

Loving Pavlova

Voyager I, four billion miles from Earth, sent back a picture that used to hang in a NASA centre auditorium. A huge photomosaic of what looked like nothing at all: shiny, streaky and black. As though a thumb had strayed over the viewfinder.

But a little more than halfway down, toward the right, you could find the tiniest blue speck, the Earth. And everyone who saw that barely-there dot *touched* it, like the photograph of a missing face.

The image got worn, like the steps of public buildings. It was replaced several times.

Why not dream? Why not imagine things are better than they are?

Anna Pavlova danced the swan in a perfect white tutu. She had a dessert of meringue and cream named after her. She also had bad teeth—really terrible. Ruinous. There's no footage of her *Swan Lake*, but there are photographs, and in some of them she's smiling, mouth open.

Her audiences didn't care. They wanted to sit in darkened auditoriums and watch, feel the hush of the swan sinking into stillness then applaud it back to life.

She danced all over the world.

To imagine things are better than they are, i.e. looking to the best in them. This isn't a lie, or if a lie, only a half-lie,

I have a small photograph of Pavlova. Dressed in her swan costume, head tilted to one side, eyes downcast—already departing.

The background is so dark I can't see the floor.
Feathers pinned to her shoulders make them look bare.
She seems suspended in outerspace.

or maybe a white lie. Because get far enough out and you can feel the strings tug at our bodies, keeping us bound to one another so we can't help but think of things as we wish them to be, as we hope them to be. And isn't this hope the whitest of lies?

When, standing in the NASA centre, you finally find the fleck of light that is us, it's almost impossible not to be gentle, to touch the Earth as carefully as though you could feel the weight of that giant finger, far, far below.

When Pavlova died for real, age forty-nine, she lay in bed clutching her tutu.

A lie so pale you can barely see it. Sometimes it helps to close your eyes.