

## **Kapok Pillow**

Dad was one of the 'Rats of Tobruk'  
    & at home during my early  
childhood  
    we often had our own private  
theatre of war

dad going awol from work  
    drinking the day away . . .  
to stagger home mid-afternoon  
& throw missiles around  
    barking orders like the  
RSM he never was

if we were lucky he might just  
fall into bed  
    still in his y-fronts & singlet  
& far too drunk to reach his socks  
    he'd gradually fill the ashtray  
on his bedside table  
    & if luck stayed with us –  
he'd likely go off on the nod

i remember lifting a red brick  
alongside the veranda  
one hot summer's day after school  
    & grabbing our front door key

there was a strange smell when i  
let myself in  
    a smell i couldn't recognise –  
& i panicked

i tip-toed through the hallway slowly . . .  
checked the kitchen & the laundry  
looking for mum then the clothes line –  
but she didn't seem to be  
anywhere

i kept sniffing the air  
calling softly in my little boy's voice  
*mum mum are you there*

yet nothing came back but a smell  
which i could only sense as death

after weeks of dad's drinking  
& arguments  
& threats  
& broken crockery  
& living with the fear  
i inched my way along  
the passage  
sniffing the acrid air . . .  
& when i got to the toilet  
the door was flung wide open  
& the white porcelain pan was  
choked high above the wooden  
seat with a charry mess

it gave off the smell of death  
& i looked around for an axe  
i thought it was my mother's  
torso

my tears & wails brought him  
out of the bedroom  
    unsteady in his grey socks  
he slurred  
    *ya mum's out shopping*  
*don't worry about that mess –*  
*i went to sleep with a cigarette*  
    *i stuffed me pillow down*  
*the toilet & pulled the chain*  
    *it's gone out now . . .*  
*ya mother'll be in soon*  
    *go outside & get some fresh air . . .*  
*go on*

& he turned on his heels  
    & staggered back to bed.

Rats of Tobruk: The name given to the predominantly Australian soldiers of the garrison who held the Libyan port of Tobruk against the Afrika Corps, during the siege of Tobruk in WW2.

RSM: Regimental Sergeant Major