

Songs of Place

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The Department

of

English

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**Canada**

Abstract

Songs of Place

Ksenija Spasic

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.

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## **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 Požarevac.

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 hellos 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,  
scrabbling 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,  
wring  
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,  
not be diverted, halted, led away

from the sliding  
doors, from the  
visible in  
in terrupted  
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-blanced  
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 gaped,  
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  
gaspd  
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,  
twinge, 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**

## Caves

### Elaboration

*“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 through 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<sup>1</sup> narrative at their axis. These voices meandered through time and included those of 20<sup>th</sup> 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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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 Coach-house."*

J.J. Foster, 'The Jenolan Caves, New South Wales', 1890, Government Printer, Sydney.

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.  
Skylesness again.

Well come. Gentle men. To Bot'ny Bay.

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  
elastic 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, learn  
ed 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 langua  
ge, like before,  
make him sing us.

*No. Gurangatch.*

*How tired  
you were  
when Big Cat  
crawled you, rivering,  
through dirt, stones,  
traped 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-ferrī*, 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 concentrate, 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  
belies 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,  
spearing 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 through 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 succeeding 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.