

Revisiting St John of God Hospital, Subiaco

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Mangling the letter about research
into bereavement services
between two shaky fingers
and feeling faintly ridiculous
I stepped into the hospital
like an elephant
with a maharaja of emotion
piled on its back, swayed slightly

and had to keep moving forward.
The worn blue carpet
still felt firm underfoot,
the doors still slid open easily,
all the colourings were subdued
and evening light poured into the pastel foyer.
Almost two years since I said goodbye;
I would never come here again.

Drawn as by an unspoken signal
I walked out of my way
past the oncologist's room, the
palliative care doctor's room,
their names still engraved
on the frosted glass. Others
fill their waiting rooms now,
waiting...

The corridors looked serene
and everything was as it had ever been
except that I swayed and stumbled
for the one thing that was so new:

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that you were no longer here
and no longer knew.

Go gently

for Bill Shepherd, my father-in-law

I come to see you this one last time
as you shake in your firm framed chair.
How hard it is to say a goodbye
that must mean never, never again.

No matter how blanketed, you can't get warm
because the blizzard of death is blowing
from within; blood leaches from your body
all the dim day and all through the night:

for the first time you don't drink coffee I bring,
your hands can't stop shivering around
the cup, your fingers are porcelain, your toes
numb, your organs shutting down one by one.

Though your endeavour has been full and long
a strong sense of pointlessness at the end
absurdly betrays us. "We will never forget you"
I say, but "never" is never a human word.

Even for those whom "never forgotten"
is said, the words should be *verboten*.
All we little vessels of self-importance
time will shyly turn into silence.

I turn and walk down what suddenly seems
too short a corridor. One last wave:
there's no more to give, all words gone.
Go gently and silently, with dignity and calm,

yet no matter how seriously we try
there is no human way to say goodbye.

Time Machines

I bring up photos on screen,
one by one, to give the new owners,
images of our house being built
at different stages:
a flat, empty sandy waste,
the drab, grey concrete slab
glistening with puddles,
the whole expectant timber skeleton,
red tiles stacked nearby.
In three or four you are there,
back to the camera, checking,
walking awkwardly, obviously ill.

And because you are there
so am I, taken by surprise,
the past scene seen now
with different eyes.
Every photo is a time machine
taking you back to a future
that now seems
wholly predictable
but then was all anticipation,

a wonderful, dreadful,
well-known, utterly
unimaginable journey

that you can no longer make.

Gone Away

Visiting Taiwan, and alone with my grandson,
 no toys around, no books, no loose Lego bricks,
 lost for something to amuse or distract him,
 I pulled from my wallet the one photo I keep:

he could recognise me, younger, before he was born,
 and laugh at his dad; I could point out Uncle Cam.
 "But who's that?" he asked, gesturing
 to where you stood, the shortest, at the end

"That's your Aussie Grandma," I explained,
 "She got sick and died."

"Sick" he understood
 of course – he'd been sick himself. "Died"
 surprised him less than I thought it would.

His friend had a puppy who had died:
 "He went away and won't be coming back."
 I thought of the great cathedrals, the stone churches,
 The wooden, peak-roofed place I went to weekly

and meekly as a child; hundreds of Indian Gods,
 the Greeks ranting, raping and raging about the sky,
 the minarets with their yearning calls to prayer,
 some of the pseudo-scientific, stranger cults

of the 4,000 religions that exist on Earth
 - all driven by faith, lack of evidence, and lack
 of reasoning, the desperate need we have
 to believe that we will never die.

I thought of the great minds, the stern philosophers,
 took the small photo from his tiny fingers
 with stuttering breath, and opened my wallet
 to keep intact the wealth, the fragility I hold there

and reflected on all the knowledge we now have
 and all the knowledge we lack, and reflected too

on all any of us has ever understood of death:
you have gone away, and won't be coming back.

The Mystery Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp

after Rembrandt, "The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Tulp," Mauritshuis,

Like a butcher lifting meat in his shop
but with tongs, Dr Tulp raises bloody
sinews in Aris Kindt's hewn open
left arm. The body where not red
is ghastly grey. A pyramid of surgeons
looks to the thief's innards, fascinated,
stunned, a touch aghast. Two others are vaguely
looking away. No-one is looking at Dr Tulp
whose left hand is held in an orchestral gesture,
his long, delicate fingers far from his body
and from Kindt's, executed so few days before.
You could expect Dr Tulp
to be turning the world away from God
to the physically human, to science, to the earth

but his eyes, those eyes, are far away, looking neither
at the dissection, nor the person who was Kindt,
nor his audience of surgeons, nor the audience of us

but in a dreamt of distance whose borders
go dark, and for all that we now know
we cannot, and can never see.



Hashtag Me Too

after Rembrandt, "Susanna" (1636), Mauritsbuis

Fear-white body beside rumped clothes,
heavy-hipped, flesh gathered in folds
beneath her arms - no photoshopped,
unreally curvaceous centrefold -
she turns away from the lascivious,
sexually harassing Elders hiding,
dark in the dark hedge, towards us,
hidden in the thickets of the future,

we who now are voyeurs too,
peering at her sense of shame
for her own nakedness made public;
but Rembrandt and his every viewer
must share her uneasiness:
we peeping Toms. But why?
She is dressed as she began
in life, naked, silent now, not as then
crying like a frightened bird,
wondering into what world
has she been thrust.

Eyes and mouth angled in
her startled face, upturned hands
with a thin slip clutching to her curves
that stark loneliness in nudity
only we of the animals feel
and fear. So Susanna looks up
as if she has something to tell us
but it stays unspoken. Femininity and time
compel it to silence; and she starts again
at all the unknowns
and all the unknown faces.



Yet*for Annamaria*

I wake beside a hunk of concrete
 angled up to a frenzied freeway
 where platoons of scooters, trucks
 and cars roar insatiably all night long

but they particularly steal my ears
 this morning of Christmas Eve.
 In Gaoxiong's soupy skies
 at night the moon is only visible

occasionally, but I know it's there;
 moonbeams, moonshine, *claire de lune*:
 all its meanings sound corny
 and are given by us, but then

can be reflected back, just as
 science says its light is reflection,
 mere reflection. In America
 a man rants in a department store

"Stop lying to your kids!"
 "There is no Santa Claus!"
 yet the kids queuing for Santa
 ignore his voice. He can't tell

how lies differ from fantasy
 or the magic in their world
 that his flattening realism
 will never dispel, the wonder

of dream. In a season of good cheer
 a killer hurtles a truck
 into a Berlin Christmas *markt*,
 Melbourne men plan murder

in the venerable name of God. Yet
 in Gaoxiong's deeply Chinese streets
 carols play, electric trees
 twinkle: Christmas is spreading.

This Christmas, half a world
away from you, I will look up
and, cloudlessness or clouds,
will see the moon is there

and by some process I don't pretend
to understand, or will ever,
I feel, though too far off
you are yet almost beside me

and that corny, reflecting moon
will spread its determined light
on us both.