

Here

It is the small birds that start the day.  
Then, silver first light through cracks in the wall.  
Frost nips on my nose,  
Aching bones  
I burrow into blankets

Dawn chorus builds with the magpies  
and then the kookaburras' crescendo.  
Mote flecked rays stretch across the room.  
A hint of the day to come,  
But it's the needy bellow from the house paddock that gets me up.

Coals in ash, kindling, five deep breaths, then flame  
At the door I bathe in the rising sun  
Warmth on my face as my toes tingle with crisp cold  
I fill the kettle from the water tank  
and smell eucalyptus, dust, dry grass and animals.

The day stretches ahead of me.  
Men and dogs gone.  
So much to do but the hours can bend.  
No meals, no demands  
Except right now from a mournful calf.

Across the yard there is a lean to  
Where the cow regards me with bloated patience  
Standing at the stall waiting for oats  
Her calf bucking in its yard, restless for feed  
I wash her bursting udder with warm water

Lard on my hands, fingers on teats  
My forehead against her flank  
The the warmth of her hide  
The beat of her blood  
Each day we become one.

The gurgle of her stomachs  
The squeeze and pull of her teats  
'whish wish' 'whish wish' 'whish wish'  
My morning music  
and I am hypnotised.

I remember the girl I was  
The doctors daughter.  
Small town. Easy life.  
House of bricks and a garden of colour.  
Now I am the wife of a drover.

We met when I bandaged his hand.  
Caught by a Mickey bull - mangled in the crush.  
He spoke of his land, red dirt plains, salt bush, big skies  
water that welled hot from the ground  
So I followed him there.

To a hut made of timber slabs, striped with daylight  
That he split with an axe  
hewn with an adze  
Dirt floor and a roof that talks as the day warms up  
Creaks and groans.

And here I am, and I survive  
and every minute, of every daylight hour, I use.  
To rise, light fires, cart water and cook.  
I milk, collect eggs, carry wood, kill snakes,  
I garden, behead chickens, skin rabbits

I wash in hell water. Sulphur stench in all our clothes  
It bubbles from the ground  
But we cant drink it and plants shrivel  
So I pray for rain almost every day  
Watching vast skies

The doctor's daughter had soft pale hands  
She met, spoke, dealt with people everyday.  
The drovers wife has red dirt under her nails  
Callouses on her palms  
Muscles cording her sunburnt neck and arms

I talk to the cow, the chickens  
I sing to myself and our unborn child  
I need to be patient  
I dream of my mother, sisters, town,  
Shops, fresh water, those colourful gardens

The drover must go with his cattle  
Looking for new feed and water  
Men and their animals, campfires, swags  
Yarning into the night, star gazing.  
New horizons each day.

He has his land but has to leave  
Because the red dirt is harsh, the salt bush is sparse  
and the water that wells from the ground smells like Hades.  
The big skies are empty.  
And I, the drover's wife, am here.

Charlotte Austin