

A preposterous hodgepodge

uniquely arranged

Inga Clendinnen

It's too hard to imagine the future or understand the past. We make best guesses, reassure or deceive ourselves, add or subtract from day to day. Even the present is more or less confusing. I am dancing

to the off-key music unravelling in my head and my steps are awkward, stumbling, because my ears resist the beat. All around me dancers twirl, dip and pirouette, two-step, tango, twist in frantic time as a gypsy band plays louder,

faster, and more erratically. In the centre of the floor Felix Dzerzhinsky goes on his knees to Anna Akhmatova and Ezra Pound clasps Joseph Brodsky to his chest; T. S. Eliot waltzes Mao Zedong around the room while, over in a corner, Joseph Stalin sobs to Shostakovich,

'I've been misunderstood.' And who's that arm in arm? Why it's Kennedy and Khrushchev watching fascinated William Wordsworth stepping out a fierce fandango all alone. Champagne fountains burble, flames leap and a Black Widow shows Snow White her dance card full of names.

My broken dance becomes a voice, limping just behind or just below the music, in its crazed and bleeding tones a history of wind, of rain, of birds, of the day after day, sun behind clouds, mist between trees, seaweed rocking back and forth. Dietrich Bonhoeffer

peeps between the curtains. Bodies dangle at the end of ropes, heads topple into baskets, tongues cry out as sand engulfs their mouths. Churchill drops his poison gas on Lenin's troops, Mandelstam waits for clothes which don't arrive. Mayakovsky puts a bullet in his brain.

Speak, sing, dance. Only listen. To the ravens and the doves, seagulls, swifts, the tiny wren, the albatross and eagle, the mutton birds – shearwaters – on their perilous journeys season after season to breed or flop into the sea.

Awake in the dark of 5 am in a strange bed in an unmoored city with that drifting space-module feeling motel rooms may induce. And then I hear it. The double-down, rippling magpie call from home. Distant, definite,

now three notes, now two. Is that an answering call, a link? And then it stops. Silence but for the slight, sinister, other-worldly rattle of the air conditioner – as if air should be conditioned. And now as the module

races on to Mars, the red and rocky planet, mad hope of space survivalists, the band once more picks up the bagpipes, drums, fiddles, trumpets, bells, clappers, hand grenades. That music, could it be the music of the spheres ...