

GUADALCANAL

I.

They left behind marineland in the shallows:  
shell-case, canteen, dixies, random parts  
of landing craft, dentures, boot and bone,  
and earnt themselves the dying gratitude  
of fish that preyed on fish that crept,  
slept, crawled, sheltered and survived  
(for a time) in twisted debris, in the bay.  
A whole new nooked and rafted world  
of hideout, red rust, weed and fish.

II.

At night, the tide,  
the phosphorescent beach,  
the subtle shifting light  
on water, indigo mood  
not quite established;  
in the wave, the drag  
of metal on shell

something is washing in

a dead man's magazine  
from a dead man's gun

The young crab at home.  
See him, shake him out;  
the cool moon will enter  
his transparent flesh.

III.

The sniper prepares  
to fall from the tree.

He shivers, the rogue  
in his blood sings  
fever, explodes  
in his chilled brain.

Moonlight becomes  
the ally of bone.  
It feeds on men  
before they age.

He must make shape  
shadow of tree,  
make moonlight move  
like a cold skull.

He is agent  
and actor, calls down  
death when glimpse  
resolves to a man.

Patrol in the blood  
has singled him out:  
fever's new host.  
His range has been found.

The sniper shivers  
the long drop down.

IV.

the palms

arch like the backs of actresses  
caught in dreams of tango and lust

reach across the stunned sky  
like pilot smoke to home

better the boy's root growth, alive  
for his woman; they mock his ache

hide death in peril; their shade  
cuts clear over the cold sand

move as the bay moves, distorted  
in water, the brown breath gone

V.

Something snail by moonlight  
covets the grass, endures  
inches by inch of dirt  
in search. Tracer,  
trajectory, slow gleam  
slimes the pathway.  
Crushed underfoot,  
has left home eggs  
aware, destined to swell  
with the damp mould.

The quick cut air stops short,  
the bone in flesh explodes.

VI.

You see nothing of this  
from the moon.

VII.

It takes so much, and stops.  
Tacticians estimate the need for leave.  
The hotel-keepers calculate the thirst.

VIII.

The cool and louvred light intrudes  
on nightmare, the silent scream  
in the hurt head roars across  
the bungalow suburbs, the rest homes  
and convalescent wards laid down  
pawns to pride. The volunteer ladies  
come at ten; they are frightened  
of dawn, the day's cold eye  
open on ulcer and flesh, amputee  
and bedpan. They will hold hand,  
write letters, generally satisfy  
the good intentions of the world.  
After late lunch, trams and roses  
in avenues, to the shawled rooms  
waiting for streetlamps, on settees  
beside their indifferent phones.

PETER BELL

A MORNING

You have gone, now,  
but I trace your path  
through  
disturbed ducks

(which I still see)

flying.