

The Pact

Tim Loveday

Off the backroad, where the sun
is an Arnott's cracker and the fences
slacken, my father shifts gear to pull up
scrub, un-tarps to wade by ridge, eyes
the slow descent of land and keens. There,
'mong needles that crunch and snap with
each chest fall, he softens his shoulder
to butt and tests recoil. Before the bang
the jump—that sudden quieting ever after
sweat licks his forehead and he mutters,
tomorrow—sensing perhaps in me,
young animal, a laboured desire
to see the world narrowed.

Skinned, slung and washed clean with
a bar of rubber soap he slackens himself
again to earth and grins. Come on, son—
he lifts. Up on his wide shoulders,
I raise my fists, a giant's horns—
a mountainside that pitches
a blaze of trees into
a purpling horizon.

By campfire, that night, he recalls catches:
finches, a baby kookaburra once, fairywrens
sometimes, and even a tiger snapped in the silver
teeth of the cage's door—the gully, his favourite
spot, turned copper with blood. My father then took
spade to skull, heard the hollowing crack of bone,
and being his first kill, a child of 10—wept.

Of course
he neglects to mention this: that unclean end. Such
stories are the burden of women. Says nothing
of the way the snake reeled, pulled back for
its last breath, the shimmer of its opal eyes
and his boyish tears pooling dust. Why

2024
RUNNER UP

Cloncurry Prize
Poetry Competition

The Pact

Tim Loveday

would he? Death suspends itself
in silence, as if a declaration of the slow
maturation of generations, a looking glass
that rarely look backs
on the colourlessness
that precedes it.

These broken details—the burial that followed,
his scolding father, the mound of earth that
he plucked free of weeds for months after—
are woven into a subtle and elegant prayer that
my grandmother gives for all men as she rubs her rosary
by generator's light and watches my mother, bower
bird, bowed over the aluminium haze, the chipped
china of many a distant family passing through
passed between her chipped hands. She scrubs,
sighs, winces, rinsing, before she lays it to rest—
an old story, a surrogate reverence as much
for the heaviness of the men
beside them.

At first light, my mother remains silent,
as my father takes me out into pastures
not yet hayed and shows me how to
handle that gun, the same way his
father did when he was a boy. The heat
of my breath against the cold of the
action, click and sight. The slick of
grease and the rusty scent of blood.
The heartbeat in my fingertip. I saw
then the length of the world and
made for the first time in my
life, a pact: to never speak
this deep unsettling.

2024
RUNNER UP

Cloncurry Prize
Poetry Competition