

The mother hand

Gilded

My palomino reached fourteen and a half hands
when I turned fourteen and a half.
Then came the breaking-in,
ribs too narrow for comfort, stride skittish,
coltish.

Boys came to ride with me,
half-known boys,
their names like ripe berries,
and long hair tied in ponytails.
We tracked over spitting summer paddocks,
crackly, combustible,
horses sweating under us,
swatting flies with sharp tail-thwacks.

We galloped;
fear of the tilting earth thrilled us.
Always an element of danger:
the bolt, the buck, the roll.
We rode boundaries,
occasionally crossing,
leaving fencelines behind for bush,
pretending to adventure.
Sometimes we rode to the pine forest,
where needles lay like a mattress on forest floor
and hushed everything.
Sometimes, resting, we fished for yabbies.

When the boys had gone
my mother and I washed my horse
with the carwash brush and a hose,
my mother in slacks,
my face half-hidden behind loose long hair.
I would learn this act had the intimacy
of knowing a man's body,
skin rippling under touch.

My hands were all over him:
I picked up his hooves gently,
hooking out the sour scent
from a tender frog,
amazed at the soft secrets within horny feet.
Curry comb, brush, hay and oats:
this is how I learned to care for another,
the looking-after love requires.
Nicknamed Shandy for his colour,
he had a smart breed name –Tshintina,
something exotic, an otherness I desired.
I would whisper the foreign syllables
into his twitching ear,
nuzzle the velvet lips,
cry into his unkempt mane for want of friends.
I pictured him wild on a faraway plain
galloping with his mob
like the stallion in *Wildfire*.

In winter he paled and grew shaggy.
Summer gilded him; he glowed,
a muscled sun.

The vet came and cut out his testicles.
I remember the hard bite
on the moon of my backside
next time I picked up his hoof.
The bruise flowered on my young skin
for seven weeks.

The mother hand

(On dipping into the new Auslan dictionary)

THE OKAY HAND

I find the sign for a close friendship,
especially one involving romantic
or sexual feelings. This is more like it.
I mean, *relationship!*
any romance lost in translation.
You're okay; I'm okay:
put us together.
I believe it when you say
everything is going to be all right.

THE POINT HAND

Next I learn *sweetheart*.
I try it out in rooms full of people,
half hoping there's someone who reads me
or that it rises from chest to larynx
of its own accord, outed.
Looking down, I find the shape
imprinted on my T-shirt.
I'm planning to teach it to you, pointing:
here, have a heart.

THE HOOK HAND

Ache, of all kinds,
its shape unforgettable, already known,
as if I've been trying to hook

or hold on to something forever.
Even something small;
god is in the small things.
For these I'd need the Soon Hand:
worn like an epaulette
it means *trust*.

THE TWO HAND

Our teacher tells us the Deaf can be blunt,
difficult truths always told, and no social niceties.
Perhaps it's harder to lie with your hands,
changing one lexeme in a sleight.
Anyway, lies show up all over the face;
you can always spot them given practice,
and the Deaf are expert observers.
Still, here is the sign, made from double talk,
one variant followed by *crying*.

THE WISH HAND

An eloquent hand in anyone's language.
Fingers crossed like children's
in a two-handed sign,
the same for *wish* and for *hope*.
Perhaps nothing is impossible
and children know it.
Saying *sorry* requires both hands, too,
wound like ribbon and tied in a bow.
And change.

THE MOTHER HAND

This hand is used very little:

Mum! Mum!

Minute and *month* are the same;

put them together

for the woman who gave birth.

Minutes for conception, months pregnant.

Mothers know time, from then on, is elastic.

There's also, oddly, *maiden*,

but that's cricket.

THE FLAT HAND

I love you comes right below *butterfly*,

hands like wings over the heart

ready to flap away, or alight.

At the chest, hands push a baby upwards,

from womb to world, an offering: *birth*.

Next page, *burial*: on edge now, hands place a body into earth,

again from the chest, as if burying their heart.

My friend says, *Don't worry so much about life:*

it's not permanent.

THE BAD HAND

A shock to find *son*; only here

because spelled out with a little finger.

I could use the Spread Hand sign

for sunrise, lighting my life.

Now we learn Auslan together

and practise when playing cards.
It is gentler than this year's language.
We say nice things to each other:
Your turn. Good luck. Go fish.

THE AMBIVALENT HAND

Combining good and bad,
this is the hand life tends to deal:
anything that can happen, will happen.
Our downfall is to expect otherwise.
It seems in any language
there's some grand design for heartbreak,
words ripe for all occasions.
We use this hand to say,
I judge.

THE LOVE HAND

Placed arbitrarily at the back; one page.
Besides a shorthand *I love you*,
it signals *bad temper, bad luck and bad taste.*
Imagine turning on the bedside lamp
in order to say I love you.
Or not even bothering,
having learned through experience
trust in the body
to say everything.

The lion

The day the lion escapes,
zoo-keepers are frenzied:
liability insurance could go through the roof.
The last lion to escape, from Taronga,

shredded a wedding party in the gardens next door.
Guests ran for cover
before the knot could be tied.
I have it that the lion ran off with the bride,

neither seen again;
that's been my trouble –
wishing the impossible,
lacking the courage for reality.

The lion symbolises courage;
Saul Bellow's Henderson sought it in Africa
in the skin of a lion.
As a new mother I took on a totem,

a creature whose traits I admired.
I chose *leopard*: beauty, strength for the fight,
speed for flight, but I might exchange my spots
for courage, though it does the lion no good

when they decide to shoot her.
I once read that love is mainly courage.
It makes me think of Anna Politkovskaya
who loved truth,

even the hard truths of Chechnya and North Caucasus.
Born in 1958, like me,
she got all the courage there was that year.
They shot her, too.

Compass

The boy's sandpit has transformed
into a vegetable plot:
the edible backyard.

Like everything in their home,
it is chaotic.
Radishes and beans have gone to seed
while cherry tomatoes gleam red
in unexpected places.
The boy eats them straight from the vine;
there is not a single thing that's formal.
Silverbeet shines,
the green of a racing car.

Sunflowers have a slow start;
their darling faces still crumpled
like a baby's, instead of all smiles,
the sun having shifted too low in the sky;
they don't know where to look.

This is one way to say it:
the woman had a child
and everything changed.

She heard about a boy who,
asked to donate rare blood for his brother,
thought for an hour, then agreed,
only later asking
when he would begin to die.

Nothing she knows of sacrifice
comes near.

Still there were times the woman's ego
was no bigger than the paring
she cut from her son's little toenail.

Cleaning, she finds her dead father's barometer –
the shape of a ship's wheel –
stashed in a drawer,
remembers its fate:
knocked to the floor by the child.
The child cried as the pegs of the wheel snapped
and its glass cracked.
One hand will always point to Fair,
one to Change.

She uses others' poems to chart her life;
only the child has a compass,
but the stars are always there,
constant, changing.

It's a small plot;
pumpkins jump their boundary boards
and creep about. They grow
when no one's looking.
It's like a game of statues,
says the boy. Who moved?

She remains uncertain.
Her talisman:
the sky's ever-changing clouds.

Clouds are always made of the same stuff.
They look white
because the light's refracted.
It's always about light.

The light on her son's cheek.
He's like a spring leaf,
unfurling.

Dear life

A scarlet robin in a red vest,
and his plain love,
mate above our heads, out on a limb.
It *is* spring, you say.

New Holland honeyeaters flirt
with the light
and the sight of each other.
Green rosellas blend into snow gums
then a piece of tree
takes flight beside us.

Eucalypt forest below is struck through with white stags,
dead trunks reflecting the sun.
I'm thankful winter's done,
that warmth seeks us out
and lures the growth of branch, blossom, leaf.

The Organ Pipes' sudden soar of sheer dolerite
outshines cathedrals,
vaulting above us,
clouds racing past the precipice;
it falls towards us,
or we fall towards the sky.

In crevices and cracks
plants hang on for dear life,
thrive, even, in their stronghold.

Beneath me,
 three hundred and fifty metres of rock
thrust through the old crust
 of limestone,
Jurassic through Triassic,
 and lower,
 Permian.
Fossils we've found at the end of your foothill street
 reveal creatures we'd find on a beach.

Voices of climbers reach us on the thin air,
ribbons of sound fluting
 through the stone amphitheatre.
We trace demarcations of botanical change –
 the last snow gum,
a new community of alpine scrub –
 due to temperature, wind, rain shadow.
Microclimates patchwork vegetation.

Hakea nuts lie among stones
like hearts cracked open,
 emptiness at their centre;
 or a seed like the gauzy wing of an insect
cleaves to the side,
 a filament of hope.

When a mountain skink and I
 size each other up,
his lungs pump a mottled flank.
 I envy his reptilian coat,
 the colour of lichen
 and rock.

Layers of city glaze craze and fall away;
my skin glows green.
 I am coming undone.

 Spoor of creatures
which inhabit the night
 and know this place not by sight,
or by heart like you,
 but by touch, and smell, and sound;
the ground they tread threads a wild pattern
 across scree slopes,
among alpine plants,
 tracing vagaries of hunger and fear.
I know it's tooth and claw
 but up here
everything appears to have its place.

 We clamber over boulders
 strewn like marbles,
rolled and eroded
 by the thumb of millennia.
Frost-cracking and loss continue,
 the washing away;
 polygonal columns sway
and fall unseen.
 When you climb the boulder
on which I lean
 I feel it tremble,
like my body under your warmth.
 Hundreds of millions of years to become this,
and still ravelling
 beneath our scrambling hands.

Up through the rock chimney in the north buttress
your ascent is laid-back.

I stall and stumble,
the swoop in my stomach
like that of earth tremors felt in the night.
You ask if I'm afraid. *Yes.*

But then I'm in the mountain's rock embrace,
and through.

Nooks and crannies of curlicued coast
now unfurl. Below us, clouds fray
and race shadows
over green peninsulas
and Channel blue.

For once, I know exactly
where I stand.

Bedlam Walls

Hush the wind in rigging
and we might hear voices locked in stone.

This was a bay of fires:
tribes gathered on the promontory
to bask in winter sunshine like today's.
Its coast is discordant,
cut with bays and rock shelves,
a place where shellfish thrived,
the shortest river crossing in a rolled-bark canoe.

Middens have been mined for lime and shellgrit;
still the white is bright throughout the earth.
Cave stone is soft, eroded;
we place our hands inside the empty sphere
where once a harder rock cleaved
like a cannon ball in the cliff face.

Looking out from the cave mouth,
I ask my son why there are waves today.
A giant octopus, he says,
is wriggling his tentacles.
It might be a fire story once told here
with age-old innocence,
before the massacre.

The race fleet goes about with the wind;
mainsails flap and billow
like handkerchiefs raised in urgent surrender.
Then: silence.

The passion

I.

Our church was built by its congregation on weekends –
yes, on Sundays – from weatherboard and corrugated iron.
It was where a small town worshipped.
I liked that word, *worship*,
and all the kissing that went with it –
garments, feet, the ground on which Jesus trod –
plotting, even back then, a passionate life.
I knew the plaster saints like friends,
studied them while Latin droned to its end.
I thought they all wore holy robes, like clergy.
One year, our Archbishop paid a visit.
Your worship, I said slowly, kissing his gold ring.
At confession, I made up sins,
beginning a lasting passion for fiction.
Some sins I didn't even understand
but the nuns told them to us as examples.
At Mass, I'd sing with the choir up the back
where Sister Patricia pumped the old organ,
and often I did the bible reading,
stories with settings that didn't convince.
In my spare time I'd make the Stations of the Cross,
for bonus points in grace.
Grace was a good word, too,
something I lacked as I grew older.
I made an altar in my bedroom, but who to worship?

II.

Having rested in the Gardens of Gethsemane,
in the shade of an ancient olive tree,
watching sunlight play in a mysterious way
among its leaves, I set off for the Via Doloroso.
In through the walls of Jerusalem,
till then a place name in the highlands,
where people also make pilgrimage,
the way they do to this Wailing Wall.
I never saw so many guns in one place.
I trace Jesus' hallowed footsteps,
follow his passion, but find a boy to kiss
instead of this street of sorrows.
It's the last time I'll ever make the Stations of the Cross.
I prefer to see what's shaking
in the *suq*, play *shesh besh* with the Arabs
in the Market of the Inn of Olive Oil,
smoke their hubbly-bubbly pipes.
The Church of the Holy Sepulchre is a tomb;
I choose life. I don't get to Bethlehem for Christmas:
security's too tight. But I visit Nazareth,
the Sea of Galilee, the Jordan River.
It's a story: one man's life and suffering among many.
Every person has their cross to bear, the nuns used to say
as they fiddled with their waistband crucifix.
One said my mother had *me*.

III.

The old Irish Catholic cemetery
is full of children's graves.
The painter notices more names begin with C

than any other; M is a close second:
all those Mc's and Murphys.
He photographs the colours
of lichen and weathered stone.
If god is in the details,
he has a lot of god to take home.
Some headstones lean, or lie askew,
worn bare of all lettering.
You're a long time dead, I keep hearing.
The western sky turns biblical,
its stratocumulus gilt-edged,
rays of light fanning across the Shoalhaven valley.
Our common Catholic childhoods revive:
Dutch and Irish, much the same.
Those rays, he says, *are really parallel*.
He's a painter, he knows about perspective,
and the way he looks at light is more respectful.
I've learned from that.
Light gives us life: this is the miracle.
I know these rays are a scattering of light
by water droplets and other particles;
they're called *crepuscular*:
god is in the words.