

# The Great Wrasse – A poem by Clive James

For Les Murray

Mask wet and snorkel dry, I'm lying loose  
On the glass roof of time, and forty years  
Straight down I see it teeming, the bombora  
Of Manning House. Tables like staghorn coral  
Chewed at by schools of poets. Frensham girls  
(Remember Xanthe Small and Joanne Williamson,  
Those blouses and tight skirts? *You little beaut*  
We breathed into our fried rice. God, what dreams:  
By now they must be grandmothers) glide by  
Like semicircle angelfish. Psychologists  
With teeth like wahoos turn their heads as one,  
Torn from discussion of the Individual,  
Their Watch Committee late-lunch seminar  
Prorogued *pro tem*.

Poised Andersonian squid  
Explain to freshettes peeping from their shells  
*If dualism allows no real division*  
*There can be no real connection.* Fusiliers,  
Trevallies, sweetlips, damselfish, hussars  
Patrol in Balbos, split up, feed, re-form,  
Waved at by worshipping anemones.  
The food chain and the mating dance, the mass  
Manoeuvring, the shape-up and the shake-out,  
The pretty faces pumping pain through spines:  
It's all there, displayed in liquid crystal,  
No further than my fingertips adrift  
(A year in time is just an inch in space) –  
And there *you* are, and I can see you now  
For what you were, most brilliant of the bunch,  
The Great Wrasse.

But to know that, I had first  
To see the thing itself, in all its glory,  
Five years ago. Sleeping on Lizard Island,  
My family was recovering its strength  
From too long in the cold. On the second day  
We woke at noon and rolled into the water  
To join the turtles feeding on the sea grass  
Between the beach and sandbar. Serious fish  
Were just around the point, at the big bommie.  
We drifted off the platform at the back  
Of the launch and let the current take us over  
A chunk of reef that came up to arm's length:  
Just what the doctor ordered. We could see  
The whole aquarium in action, hear  
The parrot fish at work on the hard coral  
Like journalists around the Doric porch  
Of some beer-froth tycoon whose time had come  
To be cast out of Toorak.

Then it was there –  
Beside us, as if to share our view:  
Materialising, as is its marvellous way,  
With no preliminary fanfare,  
Like an air-dropped marching band that opens up  
Full blast around your bed. *Lord, I can see,*  
I said in silence, smiling around my rubber  
Dummy like a baby. Powered by pearls  
On fire inside its emerald envelope,  
The Wrasse comes on like a space invader  
In docking mode, filling the vision full:  
The shock of its appearance stops the swimmer  
Dead in the water, flippers frozen solid,  
Stunned by a sudden nearness so aloof.  
As if the Inca, walking his lion's walk  
In soft shoes, were to pass by from behind  
Preoccupied by his divinity,  
So with this big fish and its quiet storm,  
Its mute Magnificat.

Bigger fish yet  
Plumb deep holes of the Outer Barrier –  
Potato cod in mottled camouflage  
Like Japanese Army Kawasaki fighters  
Parked in the palms, *franc tireur* Tiger sharks  
With Kerry Packer smiles, the last few marlin  
To keep their swords – but nothing quite as massive  
As the daddy of all wrasses, the Daimyo number,  
Shows up at the bombora, and nothing as bright  
Is known the whole reef over.

Over the reef,  
You realise, is where this fish belongs –  
Above it and not of it. Nothing is written there,  
Enjoyed or cherished. Even the beautiful,  
There in abundance, does not know itself  
"Sex is a Nazi" you once wrote, and so  
It is here. Killing to grow up so they can screw,  
Things eat, are eaten, and the crown-of-thorns  
Star-fish that eats everything looks like  
A rail map of the Final Solution,  
But all it adds to universal horror  
Is its lack of colour.

Even in full bloom  
The reef is a *jardin des surplices*:  
The frills, the fronds, the fans, the powder puffs  
Softened the razor's edge, the reign of terror.  
Lulled by the moon snail and the Spanish dancer  
With choreography by Carlos Saura,  
By feathery platoons of *poules de luxe*  
Cute as the kick-line of the Tropicana,  
The tourist feels this is the show for him –  
Atlantis in an atrium, a rumpus room  
For slo-mo willy-willies of loose chips  
From bombed casinos, a warehouse arcade  
For love-seats, swansdown pouffes and stuffed banquettes  
That he could snuggle up to like a prayer  
Of Hasidim against the Wailing Wall  
And soothe his fevered brow in yielding plush –  
But only an expert should ever touch it  
Even with rubber gloves.

Buyer beware,  
The forms of death are not just for each other  
But for us too, and not all are as ugly  
As the stone fish, toad fish, puffer and striped Toby  
In his leather jacket. Even a child can see  
That these are kitted out for bio war:  
They pull the face of neurotoxic venom,  
But the cone shells that beg to be picked up  
By writers are like antique fountain pens  
Proust might have held except he would have written  
A short book, and that dream-boat with the sulk  
Like Michelle Pfeiffer lolling in the glass  
Elevator in *Scarface* is a breed  
Of butterfly whose class would set you raving  
At closer quarters, anguish cloaked in floating  
Come-hither chiffon veils that spell curtains  
At the first kiss.

Rising above it all,  
A benign airship poised over New York –  
The *Hindenburg* without the *Hakenkreuz*  
Or parking problems- just by its repose  
The dawdling Wrasse siphons up Hell's Kitchen  
And turns it to serenity, the spectrum  
Of helium in Rutherford's radon tube,  
The clear, blue light of pure polonium,  
The green, fused sand of Trinity, the silent  
Summary. the peaceful aftermath.  
Something, someone, must be the focal emblem,  
The stately bearer of the synthesis  
To make our griefs make sense, if not worthwhile.  
That the young you, in a red-striped Sloppy Joe  
Like Sidney Greenstreet cast as Ginger Meggs  
Progressing through the Quad the very year  
Of the first Opera House Lottery draw,  
Would be the Great Wrasse, few could guess  
But now all know, glad that the time it took  
Was in their lives, and what you made of it –  
Those new and strange and lovely living things,  
Your poems – theirs to goggle at when born:  
Born from your mouth.

Born fit to breathe our sea,  
Which is the air I surface to drink in  
(My mask a nifty hat by Schiaparelli)  
Having seen wonders – how our lives once were,  
Nature's indifference, time's transparency,  
Fame's cloud of pigment, fortune's blood-tipped needles,  
And finally, most fabulous of all,  
A monumental fish that speaks in colours,  
Offering solace from within itself.