

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