

Theatre

ALISON CROGGON writes in many genres, including poetry, criticism, theatre and prose. She has published six books of poetry, most recently *Ash* (Cusp Books) in early 2007, and she has just finished the fourth and final book in her acclaimed young adult fantasy series, *Pellinor*. She has had nine works of theatre produced, including at the Perth and Melbourne International Arts Festivals, and several of her works have been set to music. She edits the online magazine *Masthead* (<http://masthead.net.au>) and also runs the theatre review blog *Theatre Notes* <http://theatrenotes.blogspot.com>.

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Also by Alison Croggon

POETRY

- Ash* (Cusp Books, 2007)
November Burning (Vagabond Press, 2004)
The Common Flesh (Arc Publications, 2003)
Mnemosyne (Wild Honey press, 2003)
The Blue Gate (Black Pepper Press, 1998)
This Is The Stone (Penguin Books, 1991)

NOVELS

- The Gift/The Naming* (Penguin Books Australia, Walker Books UK, Candlewick Press US, Verlagsgruppe Lübbe, from 2002)
The Riddle (Penguin Books Australia, Walker Books UK, Candlewick Press US, Verlagsgruppe Lübbe, from 2004)
The Crow (Penguin Books Australia, Walker Books UK, Candlewick Press US, Verlagsgruppe Lübbe, from 2006)
Navigatio (Black Pepper Press 1996)

Theatre

ALISON CROGGON



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for Daniel

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Poem for John

You ask for a poem
and I say
I have no poem

here the sky
which embraces both of us
in this single world
is blue
and I read
that birds sing
between the bombs
in Iraq

no balance
no consolation
and no answer
as the angel of history
turns its vengeful face
towards us all

you are right

we need poems
as we need bread
we hunger for that blue
human milk
to nourish our largeness
to minister our pain
and our love

here is your poem

Theatre

predictable as a tragedy
 leached of all colours
in which the painted actress
 pouts and blinks

such blackening tears that all defences choke
 on the absurd
ancient seductions
 smashing the heart

again finally
 in this yellow dusk she understands
how action breached before its time
 might be fatal

how innocence might summon
 a dazzling mirage
populous and exact in every detail
 while the desert breathes

livingly beneath it
 cheated of the eye
she asks which is more real
 the love that gathers

out of our delusions
 in all its tender
quickness of flesh or the blind
 desiring cell

the torment is always as the woman said
 to find oneself speaking
like a bad novel though fiction is seldom
 so misleading

as these selves we claim
to live by squatting
by middens of bone that the wind
scours to whiteness

et cetera she asks:
if I have been asleep
how does the anguish of dream
differ from waking

and is this really my own damage
or a wound torn in others
that they must diagnose
through my skin?

History

If in foregone times master smiths tempered a blade, folding and refolding steel to its most piquant edge, so in this we have perfected the technologies of harm. The chronicles claim that as we have become subtle in inflicting pain, balancing the maximum of consciousness and the maximum of agony to a point finer than a micron, so we are now coarsened in our joys. This protest betrays an indefensible nostalgia, the birthing of a memory which in turn labours into imagination. Imagination, the chronicles claim, is the single cell which metastasises into love. The sages are too wise not to perceive the transparency of their prophecies, but nevertheless continue to believe them.



In any case, who can hunt meaning through these thickets? Too much is imperfectly understood to leave a clean scent. Traces resolve as the simulacra of too many selves, vanishing as the yelping packs pursue them. Desire is both subtle and coarse: too evasive for our crude instruments and yet so predictable in its instincts. In unguarded moments I found myself longing for the dazzling conceits of civilisation to be actual, for the profound and bloody pleasures which underlay them. I was trapped in a softly lit room while darkness drew its mantle of cries into the range of hearing. Such shy animals as love, naturally, remained beyond even the cries.

Ode

We were woken too early, before the moths had died in the streets, when buds had barely hardened in the frost, when stars are hurtful and famished. They took us through gardens and past the halls where once we had lingered, past the houses and doused markets. Our footsteps echoed back like iron. Of course we were frightened, that was a given, of course we remembered photographs we had studied that then had nothing to do with us. The empty light of morning made anything seem possible, even freedom, even God. We stumbled on familiar roads, and everything turned away from us, lamp posts, windows, signs. They weren't ours any longer. Even the air greeted us differently, pinching our skin to wake us from its dreams.



Words of course were beyond us. They were what killed us to begin with. They were taken away from the mouths that loved them and given to men who worked their sorceries in distant cities, who said that difficult things were simple now and that simple things no longer existed. It was hard to find our way, we understood the tender magic of hands, we knew the magic of things not spoken, but this was a trick we couldn't grasp. It lifted the world in a clump of glass
and when everything came back down the streets had vanished. In their places were shoes and clotting puddles and sparking wires and holes and bricks and other things that words have no words for and that silence swelling the noise until you can't hear anything at all.



It's said that the dead don't dream, but I dream of flowers.
I could dream so many flowers—lilies like golden snow on water,
hyacinths the colours of summer evenings or those amaranths they call
love-lies-bleeding. I dream of none of those. I dream instead
of wind-blown roses that grew in our shabby yard, of daisies
glimpsed through the kitchen window, of marigolds that glowed
through nets of weed. But most of all, I dream of red anemones
that never grew in my garden. They rise on slender stalks,
their seven-petalled heads bobbing and weaving in the wind.
Wind-flowers, Pliny called them, because they open only in the wind,
and the wind scatters their petals over every waste in the world.

Beasts

The beasts are retreating. They are sliding into the dusk, into the supple light of vanishing trees, into the glue of dreams. All their strangeness wavers behind wire, between the four sides of a screen, odourless and deathless. The beasts stare out of bleached pages, enclosed at last, and the zoos are silent, except when parrots and keepers conduct their weird orchestrations.

Panic flicks in those slotted eyes but the sadness is only ours. Police hunt corpses in rubbish dumps, a pregnant mother and child. Beneath the surface, submarine cries burst the ears of whales. Coral is leached to stone by the stripped sunlight and houses crouch by the shore, awaiting the wave prophets see in the distance. In forests that glow at night, there are boars and wolves whose futures mutate daily. There is much that is unknown as always and even more that now will never be understood. The cedar forests of Lebanon are tinder dry and bears starve on the wet tundra. In the depths of night there may be a phone call we dare not answer or a cry in the street which makes the hair rise on the back of our necks. They will not come back, something is happening at the edge of our eyes, behind the reflections, and billboards shout in the silence, delivering words that in a more innocent age we thought were ours.

Coma

Eden was a cold place
inhabited by whispers.
God left early
and I took what I could
as a child eats
the poor food
on a shabby table.
How I hated
the mean words
that stamped me out
in monotone!
I stuttered
through the coma
of childhood.
Now the drab skins
are ripped open
and behind them
pulses a brutal
human eye.



All the trinkets she handed down to me.

Opalescent terrors. A carved box full of delicate resentments.
The garnet of betrayal.

Her envious eye. Her knife. Her tiny hands.

Hidden behind an emptied language, that swallowed girl.

What fable of redemption rattles through those paranoid
phylacteries?

A faecal madness hunting through the gloom. All those blank daughters.



she never cried she never
tumbled into that wet mouth she
drew such leachings of drought
over the paper sky that birds
perched gasping on branches she
found herself lipless turned
back to the bony night each star
pitiless the moon tugging
her down to blasted seas she
uttered stones the words curled up
in spiders of dust she felt
rain pulse against her skin but all
her dreaming could not think
itself past those horizons
of parched white the whiter
flame the sun whose voice
rose so white and burned

The Kingdom

no the kingdom is not yet
 laboured out of flame
 and many the heads broken
against its borders
 beyond hope of healing

all confusion and clamour
 buying and selling
 icons and pretty stories
words prepare our injuries
 and keep us from them

and slice now to its pith
 a fiery desolation
 raining from heaven
death rut in the ancient ways
 prosecutes in each again

scouring every storied skull
 the limed pit
 stinks with life
which goes about its business
 eating and burning

they say the kingdom is not visible
 all circles must be broken
 inside or outside
it shines beyond all conflict it is the agony
 some say that it will never come

Colours

There are colours you can only touch
Years ago I walked
Eyelessly through a black mountain

The sky shimmered like a knife
Poised to cut my breast in two
I remember the men in white

How they loomed over their instruments
And doors which opened and closed
I wondered if darkness was soft

Or if it felt like a collision
I wondered if I would wake up
Unable to shape my name

Locked inside my death
With hands as formless as gravel
The last thing I remember

Is the colour of kindness
My heart floating warm and strange
Through the chilling veils of my flesh

When someone took my hand and held it
And led me like a child
Into the dark

Wars

1

children played in the street
as if night were a little boy running
closer and closer

2

the terrible angels
flare out of the desert

no rain no mess
everything is simple

3

she is the scrawl
in the hidden book
she crosses the river
where no one is looking

she hates with the passion of a child

she will never grow up
the trees in her face
are still burning

Flames

I have burned my offerings I have counted the omens

I confess my obsolescence freely, I would press my lips to lips
which corrode in the high-handed manner of a god

thorn of my soul, why have you covered yourself in blood? what
are your legislations?

inside these hollow words I am ash for a beloved voice whose
irony rebukes me

and who are you, emerging from the waves? a turbulence of
money, sight turned redly in, algorithm of lack, ecstatic spasm?
do you rule the world?

you leave this mask of blue flesh, this burned shoe by a roadside,
if there were an answer to be made it should be made to you

but moralising is easy, being fatal, and nothing is easy, not a
child's petty greed, nor desire's treachery, my own face my
enemy, my feet groundless

I count my days as vanishings, as silences extruded from a
poisoned dusk, despairs whisper their names and throttle
infancies before my eyes

nothing against such certainties but a hand's shadow raised
against extinction, a trivial heat

who follows through this night of ghosts the rumours of another
vision? who dreams these baubles dazzled by a gentler light?

Beauty

I have talked of beauty
I have held it
between these hands
always
without expectation
and always
as if I didn't deserve
such punishment

The poet has no identity. She is an electrical cloud she is a swarm of bees she is a kabuki scream she is a shadow on the blind the plates in a cupboard the roar of trucks on a freeway. She is the fiery neurone and the mark on a piece of paper. She speaks on the telephone into the ether. No one there. Maybe it is god. She writes her body with the tips of her fingers but it is no longer her body. The words are not her they belong to nobody. She writes to slough off her name. She speaks to become invisible. She desires to become what she is. When she wakes into her name it is falling asleep again. When she dreams she forgets. She is blind. She has the power of flight.