

keepers of the dead I know

one

Every year on the anniversary of her death
as though the day before had tricked you into not thinking about her
new grief arrives with the old laments.

The flowers come, bright and alive.

You will watch the children today as the lighthouse keeper
watches the dangerous sea for threats.

Six years ago you lay expectant as she came to you
a finely tuned song after the white noise of waiting.

But death will have its way today as it did then.

Everything is passing, all the sunlit corners
all the shadows. The day will end as it began
the terrible pain of your brave swallow
the throat centre – incommunicado.

No prayers, no pleas, just a hard remembering.

I went to the cemetery once

I looked for her while my family sat in the car, waiting.

I don't know if I ever told you

it was dusk and almost beautiful.

There were rabbits everywhere, flipping their back legs
into the air. So strange in all the stillness.

It made me smile. I hope that's ok.

two

Memory presses you out like paper-dolls
dressing and redressing you until your fixed smile wears off
and I see, in some new photographs
a kodachrome of sadness, wintering you.
The ashes of your grown son taken by the wind
in a Gippsland forest, the walk back to the car without him
longer somehow – the sky refusing to weep
even though the clouds hung low and full all day
in the January heat. It was a deceitful Christmas.
Four days before his death you sat in church
the waxed wooden pews gave off their comfort smell
the priest in his cream silk didn't know
what it was you prayed for, or why.
Yet you carried hope
to the front of the line to receive the sacrament
and saw there your opaque faith
and the way the morning shrugged you off
after the service.
I sat with him so you could go away for the night
we didn't talk much. He told me when he was ready
for bed and I helped him down the hall.
I don't know if I ever told you

(keepers of the dead I know)

I tried to pretend I was playing a role
not his sister, but a guardian
some control in the chaos of his death. I hope that's ok.

three

You are flying thousands of miles to be with us
you and your baby, high in the head of the night sky
a plane full of thinkers and sleepers
the art of travel nonchalant this evening.
Everything is a chance, you know that now.
Your first son never made the journey of his birth
you were desperate with the pain of it for so long
you must have been suspicious when this new boy emerged
like a sweet dream, demanding your attention.
He is making it harder for the intimate ownership of the past.
You told your story again and again
every audience, every angle – blame shifted
and returned and you went on telling
exhausting the composition of every word in every sentence.
You are a talker, you talked it out so many times
but the arc of sorrow in your voice never left
and you learnt to trust a certain silence

(keepers of the dead I know)

find room for it in the geography of your heart.

I found it hard sometimes to listen

in those first weeks. To watch you coming

down the stairs each morning – ghost like.

I don't know if I ever told you

I couldn't wait to drive to the supermarket for food.

All the static, well timed light

the advertisements delivering their specials

I was grateful for the mundane task

to push and fill the trolley with supplies. I hope that's ok.