

Attempts at Being

ALISON CROGGON writes poetry, prose, criticism and texts for theatre. Her books of poetry include *This is the Stone*, (Penguin Books Australia), *The Blue Gate* (Black Pepper Press) and *Mnemosyne* (Wild Honey Press). Her poems were awarded the Anne Elder and Dame Mary Gilmore Prizes and shortlisted for the Victorian Premier's Prize for Poetry, and her novella *Navigatio* (Black Pepper) was shortlisted for the Vogel/Australian Literary Award. Her theatre texts have been produced by companies across Australia, including Playbox Theatre, the Perth Festival and the Melbourne Festival of the Arts, and also broadcast by ABC Radio Arts. She was the 2000 Australia Council writer in residence at Cambridge University, UK, and edits the webzine *Masthead* (http://au.geocities.com/masthead_2/).

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For Daniel

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The Breach was performed by Faruk Avdi, directed by Russell Walsh at La Mama Theatre in 1994.

Monologues for an Apocalypse was commissioned by ABC Radio Arts and broadcast in April 2001. It was first performed at La Mama Theatre in 1999, directed by James Clayden, performed by Helen Hopkins, Peter Green, Shelley Lasica and Tom Wright.

The Famine was commissioned by the Red Shed Company, Adelaide. It was first produced in July 1997 at the Red Shed Theatre, directed by Tim Maddock, performed by Annabel Giles.

Lenz was first performed by the Mene Mene Theatre Company, directed by Michael Kantor, for the 1997 Melbourne International Festival of the Arts with music by Michael Smetanin, with Tom Wright, Anni Finsterer, Louise Fox and Jim Daly.

Arthur was written for the performer Dan Spielman as part of *The Lucky Berlin Show*.

Part One

Child's play

What grieves terminally in that warm
angle of sun fat with voices
vapourised from play? You
know the calculation of angles, the nice
cut to the cushion: arcs of panicky
alternatives, weighted at the edge
of what is possible. The play
beggars choice: a willed act
cleaves trajectories where
eyes turn, and the hand
opens thus and the mouth speaks
doubtlessly. Luminous,
like a memory of god,
you can believe in it, knowing
it is everything there is.
Making the true, even
if it's pointless. But no gripe this, just
the courage it gives you. Hold that feather
close: it's all you've got. Days
might dribble through your hands, leaving
their tried sediment, each morning
might seem heavier, but it's how
images flicker past you faster and faster
without touching, that drills you
coreless, insubstantial. You have to reach
further inside, through deeper skins:
the animal curls up, refuses
your call: and then nothing.
But still you hear its breath, a bristle
of shock, walking unwarily
on a lightless road or perhaps in the sudden
gesture of a leaf. Only that eyes
flower all over you, and forget your name,
and you hollow and replete.
How damaged, that this is so little,
this lightness, that we must inhabit names.

What matters most is least, and that
refuses us shelter. How slight we are,
wrens running on a skin of rubbish
over a dark river: but still distinct, like actors
costumed as kings. A kiss will do
in lieu of meaning, its violent
unselving which tumbles us out, unlovely,
rotting, the blind dream
forging itself, intricate dumb chemicals,
and we their flickering screen. If
language infects us, our unease, it's one of our
few beauties. No solace there:
what hones us makes us war.
So the Word
muscles in to save us, warping to false order
the desperate ignorance on which we stand
our vanities, only to crumble
on the cusp of speech.
Music might be us, deeply,
but we can't bear it: our instruments
are too crude. We have
our hands, our lips, our eyes. Nothing.
Each other? Only what is released
briefly into lit arms. If we could hold
the dream of play and vanish
in the shimmer of that
blinding stream.

Attempts at being

i

inexplicable fire

surges flame into flame its blue
whip trawling deeps of skin
for tongues lit
to nerveflash

throat after throat
claws to its coronal

ii

brief spring tempests

a single drop
at twigtip
glanced by sun
to eyebright

muteness
breathing in

a kind of song
crude enough
for ears to see
clearly

iii

neither too far nor too within
nor too immense nor too intangible

grass that smells
of human damp
where lovers were

magnolia
 agitated by the thrust
 of a small bird

the globe trembling
through its gravid course

neurones quick with
such music
 as shakes out angels

They do not arrive in time

(No 52, The Disasters of War, Francisco Goya)

the ground is patient
it does not acquire hunger
only light

the stone is as patient as a hand
one stroke of black after another

the face might be lost in a sulk of sleep
but its heaviness tells otherwise

a black cowl pushes down the body
gripped by crude fingers

her white fingers hang

a few curved lines pull the dress
tenderly across her breasts and belly
she is still fresh

she is of course a crucified madonna
no doubt she was patient

for the rest, faces
living and dead

bearing witness

Elegy

Contempt is the luxury of a future,
resentment the past locked in a safe.
When I'm lost I pray to myself
for the lack of anyone else to pray to,
Lord don't let me be less than I am:

although I often am and am sorry for it —
the pettiness where a generosity
might have mattered or the small
angers against another's weakness —

and you were often spiteful, though perhaps
you just assumed it didn't hurt me.
It's too late to speak and all the pointless
gestures dissolve in the real drama
that finishes mid-sentence. Whatever

you did, living was inescapable
and you weren't hard enough to hobble
those suicides of deliberate blindness,
despite your darker knowings. But it's harsh
to judge a man's defences. I know better

than to look for different endings
but I remember when you rang at 4am
precisely at the time I was in trouble.
My instinct was stubborn and well placed
and I often didn't know what to do about it

being less than I wanted to be, as I said,
and sometimes as evasive as you.
I read your obituary today and wished
that you had been more like the man it described
instead of the failure you knew you were.

Hands

and my hands are happy again in the drowsing rain
these empty hands which held
my face with such hard patience in the stifling rooms
where I hid

what will I do with these hands?
they've brushed the tumescent breasts of a childish girl
who flickers white and black like a tree in moonlight,
and held the penises of little boys
whose golden urine tickled the dry grass,
they have been secret as the lovers
who heave aside a torrent of petals to bare
the blazing abyss of love

how often have I winced before these miracles
in those inscrutable nights
when my palms turned upwards like the eyes of the dead
freed at last from pain's midwifery

and when the nightmare hurtled through chill sweats
and lies marched across splintering cities
when death perched on thin shuddering shoulders
and spat cancers into childish mouths
and once again the infinite human pettiness
burned the flowering cradles
where were you, hands? were you laid again
inconsolably on a bare table?

how little you can hold:
love runs you through like the bright absence
of a stunned wild bird springing from your palm:
and every day numberless lives
are shovelled gracelessly into numbered fissures
and memories dislodge and break
the eye's intimate water,

every day the measureless seeps down
through the brilliant trash of mortal sadness

the heart sobs its fire on a plate of ice
until at last its numbed wings forget
how ardently they strained against the cold
and so and so

should I betray the sheer human glance?
why should I grasp these razors, but for love?