

poems for the manus detainees



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Those who see through our leaders' torture techniques
Tear Manus detention centre down piece by piece,
But piece by piece the silent majority of Australians
Let it come back into shape in caged imaginations.

I heard my leaders screaming
Get in line, yet lines move, metamorphise
Like government offices maturing,
Losing their puppy fat, forgetting the rules

Four years locked up for 'queue jumping'
When these men, men who don't know
Where the line begins, where the reef starts
Where the shrapnel lands.

Your fate is to walk Northbridge streets
In early November, sweat beads on your forehead
As you read that four hundred and four men
Are trapped on Manus, trapped in detention.

Your fate is to feel hopeless and powerless
And lucky you're not trapped in a hell hole
Like the men on Manus, the four hundred and four
Who feel bullet holes in the perimeter fence.

Oh, my brothers, my leaders have turned their backs
On the ocean and their sand castles will soon crumble
Next to the PNG Navy, who drink to get drunk
And fire shots into our detention centre.

I have no leaders and want no leaders
and what the sadists do in our names
doesn't correlate to sunrise or sunset
but what I do know is that those trapped

on Manus need all of us who are leaderless
by choice or default to see the sunrise
and sunset as the same ones that follow on
or synchronise or run ahead in circadian offsets —

those little tricks of avoidance we deploy
to make our days bearable, to reassure that it's really
a different ecosystem here where those entrapped
aren't and can't be because of someone else's

dirty business? No, it's close. Always close
and present. At this end of the stick —
maybe the branch down during a wheatbelt storm,
a traverser of the ridge — I accept fate

is a convenience invented
by the liars of democracy.

I want my anger to be true
And my reading manifest in solid predictions:
Our corrupt, inhumane leaders will topple.
But my leaders are killing innocent men on Manus.

Our leaders inform our anger,
And lead us by the hand, they whisper at the gravel:
“Let me have one of your hot chips,
Let me turn the gray nurses body upside-down.”

Distracted, I think the four hundred and four men
Are different from me; I waste whole days
Writing poetry, I walk Northbridge streets
Listening to cafe owners complain of an eery

Quietude that has entered the hollow
London Plain tree, where a pink and gray galah
Nests outside the Vietnamese restaurant
And the mens' sentence is cauterised, altered:

Very superstitious, writings on the wall.

If luck decides your freedom and safety
Luck also decides your food and water
Your lights and airs, luck decides
Your ability to take these needs for granted.

Plastic numbered balls in a globe shaped cage.
Who amongst my peers could endure
Sitting in an ice-cream stained cinema chair
While watching the pre-show Christmas ads?

In Perth I could find hundreds of fathers
Angry at their daughters for being home late,
For not cleaning the bathroom or bedroom
From kissing Tom and Julie, fathers weighed down

With pressure to keep the Land Rover Discovery,
To afford to pay for the family holiday to Broome,
Fathers who, when watching the news, won't bat
An eyelid when shown starving men on Manus.

It's those accumulating micro-oppressions
that make it possible for the Aussie blokes
to ignore blokes in agony, in clinging to horror
in the face of a horror of total loss of control.

Where no hope opened into hopelessness.
Where the sins of the father make fathers
lash out at anyone saying they've got it easy.
This age of confusion for mining men in mess halls.

Loungerooms. And yet, when it comes to men
being trashed and humiliated they find no words
other than 'brought it on themselves'. Practical maths
is a lie — propaganda invented by certain men

to keep the order of their universe intact,
universe in which men outside it are treated
the same as the women the certain men snared
in it — or tried to. Status quo. Footy — men's varieties —

and yet, and yet, the western capitalist
versions that keep othered men out. Complex
numbers, imaginary numbers. All in play.
Real numbers are the bottom line. The jeep.
Brands of freedom.

At the Brass Monkey, men drown their sorrows
While the men on Manus drown in death,
They hold their hands above their heads
And cross their forearms, and cross their legs

One man holds a sign: if Australia owned the air
They would sever our hands off. The men refuse
To go to Hillside, the 'new' detention centre
The next concentration camp, looted by locals.

We learn from Behrouz Boochani, a *lifer*
Who says he has spent more years behind bars
Than he has been free, Behrouz Boochani
Novelist and writer, sufferer of my inhumanity.

He tweets that the men have had their medicines
Cut off, that locals switched off the Hillside generators
And the security were helpless to stop them,
That we have been deprived of having access to food,

Water, power and medication for more than sixteen days.
Wing Xen tweets back: "you need to stop
Your complaining and go where you are told.
Your behaviour is disgusting and childish."

Time is not linear, never has been.
We warp to fit in — incidentals, let
things pass, go on, don't make a scene,
it's unmanly, like the *Rocky Horror*

Picture Show. The chronometer was an invention
of slavers, of timesharers. We'll get
the best out of our days, interstellar
asteroid, such 'orbital eccentricity'

of Oumuamua. Sanitation and water supplies
on Oumuamua are dodgy, and science
makes do with guesswork tinged with
excitement. All in the timing chain

on the way out of the solar system —
it's precision, and desperation
is too vague for the error slipping
in over distance, out of mind, humidity

and strange vegetation - building
standards Australia. A little bit
of us under the feet of the not us?
Contrôle Officiel Suisse des Chronomètres -

and only precision can bare the name,
Ownership. Art as entertainment
needs be made, needs be met, those
human interstices, breakdown between causes,
defamiliarising to make safe.

Aliens? Red meteors. Absorbing almost one
Hundred percent of the light that falls
On the surface, they arrive three a day
Passing through the galaxy. Aliens.

Here. Australia. Northbridge. There's bicoastal
Contention, top to bottom, side to side
Gnamma hole to gnamma hole
Where we normally spell behavior behaviour

And do and say and breathe and act and speak
And jump and react and don't react
And go where we are told to go;
We go to Rottnest or the Gold Coast for leavers.

We run around the bomb fires in our Rossi boots
Flicking up Pinky Beach sand in the glow,
Crushing aluminium cans. Rottnest,
The prisoners dilemma, our own paradise

Our own Norfolk Island, our own Manus Island.
Every comet takes a decade to cross our solar system
If they have a name they are special,
Too fast to be captured by Red Dwarf's gravity.

The police are dragging the detainees around Manus.
The people of Manus have been trying to help the detainees.
The people of Manus don't want any of this
done in their name. The Australian government

is flexing its colonial tentacles, like old-fashioned
postage stamps. Like likes. The men on Manus are uncomfortable,
and Australians of all genders have made them feel this way.
Their (the men's) phones have been confiscated. They

cannot plug into social media to show
how uncomfortable they are. Don't get me wrong —
I don't want anyone to feel uncomfortable,
other than myself, who is uncomfortable existing.

But I want the detainees of Manus to exist and feel whole
and intact and feel faith or lack of it without
external pressures. Their long journeys to oblivion.
The boats weren't comfortable, the situation

on Manus less comfortable for them. For the people
of Manus, Manus is beautiful, being made
unbeautiful by the empire of Australia. The people
of Manus are desperately uncomfortable, too.

A leaf heavy with humidity
falls but the path isn't blocked.
A pipe strikes the leg of a detainee
and the skin breaks and blood rises.

The smooth-suited Turnbull says
there's a plot to let more refugees in:
he doesn't understand the meaning of refugee,
nor the reasons refugees turn to people smugglers.

People smugglers are exploiters, who in other
circumstances would fit in nicely as functionaries
or donors to Australian political parties.
They've got the skill set and the ethics.

But that's nothing to do with refugees
who are people in search of a home and safety.
The Manus detainees hear the leaf fall
even through the brutality. The path

isn't blocked. We should be at the ports
welcoming them in, to this, their home, too.
Discuss the issue with the elders, whose
land it is. They have to hear colonisers

dishing out the rights. Colonisers
who operate leaf and tree mulching machines.
Who place tolls on the paths. Welcome
the men of Manus, hear pipe on bone, leaf-fall.

In two rows the prisoners sit in sodden
Tropical grass, full lotus, waist deep
With equidistant poles before them,
Today my leaders removed the barbed wire, the mesh

And tomorrow the buildings will be dismantled.
Yet the men, who boil sea water to drink
And who have not eaten for nine days
Refuse to move, want a voice, want freedom,

Not the kind of freedom afforded by fenceless
Compounds, from free trips in white buses,
They want the freedom to choose
A job, the art they prefer, where to travel.

They want a country that hears and wants them
Their stomach must be eating themselves.
The lining broken to thin layers, their muscles
Unable to support their skeleton; bedridden, broken.

The perpetrators of evil need to know
The messages they wish to send, never arrive.
What they teach is how to perpetuate more evil,
That death is not the most difficult time.

From inside, Behrouz Boochani speaks, pleads.
Old news of Fox and Mike filed into ‘the past’,
a spike to the narrative arc of voyages
of navigation that work only in *Quadrant* magazine’s

versions of history. The ‘new’ barracks
on the hill flotsam to four years adrift,
and the ‘land of the long white cloud’ offering,
to be rejected out of sheer bloody mindedness.

Who sails by what stars, in the vacuum
of night that should be a window to eternity,
but shutdown like medical facilities? —
this calenture the snappy dressers

of Canberra and their voters send them too,
an outrigger of the psyche, but one
the tyrants don’t understand helps
keep the stability of ethics, of landfall.

The message from Dutton, the ex-cop
About those refugees that shop:
The boats have stopped
The boats have stopped.

Says the first fleet to the second fleet —
Fuck off we're full your breath stinks
Hope your ship sinks
Hope your ship sinks.

The people smugglers are cunning and brave
They can sniff a bleeding heart on a wave
They arrange the first and second class passengers
And tell the kids to sit and behave.

Load up the bananas and water tanks
Load up the tubs of Selley's aquadhere
Cause in the dark we set sail for Australia
Some pollies just tweeted #bringthemhere ...

Singing too-rall, li-oo-rall, li-ad-di-ty,
Singing too-rall, li-oo-rall, li-ay,
Singing too-rall, li-oo-rall, li-ad-di-ty
Oh they're bound for Manus Island.

Dutton's deals
make family meals
difficult on Nauru —
Australia's human zoo
is located there
a halfway house to America
if you do a deal
to separate your soul
from your body;
locals too have it shoddy
under this arrangement,
barely heaven-sent
from the island continent
whose global rep is contingent
on the island of Manus
where jungle is,
where refugees are stuffed down a trash masher
(that's a terminology from America),
and Aussie democracy
will as readily
toss you into the sea
into the sea

Yet, in broad day-light those pesky
'People smugglers' slip through the multi-billion
Dollar defense drag-nets:
Putting up to Geraldton Port

Or docking on the Parramatta River
Within earshot of Bennelong,
(Named after the man who returned
From England in 1798, on HMAS Reliance.)

That's what smooth suit tells us,
Right after he's announced the boats have stopped
People have been saved from drowning
They've cured asphyxiation, and so on and so forth.

What I would prefer is a soundtrack
To help master my leader's distraction,
Who can't name a single *AC/DC* song
Thinks *Midnight Oil* is a mining band,

And awards Archie Roach Australian of the Year
For singing: *this story's right, this story's true*
I would not tell lies to you, like the promises
they did not keep, and how they fenced us in like sheep.

Lorengau. Tok Pisin
resonates with the frustration
of a forced association,
a colonial unloading,
which is no excuse
for threats, but we've
got to understand
the tension a rich nation
of job security obsessives
that refuses refugees
places on a community
that is being used
to test out Archimedes'
principle. Tok Pisin
at Lorengau is cap-
sized by the weight
it has been forced to take,
a loan word showdown
with control of trade
routes, Pine Gap, the North-
West cape, the Adani minesite,
the leafy electorates
of big Aussie cities,
the workers sharing
common ground
with class enemies
to fuel the hypocritical
quarantine, spread lies
about the plimsoll line,
paint it when
& where it suits.

This sphere of influence, this cricket-playing colonial ingratiation,
this trading partner Kokoda trial linkage, this island hopping, these precedents;
if I couldn't cut your mouth off I could love you -
victory has defeated my leaders, people inside fences without reason.

