On The Beach: A Bicentennial Poem

1  
  
Your vocation calls  
& you answer it, although  
there are these episodes  
in the shape of lips  
                        or a block cut from the ocean  
        with gradually deeper shades of blue  
as you trace down the seabed  
like a shadow spreading across a billabong  
with a quiet motor  
on a pump in the background . . .  
                          Milled day-glo ephemera  
sell you this image of Australia  
& where it appears, flogged and true-blue,  
your vocation looks  
more like a blurred tattoo  
or something you did for a bet  
                 & now regret, like a man  
walking the length of the bar on his hands  
balancing a drink on his shoe  
  
  
2  
  
(*after Juan Davila*)  
  
  
                              astonished  
trade union delegates  
watch a man behead a chicken  
in Martin Place—isn’t there  
a poem about this  
& the shimmering ideal  
of just walking down the street?  
                           not being religious  
we bet on how many circles  
the headless chook will complete  
& won’t this do for a formal  
model of Australia, not  
          too far-fetched, not too cute?  
  
3  
  
Fatal as the blue-ringed octopus  
but far less idle  
the Royal Navy arrived,  
ecstatic for routine . . .  
I mean didn’t you know that a commodore  
has a broad pennant  
& gets a 13-gun salute?  
All you did was throw sticks & jibber. But I guess  
you’ve worked that one out,  
now that you’ve got a flag of your own.  
So here’s some tips for the future  
i.e. the past considered as farce: be absolute & suave  
& know that what they gave you when they took your land  
is just a foretaste of what you’ll get  
now that your religious imagery looks subtle on a fabric.  
Next week I’ll do the convicts & how  
George the Third was so much the king across the water  
you had to piss yourself, standing up & drinking,  
to be a secret Jacobite.  
  
4  
  
Speckled drongoes coo in the margins  
parodying your abruptly tailored speech  
  
& their singular point is this: the past  
is like an Overseas no one’s gone to  
  
although we get a deluge of holiday snaps,  
each one scrawled on to tell us what it is  
  
(my two favourites are that blinded digger  
being led off somewhere by his mates,  
  
& my grandmother, with her mother, posed  
in front of the forward gun turret  
  
of HMAS *Australia—*it could be a cardboard   
cut-out compared to them). But now  
  
you are listening to the Speckled Drongo,  
its myth of content brought to you  
  
by Australian Armed Forces Radio,  
broadcasting from RAAF Butterworth—  
  
Message reads as follows: Message ends.  
  
  
5  
  
later,  
& like any poet  
avoiding myth & message  
to fake a flashy ode, consider  
what model of Australia as a nation  
could match the ocean, or get your desk  
to resemble a beach /  
                                        it would have to function  
like Tom Roberts’ *Opening of the  
Federal Parliament*, our nation being  
a sort of awkward, academic machine—  
can’t you see the feathers in my hat  
& my gold striped pantaloons  
                                                  as I jot this down  
in the open-cut sestina form,  
developing like a back-yard vegetable bed  
bordered by upturned bottles,   
nostalgia for a national style?   
                          ‘Oh, my hat!’ said the ADC.  
‘If I hold this pose much longer I’ll collapse!’  
  
  
6  
  
Is this why you want to be primitive  
but still an explorer,  
                                                  blowing  
on a conch shell in the early dawn  
before the bodies scream under the keel  
                                       & the paddles flash out  
to begin their fragile navigation  
towards New Zealand?  
Instead a bay surrounds you  
like a gentle abrasive with something in it  
that slowly sculpts your face—  
                                                                   
                                                        you notice  
each feature as it emerges,  
empty as you imagined but expectant  
                          with a blank, cut-up sense  
of what your vocation is going to be,  
glimpsed in the light  
coming through the half-open shutters  
in the lounge bar of the Coogee Bay Hotel  
                                       where you first dreamt up  
this model of the Ocean  
& watched it slide, slowly at first,  
down the beach & into the surf.