The Great Wrasse – A poem by Clive James

For Les Murray

Mask wet and smorked dry, I'm lying loose
On the glass roof of time, and forty years
Straight down I see it terming, the bombora
Of Manning House. Tables like staghorn coral
Chewed at by schools of poets. Frensham girls
(remember Xanthe Small and Joanne Williamson,
Those house and little skirts? You little beast
We breathed into our fried rice. God, what dreams:
By now they must be grandparents) glide by
Like semicircle angelfish. Psychologists
With teeth like wahoo 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
Iffaham allows no real division
There can be no real connection. Fusiliers,
Trevally, sweetlips, damselfish, busbars
Patrol in Balbos, split up, feed, re-form,
Waved by at 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 memory is 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 neurosis so aloof.
As if the Inca, walking his lissu'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, frae steur 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 Denny 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 in 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
Soften the razer's edge, the reign of terror.
Lurlled by the moon snall and the Spanish dancer
With chorography 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 numpus room
For sio-mo willy-willies of loose chips
From bombay casino, a warehouse arcade
For love-seats, swandown pouflles 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 plash –
But only an expert should ever touch it
Even with rubber gloves.

Bayer 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 killed out for bio war:
They pull the face of necrotic 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 tulk
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.

Raising above it all,
A benign airship poised over New York –
The Hindenburg without the Hakenkreuz
Or parking problems- just by its repose
The dwelling Wrasse sphinx 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 Open 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 silly 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.