

## Sonnets for a mother

i

She was always staying up late, pottering  
around, folding clothes, reading a newspaper  
before an open fire. The grandfather clock  
swung to a rhythm my mother padded to at night  
rising from a chair to put the kettle on.

She always opened up with a cup of tea and biscuits,  
her hands clasped behind her head  
admitting to wisdoms I couldn't prepare for.

Even now with her radio or TV footy shows turned up  
too loud, I know what it is to sit beside her  
listening to the talk that goes on; who's coming down  
to visit, who won't be there at Christmas.

All our lives, we've given her so much to stay up late for.  
The sound of her voice worth sitting down to.

She taps hers fingers on the table when she talks  
each corrected thought beats like a syllable count.  
She pauses, backtracks, draws out her vowels  
for emphasis bouncing between forefinger  
and thumb – who Auntie Gladys married,  
the rhythms of her past dancing amongst bread crumbs.

Of suitors, she had a few before getting word to my father  
she couldn't meet him on the steps of St Josephs.

Her own father, dead that morning – it wasn't a story,  
although once at The Dances she snapped at a question  
*no thanks, I'd rather go out with my girlfriends.*

Loyal to St Kilda, she left her job the day she married –  
*It was just something you did.* Lost to the back and forth of tennis  
our talk fast becoming background music.

At a young age I learnt that it was better to lie  
than to walk down the street imagining I was somebody else.  
Once I feigned the flu for a week until you discovered  
the bully that kept me sweating beneath the sheets.  
I felt like something cornered by a truth I was trying to postpone.  
I walked around with my eyes closed so that I might be forgotten.  
You listened in between washing and cooking, bearing witness  
with a tea towel, dishing up steaks, talking the way families do.  
  
Your voice on the phone brought the paddocks  
back home to me. The way you recounted each football match  
each brother and sister – checkpoints in a list repetitive as prayer.  
One night I listened and cried from a Mildura telephone box.  
The next week I drove six hours to watch you folding clothes.  
I am who I am, one day I will graduate from you, alone.