

Parental Guidance

Setting my star to a mountain
at Christmas, on an occasion
my father allowed us to drink,

his alcohol leave-pass soporific,
his bloke-ish colleagues three
or four sheets to the wind

hauling their Eskys and un-
welcome children up our steps,
stubbing their Rothmans in ash-

trays like hubcaps, my mother's
shiny relics from magazines.
Through a screen door, beer-talk

droned over the lawn as kids ran
past our crab-apple, littered
with leaves where green pods

had burned. We stood under
the sprinkler, posing one-legged
like concrete flamingos. Soon

I would be called for my piano
rendition and to read someone's
card pressed into my hand

like sentimental contraband.
No one cared for carols played
from sheet music with lyrebirds

on the cover and anyway, I was
absent, playing songs from the road
that led out of town in my head.

Raucous drinking & work talk
was a signal to walk with swallows
in late afternoon, skirting a forest

past a farmhouse like The Band's
Big Pink, where a fence turned
paddocks to graves & a grazing

ewe on a busted headstone
picked grass from cracks
in a young soldier's inscription.

Carting a fragment home
to my father: '*Religion's caused
more wars than anything else.*'

*

At my mother's funeral there
were hymns & hired harp music.
My sister back handed me Valium

as I greeted stranger's intent on
respect. Like the attendance
of crows we disturbed on

the way in, I wanted to wander
the margins, to walk out back
through ranunculus & scratch

blue ice off the burial blooms.
We were placed in cinderblock
like an outlying scar, & spring

uncoiled in shoots as we stood
in a sepia group, stark on a hill,
dressed in black & moth-eaten twill.

I performed a speech as a missive
of thanks, dedicating *wild geese*
& *a family of things*, my mother

just memory wavering from
a machine - a cornucopia of hair-
styles & places, a photograph

album of stills & stares, or under
palms on a west Sydney lawn
my mother would joke

that doves shaped like finials
were praying to be spared
the killing heat God allowed.

*

A trinity of steeples over the town
as blooms from the day ungloved
& fell. I stayed in a room, the air

heavy with leftover wreaths
as twilight cast pink cloud-lines
& a troupe of roos were dark

lake-shadows. All I could hear
was someone telling me at least
she hadn't died on my birthday.

There were no almond blossoms
for my father, no grinding for him
already gone to a line of light

years before, when the staff latched
a door quietly, and I thought
of the fragment I'd carried home

for him, his love of *Ecclesiastes*
☞ ragged pronouncements:
'*The church got rich on its ill-gotten gains.*'

I still don't know how to believe,
it's still *Not Dark Yet* as Dylan sings.
In the hallway leaving I think of

the nurse who eased in late with no
name- badge or directions. Young, in
shadow, strangely calm, she arranged

my mother's pillow from a chair:
steered mum along her life-
long dream of walking the *Camino*

through stands of oak & eucalypt,
high into the palliative air, then left
as they say, without a word.