

Remembering Mary

Penny Lane

We think back to Mary Bassett, born in 1835,
another in a bother of sons and daughters
for a Cornish family—our ancestor, Mary,
who scoured, laundered, stitched her years to 20
when she wed a farmhand soon short of work,
bore a run of children, just two sons surviving,
before farewelling family into distant memory

and misery on an immigrant ship, the Golden City,
16 weeks in sea-surge, stifled in breathless gloom,
bedding wet from bursts of sea through shipside gaps
and, worse than that, an infiltration of typhoid
taking her infant son to an ocean burial,
Mary staring down from heaving deckside
into a blue expansive as the heavens.

Then, a different blue, the luminous southern sky,
under which, she sadly, gladly, disembarked
to strange new sounds—kookaburras, cockatoos—
and scrawny trees and tawny grass, and
wagon-travel to outback Queensland pastoral stations—
Cooyar, Daandine—named according to
First People's words for land no longer theirs.

Did that discomfort Mary? The taken land?
Did she ponder this in isolated hours,
her wiry, bandy-legged, ready-for-horses husband
gone to the wide outdoors with cattle?
Mary, sweat-wet, swelled with pregnancies,
early-morning milking, butter-churning, baking,
hefting heavy washing, wielding flat irons,

thrusting broom and mop at there-again dust and grime,
knowing she'd be doing it the next day too,
and in the evenings tending sickly children,
scissoring, thimble-fingered pinning, sewing
by candle glow and moth flutter, darning, mending,
patching patches, her exploits stitched on calico
and linen, and writ in rust of washing tubs.

We think of Mary rearing poddy calves for petting
and for later butchering, and pigs,
dispatching deadly snakes too close to home,
sometimes seeking respite in a gum's mean shade,
the sky white-hot through squinting eyes
clouded with fatality, two daughters born and toddling
until taken by diphtheria.

We remember Mary in the Christmas pudding story
passed down through the women of the family,
the laughing aunts recalling Mary's pudding
bouncing best in a communal tub of boiling water
(that tub got somehow from the Golden City)
until the pudding, pierced by a jealous other, sank.
We see Mary in a cousin's chin, in an uncle's eyes,

and in just one photograph—Mary sitting stiffly,
jacketed in black with cameoed white lace collar,
her handsome face, her downturned smile, sad eyes,
gnarly, hard-boiled hands, her left arm gripping
an infant grandson, her right arm hanging,
its hand reaching awkwardly for empty air.
Yes, we remember Mary, our outback hero.