

A Poet's Age-old Lament : A Nation's Mortgaged Soul

The gravest sorrow comes from closing our minds to the suffering of others and feeling justified in doing so.

Pema Chodron

I

Children, bright-eyed lanterns of life's sombre maze, their tongues adrift between comfort
And craving, their minds alive like amusement parks at night, their hearts held constant
Where fortune bestows love, where lucid Virgilian ardour maps a reverential hub for any
Possible purr of earthly sublime as wild clusters of solar lore and lunar rite amassed in
Their growing minds whirl and collide, as the doom-worn dream-racked blueprint of ancestral
Families conjures the seemingly unattainable from the daily grind. Children, echoing elders,
Will sift a latched past for unlatched futures, shift the hallowed union of memory, custom, culture,
Not through occult language, but narrative desire. Metaphor. Metonym. Rhythm. Rhyme. They'll
Be flexing the full package mind to mind, reinventing words, syntax, entire grammars will be
Detained and overhauled to lay claim to visions only they can be sure will arise, for
In this world any future is theirs rather than ours. It follows, then, that their future take root where
An open thirst for justice and freedom, a covenant of succour and grace, anchor their tides.
Immigration of ideas, immigration of people and ceremony, of spirit, these too should be anchors!
Detention should not be a hull where we bury the indigestible, the unrequested. For beauty to
Centre our lives, it must launch the inexpressible, boat the imperceptible, sing a lightfast **Ever**.

II

Detention of patterns in space, of mind maps, of memories; detention of laughter and of a music
That would not, were life gliding more harmonious currents, simply burst asunder. This loss of song
Is torrential pain, lethal thunder to a puppet enchained, a hapless stranger moulded in cold storage to
Indefinite absence, one whose grieving soul will never hear with pitch-perfect clarity
Or near-perfect ease the joy of drifting days, one who cannot perceive the light glimmer and who,
Otherwise dead to blue horizons, sees only mourning night. A castaway creature, spawn of
Arbitrary power: part media rupture, part legal suture, part civic disavowal.

Is this fraught non-person, this scorned nonentity, not now the flower of symbolic banality?
Not now the zenith of poetic stasis? Figurative degeneracy? What should *not* be
Acceptable (surely we must be asking ourselves!) when it comes to a fellow traveller's innate
And universal right to security and dignity? Does our silence not tell of blindness as well?

The shallowest pseudo-smokescreen wins the day, yet again. 'We will go all out to protect the
Length and breadth of this great land.' But to whom does this great land *truly* belong?
And go all out against what? A notion? An idea? Are traumatised war victims the *real threat* here?

Conditions of sovereignty currently endorsed show us going all out against blasphemous thoughts **Of** *wanting to free ourselves!* Thus we liberate cynicism, sanctify chauvinism, rationalise the **Detention** of empathy as we drop to calloused knees for any tight-fisted liege (our fine assemblage **Including** corporate slave driver, political taskmaster, IMF ringmaster) cracking the civilised whip. **The** threat of viral empathy on the loose in this greed-fuelled circus is what drives the real-life **Appropriateness** (so deemed by public discourse mired in the obscene) of distaste and lack **Of** tolerance for those at a *real-life abject low*. Big top neglect that is no mere accident! **Both** Liberal and Labor wrap political favour in flags of lexical fraud, with fear as community mantra. **The** business model cannot afford us opening our arms in generosity, let alone offering sanctuary. **Accommodation** of a distressed neighbour (even a down-and-out family member) is anathema, **And** we, pawns of a soulless elite, must develop a taste for madness, a love for the will of the machine. **The** investor dream can *only* survive by hijacking compassion, steering it day and night to contempt for **Services** put in place to ease a targeted victim's pain, contempt for the victim herself. *Who to blame?*

Provided we go on obsessively rivalling our neighbour, we'll go on pretending this is democracy. **Would** that it were otherwise, but our personal complicity in creating such a nightmare is paramount – **Be** it the way we void loneliness, filling our lives with endless chatter and needless clutter, or how we **Subject** ourselves to power, play each other off. True power, real power, is taking the supreme risk **To** attain the supreme good. Not fanning a mindset that treats the helpless as beggars and thieves. Our **Regular** daily diet of news feed and night-time TV seems to offer little that might foster personal **Review** or lead one to actively seek, for the dispossessed, vital change **And Ongoing Betterment**.

III

Detention of time's enchanted mode, all seduction out the window, all life support systems **In** free fall, Christmas Island crystallized into Armageddon, poetic expression itself in the throes of **Immigration**, holed up in its new realm of sunken rhythms, morbid repression, visionary stammer: **Detention** of time's enchanted mode is the militant capture of sacred being and **Centres** love's helm in sensory privation, the dislocation of body from soul, whereby any focus one **Is** able to muster festers as rage, knots the spine, builds into loss of mind. For a detainee, there's **Only** slashed wrists or sewn-up lips to feel alive, filter the pain, or dead letter chest scars **To** beg for aid. Let someone know you're there. Let someone know you're real. That you could **Be** just as playful as the next person if only accorded the recognition. But you've been exploited, **Used**, sentenced to spend your days engaged in a makeshift abyss cunningly devised **As** part of a campaign to keep a nation's psyche divided, a nation's workforce enslaved. **A** workforce for which your mental health might never retrieve what it needs to actively engage. So at **Last**, after all you've lived and seen, guns, bombs, torture, rape, famine, perilous seas, you must **Resort** to suicide, a despairing stone's throw from some of the world's most liveable cities. **And** if this fails, you return sedated to your cell, under twenty-four hour ill-equipped guard. But if, **For** sanity and self-esteem, you succeed, no more than your own freedom will have been gained. **The** brutality will carry on just as before. Your death will be reported as tragic in the press and, for the **Shortest** time necessary, your picture will be displayed across the country. But it's not at all **Practicable** to humanise the system *and* screen this great land from the heresy of human rights. So **Time** passes, memory shortens, horrors are forgotten, ideologues do the minimum **Possible**.

IV

People seeking asylum look out onto the poem of their lives, see concrete, metal, razor wire, listen **In** to the hymn of their minds, hear trauma past tolling trauma present, hear the closed-circuit lauds of **Detention**. *A Poet's Age-old Lament* will be shaped by our comatose *Immigration Values*. It **Will** be an anguished cry, holding the cold-blooded to account for onshore and offshore crime. It will **Be** a fiery declaration of shame, short on invective but full of dismay for the way the needy are **Treated**, a direct appeal for a show of Christlike integrity – that refugees be cared for, **Fairly**, humanely. It will be an open apology for a silent nation in denial of its collaboration, **And** an open censure of the vice of our times, a world which orbits the 'me, myself, I'. **Reasonably** contrived, a poet might hope to get her simple message out where it matters. *Hope!* **Within** these restraints, allusive ploy, aesthetic dramatics and allegorical baggage are kept to a low. **The** manoeuvrings of wisdom, pragmatically empathic, must be on display. Poetry deals badly with the **Law**, even more so with lawmakers, being a law unto its own: the law **Of Reverential Light**.

V

Conditions of sovereignty stripped of remorse call for the artist's polished lens to refract the glare **Of** parochial rigidity, ripple the stagnant waters of a nation whose first peoples are still moored through **Detention**, refugees from their own sacred lands, sacred truths. Yet poetry, that rare and bountiful gift, **Will** not – nor could it – modify or rebalance the plight of so many, nor could it promise to **Ensure** insight in any shape or form. The poet, feeling pressed, backed into a corner, can but conjure **The** battleground on which ideas find themselves pitted, let fly an ornate game of barbarous politics. **Inherent** to poetry's thrust as formidable weapon, nonetheless, is a vital vision of **Dignity** woven into the tapestry of all beings, anchoring a world where the doltish god **Of** finance no longer vetoes our efforts at self-realisation, let alone environmental preservation. **The** poem, striving to unseat such an elusive monster through nurture's ever-present gaze, paints **Human** dilemma with a palette bold enough to spark recognition from within, a covert call to each **Person** in the wider community to map the self through wider commonalities. Informal, impassioned, tonguing the hearts of timeless minds, such music cascades to a thirst for laughter, crusades to the rhythms of an angry town crier, haunts, like a lovelorn ghost, the stifling hull of perpetual sorrows, rides wake with the impounded, makes sure the light **Is Ever In Sight**.

Background to the Structure of the Poem

On 29th July 2008, the Australian Minister for Immigration, Chris Evans, outlined the Labor Government's new set of seven *Key Immigration Values* to drive immigration detention policy and practice – values that sought to *emphasise a risk-based approach to detention and prompt resolution of cases rather than punishment* [New Directions in Detention – Restoring Integrity to Australia's Immigration System]. This alternative 'risk-based' approach to dealing with people seeking asylum was 'more consistent with international human rights standards safeguarding the right to liberty' [UNSW Law Report, 2015], and the Australian Human Rights Commission 'welcomed' five of those seven values and 'recommended that they be translated into policy, practice and legislative change as soon as possible' [AHRC]. Despite this, both onshore and offshore long-term mandatory detention continued under successive Labor and Liberal governments, with conditions worsening dramatically for all concerned down through the years. Labor's *Key Immigration Values* have never been enshrined in legislation, nor are they reflected in Australia's treatment of asylum seekers.