**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