

Poems by Rita Tognini

Sea Walk

(Green Island, Great Barrier Reef)

E 'l naufragar m'è dolce in questo mare.

L'infinito, Giacomo Leopardi

(i)

beach

boat

pontoon

ladder

sea bed

(ii)

sheathed in black vernix of wetsuit

head belled in glass and plastic dome

hands gloved feet slippered

I take the first

backward step

down

the ladder

pass through

a vitreous ultramarine swell

descend

rung

by careful

rung

'til the sea licks the bell's bib

gurgles at my neck

and with one gulp

ingests me

(iii)

on ocean floor
I anchor knees
deep into sand
resist the sway
and swell of currents
that would lift me away
as lightly as coral spawn

I kneel to my new element
defer to its rise and fall
its restless amnion

(iv)

clutching our scuba-guide's silver bar
—a lifeline—five sea walkers
track along the sea bed
black beings suspended in azure bubbling CO₂
dabbled by the ocean's arterial slosh and slurp

Spanish flag fish flutter stripes as they pass
perch, yellow-tailed or mauve, swoop for fish food
spaghetti coral waves
from sprawling plate coral beds
and giant clams gape serrated shells

(v)

I watch the others ascend
push up against the weight of all the ocean
break through to air

waves of damsel fish
swerve towards my bell
lips puckered as if blowing kisses

how sweet this pleasure

how sweet

to drown

in such a sea

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Visitations

Twice they came, New Year's morning
forest red-tailed black cockatoos.

First four mature birds
poised sentinel still
in the hakea's grey-green foliage
posed as if for a portrait
Elvis-crest combed back
huge hooked beak clamped shut.

Then a flurry of adolescents
sashayed from branch to branch
all bravura and quivering tail feathers
tearing at bivalve nuts
lacerating the foliage
quarrelling over leftovers
scattering husks and twigs.

Black cockatoos
stop over to refuel

black cockatoos
take off like Harrier jets

blood-red undercarriages
between canopy and sky.