Three Poems from *An Adelaide Boy*
(a verse novel in progress)

**Passing through the Suez Canal**

People say there isn’t much to see
along the shoreline of the Suez Canal
but I don’t think they were looking.
Peering over the deck rail
I saw the desert sands shifting
and sunken ships that might block our passage
through the expanse of bisque and blue.
Only three years since the crisis
I could feel the eyes of troops upon us
I’m sure I saw a soldier or two with rifles
slung over their shoulders, and I know there were tanks
glinting darkly in afternoon sun.
Here and there were patches of lush green
like little oases in a parched land
an obelisk of petrified sand
its shadow pointing to the calm surface
a convoy of colourful cargo boats
the wings of white sea birds.
And from my imagination
a mirage of pyramids
shimmering in the distance.

**One Christmas**

Despite my father having two trades
and full employment, our cupboards echoed
I wore my mother’s shoes to school; I went to bed hungry.
There were debt collectors at our door
the television was repossessed
bills screwed into tight balls littered the kitchen floor
the electricity often went off.
One Christmas my father answered my mother’s despair with a .22, which he slung across the back yard fence to kill one of the neighbour’s turkeys. Whether his silhouette was seen hauling that dead turkey over the palings or the aroma of roasting flesh aroused suspicion I don’t know. All I know is that my gentle brother Adolph took the rap when the detectives came, it was he who stepped forward in the face our father’s denial and did the time…and paid the fine.

That turkey meat tasted damn good but I can’t eat it now without the taste of guilt and shame.

Otherwise silence

All afternoon, at school my stomach feels as though I’m going down fast in a lift. Trees outside the classroom window are unnaturally still I am trapped and restless cannot concentrate on words and equations, dictation doesn’t make sense nothing adds up. I’m unable to snap out of it as the teacher suggests with a harsh rap of the yard stick across my desk.

At the afternoon bell I bolt across asphalt and dried grass to jump the fence and hurry home to a house I already sense is empty door left open, flyscreen unlatched a blowie buzzing around the kitchen unwashed dishes in the sink. Otherwise silence.

I run for my bike and yank it up out of the dust throw my leg over and pedal like fuck I don’t think about the destination as I race along hot half-shaded streets where the only sounds are crow calls ark...arkkk…farrrrkkk and my own rapid breathing the clicking spokes of bike wheels

at the last corner, the snap and clang
of a broken chain
and I’m sure I hear a distant train.

The two tracks are rusty with grief
they glint under the haze of heat
over scrub and stones
following a trail of litter along the mesh fence
there’s no-one on the platform to my left
but turning right I see a sweep of fabric
veiling the track, my mother’s battered handbag
my baby brother clamped to her chest.

My mother is a dead weight I cannot drag.
I scream at her deaf ears and don’t understand my own voice
I wrestle the baby from her and grasp the oil streaked pleats
of her dress, which tear untidily and reveal her bare legs
the rest of the scene is a blank in a recurring nightmare
somehow there is a sudden light in those haunted eyes
and an end to resistance, just moments (it seems)
before the train signals its approach
and the rails vibrate with reality
in the unreal suburb of my fear
where my mother, clutching a dusty handbag
wheels my broken-chained bike along late afternoon streets
asking me “How was school?”
while I hold my brother tight and kiss his fair head
and the train lurches on toward its destination
and we never speak of it again
otherwise, silence.

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