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PART ONE: PIGS

Sack

Ancient river bed hacked and carved whittled deep
by winter run-off river as sudden as a dust storm
in the long summer red bed red dust caves haunting
level best upper storeys where sea breeze ratchets
off ocean and estuary black bream spiky and petrifying
in their pools cut-off omphaloi each and every one
an oracle of seams and joins worked by heat rising
and stretching to breaking point the ripple and crackle
of segregation; onto the sandy riverbed soft and cool
to feet when waded through like frothy low-level surf,
encapsulated by shadows crosshatching from red
river gums in nooks and crannies down down
from ledge, onto sand the flung sack came down on,
its pulsating and cavorting arc, aerodynamic mischief,
anomaly in flight to parabola and plunge to thud
and be absorbed into white sand reddening as hessian
soaks up last breaths and catfights and mews into grey
currawong and red-tailed black cockatoo distraction
and camouflage, seed-eaters and carnivores mixed
to a pitch of blur. And witnessed by teenagers mucking
about after school: sack wrenched straight from car
lurching on dirt track a lover's leap moth-eaten or chewed
to disappointment, the sack hurled up and down down
with such force the face of perpetrator lost or encrypted,
the type and colour of car forgotten, number plate
unthought of; just the sack now twitching between pools
shallowing with heat and red motes and litotes in the air,
choking and irritating, down down onto the cool sand
(sandals kicked off), to cut open the stitched-up sack

with a pocket knife and reveal the mince of kittens
all trauma and extinction and two or three
with mouths carelessly wired together, half-open
half-closed so their noises would come out all wrong.

Blue Asbestos on my Bedhead

We always knew someone who knew someone who could get me what I wanted for my rock collection and pride of place was given to the large chunks of blue asbestos a certain someone retrieved from the Wittenoom tailings heaps. Icons, they sat on my bedhead for years, propping up my bedtime reading – exquisite seams of crocidolite sandwiched between iron oxide bands. Plush, soft waves of fibres I prised apart and rolled between my fingers: I smelt it and tasted it and cherished the irritations fibres made in my skin. In my wardrobe lurked an imported piece of white asbestos I'd swapped with another kid. So, some rocks are worth worshipping and others not? Art overflows with representations of death's beauty. I built cubbies from asbestos sheeting, smashed it up to enjoy the brittle vulnerability of the solid. It's a long list of industrial and domestic encounters. But the violence I must look back on in my leisure moments is the blue confusion of glow and absorption, the soft-hard confusion of my childhood: fibres so small they can break into a chromosome, speak to the most complex and basic level of who we are. It's the tweak of a collector's conscience, the breath I exhale on us all, the odd cold of the iron that would have cracked my skull open had it fallen on to my sleeping head, the swirl of imps and sprites and angels less blue in the crystal haze, freed from their amianthus bundles.

Feral Kittens Under the Rainwater Tank

Anywhere else and they would have been blasted.
A tank springing a leak would be a sacrifice
worth making, even in drought.

But near to the house, surrounded by lawn
battling to retain a tinge of green, watered
with the red dregs of the top dam,

they'd played their cards right. A gamble
though. Being born wild and spitting so close
to the house. The queen tucked into the dark,

narrow space between tank platform and dirt,
hellmouth siphoning light to make wildfire
at human kid's eyes looking in, searching

for the source of kitten sounds. 'I bet their
old man was Red Tom! I can see one of his
colour. He won't get to see them grow up,

but they'll see 'im hangin' on the fence,
strung up by his gonads.' The mother, all
mothers, hissed from deep within, warning!

Sundews and ‘Enzymatic Absorption’ Versus all Flesh Feeding Plants Anyway

Sticky about heels moving fast through damp bush and
swampland,
a delicate tangle, more unsettling for fixing dead or struggling ants
which haunt with formic mapping, countless lives strung up,
threads to hold a bobbin on its spool, allurer or speculator,
apocryphal or portentous, a tearing away before the science
took hold and guilt declared ‘Carnivorous’. Self-fascination:
and then a silence, a survival post-contact just a case of scale:
to break down into cries and pleas, the gasps absorbed into a
vegetal world:
glistening in sun before it goes under, a new scale for
comprehension’s
sake; take black holes: categories increasing as stars shine bright
on the edge of gravity: miniatures, stellar, supermassive. A necklace
of cupped coffins winking, the end of all life declaring beauty
which rests
in the plant eating the animal: which it does, which it always does.

The Fable of the Great Sow

Great Sow, who squashed dead her litter
A year before, rubbed her thick sparsely haired
Hide pinker than pink against sty walls.
Flies and pig smells wrought hot under
Tin roof, wagtails working their way
Between pigs and dust and shit, picking off.
To cut across her pen was an act of dexterity.
A leap across the gate, a pivot on the wall
Opposite, and over into a neighbouring pen.
Short cut. I could have gone around. But
I'd done it before, and she looked so distractedly
Blissed in her deep scratch that I took the plunge.
Many times my weight, and half my
Stretch again in length. Reacted quick
And cut me off. Back then it would have
Been easy to talk of her malevolent eyes,
Her snotty nose, her deadly teeth.
Of all human warp embodied.
My wits were dulled. She was total pig,
Pure sow who'd farrowed litter on litter
To watch them raised to slaughter.
Fed on meal and offal, she'd been penned
With boars merciless in their concupiscence.
She had a reputation for violence against humans:
She loathed them. Us. Thirty years later,
I see James Ward's painting, *Pigs*, in the Fitzwilliam.
That shocks me into recollection. Grossed out,
Exhausted Sow, eye to the light made night
With a forward ear, milk-drained, piglets
Piled sleeping by her side, eternally confident,

Her Self replete in their growing natures.
Even the runt snuggles content in straw
As there'll be plenty in her sow abundance.
She has manufactured. And as Great Sow
Is about to charge and crush and tear
My childhood out of me, I take this picture
From my future, a painting from 1793,
A painting from nine thousand miles away,
Maybe in a place where Great Sow's ancestors
Planned their vengeance, passive for the artist,
Brewing generations of contempt inside.
A point of singularity is reached, epiphany
In straw and swill-filled air between us
(Normally, I would gate her out to change straw
And water). We both grunted and she went
Back to her scratching. I scurried out, neither
Runt nor star of her litter, her old fury lost
To pig history, flies and heat of the shed.

Morgellons

Jorge Luis Borges translated Thomas Browne into seventeenth-century Spanish. I read this in an interview with Daniel Bourne, whom I know but haven't seen (in Ohio) for many years.

Borges told Daniel, that 'I' — then 'we' — 'took a chapter out of *Urne Buriall*' and rendered it unto, or maybe in the manner of, Quevedo.

The slippage was in the Latin, as is the slippage in the hairy children of '*Languedock*, called the *Morgellons*', noted in Browne's 'Letter to a Friend', and sourced to name a hairs-under-the-skin scourge of modernity, seen by some as 'delusional parasitosis'.

The spread of this disease is concomitant (we read) with that of the web, a metaphor for invasiveness, to catch by proxy or suggestion. The psychosomatics of living in the windfall of uranium decantation ponds at Narbonne (*Colonia Narbo Martius*), commune of Languedoc-Roussillon, where we would have gone

with its '*Languedock*'-like spelling, our nine-year-old prey to uranium hairs that grow unseen, undeclared, only *just* recognised. Precise or imprecise as a word, a coinage of a learned and inquisitive stylist of the English language; Romantic irritant.

Yellowcake

From ages fifteen to nineteen I worked during school holidays, and casually during my first year or so of university, preparing mineral sand samples for analysis in an assay laboratory.

The lab that nurtured me was just outside the coastal town

Of Geraldton, alongside what was then the Allied Eneabba

And Jennings mineral sands refineries. Geraldton was a town

Where commodities clashed. Later, at eighteen and nineteen

And attending university way down in the city of Perth,

I prepared samples in a warehouse near Leighton Beach,

The ocean almost lapping at my feet, glaring white sands

Used for sunbathing. I prepared thousands of samples

Over the years. When I walk on sand now I sink or skate.

Ah, titanium dioxide; ilmenite, monazite, zircon, rutile ...

Using a small mill and also a massive disc pulveriser that cracked

Its shell, compressed air to clean the equipment, and rarely ever

Any kind of mask, providing the powdered samples

For spectrometric/chemical analysis. I also compressed samples

Into discs for analysis by X-ray diffraction — Siemens

Equipment, equipment which I also operated over weekends

And late at night (outside school hours). I was exposed to clouds

Of pulverised sample-dust over a long period. It silted the shower

Recess. That was roughly Seventy-eight to Eighty-one. I handled

Radioactive materials for calibrating the Machine.

True, I loved the names: yttrium phosphate, thorium nitrate;

Ah, boron and beryllium, and the structures of silicon;

The ghosted cells of my body, a world of crystallography.

And *then*, then there was the yellowcake I was enriched by.