



Katoomba Incantation

John Charles Ryan

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Dedicated to

"Amanda and the Plants"

But there are no flowers here
Persephone could have gathered;
nor do our people go
down on their knees at swamp-edges
or shorten their range of sight
to your less-than-finger's height

-Judith Wright "Swamp Plant"

And this the Boronia, and small, small harvest,
The parasite Floribunda for my drowned son.
How delicate they are, these stars at random,

-Alan Alexander "Nuytsia Floribunda"

My desire for knowledge is intermittent; but my desire to bathe my
head in atmospheres unknown to my feet is perennial and constant.
The highest that we can attain to is not Knowledge, but Sympathy
with Intelligence

-Henry David Thoreau

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PART I

Katoomba Incantation—*one.theups*

bivouacked,
between Sydney and Bathurst—
alembic of buskers and brisk air:
Katoomba by dusk.

after the tempests
I take notice of myself
in an acrobatic city
refulgent amidst its
frangible sandstone terraces;

in the sunken green dimples
of treed land between tin roofs,
obstreperous white cockies
ravish seeds of casuarina
agitating the backstreet silence
above The Gully.

locals cram into arteries
off Katoomba Street, souped-up
exhaust system epiglotti
bellow foully like indigestion
for tourists moseying towards
a share of the mountain dogma;

the cart-wielding madmen
clanking cans of Coles beans
outside biodynamic food stores,
insult lavender with body odour;
within earshot, passing freight—
Great Western Highway's incantation;

little city whose sun gods
are spat upon by clouds;
stoic place of gentle bookshops
and end-times exegeses in cafes,
of Land Rovers in low gear,
those cocksure vendors of adventure.

Agoraphobia in the Garden State

For New Jersey

these woods are not open
but hemmed in with all manner
of tree and brush and herbs,
oaken trunks are wishbones
slowly straining at the crotch,
a gash in a pitch pine exposes
tawny-brown flesh sealed in
a rosary of golden sap—
its untalking lips closed and
pursed prayerfully upward;
I gouged it there years back
wounding the pitted bark
with a meat cleaver;
lady slipper orchids will come
if I wait for the veiny pink
testes to emerge and droop
and—in truth—ivory lantern
bunches of wild blueberries
will call rhomboidal light to the
duff, showering hard inedible fruits
upon strata of decaying things:
samara, rhizome, flung sepals;
one morning, crouching among
convolvulus, I will decide
to kiss the dryads
on their ruddy cheeks
board the plane to Sydney,
upchuck my guts into the sea.

Sheoak Reverie

Welshpool Road mounting
the Hills above Perth City
soused in eventide spawl

sheoaks rummy with radiata pine
all fogging together—
my auto reverie cut short

by the uphill travail of three
cylinders. I lapse into a mindset
beveled into white or red oaks

ejecting lacquered acorns
to the boreal duff somewhere
on a tenebrous broadleaf floor;

lore hunts us down the same
Nantosuelta lurking on the plain
feminine oak or the settler's bane;

tiny teeth are your verdure
neither as leaves nor as needles
but as cladodes, unlike the pine,

you see, where I come from
winter is roughshod and slaps
the rubicund faces of boys and trees

threadbare smiles crack coldly,
fall in brittle leaf potshards,
marrow hardens and turns to ice

and just when you get used to it
the thaw barges in overnight
I know, this is somewhere else

but further on, at the roundabout
the bald tyres of the Daewoo skid
on the slick bitumen to Kalamunda

and I end up facing backwards again.

My Librarian Is A Pop Psychologist

my librarian is a pop psychologist
seated behind a leaning tower of science
tomes, bifocals slunk down his proboscis
: my parents were old, he guesses

a good point. the armload I cradle sags with
epitaphs: a bristlecone pine dubbed 'Prometheus'
chain-sawed after the winds of five millennia
: people don't energize me, he claims

brooding through the slalom of stacks, he
follows me around the archives, right past dusty
potted jades, into the entomology collections
: like his first wife, I'm an introvert

I clear the security check and jettison
the spires of theories, the indecipherable
snarls of logic, mildewy and soon-to-be-dated
: he says, I'm anxious for an unimaginable

place elsewhere, his forehead in accordion
ruffles. the floor is freshly waxed and formal-
dehyde and urine waft in the dimly lit hallways
: true, I take everything too seriously

outside, the wind flicks the silvery
undersides of Russian olive leaves then
tickles cumuli across the painted dome
: outside, the masters waiting.

Dispersion of Seed

a gap in the range
along Chester Pass Road
where *bullanock* grow
on charcoaled soils;

we have come to see
wild things, anxious
as furred buds, instead
lying on the road verge

the sun-baked corpse
of an old kill, wincing
its last breath, grains
sprawled about, its guts;

umber burlap bleached
tawny brown and riven,
spilling maggots and stones
in difficult morning light;

Hoodini escapee from
roadtrains, *persona non
grata* at an ill-fated wedding
where wheat sullied the rice;

interloper on an island
of mallee and wattles,
sweeping the understory
in a bile yellow peristalsis.

habitats become habits —
all the shades of saffron and

sinopia signify the storm
of spring as we know it, or

djilba as it has been called;
these worlds, sharp with edges
that overlap and occlude
curl up one day like fern fronds

shrivel the next, dispersing.

Quabbin Reservoir, Nearing Spring

Petersham, Massachusetts, USA

I.

spring spurs the yellow spotted salamander
from their burrows and overland to spawn
in vernal pools where they conjoin a squirming
mass, the raccoons drawn to feast as well

we gather torches subdued in red cellophane
to not disturb them and plastic buckets into
which we flop their rubbery bodies and carry
unscathed to the other side, deflecting motorists

lest they squash the sidling creatures, yellow
dots on top of glistening ebony undercoats
our breath fuming in the nearly midnight new
moon, we are more than voyeurs to the cavalcade

that hastens en lascivious masse with the warm
hesitant rain turning bitumen to a throbbing.

II.

the farmers who come to collect maple water
no longer use metal buckets and spiles
but a lattice-work of yellow, red, and blue
plastic tubes netting trees to fifty-five gallon

barrels, in the bright barren late winter sun
the saccharin drip-drops like soft puckers
and through the nights, the flowing forth from
phloem, fermentation, then the sealing off

maple, sweet maple, simmering in sugar shacks
a single drop, the juice of primordial seduction.

III.

over thirty now and idle, I walk a battered track
to a curve at a delta of frost-singed grass
and backfill, the church bell *dlungg-dlungg*
across the valley. In these northern towns

I sometimes think limpid days will never come,
that I live in a forgotten freeze frame of corn-
snow, porcupines gnawing at bark in the pallor
of short light, that I might always dwell in drafty

rooms with sodden firewood for a hearth of stone,
tracing the shadows of tattered fecundity.

Sunday Zamia Swagger

by the fire, Sunday morning I imagine *by-yu*
so meander out to the plicae between rolling land
higher to the scarp where the red gums thicken;

a Qantas jet groans, the sun strikes sporadically,
under the path of flight through autumn clouds—
from its lonely nook, a dusky roo breaks into
fricatives;

cross-hatches of wash-outs and dirt tracks
to the bitumen wending west to Swan View—
a scenic vista, lugubrious cars slanted at the edge
a woman with a crew-cut extinguishes a butt
a faceless man slinks into the peace of nothingness

others pass slowly | the way to better things:

an imperturbable hydra, squat black trunk
leaflets stiff as blinds, crisp as piano keys played
forté in one long swipe through seven octaves

tawny cones leaking aloe, striking the nostrils
larghissimo, tessellations of earth acridities
eerily dying back into a rotunda of arachnid legs

Grey observed ‘violent fits of vomiting’
Vlamingh, ‘no distinction between death and us’
savouring its bready fruits, unsoaked like hazels
cattle staggered at the poison of the New World,
encased in the sweet flesh of a nut.

Through The Karst

riding in the cab, heading south,
principles of Buddhism, kava, and dawn
blooming jasmine incense.
entrained to the inflowing stream
of the highway, or is it our motion into
its pin-straight body?

either way, I estimate the Doug Firs,
and the small passes that restrain
the big machine to a creep.
through the karst, a glint rises there,
then vanishes. thunderstorm on the desert flat
and the scorched prints of rainspray.

what comes next:
the birds' loosen achenes, roots intertangle,
water sucks into membranes.
engine torque, seed dehiscence, all movements
are the movement of water,
and eyes that once swirled are now
paused on the soporific curves of the interstate
in the southwest burn.

creaking seat springs
clay red Manzanita
Jake brake rumbling
over steel bridges
then the sun—
I must place and be placed.

Under the Wattle Scrub

For Frank Cook

When I want to whisper to those long gone,
I go to the fields of everlastings
And hold still watching the slow yellow dawn.

A friend who has drowned, my father withdrawn
Both becalmed like tallships at half-masting,
When I want to share time with those long gone.

All the ones who have been too early drawn
By cancerous rot or the sea's clasping,
I hold still watching the new yellow dawn.

Frank, here you are with your tall sapphire brawn
Wide as the flowered hills and unlapsing
When I want to converse with those long gone.

Under the wattle scrub, shimmering lawn
With the lissome Irwin River grasping,
I hold still watching the swift yellow dawn.

The arid lands east, the *kwongan* heath on
To the Indian Ocean's rare lapping;
When I want to reflect on those long gone,
I hold still watching the spring yellow dawn.

Blood

*gum trees emit, when wounded,
a stream of reddish fluid of a consistence not unlike thick blood*
– George Fletcher Moore, Western Australia, 1884

once you've seen blood
you look for it everywhere
the glowing dark enamel

seeping from chambers
where organs pulse
blood impregnating blood

wave after wave
in the columnar light
of late afternoon, a marri

performs a plasma-letting
I taste the feasting flies
with flecks of sugary kino

disintegrating on my tongue
imparting an acrid sting
agreeable as an antiseptic

their lineage inside my blood.
bloodroot spicing bland roots
or the colonial bloodroot

white-flowering under oaks,
the profusion of my blood
after a summer camp slashing

how it spilled like a springtide
or an open tap in my eyes,
I asked would it ever stop.

strange spangles of crimson
along a suburban Seattle street
after the drunken night ranting

of the neighbors, a terse friend's
nose ruptured from the altitude
of New England Green Mountains

his only ebullition of the day
my scalp sopping like fresh paint
as the surgeon excises a lesion

and all the births I will never see,
including my own, but blood
is everywhere, though the body

dams it back in its remotest gorges
it gushes forth at improbable
moments of indifference—

blood *ortus* blood, *nativitas* blood.

Wild Grapes

we are bodies
walking our libations:
your hardened plates sutured
into the pattern of skull and
inside, the soft hemispheres,

neatly switch-backed neural hoses
farther down, the tubing of guts
climbing-traversing-dropping in
a raw cavity, closer to earth
the symmetry of hip bone to
femur, ball of the foot grinding

its labors, toes countervailing
the sucking downward sink;
and we are transmitters,
walking with both eyes in a shared
line of sight (as surveyors of
countryside); so that, sweat

pearls plummet to gingivitis-
stinking soil and spittle of
soapwort beetles to concoct
(secret-ions, that we are purveyors of);
so that hazy-headed and hassock-
mired, we rise to repeal alms

to an uncaring and oblique god,
the purveyor of final release;
we share a nomadic mind
clung to ridges and sobbing

on the rhododendron leathers—
the chrysopoeia of bile or

congealed winter's hoary hour
churning spring's plasma light;
the lift of the bloodroot's too-
soon white flower, pirouette
of morning-glory tendrils 'round
a bare-bone trellis, saying

again what the ice-glazed wild
grapes have already suggested
we are to do.

PART II

Katoomba Incantation—*two.thedowns*

my neighbor,
he is a master of the rubbish bin—
though obsessive-compulsive about them,

an expert in their etiquette
impeccable with their timing
never sooner, never later
an exertion of love unfolding
in the little valley sidewalks
of Wembley Downs;

the same person each morning
fast-walks for heart fitness
while magpies and crows cackle
then release sudden white shite
to the perfect black bitumen,
aiming for jogger heads

such artistic, altruistic birds!
dripping mandalas of excrement
(like Pollack) dropping divinatory
splotches for Buxton Street's
residents, but who gives a shit
about esoterica nowadays;

instead conversations revolve
around the sounds of crow feet
on corrugated roofs at 6am,
the ball & chain watering schedule,
that bloody bark-shedding bastard
of a gum tree and its fucking birds!

all this, before the god of sun
stymies the involuted clot of creation
singeing the hirsute dunes of Floreat
collapsing houses, imploding seas
liquefying Scarborough's Priapus
between Fremantle and Hillarys.

Bushtucker

(after reading Ginsberg)

soften your palate
with an *amuse-bouche*
fine finger food grilled
to burst-in-your-mouth
goodness, yummy!

knife and fork ticking
the china, slice them,
spice them *bardi* grubs
cooked in hot ash
or raw with a sprinkle

of blood root zest
those steaming gooey
insides sliding down
your throat like oysters
next for *hors d'oeuvres*

marinated orchid bulbs
with *macrozamia* nuts
translucent slivers layered
on doily-sized *yabgeti* cakes,
slathered in tart finger lime sauce

a slow cook stew of tubers
for your entrée
gotten from the ground
with my bleeding hands:
kara starchy white

as an Old World potato
the fringe lily *tjunguri*
with flecks of cypress
stem and if there's room
for the main course

roasted wild yam
with the flaccid leaves
of spinachy saltbush
in a *béarnaise* sauce
of emu egg and sour

mistletoe fruit *nyilla-nyilla*
for dessert eat quondong pie
slathered in rooty syrup
of the Christmas Tree
or drizzled in a brine

of amber wandoo nectar
red-eyed wattle seed
ground and sparged
like black pepper
come on people

eat your bushtucker.

First Kangaroo Paws

they speak charmingly this way—
up briskly from tawny earth
candelabras of crayon red, capped in green,
the old tentacles darkening to crimson;

refractions of sunset imprinted in soil
but spiraling back to dust already under
zephyr swoosh and swivel of gum leaves.

the dogs closer to ground than me
imbibe root steams of warm earth—
stutter and overstep razors
of *Isopogon* and pricks of *Hakea*

leap, pant against barb wire bush.
wind-spurred rain skittles over ground
hankering for sun, colour is gestated;

spry newbies in variegated cradles,
kangaroo paws crane necks,
resign to brown, shrivel pubescent hope
in glistening perimeters

I breathe into conch shell flowers:
bristly hairs ping my nose,
the shimmering season shucks off.

Two Moments – Nerved Hakea

I.

in a meadow amongst the gum-nuts
underfoot like marbles on a slick floor,
a campsite – cold water shower upslope
the loo improvised from a trip to the tip
faucet with drain all plugged up – a moat
of soapy scum water, a minor calamity of
saponin – rubbish bins tucked under wispy
eucalypts, the outlines of tents disappearing
into the tall grass. looking for the level ground
following the drinking gourd to the promise
of deep slumber in the late winter pith of air
condensing as soon as the sun dips below
the heathland hill to the West

II.

awakened by a series of muffled explosions,
in that chiaroscuro between tender dreaming
and cynical reality, a flurry of sparks, like logs
newly thrown into a fire – a pyrotechnics –
New Year’s Eve style, startled like Dowager
Gong Sheng by her cheeky son in the 11th C
or, like me, by the tyrannical cannon my father
fired off on a July 4th New Jersey eve to blast
all that he could not blast the rest of the year
lying supine there, vulnerable as a suckled
babe, ensconced under the hissing, flaring
arc, half-thinking the hubbub is of a nocturnal
marsupial snuffing around the tent, rooting
for ants or worms, sticking its snout rudely
into my centre belly chasm: dew enters
a ragged power cord patched with blacktape.

Qualup Bell

when nickel prices plunged
BHP reneged on promises
of glittering wealth to Hopetoun—

now half-hatched façades of
slapdash boom burbs riddle
the hinterland between Veal Street
and the Fitzgerald River heath;

north side of town,
a colossal mining truck wash
stands sentinel, belittling all small
tokens of catharsis—

in the saddened hodgepodge,
retailers peddle couches and caffeine,
with that expectant look of refugees;

but then I found a Qualup Bell
pendulating a fuchsia flower trio
each veined-heart bract
poised breathless at its heights

as the Southern Ocean beat alabaster sand,
it would soon bellow into the earth
fomenting the white-capped sea.

Orchid Anima

sometimes it works well
to hammer your dulcet note
 into the throat of the wind;
it has been a good year,
rain-wise, for the donkey orchids
 of the Eneabba sand plains.

sanguine-yellow tremors in air,
stammerings of petal-syllables,
 cheeks animated by the vivid flush
of pigments bladdered in downpour,
un-delicate elementals, entirely
 guarded by scorpion plectra.

love-children at the sun's last flaring—
at certain angles, they are coy
 faces squinching noon-burnt noses,
curved upon by casuarina locks;
then their tongues madden with desire,
 and limp waspy legs dangle forth.

ethereal flowerers who are not yet mass,
who are too light for air, four dimensions
 of blossom conjured from sand,
residues of sky slumbering in earth:
orchid anima, punctuating the heathland
 at the cusp of darkness.

Applying For A Seasonal Position In An American Candle Factory

temp work—
packing. lifting. mandatory over-time.
9 bucks per hour on the third shift.
Is this something everyone can live with?
no objections voiced, so we
like cattle to the abattoir...
you know the saying, but here's the scene:
executive meeting room, new pens,
crisp forms effusing benzene. three
college degrees gets me alongside
a society of ex-cons, socialphobes, stiffs,
and druggies, weakly muttering insults:
dumb ass can't follow directions.
my pen stiffens and slows, there is
Christmas sickness in the air. *when you're
done proceed to the next room.*
I tell my prospective boss I'm proofreading,
pause, scan the room for danger, then
pin a clear route to the exit. The parking,
lot seems vast, the wind had changed
directions, carrying the sweet chemical
sting off to the hills, mottled with
the variegated blood of this
last radiant day.

I have got to do something.

Inside a Jarrah Tree, A Black Tunnel Reaching Skyward

neatly burned-out innards,
this tree lives on as skin,
still supple and twisting in pleats,
but where did the heart go, and the breast bone
and the heavy, unctuous insides?

the spine endures, knobby column
ripped bare by a magnificent thrust of liquid fire;
but what about the soul,
where is its perch now?

outside, the grass trees don
verdant headdresses over the charred land,
and kino sap stamps red
insignias along marri trunks.

have you ever breathed inside a tree
to feel the cool glance of air
where once a molten river ran,
seeing the outside from within?

witchetty grubs or kookaburras might,
clawing skyward towards a portal of light

but I would not stand here forever.

Seven Names For a Plant

mudja,

beacon of the banksia scrub
soft summer burning stirs
movement to the coast

ghost bush,
waystation of the dead
glissading spirits to the sea
branches pose ghosts, like buds

christmas tree,
burning with sun's burning
antithesis of spruce, sering
the cold forests of Doug Fir

tree of the dead,
haustoria crawling into rock;
striking interpose between
luminous sky, musky underworld

nuytsia floribunda,
abundantly flowering namesake
of the Dutchman who seized
coastline with cartography

cabbage tree,
plumage in whorls of yellow
trunk laden with water
necrotic stench

a tree on fire,
obscured in the bright wash of

birok, burning a burnless
land, igniting orchid passion

like a *soiree*,
of leaf and light, root and loam;
irretrievable from the name
is the love that goes on.

Wheatbelt Pneuma

the Mullewa Caravan Park seems
 sopped in yolky undulations of canola
 where hippopotamus-sized RVs turn
 then lurch before the pretty graffiti

: emblazoned on the ablution block

wreath flowers riding the railway lines
 or lipping along footpaths in the monochrome,
 these candied stromatolites in a silica sea
 entrusting their souls to the umber ground

: and the acacia desert which cups

seed grains in its apertures—
 they lie as flower germs all the year
 then the sun's azimuth slants
 and the lilt of the wind gads

: pip flesh to flower – the earth gestures

in florid rings beside corrugated
 arterials grumbling from Geraldton;
 what gives you posture at the verge
 tramped over by incautious boots?

: you are the land's augury, like us

short-lived sparks in recalcitrant soil
a star-struck choir nodding to God
in unison or a congregation clothed
in ruby and off-white finery

: heads tipped piously to the ground

they listen to the primeval incantation—
when pneuma fused breath and heat,
the woven flower of *Leschenaultia macrantha*
flexed a green heart girded by blood fire

: asking the secret earth to sing.

PART III

Katoomba Incantation—*three.between*

The Indian Pacific makes
its swatheline through Australia
dissecting fractals of mulga bush,
ten more hours to Kalgoorlie.

A dark walk in the wide streets
of the Golden Mile, next day
tropical gales at Cook
old gaol propped like outhouses
bush hospital a stack of rocks.

retrieve internet palaver at Adelaide,
downgraded to the Red seats,
families crawl aboard to the Pacific
why don't they just fly? backtrack
towards Alice, then abruptly east.

watery heat of Broken Hill,
through the night, fetally
expiring through the undefined
expanse of the Blue Mountains—
early morning call, off at Lithgow.

wind tussled your hair
the train snapped into motion
eyes locked, you left me with
my burning feeling of always ever,
either leaving or arriving.

Two Possums

upon arriving,
Possum—the cat—spooked
by noir slabs of luggage,
hissed and hid under
etiolated veranda steps;

with caution, she sniffed
and slid under my palm,
twined an aged and hairless
back-end, the skin slipped
off the cupules of spine;

near the old Kalamunda Zig-Zag
splicing hilly adumbrations of dusk,
a ringtail scudded over the tar path,
alighted from its grevillea chamber:
peregrinus, golden-eyed *flâneur*;

there was no chance to swerve—
the tintinnabulation of the night,
subdued in one sudden thud,
definite as an abdominal blow.
I went the other way in the morning;

on the last day, her sand-papery
tongue and quicksilver purr flared
with the crackling aura of jarrah.
the hardened skeins of departure,
soothed—our small lives consigned.

if I could, I would have stayed
motionless by the stove there,
twenty-eights snipping seed radiometries,
haunted by the hand of twilight
heavy on the back of the day, Possum.

On the Desirability of Wildflowers Whilst Dogwalking

my Rottweiler named Axle
suspires and strains at his lead
raring steadily like a sled dog
neck barreled and rippling,

musculature, a sleek black
as the hide of a gorilla, loping
along fickle Lesmurdie sidewalks,

overarched by wattle spooondrift
and the tentative reds of eucalypts
the sprawling coven of the winter hills
fuchsia grevillea and prickly moses—

his injections are succinic
episodes of *micturus interruptus*
into each cosmetic cranny of lawn,

each errant tuft of trans-hemispheric
grass issued an amber ordinance
a canine-decreed cease and desist
he knows the punctilio of the town—

in the enclaves of bush, a Telstra tower;
underneath the aureole of flowering acacia,
a radiance tempered by solstice mists,

a daily rumpus with a fenced-in dog
perturbs his mild-mannered countenance
sends him into twists of baritone
barking, shaking bowel-deep excitement,

quietened by the red-tailed cockatoo
wrestling jarrah nuts, splitting stone-hard
hulls with beaks like iron instruments—

my companion sees none of this (or alas)
has seen it all along, feigns being impressed
seems mesmerised by sand specks
studding a tennis ball that I pitch in perfect,

slow camber over the sated scrubland
over low-dwelling insect sucking rosettes
above purple splendour herbal ringlets—

he goes tearing down the track after it
snaps the radioactive green orb into his jaws
in mid-stride, sniffs for dog sign language,
leaves a vile dropping that consumes the air—

nose safe in wattle churnings of sweetness
it occurs to me, there are too few adjectives
for the tragedies of smell, well, none that egress

Axle goads me onward, 'round the sandy track.

Notes On A Dying Chook

an amoeba of auburn hues
pontificating on one leg

meditatively in a t'ai chi
posture

lashless eyes tightened to slits
red rubber viscera under-jaw

hung like a windless
flag

when the patio door creaked
her orange moons and absolute

black opals flashed full
embouchure

her shape particularised,
dashed underfoot hoping for

the salmon-coloured ceramic
floor and

when denied entry sputtered like
a dervish on dinosaur feet

mohawk comb a flabby
mess

of raw meat (bird-sign of dehydration),
lapped the swamp under potted

plants, accepted no freshwater
almsgivings

the hangman was silent with his deed
lest dogs would smell the knell

and, impassioned, unearth the
entombed

but somehow, when the chirruping
in the steel cage ceased, I convinced

myself she had simply wandered off
into the wandoo forest.

You Are Known By The Company You Keep

where is the black snake
of my dream, fleeing the threat
of my thumping steps
on its watery sanctum?

traversing sand is exhausting
and though an overcast day
spontaneously I sweat bullets
my legs gone flaccid

thermal layers sloughed off
in the trough of the woozy track
at the crossroads, signposts: a toy
motorbike and high-tension wires

jittery rabbits of the pre-dusk light
glide down gouges in the sand
scored by motorbikes; then hide
in the safer sinks under paperbarks

willy wagtail and one long-legged
laconic marsh bird, not to forget, a cadre
of devote flies, the company I keep
at the corner of the swamp

flora exiled in the southern suburbs—
browned Mangles kangaroo paws,
orchids aslumber, the charred outer
bark of a balga tree, old torpid grower

with its pineapple splash of hair:
I see a grass tree, I see a Black Boy
if I tried hard enough, a coolamon
leaking its saccharin ferment

touch confirms sight
smell is non-registering,
taste, ahhh, a total exclusion.

Quandong

maybe it's a quest for kinship here,
but I quite like caravanning across town
to a rendezvous with a quandong tree

around Kojonup, he says, farmers
wives gather fruits for jam and like little
pomengranates they judder there *pluck*

pluck as the double-decker sheep trucks
bound for Katanning, shake the ground -
now the pulp, tempered to dragon's blood

is cracked like an egg shell over petrified
medulla. Resting deeper in, an amygdala
of a nut with a faint wintergreen taste

a macademia crunch, cigarettes fall
we crack the miniature brain with a
tyre iron from the boot of the Holden

exposing: the scandal of
santalum acuminatum.

dispersion of nuts and the wind before
winter mark the spaces between seasons
soft here like sutures rather than ruptures
and snake roots tangle in quorum below.

At A Bend In The Track, I Help A Marri Return to Earth

I could burrow to the pith of this tree
with my fingertips, through cambium
once hard as concrete, but now rotting
in its sleep, this boneyard of protuberances—
disfigured scapula, splintered sternum
a broken femur heaped in the middens;

down below, the daub of a defunct
termite clan, a gangrene in the toes—
I kick it off, watch it roll down slope,
but high up, stubby limbs bloat
like beached whales but without
the sick belch from under bleached skin;

all the colonisers have been stilled,
no red-tailed black cockies swarm nuts,
no blood-splatter on blackened bark—
palimpsests on tree body, washed-out
and hence the sun shies away too
from the slow leafless reckoning;

this giantess slouched when mature
slouches now dead, acid red ants
hasten where lungs would aspire.
behemoth that inched heavenward
through inflections of trunk syntax
towards the sharp flecks of light above,

its hidden arteries dried and drawn creeks;
the jarrah knows why the balga weeps,
a powdery residue falls at its feet—

I could spend this sundown peeling
away the layers of tetrahedral bark,
sifting through extinguished tints,

but west on the track, *yonga* scratches
and stirs, an earthbound stalk curls,
an orchid unfurls, something living
again animates an arboreal world.

I Lose My Balance Stretching For Wattle Pods

custard swathed the hills
of wild mustard sour
and wattles—how we will
prattle about the flowers

now the sky is full of dangles
that jig on woody stalks,
tic at sudden angles
black signatures in chalk

a hundred slits of eyes
hanker to be free,
a hundred slits of eyes
beckoning to me

river burnished stone
dark, arrayed to keel—
to ancient ears, the hone
of seeds pounded to meal

the damper in the fire
its scent of earthen bread
would stet my hungry ire
and leave my digits bled

the blossom has its hue
and leaves diffuse the light
but wattle pods ring true
the chime hung in the height

I grab a bunch of husk
they spin and crenulate
clench up like a tusk,
plant feet and ambulate.

Smokebush Coda

I touch the crown of my skull
a shallow crater
dibbled out by the surgeon's
falchion and empathise
with the planet
pockmarked by meteorites

the cicatrix of rogue stars
collided
into its tender gyrating soma
like Chicxulub under the Yucatán
from space
daubed in sooty clouds the hue

of a man's beard in middle years
shared colour
of the left-slanted scripting
smokebush before our horde
staunchly leaning
in the brusque huddle-together

kwongan season earliness
the sea scended
rushed down into the inky pit
doused the bolide flumed
up a patois
of protea for which we lull

now alert for Orpheus
in the laterite
creeping up the waving panicle
musical draught, chakric paeon

essence soaking
into the nervous nexus

firestorm in my indentation
stochastic *stoechadis*
a blossomed healing interruption.

Surgical Theatre

a curtain raiser
systolic climbing to 180—
surely I look nervous,
the nurse says action!

a neon man delivers
pyramidal sandwiches
to the ward, exeunt!
a teetering woman
squinces ashen eyes
behind a gauzy turban

as the claque assemble
a surgeon requests
a five-minute tea break

shadows behind scrim
a tête-à-tête about skiing
in the Alps, she flew in
from Geneva last night
it's been a good snow year

motionless in the false
proscenium, a ragged issue
of National Geographic
salmon poaching in Kamchatka,
Venice underwater

the sterile garb drapes
me like a bathrobe
with a slipshod knot
at the back

what we've all been
waiting for!
diaphanous veil
placed overface, pinpricks
of anesthesia ushering
in a sensation of being
refrigerated

the nurse casts
a cord between my legs:
the dzzzzzz of an electric saw
the aulaeum descends

excessive blood indicates
good scalp health, stitching it
together my unruly hair
drives them crazy

denouement

next time in Dunsborough,
on the doctor's orders
I'll visit that organic food
café with yoga out the back
with the oceanscape and
windchimes quivering
the one I could see only
because I couldn't see a thing.

Understanding Parrotbush

beside the rusted out
Survey Corps station
:budjan in the Dreaming

bolted into limestone occiput
punted by prevailing winds
:sessilis after Banks

hypostasis of endurance
condensed between ocean
and inner limestone enormity

turret of petals, stamens silky
helter-skelter inside an armamentarium
:josephia in early taxonomy

you adapt your downy insides
softer in hardness, more loving in
the hardnesses, this land,

a place of beetles' rest ringed
by tough unflinching spikes
:virile many-flowered dryandra

fair seas west off of Jurien
polygonal interruptions south
:prickly banksia, coarse to touch

made bold and brash by abrupt
inversions of colour and the shock
that enfolds light-bathed pupils

When Poems Like Bedbugs Bite

I awake every two hours
with a case of pins and needles

did I alienate the reader?
did the poem go anywhere?
did I give them bits of sugar
before the bitter tonic?

poems bite like bedbugs
in the unwitnessed hours
between midnight and dawn

did I speak the common tongue
keeping one foot in the pulpit?
were the words the artifice of
blinking lights in a Dr. Who episode?

I fossick around for a balm
behind the sliding mirrored door
of the vanity, but the nipping...

did the butter come before the bread?
how predictable was it?
was it flat like soda water left open?
was its spontaneity
just the prattle of a troubled mind?
would James Wright
get even more depressed after reading it?

someone forgot to wash the sheets,
the dog has been sleeping

on the bed, under the doona
and I can't help asking

did I pad it out for fear
of letting it end too soon
as I almost did just now?

Balga, Jarrahdale, Western Australia

beyond the slender jarrah stalks parsing the lazuline into snaggy bits is the roar, like an indomitable river hammering rocks on a violent descent out of some snowy silence: the boom of terrestrial pilots on burning bitumen. before me, a song flies by, pure song, only song, of a bodiless fluttering katydid; between the metronomic clicking, the bush breathes out an off-beat whistle and for all I know, below: Alph, the sacred river runs through a chasm in Xanadu. somewhere a siren sings sweetly for a grasstree, but here, neither tree, nor grass, nor lily—not a black boy but a balga—this two-trunked oldster splits into heaven, offering: covenant in its roots dark shelter in its limn.

Between Blackouts

at the end of the driest
summer, the acorn banksia
sway citronella flowers
on ingrown branches,
wind-rough knuckles buckled
down over dun robes
along the Reid at dawn.

on the Mitchell Freeway
where the bush glows,
frenetic wipers
absolve pangs of rain
and perverse sun flare
within fifteen minutes
everything has slowed
to an apocalyptic beauty
of no sound, of breaking
cresting colour and light.

the brooding midday globus
deposes the long limpid
reign of blue time
which is summer here
gums thwart diagonally
each febrile pulse of wind
lightning obtrudes
the urban cirrus above CBD,
hail thrashes Barbagallo.

the city arteries
rupture with schlerophyll
anatomies and ice pustules

Scarborough Beach Road herniates
frigid water into ersatz lairs
Mediterranean gazes spellbound—
oscillations of cobalt crimson
the inverted sense of freezing
wet heat on the skin.

Nuytsia fire flowered
through the surfeit
of heat, I searched
your contours burned
through the clothes
the quiet stir between us
drunken with sun
at the instance of surging
the power cut in the neighborhood.

we foraged mutedly
for a candle in the dark
recesses of spindly cupboards
aware of our breathing presence
groping for a waxen mandril
a fibrous wick to light the gaps
we navigated by feeling,
our bodies the barometer between.

All My Life, I Have Looked For Signs

I am in the same place now as I was a year ago, facing west instead and with all new cells and bones but an unchanged birth date; a pair of red-tailed black cockatoos flirt in the tall trees, but I think something inane and the breeze shifts and chases them off; my friend, who is a shaman, reads the flight paths of birds and consults with stones, says it's ok to go here or there, do this or that, and I listen to him; but now I can't write *anything* in my diary without a complete stranger intuiting it then scaring the shit out of me with direct questions on the theme; some carpets are patterned after my childhood in Neptune, New Jersey, and occasionally I see that terrible 70s linoleum and have a flashback to *Love Boat* or *Gilligan's Island* or *Brady Bunch* and young me with a big head of curls and a skin-tight Mork & Mindy t-shirt striped like a barber shop pole—by the way, barbers did surgery and enemas, not just beard and mop trims, so next time you call in, ask for a divination; what *is* happening in the stars tonight?—caught up in some far-off ridiculous thought, I look skyward and there's a comet making it's every-300-year trip through these parts and then a meteorite shreds the blank firmament but they don't collide; of course, I take this all into consideration, and I hear a familiar whisper in my dreams so I email that person in the morning and, what do you know! at the exact same time I crack open Gmail *that person* sends a message to my inbox; we too crossed paths in the ethers—is this a theory of chaos in action? I was in America when I saw my reflection in a puddle on the sidewalk; surrounding my attenuated face, an outline of the upside-down heart of a very dry island, and, I thought, *been waiting for that*, all my life, I've looked for signs.

Dragonfly Before Embarking

a dragonfly quivers
in a puddle outside the bus station,
lacey wings waterlogged
as the diesel engine idles;

flailing about and flapping
its appendages in the ephemeron:
a septic-brown shallow sag:
I grab its sinewy, sectioned waist

and there on my blue-gloved hand
lifting skyward and drying out,
the glassy orb eyes contain
no corpse, no caterwaul, only

cloud worlds—and me—
iridescent

bulbs
beholden to everything.

A Colony of Royal Hakea

I never grow cynical of the idea
that sea is spermatozoa
that each earthen tremulation
is a breast that we succour,
that we enter the creases
of earth at these carnal moments.

...the most hazardous coves
with the best fishing...

otters periscope whiskered faces
above the effervescent meringue
where water crashes, not soughs,
against a semicircle of boulders,
aligned like Stonehenge to the Antarctic.

through the knee-high scrub
the old explorers curse their way up
to an upland of Royal Hakea,
erratic columns of cabbage heads
oddly crowned with brown splotches
as if gnawed on by locusts

to decompose while alive is a gift,
to court death a little each day
rather than plummeting, is grace;

its vegetable body pulsates
orange scrawlings within green translucence
plying an inheritance from the sea:
teeth of tiger shark, teeth of mako,
teeth of lemon shark, hammerhead

if I were to touch this saw-toothed plant
all the fluids of me
would sizzle and steam,
and looking up from the earth,
the serene blue would fracture into fiery lines.