

Appellations

A semi-acoustic ballad
merged with an instrumental of breaking waves
as I entered the Black Bay Revivalist church

drawn by a mural of sailfish on the wall
and the words *Be Thou My Vision*
in a clouting scrawl above a lit-up sail

and as my eyes adjusted to the light
I fisted the loose change I'd spared
from a night out with my spirit of choice

my late brother, his collection of cowboy songs
throwing up a chanter of dust
over where I'd been

uppermost and uppercase
in the pastoral care of the here and there-
after, his features coming apart

whenever I spoke of a road
black with ice under his cruiser, where he was
a tight corner away from dying

and having said his name, I stood
as a flurry of hands made shadow puppetry
from belief, and even

while being embraced by strangers
I could feel my burden, a weight
distributed unevenly and almost entirely

composed of emotion, shift around
and settle in the windy stairwell
of my throat, and I found myself

trying too hard to find and feel The Name
as the band kicked in
with a sanitised version of *Lust For Life*

and soon it was over
the believers became leavers
and at the door I was met by the pastor

minister or elder, who welcomed me
as I said goodbye, then extended
an invitation to return, and when I did

not respond, he quoted a prophet or disciple
his voice on the awkward side
of being theatrical

and on the street I flipped
through the selection of 45's I'd filed
away in the sound archives of my head

choosing songs that matched my mood:
Melanie's version of *Ruby Tuesday*
Graham Nash falling apart with grace on *Simple Man*

Billie Holiday's *Strange Fruit*
and when the songs had been sleeved and shelved
I questioned the cost

of a loving name and nature
my brother saying faith, yes, but in the end
I needed speed, then he faded

a slow dissolve from scene to scene
and walking to the wharf
I followed patches of dried blood

like an archipelago, saying God
the hard syllable dying out like pain
in a facial nerve

and on the ferry
I heard the thump and surge of a troubled heart
in the engine, which continued

even on the beach below the zoo
where a man was using
an old-style wooden spindle

as though it had been lifted
from the hand-gathered pages of his life
as behind him, from terraced enclosures

the lo-fi, wistful broadcasts of animals
came and went on the wind
and I asked him how it felt

to be as one with the elements and himself
but before he could answer
a wave left condoms and a clot of red hair

on the sand at our feet
as the day shut down like a faulty alarm
and my brother waved

from the fire a panel of sunlight had made
inside a cave at Curlew Camp
and I knew that to abandon

not suspend disbelief, I could remain
in contact with someone
ten years dead, and I could see

in Autumn's lease of colour
in the fire-water that died out
as I waded to wherever I was going

to spend the night
that we are, for all our need to take control
most likely not the ones in charge.