

# THE UNKNOWN SWIMMER

3:30PM

SATURDAY 12 OCTOBER 2024

ST PATRICK'S HALL



## The Unknown Swimmer

Kevin March *composer*

Judith Dodsworth *libretto and soprano*

Jason Reekie *photography and videography*

Justin Gardam *digital environments and video composition*

Alyson Campbell *direction*

Laila Engle *flutes*

Campbell Banks *cello*

Louise Devenish *percussion*

Welcome to *The Unknown Swimmer*, a new multi-media song-cycle/theatrical work for soprano/speaker, flute, cello and percussion by composer Kevin March and librettist/performer Judith Dodsworth. What began as a light-hearted challenge between friends, Dodsworth and photographer Jason Reekie, to swim every day of the year at their local beach led to the genesis of a work that continues to evolve. Jason's photographic record of their daily swims inspired Dodsworth's accompanying writing. Award-winning composer Kevin March has crafted this text into an evocative score; Jason's images are incorporated into digital environments by Justin Gardam, and *The Unknown Swimmer* emerges.

*The Unknown Swimmer* depicts the poet's profound, personal transformation as cold-water swimming becomes an integral part of recovery from a mental health crisis. Reconnecting to one's creativity as a response to adversity, initially whilst living under COVID restrictions in 2020 and through the challenges that we continue to face, is the theme and rationale underpinning the work. Through poetry, evocative music and stunning imagery, *The Unknown Swimmer* speaks to the individual and collective transformations we undergo to find meaning – the Unknown Swimmer is every one of us. We are thrilled to share it with new audiences in beautiful Port Fairy, another environment shaped by its proximity to the ocean, and the community that gathers here.

*The Unknown Swimmer* was the 2023 recipient of the prestigious UKARIA Residency and was workshopped and previewed at the UKARIA Cultural Centre in January 2024. It was previewed again in February at Homophonic as part of Midsumma Festival. It received its premiere performance at fortyfivedownstairs' Chamber Music Festival to a sold-out audience, and was subsequently performed at Edithvale Lifesaving Club through the City of Kingston's annual arts grants.

*The Unknown Swimmer* has been assisted by UKARIA and the Australian Government through Creative Australia, its arts funding and advisory body and by the City of Kingston's Annual Arts Grants program.



# **The Unknown Swimmer**

## **poetry by Judith Dodsworth**

### **I. Out of my element I**

The bay is a gateway  
... and she is a tiny speck in an endless expanse of grey  
She is an intruder, a clumsy, slow, land-based mammal, ill-equipped for this world.  
... and she is tiny

### **II. Deserted Cathedral**

I am alone with the waving tussocks and the fading beach boxes and the whitening bones of seabirds, bleached shells, a feather, a jumble of memento mori.

The wind-whipped dunes a haven for my curious dogs, offering a smorgasbord of scents - saltbush and sand and foxes, and new hidden paths to explore.

Memories of summer crowds and shouting children, bright banners and melting ice creams are only a trace on the wind.

A dark secret ocean lies beyond. The beach is a deserted cathedral.

### **III. SOS**

Today, the vista ahead is vast.

It is overwhelming.

I am tiny. I freeze.

I can only take hesitant, shivering steps into the icy water and begin to describe small arcs with my puny arms, praying they will move me slowly forward. Or at least stop me from drowning.

I am in freefall.

De profundis.

Salva me.

All the sand has fallen away beneath my feet and there is nothing there. The cantus firmus I knew has dissipated.

Heavy with sadness,

I strike out.

I hope.

I think my salvation will be here, in the cold water. It must be. There is no choice but to surrender to the weightlessness. Every nerve ending, every sense is screaming:

You are alive.

This is all;

this is enough.

### **IV. Out of my element III**

Slowly the blood begins to flow again and the numbness recedes. Imperceptibly the strokes become easier, her limbs lengthen and her breath finds a rhythm. She is slicing a pathway through the water now, there is a growing ease and freedom to her movement. She is suddenly weightless and efficient and the current is propelling her onwards. She is a small torpedo. For an instant she is no longer a stranger here, but an infinitesimal part of this swirling ecosystem.

For an instant she is transformed.

## V. Out to the marker

An arbitrary, weathered wooden pole that is home to a thousand shelled creatures, sharply unforgiving against our bare legs. We have swum out to touch the marker, trying to impose some measure on the measureless ocean and stake our puny claim. The fragile arrogance of the tiny swimmer. The swell is greater here and the water is dark and deep; we are buffeted and tossed. Gulps of salty water pour uninvited down our throats when we try to speak. Silence except for the slapping of water against wood and a world viewed through foggy goggle lenses. No vessels beyond this point, no vessels, announces the sign. Only ours, two frail fleshy vessels, battling to stay afloat in the dark swell.

Out of my depth. You may think you are at the helm but here it is greater forces that decide which way you will go, whether you will flail beyond your depth or soar with the secret currents; whether you are a heavy, antiquated wooden vessel, groaning and straining and splintering in the water, or a sleek torpedo. Whether your tender flesh will burn with the cold and be lacerated by invisible tiny predators beneath the water, or you will glide effortlessly, smooth and at ease, the water only skimming your sleek surfaces and falling away. Whether it will tug and drag you downwards, or bear and propel you, and you will fly and soar.

## VI. Older

Perhaps she feels so acutely the rising and falling of the tides  
The turning of the moon  
Because her own tides are becoming sparse and scant  
And will soon cease forever  
The time for miracles will be past  
She too will whiten, washed up on the sand, forgotten  
So with the final waves that remain  
She throws herself headlong into the dark water skirmish  
With the last ragged breaths in her lungs  
She must scream and wail and keen  
Before the final transformation, the last moonrise.

## VII. Coming Home

A yearning, profound, unspoken,  
To return to our place of origin,  
Back to the womb-wet, womb-dark  
Womb-silence  
Or some deep ancestral longing  
For homecoming  
To be subsumed  
In the arms of the life-mother  
In the rise and fall of tides  
In the half-life of a breath

In the green secret places in the water  
In the cadence of a phrase  
So deeply held  
So sacred  
So perfect  
  
I breathe  
I hope  
I love

## **VIII. Why do we do this?**

It's a cold Sunday July morning. There's a steady drizzle and the breeze has icy teeth. Maybe she is starting to crave that first glorious burn. Her body is starting to yearn for the sensation of being rudely and abruptly activated. Her skin wants to prickle and protest, heart pounding against ribcage, as breath is snatched away by a cloak of cold thrown around bare shoulders. Her face wants to be frozen into a rictus by the icy water. She wants to gaze out into the limitless grey, arms outspread, and become part of this wilder world, where the monkey on her back cannot keep its hold. She is ready to defy the creeping fear, the doubt, the shame, the voices, the instinct to flee; to leave vanity and sense behind, to throw herself completely into this new, all-encompassing, breathtaking love.

## **IX. Full moon**

There are two moons tonight.  
One is suspended just above our heads.  
We could reach up and touch it.  
It is round and golden and incandescent and ridiculously, unfeasibly huge.  
The other has been shattered like porcelain, a million golden shards scattered across the surface of the water below.  
We are doused in light.  
The waves are swathes of inky silk, rustling and undulating.  
Sliding between them we howl nakedly at the full moon and the thrill of cold.  
A benediction, a ritual more ancient than memory.  
We are drawn by the tides, we are tumbled and assailed, we are broken and we heal; and we are here for only the briefest moment.  
We are shards of moonlight on the silken blackness of the sea, blinking and glittering briefly, and then we are gone.

## **X. Book of days**

Skin swimmers.  
Cold water warriors.  
That first searing burn - as our startled brains struggle to differentiate between cold and hot - that is becoming so familiar.

We are learning the secret language of the winter swimmers; we are slowly earning our badges of honour as we tick the challenges off our list.

Some days we are the conflict that seeks resolution,  
Some days we strike out strongly into the void.  
Some days we drift.  
Some days we glide silently beneath the still, silken surface of the water;  
Some days it rises up to slap us rudely.  
Some days it is so clear we can read between the lines in the sand at our feet;  
Some days we swim blind, suspended in a strange, opaque green world.

Some days we feel so lost and alone that we will never be found  
And some days we come home.