

The Milking Shed

She wakes before dawn
belly stirs from the night before
tall girl, brittle and bent
echoes of war in her head

Mr Kaufman is in the kitchen
carving yolk and ham
filling his quota for the day ahead

On the verandah table; a lump of butter
some for the child, the rest for the mother
a portion of bread between the two

Door slams; the wife emerges
again, the sour morning parade
buckle boots scuff wood boards
hair tied tight like a fist,
eye on the girl, she points and spits;

'Coupons for this in the city, coupons!'

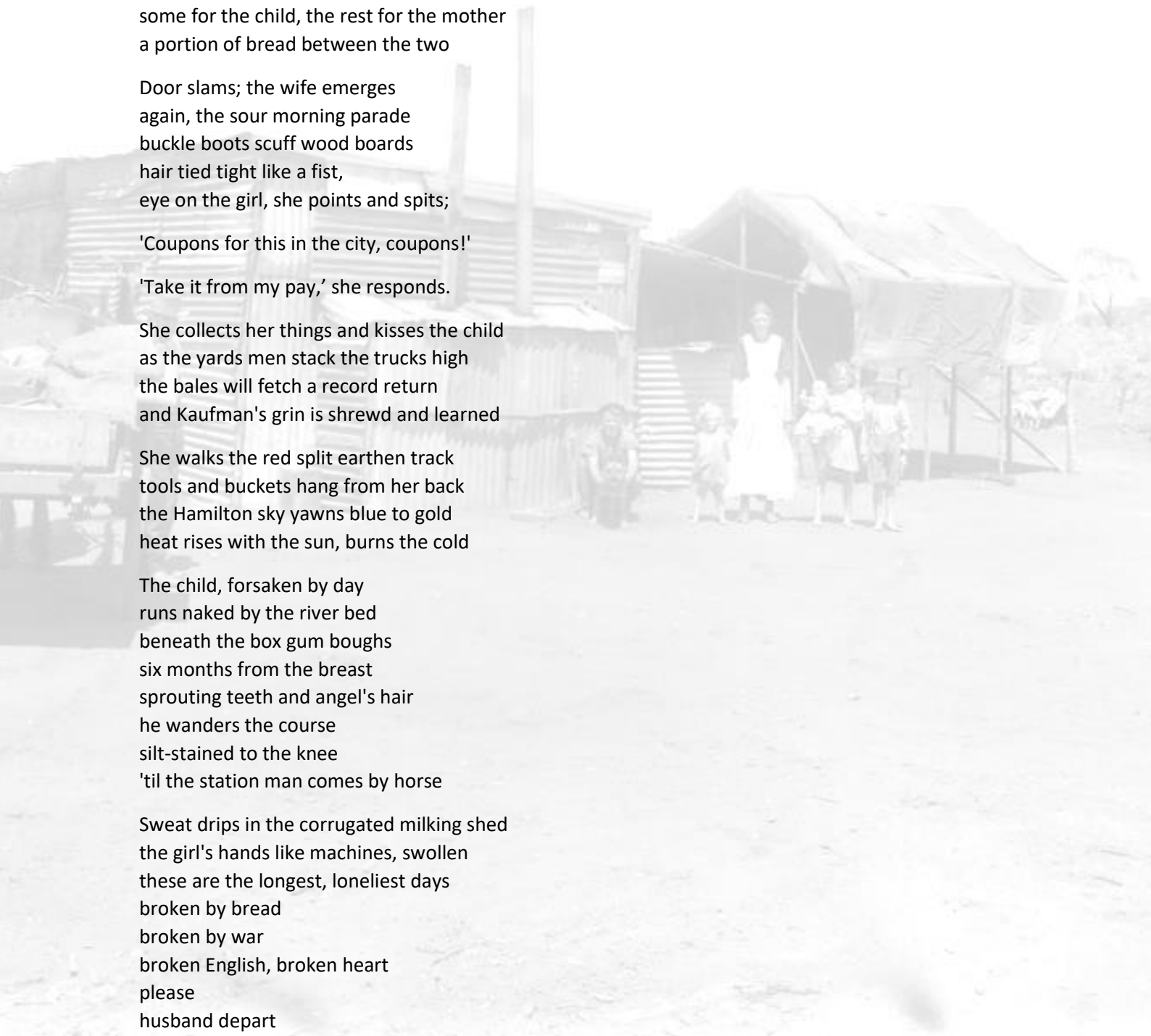
'Take it from my pay,' she responds.

She collects her things and kisses the child
as the yards men stack the trucks high
the bales will fetch a record return
and Kaufman's grin is shrewd and learned

She walks the red split earthen track
tools and buckets hang from her back
the Hamilton sky yawns blue to gold
heat rises with the sun, burns the cold

The child, forsaken by day
runs naked by the river bed
beneath the box gum boughs
six months from the breast
sprouting teeth and angel's hair
he wanders the course
silt-stained to the knee
'til the station man comes by horse

Sweat drips in the corrugated milking shed
the girl's hands like machines, swollen
these are the longest, loneliest days
broken by bread
broken by war
broken English, broken heart
please
husband depart
soon



Kaufman watches her feed the pigs and count the eggs,
he watches her count the eggs
silently, she counts the days
'til the numbers streak one hundred spent
and come the end of each midnight shift
she lays her head down,
lays it down
and drifts
opens to the 'dreaming land';

*A face in the crowd holds out a hand
the camps disperse from the Melbourne docks
hearts full of promise, yet stories of loss
and again, two lives have crossed*

She wakes before dawn.

A true post-war story told by a Russian friend who arrived from Germany as a new Australian in the 50's and young mother working on a Hamilton sheep station. It was not uncommon at the time for the wife and children to leave Europe (for Australia, Africa or America) six months prior to the husband arriving at the destination.

Written over the Christmas holidays in 2004.

