

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.