Songs of Place

Ksenija Spasic

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Abstract

Songs of Place
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The poems in this collection centre on travel experiences. The opening section touches on childhood memories, while the closing one considers the speaker’s present home. The notions of home and willing displacement from it are present throughout the collection. The “North Bay” and “Echo” sections chart the disintegration of a relationship. The central “Terra Australis” section is a mosaic of Australia; a search for the place even as it is transformed by memory and some fragments are exalted to become emblems of longing. The journey to Australia also gives rise to “Caves,” a sequence addressing the legend of the Jenolan Caves’ discovery and their continually accumulating strata of myth. The final section, “Verdun,” presents diverse views of a home which the speaker struggles to accept as hers; a place that is at once fantastic and mundane.
Table of Contents

Paris by Night ........................................................................................................ 1

First Address

Braid ..................................................................................................................... 2
Rain ....................................................................................................................... 3
First Address ....................................................................................................... 4
At the Museum ..................................................................................................... 6

Stopover

Land of a Thousand Bribes ............................................................................... 7
Stopover ............................................................................................................... 8
Train Station ...................................................................................................... 9
Lullaby After the Sun ......................................................................................... 10
Fiddlers ............................................................................................................... 11
Re: LAX .............................................................................................................. 13
Nohoch Mul ...................................................................................................... 14

North Bay

On the Way Up .................................................................................................... 15
North Bay ........................................................................................................... 16
Poem for My Boy ................................................................................................. 17
Spring .................................................................................................................. 18
The Rites ............................................................................................................ 19
*Evening Silhouette, Georgian Bay, 1928* ......................................................... 20

Terra Australis

First Watch ......................................................................................................... 21
## Diver
- Picnic in the Graveyard
- Portraits Not Entirely from Memory
- On the Promontory at Kanangra
- More Room
- How You Become Songs
- Corunna Rd
- Mud
- Home

### Echo
- My Head Wants to Spit
- By Hanging
- The Way to You
- Long Exposure
- It Will Be
- Echo
- Small Moon

## Caves
- Caves Elaboration
- Dedication
- McKeown's Song
- Binnoomur
- The Tour

## Verdun
- The Kingdom of New March
- In Which the Princess Goes for a Ride
- In Which the Princess Takes Tea
- In Which the Princess Takes Leave
Paris by Night

I stand by the window;  
my double-glazed reflection  
grazes the roof of a taxi cab  
with its left breast.  
In my forehead,  
a yellow window opens,  
a woman in her nightgown leans out, carefully,  
to water the lips.
First Address
Braid

Where buildings collapse like birds,
charred ribs and downy ashes—
a string of captive shawls spluttering in the wind,
ballooning silk blots rouse
indigo in the eyes.

Stand up in recognition of the weather
and do not turn to lift the toppled chair;
cumulonimbus conglomerations going by,
trumpet-cheeked shadows bustling over balconies;
the rubble twitters glass.

Sandals on brick, spark of sun, spark of sugar
in the dark of children’s mouths.

Stand up, stand up!
A girl of uncomfortable age perched on a cement block,
stiff guts of armature salute around her, she has
lost her grip on the children who run
through the rubble she has

the strands of her braid in one hand.
Rain

plunges clapping
into a basin
patched crooked rooftops
tin overlapping
bristle with echo
clatter of caltrops
roaring of children
rattle of bullets
from plastic pistols
rips from the tongue
rolls to a dribble
silenced by darkness
when calling mothers
billow like bed sheets
on summer evenings
over the railings
their voices draining
down through the treetops
catching the children
and so the game halts
and so the rain stops
shuddering puddles
somewhere a branch
drips
a gust of wind
clips
glittering harvests
First Address

Smoke of blood in water–

Here (I show you) the veins,
cradled in ligaments,
so never across the tracks,
always
down.
Is there a twinge
of concern in your face?

–how it uncurls and clouds and filaments
and could one watch it as though One and not I?

Squealing of piglets being weighed
in early morning
I was small, crying for them
sucking on felt-tip markers
mama with a belt springing across the
fold-out bed at
Ulica Dositejeva 8/11
12000 Pozarevac.

Where we played, we could all see our balconies.

I rubbed styrofoam snow over a candle in the four-faced courtyard
under the summer night of my home.
My friends knelt on the curb, bated breath–
I was a magician, white weightless, making a live New Year’s card!

We repaired the building’s teeth, little holes,
with mud and stolen toothpaste, mixed the fillings
spackled them in.
Girl on my balcony wall
left unfinished with hands
like mittens,
has stayed there
all these years, in memoriam
when they paint her over too,
where will we go?

In the cool under-stairs cellar
wet rag and cement smell
a boy’s tongue moved stiff in my open mouth
he’d asked
disgusting, tentative, I
made it happen
the second time.

“For unremembered lads that not again
will turn to me at midnight with a little while that in me
sings
no more!”

Straight
down,

Smoke of blood in water…

But all my binding loves make these sharp contemplations
obsolete, before the opening of the taps.

Between stones of Quebec
and bricks of Montreal,
running fields;
Hard winter,
far from my beginning.

The drip
drip of your tears
on the bus seat. I cannot imagine where they are traveling from to fall
so clean and heavy.
Your early hurt helloes to me
too little.
At the Museum

A little girl in pink
with heat-mussed hair
and an ice-cream stain on her skirt
looks inquisitively into a big urn.

Looking back at her
is the sand-filled skull of a child.
There, in darkness so old
it can never be lit out,
its little bones rest delicately,
brown and hollow like a bird’s.
Centuries,
three thousand years
they float there
with particles of dust lingering around them like stars
and the little girl
moves her lips in wordless wonder,
pulls on her mother’s sleeve,
but her mother is too big
to fit inside the urn,
she must go there
alone.
Stopover
Land of a Thousand Bribes

Somewhere approaching daybreak,
I am sitting in the grass on the Hungarian border.
All I have to show for my day
with spinning French and German scenery
are two unfinished poems.
I courted sleep in contrived poses
and dreamt of beds and being so half asleep
I was unable to tell you something,
also about looking from a bus window
at huge birds
with saucer eyes and equally enormous fish
in their beaks.

Sky lightens over your father’s native land.
The countryside is truck and bottle strewn;
we wait to cross
from Clean Toilet Territory
into the Land of a Thousand Bribes.
Stopover

San Andres has
a wing and a clothesline,
a satellite dish,
green siding to cover the rust spots,
a soccer field,
banana palms
and enough turquoise to lick an empire!

The wheels hurtle,
scabbling the sky before anything can be explained,
coral jaws bite off the blue tongue;
foam flecks the coast...

From the sun on San Andres
it's 4.5 hours to winter.
Train Station

Sitting in my homelier self, 
waiting 
for the world to open 
glittering lakes, 
compass me with the song of trains.

In loudspeaker grottoes, 
travellers are not obliged 
to look other than weary, 
with the marks of place upon them 
for other travellers to read.

What comforts are so good as these, 
a seat, a suitcase open 
and a shirt 
that smells of home and is better 
than home.

Great noisy calm 
of the marble hangar; 
the announcing voice 
reminds you there is time 
to sleep.
Lullaby After the Sun

Jar of red light
at the shooting range.
What pleaseth the eye,
perisheth.
Bowstring pulled back and
now!
The jar claps its shards wildly into the void.
Light hanging upwards
for a long moment –

Twee-feathered ladies
turn their brims up to see,
but the string is slack.
The other jars
glow on.

What does the story mean,
Mommy?
It is about a star that swallowed our world.
About the Far-shooter who burst the star.
It is about the slow, red light
that lingers after nothing else is left.
I don’t understand...

And the ship moves on
through the night that is the real
state of things.
Fiddlers

They lean into each other... First sounds
warm the walls.
Feeling for, finding melody,
pick up the stem that slips around the arm, between
the fingertips; test it,
let it rest.

My words crowd up breathing and ogling.

Music hones hurt, strings, threading high stitches
the sharp tip spins, winds inhalations tight
or pierced flesh would lapse,
relinquish blood,
loosen and wilt.
Life is in the coil.

These lean fiddlers extend to where
the forest peaks
and pill bugs twirl in moss;
drops of liquid light shine and slimes
strung from frog toes and fog
rolling over cavernous logs.

Stone walls, blunt domes toll
in the loose clung string,
then, stretching thin, whip up stinging, sizzle and squeal.
Two bows rove, chewing the resin of each other's tongues,
clasped in lowing,
wing
orange oil,
green glaze.

And I am crazed with sitting so still.
Re: LAX

I was told to take off my shoes
but the guard smiled—
understanding, even after twenty thousand pairs,
the uneasy intimacy, still warm from my feet,
happy Valentines Day, he said.

From the black strip I gathered up the weight, the clutter quickly
to make room for next in line already unlacing
bent above a child who kicks two
dense (little) thumps
into the air, easy of consequence, everywhere
at home.
We shrank
against the size of that hall,
closer to carpet, and potted plants
the ceiling,
armature of pipes and glass—
so high
night pressed flat against it
and fluorescent eggs melting against night’s Teflon.

We all enter the peristalsis and it is best to pass
peaceably
the crowd’s endless processing through plastic gates
does not concern the separate traveler
only the steps.
That they are reading us—
in discrete negatives—
each coin and key— picked out—
that we are keeping
only what they let us,
does not concern.
It is time we hustle to our chests,
only to continue,
ot be diverted, halted, led away
from the sliding doors, from the visible in in interrupted gaps, dusty
tree
**Nohoch Mul**

The jungle beat us up the pyramid—
while our soles polished the stepping blocks,
trees took root
on the other side,
bushes adjusted stones and offered
leaves
to gain earth.
We reached the top, hearts slugging,
sweat slinking behind the ears
and the trees
met us
and we were grateful to stand
in shadow of the victors.
North Bay
On the Way Up

Neat gravestones with warm little snow hats,
the bones of a house sucked dry by a fire
and the sun,
a molten platter,
reading the pines,
naked from the waist down.
You were right,
this is breathless beauty
this is the crest of endurance
and the deep grip of winter,
still and resplendent.
How I long to press my mouth
into the stone composure of these hills
and toast with blood my ridiculous softness.
North Bay

While I’m on the bus,
watching the pines volta with sun
I understand why you want to live
here:
even though your wit must stoop to kindness
in a small city where people
know your name,
but not the names of the books you’ve read,
where all the surprises are in the forest
and the stores on Main Street close
if we stay in bed too long.

I understand.
When my eyes span
the sky’s deep perfect gradient
darkening slowly enough
to be watched for hours;
islands of ice
become islands of earth
and one small star
shivers near the shore.
Poem for My Boy

Dance words!
I want to make a poem for my boy,
a comfortable poem
or a toy
such as a clever prince would not disdain.
Words, you must rhyme,
he loves that verse which keeps an even time
and you are hardly even;
At least,
if not to pamper and amuse,
to feast:
spread black and sprinkle white
the sky
and make the stars
sweet drops for his book-weary eye
and if you are
not perfect in your metaphor, be strange,
go in my stead
arrange
reflected in his windowpane, my dream;
the one with torches and the singing in the street,
the crowd with jugglers, horses,
on ancient cobblestones,
a myriad of miss-shod feet.
The potent feeling of a different time,
an autumn night
and me
living a different life,
wrapped in a heavy cloak
and breathing white
laughter into the swaying lights.
Show him the place,
let him go there and find me in the crowd
and take my hand before I see his face
and press my fingers in his glove,
do me this grace;
dance words
it's not beneath you
for the one I love.
Spring

She comes. And with a sleek-gloved muddy hand
eviscerates the dormant violins
and strings the cats and lovelorn bids them band
to serenade the leaflings from their skin.
But men she tempts with glib, lubricious sun,
to her their coats they lose and breathe her in.
once silent streets with singing ichor run,
once solid skies with giddy lightness spin.
Still, days are brief. The lining of her gown
is twilight, and with lappet loose she sweeps
air-maddened birds and trees in darkness drowns,
behind her frost in sterling slippers creeps;
so blue is black, so green is spectral white
and I am once again alone with night.
The Rites

Roadside gulches slap my eyes with sun,
past drowned hairgrass,
morass,
crushed crusts of ice;
boot rubber
sliding
into full-blooded muck.
Tell me chook,
are we of fertile plains not in luxurious luck!
slurping the season with slobber and smack
the way a lusty friend of mine
scarfed chocolate-cream-eggs,
sliming saliva licking and sucking
which she now reneges,
having become
crisp iceberg lettuce &
curt carrot sticks—
not like us, eh lambkin!
trumping beside the practical attraction
of concrete;
in the mud,
your formidable footprints slur with gold.
Evening Silhouette, Georgian Bay, 1928

The painting makes me hungry
for air and rock,
for the smoky chill of summer twilight
when sunlight settles in the greening sky
and water turns to glass.

I feel my soul
cut open like a letter,
feel beauty push my ribs apart
carefully
and my raspberry-stained heart
grows with the coming darkness.
I am there,
swimming,
sure as the lake is wide
that I will not get tired
and there
standing on the rocks
content to be cold for a long time.
Terra Australis
First Watch

Did you know it gets cold here?
Enough for sweaters and shuddering,
for fingertips to raise gooseflesh along the arm.
Winter's got me again
and the moon is as blank here as anywhere.
In the courtyard, an overturned boatload of shadows,
light on the white hull
and the still-forever-green plants
lean over it
watching
Quiet lemons among the leaves
are cooling,
metamorphosing,
absorbing moonlight through their big pores;
it condenses around the pits:
Who knows what will happen if I don't go to sleep,
a thud of frozen fruit,
lemonlight on the ground.
Diver

Are they not sweet, the masts of sunken ships? 
Tall beams, all green with wavering sea moss 
and the decks below, where soft holes open 
into the dark of hulls. 
Sunlight goes down and minute creatures dance 
in its columns, 
dance also in the black 
that floats inside the basin of my skull. 
I go above the wrecks and towering reefs, 
too slow and aimless to be flying; 
waves drag me like the slipstream drags the sand. 
The skittish triggerfish around my ankles, 
the water cooling in the neoprene 
above my body. 
Air canisters, descended, nestle 
under the pressure of all that blue weight. 
The cloud of flesh, 
that twitched in slivered synchronicity 
has vanished, 
and the roving sharks 
do not look down.
Picnic in the Graveyard

We step out of our staple selves and play;
the sunny churchyard on an autumn day
has lent us children's shadows.
On the branch, just wide enough to balance on, and bounce,
I draw my sword!
You, with a pirate pounce, land on the ground,
the gravestones that surround us lean,
dense curiosities in grassy green.
We read the names aloud,
but cannot care
much longer than the words are in the air.
Portraits Not Entirely from Memory

Prologue

We lunged into the train
shoved the case through, guitar neck almost caught,
yanked arms, straps, backpacks in, and just
made it.

Then there was plenty of time for Katya to berate
my unwarranted lateness as we settled amongst bundled sleeping bags,
stretched our legs on seats opposite and contemplated
getting her guitar to serenade the passengers
like the Komsomol did on trains in our former Soviet homelands.

Mid-afternoon at Maitland Station
there was no one.
We walked the platform, photographing puddles,
Rain-brilliant concrete, the station house on stilts.

All three days the guitar stayed in its case, except
those first few hours after we arrived.

The waiting room was symmetrical:
two benches freshly painted wilted green,
two small windows,
a heater in the bricked-up fireplace
ten linoleum squares across and blessed
with the best acoustics in New South Wales, if not
the Southern Hemisphere.

Between phone calls, we took turns playing
anything we could think of. the walls
doubling voices, spilling
fortified chords
into our ears.
Ungratefully we fretted, swore,  
ran out of songs, sat  
on string-bruised fingers.

Over the static of fine rain misting the arid fields,  
finally parlayed a car,  
someone from camp to take us  
and the garb: long dresses, doublets, cloaks. By then  
the slow storm clouds had shuffled into dusk.

As we drove, I could barely discern  
the giant furrowed hills, the valleys,  
but I felt the span  
and, though I talked,  
was quiet.

I

Kateryna,  
sitting by a small pavilion tent,  
eyes inked eastern;  
embroidered shirt, red sarouelles,  
cloth creased with shadow plush.  
But on her feet,  
scuffed sneakers.  
She enters into the spirit of the game  
up to a point,  
too much a trekker for the constraint  
of dainty footwear in the scrub grass.

Under a lapis sky, the river was so cold  
it crush our ankles,  
tossed sunlight, sharp  
into the sharp-leafed trees.  
We played at Turks and Byzantines,
then crossed the river,
and climbed up a hill
to look at laps of landscape;
see a tableau of soldiers ranged
on a yellow plane that’s nowhere near
Constantinople or the Dardanelle.

Dark Kateryna sits beside her tent,
peers into distance,
holds the phantom horses
with just the sable tethers of her gaze

II

I’m standing flash-blanchèd
in the bathroom, just arrived.
One of the girls (already dressed)
has pinned my woolen cloak,
below the shoulder.

Here generations of boys
took regimented baths,
and left a crusted neatness,
with tub and sink on either side,
a stack of tiles, cracked soap bar,
everyone tromping through in boots...

Next morning,
after I scoured the tub,
I took my first bath;
stole a tin bowl from the kitchen to pour
water over my head sluice after sluice,
jet roaring from the utilitarian tap
never ran out.
Here I am,
warm in the golden grime-light,
full bowl above my head,
hot water
steam

III

Justin is smiling into the ground.

It was the whirlwind of pre-parting love,
when everyone is beautiful!
Lined up those who would stand,
before the firing squad of sentimentality;
caught their faces.

 Already out of his pretending garb,
un-knighted.
Grey t-shirt, soft pale forearms,
a silver pendant on a string around his neck;
hands that look nearly like a man’s,
awkward above his pockets.
His shoulders stoop a little.

The wind sets clouds
above the hill and sunlight blazons
the white wall of the Boy Scout barrack
where we slept.
On the Promontory at Kanangra

No, this is not my real life,
I know,
but with a heart that's treacherously light
I turn into this unexpected snow,
wind-rushed through eucalypts;
the green and white,
the gray,
the muddy cold and sudden sun
unfolding in the gorge below, I trace
with calm meticulousness of a hopeless love
that blueing distance and the dry cliff’s face
and one vertiginous leaf
that turns above
the sighing vastness.
Over all that space
I move my eyes,
and listen to him speak
and cannot think that this is not my life.
More Room

Now that I’m out of bed,
there is more room for you.
Soon there will be
a lot of room;
the intervening space
will fling itself across the earth.

Anyway, I disagree:
Death is not like before we were born,
a non-existence comparable to ours
during the time of the Caesars,
Death is the threshold of loss;
balancing on the parapet
with the last feeling of wood
under the ball of your foot.

You stretch out your legs,
throw both arms behind your head,
but your own movement wakes you
and the space
condenses instantly
into a pearl behind my ear.
How You Become Songs

A winter sunset through the windshield,
the veins on your hands,
the heavy boots in the hall...
First, you dissolve
into details.
Corunna Rd.

Little side street in Stanmore,
off Paramatta Road,
up from Victoria Park,
on this paper tongue
the names stick,
but the street flows on;
high curbs and good deep gutter;
houses – paprika brick, sharp gable,
frowsy eucalypt shade;
extrusion of roses from the second-last fence
and my hands,
picking the last of the honeysuckle,
before the marauding roaches.
It arches under sun
and turns at night
into the darkness of flowery front yards,
where yellow porches hang
their stained-glass doors.
As I walk home, it clicks
tile walkways into place,
the patterns all similar
(though mine is best!)
I can unlatch
my gate
one-handed,
grocery bag cutting into the other
with the golden weight
of breakfast juice
or books.
Would you believe ·
the street continues,
lined with parked cars
that can quicken and flow
round the roundabout
with one centripetal palm tree.
That everything is there,
straight and real
not dried into
this cocoon of memory
that cannot drip with wings
until I stand there again.
Mud

Stupid brown mud
obscured the red
that seeped into my soles;
tempera clay of the rainforest path
where slicks of burgundy dried to rust;
the porous rubber held that dust.
And now,
this damn predictable springtime mud,
smeared over everything,
drools to be loved
and ventures points
of little grass from the sod,
gesturing at how fresh and blue the sky.
And I, so sick for the memory,
I have been looking at these shoes for months,
making sure the red is still there;
proud of the stain,
remnant of my love affair.
I’ve been touching
electrodes to my heart,
so that it will not settle in this rut of seasons.
I’ve been homeless.
My mouth, my pen run dry with talk of
Australia, Australia
the incandescent birds, the white
gold-crested cockatoos, the haze that blushes
over eucalypts at dusk,
the waves that rear to cliff-height and crash down
turmoiling sand and whirling petal shells,
but in clear water, coral’s cavernous marrow
breeds fish
violet-yellow, crazed green, fluorescing pink—
I held
my breath to watch them move until
the alveoli burned with blood,
I stayed below until my lips
were raw with salt
and still my retina gaping,
a desperate, a starving net
unable to hold anything.
Home

Patter of bird-wings
in the wild grapes.
Light of my sister’s sleeping face.
Echo
My head wants to spit
bullets like olive pits,
to hear
the clink of shells hitting floor,
and no more.

Pulsed out in spurts, you go.

Like water into a thirsty mouth,
comes silence.

My head wants to be
school in the summertime:
dry drinking fountain,
sunlight holding dust,
no echoes.
By Hanging

toes in aerial relevé

the wholesome creak of rope
on wooden roof beam...

Afterwards

the body sways impartial;

the fingertips' condensing gracefulness

drops

on the discoverer.
The way to you

is closing like clouds
    sliding their blue-gray over glass.

Like a
    big moth
laying
stealthy
surgery
in my heart.

Chamber will find
it cannot see
Chamber
    will grow over
ragweed and tangled flowers to distract from
the wall.

In years, I may
    prop my chair against it look out at the garden

Isn’t it better
to die now?
Long Exposure

In a dress worn once before
(the hem knows even if you don’t
where it bustled dust
flurries of swinging silk
gasped
radiant legs)

on the edge of the chair
as if a spring broke
somewhere in the bodice
she sits very still.
It will be

summer will bend
into the water
hot hands and flowers,
after a season of such hours,
the thought
will no longer trouble me.
In order that I may continue to breathe,
though it may take
a season more,
tallow will melt
and the winter bore
a cleaner window,
it will be.
If not the spring
scouring cloud
to barest bone of blue,
then the coming summer’s thickening loud
bluster of water
that pulls me through.
And it will come.
in no one moment.
used to turning away the mind.
I will look full
and put asunder
a sorrow I can no longer find.
Echo

Echo is not always
an open thing;
it turns like shoulders
in a narrow passageway.
The spinal column bears it
on the bent grudge of its steps.

This ripple
in the flesh,
twine, temperate pressure,
unlike a wave,
unlike the pull of stones in water.
Simple rill,
scrawled in the nerve,
repeating.
Small Moon

The work of my hands
is fingerless,
is invisible,
the Spanish stars flicked out;

we never settled on the terrace,
although it was the whole rooftop
and we had all the blankets
and the moon was full.

Squeeze the pimples of the heart;
the past is cold-sweating,
doubled over the bar.

The work of my hands
is taking apart the toothpick fence of sacredness
around a bit of Andalusian coast.

We are dead,
walking beside the sea,
straining through the hills
to photograph the moon.

It comes out shrunk
but undiminished in our nighttime.
Caves
"European discovery of the Jenolan Caves is said to have occurred between 1838 and 1841. James Whalan [...] is said to be the first free settler to have viewed the caves. James' brother, Charles Whalan, was the first free settler to enter and explore the open caves and arches.

The story of this discovery has been met with much speculation over the years. It is the grandchildren of James Whalan who spread the story of their grandfather's wild adventure to capture an escaped convict, James Mckeown. It is said that Mckeown had been stealing from the Whalans' property and hiding his proceeds in a cave known now as Bushrangers Caves. His eventual capture was said to have taken place in the Grand Arch.

Evidence to support the claims of Whalan's grandchildren is somewhat imprecise [...] No matter what the facts are behind the Caves discovery Charles Whalan set himself up as the first guide and took the first intrepid visitors through the open archways and semi-daylight caves of Jenolan."

- From Cultural & Historical Significance of the Jenolan Caves

The Jenolan Caves, as I first experienced them, were a series of spectacular subterranean halls, but there was nothing intrepid about my visit. The tour group filed though metal doors that separated one spectacularly named chamber from another, the guide turned on the lights, extolled the decorations and scattered intriguing historical tidbits.

After the tour we emerged into a cloudy afternoon and walked by the Blue Lake, with its calcite-dyed, turquoise water.

It was only gradually and subsequently that the caves became more than a network of beautiful stone rooms for me. The seed of my fascination was light’s illusory transformation of the chambers. During the tour, I repeatedly snuck ahead into the yet unlit portions of the system; I was experiencing a quantum physicist’s annoyance at the impossibility of observing while absent, while sightless. I could never see the caves as they were.

During my later nosing into the histories of Jenolan, Caves began to develop as a network of voices with the McKeown narrative at their axis. These voices meandered through time and included those of 20th century visitors as well as the creatures of aboriginal myth. Caves became a place where all the stories ever told about Jenolan could exist simultaneously.

The Caves series is still a work in progress. It is my intention to make it much longer, more polyphonic, to continue and complete McKeown’s and Margaret’s stories, to introduce new characters and create a shifting maze of possibilities in the dark.

1 Like his story, the spelling of his name is variable.
Caves

A Sequence

Consider this, briefly, a dedication.

More and more comes coiling;
when I can no longer see
the spindle, you must remember
how Swiss the cross-beamed Cave House looked,
how the potato parrot
blue-red pertness
hopped over tiles to snip
chips from my hand.

Rounding the lake,
mist breathed and beaded on our sweaters.
We entered, though the metal door,
that constant air.

Which chamber was it first?

And how do I unsay, “you must remember?”

Only,
thank you.
McKeown's Song

"For several years this desperado carried on his depredations, retiring to the security in these, at that time, unvisited, mountain fastnesses. During the hunt for McEwan's den his pursuers saw the great black caverns, now called the Grand Arch and the Devils Coachhouse."


I

Blue Lake

He was the first singer here.

Out of fog-steaming mountains,
he came,
herding the noises of the wood before him,
striding his long legs free;

down to the edge of that lake,
chalk-blue.
In his thirst dreading
clouds of limestone haze,

but he drank clearly
and drank again.

Plunged in his shirt;
water seethed up,
white hiss; cloth ceding sweat and dust,
cuffs melting.

Wrung out,
it swelled
on a branch;

while he dug his bare arms into the earth.
Prosperous muck of the lake-valley,
quick with worms,
his fingers pinched,
slid onto a makeshift hook.
The line sprang tight
against the swimming muscles of the fish.
He knocked it still,
gutted,
soft gore slid down
air bladder
    drifting

carved mouth of fish flesh
licked his hunger;
dry grass packed in the belly, so it would keep,
and hunger waiting patiently,
well-trained companion for twelve days
in the mountains.

Now he laid fish after fish
across the hummock.
Bell Birds began
to drip
small silver pings that pulled in dusk.

He did not light a fire.

The forest;
smooth mottled trunks receding,
leaves settling earthward,
attentive pads, a claw correcting bark.
Acres of silence.

And still, he did not light a fire.

The cold came.

Wrapping his catch
he moved, while there was light
towards that high stone cavern,
the roof
he did not want.
If it could be just this
forest and lake.
fish and his stomach clenching at the sight
flap-splutter of his wet shirt in the wind
and every other sound
except that retching ship.

Turmoil and grunt of bodies
subdivided days:
below-deck mouldering,
above deck, slotted to scour tin bowls,
furtive sunlight
on the back of the hands, the neck.

And everybody leaning towards
landfall.

He turned it in his dark hammock,
the moment
of the solid step,

he held it close. like his first night,
in their first room that smelled
of bay leaf and fresh floorboards,
how she had said—

When they scraped ashore,
dropped oars into the shallows, he would have run
rolled
rubbed in the grit and spume.
But the Coats knew
how nauseated meekness of routine
cracks,
how men, even on shackled ankles,
lurch into tree-wind,
find their teeth.

The barracks.
Skylessness again.

And each night knowing,
through the boards,
a crack of air that let in
rustling darkness
knowing that it was
open
cool

Brass clang,
wrenched up to morning recitation:
dead words,
live welts.

When memory of it came after him
only running could loosen
scarred back’s conviction:
they came behind him
because the smoke of last night’s fire had betrayed him
and he would kill as many as he could.

II

*The Devil’s Coach House*

Under the roof of the great arch,
it was already night.

He walked himself in, trying
to use the last light, attentive
to the last bird’s sleepy warble;
but each footfall’s stone
ground open an echo that widened
into a darkness walled so huge, he could not tell
where it ended and the wall began.

Then the wind did something, behind him
a knowing whooo and scrattle and he
dropped
fish ran
out
Shh.
James,
come back.
It was only
the wind.

Yes. In there
no one would see the smoke and he needed
fire surely as the fish needed roasting
so he gathered an armload of dry branches
and decidedly
walked
back
in.
But not too far.

Behind the first stone outcrop,
he could still see the sky
slowly begin to elaborate its assortment of stars
and those deliberate five they named
the Cross

James...

Before you start the fire
or search for the fish you dropped
somewhere between the stones,
look...
the stars stand ready
in their strict quadrille,
but the little
one,
constant sting
in their evenness
because of her,
you can turn it any way you want.

Now it's not a Cross, James,
It's Little Possum or--

James...

You could light the fire now.
And when the flames were beyond dispute, 
light barging around and warmth, 
charred fish skin, comfortable fat on his fingers 
sucked clean of the last flakes, pinkish

juice-soft in his mouth, perfect (bones aside) 
even a little triumphant salt discovered in the match tin, 
he laid his head back 
against a bed of branches, crushed 
out of eucalyptus leaves, 
blue smell 
esthetic lull 
of half-sleep

and his childhood throat 
opened:

will you be

gone
so soon
my love
so soon and I
alo
oooo
on

e

sang
stone to stone

to stone

to
ston

e

James?
**Binnoomur**

Jaames?

We were listening!
Are you asleep, James,
James, sing us,
sing us the new song! You’ve been to the Wahwee
in his lake-grass den, learned the new song.
James, James, ja aa mes.

Guh.
He’s asleep.

You get him, Wife.
Slope him back to us
with your smallstep talk,
stars, soft firewords,
hiss his language,
like before,
make him sing us.

No. Gurangatch.

*How tired you were when Big Cat crawled you, rivering,*
*through dirt, stones, trapped you in deep dark,*
*drilling after and after you, sent Diver Goola to tear you out?*
Tare out my back flesh. Fin! I rememb er, they laugh ed, roasted my hurt, ate it blee ding! Still the hole howls where the fin was.

This Jaa mes. like Big Cat, ate! six littlefish. I'll draag him into deep dark if he wont sing us, Wife.

*Gurangatch. He has been running, hungry, see, now the fire gloams, only antsparks, see, his back, bitten too, flit your tongue there, lines sting white, don't wake him.*

Guh. *Wife.*

*Don't wake him, a little while, let him sleep. If we keep him he will sing us again.*
The Tour

Regarded as Australia’s most outstanding cave system – with 11 spectacular show caves, pure underground rivers and amazing formations – Jenolan Caves is among the finest and oldest cave systems in the world!

Jenolan Caves Guided Tours

Cuckoo

I

“If you tell me you can see your hand in front of your face, you’re lying.”

But he lets us try; waving to ourselves, the motion’s weak breath on our foreheads, pupils gaping.

It is transparent, the pupil, waiting at the back of the anterior chamber, it only seems black; siphoning light into everything.

There is no light.

Trying is ecstasy.

Certain of sight, the nerves scramble for buzzy outlines, I lead them on, press fingers, trick smeared fireflies into my eyeballs, trapezoids, luminous filaments, brainlights, nothing more.

The darkness here is absolute.
Our guide waits out a minute,
well short of fear,
and flips the light switch.

"A lot of the wiring is old,
this setup dates back to when the caves
were first electrified,
in the nineteenth century.
It's going to be replaced soon
by state of the art, environmentally friendly...
so the next time you visit—"

– this buttery light, dripping
off shawls,
this warm lying glow,
that makes the Persian Chamber
comfortable as a kitchen,
will be gone.

II

In one of the walls, a grotto
sprouting translucent tendrils,
corkscrewing horizontally, their moonmilk
squirming into the gallery with the alacrity
of stone.

A frozen waterfall.
Lot's wife.

The guide chatters about
formations, words coming
ready to discard;
I scramble after them
calcite, helictite, speleothem,
but they sink in the pre-wrapped poetry of
chandelier, pillar, soda straw.

"There's an easy way to remember," he said
laugh worn smooth in just that place,
"mites come up,
tights come down."
I remember.
And some day, standing in a cave
I'll point at calcium's millennial reaching
and say knowledgably,
the little mnemonic scurrying in my brain
"that is a stalagmite."

Forgive me, Acicular Crystals,
flos-ferri, Blossoms of Eternal Night.

Lyre Bird

I

Tom says he isn't scared, but I don't believe him.

He wants to look all brave
so daddy will keep telling him about the rocks' names
and the man will like him.
He says after the man staligmoit
Tom is stupid.

I saw fairies in a hole. They were real only they didn't move.
There was a white light inside of them and some were picking
white flowers and some were dancing.
They were pretending to not move so no one would catch them.
I saw worms too. That's how fairies are born, out of worms,
but not like butterflies. They come right out of the top
and the worm just freezes like that.
I tried to tell Tom, but he said they're staligmoits.

I had to wee in a bag.
The man told us there wasn't any toilet and
we went to hide in the dark part and daddy had
just a little bag. So he got some wee on his hands
and he was mad.
In the dark part, I could hear the ceiling.
Daddy told me to con cen trate, but there was
these soft noises and I knew it was the fairies.
After that, the man came and opened the green door
and turned on the light and I was looking right away to see
the fairies, but the people came and all their shadows were
jumping everywhere and the fairies must have got scared.

Tom said how come you can't hold it
and you're such a baby and I said I am not
and the tall lady was looking at the bag and
Daddy was mad so he didn't say for Tom to stop, so
I'm hiding
in a little cave, behind one of these wavy things,
and everybody's calling me
Margaret, Margaret but I'm not coming out.

Cuckoo

III

Hunger is so much smaller than the cavern,
this early hunger, almost not pain;
sitting by the green door we know must open
the green metal door, letting in
none of the cold mountain air,
we are balmy in our contemplation,

but a little hungry, and we elect
not to discuss the things we'll eat when we get out.

We kiss, but make a mental inventory of our pockets,
I have a wheat bar you don't know about.
You take my thigh,
I almost forget.
Outside my lungs, the air is also static.
We hear ourselves,
the storm,
hurling and booming in the outer world,
wrenched tree crowns, forest arching
branches ripped off in sudden night,
we do not hear.

Resting our backs against the green door,
we share your bread roll.
Verdun
The Kingdom of New March

She is unable to charm the children
they know her to be dumb
in their tongue,
with only a smile
to cover her silence.
The swings
go up towards the branches and descend
into the last of the September balm.
Four girls run,
their bare legs whisk the light;
this golden afternoon
belie the night.
When women
drug-thin and dry
with searching eyes,
come out
to do some errands,
the nature of which lies
outside the scope of streetlamps;
when stumbling men
fumble with zippers,
leaving, in some dark corner,
a gleam of slick and darker pavement.
Padlocked shop,
windows white-dusted and a potted plant
so dead it has become
its own white effigy.
She flies, seeding,
spear ing into the ground – mythologies,
standards of hair embellish and erase.
Will she ever love the place
for what it is?
In Which the Princess Goes for a Ride

Soon, all too soon,
Winter will descend upon the city,
And the city will be
Winter-bound.
Streets will narrow,
Domes be mute with ice
Gutters will crack
And night will be at windows.

The Princess of Newmarch
weaves nimbly through pronouncements and cold air,
sidesteps a puddle blind with leaves,
scuttles under the overpass and makes it
to the river.
The banks are clammy with dusk.
Beneath the surface, shapes of rocks
are eloquent and lucid.
Here she starts,
pedaling along the river-edge,
beyond the niceties of peopled streets,
into the Otherland.
She is rolling past
castles,
keeps of crumbling cement,
corroded palisades
gravel yards strewn with glints.
Each silo holds
a massive emptiness,
the silent madness of neglect
her eyes climb into
veer
a fellow rider cursing rattles by
--keep to your own path!
But the scrubby grass
receives her kindly.
She walks
along the river to the bridge;
tall yellow lights melt all melodious
on placid water
where the gates suspend
river in traction
but below
a roll of crashing wallops splitters
upwards into the night.

Winter will never close
this jostling water,
nor the silos fill.

Into the cavern of its snowy hush
her feet will venture.
In Which the Princess Takes Tea

In every room—
a sleeping body absorbs sound,
so that the house
is still enough
for sugar to sift tinkling
onto a blue porcelain plate
and over
blackberries dressed with mint.
She slips a spoon
into the still life,
tastes
overgrown car tracks
brambles rasping skin
small berries, mostly seed
ground on thorough teeth.
Snow sifts down.
The icicles outside the kitchen window
have been sucked long and sharp
by mild days—
each sip of tea
is perfectly audible,
liquid and air
drawn in at the lips.
The Princess
vanishes slowly
as five o’clock
winter twilight
dims the white sky.
In Which the Princess Takes Leave

of leaves
her eyes have nursed out of sticky buds,
that flicker and nod,
air turns tulip beaks
after her feet,
sweeps crumbs of flowered
maple into gutters;
pollen-skinned water
strolling along with her,
turning into a wider street,
old-clothes-shop-man
smiling through clutter,
outside a red
shirt breathes,
swelled by wind
and the bells
of the giant
church tell
the level street it is
noon
time
noon.
Lilac

Every fall I think
the green is insurmountable;
but see how the cold
gangrenes the hardy lilac:
it makes me
curiously excited,
the way a torturer is
who had believed
the victim would not break
and finds himself
pleasantly disappointed.
By the Canal

Warm November day
and the soporific stink of canal floor
wafting wide.

On the rusted fence, clusters of mussel beaks
sing the shrill silence of their shriveling tongues;
fish carcasses recline into the muck
and the prostrate seaweed shows which way the water went.

Ducks have a sloppy feast
padding the shoals, pulling at soggy stalks.
They preen beside the last big puddle
and are the only moving things.

Rest and rot, says the mellow sun.
Take time to thoroughly fall apart,
before winter tightens everything.

Open your cells,
lie back and ooze,
relaxing into slow putrescence.
And let the living bustle off
disgusted by the smell,
their fussy wholeness,
scrouged into skin.

Here, out of prudish water,
begin to flow.
January

The wind cracks my septum
And blue sky
drips
off my lip.
I can see everything:

Frost in the matted grass, lamb-eared leaves. 
On the way to the metro; shine and smoke-cold.

The face of the accordionist is an opening in the crowd.

November: Innocent gray twigs, the fog amicably withdrawing, 
the ice, thin and delicious, 
craquant!

I think I might get fired...

The students like me, but 
I tend to be late and forget procedure. 
Gabi tries to get a test word out of me,

She is a beauty composite of cheeks and eyelashes.

A covert dialogue snags on my intrusion, 
I hand out two language warnings and meet my quota.

On the way to the University, the painting of a bear. 
I name him Brundle for his surliness, 
glint eyes and furry corpulence, unconcealed by two aspens.

The Engineers are not learning enough, but 
at least they’re laughing.

On Avenue St. Catherine, the cold has less room; 
on Rue Ross, more.

It’s always dark when I come home.
Streetlight lends youthfulness to the neighbours’ one remaining apple.
My house is incomplete—
its brilliant parquet displayed to best advantage.

In the guestroom, my boyfriend’s rows of tiny robots
battle the unoccupied coziness I wish to cultivate.

The white bedroom desk has a lamp
only as big as two cupped hands
holding a round bulb.
First Resort

Get up.
Step out onto the balcony for awakening by wind and sea noise.
Pick up the towels lying in easy heaps;
they have not dried.
Nothing left outside really dries—
cloth finds an understanding with moist air,
drops into a pile, the better for green things to take root.

Tips of one palm frond pass
through the interstices
of another.

We pass along the paths, scrubbed nightly with soap and water
from which the grass is kept by a margin of earth;
we pass along the oval pools, along their blue curves,
chlorinated nightly for burbling clarity,
from which each day’s sediment of sand
is nightly removed;
when we pull our sandy feet though the shallows,
there is almost no guilt.
We pass along the corridors that have no walls,
that breathe,
we pat their clean floors with our clean bare soles.
See our first iguana,
pixilated skin
sun-squinting, nostrils aloof
stone sentry
jumps
paddles its claws towards a big grape
tucks it into its pink yawp
waits—

One of the palm blades
has broken,
its needle swings towards the sea.
We walk into our cleaned room:
the sheets and blankets, army-tight
the fat, bleach-perfect towels stacked above the tub
and on the bed –
a towel-twist lobster with stick-on eyes.

I drop to the spotless tile
and kiss the hand of the chambermaid,
the one they didn't pick for waitress because
no English short legs small breasts
And I pray for the light of her
unpracticed smile
her one gold tooth to shine down on me
forgive
for the disparity
that gives me
six days of childhood.
After Yucatan

It's a dry sky over my house;  
the cold is stingy of water,  
the stars – pins,  
They do not dilate.

Once I lay  
in belladonna ocean,  
under a broader, lavisher sky;  
wet stars in fumes of light,  
black bed lapping.
The Waltz

Again, dirty spring?
Bulb run aground,
tightening with green.
Mud-garden print
by Cats of Verdun,
bushy winter in tails.
They yowl who fail,
and who successing in the lanes,
yowl also, through our blanket cave.

Night music,
into the receiver
to keep
a record/not a record, issuing
ex answering machina
our low fidelity duet,
my merry expletive
your corrugated tune
thrum in the wire
as though
we are already
eaten under ground
and pushing up
the waltz.
Birthday Poem

This weariness;
fluorescent tubes for bones
pasteboard lids, old yellow keyboard nails
this weariness is patient desiccation
(true love's green well)
in days of meantime.

Along the way,
construction workers pound
splurges of mud
from February ground
draining to build another tunnel they can fill
with that dead light.

Still,
the smell of silt,
the ecstasy of the pneumatic drill,
the welder's white divinity
makes metal blush,
stars scatter,
end in air,
bounce over dirt.

Scraping by,
I find enough
to lift me:
gravel and sky
Cuckoo

You will love me as your own.
See how apt I lay my cheek against your culture?
How I, with curlicues of tongue, attain
your language?
My flute tooth
sips into your cold stratum.

Windows blare sunlight;
uncellophaned after four months!
I push the door into
a wallop of warm rubber metro air.
You will!
When bare knees
on your polished floor,
when I lift you:
épicerie, confessional,
although you know
brighter birds are painted on my back, flowers
gaping past loves,
you will,
knowing you can never have
the first four hand-lengths of my hair,
mon ami de la pierre salée de l’hiver,
you will.