



VISCERA

Poems

Paul Hetherington
and Jen Webb

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Poems written by Paul Hetherington as part of a collaboration with Jen Webb

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Trench

They stood at the slit trench's edge
pissing nervously, ducking down.
Bombs, when they came,
were thumping exclusions of sense
as if language and thought
had lost all bearings,
thrown like dirt into air.
One man's memory:
a child standing upright in a ditch
being belted by his father,
red-faced, apoplectic.
Not far away bombs hit a trench
square on, men falling in bits
on scoured ground.
That red again. The way
the face pales at the end.

Sun Bursts

Explosions were not flowers
sun-bursting their way over fields,
but looked like improbable sea creatures
pulsing and blooming in a cycle of feeding.
Occasionally a barn or house was hit
and a section of it burnt
with a kind of belatedness,
or the whole thing vanished in conflagration.
Sometimes a person was ducking
and the sea anemone sucked them away
in a single movement.
Once or twice someone looked startled
as a bomb blossomed near them
and, afterwards, stood in a daze
hearing the surprise of their breathing.

Meeting

She greeted the man cautiously,
fed him, pointed the way to a border.
But he stayed, liking the tilt of her head
and her skirt riding on her buttocks.
She was surprised at his easy kindness;
and how he watched her
but, at first, was careful not to touch.
He helped bring up her son.
Two years later, as he dug in their garden,
three soldiers approached.
'Guten tag', raising guns.
He lowered his spade as she ran towards them,
shouting something in German.
The day was blue-skied
and he thought the soldiers were Russian;
that surely there was
an awkward misunderstanding.

Napkins

He thought it strange, standing in fields
where buttercups dewed and trees hung shade.
And ridiculous that sheep continued to graze.
Sunshine lay flatly, as if someone had tipped
a bucket of dye over hill and valley.
Incongruously, he thought of songs—
refined arias, sentimental tunes.
He picked up a scarf and a broken-backed book.
He looked at the girls folded and tucked
with blood on their blouses
like blue and red napkins on yellow earth.

Girls

Two girls played as bombers droned,
scrambling over an orchard's trees,
picking apples. Wounded men
were brought in on stretchers.
'That's David Austers', one girl said,
dragging an apple
that wouldn't let go of its branch.
All afternoon in a scrap metal cubby
as bright day faded. More bombers came.
At night they went back to a cottage
and lit two lamps. Their parents' absence
hung low in the rafters.

Dropped Book

The dropped book lay on soil, its equations partly obliterated by dirt. Later, he heard that the boys were found in a ditch, thrown like bags of grain. One had run and two had stood quietly. All had been shot. Their mother survived, living in the woods. Every day she made an obeisance of sorts, lighting a fire, nosing at the sky like an animal, grunting and scratching.

Burning the Books

They packed into a truck
chairs with finely turned legs
and two or three paintings
of country life—showing a farm,
streams in a valley; a skipping girl.
They frowned at books in the attic—
a thousand leather-bound volumes.
The writing was ancient; some on vellum.
The man they held captive pleaded and cried
as they made a pile near the road.
'Go ahead' was the command,
petrol ensuring that the fire caught
in a gush of flames
and blackening smoulder.

Waiting

Waiting is what they do. News of skirmishes
gives them no purpose.
Their own mission has yet to arrive,
its timing the shape of an obdurate future.
They talk of growing up in Wangaratta and Hay;
of won football finals; of days
in a swollen river like Huck Finn;
how they farmed and courted;
how Jenny rang the church bell
at midnight; of boys who rescued her;
the scandal it caused, the red-face mayor
who stood apoplectic before a congregation.
Stories repeat. Boredom and anxiety
run fast and stall. Tomorrow, or next month,
they will enter swampland and pass
broken buildings under enemy fire.
Two phone their wives and three are playing cards.
One sits alone, reading Hemingway.

Court Martial

It had been hijinks at first. We'd been drinking,
Reg had made a speech about barbarism
and how our commanders wouldn't take proper action.
Some prisoners escaped, a group went after them
and before we knew it Reg had shoved five
out of their cells. Even then, it seemed funny
until he drew his pistol. We stared at them
tumbled on the ground and he shot three others, too,
who were still locked up, talking
about people smiling on the other side of their faces.
We lumped them all in the jeep and buried them
near where the river exits the forest,
falling towards the group of bombed villages.
There was a shrine still standing and an ancient statue.
Someone stole that as we were being rounded up.
Reg said it was nothing to do with him.
We said the same. But they looked at us
like we were mongrels. 'Better to have told the truth',
a sergeant said, running a finger across his throat.

Imprisoned

That brown river
glinting at noon;
wombats that dug
holes in the riverbank,
their stubborn refusals
backed against daylight;
Amy who lived
above the sweet shop
with her crippled mother
who gazed every morning
from a first-floor window
sucking the lip
of a willow pattern cup
while Amy swam
to the furthest bridge
where the river widened
like the pot belly
of a circus fat man.
She took off her top
and practised diving.
Birds in high trees
watched bright strands
fall through boughs,
sitting like councillors
at monthly meetings,
sometimes hopping
as if surprised by a word,
hunched over, inspecting
grounds of decision.
And school, where Ambrose
insisted that grammar

would put right the world,
Sam who could amble
on palms of hands,
Geoff who ate buns
in Social Studies
leaving white icing
on chair backs and books,
Jane who ran out
on the old back road
and was struck by a car
driven recklessly
by lost city kids.
Then war and a front
where rats, like small dogs,
worried the trenches
and a patrol of ten men
disappeared on a mission—
no remains to return
or bury and grieve for.
After the hijinks
and murder of prisoners
it had been like smoke
in front of his eyes—
questions, a need
to make an example.
These closed mornings
of fetid, sweet air
pumped out by the jungle;
days of wondering
at the nonsense of life.

Translation

He brought back from war
another life, and had no place to put it.
Black nights followed;
screeches of monkeys
pummelled and bounced
from a jungle's high trees.
'Adjustment' was a doctor's idea
but no therapy
would return the jungle to itself
as it invaded his living room
with tendrils and shouts;
as its rain made days torrential;
as stretcher bearers ran ahead
waving towards a helicopter
whose rotors fanned water.
There was boot-polishing drudgery,
unending narrow tracks,
insects whirring, and the sound of ticking
just out of sight like a pecking bird,
or someone casually
flicking a holster with a finger.
And patrols, occasional villages
where people farmed
and women fanned away from them;
or where they lay as another patrol
had left them; where extraordinary blossoms
hung like scrotums.
Every prayer he had tried
had been emptied of gravitas.
The boy he'd found at a swamp's edge
had been eaten by insects—

himself, he had thought,
in a proximate life. The boy lived on,
stare-eyed and gasping. No doctor
could translate him, or banish
his breathing. There was no afterwards.
There were no other places.

Bundle

He lay bundled near dollops of ground,
one arm a rag
hung from a tree.
Men with a stretcher lifted him delicately.
He'd been thrown and curled
where jungle plants,
each one grotesque
nudged the singularity
of his panting flesh.
His hearing was damaged
and language, once ordered,
was as liquid as water.
He saw a thin child absorbed in a game
wandering in a no-go zone
while soldiers watched on,
one lifting his weapon,
squinting and swearing—
he was nine years old.
Someone said 'Leave him';
the gun was put down.
Mostly the orderlies left him alone;
a doctor pronounced: 'He's soft in the brain',
while eleven ballerinas
danced a scene from *Swan Lake*.
He said 'I love you' to the one who danced best
but each night she changed to a flurrying bird
and flew like shrapnel into his head.

And Then Women

walked out into streets
wailing, or were ensconced in corridors,
or taken by relatives
into rooms of subdued light.
Men who were left
moved away from parlours and back rooms,
some making statements.
Children were dark-eyed
and had garnered a kind of loathing.
Yet the baker came by in his cart,
shops sold meagre goods,
and light slid down the sky
as in previous years.
When the boys were finally brought back
they were fine boned and their skin shone.
Someone hailed them, then shut his voice down.
Mourners looked at the ground,
or their companions, or the sky
and unspecified distance.

A Thousand Birds

In fields where grass was burnt
by swathes and slashes of afternoon
he could not find evidence.

Only two years ago
and yet so long in this field's time
that a thousand birds
had come and gone;
a hundred animals
shifted and burrowed.

What animals had carried away
had been taken to passages
of an old, unspeaking world—
his brothers' fingers and leg bones;
the lucky socks they'd worn.

Bombs

One of my father's stories
could have been a parable:
last from a mess hut
in Darwin during the war
he faced a line of Japanese bombs
with the slit trenches' protection
an impossible short distance away.
There was a moment
of seeing his own oblivion,
and, perhaps, because of his lapsed Catholicism,
an aura of an afterlife
as death ambled near
in clumping, explosive steps.
His training had taught him
to lie on the ground
and, after bombs fell either side
and dirt sprayed his helmet,
to the surprise of his mates
he stood up, pale but cheery,
saying something they didn't catch.

Retired General

It had been a success, largely—
battles won, fields conquered.
A career he'd dreamed
playing cowboys and Indians
with a shell-shocked father—
his father's need to outflank him
had often left him in tears.
Now, back home,
he'd been required to cease
barked orders
and finely honed strategies
in the face of bombed houses
and fragments of flesh.
At night, desert winds
rushed through his breathing.

When the Plane Stalled

When the plane stalled
on that final manoeuvre
they'd been cheering the pilot.
Home was a few hours distant.
Time had furrowed towards
the near destination—
girlfriends, beer, a humming piano.
He'd never know whether it was pilot error
or random fire. His parachute
pulled his shoulders upright;
air yelled and hissed. After interrogation
they shot the pilot and navigator;
left him in a cell with gypsies they'd captured.
The guards were efficient.
No one was allowed to sing.

