

Cemetery, Circular Head*

*The land seemed anxious to meet
their sloop, jutting out like a skull,
sandless, a beached whale slapping
the black rocks. Flinders and Bass
anchored in the deep offshore,
stopping razors to pass the tide.*

Here the sacred grounds are young.
(dreamtime lizards lose their way
among these chiselled tombstones

and shattered shells.) “Betsy Parker,
beloved of Sam,” sweated for hours after
an unknown fever boiled her heart dry.

Under this cornice of earth, she sniffs
the sea and wraps a scarf of salt around
her leaching flesh. Her children once
sprinkled petals across this deflating
envelope but soon they tired of island
milk and let the wind invade her flags.

*“I dreamt that so many bones were burnt,”
said Bass, “the moon choked on their ashes,
and the sand burst into shards of glass.”*

*“You cannot mean our blood,” said Flinders.
“Surely any storm at sea is more fitting
for death than this torpid, leeward calm.*

*How much lava would that distant scarp
have to awaken before it could consume
the tracks we must set for others to follow?”*

* Matthew Flinders’s voyage charting the coast of Tasmania for the British is a familiar part of Australian lore. William Bass was second in command of the ship but seldom failed to speak his mind when he differed with Flinders over matters of strategy. Truganini was the last Aborigine in Tasmania. Circular Head is located at Stanley, a small town on the northwest coast of Tasmania.

*Yet Flinders felt it too: the darkening shore
reeled them in like an eagle calling its young.
Reaches of sand danced so before the bow*

*that he began to mistrust his eyes' mission.
Each time they drew close enough to land
the flatness suddenly arched into hammers*

*and they would have to fight back against
the tide pushing them toward the taunt.
His crew grew nervous. Would a mere shoal*

*unnerve this man who'd delivered them safe
from every torment the open sea could muster?
No worthy death can strike without lightning.*

Did Truganini curse us before she died
or did we bring our own serpents with us?
Though we claimed it for king and country,

the earth bristled beneath our ploughs, coughing
up dark stones. After sun and wind, the cleaves
scabbed over harder than before. Rain flooded

the seedlings from their anchor, thatching
the lowlands with silted refugees. More lambs
fell to devils and tigers than proper slaughter.

Our masters said the land was fit for convicts,
thus we became three generations of keepers.
The walls have crumbled to ruin but our prison

lives on, wider now. See how these gravestones
publish it—so many spilled overboard at sea,
or drowned in the angry blood of childbirth.

“We shall sleep but not forever,” one scroll
proclaims, but who can tell if this is a blessing
while our curse's horizon remains untraced?

To lighten the load, Flinders ordered every other man into the water while it was still waist-deep. He and Bass remained aboard

to direct their steps to best advantage. Midway, one man got stung on the leg by something unseen and nearly drowned when he slipped under his load. In the failing light, they pushed on to the shallows, stumbling across rocks sharp enough to bruise their feet right through the soles. The shore was littered with torn sponges. Battered stone fish, yesterday's soldiers, floated on their sides in the trenches.

"A circular head," nodded Flinders, meaning the land's shape. "And so we should name it."
"A mistake," said Bass. "And so we should leave it."

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