
They clamour in their disapproval,
discuss immediate removal,
and call for her to be uncrowned.
The others, who think Nat should be
encouraged to be fancy-free
and “spread the royal joy around”
(as one wag argues in his letter)
don’t leave her feeling any better.

[131] 30/1

Her friends are properly incensed,
and rally once more to protect her
like loyal worker bees against
the lurking and expanding spectre
of vicious public ridicule.
They swim together in a school
with Nat forever in the centre.
She looks on her impedimenta
with almost perfect gratitude
for saving her, but sometimes thinks
they may have proved to be a jinx,
that this unpleasant interlude—
which may become her requiem—
was caused, at least in part, by them.

[132] 31/1

She never meant to be a story,
resisting that unlikely honour.
She feels her fame and this furore
have equally been thrust upon her.
She never sought to catch a highlight,
preferring to embrace the twilight.
But first her Hallowe’en enthronement,
then indiscretion past atonement
leading to James’s special feature
and quickly to her present title
present a treacherous recital,
and now she finds herself a creature
frozen before the public eye,
not understanding how or why.

[133] 1/2

Even Nat’s legion of advisers,
from make-up girls to grand viziers,
are warning that the organisers
are getting dangerous ideas.
“It doesn’t seem—it could reflect—
we’ve got an image to protect.”
Natasha says, “Give me a break.
It’s all made up, for heaven’s sake.
The only person on the boat
who isn’t in the picture’s me.
I’m innocent, it’s plain to see.”
Their answers come as if by rote:
“We need much more than strict adherence—
these things are all about appearance.”

[134] 2/2

She’s not helped by the social pages,
who introduce “Natasha Watch”,
a periodic piece that gauges
any suggestion of a notch
engraved upon the royal bedhead.
The call goes far and wide: some deadhead
sends pictures from her high-school formal;
another goon stakes out her normal
morning suburban jogging route
and snaps a picture of her sweating
dark patches through her sports-bra’s netting.
Piqued into pitiless pursuit
they follow, photograph and flirt,
prospecting for the merest dirt.

[135] 3/2

“Want to draw Sydney? Draw Natasha.
All that we’ve learned from this campaign
is no-one even gets to pash her,
let alone fuck her—that’s the main
reason they’re trying to destroy her.
She’s way too much like her employer:
this is a city built on sex,
from the first siren-sung shipwrecks
to the damn fireworks every night;
it’s like the ultimate first date—
but no-one gets to consummate.
It’s cold as ice; it won’t requite:
no-one can make this pussy purr.
You want to draw it? Just draw her.”

[136] 4/2

Evaluating Pyrrha’s theory
is more than Glenn can do at present.
The world is looking soft and bleary;
the flashing lights are warm and pleasant,
surrounding him with tiny hugs.
His eyes are wide. He’s on some drugs
procured by Pyrrha and her friends;
he watches through a stockinged lens,
sitting, contented, in a corner.
Pyrrha stops by to tell him that
he really should be drawing Nat;
he stutters, “I’ve already drawn her—
the Root girl—you were her—you said—”
It all begins to hurt his head.

[137] 5/2

Glenn’s strip of paper, closely furled,
enclosing Pyrrha’s silent number,
has opened to a whole new world,
where all the shackles that encumber
his daily life at once grow wings.
He’s bid farewell to many things:
like sleeping every single night
and waking with his hearing, sight
and other senses all intact.
He’s feeling wired and superhuman:
he’s Albert Einstein, Alfred Neuman.
He sees the spinning tesseract;
it doesn’t worry him at all,
but makes a charming mirror-ball.

[138] 6/2

Now every night is loud and deep
and thunders dully in his gut
as laser beams caress and sweep
and somehow nowhere’s ever shut
and glamorous and friendly folk
are generous with speed and coke
and won’t accept his buts or ifs
and dark and shadowed Pyrrha riffs
about the city’s sex appeal
as Glenn’s dim vision doubles, triples:
“Just draw the Opera House with nipples,
erections made of glass and steel....”
And as the smoke grows cool and dense,
he thinks she makes a lot of sense.

[139] 7/2

He tries the shapes that she’s suggested:
telephone wires in pubic tangles,
the business district, double-breasted,
skyscrapers at suggestive angles.
He ribbons spotlight gels with razors
and learns to program lights and lasers
with restless, multi-coloured vectors.
From blacklight overhead projectors
his shapes embrace and thrill the crowd,
mapping against the walls and ceilings,
inspiring overwhelming feelings.
He paints whenever he’s allowed,
a spinning, speeding, coked and cocky
electrified emotion jockey.

[140] 8/2

And Pyrrha’s never far away,
keeping an ever-watchful eye
upon her budding protege,
bringing him drinks before he’s dry,
taking him outside when he starts
to fall into his many parts,
telling him how much is enough
and what to do when things get rough,
holding his hands, his cheeks, his head,
guarding against the crowd’s approaches—
she’s the most consummate of coaches,
and Glenn’s so effortlessly led
through easy and ecstatic classes
he doesn’t notice as time passes.

[141] 9/2

He sees, for the first time in days,
the message light on his machine,
a fog-lamp through the morning haze.
“Where are you? Glenn? Where have you been?”
Rebecca’s called him fifteen times.
Each syllable of worry chimes
more clearly than he’s lately heard;
each lonely electronic word
reaches to shake him by the shoulders:
had Bec been so far from his mind?
He’s jarred, bewildered, misaligned;
his morning headache smokes and smoulders.
Weighed by repentance and regret,
he knows that he can’t face her yet.

[142] 10/12

“Glenn?” “I’m so sorry. It’s been mad—”
“Are you all right?” “I’m fine.” “I’ve been
so worried—” “Yes. I feel so bad.
You won’t believe this crazy scene.”
“Are you on drugs?” “No! What—” “Your voice.
Oh, Glenn.” “Just once. I had no choice.
There was this party—” “Please, be careful.
Imagining you in this lairful
of ponytails and office bimbos—”
“It’s not like that. I’m having fun,
but you know you’re the only one
for me.” “Am I?” “Of course.” “This limbo’s
so hard—” “I love you. Please, don’t doubt it—”
“I don’t—” “Don’t even think about it.”

[143] 11/2

“Hi, Stan. It’s me.” “Are you all right?”
“Will you be on the payroll soon?”
“Jo, it’s the middle of the night.”
“It’s halfway through the afternoon.”
“It is? I had the graveyard shift.
I was asleep.” “We’re being stiffed.
They’re pulling wool across your eyes
while you’re asleep. You realise
that all these stupid, stupefacient
and plain placatory techniques
have kept you on the hook twelve weeks?”
“Honey, you just have to be patient.
I’m sure that it’ll happen one day.”
“We don’t have time. The auction’s Sunday.”

[144] 12/2

Surprisingly, Stan springs to action.
Incited by her accusation
of stupidness and stupefaction,
he telephones around the nation:
directors on the eighteenth hole,
executives on beach patrol
and supervisors out to lunch.
It looks like coming to the crunch,
but never quite gets past the post.
They snub him in the end, invoking
lack of authority, or choking
theatrically on Turkish toast
so disingenuously that
even poor Stanley smells a rat.

[145] 13/2

The auction seems an execution
Joanna is compelled to witness.
She wills a violent retribution
on those who weigh the house’s fitness
for demolition or conversion,
taking a leisurely excursion
that tramples mud across her dreams.
When bidding starts, she almost screams
the highest number she can muster,
but shuts her eyes and blocks her ears—
and as it happens, it appears
that interest is, at best, lacklustre:
the agent glares and juts her chin
as Jo’s ambition passes in.

[146] 14/2

“I’m telling you, that was a sign,”
Jo says to Stanley as they share
the chocolate from a Valentine.
“I only wish that you were there.
To stand inside the house, to smell
the air—and have great-grandpa tell
me clearly that’s where we should be.
I felt it unequivocally.”
“It’s something that we can’t ignore,”
Stanley agrees. “I’ll get a raise.
They’ll put me on some extra days.
Leave it to me. This time for sure.
Our fortune’s going off the chart.”
Joanna sighs and holds her heart.

[147] 15/2

But even now she starts to wonder.
Faced with the clammy light of day,
her hope begins to fall asunder.
The morning harbour’s cold and grey,
delivering an autumn preview,
a silent, slate and surly sea-view.
The clouds scoop low and scrape the buildings,
hemming the city, and the gilding’s
vanished from wrought-iron and dull bronze.
This winter city’s cold and bleak,
shrouded in more mist than mystique;
facades come falling fast, and swans,
caught in the year’s relentless flux,
reveal themselves as ugly ducks.

[148] 16/2

In this cold city, shoulders turn
and everybody begs for change
and office-workers stand and yearn
through tinted high-rise windows. Strange,
inconstant, schizophrenic town—
content to let your children drown
in loneliness, then celebrate
the perfect love of mate for mate!
Now chill winds buffet through the streets,
and Stanley, hat in hand, explores
a labyrinth of closing doors,
a path that circles and repeats
while Jo looks on, convinced they’re all
beating their heads against a wall.

[149] 17/2

Now Arthur’s head is also hurting
as he endeavours to undo
the ranger’s strange and disconcerting
departure—or at least review
the reasons for his change of heart.
“You’re knowledgeable, keen, and smart,”
the ranger says. “I’d love to hire you.
But we’re the State, and we require you
to have at least a bank account.
We turn a blind eye to your staying,
but if it looked like we were playing
along with this—it’s tantamount
to taking on a welfare role.
It’s really out of our control.”

[150] 18/2

The ranger now refers to taxes,
the impact of the GST,
theories of social prophylaxis
and models of philanthropy.
Art finds this talk at first frustrating
then gradually infuriating,
distracting from the bottom line,
filling the air with asinine,
ever more tenuous excuses.
When he makes dangerous remarks
about bums sleeping in his parks,
being unpleasant, Art deduces
it’s time to let the whole thing rest
before he’s further dispossessed.

[151] 19/2

“All right,” says Murray. “Now you see
how people operate out there.
It’s all right. Just stay here with me.
When life’s persistently unfair,
it’s best to keep out of its way.”
“That’s what I always used to say.
But then I might as well have stayed
right where I was, in Adelaide.”
“Why did you leave, then?” “Market forces.
Recession leads to pretty slim picks.
With Sydney holding the Olympics
I thought there’d be abundant sources
of income, shelter, and support
available. That’s what I thought.”

[152] 20/2

“You thought you’d be the only one?”
“I knew it’d be dog-eat-dog.
But back home I was king, and fun
and friends and food and gulls and grog
were hardly ever hard to find.
We talked and sang and wined and dined.
I miss those guys. It’s different here.
Beneath it all, this kind of fear—
maybe because there’s more at stake;
more money, sure, but more to lose....”
“...And now you’ve got the Poor Bum’s Blues—
you’re waiting for your lucky break?
Forget it. All the kings are dead.
The lucky ones are here instead.”

[153] 21/2

“What about you? I know you said
you’d lost it all, but you can still
succeed: you’ve fallen in the red,
but you’ve got assets and goodwill,
and you can always clamber back,
progressing through the shades of black.”
“I lost enough, and felt the rest
slipping away. I was obsessed,
waiting for all these boots to drop.
It was part panic and part pride,
but when I felt things start to slide
I didn’t think they’d ever stop.
Best stick with nothing: if you do,
there’s nothing they can take from you.”

[154] 22/2

Art ponders these conflicting views:
he doesn’t mind his chances, since
he doesn’t have a thing to lose—
but Murray’s trying to convince
him not to try his hand at winning,
since that leads back to the beginning
with pain and torment on the way.
The only move is not to play:
it’s better not to love at all
than to have loved and lost, and lost.
Best not to let yourself be tossed
by fortune’s every gust and squall.
Keep to yourself, and stay defensive.
Art ponders, paralysed and pensive.

[155] 23/2

Nothing-to-lose now seems a token
that he can gamble as he chooses.
Murray assumes the wheel is broken,
ensuring that the player loses
at least his stake, if not his shirt.
Preferring to remain unhurt,
and knowing his apparent curse
may be exchanged for something worse,
he keeps it safely in his pocket.
But Arthur’s nothing burns a hole
as if it were a restless coal,
and Arthur feels compelled to hock it.
He weighs it in his hand, unable
to keep it from the waiting table.

[156] 24/2

Now Glenn sits staring at his cards.
He’s poker-faced, afraid of showing
the ache he feels as he regards
his fate. His pile of chips is growing,
but now he’s forced to split his hand.
He can’t remember how he planned
to reconcile the old and new,
and now he doesn’t have a clue.
He feels the city slyly beckoning
from this dark corner of the nation
but doesn’t trust its navigation:
forced to rely on his dead reckoning,
he prays that the horizon’s dome
won’t lead him out of sight of home.

[157] 25/2

Rebecca’s been his world for years,
a light that he emerged to, blinking,
illuminating new frontiers
beyond his mathematic thinking,
beyond his world of pale-blue squares
and largely logarithmic cares:
he owes a debt he can’t repay.
They broke up for a single day
one dim, delirious midsummer
now long ago—or so it seems—
a day of fevers and of dreams,
which could be called, at best, a bummer,
a poisonous hallucination—
until their reconciliation.

[158] 26/2

He wanted to refuse this job,
but she said, “I don’t want to see
you turn into a bitter blob
who’s wasted his ability—
especially if I’m the cause....”
Tears blur his vision as he draws
speech balloons on a serviette—
they promised never to forget
the smallest detail of each other,
and visit back and forth while she
was finishing her Ph.D—
but drops of inky water smother
her features in a smudged confession:
he can’t remember her expression.

[159] 27/2

Pyrrha first notices his doodles
when, late tonight in Chinatown,
she sees him weeping in his noodles.
“Poor baby. Are you coming down?”
she soothes him with Rebecca’s sketch
as lines of blackness bleed and etch
his furrowed forehead. “You’ve been drawing?”
She holds his face to stop him gnawing
blood trenches in his lower lip;
his story tumbles in a sweat.
“That’s why you’re playing hard to get?
a long-distance relationship?
Oh, Glenn....” And like all modern ills
his pain is cured by coloured pills.

[160] 28/2

But in the morning he feels worse
and can find no way out of bed,
afraid the shrinking universe
will further crush his shrink-wrapped head.
His thoughts pursue themselves in rings:
the drugs wash over painful things
and leave him smiling in the present
but even that becomes unpleasant:
forgetfulness becomes betrayal;
the single source of pain and pleasure—
the memory he’s vowed to treasure—
begins to blur, begins to pale;
relief becomes exaggeration,
and fantasy becomes frustration.

[161] 29/2

Leap day, that nervous interloper
across the calendar, feels wrong:
that illegitimate no-hoper
doesn’t entirely belong
in any year. But some believe—
the last twelve strokes of New Year’s Eve,
the doubled hour of Daylight Saving—
that it’s a time of misbehaving,
mischief at least, and even crime,
when many laws do not apply,
and it’s a perfect alibi
to be forever lost in time.
Glenn knows all this, and works all day,
and hurries homeward right away.

[162] 1/3

Natasha passes up the chance
of leap day’s amnesty as well:
since everybody turned freelance
her life’s become a public hell
where every indiscretion’s apt
to be well-documented, snapped
and peddled by a thousand newsies
with photographs of page-three floozies.
She has to temper reckless urges
that border on the pornographic—
to flash at motorists in traffic,
to streak across suburban verges—
knowing that the resulting rumour
would not be met with any humour.

[163] 2/3

Instead, she uses extra caution,
and every action or omission
is magnified past all proportion
in the cold light of her position.
She is, by nature, independent,
but now she feels like the defendant
in a mad, moralistic trial
calling for utmost self-denial.
Cardinals crowd to cross-examine
their suspect, surly in the dock;
she dances, staring at the clock
across a land laid waste by famine,
wondering whether this new thirst
or drowning will destroy her first.

[164] 3/3

How easy it would be to slip!
With so much time and so much talent
she longs to sensually strip
before some gorgeous, grateful, gallant
and mercifully tongue-tied guy.
She isn’t even certain why
she’s suddenly becoming tempted—
she’d always thought herself exempted
and hardly even thought about it;
she had her mind on other things.
Seduction wasn’t worth the strings,
and romance? She could do without it.
But some desires, however hidden,
arise as soon as they’re forbidden.

[165] 4/3

She swaps her shifts so she can work
only the quiet afternoons,
when shuffling drunks and junkies lurk
among the laughing-stocks and loons
and everybody really stinks
but no-one tries to buy her drinks.
They huddle, blow saliva bubbles
and think about their own dark troubles,
protected by the blackout glass.
Some stare and smile while others glower,
a game of pool can last an hour,
the jukebox only plays bluegrass,
and they’re forgiven if they shout
when Jack O’Lantern kicks him out.

[166] 5/3

At nightfall, she returns to Glebe.
The driver wakes her at her stop.
She talks wine with the dapper dweeb
who works the local bottle shop,
drinks half a bottle in the tub
and wanders to the local pub
for half a pint with chips and gravy.
Old barflies recollect the Navy
and spin her yarns so often spun
that she can hear them in her sleep
of days when life and talk were cheap
and how the Inner West was won,
cursing the current of newcomers
who’ve lived here less than sixty summers.

[167] 6/3

At closing time they kiss her hands
and stagger off, already dreaming
of younger days in older lands.
The streets are almost empty, gleaming
with half a night of rain already.
Nat breathes the chill air, moist and heady,
watches the moon-clouds wane and wax
and takes a taxi back to Jack’s.
The boon of her belated entry
is that her probing persecutors
have given up, and of her suitors
not even one remains as sentry.
She’s left with friends and sympathisers
among the smoke and synthesizers.

[168] 7/3

During the day she seeks out battlers,
never fatiguing of the stories
of even the most prolix prattlers.
She loves their past and future glories,
fond memories and fervent hopes.
They raise exultant periscopes
above their present seas of shit
and even when they seem to quit
they always keep a tale to tell.
She meets them at her local haunts
and various suburban jaunts
and finds herself beneath their spell,
delighted that no raconteur
is interested at all in her.

[169] 8/3

Back at the bar, a stevedore
who’s just come off a shift complains:
“There ought to be a bloody law
against those bloody shit-for-brains.”
He scowls as Nat refills his glass.
“I tell you, it’s a bloody farce.
It isn’t like I’ve asked for much,
but never have I heard of such
a bunch of pitiful excuses.
It’s been three months. It’s just not on.
If they’re not careful, I’ll be gone....”
Natasha listen as he looses
volley on volley of invective
and feels his pain, and feels protective.

[170] 9/3

Stan’s building up a head of steam
and building to a mighty bender.
Enlarging on Joanna’s theme,
the only points on his agenda
are recompense and retribution.
She’s startled by his resolution
and worried by his sudden rage.
It’s always difficult to gauge
the depth and tenure of his moods,
especially those fuelled by drink,
but Stan seems like he’s on the brink,
and violent, clashing attitudes
are thunderstorms across his brain,
lashing a cracked and soaked terrain.

[171] 10/3

After each shift he comes home reeling,
straight from the pub, or with a bottle.
Before, she cursed him for freewheeling:
now, as he opens up the throttle,
she sees him running off the rails.
She watches through his gusts and gales,
trying to somehow calm him down,
seeing him sputter, spit and drown
in alcohol and rising bile:
“It’s fine. We’re fine. We’ve got it made.
Look at how much you’re getting paid.
The house was just a juvenile
infatuation. It’s too old,
run down....” But Stan won’t be consoled.

[172] 11/3

“House or no house, I’m being shafted,”
he says. “And that’s what I can’t stand.
They said they had the contract drafted.
I work hard, and they’re undermanned.
They can’t just go and change their minds.”
He takes a belt of whisky, grinds
his teeth, and glares with reddened eyes.
“Please, don’t do anything unwise,”
says Jo. “You shouldn’t drink so much.”
“I was unwise to let them screw me,”
he slurs, swings, staggers, ruddy, rheumy.
“They took me for an easy touch.
I’ll show them—show them—show them all!”
Now bottle, glass and teardrops fall.

[173] 12/3

He spends the morning sick in bed
with water, compress, pills and bucket,
but as the poison leaves his head
his anger re-emerges. “Fuck it.
I loved those guys, but now I hate ’em.
I’m giving them an ultimatum.
Either I’m gainfully employed,
or I’m a cloud of dust. A void.
And I might punch them in the bargain.”
“No, Dad. You can’t. You’ve worked so hard—”
“I’ll punch them! Yes! They’ll be off guard,
hiding behind their forms and jargon—
I’ll hit them—pow!—right in the nose.”
Joanna’s panic grows and grows.

[174] 13/3

With three sheets flapping, pickled, pissed,
Stan tacks and weathers, disappearing
beneath white canopies of mist.
Jo watches after him, still hearing
his tuneless notes of battle-song
joining a pale and plaintive throng.
The air is warm and dirty-yellow,
almost intolerably mellow.
The bloated clouds sink ever lower,
enveloping each building-top
with signs and portents that would stop
even the most reluctant Noah.
As grey obliterates the sun
Joanna wonders what she’s done.

[175] 14/3

Implacable and patient rain
begins to fall before the dawn,
falling with duty and disdain,
swimming with sympathy and scorn.
It promises to fall for days,
meting monotonous malaise
across the sodden, streaming city,
washing its gutters grim and gritty,
flooding its avenues and alleys.
Cold cataracts and currents chisel
the sandstone, and the steady drizzle
collects in undiscovered valleys.
The planets tilt along their axes
and people search in vain for taxis.

[176] 15/3

Arthur and Murray’s golf umbrellas
fare variously in the storm.
Some flap, or corkscrew like propellers;
some are uprooted and perform
damp acrobatics in the air,
but most stay firmly planted where
Arthur and Murray coldly huddle.
They watch their muddy doorstep puddle
evolve into a marshy delta,
eat baked beans by the stodgy plateful,
clutch blankets tighter, and are grateful
for such a well-adapted shelter.
The outside world begins to fade:
diminished, disregarded, greyed.

[177] 16/3

They walk together in the rain,
both long inured to being drenched,
alone across the damp Domain.
The gardens’ summer thirst is quenched
to overflowing, and the ground
beneath their feet has sunk and drowned:
their footprints fill with seeping mud.
The sole survivors of the flood,
apart from them, are scuttling rangers,
hidden by dark green mackintoshes,
squelching in oversized galoshes,
helping the hardier hydrangeas
to keep their heads above the water,
saving the shrubs from swirling slaughter.

[178] 17/3

Art wonders whether he can cure
his ranger’s sudden schizophrenia
by offering an overture
to someone suitably more senior,
one of the bureaucratic types
whose raincoat bears a dozen stripes.
“I throw myself before your mercy
to solve this trifling controversy.
I’ve had an offer of employment
hastily taken off the table.
I’m fit and strong and clearly able—
but I’m not here for your enjoyment.
What reparations will you make?”
“There’s clearly been a grave mistake.”

[179] 18/3

“A grave mistake!” Art cries, exultant.
“There’s been a grave mistake, she said!
Who needs a management consultant
to tell this is a watershed?
My days of living here are numbered,
my friend. You’ll soon be disencumbered
of all my whining and complaining.”
The sky is resolutely raining;
skyscrapers are decapitated;
the harbour rolls with ships of mist,
and Art’s unable to resist
a soggy two-step. He’s elated,
lost in a haze of gleeful madness,
and doesn’t notice Murray’s sadness.

[180] 19/3

His ranger comes apologising
early next morning, but his frown
and careful coldness are surprising.
He says, “I’ve come to shut this down.
It’s clear to me that you’re insane.
I don’t know what you hoped to gain
by telling stories to my boss—
it doesn’t matter. It’s your loss.
You haven’t only caused me trouble,
you’ve brought it on yourself as well.
You know this isn’t a hotel.
And now you’re out, and on the double.
After today, you’re interdicted,
and you’ll be forcibly evicted.”

[181] 20/3

“Not a hotel? The ignoramus!”
Murray explodes as Arthur packs.
“What hotel hoped to be more famous
than Starlight?” Arthur says, “Relax.
It’s all right.” “Will you come and visit?
I’m sure that’s still allowed.” “Well, is it?
I’m not sure that I want to risk it.”
“Come. Come! We’ll have a smoke, a biscuit,
you’ll let me know how things are going....”
Art ties and yokes his bags. They stand.
Arthur extends a trembling hand;
Murray embraces him, cheeks flowing
with dirty, unrepentant tears;
Art meets the mist, and disappears.

[182] 21/3

The equinox, the height of autumn
if autumn ever had a height,
contains both post- and ante-mortem,
the morning after and the night.
Between its tallest and its deepest
the curve of day and night is steepest
here at the point of its inflection.
The city basks in its protection:
the rain has stopped; the air is balmy;
a sense of balance and of stasis
converts the flood to an oasis
and checks the gathering tsunami.
The city hides within its folds
and wonders what the future holds.

[183] 22/3

It doesn’t have to wonder long.
Today the world is saturated.
Hail plays a furious ping-pong
against the rooftops as, translated,
the heaving heavens flash and boil
and small suburban cyclones coil,
destroying trees and wheelie bins,
punishing Sydney for its sins.
The city shivers, silent, cold,
its streets an underwater maze.
Its nights have overcome its days;
its windowpanes are unconsoled.
The storm will isolate it, sever
its powerlines, and rain forever.

[184] 23/3

Art sets up camp behind the gym.
White Bay today is aptly named,
as clouds of fog expand to skim
the land that humans once reclaimed
but now seem set to lose again.
The rain, the repetitious rain
is falling here as everywhere,
and Arthur’s soaked but doesn’t care.
He feels the city’s ebb and flow.
Returning to his grimy grotto,
discovering that his new motto
is easy come and easy go,
he listens to the raindrops drum
the roof, and feels completely numb.

[185] 24/3

At Jack O’Lantern’s fallout shelter,
braziers huddle like the core
of some reactor, or some smelter;
umbrellas barricade the door
and drinkers turn their sodden backs.
A sombre crowd has come to Jack’s
with foggy glasses, dripping hair
and one collective shell-shocked stare.
They sit and drink and drip together,
decide that outside’s far too risky,
and over warming wine and whisky
wonder what wild and woolly weather
like this could think it’s doing here—
just as they wonder every year.

[186] 25/3

Natasha walks to work, ignoring
the crowded buses sluicing by,
the headlights’ tiny storms. It’s pouring,
but Nat’s determined to defy
this taunting weather come what may:
the rain continues anyway,
soaking her T-shirt and her pants.
Her clothes, her cloying sycophants,
insinuate against her skin;
she dances through the streaming streets
and flashes everyone she meets
and can’t contain a growing grin,
feeling exultantly insane,
skin-clothed and naked in the rain.

[187] 26/3

She waits for the expected fallout,
the pictures and the snide remarks.
the wags are certain to go all out
like gnashing groups of hungry sharks,
smelling her blood across the ocean.
Their dull and durable devotion
can be relied on not to miss
an opportunity like this.
How many people did she pass?
How many lecherous drowned rats
have leered beneath cascading hats?
How many gaped through windscreen glass?
When she displayed her dripping rack,
didn’t a camera flash her back?

[188] 27/3

The papers talk about the storm,
and anecdotes of daylight saving.
The TV guide, the racing form:
the same as always. Is she raving—
or have the jokes become too subtle?
She waits for any late rebuttal
against her embryonic theory—
but all she finds is silence, eerie
and unexpected. On the telly,
the talk-shows haven’t touched her yet;
she searches on the Internet
for any sign of breast or belly
but can’t unearth the merest tit.
Perhaps she got away with it?

[189] 28/3

She feels abandoned. Vigilantes
who’ve tailed her doggedly for weeks,
stalking her washing line for panties,
have disappeared. The usual freaks
who honk and stare at traffic lights
now tune their radios; her knights
in shining vinyl, suede and denim
have galloped sunward. Has her venom
finally taught them all a lesson?
Have all of her reluctant pupils
been overcome by sudden scruples?
Has talk of options and Luc Besson
and hidden gems in Tears for Fears
finally faded from her ears?

[190] 29/3

She braves the bar with trepidation,
but meets an unexpected let-down.
Instead of instant inundation,
the dancers dutifully get down
and boogie, leaving her alone.
She stumbles for a moment, thrown—
and even as she starts to founder
her friends appear and crowd around her,
welcome her home and buy her drinks.
She feels her fortunes are restored,
but even now her mind is clawed
by riddles fit for any sphinx:
what’s fame? Esteem? Is glory only
a game? And why is she so lonely?

[191] 30/3

Lonely’s the opposite of Glenn.
He sits upon a bean-bag throne
tonight, and can’t remember when
he’s had a moment of his own.
Speakers are sparkling, lights resounding;
his head and heart and flesh are pounding.
People are asking his advice:
they volunteer to sacrifice
themselves for utterance or sketch,
as if he were a source of knowledge
superior to any college,
able to lift the lowest wretch
to heady heights of triumph, using
only the power of his schmoozing.

[192] 31/3

He brokers deals and deals to brokers
and reconciles the warring factions
of zealous pro- and anti-smokers,
oversees sensitive transactions
and draws political cartoons.
He’s friends with bouncers, bitches, goons
and never has to wait in queues.
He’s skilfully designed tattoos
for private parts of public figures.
He’s like an aging Corleone,
dispensing wisdom, fake and phony,
unused to dealing with the rigours
of such punctilious affairs,
or having to pretend he cares.

[193] 1/4

He sees that this is just like work.
The water-cooler politics
are there; the hours are more berserk;
he has to kick against the pricks
as vigorously as before.
His body aches; his head is sore.
If not for stimulants to keep
him up, he’d always rather sleep.
He wonders whether there’s a point;
he wants to stand up now and shout it.
Instead, he doesn’t talk about it,
but mutely passes on his joint.
For though his newfound friends are fun,
he doesn’t trust a single one.

[194] 2/4

Well, one. As Pyrrha passes by
she says, “Oh, Glenn. You look like hell.”
He fights the urge to laugh, to cry,
to scream at her, and says, “I’m swell.”
“You’re swell? What kind of word is that?
Come on. Your batteries are flat.
It’s time for you to get some rest.”
She tips his head against her chest;
he feels the warmth beneath her shirt,
her kind, accelerating heart,
her flesh, her nipples as they start
to harden, pointing, perfect, pert—
she blushes, moves his head away.
Glenn doesn’t know quite what to say.

[195] 3/4

That almost-penetrated shirt!
That penetrating, puzzling blush!
He’d taken Pyrrha for a flirt,
but if, instead—some sort of crush?
Some honest, unaffected feeling?
The very notion sends him reeling
into a chaos of confusion.
His worlds are layered with illusion
fostered by chemicals and copy:
a pure, ingenuous emotion
divorced from that? The very notion!
How unironic! And how soppy!
How rare, how precious, how untrying,
how alien, how terrifying.

[196] 4/4

He tries to focus on his task:
his summary, his undertaking.
The partners have begun to ask
what kind of progress he’s been making;
he’s stalled, prevaricated, fudged—
in truth, the project hasn’t budged:
his inspiration is elusive;
his hours and lifestyle aren’t conducive
to reason, rhythm or reflection.
He’s missed one deadline, then another:
though Mates has called him mate and brother,
he can’t rely on his protection.
He feels endangered; if he blinked,
he’s certain he’d become extinct.

[197] 5/4

He leafs through everything he’s drawn,
piling in drifts across his desk:
the Bridge, a rope, a friendly prawn
(meant to be groovy, but grotesque),
flotsam and jetsam, sailors handsome
as anything from Arthur Ransome,
bell-bottomed, anchor-tattooed, flaxen—
a poor, personified Port Jackson
with jagged mouth and steel-arch braces,
a seaplane coming in to land
(rather, to sea), the gleaming sand,
bikinis, boardshorts, beaming faces,
black and white, coloured, old and youthful—
nothing comes even close to truthful.

[198] 6/4

He wakes before the sun has risen
and walks among the fading stars.
Peninsula now seems a prison
with masts and cranes for gilded bars.
He watches his frustrations double:
his new career reduced to rubble;
his separated love now mocked
by Pyrrha’s revelation. Shocked,
white-faced before the black White Bay,
he feels too tragic, operatic,
unnecessarily dramatic,
but best intentions won’t allay
the feeling that he’s treading water
too dark, too cold to give him quarter.

[199] 7/4

Art shivers, waiting for the sun.
He feels the nights are slowly waxing,
accumulating one by one,
creeping. It keeps him from relaxing,
the darkness snapping at his heels,
encroaching on the day. He feels
that some descent is taking place,
gathering impetus and pace,
tracking the motion of the Earth,
shifting to shadow as it tilts
beneath a planet’s woes and guilts,
weeping, awaiting its rebirth.
He shivers in a world of dew
and hopes he’ll see the winter through.

[200] 8/4

White Bay, his home, has changed completely.
Apartment blocks have newly sprouted,
dividing up the landscape neatly,
leaving protesters dazed and routed.
Now strata title rules supreme
and all bow to the strata scheme
as densities of housing soar,
stretching against the straining shore,
craning behind the cranes, and vexed
that harbour views so highly sought
should be devoted to a port!
No matter. That will soon be next,
and everyone will live in cubes,
then capsules, and then vacuum tubes.

[201] 9/4

The flanked and canyoned common gardens,
sighing with dull, compliant flora,
offer a thousand pallid pardons
to memories of the agora,
where citizens would chat and barter
before the tyranny of strata.
Teenagers, dim and discontented,
now loiter there, and sad, demented
outpatients from the closing wards
fondly recall their institutions.
Preparing for their revolutions,
they spit and sharpen switchblade-swords,
rattle their spraypaint cans, and swarm
to take revenge in any form.

[202] 10/4

Revenge on what? Revenge on boredom,
the plight of Generation X,
the parents who attended Fordham,
did all the drugs, had all the sex,
left nothing to rebel against,
left children fuming and unfenced
to roam the inner-city wastes.
Revenge against the public tastes
that only vote for private wealth,
electing maniacs and fools
who close our hospitals and schools,
are squeamish about mental health,
and can’t tell head and arse apart—
why not? But why revenge on Art?

[203] 11/4

Reason or not, he’s being pestered,
returning home at night to find
his property has been molested.
His sturdy faith in humankind
is battered, and his mattress slashed;
his blankets and his bed are lashed
with angry and misspelt graffiti.
The night rings out with his entreaty,
but angry whispers, hateful hisses
are all he’s offered in reply.
It almost makes him want to cry
with anger and despair; he misses
his plants, his gardens, and his friend,
and wonders when this night will end.

[204] 12/4

He feels the darkness crowd around
as thick and silent as a fog,
carrying muffled bursts of sound:
the death-bed whimper of a dog,
the creaking of a nearby tree,
the howl of sailors drowned at sea.
He sees the shadows loom and scuttle,
malevolent, malicious, subtle,
lone wanderers or restless gangs.
His raw nerves deafen him and blind him:
they’re far away, now right behind him.
His pounding heart sends icy pangs
of panic through him, flays his senses,
erodes and topples his defences.

[205] 13/4

He takes to creeping out at night,
using the darkness as a shield
as if a cringing parasite.
The shadows harbour him; concealed,
he pads from street to darkened street,
nervous and nimble, flashing fleet
between the streetlights’ lonely pools,
skirting the gangs and gangling ghouls
who crash around his wakeful dark
and take no notice of the bum
whose feet, so light, so bare, so numb,
break not a twig, leave not a mark,
and leave each blade of grass unbent
on their invisible descent.

[206] 14/4

Pausing his vigil at the park,
he watches trade ships, low with cargo,
illuminated in the dark,
lifting themselves to strains of largo
percussions, pistons, praise and panic
as if each were a raised Titanic,
not just an end-of-shift no-brainer—
until a slipping, rogue container
knocks a man cleanly overboard
so silently that no-one knows:
except the silhouette who throws
himself uncertainly toward
the water, splashes, struggles, drinks
a broken breath of brine, and sinks.

[207] 15/4

The image hangs before him, frozen
half-permanently on his vision,
unfading. Why was Arthur chosen
to view this picture, this collision
of circumstance, this fateful tableau
fractured as anything that Pablo
Picasso drew at his most torn?
The meagre light before the dawn,
the crane’s slow sweep, the silent knock,
the falling figure—then the drunk,
or junkie fortified with junk,
diving foolhardy from the dock,
leaping, unselfish and unthinking,
flailing and failing, shrinking, sinking.

[208] 16/4

The second hand ticks off the hours.
The ward is dressed in eerie white.
Pollen falls silently from flowers.
Above the Earth, a satellite
takes telescopic photographs.
Along the hall, somebody laughs.
Machines that measure pulse and breathing
are sighing, beeping; clouds are wreathing
behind a frosted windowpane.
The sheets are white and pressed and starched;
the air is air-conditioned, parched.
It’s early, grey. It looks like rain.
Nurses discuss the weekend’s dates
with squeaking shoes. Joanna waits.

[209] 17/4

Her father’s waterlogged and broken.
He’s had an ocean in his lungs.
His spine is smashed. He can’t be woken.
Doctors with smooth and silver tongues
and snaking silver stethoscopes
explain in metaphors and tropes
that it would be a grave misnomer
to say that Stanley’s in a coma,
but he’s unconscious nonetheless.
Not enough air to feed the brain,
impossible to ascertain
his prospects—anybody’s guess.
Perhaps (in voices hushed and solemn)
some damage to the spinal column.

[210] 18/4

She prays to all the sailors’ saints,
to all three points of Neptune’s trident,
offering compliments, complaints,
and sacrifices sad and strident.
Her father’s brow is furrowed, lined,
reflecting ripples of a mind
she knows is still evaluating
a life’s injustice, gears still grating
beneath this saturated shell.
His face is not a mask of peace
accepting any sweet release.
Stanley’s still angry, she can tell,
and growing daily madder still
at being kept against his will.

[211] 19/4

Blood tests come back, and all confirm
that Stanley was completely drunk.
A furious tequila worm
was lashing him as he was sunk
by rage, confusion, lack of swimming.
She sees him, blustering and brimming
and swigging from a fiery bottle,
gabbling guttural and glottal
to anyone who cared to listen.
Did he feel an apotheosis
and try to part the sea, like Moses?
Or did he feel compelled to christen
the blank hull of a oil tanker?
Or was he just a drunken wanker?

[212] 20/4

What was he doing there at all?
He wasn’t rostered on that day.
She took a grim and garbled call
from someone at the wharf, to say
that there had been a dawn disaster,
they’d have to tell the harbour-master,
they’d found him, blue and barely floating,
and thought him drowned before promoting
his status to “extremely critical”.
Of course, no foul play was suspected:
Stanley was well-liked, well-connected.
Although he’d been, at times, political,
that was no more than workers’ pride,
and everyone was on his side.

[213] 21/4

This comes as some news to Joanna—
since when do people on your side
treat you in such a churlish manner?
She had to bite her tongue to hide
her indignation when she heard
that empty platitude averred.
In truth, though, she agrees foul play
is most unlikely anyway.
What needs invent a dark contrivance?
With Stanley’s alcohol and anger,
a foe could wait in lazy languor,
rely on time and fate’s connivance
to draw their friend disaster near—
and what else could have happened here?

[214] 22/4

Poor Arthur knows, but he’s not telling.
Living the harsh life of outlawry,
he finds this argument compelling:
if the man lives, he’ll tell his story,
and no one dead needs Arthur’s help.
The thought of him, collecting kelp,
plumbing the bottom of the ocean,
provokes a piteous emotion
but doesn’t match his secret fear:
that what he witnessed was a message,
a brutal show of strength to presage
his own fate, and to make it clear
that he’s alive at the concession
of someone’s—something’s—sole discretion.

[215] 23/4

It’s Easter Sunday: solar, lunar
and secular considerations
have hampered it from coming sooner.
The revolutions and rotations
of earth and moon are coinciding:
new life is meant to spring from hiding
the full moon after equinox,
replenishing depleted stocks,
preparing for a perfect day.
But here the opposite position’s
apparent, and these old traditions
were meant for half a world away:
the full moon’s just a brief respite
preparing for the darkest night.

[216] 24/4

Art feels it as the moon is waning.
The world slips further into bleakness
as crescents shrink and sliver, straining
against its helplessness, its weakness.
He tells himself he’s superstitious
to find the weather inauspicious—
but never since the ancient Romans
have heralds, harbingers and omens
seemed as important or as loud.
Planets’ positions, names of years
and prophets have aroused the fears
of the world’s masses, and avowed
skeptics have lost their paradigms
in these most superstitious times.

[217] 25/4

A lonely, unofficial bugle
echoes across the Anzac Bridge
at dawn. The sound is haunting, fugal,
the lamentation of a midge
mirrored and magnified all day:
war movies at the matinee;
the cheers and clattering of two-up;
the story of the sorry screw-up
who later saved somebody’s life
or just got laid in Abu Dhabi;
the beach house or the backyard barbie;
the silence of the digger’s wife;
the weeping motorists who cram
the dusk bridge with a traffic jam.

[218] 26/4

Art tries to sleep all day, to capture
whatever warmth the sun will give.
In dreams, he drifts into a rapture
where money’s not required to live,
where ample food still grows on trees
and there’s no coldness or disease,
no monoliths of weeping stone,
and where a man can be alone
or with companions as he chooses.
He’s woken by the taunting, calling,
kicking of kids, or by the falling
of night, and stirs, and feels his bruises,
and wonders why the rising moon
must interrupt his dream so soon.

[219] 27/4

Glenn’s fallen to familiar patterns,
burning a late-night blend of oils
while partners laugh and drink Manhattans,
using two arms to scrape their spoils
together, running endless tabs.
For Glenn, it’s back to late-night cabs:
he thumps across the bridge’s span,
misses the missing homeless man
and notices an orphan bundle.
He’s startled as one memory meets
another on his hometown streets:
Grote, Gouger, Flinders, Franklin, Rundle.
He pauses halfway through a curse
and thinks that, yes, things could be worse.

[220] 28/4

He thinks about him, and remembers
his face, his beard, almost his name.
He breathes upon the fading embers
of memory, and feels its flame:
Rebecca spoke about this man
as if she were his greatest fan,
and called him generous and wise.
He thinks about him as he tries
to sketch and rule, to trim and trace:
another outcast emigre,
what would the homeless exile say?
How did he come across this place?
What opportunity? What blunder?
What miracle? It makes him wonder.

[221] 29/4

But he can’t cling to this perspective
for long. Soon, once again, he’s fuming.
He finds it hard to be objective
within this curling, all-consuming
cyclone of deadlines and decrees.
High and low-pressure systems squeeze
his heart, and make him fight for breath.
He’s sure that he’s approaching death,
and sees his life before his eyes:
a half-lived life, a life enslaved,
his spirit sold, his freedom waived,
and as he feels himself capsize
he searches for a rescue rope—
but all he ever finds is dope.

[222] 30/4

He’s got no time. He’s gone cold turkey.
He isn’t certain how he got here
(a missed left turn at Albuquerque?)
but deeply wishes he were not here:
a world of emptiness, of longing,
a silence that’s replaced the thronging
of drum and bass, of pill and powder,
of life and love—and seems far louder.
He feels a comprehensive hunger
in gut and bloodstream, heart and brain,
a sadness that feels worse than pain.
And in his dreams, the powder-monger
with diamond eyes and twinkling toes
holds carats underneath his nose.

[223] 1/5

The night-life courts him with its splendour,
beguiling, blinding, ridiculing,
offering bittersweet surrender.
For now, his common sense is ruling:
he can’t afford another spree;
he has to keep his thinking free
of artificial inspiration,
inevitable degradation.
How difficult it is to think,
how hard to keep a train of thought
on track! How flimsy and how short
is his attention! Lest it shrink
still further from its hallowed heyday,
he summons up a desperate mayday.

[224] 2/5

He calls Rebecca: “I’m in trouble.
I feel like I’ve been blindly bumbling,
protected by a flimsy bubble.
But now it’s burst, and it’s all crumbling
around me, and I don’t know what
to do. I’m lost. I’ve lost the plot.”
She reassures him, soothes him, calms him.
Her voice is soft. Her love disarms him.
But when he says, “I need you here”,
she talks about her final chapter,
her pitiless and jealous captor,
and weeps, and whispers in his ear:
“I’ll be there when I can. Don’t cry.
It won’t be long. Oh, Glenn, I’ll try.”

[225] 3/5

But trying isn’t a solution.
What Glenn needs is an instant fix.
He briefly ponders prostitution,
smashing his head between two bricks,
joining some country’s foreign legion:
perhaps he’d make a good Norwegian?
He’d not return from Pyrrha’s party,
couldn’t prevent some sweetest Smartie
from melting in his mouth and mind
with disappointments and surprises.
He can’t work, so he compromises,
leaving his suffering behind
but making sure it’s not too far,
volleying vodkas at the bar.

[226] 4/5

The bar is curved and stainless steel,
and soaks his elbows with the spilled
and sticky ponds he doesn’t feel.
The barman keeps his glasses filled,
knowing a sad and solo drinker,
a ponderer and deep-thought-thinker,
will drink with tight-lipped dedication,
distracted by no conversation,
and makes a most efficient client.
Glenn revels in his solitude
and cherishes his surly mood,
betrayed, indignant and defiant,
head dropping, stooping, almost prone,
just grateful to be left alone.

[227] 5/5

Natasha’s customers don’t stop
to nurse their vodkas at her bar.
They look the other way; they drop
their change in puddles, mutter “ta”
or offer her the briefest nod.
She finds it unaccustomed, odd,
that they should hurry to their friends
and take no notice when she bends
or stretches for a glass or tray.
Her shoulders as she pulls a beer
do not attract a single leer;
none brush her fingers as they pay,
or stutter at her, lick their lips
or leave extraordinary tips.

[228] 6/5

Now she’s the one who drinks alone,
squeezing a periodic shot
that startles throat and rattles bone
and wraps her stomach in a knot.
There’s a new barmaid now, a blonde
with fairy wings and fairy wand;
her eyes are wide and blue and slow,
and Hallowe’en was long ago.
Nat feels a dark step-mother queen,
now growing bitter, warty, jealous
of this young, fresh-faced, overzealous
and pretty princess, cute and keen.
She pours her drinks and feels ignored,
resentfully nostalgic, bored.

[229] 7/5

Her friends come to see how she’s doing,
to show off hairdos, shoes and dresses,
and point out who they’re lately screwing.
She listens as each one confesses
that they’re in love, or drunk, or horny,
and praises each boof-headed, brawny
and boring object of affection,
who never looks in her direction
but hides behind an amplifier
or stares intently at his feet,
expressing no desire to meet
yesterday’s news, today’s pariah.
She feels them ground beneath her boot,
but smiles, agreeing that they’re cute.

[230] 8/5

She asks her oldest girlfriend, Deb,
to tell her honestly why she’s
experiencing such an ebb.
“Some people say that you’re a tease,”
Deb answers: “Others say you’re frigid.”
“I’m not! My guidelines may be rigid;
I may be choosy—” “I know that.
Come on. You know I love you, Nat,
but everybody knows you don’t
put out. I mean, if you’re a dyke
then why not find a girl you like?
We all need love—” “Shut up! I won’t
listen to this! Not one more word!”
“I’m only saying what I’ve heard.”

[231] 9/5

Nat walks around Glebe Point, unnerved.
The lamplight shimmers in the water.
Such vitriol, so undeserved—
she feels she’s lost her last supporter.
She treated the persistent rumours
as if they were malignant tumours,
denied them any flesh to suckle
and gave no cause to wink or chuckle—
and now she’s persecuted for it!
Watching the streaming bridge, she tries
to let the traffic hypnotise
her senses, but she can’t ignore it.
She knows her hunger won’t be sated
until she’s rightly reinstated.

[232] 10/5

James comes to visit: “I’ve agreed to
a follow-up—Where Are They Now?”
“Did you do this?” “I didn’t need to.
You did it, Nat. You’ve been a cow.
The public won’t stand being snubbed.
You ought to hear what you’ve been dubbed:
the Witch’s Tit, Ice Queen, for starters—
this is a lonely town for martyrs.”
He’s almost sympathetic, grinning
with cold and graceless victor’s eyes
and makes no effort to disguise
the loathsome, low, last chance of winning
he’s offering. “What will I do?”
“You’ll come with me. We’ll talk it through.”

[233] 11/5

She stands beneath the light and strips,
focussing on the cigarette
that dangles from his curling lips.
“Singlet... skirt... bra... good. No, not yet.”
He leads her to the bed, exchanges
his old butt for a new, arranges
her body coldly into place,
says, “I don’t need to see your face,”
pushes her firmly forward, yanks
her panties down, and slides inside her.
His breath is like a crawling spider
across her back: “Say thanks. Say thanks!”
She cries into the sheet. It’s brief.
What she feels most now is relief.

[234] 12/5

Two or three times before the dawn
he takes what he calls his commission,
leaving her weary, weeping, worn
by one improbable position
after another. When she sleeps,
the night’s entire encounter keeps
replaying in a thousand takes
of tears and sweating. When she wakes,
there’s nothing of him but a note:
If you’d just done that months ago...
I’ll see you round. Your friend and foe.
He didn’t even stay to gloat,
Natasha thinks while getting dressed.
She walks back to the Inner West.

[235] 13/5

Stan sleeps, too, while a single note
measures the beeping of his pulse.
A tube has plunged deep in his throat,
making his chest rise, fall, convulse
and rise again. Joanna reads
works of the Venerable Bede’s
(the closest she can come to praying)
and hopes Stan hears what she is saying.
Stanley’s still resolutely frowning
from his invisible endeavour:
his forehead may be creased forever.
Though he’s recovered from his drowning,
his mind still wanders, lost, and he’s
now caught some waterborne disease.

[236] 14/5

She sees the sunrise and the sunset
and thinks about this nearest star.
She likes to think the future’s unset,
that things so lifeless and so far
away as suns and satellites
can have no bearing on the plights
of thinking creatures. But the days
lighten and dim beneath their gaze,
and warm and cool. She won’t believe
in winning or in losing streaks,
but Stanley’s been this way for weeks,
and should she celebrate or grieve?
The stars stare back at her, and choose
to shed no luminescent clues.

[237] 15/5

She’ll never know what might have done it:
the sound of her insistent reading?
Strawberries by the costly punnet?
Unconscious, undirected pleading?
Alignment of the stars and planets,
garrulous garrison of gannets
gathering outside on the ground—
or has his silent journey found
an answer in the murky deep?
Or is it two of these in tandem,
or more, or is it merely random
that Stanley’s stirring from his sleep,
and thrills Joanna with a wink
and mouths, “I really need a drink”?

[238] 16/5

A round of tests. His brain’s intact
and he can whisper, almost talk,
though his respiratory tract
is ravaged, and he may not walk.
He says he felt her with him nightly;
she hugs him fervently, so tightly
that he complains of indigestion.
She’s trying to decide which question
of all those jostling in her mind
to ask him first. How did he climb
back to her after all this time?
What was it like? What did he find
plumbing his coma’s depths, its rock?
And just what happened on the dock?

[239] 17/5

He answers all of these in one:
“I thought that I was underwater,
looking up at the stars, the sun.
You were up there, but rippling, shorter
than usual. I could hear you calling,
but you were muffled. I was trawling
the harbour, looking for the drowner.
The water thickened, darker, browner;
I couldn’t see. My lungs were bursting.
I talked with corpses, sunk in dreams
and bottom-of-the-harbour schemes
with rotting fingers, wailing, thirsting
for any news from overhead.
But they were all already dead.

[240] 18/5

“I guess I’d had a bit to drink;
my temper was a little warm.
I went down there to cause a stink,
to have a forceful word with Norm.
I was the only one who saw
the accident, the stevedore.
Before I knew it, I was diving.
I knew the chance of him surviving
if I went off for reinforcements…
maybe I thought I’d be a hero
like some Pacino or De Niro
with medals, money and endorsements—
or maybe not. I can’t recall.
Maybe I didn’t think at all.

[241] 19/5

“I fell wrong, maybe jarred my spine.
I tried to swim, but only sank.
I couldn’t breathe against the brine;
it pressed between my teeth. I drank
a gulp or two of something awful;
terrible-tasting, stale—unlawful.
I tried to find the man who fell
but felt like I was down a well.
I struggled, scrambled, lashed and lurched,
until I suddenly felt calm,
as if somebody took my arm
and kept beside me as I searched
the currents and the undertow,
then told me it was time to go.”

[242] 20/5

Joanna leans across the rail
for snatches of the world below:
an underwater kingdom, vale
of salty tears, whose channels flow
with tides of memory, whose shoals
are lined with lost and sightless souls,
singing laments and jeremiads
to unresponsive nymphs and naiads
where Stanley searched. She sees despair
and seaweed roll in bitter eddies;
the heaving ferry lists and steadies.
She tells the captain to take care,
afraid the schizophrenic hulls
will skim the skeletons and skulls.

[243] 21/5

Art rounds the point at Bennelong
and sees the harbour brim with tears
and listens to its whispered song.
The perforated sea appears
secretive as a frozen lake;
the raindrops render it opaque
as rings and ripples merge and muddle
as in an agitated puddle.
Watching its interrupted slate,
Arthur can’t guess what passion lies
beneath its stern and stoic guise,
what paths and sunken journeys wait
beneath its cold and patient swell,
what hopes. He thinks it’s just as well.

[244] 22/5

He thinks about his first exposure
to Gardens and Domain and Chair—
the sun! The nectar and ambrosia!
Blue water, green grass, golden air,
deceitful products of nostalgia,
invade him like a grim neuralgia,
setting his tender teeth on edge,
driving a sharp and painful wedge
of memory into his brain.
He thinks about his humble plans,
as reasonable as any man’s,
now mercilessly down the drain,
and buckles underneath their weight
and turns back from the Gardens’ gate.

[245] 23/5

The glory of the Gardens grows
beyond all plausible proportion:
now every flower was a rose
and neither rain nor need for caution
dampened their earthly Paradise,
and they drank lemonade with ice
and spent the afternoon at croquet,
and everything was always okay.
As he continues to embellish
his memories, he wallows deeper,
feeling as grim as any reaper,
thinking how squalid and how hellish,
by contrast, is his new abode
beside the cold and streaming road.

[246] 24/5

The past is ever more alluring,
the present ever more appalling.
Arthur soon finds it past enduring.
He feels his discontent snowballing
into a mighty avalanche,
making him clench his fists and blanch
with ruthless, overwhelming yearning.
He thought he couldn’t bear returning,
but now he longs for one more taste,
just one more glorious immersion
into this rediscovered version
of Eden. Banished and disgraced,
he nonetheless resolves to sneak
a final, self-destructive peek.

[247] 25/5

But when he gets there, he’s amazed
by the destruction that’s occurred.
The trees are bare; the beds are razed.
He can’t see bat or bee or bird.
The grove is strung with mist, and feels
abandoned: only sullen eels
remain to guard the coming winter.
He winces as a bamboo splinter
pierces the numbness of his foot;
a muddy misstep twists his ankle;
the moss and dripping branches rankle;
the empty lawns and walkways put
him in a melancholy mood
into which nothing can intrude.

[248] 26/5

He comes across the constant colour
of Murray’s brave umbrella camp,
but even that seems sadder, duller.
The skins are torn. The floor is damp.
All of their hip flasks and canteens
are empty; Murray’s out of beans.
They greet each other in a fit
of friendliness, and then just sit.
At nightfall, there are howls and rustles:
an animal, a thief, a bandit,
and Arthur can no longer stand it.
Clutching his head with straining muscles,
he cries, “What’s this? Where’s it all gone?
Who’s done this, and what’s going on?”

[249] 27/5

“I’ve lived here all my life,” says Murray.
“I’ve seen the seasons glow and pale.
The burning sun, the fog, the flurry
of wind and rain, the lethal hail.
This city isn’t bricks and mortar
and history: it’s sand and water.
It’s ruled by sun and moon and tide;
its shifting fortunes coincide
with shifts and patterns in the heavens:
our journey past the sun, the play
of day and night and night and day.
Our progress through the seasons leavens
our lives, and it infects our fates
with times and tides and days and dates.”

[250] 28/5

“That’s bullshit,” Art says. “I don’t buy it.
Too many people build their hopes—
or let them languish—on this diet
of crystal balls and horoscopes.
The stars, the satellites, the shuttle....”
“It’s not like that. It’s much more subtle.
It’s not prediction, just a pattern.
You see the moon’s face starve and fatten,
the days grow shorter, turn and lengthen,
the seasons change, the poles reverse—
and things get better and get worse,
and fortunes ebb, then turn and strengthen.
It’s like a bond—though not a fetter—
that bad things always end up better.”

[251] 29/5

But Arthur feels betrayed and slighted
and doesn’t see his friend today.
He thought the two of them united
against such rank naivete.
Murray’s a mad and muddled mystic;
Art thinks him painfully simplistic—
and, worse than that, too meek, too passive
to persevere against the massive
forces of mischief that are mounting.
He’d rather be alert, though scared,
than comfortable and ill-prepared,
and knows for sure there’s no use counting
on fate or fairy, imp or elf—
it’s up to him to help himself.

[252] 30/5

Glenn mounts a desperate attempt
to free himself from this disaster.
It’s all gone wrong. He never dreamt
his life could plummet, ever faster,
into such infamous debacle.
His pen and pencil used to sparkle,
but now they grate across the cartridge.
He draws a shoe, a cow, a partridge
in a pear tree, and endless worthless
designs. It used to be a thrill
to sketch the sunset on a hill,
to mould a face. But now it’s mirthless,
a chore that hurts his heart and hands
with trade marks, logos, badges, brands.

[253] 31/5

The spectral form of Marshall Marshall
is rarely seen around the firm.
The oldest partner, cold, impartial,
invoked to make designers squirm
with abstract and free-floating terror
of making any slip or error—
he’s here with Glenn. “It seems that you
have bitten more than you can chew,”
he says, benevolently brutal.
“I think we’ll take you off the case
and find someone to take your place
and give you something else to footle
around with—something less essential.
It seems we’ve misjudged your potential.”

[254] 1/6

And so, for all his sins and vices
spotted and punished all at once,
Glenn’s back to drawing petrol prices,
a pointy-headed, cornered dunce.
He fumes and suffers, sends well-wishers
away with louder and more vicious
dismissals as the day progresses,
and keeps his head down, and suppresses
the urge to go completely postal—
attack his colleagues with dividers,
hook up with motorcycle riders
and set up somewhere distant, coastal,
a new identity, to live
forever as a fugitive.

[255] 2/6

Instead, the sunny psychotropics
provide a well-deserved escape.
He teaches on a thousand topics;
dull and dilated pupils drape
their bodies over their instructor.
He feels their heat; he’s a conductor
snatching the ions from the air
as fingers crackle through his hair,
charged with the rising scent of sex.
The rumours radiate in ripples;
the room is full of reaching nipples
brushing his face—but they’re not Bec’s,
so Glenn must suck on ice cubes, cork
his passion, close his eyes, and talk.

[256] 3/6

Natasha stands and feels her body,
decides it’s excellently built:
nothing inferior or shoddy.
But something’s different. Is it guilt?
She doesn’t think so. Sex with James
could hardly be called fun and games,
but maybe it’s released some power.
She poses in the steaming shower,
sticking her chest out, arms akimbo,
and feels a twitch between her legs
for which a humble half-world begs,
and wonders whether every bimbo
who ever took a slurred proposal
felt such a force at her disposal.

[257] 4/6

Back at the bar, she feels neglected,
almost invisible, transparent,
alone. It’s not what she expected.
She thought these animals, these arrant
degenerates, would know that she’d
been tumbled, tarnished, done the deed,
and kill themselves to be the next.
But they ignore her. She’s perplexed,
and pours and mixes, fumes and flames
until she’s cornered by a crook
who gives her a familiar look
and coolly murmurs, “I know James.
I thought that we might—well, you know.
What time do you get off?” “Let’s go.”

[258] 5/6

Glenn knows that girls have learned to trust him
and love to gather round him, since
he means no harm, and they can dust him
with glitter, kisses, fingerprints,
as if he were a kindly cousin.
Tonight, he sits with half a dozen,
the sexiest of all sextets,
who know he’ll cause them no regrets,
who know he’s genuinely gentle,
who let him compliment their breasts
and lean his head against their chests,
who know there’s something fundamental
that stops him crossing their bright line:
their suited suitor suits them fine.

[259] 6/6

But then there’s Pyrrha. “There you are,”
she murmurs. “Where have you been hiding?”
Glenn almost chokes on his cigar
and looks around him, nervous, sliding
into the cushions of his couch,
brushing her off. “Don’t be a grouch,”
she says: “I heard about your job.”
“It’s fine. Leave me alone.” “Don’t fob
me off like that, Glenn. I’m your friend.”
She sits beside him on the sofa:
“I’ll take you home.” “You’re not my chauffeur.”
“I know I’m not. But let’s pretend.”
She rises, beckons him to stand.
He frowns, but lets her take his hand.

[260] 7/6

Another night, another bed.
Natasha’s on her hands and knees,
giving enthusiastic head,
shrugging away the hands that seize
her scalp to pull her close and choke her.
Another bed, another smoker:
his skin is yellow and smells stale
beneath the smell of sweaty male.
He seemed all right in the beginning:
an actor, avid angler, Aries.
But now he’s muttering Hail Marys,
begging forgiveness for his sinning.
Another time, another place.
She grimaces and wipes her face.

[261] 8/6

Glenn knows he’s heading for more peril
with Pyrrha than he cares to mention.
She’s unpredictable, half-feral;
he isn’t sure of her intention.
Unlike his group of doting ravers,
as frivolous as semi-quavers,
she has the patience and persistence
to overcome his pale resistance.
She locks her lips against his lips.
behind his eyes a battle rages:
he’s not been kissed like this for ages,
so kind, so tender... but he slips
away in time to see her swoon
and call to him, “I’ll see you soon”.

[262] 9/6

Another night, another lover—
the word sounds worn and out of date.
Natasha feels she’s undercover
in a new world where lovers hate
their lovers as they hate themselves.
She feels infected as she delves
into this misbegotten mire,
as loneliness infects desire,
as emptiness and fear infect
the patterns of her body’s pleasure,
as if each meeting takes a measure
of flesh and blood and self-respect,
as calculated, fireless fervour
can claim the most detached observer.

[263] 10/6

Another night of sweat and stains,
a night of scratching and of biting:
a Buddhist with more balls than brains,
who tears her clothes off while reciting
the gentle teachings of Siddhartha
and pacifist desiderata,
and why it’s grand to hug a tree,
and bends her, shocked, across his knee
and gives vent to his thing for spanking.
He fucks according to the tantra,
repeating a relentless mantra
for hours on end, and has Nat thanking
her tardy stars when all things pass.
She leaves with bruises on her arse.

[264] 11/6

Glenn can’t believe that Pyrrha’s nervous:
her wide, dark eyes, her trembling lips.
Tonight they’re dining silver service
against the Quay. They watch the ships
hauling dark shapes and bright reflections
and plan escapes, discuss defections,
and kiss again. She tastes divine,
like Hill of Grace, like Grange, like wine
Glenn can’t afford to even taste.
Later, they walk along the Quay,
watching the moonlit ripples flee,
and Glenn takes Pyrrha by the waist
and talks of distant harbours, rivers
and ports, while Pyrrha, nervous, shivers.

[265] 12/6

He feels he’s treading on a tightrope,
or sailing close to fearsome Scylla.
If he can only pull the right rope,
keep his hand steady on the tiller,
then maybe he’ll avoid disaster.
But here’s Charybdis, swirling vaster,
and here he is in Pyrrha’s room,
watching a waving flame consume
the body of a bottled candle,
and Pyrrha’s only wearing knickers.
The shadow of his body flickers
against hers, more than he can handle.
He holds her close and tries to sleep,
and counts eleven thousand sheep.

[266] 13/6

Another night. This time it’s tender;
Nat knows he can’t believe his luck.
He’s handsome, half-blind, supple, slender,
thoughtful and thankful—thunderstruck—
earnest and accurate with tongue
and more than adequately hung.
He sears her with a friendly fire;
she moves with genuine desire.
He holds her gaze and strokes her forehead
and leaves behind a kinder note
than James’s. Reading what he wrote,
she swallows, almost weeps, feels horrid—
I’d like to take you on a date—
but crushes it. It’s much too late.

[267] 14/6

The scene is set, the curtain drawn,
sealing this featherbedded crypt
and fate together. Though Glenn’s torn
by loyalty, he’s also ripped,
and nothing outside seems to matter:
he feels his sturdy scruples scatter
before a dry and ruthless wind.
He feels remote. He’s scalped and skinned.
His shaking fingers ache to clutch
her body, full of rich surprises,
to his. She twists and arches, rises
to cauterise him with her touch.
He feels her heat against his skin,
and slips, and falters, and gives in.

[268] 15/6

They fold together, and Glenn freezes,
looking down from a dizzy ledge.
She wraps her legs around him, squeezes,
pulling him closer to the edge.
He shakes his head. He’s pale. He fears
that he’ll dissolve in floods of tears
and floods of furious orgasm
if they betray the merest spasm.
he lies inside her like a stone,
tracing her shoulder, breast and hip,
kissing her, careful not to slip
until he’s able to postpone
his climax through a slow ascent
that leaves them absent, distant, spent.

[269] 16/6

Natasha’s full. She feels a vessel
for half the city’s spiteful uses,
a mortar for each careless pestle
to pound its powders. She seduces
or is seduced—it’s all the same—
and finds herself caught in a game
where someone else has made the rules:
the fascists, fetishists and fools
who need revenge or affirmation
or any other nameless need,
who cry, who want to see her bleed,
who sublimate their lives’ frustration
into this all-consuming urge
to dominate, to flee, to purge.

[270] 17/6

“So this is what the city wants,”
Natasha mutters. “All its views,
its fancy bars and restaurants,
its yachts are nothing but a ruse.
It’s only nickel-plated tin,
it’s only there to suck you in.
If it can deify you first,
if it infects you with its thirst
before it strikes, so much the better.
It’s shiny, sparkling, slick and sunny,
flowing with tailored silk and money,
but that’s all part of its vendetta,
the battleships in its armada.
It’s only there to fuck you harder.”

[271] 18/6

Summer has long since turned its back
upon the hemisphere, and winter
zealously steps up its attack,
yearning to sink its teeth, a sprinter
lunging towards the finish line,
a parasite, a strangling vine
obsequious against an oak
with only one more twist to choke
the lifeblood from its failing host.
The days and nights are cold and clear,
and mists and spectacles appear:
a revenant, a dead king’s ghost
sent to remind us all—too late—
that things are rotten in the State.

[272] 19/6

The White Bay wind is close to freezing
and scrapes across the city’s throats.
The water’s thick, and Arthur’s sneezing,
walking among the floodlit boats.
It may be more than he can bear:
it’s in his aging bones, his hair,
his overworn and wrinkling skin.
He finds there’s no room at the inn,
the shelters bursting with the snap.
He prays for anything: a storm,
blanket of clouds to keep him warm—
or maybe company to wrap
his spirit in, to set things straight.
He goes to make up with his mate.

[273] 20/6

The moon has set, and the stars light
the gardens like a troubled dream,
shadows of lifeless black and white.
Art hears an interrupted scream
and rushes to attain the hill.
Scattered and torn umbrellas fill
the lawn below, and darkened figures
appear to dance. One shouts. One sniggers.
A glinting arc, a buried knife,
a voiceless cry, a startled hiss,
a kneeling and an earthy kiss.
Art runs as if for his own life,
but when he gets there, three have fled.
One’s left. It’s Murray. Murray’s dead.

[274] 21/6

This is a sombre celebration.
The solstice is the longest night,
the shortest day: what consolation
could raise it to a cheery rite?
Only that midwinter’s arrival
heralds a triumph of survival,
a promise that we’ve seen the worst,
that fortune, plummeting head-first,
has missed the ground and changed direction.
The days and nights will reconcile,
the sun will greet us with a smile,
and the past months might find reflection
in better days and weeks to come.
Is that enough? Perhaps for some.

[275] 22/6

But what of those who just can’t make it?
Who feel that fortune’s slings and arrows
are too unkind for them to take it
a moment longer? Who watch sparrows
cascading from the winter sky,
consider that all lilies die,
and can’t quite see around the bend?
Their solstice is an unmet friend,
a Godot who has made them wait
a fateful day or two too long,
a drunken messenger gone wrong,
a pardon that arrives too late.
They sit in patience, to be told
their comfort’s on the table, cold.

[276] 23/6

Art hums a requiem for Murray
and trudges Ms Macquarie’s mud,
a sodden soup, a silted slurry
diluted with his brother’s blood.
Poor Murray, with his simple trust
that nothing could be so unjust
as to deny his modest dream,
embracing his ascetic theme
as if an amulet or charm.
He thought that he could live, let live—
reflective, undemonstrative—
and in return be safe from harm;
he never thought that hoons or hicks
would want to kill him just for kicks.

[277] 24/6

The weekend papers’ feature scribes
engineer earnest epitaphs
and cobble hasty diatribes
in countless clichéd paragraphs.
They vale the Umbrella Man
(who was he?) and propose a ban
on homeless people in the park
(for their own good). He made his mark
on all our hearts, they all lament.
The way that he enjoyed his lot...
whether we spoke to him or not.
The city turns without dissent
to curse the creatures who assailed him,
and doesn’t ask who really failed him.

[278] 25/6

Joanna feels she, too, is failing.
She’s happy that her father’s home,
but he’s still broken, and still ailing:
some chemical, some oil, some foam
that floated in the stagnant bay
is floating in his blood today.
He wheezes when he breathes, turns green,
complains of twinges in his spleen,
and sweats in sudden chills and fevers.
He can’t eat anything but soup,
and when he walks, an angry stoop
does battle with the rusty levers
that join his ligaments and bones,
provoking creaks and grunts and groans.

[279] 26/6

“I can’t stand this, Jo. It’s too much.
I’m too young to be geriatric.
I was a starting forward, touch
or tackle; I could take a hat trick
against the keenest teenage batters.
What do I do now?” “Nothing matters
except your getting better now.”
“I wish it were that simple. How
are we supposed to live until
I get back on my feet? We’re broke;
There’s nothing in the bank but smoke.
How do we pay the doctor’s bill?”
“It’ll be fine. Relax,” says Jo,
but with her shrug says: I don’t know.

[280] 27/6

She’s struggling underneath a swamp
of pamphlets, documents and forms,
the guardians of worker’s comp.
She’s navigated through the swarms
of red tape, loopholes and disclaimers
impertinent as lion-tamers,
and come against a shrugging wall.
“It was an accidental fall,”
their representative concedes,
“but Stanley had no business there,
and he was drunk, and we can’t wear
the cost of this.” Joanna reads
the fine print till her vision blurs
and unproductively demurs.

[281] 28/6

“It says right here, in the award—”
“You know that’s just for employees—”
“You promised him. This is a fraud—”
“Your father’s on a contract. He’s
been paid well. He’s been well looked after....”
Their condescending tones, their laughter,
their slick and watertight responses,
this ponderous pontoon of ponces
drives her to furious distraction.
“This isn’t over, you hear me?
He’s twice the man you’ll ever be,
all put together!” Their reaction
(“You’d better tell it to the jury”)
serves only to increase her fury.

[282] 29/6

She tries to keep an even keel;
she won’t allow the smallest chink
to compromise her mask of steel.
“Maybe he’d had a bit to drink.
Maybe he wasn’t meant to be
at work that night. And maybe he
was never technically employed.
But you should all be overjoyed
that he should be there. He’s a hero.
A man had fallen overboard.
The chance—award or no award—
of Stanley standing by was zero:
he had no choice.” But they’re unstirred,
and say, “That isn’t what we’ve heard.”

[283] 30/6

“We know the whole—alleged—saga.
We’re sorry, but the facts don’t point
to anything but too much lager.
If it were different, we’d anoint
your father as our patron saint,
make him our mascot. But it ain’t.
There was no mishap—check the logs—
and nothing in the bay but frogs.
Who knows what Stanley thought he saw—
pink elephants, drowned dwarfs and such—
and we admire his courage, Dutch
or otherwise, but it’s the law
that only real catastrophes
can help in cases such as these.”

[284] 1/7

Stanley’s bewildered by the news.
“What do they mean, no one fell in?
They think I did it to amuse
myself? I’d sooner save my skin!”
“Do you remember who it was?”
“I didn’t see.” “How come?” “Because
the man was floating belly-down.
That’s why I thought that he would drown!
I obviously didn’t save him;
I don’t deserve the Nobel Prize.
But he was there before my eyes,
right in the water, and I gave him
the best I could—believe me, kid.”
“I do,” she says. “I know you did.”

[285] 2/7

She sees that Stanley’s convalescence
is hampered by this painful issue.
It’s flattening his effervescence
and tearing at his very tissue
and drowning him in discontent;
it bends him as his back is bent.
She thinks about him as she twists
a rope around a bollard, fists
feeling the heat beneath her gloves.
She concentrates on her belaying
as if it were a way of saying
that she believes in Stanley, loves
him foremost in her heart and mind
with knots that stay and ties that bind.

[286] 3/7

Across the city, Glenn unravels
as if he were a silver thread.
His conscience has been casting cavils
around his unresponsive head,
reverberating longer, louder,
fighting to penetrate the chowder
that passes for his addled brains.
His swollen cerebrum contains
surging electric storms, a torrent
of signals darting right and left,
a tapestry, a warp and weft,
some welcome, some absurd, abhorrent,
a costume for a masquerade
caught on a nail, unwoven, frayed.

[287] 4/7

He leaves her in the morning, vowing
through wreaths of morning mist and guilt
that there’s no chance of his allowing
this to continue, that he’ll jilt
her finally before the dusk.
He’s sickened by the clinging musk
that cloys his fingers and his nose.
He’s sticky with her, feels her close
around his body, feels imprisoned.
He thinks he’s been entangled, fooled.
If he’s not careful, he’ll be ruled
until he’s old and grey and wizened
with priests and mourners in attendance;
he clamours for his independence.

[288] 5/7

But by the afternoon he’s struggling.
His mouth is dry; his head is aching.
The light’s too bright; he’s too dim, juggling
a thousand painful tasks, mistaking
ruby-red pigment for red ruby,
an HB pencil for a 2B,
an A3 setting for an A4—
costly mistakes he’ll have to pay for.
Remorse and failure overwhelm
his resolution as they turn
his groaning engines hard astern
and lock them there, and lash the helm
to its repeating, circling course
with firm and unrelenting force.

[289] 6/7

And by the night he’s learned amnesia
and other swell synaptic tricks
like synergy and synaesthesia.
He’s feeling fine. He’s found his fix,
and now his blood runs hot and sweet,
his eyes are hungry, and his feet
dazzle and pirouette and twinkle
above the ground. He’s Rip Van Winkle
awaking from a mighty snooze
with one almighty morning boner,
transformed from brooding, angry loner
to sex-bomb with a blazing fuse,
directing pyrotechnic charms
at Pyrrha, with her open arms.

[290] 7/7

And every night the sex gets better.
He learns her curves, her gaps, her limbs,
translating from a blank Rosetta
into a lavish book of hymns
with notes that climb above the clef,
ring in their ears, and leave them deaf.
They learn to hold and to let go;
their pleasure’s on a new plateau
that almost beggars his belief.
But in the end it all collapses,
leaking away from cooled synapses,
dashing off like a dashing thief,
as Glenn is overcome, and takes
his leave of her before he wakes.

[291] 8/7

A ferry, and a walk of shame,
a suited, stubbled, pre-dawn trekker.
He hears somebody calls his name
and looks up, startled. It’s Rebecca.
She’s huddled under his verandah,
a black-eyed, tear-stained, doleful panda.
“I came to see if you’re all right.
I’ve been out here all fucking night.”
He searches for an explanation
but feels his face revealing all.
She stands up, gorgeous, tanned and tall,
and without further hesitation
she glares at him with dying suns
and pushes past his arm, and runs.

[292] 9/7

Of course he followed her. He tried.
He ran for her, but she was faster.
He panted for her, gasped and cried,
and watched her fade, and tried to plaster
the air with words, with pleading flyers,
the pale advertisements of liars.
He prompted lights along the street
and felt his failing kneecaps meet
the ground, and knew that all was lost.
He’d never find her. Anyway,
what could he ever do or say?
He’d had his fun, and paid the cost,
predictable as any lyric.
His victory was deathly pyrrhic.

[293] 10/7

Natasha’s suffered heavy losses
as well, pursuing her campaign.
The sun has just come up. She crosses
the city in the scattered rain,
the tram tracks and the monorail,
a poster for a winter sale.
She tilts her head, and the rain rinses
her memory away. She winces;
her body feels the night before.
She’s worried. Things are getting rough;
it’s obviously not enough
for them to fuck her anymore.
It doesn’t matter how they take her:
they won’t be happy till they break her.

[294] 11/7

It seems as though the word is spreading,
and she’s the subject of discussion
again. She’s not sure where it’s heading:
a gamble, a tontine, a Russian
roulette. She feels the city’s need
lapping against her with its greed
for something only she can offer,
and she no longer plays the scoffer
but now enslaves it by indulging
its appetites. It’s made her bitter
and bruised her. But she’s not a quitter.
she’ll stand before its growing, bulging
collection of depraved desires;
she’ll stand unburnt upon its pyres.

[295] 12/7

Some have been very naughty boys
and yet, perversely, want to spank her.
Some bring along their tools and toys,
and one’s a dedicated wanker
who sees her as a giant Kleenex.
A flabby man with two or three necks
wants her to ride him like a horse,
and there are whips and chains, of course.
She learns to recognise the trends:
the need to hurt and to be hurt,
to keep clean and embrace the dirt,
to be alone and brag to friends,
to be exposed and hidden. “What?”
she cries. “Is that the best you’ve got?”

[296] 13/7

She knows that she can take all comers,
however sordid their perversions.
The freaks, the pussy-loving plumbers
who want to bring along their Persians,
the men in masks. She’s not a fool:
she sees her body as a tool,
a supple implement of trade—
and, after all, she’s getting laid
in quite extraordinary ways,
exhilaratingly and madly.
It doesn’t even hurt too badly
when carpets burn and handcuffs graze;
she doesn’t think she’s met her match
even when careless kittens scratch.

[297] 14/7

But things are getting more extreme.
The rumours spread, the ante’s upped.
Each night reveals a private dream
more questionable, more corrupt.
The urgent thumb that almost throttles,
the eager Coca-Cola bottles.
One wants to slash his chest with cuts
and bleed against them both: “You’re nuts,”
she says, disturbed. “Get going, mister.”
He takes his razor home. Another
makes her pretend that she’s his mother,
his cousin, aunt and older sister.
One wants to stigmatise her palms;
another almost breaks her arms.

[298] 15/7

She takes the weekend off to rest,
to check and lick each battle-wound.
A scratch, some bruising in the breast,
pulled muscles. In the bathtub, pruned,
her body gives up its complaints.
Natasha feels herself, acquaints
herself completely with her armour’s
new dents, and puts on her pyjamas
to curl up with a half-read novel.
Who’s frigid now, and who’s a tease?
Notoriously hard to please?
They tried to snub her; now they grovel
between her legs, beneath her feet,
and lick her, and pronounce her sweet.

[299] 16/7

On Glebe Point Road, a lazy Sunday
sizzles with scrambled eggs and bacon.
Natasha wonders whether one day
she’ll come to rue the path she’s taken,
and whether one day market stalls
and cinemas in shopping malls
will come to represent her lot.
If so, she’s glad for what she’s got.
The winter sun leaves her recharged;
her toes enjoy the chilly grass;
she smiles as suits and ferals pass.
She feels her confidence enlarged:
back up the creek to find her paddle;
back in the sack, back in the saddle.

[300] 17/7

Arthur lies waiting for the chill
to pass him by. He’s by the gym.
He’s dressed in shivers, feeling ill;
his eyes are red and cold, and brim
with brine although the winter wind
has lost its breath, and the sun’s grinned
apologetically since dawn.
He doesn’t want to be reborn
into a world of so much menace,
a world of great and petty evils
and unpredictable upheavals
that plays its citizens like tennis,
serving them straight into the net
in every game and every set.

[301] 18/7

He finds another paper clipping—
The Man Who’s Under the Umbrella—
a rerun of the murder, slipping
to history. The story-teller
has unearthed most of Murray’s life,
located daughters and a wife,
the rise and fall of his career,
his legendary wit and cheer.
Art learns things that he didn’t know
about the man he called his friend,
but no reporter could have penned
a story that would truly show
the world what it will have to miss
forever, after all of this.

[302] 19/7

Arthur feels awfully alone—
the loneliness of having lost
the only person that he’s known
in Sydney. Tired and tempest-tossed,
a solitary Thursday Crusoe,
he can’t leave White Bay now: to do so
would be to leave himself exposed.
The city’s boarded up and closed
as far as Arthur is concerned.
It’s better to be close to home;
it’s comforting and monochrome.
There may be mischief, but he’s learned
to scurry out of mischief’s way;
he’s safe here. This is where he’ll stay.

[303] 20/7

This morning, though, the rising sun,
tilting above the early cloud,
does something that it hasn’t done,
it seems, for weeks: it melts the shroud
of mist that scrapes the building-tops
and glitters on the city, hops
across the harbour’s tidal swell,
darting between the waves, pell-mell,
and catches Arthur’s eyes, his hands
as cold as mossy, sculpted stones,
and dives on in, and warms his bones,
and wraps his heavy heart with bands
of pale and thinly-beaten gold,
and takes the anger from the cold.

[304] 21/7

Perhaps he’ll call it Murray’s gift:
to see and hear above the noise
as day and night begin to drift
into a fairer counterpoise;
to see that night is falling later;
to see the sunset cast a freighter
in glorious and golden rays
superior to yesterday’s;
to watch the morning’s first pink feathers
stretching across untouched frontiers
of winter sky like pioneers—
to know that, after all, good weather’s
returning to these frozen climes,
with tales and gifts and better times.

[305] 22/7

But dawn’s deferred as Jo’s alarm
sends shocks and shivers through her doona;
the morning’s reassuring balm
still lingers, distant, a lacuna
that leaves Joanna in the dark,
sometimes aboard an empty ark,
sometimes a rattling, floodlit train.
She presses to the windowpane
to see the silent city sleeping,
and knows they’ll wake to meet a day
that hasn’t made it out her way
just yet. She doesn’t know what’s keeping
the dawn from knocking at her door,
the spring tide from her yawning shore.

[306] 23/7

When Stanley sees the coming spring,
it only serves to make him restless.
He’s bored. “I can’t do anything,”
he says. “I’ve got no breath; I’m chestless.
By now I should be getting better,
not sitting like a lump of feta
that’s going mouldy in the fridge!”
“You’ll soon be standing on the bridge
or racing in a racing yacht,”
Joanna says: “It won’t be long.”
He turns away: “I think you’re wrong.
They’ve taken everything I’ve got.
Sometimes I think I should have drowned
instead of this: I’ve run aground.”

[307] 24/7

She hates to leave him in these moods,
but answers to the ferry deck
as usual. Milling multitudes
surround her, and she has to check
this ferry-ten or that blue weekly,
assuage the pensioners who meekly
inquire about their destination,
help out the tourists on vacation.
In fact, she’s helping everyone,
cheerful in affect and expression,
a credit to the whole profession.
And after everything she’s done,
would anybody think it slack
if she should ask for something back?

[308] 25/7

She spies on her suburban sailors
discreetly, carefully observant.
She knows the judges from the jailers;
she can tell who’s a public servant
who might work in the right department
to tell her what this term of art meant,
that definition signified,
who might be moved to take her side.
Or maybe she’ll approach a banker
whose heart is of a softer stone,
who’ll pre-approve her for a loan,
a banker’s bagatelle to thank her
for all her hard work, as a mate—
reflected in the interest rate.

[309] 26/7

Thick folders, glasses, frown: a lawyer.
She beams. “And how are we today, sir?
Say a recalcitrant employer....”
She gives an outline of her case. “Er—
this isn’t really in my field—
Acts are amended and repealed—
but if there’s an emergency,
as there is here, it seems to me
the definitions are expanded....”
“You mean you’ll represent me?” “Oh no.
We don’t do very much pro bono.”
She’s thanking him for being candid
when he says, “Then again, we might—
if evidence should come to light.”

[310] 27/7

A tape recorder, pad: a journo
reading the paper with her feet up.
“A travesty. A sheer inferno
of lies,” Jo prompts. “Sounds like a beat-up,”
says the intrepid news reporter:
“But stevedores? Polluted water?
It could be good for circulation.
Of course we’ll need corroboration
or else, you know, it might be libel....”
Jo looks around again. A surgeon?
Perhaps a sacrificial virgin?
A priest with rosary and Bible?
Someone in real estate might hold
great-grandpa’s house—but it’s been sold.

[311] 28/7

She’s in a race against the clock:
Stan’s getting desperate, getting sicker.
He’s started hanging round the dock,
beneath the gantries, swigging liquor,
wrapped in a beat-up leather jacket,
bent double like an aching bracket.
She sees him sometimes in the distance,
in this peripheral existence,
and escalates her sweeping search,
scouring the ferries to locate
a saviour in the fourth estate,
the bar, the bench, even the church:
she sure that one of these commuters
will free them from their persecutors.

[312] 29/7

Glenn, for one, wishes he could help.
Through salty glass he overhears
the deckhand’s overtures, the yelp
of ruthlessly resisted tears
that infiltrates her cool control.
He leans to listen to the whole
of her entreaty, but he catches
only the insufficient snatches
allowed him by the fickle wind.
Now all the ferry’s stories mingle
and drown hers, and she doesn’t single
him out—this onetime wunderkind
quite obviously can’t produce
any result of any use.

[313] 30/7

He feels he’s waking from a fugue,
a feather-footed, frenzied flight,
carnival canons from a Moog,
a symphony of coloured light.
Now, suddenly, the party’s over,
and samba, tango, bossa nova
pause in a thunderous mid-step,
and scaredy-cats no longer hep
have lost their rhythm, and are tripping
and crashing into broken piles,
rocking and rolling in the aisles,
and someone’s hands are redly dripping
and horrified, and everyone
wonders what he or she has done.

[314] 31/7

Rebecca’s visit was a puncture
in the dream-world that he’d created,
the flimsy film that, till that juncture,
had stretched its soapy hues and waited
for its inevitable breach.
It only took Rebecca’s reach,
an introduction of the actual,
to compromise his counterfactual
and send it into scattered scraps,
the rubber of a burst balloon,
leaving him howling at the moon,
cursing the heavens for his lapse,
denouncing gods of every name,
looking for someone else to blame.

[315] 1/8

Pyrrha’s an obvious contender,
ideal as far as scapegoats go.
Her plan to resolutely render
him powerless to answer no
has been a runaway success.
Though he’s the one who answered yes—
he knows it, and he can’t deny it—
she’ll cause him nothing but disquiet
as long as he’s compelled to live
with his regrets. She’s a reminder
of days when he was dumber, blinder:
until he’s able to forgive
himself, he won’t forgive her either.
He calls to say he needs a breather.

[316] 2/8

He calls to see if Bec is calmer.
She is. “You didn’t have to call.
There’s no room here for melodrama,
so don’t apologise. Don’t crawl.
Nothing between us can be mended.
Everything’s finished, Glenn. It’s ended.
Maybe it wasn’t realistic,
and maybe we were masochistic
to put ourselves in that position
at all. I only wish you’d told me
the honest truth, and not cajoled me—
against my better intuition—
into believing things were fine.
Goodbye.” And silence fills the line.

[317] 3/8

Denied by Bec, denying Pyrrha,
he walks along the patient river,
humming a lonely tirra lirra,
watching the rushes bend and quiver.
Nostalgia fills him, ruthless, vivid:
Rebecca’s image rising, livid
and tear-stained, never more attractive,
combining in some retroactive
elision with her naked form,
the way he knew her long ago,
her eager body, long and slow,
languid and cool as it was warm
with whispers. As he bites his lip
he feels his heart’s stretched muscles rip.

[318] 4/8

At work, he’s going through the motions,
dishearteningly tracing hearts
for philtres, pheromones and potions
applied in the romantic arts,
making a cooing turtle-dove
crap on the heads of those in love.
He finds that he can’t stand the city’s
derivative design committees,
its stainless steel and silver bars,
its silver-haired and suited sect
arguing over the correct
pronunciation of shiraz—
but they’ve not swamped the suburbs yet,
so that’s where Glenn drinks to forget.

[319] 5/8

Towards the tail end of her shift
Natasha’s gasping for a drink.
She’s flagging, and she needs a lift—
or else she simply needs to sink
in alcohol’s swift anaesthetic.
She looks good, though, and feels magnetic,
and all around her point and whisper—
the raconteur, the fool, the lisper,
the gadabout, the rake, the bumbler—
and anybody she prefers
to take tonight will soon be hers.
She gratefully accepts a tumbler,
drinks deep. “What’s this?” “A Mickey Finn.”
Fading, she murmurs, “Oh? What’s in....”

[320] 6/8

The morning’s metal grey. She’s folded
against a corner. Rusting hulls
and chains loom over her; she’s scolded
awake by the complaints of gulls.
The air is damp and thickly misted.
She tries to move. Her skirt is twisted,
her shirt a mess of fraying thread.
It hurts. Her fingers come back red
from straightening her underpants.
She can’t remember what she drank
or what she did. Her mind’s a blank.
She looks around: the man’s bent stance
reflects hers as he stoops and sees.
She struggles to him. “Help me, please.”

[321] 7/8

The bathtub fills with curls of blood.
Natasha shuts her eyes and hears
her heartbeat’s hypertensive thud
thunder in underwater ears.
Worse than the evidence of violence
is the inexorable silence
that answers every time she probes
her memory, the velvet robes
that fold across the night’s events.
There’s nothing in her mind but static.
Perhaps it’s something automatic—
some mechanism of defence,
some merciful retreat—but Nat
knows it’s more sinister than that.

[322] 8/8

Was she awake, or in a stupor,
or was she totally out cold?
Did she resist? Was she a trooper
who giggled drunkenly, and told
them they could do just what they liked?
She gathers that her drink was spiked,
and that can only mean it’s rape—
she searches for a clear-cut shape
for her reaction. She’s enraged,
but through her anger she sees flecks
of guilt. She wanted to have sex
with someone; was this set-up staged,
in part, by her? Could her assault
somehow turn out to be her fault?

[323] 9/8

She knows she shouldn’t think that way;
she knows it isn’t complicated.
She had sex when she had no say
about it: she’s been violated.
If her consent was drugged or tricked,
it wasn’t hers. The law is strict.
But many people think that flirts
are apt to get their just deserts.
And many innocents coerce
reluctant partners using threats,
or promise favours, call in debts:
were Nat’s attackers so much worse
than opportunists such as James?
This is the thought that shocks and shames.

[324] 10/8

She thought she knew what she was doing,
but now thinks maybe she was wrong,
and maybe she’s been misconstruing
her motivation all along.
Maybe this lecherous response
isn’t exactly what she wants.
Her stooping saviour on the dock,
staring in sympathetic shock
at this dog-eared and battered tome
as if she were an empty page,
murmured “My daughter’s round your age,”
and helped her up, and helped her home.
Something about his words, his eyes,
tugs at her now. She sits and cries.

[325] 11/8

Stan tells the story: “It was early,
the first shift hadn’t started yet,
and there she was, this poor young girlie,
alone and frightened and upset.
She wasn’t well at all; in fact
she looked as though she’d been attacked,
although she said she’d no idea
what happened, how she happened here.
She wasn’t far from home; I took her,
and waited while she had a shower
and cleaned up—maybe half an hour.
She hardly spoke. I said I’d cook her
an omelette, or some scrambled eggs,
but she just sat and held her legs.”

[326] 12/8

“What were you doing there?” “Just taking
a walk. You should have seen it, Jo.
Red ripples as the dawn was breaking,
the clouds like mountains capped with snow,
hearing the swarms of seagulls squabble.
and there she was. She had to hobble,
couldn’t walk properly—like me.
We must have been a sight to see
if anybody could have watched:
a pair of pale parentheses
bewildered by the harbour breeze.
We were the bungled and the botched,
the old dog and abandoned whelp.
I’m just glad I was there to help.”

[327] 13/8

“I’m glad as well,” says Jo, annoyed.
“But shouldn’t you have been in bed?
You ought to rest up, and avoid
the sea air like the doctor said.”
“How can I? I’m the port protector.
I have to guard the cargo sector
and oversee the ocean trader.
I’m like some kind of caped crusader.”
“That’s how you got yourself in trouble
to start with,” Jo says. “Now you’re sick
and talking like a lunatic.
And superheroes don’t have stubble.”
“You’re right! I need a jaw of granite.
I’ll shave myself and save the planet.”

[328] 14/8

True to his word, he disappears
earlier each day, comes home later.
He walks the waterfronts and weirs,
a lame and land-locked navigator
with sails and rigging tightly furled,
prospecting for his brave new world.
“I can’t sit still, let alone lie
in bed until it’s time to die,”
he says. “I need to be productive.
If I can help somebody out,
then surely that’s what it’s about.”
“Not if it’s plainly self-destructive,”
Jo argues, but to no avail.
Stanley’s weighed anchor and set sail.

[329] 15/8

She keeps an eye out on the water,
amazed at just how far he’s getting:
the city’s heart, and each aorta,
each leaking vein in its bloodletting.
The Hawkesbury, the Parramatta,
the finish line of a regatta,
Rushcutters, Rose and Double Bays
where toddlers and romantics graze,
Woolloomooloo and Garden Island
and Neutral Bay and Kirribilli.
His journey’s random, willy-nilly;
she’ll spot him now and then, and smile, and
watching his hobbled, doubled gait
hope that he won’t be out too late.

[330] 16/8

The working stiffs unfold their papers
with swift and synchronised precision
between apartments and skyscrapers,
spreading before Jo in a vision
of strange, identical broadsheets,
as if they’d taken to the streets
in polite protest, waving placards
promoting Packers, Hewlett Packards,
switching with almost perfect timing
to hold up soap stars and stock sages.
The choral whispering of pages,
regular as the town hall’s chiming,
can almost make her tap her feet
along the ferries’ business beat.

[331] 17/8

Freeway apartments hurtle by,
providing interrupted views
of lives lived low and hearts held high.
As they flick on the evening news
the same moon-faces peer at Glenn—
the same austere and balding men,
the same enunciating girls—
connected like a string of pearls,
bathing a thousand meals and cuddles
with one blue light, one urgent tune,
kaleidoscopic like the moon
reflected in a thousand puddles.
Great blocks of life on either side,
caught in a net that’s broadcast wide.

[332] 18/8

These days, Glenn never heads straight back
to empty house and silent phone,
nor nightly news. He’s lost the knack
for spending any time alone.
Pyrrha’s infallible arrangement
has vanished with their late estrangement;
even Rebecca’s absence used
to fill the room. Now he’s reduced
to loitering in low-rent locals,
nursing a cheap domestic beer,
exchanging artificial cheer
with surly staff and yawning yokels,
whatever he can do to fill
the time, to stop it standing still.

[333] 19/8

He finds an old place in an alley
not too far off his taxi route:
it’s open all the time, reveille
to last post, and his pinstriped suit
might raise eyebrows, but not objections.
It burrows into his affections
with rustic charm and budget ale
and barmaids who can spin a tale
and take the spin off one as well.
As soon as work withdraws its claws
he guides the driver to the doors
of his new favourite hotel,
where every night he’ll stagger—and fall—
against the shoreline of the Landfall.

[334] 20/8

He soon finds that his drinks are stretching
as he spends more time reminiscing:
talking to barflies, sometimes sketching
notions on napkins, seldom missing
the missing minutes as they stray.
When he continues on his way
he always feels replenished, lighter:
he’s an anarchic artist, writer
of poems in the midnight mist.
His friend is back behind the gym;
he almost wakes him on a whim,
to buy him dinner, get him pissed,
talk about mutual friends. Instead
he waves at him and heads for bed.

[335] 21/8

Nat hands in sceptre, orb and crown.
Recently shy, she’s now retiring;
she flees fame and resigns renown,
returning to her deeper wiring.
Fame was a fortune she’d avoided
until she found herself embroidered
with all the stitches it inflicted,
its needles leaving her addicted,
until she’d sell her soul and body
to jack herself into its matrix,
reducing her from aviatrix
to earthbound, acquiescent Noddy
with springy neck and bobbing dome.
It’s time to dry out and go home.

[336] 22/8

The legacy of Mickey Finn
and those he aided and abetted
still crawls against her crawling skin,
sticky, malodorous and fetid.
It moves through platelets and corpuscles
and lingers in her aching muscles,
and deep inside her lies concealed
in tears and fissures not yet healed.
She carries it upon her back;
it bends her torso to the floor
so that she can’t dance anymore.
Her resignation note to Jack
is written on a single coaster,
and she won’t stay to let them toast her.

[337] 23/8

Is this a triumph or surrender?
In which direction is she running?
Returning to the hacienda
in guts or glory? Is she cunning
or merely cowardly to beat
this hasty or hard-won retreat?
Sometimes the dark and distant figure
with fingers locked to rein and trigger
vanishing in the setting sun
looks inescapably heroic;
at other times, he’s merely stoic.
But sometimes it takes strength to run:
sometimes the hardest thing to say
is hi-yo Silver, and away.

[338] 24/8

Jo wasn’t there for Stan’s departure:
he disappeared into the dawn,
a broken but unbending marcher
attempting to escape the thorn
working its way into his side,
the pinching vertebrae of pride.
She thought it just his daily ramble,
but now it’s proved a grim preamble
to terrors that he’s yet to write:
his wanderings become extended
into a journey not yet ended;
he wasn’t home at all that night,
and as progressive suns decline
Jo watches, and there’s still no sign.

[339] 25/8

She knows she should have seen it coming.
With all his anger and ambition
he couldn’t stand to sit there, slumming
in sloth, for long. In his condition
she knows he doesn’t have the strength
to stand up straight for any length
of time or distance either, but
he’s stubborn as a coconut,
extraordinarily evasive
or else completely camouflaged.
Her rescue runs are sabotaged;
none of her pleading is persuasive
enough to bring him out of hiding;
the tides speak of his woe betiding.

[340] 26/8

She doesn’t see him anymore
upon the ferries’ daily journeys:
no figure dancing on the shore
as she appeals to her attorneys
for help. No trace of him remains
among the forklifts and the cranes;
nobody’s heard of him in pubs,
seen him in liquor stores. She rubs
the city’s ocean-tarnished lamp
to resurrect her vanished genie,
dressed in three wishes and a beanie,
mistaken for a common tramp;
she won’t give up till it’s demolished,
but nothing seems to get it polished.

[341] 27/8

He’s fallen in between the cracks,
behind the cushions of the couch,
tripping the wrong way past the tracks,
living in trashcans like a grouch,
waddling in whiteface and moustache,
learning that life is hurtful, harsh,
and has no loyalty to spare.
Ask Arthur here, who doesn’t dare
discover anything arcaner
than this peninsula, this eddy,
who wanders, stealthy, slow and steady,
until he finds a spare container
as unremarkable, as boring
as any—other than its snoring.

[342] 28/8

He’s scored an admirable setup:
a sturdy standard twenty-footer,
blankets and pillows. “No, don’t get up,”
says Art. “I’m thinking, you could put a
couple of chairs in here, a lamp,
something to fight the rising damp,
and make a killing off the tenants.”
He scowls. “I’m only here for penance.
I’ve got a home. I won’t be staying.”
“Two homes!” says Art. “When, at a push,
one’s worth a couple in the bush—
according to the ancient saying.
Tell me what happened.” “Well,” says Stan,
“It started with a drowning man....”

[343] 29/8

Guiltily, Arthur hears his story.
It paints him with his patent pain,
leaving him haggard, hardened, hoary,
looking for some way to explain
his lacking luck. Art bites his tongue,
tormented: all these months he’s clung
to silence, seeing what he’s seeing
as threat and malediction, fleeing
their sinister and jealous forces.
He’s seen first Stanley and then Murray
cut down; he closed his trap to curry
favour from these unlikely sources,
hoping they wouldn’t come to call—
but whispers, now: “I saw it all.”

[344] 30/8

Glenn feels his eyelids are unsealing,
letting him see his first few sights.
It’s an exhilarating feeling.
The sparkle in his eye ignites
a world he’d thought forever clouded,
too overwhelming and too crowded
with drinkers, dry ice, droogs and drugs.
Now he sees microscopic bugs
and atoms in the air; he sees
each particle of life, each crumb.
He notices the fickle bum
has once more left the bench that he’s
been on and off again all year—
but now Glenn’s bringing up the rear.

[345] 31/8

He calls in sick, and spends the day
turning the suburb upside-down:
the hidden parks that line the bay,
the scrap and plastic shanty-town
wrapping the new construction stages,
the skips and alleys, and the pages
of newsprint as they flap and float
like cities. Every upturned boat,
each fracture in a cyclone fence,
each wild and weedy vacant lot.
He takes the backstreets at a trot,
glimpsing the city, tall, immense,
spiking the sky between the bricks
and plaster, like a crucifix.

[346] 1/9

An emerald background: in the foreground,
the rusting wire and dying grass
and litter, chequered rich and poor ground,
glittering plate and broken glass.
Somewhere below the tilting towers,
a bouquet of downtrodden flowers,
a man asleep upon a bench
emitting lines of cartoon stench
just as the sun hurls cartoon rays
against the city’s gleaming facets,
warms its securities and assets.
The bum beneath the city’s gaze:
it speaks to him, at last—he’ll draw it,
no matter if they all ignore it.

[347] 2/9

As weeds heal over city scars,
bones knit, breaks mend, and bruises fade
like memories, like shooting stars.
The ice breaks for a breakthrough blade
of grass as tundras melt and soften,
and all that came before is often
invisible to fresher eyes.
Waters recede; the floodplain dries,
and new life springs and takes firm root.
Bomb craters create verdant valleys.
And even now, Natasha rallies,
emerging tired but resolute:
her muscles mend, her memories blur
until they don’t belong to her.

[348] 3/9

Her local’s naturally delighted
to have her as its newest barmaid.
She loves its darkness, never blighted
by bland blond wood or lame and laméd
halters and boob tubes for the staff.
She wears her street clothes, and spends half
the night in tangled anecdotes:
“Of course, back then we had no boats;
the Navy was a bunch of swimmers....”
The ribbing and the ribald wits,
the jukebox’s nostalgic hits,
the dusty bulbs, the blackout dimmers,
the counter meals, the drinkers’ hall
of fame—the Landfall has it all.

[349] 4/9

At first she’s shy, and simply smiles
and pulls beer while her patrons ramble:
“The butterfly’s the best: freestyle’s
for wimps. I’ve always liked to gamble,
but pokies?” She remains elusive,
afraid that they’ll become intrusive,
reveal what she’d prefer was hidden.
But they’ve not heard of her bedridden
adventures, nor her former fame,
and everybody has a story
from his or her long life more gory
than hers—so ever since she came,
she’s shuffling out of her shocked shell
with battle-scars and tales to tell.

[350] 5/9

Joanna’s staggered by the tale
she’s being told. The man in rags,
and Stan no better, saying they’ll
be rich soon, better pack her bags,
this bum’s some kind of panacea,
so Ave Mary, Hail Maria,
they’ve found the witness they’ve been seeking,
and here he is, barefoot and reeking,
searching the house for something edible.
As last hopes go, he’s fairly crude,
and what if he were interviewed,
or called to court? Would he be credible?
She’s glad that Stanley’s home and cheerful,
but doesn’t trust this earnest earful.

[351] 6/9

“I scrub up well,” he volunteers.
“I’ll shave, and borrow Stanley’s tie.”
“We’ll say he lives here, has for years,”
says Stanley. “It’ll never fly,”
Jo says. “I’m sure you’re very nice,
and I’d believe you in a trice,
but even if you wore a tux,
they’d think we’d paid you twenty bucks—”
Arthur’s indignant. “That’s a scandal!
I saw him fall. My vision’s fine,
and that should be the bottom line,
whether I’m vigneron or vandal.”
She says, “I know that’s what you saw,
but would you recognise him?” “Sure.”

[352] 7/9

They take their convoy to the dockside
and wait for Art to find his mark.
It isn’t hard. He’s blond—peroxide—
with tattoos like a blue Rorschach.
He blisters underneath their grill.
“Sure, everybody takes a spill
now and again,” he says. “I lost
some wind, and had to go defrost,
but in five minutes I was sorted,
and wharfies are a smart-arsed lot,
and it’s embarrassing, and not
the kind of thing you want reported.
You came in after me, did you?
Well, thanks, but no-one asked you to.”

[353] 8/9

Like Bremen’s wandering musicians,
Stanley’s expanding band proceeds
with each one of its late additions
to see the foreman. Norman needs
to hear their stories only once:
“All right,” he says. “The waterfront’s
no place for perfidy or fraud.
We want to have you back on board,
we’ll find a job that you can do,
give you a salary, a bonus;
you’ve been a hero, and the onus
is on us now to see you through.”
He offers up his hand to Stan,
who hobbles home a happy man.

[354] 9/9

Glenn’s search is proving less successful.
He’s found his inspiration, lost
his subject. It becomes too stressful
to cross streets he’s already crossed;
he’s left with nothing up his sleeve,
no patience and no annual leave.
He’s back at work, which means his nights
receive, at last, the Landfall’s rites—
delivered by a new priestess.
He stares at this belated beauty,
alternately urbane and snooty,
and wonders how she came to bless
these memories and memorabilia—
and why she’s looking so familiar.

[355] 10/9

Nat asks her manager, “Who’s that?”
She squints, and says, “That’s only Glenn.
He comes by after work to chat.
We don’t get many younger men
around here. Don’t you think he’s cute?”
Natasha glares at him, his suit,
his midnight shadow. She preferred
the old crowd, doesn’t say a word
to this newcomer: he reminds her
of all the other guileful guys.
But something in his slouch, his eyes,
is strange, familiar, and she finds her
hostility is disappearing.
She smiles and fiddles with an earring.

[356] 11/9

Tonight they talk together, puzzled
as conversation slips from gruff
to smoother gears. As if they’re muzzled,
they part their lips just wide enough
to let out small words, small ideas,
and lean in close, and strain their ears
to hear between the many gaps.
They’re noticed as the hours elapse,
and take no notice, more than playing,
still less than earnest. It’s begun.
Didn’t you use to be someone?
is what they’re always never saying,
speaking in silence and omission
and recognising recognition.

[357] 12/9

Pity the medieval sailors
who still believed the world was flat,
bullied by blackguards and blackmailers
into the foolish journeys that
would breach the final cataract,
bracing themselves for the impact
that wouldn’t come. Imagine waking
into the new world, its breathtaking
improbability, survival!
So Arthur, waiting for the payback
for his ship-sinking lips, his playback
informing on his ruthless rival,
the nameless nemesis of bums,
is quite surprised when nothing comes.

[358] 13/9

Perhaps his foe has lost its teeth?
Or rusted in the salty air
until it can’t pull sword from sheath?
Or maybe it was never there,
just a disturbance in the light,
the shadowed furniture at night.
Either way, Arthur now feels safe,
no need to wander like a waif
beset by fearsome fortune-tellers.
He feels a weight fall from his heart
and so, to make a modest start,
he takes two cheerful beach umbrellas
and plants them in the Gardens’ loam
with due respect, and calls them home.

[359] 14/9

It’s the fulfilment of a promise
that Arthur never quite believed.
He stood by like a doubting Thomas
until, so brutally bereaved
of promise and of propagator,
some tilt of axis and equator
or else some chaos or dumb luck
showed him that no one’s life is stuck
at any high or any low.
Now spring is well and truly sprung,
and he’ll make sure that Murray’s sung
as further seasons come and go,
and he’ll continue his tradition
from this most privileged position.

[360] 15/9

Norman’s come through, and Stan’s receiving
the finest care the private system
can offer. “There are forces weaving
throughout our lives. We can’t resist ’em.
One day you’re thinking life is sweet,
the next you’re living on the street,
the next you’re back. Some call it karma,
the different acts in any drama,
or is it luck?” Jo lets him babble,
just happy that he’s getting better.
She brings him eggs, buys him a sweater,
and lets him win at travel Scrabble.
“Tell me, is grandpa’s house still there?”
“Dad, it’s not going anywhere.”

[361] 16/9

On the last ferry, drunken members
of some acoustic band or choir
sing on the prow as neon embers
cascade into the harbour’s fire.
One plucks a periodic chord
as passengers lean overboard
and listen to the windswept ballad.
The bright night leaves their voices pallid
and tentative; the churning motors
drown half of every phrase or word,
but no-one’s singing to be heard,
and silent and attentive boaters
find that these soothing scraps suffice
to carry them away. It’s nice.

[362] 17/9

Now everything that daylight throws
at Glenn can have no ill effect,
and everything Natasha knows
about herself and self-respect
suddenly seems to have no bearing
on anything. They’re both past caring.
Looking beyond their daily slog,
their evening is an epilogue
that takes up where the story ends.
She says, “I think we’re both survivors.”
“I think so too.” “Like deep-sea divers....”
“...Who’ve managed to avoid the bends.”
A glass of scotch, and life preserved
again, and no-one else gets served.

[363] 18/9

They know that one night, maybe soon,
they’ll find that Glenn’s still there at closing.
A starry night, or a full moon
above the empty street, imposing
its influence on tides and lovers.
That night, they’ll slip beneath the covers
of green-leafed Glebe or blue Balmain
and find a full-stop for their pain
reflected in the satellite,
and take the future facing forward
like battered clippers heading shoreward
at long, long last. Until that night
they’ll teach each other to forget.
It’ll be soon, but not just yet.

[364] 19/9

They stroll the waterfront to check
that they’re still suited in the daylight.
She thinks of James; he thinks of Bec,
but ripples of reflected bay-light
remind them of each other shortly,
returning to a love as courtly
as any. As they crest a hill
they see umbrellas spinning still.
Natasha says, “I thought that guy—”
“Yeah. Maybe that’s a friend of his.
I think I might know who it is.”
In fact, he’s sure. He can’t say why,
but this is what he understands
as they walk onward, holding hands.

[365] 20/9

The planet’s memory is short,
especially here, where seasons pass
as quickly as the speed of thought,
and tragedy moves into farce
or romance without intermission.
The first state’s always been transition:
from colony to would-be player
it’s nothing but the thinnest layer
above the rising, falling land,
the reconfigured bays and rivers,
the sleeping planet’s quakes and quivers,
high and low tide marks in the sand,
the cosmic pendulum that swings
through summers, autumns, winters, springs.

[366] 21/9

As equilibrium approaches,
some things are lost and others found.
An early summer sun encroaches
upon the winter’s drying ground,
producing clouds of golden mist.
The harbour ships no longer list,
but tilt towards their even keel
as pilots navigate by feel
and gently rearrange their ballast.
Though some hands have been lost in storms
and some survive in different forms
and some are broken, bruised and calloused,
the winds are dying off the bow
and Sydney Harbour’s safe for now.

Originally published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* 22 Sep 2004 to 21 Sep 2005

See <http://ma.ttrubinste.in/?p=49>; text taken from

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/Specials/Equinox/2004/11/16/1100384537511.html>