

# FISH SONG

CAITLIN  
MALING



FREMANTLE PRESS

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## The Drowned Man

Perhaps he had a wife, three slovenly  
lovely children, dreams of a down payment  
on a red-brick two-by-two where the girls could share  
and everyone would love the dog best.  
In bed, his wife might have sung him stories of trellises  
and the night before maybe she wound his long hair  
round her fingertips to show him how  
the garden tomatoes could grow.

Dad says that he knew the weather was turning  
when the draught started drawing without a head.  
His story always begins with him hungover  
and the man who took his place splayed on Swansea beach  
weed weaving through his hair like the song of a vine.  
Dad says that was the day they made me.



## South Beach

The pontoon is back. It's summer  
and the house prices are spiking.  
Mother wouldn't let me spend the night  
this side of the highway when I was younger  
but now it's all manicured,  
mothers negotiating strollers  
along the beach road past fifteen cafes,  
three microbreweries and a coffee roaster.  
I've forgotten what it means to be  
female in this city. My sister says  
she's started wearing men's shirts  
she's into androgyny now, her ex,  
she says, was always asking her why  
she didn't wear dresses anymore.  
Still she rises an hour before work  
to walk the river path, arms stretched out  
awkwardly, like swan wings, to work the fat.  
It must be nice, I say, to be pretty;  
some desires you never grow out of.  
Out on the pontoon, the kids push  
back and forth, trying to convince  
one another of sharks. My unlined skin,  
greasy with sunscreen, is heritage  
of being taught to guard whiteness.  
Like our parents visiting the doctor weekly  
to get another small coin of cancer burnt off.  
They will both die of throat cancer  
if melanoma doesn't get them first.

The hole in the ozone layer above Perth  
is a portal of sorts; if there'd been no colony,  
no Stirling up the Swan, the westerlies still  
would've brought the factory fumes here.  
You can't stop some things from eroding.

## Where There's Smoke

the sun comes through the sheeting not enough to burn

I keep asking people to tell me that I'm worth something

recently there's this helplessness, an inability to find rhythm

I try gym class after class, the swimming pool works for a while

following the white tiles with my shadow and breathing either side

the next day I find my skin reddened, though I felt nothing at the time

I sit at the café and read a book over the shoulder of my bench-mate

a page asks, "I've bought my first home, what next?"

I have paid for nothing in this world and own the same

a home is given to me when my mother hands me plates

asks me to set them clockwise around the table, knives pointing in

this is more fragile than mortar and board, the sky

stays so blue in Western Australia, but once from the sea

a tornado came and tore our roof off, since then

Dad smokes but we must pretend he doesn't  
even while some small deadly thing grows inside him  
we sit in the heat out back the house and pretend  
not to notice the smoke from out the front

Fremantle, Summer

I fly home  
to see all my family  
in one place.  
By the beach  
we run into  
a high school friend  
also with her sister,  
go to brunch  
next to the hometown hero  
whose band  
recently went big  
in the US;  
good-looking couples  
of various ages  
with beanies  
and dark blue stripes  
wander, everyone  
has puppies or babies.  
I'm here  
to confront  
death,  
which I'm told  
it's ok  
to be angry about,  
which is like  
being angry  
at having loved  
at all.

These are my streets,  
family, kin  
stuck like salt  
against metal  
rusting in the breeze.  
It is too hard  
to feel angry  
when the soft sunburn  
of 10am  
starts to redden us,  
walking together  
among tourists.  
How I have longed  
to move like this,  
pushing familiarity  
against strangers,  
my own skin  
splitting open,  
the thing inside  
my loved one  
growing and pulsing  
with his own blood  
even as it might  
expire him,  
like milk left too long  
in this mild  
suburban sun.

## Pain Scale

My sister and I rewatch the old films  
of those late night \$2 childhood Fridays.  
My happiest memories are of spending  
what we didn't have to spend, a coin  
given to each of us by our mother could last  
between 6 and 9pm. Now we come back to these places  
of poverty in times of stress, watch the boy outwit the thieves  
with tape and a bowling bowl, someone lost in the jungle  
is found, often a family reappears from off-screen  
in the final scene and we know because the film ends  
that they will live happy. We are at home  
because our dad is dying, or will be dead  
sooner than expected. In bed we watch  
the witches be vanquished by something as small as water.  
We wish we were not old enough to be drunk,  
to feel in the morning our own dried-out bits.  
She will fly back to Sydney and I will stay here,  
where we both call home, to watch what makes it so  
crackle in and out of reception.

## Argo

It's funny how the ones with round faces  
grow up to be the kind of pretty  
that men stay home for, that start families  
and stay ships. Of course  
I'm not saying that being sharp  
doesn't have value, that you need  
that softness to settle  
but it helps to have throw cushions  
with stitched whimsy, placed at odd angles  
to the off-white couch and to never  
need with a thirst that might lead  
to spilling something or sharing  
how the crumbs at the bottom of the biscuit jar  
can transform it into an urn.  
You spend a day with the duster  
collecting each bit and shaking it out.  
Shake fast enough and you've made  
a breeze come in, the sheets into sails.  
In the hiss of the kettle  
you've found your head of snakes.  
You've buried your enemies at sea.  
You're leaving and stoning  
those that might find a way  
through the picket fence line,  
even if you've borne them  
for so long they tore at your flesh  
when they dug themselves out  
and set up home, like a row  
of red matched kitchen appliances.

## My Own, Smaller, Wound

The day after  
the things are cut  
ceremonially out  
the lab report reads  
“cold snare”  
like an unemotional  
way of hunting  
something small,  
not for food  
but vivisection.

Under the scope  
I know I'd  
see nothing  
I could tell you  
the name of,  
only that  
they were spreading  
like rabbits.

The day after  
I feel drowsy  
with a pain  
deep and low.  
I clutch  
at others' faith  
like rabbits' feet.  
Even though I never  
pictured a warren,  
just one soft thing  
I might've loved.

Raft of the Medusa in the Swimming Pool

*After Géricault*

All thoughts of cannibalism extinguished  
by the BBQ, charred thighs  
ritually sauced and the cry of children  
chucking high bombies  
into the saltwater pool,  
coming up spluttering.  
Blood and ocean  
almost chemically indistinguishable;  
to drink either en masse  
leads to madness,  
like this heat, like waiting  
on a still day for wind,  
the sun holding us all to shade,  
opening up our throats.  
In the annals of our digital reproductions  
there's the smile, the white,  
the glint of wine and beer,  
the flint of our fluoride-gifted teeth  
tearing through flesh. All only  
moments, momentary stays  
and movement again, the roof  
giving with a pop to the heat  
like the crack of a canine  
hitting bone hard.  
We have been abandoned  
to one another,  
to the afternoon;

like any party set off  
into the unknown  
we have taken care to over-cater,  
to learn from those before us  
what it takes to hold civilisation.  
Yet on either side of the yard  
are terrors – hammerheads  
of circling windows  
snapping up the light.  
We owe them nothing,  
them over the fence.  
Turn the music louder  
until darkness and mosquitoes  
force us into the parched dry  
of air conditioning.  
And we wake with scratched throats  
and sea-salt-crust ed eyes  
to ask: what of myself did I let go  
to balance the raft?



My greatest gift is to move  
among you & say,  
“Each of you, your name  
could be mine.”

## To the Planets Undiscovered in our Solar System

There's a cube I can plug into the TV  
that matches the one on the computer.  
Between them I can cast whatever up  
in the highest res I can afford,  
like the smallest telescopic array  
collecting only what I'm into. Like the Universe  
is this small city, isolated by thousands of km  
of desert, where everyone went to school  
with everyone else's siblings and we all feel  
the exact same shame about the treatment  
of refugees but don't know mate what  
the solution is but it isn't getting easier  
what with the global warming. Once  
I was driving up Roe out past all the regular turns  
and I ended up in Gosnells, the arse-end  
of the known world except for Armadale  
hanging even further out like a papier-mâché Pluto.  
I turned off somewhere and within five minutes  
I was by a river, gums hung low and filled  
with parrots. It was just a little crack in the veneer,  
not a dead spot but pixels added.  
Brightness entering without warning.  
Brutal knowing that seeing didn't make a difference,  
how I'd forget once I was back on the road.

## Treading Water While Sharks are Circling

The Asian paddle crab should not be confused  
with the blue swimmer crab  
nor the four-lobed swimmer crab.  
Its ability to outcompete the local crabs  
recognisable by six spines  
on either side of its eyes.  
Some things made metaphoric are monstrous.  
The government warning us of foreign investment.  
The fear of being out of control  
of the water trade which is the food trade  
as if the two can be separated  
any more than flesh can. They say  
the borders are strong. Flying in and out  
ticking what you've taken, what you've returned.  
Waves or storms break easily across countries.  
The Asian swimmer crab has come from Out There.  
Maybe on a boat. In the photos on the jetty  
you see it is two red-bricks big.  
We are encouraged to find and post these images,  
to sort the right from the wrong among ourselves.  
It is quite a beautiful thing. Paperweight-heavy  
with marbled purple. The poster says  
it hasn't found settlement—yet.  
It is a five-minute walk home. From this dead centre  
of my world where house prices are dropping,  
the yuan devalued, a small summer storm above  
watering the plants enough to ignore the El Niño  
storming out the far countryless ocean, each drop

breaking its boundaries immediately,  
becoming only water, salty and undrinkable,  
among the boats piled with oil, piled with people  
shifting between nation and nationless.  
The paddle crab resting in a small wooden crevice  
is only a crab before it becomes a terror.