

TUG DUMBLY

The
Lyrebird
Murders



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Contents

Domestic	1
Les Murray Through a Glass Bottom	2
Taste	4
Shack	5
Ghost Farmers	7
Creek	8
Pod	9
My Leaf Insect Dies	11
Arvening	12
Drive	13
Pronounce	14
The Ladies of Erskineville	15
Hometown Faces	17
Lychees	18
Lockdown Music	20
Lost Time	22
A Haiku of Basho's Gets Made Into a Six-Season Netflix Series	23
Secret Lives of the Great Dictators	24
War and Peace	26
Underdog on the Tuckerbox	27
Take	29
Spot	30
Ask	31
Dear Liza	32
Our Father	33
Jess	35
Redacted	37
Her Last Poem	38
Development Notice	39
Home	41
Local	42
Thistle Do	43

Weather Proud	44
After Church, 1975	45
Biology	47
On Location	48
Popular Mechanics	49
Dreaming Cannons	51
Cows in Flood	52
Insects Fold Arms	54
Encyclopedia Botanica	55
Breakfast Antiphonies	57
Beauty Tips for Survival	60
Kingdom of Salt	61
Sounds	65
Some Other Skywriters	66
Old Boy	67
Moon Closed	69
Malentine	71
On Tour	72
Unplumb	73
Spillway	75
What are the Odds?	77
Cats & Socks	78
Chanty	79
Beanbag	80
For Whom the Road Tolls	81
Marginalised	83
Think You Got It Bad?	84
Farmers	85
Sorry, William Carlos Williams	87
Christ, you know it ain't easy	88
Fake Billy Collins Poem	89
Affrayed	91
Touch	92
Incredible	93
Haruspex	94
Fantasia on the Talk before Death	98
The Rest is Silence	100

Domestic

Just quilting and unravelling the thing.
Penelope was probably happy doing that,
flattered by a bunch of oily freeloaders
she didn't have to touch, the toyed with
idea of an absent husband better by far
than the smelly goatish fact of him
turning up with ten years BO and VD
from a Boys Night Out battling monsters
and fucking witches on the high seas.
Who could live up, or down, to that?

And then what? Him at home endlessly
jawing his tales like a pub bore, fisherman's
fables about the one that got away,
head and tail growing more between the hands
with each deadly retelling. Poor Cyclops,
ever expanding, like an accordion, from
the wretched one-eyed shepherd they bullied
into a multi-storied ogre of awe.
Or him off his face on lotus flowers, imagining
his faulty smoke alarm as a siren call.

Yes, what a treat. 'King Odysseus', bored
to shit down on the farm, stumping about
pulling fat Elvis karate kicks at menacing
olive trees, bellowing up a nightly meat feast
for him and his pissed mates, berating his
kid for being a pale bedwetting vegan Goth
who brings home the wrong kind of dates ...
No, all things considered, tried for size on,
better to tip Border Patrol: "hey, he's on the horizon."

Les Murray Through a Glass Bottom

Les looks down
through a glass-bottom boat
at the fishes and the weed,
at the reef that knifed the *Sirius*.
A big man in a coracle.
About six of us.
This much I remember,
though most of the time I was gilled
on duty-free gin.
I barely recall my readings
on Norfolk Island.
(That's another festival
not to have me back again).

I get a flash of running into Les
and his wife Valerie
outside a convict ruin on the green,
of she being lovely
and Les expanding free
on the place's history,
eating up the sandstone
like a scotch finger biscuit.

Dorothy Porter I find
alone and under the pines,
high above Anson Bay.
It's evening, and she so small,
dark-eyed and self-contained,
far from anywhere and anyone.
She smiles. She gone too.

But what sticks most is Les,
too big in that boat too small,
looking down through the glass
into a clear green fathom,
and me thinking Prospero,
what's he seeing down there?
No, what's he *really* seeing?

Taste

A dead Snapper in a fish shop window
is lovelier than a sports car,
the scales, the fins, the whole design,
the brutal set of the mouth,
slanted like a One Nation picket line.
But no politics for fish, something deeper:
look into that jelly-black eye and see
what it saw that last day in the sea,
what rocks, what wrecks and weeds,
what crabs and creatures,
all the wee fishies aswim in the yeasty
deep, under a churning ferry,
through the gangrened legs of a pier,
scooting some undersea canyon,
echo-sounded gulley, valley, trench.
Tell me how it was, dear fish,
that last day you were took from yourself,
what frolics before you were hooked,
trawled, scooped from the shelf.

Shack

In the crook of a seacove, among
cauls of kelp and shellgrit ricks,
a castaway's shack.

A model home for a model wretch
(if Crusoe had a car, and its wheels
were Coke caps), just a toy, of driftsticks

and wrack, of stones and shells and plastic
oddments combed from the shingle,
a little house built by some Jack.

It peppers the heart with a tiny arrow
barrage. All this futile beauty
of the going-gone world beckons back,

feathers a nestling need, a candle
cupped, mouth to protect, a little stumble
in the spirit key to stop your tracks.

Picture the maker – some child, tongue
gummed like a stamp in concentration.
Maybe an adult hand too, in the knack

for landscaping, in the cuttlefish surfboard
and location in this sheltered elbow
of beach, out of reach of the ocean's lick.

But it could be the larking of stoned teens
or some old sculptor crawling the shore,
feeling a last impulse for art give beck.

Who cares for the maker?
All frivolity soon leveled as people
mesh back into the tram tracks.

Sole relic of intelligent design for miles,
anchorite lodge wedged
in the shore's fossil neck

someone made you, built you
with a plea for survival, so sacred,
so enduringly pathetic.

Ghost Farmers

They must exist, these fallow travellers,
if not in our milk and meat then in the
fact of those cream bungalows dotting
far hills, glimpsed from anting highways

and in slanting sheds, led a dance
by the wind, and in swallow scooted barns
of corrugated rime, and in cankered silos fisted
by figs, like magic wands of exploding flowers.

Creek

JRR Tolkien held
the most beautiful phrase in English
to be 'cellar door'.

I think a lovelier sound is 'creek' –
the word fair gurgles through me,
runnels, rills and frog fermenting stills.

They speak
they speak
they speak.

Pod

We came up the dune and saw them, these dark specks way down on the surfline. Birds fell to them like dandruff, and more birds were coming in from behind us on the dune top, gulls, skuas and shags, crying through the metal sky like fighter planes to some Dunkirk scene. And not just seabirds but crows and ravens too, corvids drawn from miles to this peninsula, with its mohawk of pubic scrub. We skidded down the dune and the gritted wind hit our legs. It was no joke, this summer. We just wanted to get the pippies and get out quick.

“Cargo spill,” someone says.

But up close we saw they were coffins, hundreds of ’em, thousands maybe, going forever down the blade of beach, melting into the brinehaze of the coming storm. Some were beached high and others rocked rough in the foam, knocking like trawlers on a schizo swell. They were mostly adult, but there were child ones too, and baby ones in pink and blue. We tried pushing a couple back out to sea, but were fighting an onshore Easterly and turning tide. Kelp wrapped our legs and tripped us, waves smashed into us, soaking us straight to frozen bone. If you battled a box through the breakers it just got punched back in. It was hopeless. And they had no will left to fight.

“Lookout!” someone yells

and this big dumper chunders in and skittles us, rolls us under like rags. The wave takes the coffin we’re steering and spits it high. It comes down hard, like a caber, on the shingle, and splits and spills its guts – little foam balls, hundreds of ’em, an esky lid, a bong, water pistol, bait packets, condoms, tumbleweeds of net and fishing line, bottles, pallet banding, thong ... just plastic shit of all kinds. Dead

fish too, and a couple of gulls, one with a rusty hook through its rotten black skull.

And masks. Yeah, heaps of slimy green facemasks ...

just all this stuff spewing from the coffin, and from other busted coffins too, washing up in a necklace of trash all down the shore. We forgot the pippies, just got back up the dune to the car.

We never talked much on the drive, but knew we weren't going to say nothing. Not today. We stopped at the store to get some rum and tried to be quick. But Tilly Mack, the mayor, was up a ladder outside his shop. He calls us over, the jolly fat fuck.

"Weh-hell! You fellas bin havin' a time of it! What's the go?" The red pan of his face looks down at us, soaked and shivering like rats.

"Just gettin' some bait, Tilly."

He was stapling up bunting and its little flags snapped in the wind. Other shops were decked with streamers and balloons. The street stalls were getting set, and we could hear the town band farting away behind the Progress Hall. The parade started in an hour and we didn't want to spoil anyone's fun. Not today.

My Leaf Insect Dies

She slows like a digging machine
tucking its head
closing, cooling, ticking. Imagine a last
tiny pneumatic *hiss* ...

and then she stops.

A dancer wound down in the field
of her future – a scatter of eggs,
like hemp seeds, squeezed from the pipette
of her body.

A good end, you could say, a lesson in dying
the way she eased to the floor of the cage
to lay limbs in symmetry to some hereafter,
her unshelled children by her side.

You might almost say in dying she prayed.

Mawkishness, of course.

But sentimental crimes might be all we have left.

A wet imagination the last green pocket
in which to hide.

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