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My Mother's Anzacs

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My Mother's Anzacs

Abstract

Take your pick: the roan in the moody paddock year after bloody year, and the dawdling cows, or the grand tour, the Pyramids, the Last Post, the smack and harness sounds of rifles,

The pines grow older; the dark spreads up,
even 40 ft high, till major boughs drop off.
Only from above the forest shows no brown, seems
a Big Top with a thousand Spring-bright poles
lifting its dunner green.
— so joyfully these thousand tug up,
raising the huge brown room below.

Vincent Buckley

MY MOTHER'S ANZACS

Take your pick: the roan in the moody paddock
year after bloody year, and the dawdling cows,
or the grand tour, the Pyramids, the Last Post,
the smack and harness sounds of rifles,

mates running and kneeling up the sand
where their turds were buried,
stumbling up over their own handholds,
joking about it, getting close enough

to hear the bristle of the Turkish oaths
when they reared, close enough to link blades
or to see one another grinning
at this Other. That'll stretch their cods.

Back home they were raging against my father.
A male bonding, mate? A coming of age?
Your menstruation? No, it was my mother's
myth-time, the openeyed failure of her girlhood.

* * *

There was the sea. And footholds
stepped into the land, the dung-coloured
long bathing place, its beach, slopes,
gullies and escarpments, all the way
up to the plateau, everywhere
was our army, lying, shooting, shovelling,
a land-covering, black as treacle.

A few yards from the front of it
the Turks, laid out in their army
with their weapons, breathing, eyes scared like us,
lying in fissures, on the slopes,
a sand and rock covering
stretched black as treacle, all the way
to the bathing place, the footholds. There was the sea.

* * *

And their hessianed dead,
thrown in front of them, falling apart
inside their tunics, the swaggerers in puttees
neatly darkened in the shitty sand.

Just when these others have stopped singing
and doused their cigarettes, and inched forward
to be thrown up the slope as up a wall
to die humped like vines on terraces.

Her slow eyes will guard them coming back
into her album, shapes caught in a brownout,
implausibly high-shouldered, hair combed sideways,
bringing a paleness back to everything.

* * *

We are seeing the death of photographs;
slouched heads curdled on the paper, light
pushing in at the corner of the eyes;

We are hearing the death of songs
which die being sung by the wrong people
in prim accents that slide off 'shit', or 'gravel';

We are laughing at the death of death-jokes,
jokes about fear, and impotence and bowels,
and the homefront, and the warp of their own faces.

* * *

And then, dead, they taught you what life is,
in the risqué jokes and boyvoiced kitchen singing
in your fist pressed to your midriff, and your legs bleeding,
and how to forget what you can't photograph:

almost everything: your staring eyes,
the half-scared pleased attacking voices,
or the comic slouch of their shoulders on parade,
or the years, going brown as they do,
that drive a pinpoint deep into their eyes
resisting the camera till the last minute;

And the young women left, chalked with sunlight,
prudish, laughing, tightening their hair,
who, married elsewhere, found year after year
their songs bewildered by a photograph.

Taught: the sun that fadeth everything
browns on the wrists and foreheads of the dead
that lie here, twisted, softening and spent,
that went to war for songs
having stepped into and out of photographs.

And fade our voices, scattered, distant, potent,
furred from the creek's light,
but full of noise as animals
not needed till tomorrow,
free to imagine memories of their own.