

Tony Lintermans

Friend is a Scrawny Word

Friend is a scrawny word to dress you in,
but memory had skinny legs back then.
A cricket ball whacked me in the head,
arcing from pitch to oval's edge
where I played marbles, intricate thought.
You said kind words, gave fierce comfort.
Maybe I'll call you Mountain, my weather source
pouring winter air on gravel and grass,
our bare legs, the hard-scrabble school
at the foot of the Dandenongs, morning fog
fingering dairy flats, swaddling cattle.
Our mothers knew each other, nailing
links that outlasted lives. Their grey hair
was our roadmap, not that we knew, through
Vietnam marches, the wild Whitlam ride,
women, work and children in that disorder
which somehow made us men, who laughed in the surf
and kept on laughing as the tractor nearly rolled
in a rocky thistle field at Clydesdale, the spray
washed off as we dived in the Yandoit Creek.
But nothing stopped the rolling years until
our heads too were silvered, matching our mothers
so long gone, those paddocks buried by houses.
You always forgave my leaps of metaphor.

I forgave inscrutabilities, like
“What the duck IS Mexico?” at dinner
that night before I was flying out, away.
I’m still stumped decades later, galloping
gravewards, this horse has no reins.
The saddles I carry, or the horse to be fair,
are weighted with wonder at how far we rode,
how deep the days were, so ordinary
the rough ridged country of friendship.
The horse, by the way, is called Love –
I should have told you that before you left.