

Uluru

I.

Three days after my middle miscarriage
we went to the desert. Not the desert
I'd seen before: the expanse and romance
of New Mexico, moonlighting on the set
of a better western where Native Americans
answer back with business, with art,
with a refusal to play that old, shabby role.
Not the primal pull of the bible:
hooning around Gethsemane in a clapped out
minibus, seeing but not understanding
the intricate protocol the driver
navigated each time we crossed the border.
No, this was like visiting someone I love
with dementia. The hotel, a behemoth,
like a locked ward: corridors and nylon
carpets, lifts and doors to hold her at bay,
to keep her out there and us contained.
But the desert called to me, a crazed old
lady I couldn't refuse. Wilderness
that is not my wilderness, not my forty days,
it called to the empty space in me.

2.

I envy the Dutch tourists climbing the rock, so much easier for them; this is their Taos, their Jerusalem. We go with an elder who tells us some things that can be told to tourists. It feels right to walk the base of Uluru with him, like being shown family rosary beads by my devout grandmother, told she could not be Catholic because her mother wasn't married. Afterwards, we meet women from the camp in the forlorn supermarket, the armpit of the hotel complex, hidden away, not meant for tourists. I smile in the cereal aisle and they smile back, but at the checkout they're furtive, waiting to be humiliated. We chat, their phrases the old fashioned slang also spoken by my parents, weathered and lovely in their mouths.

3.

Like life in a moon colony, nobody walked
so we were alone exploring the resort
when we found ourselves at the visitors'
camping ground. There was no perimeter,
no centre, no solid ground; the entire place
a threshold. Tents bleeding out
in all directions, the rock
the only anchor, everything swaying
and shimmering, in danger of falling
away into the desert; the dingos patrolling,
padding through the scuffed children's playground,
looking for scraps. Within minutes I knew
a dingo took that baby. Then grief grabbed me
with its jaws. This country could not
countenance a woman who did not collapse
on prime time, who would not unstitch herself
in front of strangers. A woman at her very edge.
A woman straining to hear God's voice, blank
and waiting – what should I do next?

The night sky was the most elaborate
I had ever seen, the world seemed to turn
inside out when the sun went down. The sky
illuminated, a map of meaning, the earth
dark and still, slumbering like an exhausted child.