

ONE

JACKIE

That summer in Perth
the city cooked for months
the sky burned white.

The kids were over at the pool
all day every day
baking brown in glitter-blue chlorine.

They had to take Jackie
whining for a Coke, for lip gloss—
dripping on their magazines
and stealing drags of Sophie's smokes
then coughing up her lungs
in front of everyone.

They could be mean
but Jude and Soph put up with her
because they had to—
Mum said they had to take her.

So they're at Beatty Park
all day every day
that rainless summer.

The complex takes a city block—
a chlorine palace filled with pools.
The long one's rimmed with stands
its racing lanes marked out
in black-snake shimmer lines.
The kids' pool's down the back
beside the kiosk selling chips and ice-cream
and, lastly, there's the diving pool
mapped out in squares of darkening blue so deep
you can't see the bottom
with five boards all stacked up

like in the Olympics—
the top is thirty feet.
Its tower casts shadows half a block.

That's where the girls bake
in coconut oil, on concrete
behind the highest board
with bloody cousin Billy bouncing round
in the background
like a caffeinated flea.

They're not supposed to go there
but it's the best place to sunbake
without boys doing bombies to annoy you
or little kids running through the towels—
and anyway the life guard's nodded off
behind his reflector sunnies.

And that day
against all the rules
a boy sits near them—
a shy boy (not one of those hairy screamers
that splashes in your face—
the Greek kids are the worst
then the Irish).

But this kid's not noisy
brown eyes, gold-brown tan
just starting to get muscles.

He says to Jackie, softly
I think you're beautiful
and the others look at her
and for the first time, see it's true.

Jackie scoffs and flips her curls
a little bothered, a little pleased
by the strange new feeling of being looked at.
A boy with brown eyes likes her,
yes her, yes a boy.

What's your name? he asks.

– *Jackie.*

– *Cool. I'm Karri.*

In the sticky silence
they both laugh, then look away.
The air between them shimmers.
Jackie traces fingers on her towel
(Karri puts his shades back on
but doesn't go away).

And the sun shines on her alone
in her tiny black bikini
with her don't-care Irish curls
and cat-green eyes
and leaves the others out
with their damp cozzies and soggy towels
and magazines
and who-needs-it-anyway smokes
and melting ice-creams.

Jackie basks
in the glare of her sisters' envy
doesn't see
the black snake nestled in their towels
wake up—
hidden by the stacks of magazines
and smokes and lollies
her sisters guard against all comers—
right next to the stairs to the highest diving board.

KEVIN

Kevin's eyes are tired from driving.
Stuck in traffic. Rush hour.
City summer afternoons are bad
And here's the worst part of the shift—
the bottleneck on Vincent Street.

At Beatty Park the bus fills up
with raucous flocks of pool-damp kids.
They flick their towels
and fight for seats
like greedy parrots swooping on a fig tree.
Won't get up for tired old ladies
so he stops and yells at them
Move down the back of the bus. Yeah, you.
No aircon—so the bus gets hot
and smells like dirty feet.

Back in the late seventies
when Bondy ruled the roost
(before he went to jail)
a craze for shiny glass hit Perth.
They stuck it in all the tall buildings
popping up like weeds in the CBD.
Mostly they used that one-way mirror stuff
with oil-slick rainbows at its edges.
Looks like mirror sunglasses for giants.

Gives you a headache when you're driving.
All you see's yourself
in window after window—
that, and other walls of windows
bouncing back and back and back
like glassy echoes in a cave.

They got that right, those fucken architects.
Now every east–west street’s ablaze—
a howling corridor of light, come afternoon.

Kevin wears cheap but sturdy sunnies, aviator glasses
bullshit name coz pilots just use radar
but the frames are light and that’s what matters—
that, and bouncing back the glare
from crazy paving walls of light
that drive you up the wall all day.

And every building looks the same.
Shiny and hostile as a beetle.

City of light.
In 1962 they turned the lights on
so the space shuttle could see us wave
from space. First place you’d see
on your return. Last place
you’d see before the moon.

But on their return
the astronauts sailed straight past Perth
the city waiting, all lit up
with chips and dips
dressed up to party—
an outpost on the border of the void.

Perth.
The loneliest city in the world.

Seven years later, Kevin was in Grade Six.
Instead of doing maths
they watched the moon landing on the telly.
Slow metal insects stumbled
one by one

out of the space ship
on the moon
on a crackly black-and-white TV.

Then they jumped and it was beautiful
they didn't kick up dust—no atmosphere
just long slow flying leaps. If it was Kevin
he'd have jumped all day
played leapfrog with the other blokes in suits
then gone exploring—
but they didn't do that.

They just stuck a flagpole in a pile of rocks
and got back in the ship.
After coming all that way
that's all they did.

Kevin wanted to see moon rocks
and more jumping
and the dark side of the moon
but that was all they got
and anyway
it was sort of hard to see from down the back
with other kids' heads in the way
on a black-and-white TV
with bad reception.

You couldn't tell that much about the moon from there.

That night from out the back
the moon looked pretty much the same
though if he squinted
Kev thought he saw some tiny dents
from jumping astronauts.

He was glad he couldn't see the flag but,
because the moon was still his own
the one that shivered up the Swan in ripples
bright enough to read by,
made the dogs howl on a summer's night
and turned the shadows inky purple
making monsters out of jacaranda trees.

Traffic's jammed again. Rush-hour Friday.
Kev can't wait for sundown.
He takes his sunnies off and rubs his eyes—he's wrecked.
This shift's a bitch. The rowdy kids, the sun—
Along the Esplanade
the light beats off the river
breaking
like a bottle in your face.
But at last, the traffic moves.
Home stretch. He puts his shades on
jams the bus in gear.

Tonight they'll take the kids
go fishing off the jetty
if the moon's out soon enough.
After a bite and a beer or two—he'd kill
for a nice cold beer.

AUNTIE

Across the road from Beatty Park
on Vincent Street
in the brick house with the high walls
it's morning shift. Penny comes in
re-locks the door
and reads the refuge night book—
New arrivals.

Any attacks or threats.

No-one's up yet—good—she lights a smoke
and fortifies herself with coffee.
Once the kids get up, it's over—
best to take a moment while you can.

Auntie hears her, locks the bathroom door
for privacy, and has a little cry
then combs her thinning curls
and pulls herself together for the day
before Jerome wakes up.

It's hard being down here in the city
on a mission by herself
with Sally Jo's kid to look after
'specially the way they look at blackfellas here
even an old lady with respect back home—
an Auntie.

She's slow moving, a heavy lady
pushing through the city's shiny-bright
to find her niece, Jerome's mum Sally
tell her off, and drag her home
unless she's gone for good—
but that's a hole she won't trip into
so she moves slowly, carefully
even when she combs her hair
each stroke's an act of will.

She wears a flowing cotton dress from K-Mart
black flip-flops
Auntie clothes.

Back home in Geraldton, she works
in the sandwich shop
chops and slices all day out the back.
The young girls work the counter—
the blokes prefer that.
Baloney, white bread, spam, tomato
onion, cheese slices, hot dogs, rolls
with mustard, mayo
yellow chutney
bright green pickles
peanut butter
all sweet things that come in jars.

It's Geraldton. They don't wear those doctor's gloves
just to make sandwiches, but wash their hands
in the big ceramic sink out the back.
There's a fridge out there, and a big metal fan
but it's still stinking hot
out the back of the sandwich shop.

Cinderblock walls
a chopping island
trays of stuff beneath in ice
the stuff you put in sandwiches
by the fistful
till the vinegar stings your nails.
And the floor's hard on your feet for hours
because it's concrete
but it stays cool and it's easy to clean.
There's a grey bucket with metal rollers
for squeezing out the string mop.

It swishes on the floor like an octopus.
Sometimes it's the only sound you hear
at night when you shut up shop.

But down here in Perth, the traffic howls all day
rattling the windows of the refuge
on Vincent Street, across from Beatty Park
the giant swimming pool complex
north of the city.

She doesn't know this place
or anyone in Perth 'cept cousin Elsie and her mob.
Heard from Elsie you could stay
no questions asked—at least for long enough
to catch your breath—
until they need the beds for women fleeing men.
And Auntie's not in flight—
she's in pursuit.

Came down with the little fella on the bus.
We'll find your mum, she tells Jerome.
Four hundred K from Geraldton
red dirt town.
In the season, full of fishermen
hard drinkers, hard workers.
They make a ton of money off the boats
head back to Perth in the off-season.

In the season they work fourteen-hour days.
Sometimes they're out for weeks
way off the coast—
you can't see land—
out by the crayfish breeding grounds
the reef-rim round the Abrolhos Islands
where murder followed mutiny
when the Batavia ran aground

and, in shallow pools of blood and salt
and treason, hundreds drowned.

That's centuries ago
but way out there, time circles
like a shark around a bleeding fish.
Moaning voices thrash in the salty air
beaten by the wings of shrieking gulls.
Way out there
the wind and birds and water howl
and flicker like the static on a black-and-white TV—
unquiet, moving, meaning nothing
making shapes and sounds incessantly.
Only the sharks are quiet
and the killer waves
that rise beyond the reef to roll the boats.

When the fishermen get back to town they drink
and party hard, then drink again.
Blow the foam off the month's paychecks
that keep the sandwich shop afloat.
The money lasts them through the off-season.
It's a pretty good life.
The single blokes take off to Bali
or blow it all at Burswood.

The married fellas keep their wives
and double-garage houses
back in Perth, in cul-de-sacs
in Balga and in Joondalup
where sprinklers keep the lawns a neon green
and wives do all the cleaning.
And if the wives see other blokes
they never tell
and the fishermen don't either—
it stays in Perth or Geraldton—

what goes on in the fishing pubs
or the blackfella shacks on the edge of town
where some of them have girlfriends
and a place to crash when stoned.

They're not bad blokes
a whole lot better than the miners
who burn through town on the way up north.
They bring a bit of money
and fresh crayfish, that's a boon,
and lots of beer
and don't get into many fights
but the local girls—
the girls do what they like these days.

Sally Jo's the worst of all.
Since she lost her mum
that girl's gone off the rails.
Sleeps too little, laughs too much
smokes like cigarettes were air
and bourbon turned to water
glitters like a piece of broken glass
that sparkles in the eyes of men—
the fishing mob especially.

You just can't tell the girls what's what
though Auntie sees it every year—
they must know what they're in for but,
the fellas leave the end of season.

*where you think they go, girl?
in the deep-freeze or what?
they got families you know*

They hate hearing that word—
families.

BAT GIRL

Bat Girl likes the swimming pool in Perth—
a giant concrete echo chamber
walling in its sound-transmitting water.

Splashes, ripples, arrowheads of light
the crack of bodies slapping water
all form patterns she can measure
weave into a hard and shiny shape—
a beetle's shell to crawl inside and think.
A shelter from the world's chaotic waves.

Some are fast and violent, battering at her head—
the sound of human chatter, TV sportscasts
the flickered white of fence posts from the car.
Some so fragile butterflies could crush them—
whispering of light on summer leaves
the clink of sweaty coins in someone's pockets
seven aisles away in K-Mart.

Safe in Beatty Park's acoustic shell
she listens for the whistling curve of bodies
then the splash—computes the fall—
one point four three seconds—does the maths—
thirty two point eight feet high—that's tall!
Looks up, confirms. Yes, five boards stacked.
She hears the diver's shock-wave hit the pool-sides
not quite square—the sides hit first—
so roughly sixty feet across by seventy-six—
Good. That pool's mapped.

She's glad they've moved down South.
Less random noise. More bats
whose sonar patterns map the sky
in tandem with the stars—
a perfect site for building her machines.

Today, they're back in Perth just for the week
to finish business, sign off school, pack up the house
and say goodbye to Karri's friends
then hit the pool he loves for one last swim.
Beatty Park—*it could be worse*—
there aren't that many places all of them can stand.

Her mother Margie stretches out her legs.
She sports those cat's-eye sunnies
with a yellow fifties' bathing suit she picked up at the op shop.
Surveys the kid-jammed pool, decides against a dip—
probably full of chemicals and piss.
Margie'd rather head to Swanbourne
swim, then smoke a joint and drift with Jarrah
into salt-skin snoozing, after sand-dune pleasures...
but those sweet days went west with kids.

It's hard for her to set the rules—
she'd dimly thought of parenting like *hanging out*—
your kids your friends.
But Bat Girl soon put paid to that
and lately even Karri cringes—
hippie parents are the pits
Jarrah has a ponytail
Margie never shaves her legs.
And then there's Bat Girl, *worst of all...*
Karri keeps his distance these days—
just drops in to get supplies.

Oh—*here he comes.* Bat Girl points her brother out.
He's running, wet and shining from the pool
to burst their cone of silence—
Margie oiling up her legs, Jarrah rolling a smoke—
– *Mum—can I get chips and Coke?*
– *How much d'you need? – Five bucks.*

- *Five bucks? You're kidding. Two!*
- *Mum...come on...there's other kids...*
- *Other 'kids'?*

A pause. Then Karri shuffles.

- Margie laughs – *You mean, a girl.*
- Another pause – *I'll get you chips as well?*
- *So, what's her name?*
- *Aww mum!!!*
- Jarrah laughs, but backs his son—
- *Come on, lay off him, Margie.*
- *Please mum? I'll get Coke for Bat Girl—*
- Margie frowns – *I mean, for Beatrice.*

Bat Girl scowls, looks up. She hates that name—
it tethers her to some dream daughter Margie wants
who smiles, and likes to chat with her
and cares about her hair and what she wears
and isn't Bat Girl—
brooding purple flower in her swimsuit
sitting on her favorite orange towel
the innards of a radio spread out before her.

- *Go away, she mutters.*
- *Thought you'd like a Coke, humphs Karri.*
- *Kids. Don't squabble. Here's five bucks, says Jarrah.*
- Karri grabs it—*Thanks, Dad!*—tears away.

His parents laugh, and talk in chalk-scrape chat
about *this girl he's met—I bet she's cute—*
the jangly noise of human back-and-forth.
Bat Girl presses on her ears and rocks—
her mother nudges at her dad—they stop—
the shell of splashy silence forms again.

The innards of the radio stop jiggling with her pulse
and settle down.

The pool's electric shiver-blue returns.

Bat Girl starts to work again, rewiring, building order
in a corner on a towel in Beatty Park
itself a concrete monster crouched inside
the roaring roads of Perth, a sanctuary from traffic
shielding patterns of its own—

Arcs of diving kids in glitter shields of spray
black-snake lap lines guiding swimmers
diving towers where Jackie and her sisters bake
and bicker, in the chaos Karri left—
a rudely switched-up pecking order.

Jackie's sisters' indignation raw and new
as if they'd never read a fairytale
or if they had, believed themselves immune.



At three o'clock, the sky is almost white
the sun consumes all trace of shade.
Sky and water bounce each other
light to light
and nothing breaks the lock of summer heat.
The sun's a ball flung high
a molten moment
weightless
at the apex of its flight—
the night too far away ever to fall.