

**PRIMAVARIANTS:**  
**Conversations Across a Continent**

Glen Phillips and John Ryan

2017

First published in 2017 by  
International Centre for Landscape and Language (ICLL) Press  
Edith Cowan University  
2 Bradford Street, Mount Lawley  
Western Australia 6050

*Primavariants: Conversations Across a Continent*

This book is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of private study, research or review, no part may be reproduced by any process without prior written permission. Enquiries should be made to the Publisher.

Printed by iPrint Plus  
Unit 14-15 Carbon Court  
Osborne Park, WA, 6017

Phillips, Glen, 1936–  
Ryan, John Charles

ISBN: 978-0-646-51037-8

Cover design and typesetting by Glen Phillips  
Photos by the authors  
Sketches by Glen Phillips

# CONTENTS

Acknowledgement of Country  
Prefatory Notes by Glen Phillips and John Ryan  
Foreword by Patrick Armstrong

## **Western Shield Variants I: Glen Phillips**

Bloody Old Almond Tree  
Awakening  
Greening  
Spring is a Granary  
My Spring Shadow  
Dryandra Dreaming II  
Spring Burning  
Resistance is Useless  
*Il Mandorlo Primaveraile*  
Tamarisk  
Spring Hurt  
Suddenly the Sun Shines Again

## **Northern Tableland Variants I: John Ryan**

Blooming Old Cherry Tree  
Variations on the Theme of Gorges  
Outstanding Dendrobium  
A Noctuary of Nettles  
After Visiting Beadle's Grevillea  
The Churchill of New England  
An Epiphyte Whinges  
Two Old Trees Embrace  
What the Pine Says  
The Inner Lives of Garnishes

## **Western Shield Variants II: Glen Phillips**

Spring Settina I  
Spring Settina II  
Dryandra Dreaming  
A Spring Storm Sonata  
Glory, Jest and Riddle  
The Rites of Spring  
Toil of the Lilies  
Spring Etude 2  
It's the Turning of Spring  
Ulysses is Home  
Desert Gold  
Contemplating an Echidna  
The Balga

## **Northern Tableland Variants II: John Ryan**

The Blossoms Will Soon Fall  
Letter from Armidale about Driving  
There Are At Least Five Ways To Arrive  
Gondwanan Beech Walk  
Cauliflower Fungus  
Ingram's Wattle  
Immortelle  
Dorrigo Dialects  
Rusty Fig  
Brush-Tailed Rock Wallaby  
The Wollemi Pine

## **Biographies**

## **Notes**

## Acknowledgement of Country

Glen acknowledges that his poems were conceived in the traditional lands of the Nyoongar and Wongai people. John acknowledges that his poems were created in the traditional lands of the Anaiwan and Kamilaroi people. Both poets pay their respects to Elders past, present and future.

## Prefatory Notes

*Glen Phillips*—Late in 2016 I discussed with my poet friend and fellow admirer of Australian landscapes, Dr John Charles Ryan, the possibility of adding to the long list of books published by International Centre for Landscape and Language (ICLL) Press a collection of poetry specifically linked to springtime. As we are currently living on opposite sides of the Australian continent, we agreed that the unique flora and fauna of our two separate locations would be a worthy subject for celebration in such a book. *Primavariants* picks up on the word for spring in Italian, “Primavera,” but seeks to contrast the sometimes startling contrasts to be found in biological “hotspots” in the Great Western Plateau of Western Australia and the similarly rich life forms to be found in the Northern Tablelands of New South Wales (commonly known as the New England region). Naturally, because of the commonality of some plant species such as the eucalypts as well as Australia’s marsupials among our animals a certain “cross-referencing” is to be found between many of the poems. *Mount Lawley, WA*

*John C. Ryan*—An increasing number of Australian writers today find inspiration in their localities, places and regions. Literary works that attempt to forge connections between geographically disparate places while drawing comparisons across regions, however, are less common. Glen Phillips and I have aimed for the latter through our vernal reflections on the Western Shield (or

Plateau) of Western Australia and the Northern Tablelands of New South Wales (also referred to as the New England Tableland), respectively. Our subtitle, “Conversations Across a Continent,” highlights the potential of poetry to become a mechanism for dialogue across time, space and place. Before relocating to the New England region in 2017, I lived in Western Australia for over seven years where I developed a fondness for the plant life of the Southwest hotspot. Spring is a phenomenal event there. From my distant position on the east coast of Australia, I imagine now the stirrings of the Western Australian environment and, specifically, the symphonic flowering of its highly resilient and ancient plants: banksias, grevilleas, hakeas and, on the heels of the spring, the famous Christmas tree. Our co-authored poetry collection reinforces the idea that, in an era of global ecological disturbance and loss, “place” offers an important vessel for hope and transformation. In this respect, I admire Glen’s ongoing dedication to place. His ability to observe and bring to life the particularities of Western Australian environments is commendable. It has been a pleasure working with him on *Primavariants* this current volume. *Armidale, NSW*

*The authors are very grateful for the excellent Foreword kindly written for us by leading scholar on the travels of Charles Darwin and naturalist himself, Professor Patrick Armstrong.*

## Foreword

*Patrick Armstrong*

In these poems, Glen and John manage to capture the atmosphere, or essential feeling, of their respective environments extraordinarily well. As one reads them, the smell of the plant life in wild places, the scurrings of the small creatures in the bush and the vistas of the Australian landscapes can be very clearly be imagined:

I begin the trudge  
back up the hill from great  
white-gums and those fuming fields  
of everlastings and dampiera  
to take the dusty road to Cuballing  
and Popanyinning once again.

In lines like these from Glen's poem "Dryandra Dreaming II," the reader experiences a sense of place, just as though he or she were walking alongside the poet.

One feels, too, in these verses, the continuing march of the seasons, the "ordained beat of time" (from Glen's poem "Greening"). "This spring / greening had plumped them," writes Glen in "Spring Burning" of the wild oats growing on a roadside verge. But spring follows "winter's cramping frosts" (in "Spring Hurt") and ushers in "summer's brazen promises / of beaten brass." In "Suddenly the Sun Shines Again," he again captures the mood perfectly:

... the shift  
of mood after rain showers, when sun  
shone on the mallees and salmon gums  
and turned grey-green to gold.

John similarly sets the scene in "Variations on the Theme of Gorges," a sequence of haiku poems about the gorges of the New England landscape:

At Wollomombi  
burning gorge-wattles borrow  
the spume of the falls.





“crown of noble leaves”!) Glen compares the plants, H.G. Wells-like, to imagined invaders from space:

Driving through wheatbelt  
country we could see them  
marching across hill and vale  
like armies of extra-terrestrial invaders. Robots  
with their antennae aloft, their single foot turned black,  
burred greybeards frowning through the forests and along river flats.

No book of poetry describing the plants and flowers of Australia’s countryside and suburbs today could omit a hymn to the jacaranda, a relatively recent introduction to the landscape. Glen’s “My Spring Shadows” is just such a rhapsody, describing, as it does, the descent of the brilliant mauve petals:

slow purple rain  
falling like severed wings  
of great mauve moths

The “rain” covers the lawn, the steps and paving slabs of his garden. The poet wonders how the tree was able to draw from the infertile white sandy soil beneath his garden “so much purple / richer than vestments / of a whole line / of mightiest kings.”

The poems are deeply Australian, yet contain the occasional glimpse towards the wider world. Indeed, there is the occasional classical allusion, and Gerard (c. 1545–1612), the herbalist, makes a cameo appearance in John’s “A Noctuary of Nettles.”

The poet John Betjeman (1906–1984) is often remembered for his detailed evocation of “place.” He describes the English (and Irish) countryside with great affection and with attention to detail. In *Primavariants*, two poets pay comparable compliments to the landscapes of the Western Shield (inland south-west area of Western Australia) and the Northern Tablelands of New South Wales.

I commend these fine poems to readers who relish verse clearly anchored in locality or place, and who have a feeling for the distinctiveness of the Australian environment and landscape.

**Patrick Armstrong**  
**Geographer and Ecologist**  
**Adjunct Associate Professor**  
**Edith Cowan University, Perth, Australia**  
**October 2017**

*Professor Patrick Armstrong* is one of the foremost commentators on the work of Charles Darwin, particularly his fieldwork in the Galapagos Islands that formed part of Darwin's epic journey in *HMS Beagle* in the 1830s. Armstrong is an acknowledged world expert on Darwin, widely published in scientific journals and author of the acclaimed *Darwin's Other Islands* (Bloomsbury, 2004)

# **WESTERN SHIELD VARIANTS I**

Glen Phillips

[Insert Image of LG]

## **BLOODY OLD ALMOND TREE**

Bloody old almond tree's out again—  
must be spring come round one more  
time. Fierce showers dash little flags

so pale. Ezra noticed them in Paris  
all those years ago, sticking to wet black  
boughs outside the entrance to the *Metro*.

Stupid bloody tree to choose to bloom  
at the worst storm time for fragility.  
Petals too delicate to flaunt in the rain.

My dear, doesn't it remind you  
of tempests that strike love down?  
And just when you think it smells so sweet.

You embrace these feathery white fantasies  
mounting on the tree's soaring boughs,  
as silky as festoons of pallid butterflies.

Now black clouds come from the west.  
blowing a gale with sharp cold showers  
machine-gunning beauty to the turf.

## **AWAKENING**

*(‘A passion for flowers has driven me distracted...’ Lu You)*

The art of flowers is in their opening—  
the way petals uncurl like stars  
except the sky is not black. Light  
comes at the window, the lily flower  
is stretching, yawning, as if peering  
up into all of future time. Pale  
but full of light now the flower  
seems to smile shyly, then more  
and more broadly. The more you  
look to see this detail of blossoming,  
the more your heart opens. So gladly,  
like a flower— the more you smile,  
at the spring lily’s art of awakening.

## **GREENING**

Why in this world of warmed grass  
and treeleaves glittering in sunfilled air  
do you accept time’s spasmodic ordained beat?  
Better we envy the stirred air that dallies  
over green smooth haunch of land

dotted with scatter of sun-dulled sheep.  
I, who envy freedom of air, earth, fire  
and welling of water from the spring,  
must sit distracted here,  
measure with words  
ordained beat of time.

## **MY SPRING SHADOWS**

slow purple rain  
falling like severed wings  
of great mauve moths

so slowly that the eye notes  
one and turning away  
one and one more in the  
cornered blink

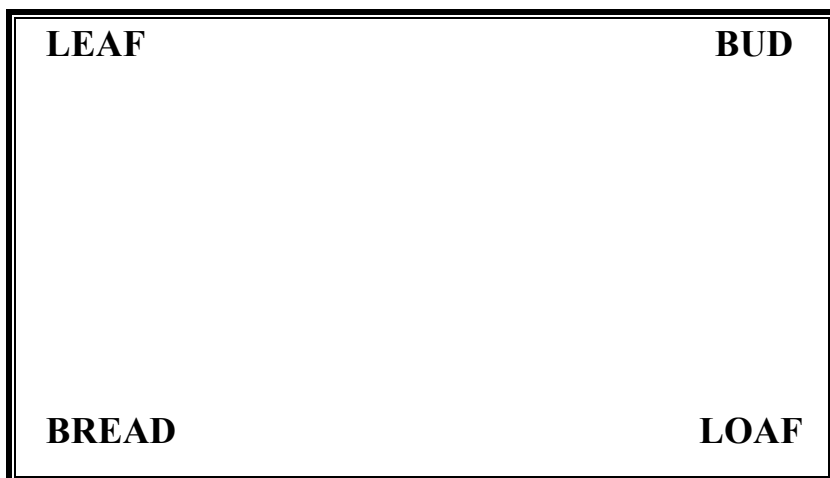
but in the morning  
these lawns and steps  
and paving slabs in bright panoply  
are strewn with a royal shadow

and I marvel then

how, where in the deep white sand  
that underlies my garden  
by what alchemy my jacaranda  
found so much purple  
richer than vestments  
of a whole line  
of mightiest kings  
to make my spring shadows.

**SPRING IS A GRANARY**

(Apologies to Ian Hamilton Finlay, Little Sparta, 1925–2006)



## **DRYANDRA DREAMING II**

(Requiem for a Forest)

Profuse spring eucalypt blossoms  
seem to boil off in flying spume  
of pollen to the skies, join swarms  
of insects rising from the earth.

At this place of  
ochre pits, powder-bark wandoo  
and florettes of dryandra among  
the darker mallets, darting glimpse  
of fleet numbats, my mind flashes  
back, years to brown bodies sprawled  
on the Hotham's sandbanks, under  
a late winter sun.

But now grey drift  
of clouds darkens the scene and I feel  
cold winds huddle the honeyeaters  
and wattlers on branch and bough.  
Sorrowfully it seems, as first  
drops of rain come.

I begin the trudge  
back up the hill from great  
white-gums and those fuming fields  
of everlastings and dampiera



to take the dusty road to Cuballing  
and Popanyinning once again.

And at Karping Bridge  
see, these days, salt sandbanks  
stretched along the ruined river  
where never again will bodies  
plunge under river gums into  
the cool sweet waters  
and plunge again.

## **SPRING BURNING**

I stood thigh deep  
in wild oats on  
a roadside verge  
of mine. This spring  
greening had plumped them.  
The full heads nodded  
heavy on emerald fibre optic shafts  
and swayed in the breath  
that shook  
the loose-leafed eucalypts.

And yes, summer  
Would come like a  
brazen border-invader  
soaring up the stalks  
with a brief  
rinse of gold  
before husks become pale flags  
fluttering  
at the edge of farms.

Then we must think:  
a falling spark  
of conflagration  
in this dry grass  
could sweep for miles.

Better to act now!  
A spring burning  
would see us safe  
all summer long.

But still I stood;  
whichever way  
I looked, the road  
stretched on and on.

After all, this  
was just another  
growing wild oat crop.

It's hard to clear  
the feral off  
your property.

Then I felt spring  
still burning  
in me.

## **RESISTANCE IS USELESS**

You can say exploding buds are enraged  
because once more with spring they succumb  
to that interloper the sun. Three months  
to release their algorithm, wonderful  
to behold. Each petal, pistil clearly tried  
to be first to affirm ancestral lines of blood.

Such haste, such clamour even among blood  
relatives is our bounty. The enraged  
bluster of bees fumbling.

## **IL MANDORLO PRIMAVERILE**

*(XXVII<sup>th</sup> Birthday Poem)*

Yes, the first adornment after  
bare boughs of winter. Diffident  
you seem to stand, yet thankful  
of new warmth rising in you.

One after one these pale flags  
of your dressing are hung to screen  
your sun-strung limbs. Such  
certainty of a white wardrobe! And

this advises that spring's season  
has come to lay claim on you.

And I, as ever, am claimed to  
move in other circles. But stay

to be moments more beside you  
as you dress yourself, so absorbed  
you have forgotten me, I think;  
and another time, another season

when, the sky, white-daubed,  
looked down on ecstasy. So

even now I know late gusty showers  
will come, to chill, to dash  
dustings of white petals,  
laying a garment on winter's  
unkempt lawn. Fleeting snow  
of love notes, clothing our partings.

## **TAMARISK**

Drooping heavily  
with the drops  
of slow spring rains,  
the lately flowering  
tamarisk's feathers  
of dusky pink persist.  
Seeming reluctant  
to sustain eternal  
vigour of spring.

But when I brush  
under those cascading  
boughs up close I see  
the blossoms sprinkled,

speckled in defiance  
among that foliage green.  
Flowering tamarisk  
is showing me  
how to give love  
one more chance.

## **SPRING HURT**

Hurt  
with the violence of  
leaf bursting from the bark,  
explosion of blossoms,  
the spilling of seed.

Hurt  
with the violence of  
love's first joyful/tearful blows;  
or the infant's cry at birth  
thrusting into this world.

Hurt  
with the promise of  
winter's cramping frosts;  
with summer's brazen promises

of beaten brass.

Hurt

with brightness of blood  
that jets from a joyous heart,  
and surges to tingling finger tips  
to dance in the spring of art.

I ask you

to promise this—

O hurt again and yet again

O hurtful spring.

## **SUDDENLY THE SUN SHINES AGAIN**

Oh, such a sudden well-known change!

Yet it does not fail ever to lift

the spirit that dwells too long in shade.

A child, I recall Sundays, the shift

of mood after rain showers, when sun

shone on the mallees and salmon gums

and turned grey-green to gold. We'd run

out in the yard with the words of mum  
still in our ears: 'the sun agrees,  
this day to celebrate God's grace.'

Whether by God or gods, the trees  
today are bright with warm rays  
I do not know. But when night falls  
mysterious as ever my love returns.  
And my life, transformed once more,  
takes a leaf from the sun and burns  
and burns.



# NORTHERN TABLELAND

## VARIANTS I

John Ryan



Rock Orchid, Budds Mare, August 2017. Photo: John Ryan

## BLOOMING OLD CHERRY TREE

Blooming old cherry tree's out again—  
even in the frost of early morning August,  
beside the rutted track between paddocks.

I stroke its silken symphony of sweet blossoms,  
springing in my hand like elastic, their dark  
red centres streaking fuchsia and eyeing me

back. The tree seems delighted by this too.  
Sakura, emblem of the transience of things.  
I want to pinch off a branch and bring its

fragrant flares of exquisiteness inside but,  
instead, turn and tread back uphill. A duo  
of rainbow lorikeets carouse in the olive

orchard. A 'roo with a cleft ear appears,  
munching his cud. My antique stove croons  
with warmth. Every morning, beauty

breaking.

## VARIATIONS ON THE THEME OF GORGES

At Wollomombi

burning gorge-wattles borrow  
the spume of the falls.

Near Dangars lookout

brush-tailed wallabies escape  
the gape of walkers.

Under coachwood a

lyrebird struts with aplomb but  
forgets to greet us.

Clinging to the lip

of a scenic vista, herbs  
as fragrant as thyme.

A mother possum

claws the coarse skin of a tree,  
her dusk-eyes squinting.

The kangaroo bounds

across the water-logged track,  
a forest stream purls.

Craving its quiet  
the rare grevillea bush  
wants no visitors.

En route to Walcha,  
memories of stone orchids  
laden with storm-drift.

Three-tiered waterfall  
where a tired nature poet  
once lost his footing.

Restless night in camp  
awoke to the earsplitting  
fever of gorge talk.

## **OUTSTANDING DENDROBIUM**

Its lustrous leather leaves splay open to welcome rain  
And to issue orchid hope from the tips of pseudobulbs—  
Those jaundice-green stalks dense and rigid as bamboo.

Some know it as Sydney Rock Orchid but I prefer  
Outstanding Dendrobium: a lithophyte leaning from

A granite ledge overlooking the Apsley River chasm.

Beneath the viewing platform, we stumble gingerly—  
The soil crumbles and rocks dislodge with every step,  
Rumble entropically into the green groin of the gorge.

One day, this dendrobium will tumble too: a ganglion  
Of debris, like a matted birds nest, has amassed, pushing  
The precipice dweller away from its precarious holdfast.

It clutches to the outstretched forearm of a woody  
Vine—just as we do—in a last-ditch impulse to preserve itself.  
But one day, at last, we will fall. The abyss will reclaim us

All. Until then, we hold steadfastly to one another: the stingless  
Bee swaddled in the draping moss, clinging to the cliffside  
Eucalypt, sinking its digits into the precious earth given it.

## **A NOCTUARY OF NETTLES**

Shutting the henhouse after dusk  
I thought I had blundered upon a nest  
of fire ants. A searing itch seized my hand.

\*

But, no, it was lowly nettle's hollow  
hypodermic needles injecting histamine  
into my bloodstream. Someone neglected

\*\*

to secateur that damn spot. Was it me?  
Probably not, well, umm, maybe: you see, I have  
a weak spot for weeds, some, not all, nettle is

\*\*\*

one. I love a baneful thing that heals.

For it was the herbalist Gerard who described  
the weed as fully "couered with a ftinging downe,

\*\*\*\*

which with a light touch onely caufeth  
a great burning, a raifeth hard knots in the skin  
like blifters." Its potency being to "prouoketh vrine,

\*\*\*\*

and expelleth ftones out of the kidneies."

And Galen recommended grinding the leaves,  
ingesting the pulpy mass with olive oil or axle grease

\*\*\*

to bulwark oneself against the harmful humours.  
The glass-shard fibres degenerate when crushed, or  
scorched, boiled, fried or manipulated otherwise.

\*\*

My god! the henhouse is a pharmacy

and the chooks were telling me through their fowl  
glossology and odd behaviour I considered OCD.

\*

Opening the rusty door after dawn,  
I faintly recalled the burn of some green thing,  
which had seized me by the hand the night before.

But it was gone.

## **AFTER VISITING BEADLE'S GREVILLEA**

The bus, weighted  
with conservation students,  
bogged in the greasy autumn  
mud of the road leading out of  
Guy Fawkes River National Park.

Darkness dropped  
like a curtain around us. The students  
were too afraid to alight. The rest of  
us huffed and hacked up some downed  
branches to lend enough traction for

The beast to climb.

We had come especially to survey  
rare Beadle's grevillea flowers, their  
one-sided mauve racemes, attentive  
as blood-hued horse-brush bristles.

Once presumed extinct,  
(the species, not the passengers)  
they were rediscovered in the '70s  
and now are known to exist at a mere  
five locales in northern New South Wales

Much like the locale we visited:  
a sanctum of ravine-crossed country  
pollinated by eastern spinebills,  
yellow-tufted honeyeaters,  
crimson rosellas and the less frequent

Undergraduate feathered in fluoro tape.  
With their silky deep-lobed foliage,  
the Beadles resembled bonsai among  
less mature sheoak-wisps of the friable  
slope. Their red flowers formed a fusillade

In the thick olive-green bush.  
The bus snarled up the gradient. Its pallid



light frenzied spectral shapes into motion  
but, by the time we reached drowsy Ebor,  
the fusillade had softened into an afterglow.

## THE CHURCHILL OF NEW ENGLAND

One of the fig trees at Mount Yarrowyck bears  
An uncanny likeness to Winston Churchill, were he  
Reincarnated as a Green Man: a imperious chlorophyll  
Sourpuss with leafy jowls, bloated stomach, barrel chest

And generous buttocks. The wind has blown off  
His top hat and blown out his cigar, but he sharpens his  
Oratory in the presence of whoever will listen, for instance,  
An impressionable young wattle, new generation of duff

Eucalypts. And other audiences. But I cringe a bit  
At my crude comparison, for to blemish *Ficus* with politics  
Seems gratuitous and does no justice to the consummate  
Magnificence of this portly persona on a granite plinth.

Doubtless, some bird once puked or pooped him out  
Here. So he deigned to deem the rock home-enough.  
His single root like a bonded-pair cable has intruded a

Fissure, plunging whole-heartedly into dry terra firma.

Now he is free from the trauma of the Iron Curtain era.

Yet his pomposity belies a sensitivity. An affection for the  
Brusque warmth of monoliths. A forbearance with the wasp  
Larvae of his synconia: his flowers sting him innerly.

## **AN EPIPHYTE WHINGES**

It's blooming pandemonium up here!  
Lemme out fast, gawd, I'm suffocatin';  
Not havin' privacy is frustratin'  
and bloody chinwaggin' is all I hear;  
Stupid creep neighbour like a pupeteer  
priming me, posing me and dictating,  
psychotically circumnutating,  
waxing poetic like William Shakespeare;  
I'm an antisocial bloke by nature;  
Wish I was born in an outback wasteland  
and who appointed the legislature  
up in this gaol of a rainforest stand;  
breathless in a kind of caricature  
of the life of solitude I once planned.

## **TWO OLD TREES EMBRACE**

A conjoined duo tethered at sternum,  
filmy fern fur, fused feet and femora  
in clique of cryptograms etcetera;  
We concede not having nerve to stir them;  
We agree 'twould be a risk to spurn them,  
those fellow late Cretaceous genera  
crisping old muscles like thick tempura.  
Towards one other we therefore turn in,  
Halfdressed, chest to chest, stomach to stomach,  
locked in eons of terse conversation,  
fantasising of some younger hummock,  
free from the effects of glaciation,  
perhaps filled with the tune of a dunnock,  
something other than this speciation.

## **WHAT THE PINE SAYS**

Bloody brilliant place to take a smoko  
mate! Leaning against me in this boneyard;  
Just sip yer cuppa, have a look homeward  
cos' when ya cark it that's whereya will go;  
No worries, there's time but we'll let ya know;

Each arvo they rockup, grey heads lowered,  
passed rellies concealed by plastic flowers:  
Mattie and Davo, Bazza and Johnno,  
resting in Presbyterian quadrant,  
thick with blackberries plantain and mullein,  
“thy will not mine” on grave of an infant;  
Damn cockatoos rippin’ me cones again;  
Kickin’ the bucket is yer commitment;  
Hooroo ol’ matey, catchya later then.

## **THE INNER LIVES OF GARNISHES**

The parsley in the planter box  
    outside has shriveled and deflated,  
turned browned and disintegrated.  
    Alas, he is suffering from shock.

The winter has been too much  
    for him, without so much as a blanket  
for heat, or, to warm his feet, an anklet  
    or merino wool gloves to clutch.

He alleges that I was negligent,  
    blames his predicament on my watering

(or lack thereof), my preference for flowering.

He is stressed. His claims, exorbitant.

In this hypothermic condition,

I try to reason with him. Would he rather  
have been eaten in a garlic butter slather,  
diced up? No matter. He won't listen.

I suspect his inner state will worsen

over basils I befriended and who now relish  
the vantage from my kitchen, on whom I lavish  
attention: herbs are complicated persons.



# **WESTERN SHIELD VARIANTS II**

Glen Phillips

[Insert Image of Balga ]

## **SPRING SETTINA I**

Do they ask us to armful  
blooms, these blazing petals strewn  
in spring where green paths wind?  
Blow away burdens; oh blow  
winds of spring's plenitude in  
spring garlands gathered here—blooms  
strewn in garlands with much ado!

## **SPRING SETTINA II**

Will you allow that the last  
spring I was free to go out  
in the sun unschooled was my  
greatest one? I do say great,  
my friend, because whether in/  
out, I bowed only to spring.  
Last gasp perhaps of free will!



## SPRING STORM SONATA

### I

Characteristically, young gum tips  
are golden, tawny rather. Then greening  
later when spring rains have come.

And the other side of spring?  
Look on the ground;  
look for the florettes—  
see the remnants  
of gum blossoms  
where ants are curious.

Wool-sack clouds scud across this  
China-blue spring sky  
matched by muted shadows  
moving over pasture and paddock.

It is a vast land, yes. Distance means  
nothing when a weather front sweeps in;  
even ringbarked spectres fringing swamps  
are shrugging in the breeze, clattering  
limb and clustered branch. And when  
the wind rises with gusting tumult,

the next downpour joins in. Sudden  
stutter of hailstones adds measures to the  
cacophony of thunder. Then coming dark.

Boy walks roadside  
by a muddy ditch  
where the overhang  
of she-oaks distributes  
a stream of droplets  
on the nape of his neck.

Yet so long to go  
in a life barely begun?  
It overwhelms. Now  
the paths chosen  
are no more.  
For here, too, the storm  
tracks ascend to  
crescendo with  
chain lightning flashes.  
Then it is finished.

## **GLORY, JEST AND RIDDLE OF SPRING**

Yellow broom's flowering crown uplifted;  
against grey raining skies flouted;  
all that survives, is reborn, waves spring flags;

my weight of weariness, lungs caving in;  
tons of air above press down; gravity draws  
me to the tomb, and its huddle of empty rags.

Ragged beggarman clown uniquely man  
ever the jester naming three-times the cock,  
his own glory in the dust now drags;

and still in swagger, suddenly he checks,  
sees his own fall once more in gust of shame;  
now yellow broom of spring to blue sky brags.

**[Insert small image of salmon gums]**

## **rites of Spring**

*(Vesna svyashchennaya...Le Sacre du printemps)*

Can you hear it, the Djilba and Kambarang?  
Six Noongar seasons stir into new life.  
Meanwhile, along Tigris, Euphrates and Nile,  
in flood plains of the Yangtse and Huang He,  
among the islands and alps with shared view  
of blue Mediterranean, Danube  
and grey-green rivers of northern plains,  
they still celebrate four seasons' simplicity.  
But here in more ancient lands, where Djilba  
signals first change from Makuru, winds grow  
warmer day by day. And first pollen clouds  
of wattles' gold will drift down from the hills.  
Rain showers retreat, sun orchids join balga  
spears in blossoming, shy at first. Kambarang  
is coming too, for then warm days prevail  
and from burrow and nest new life stirs,  
and burst their shelled burdens in tuart, wandoo  
and dryandra thicket; reptile and insect  
larvae clamber out of their burrows, check  
friendlier sunshine along with warm-blooded  
echidna puggles, numbat and bandicoot.  
It's rustle of a greater spring. Hear it do  
you? Clamour of the double rites of spring.

## TOIL OF THE LILIES

in the fields in the fields  
goats are grazing cropping  
the bitter grass fossicking  
gibber patch and salt flat  
finding little less nought

in the fields in the fields  
the cumbrous throb of machine  
dwindles dies out wheels spin to a halt  
mud hardens in the slurry pool  
the battery stops echoes die in the scrub

in the fields in the fields  
red earth recovers from  
the drench of storms  
swelling hard seeds to fracturing life  
days pass until great tracts of blooms  
start up out of dust of that unpromised land

and feverish travellers  
passing through  
we draw  
no such glory from our measured fields



## IT'S THE TURNING OF SPRING

I'm off now, will tell you all about it  
if and when I get back. The parabola  
paused—this is the point of interference,  
the perfection of the secant's cut-away.

I see a yellow dirt road—sandplain  
country hedged by hakea and heath  
that will blaze out with the next spring.  
Now it is waterless and the way leads on.

Beyond are threadbare pastures fenced;  
and in the hollow a turning iron windmill.  
So down there is water to suck. Sheep  
come to a brackish trough. An eagle is aloft.

It is good to get away in this metaphor  
that exists for an hour, for a day, to embrace  
the dreams of solitude, independence—far  
from the slinging arrows of the fortunate.

At home there, among herds of loved ones,  
we are crowded into folded hours;

we fetch and tend in the home pens with  
press of fleecy eyes and cloven hooves.

But away here, sand road running under  
clouds, we travelled far off for a time;  
stood upon rock domes or peered into  
open gold mines. Then thunder and rain.

So at the furthest point where salt lakes  
stretch out on either side of culverts  
and roadsides over-arch with salmon gums,  
we have to turn the car around—  
only to be back later...

## **ULYSSES IS HOME**

(for John Kinsella and Tracy Ryan)

The usual stumble up the steps  
where once I'd sat, elbow on knee,  
the mallees wavering before my eyes,  
straining to see beyond the showgrounds  
beyond bleached salt-lakes, reaching  
white and shimmering to mirage of blue.



In kinder time of year, damp earth  
frees grass clump, bush and tree  
to release their conjurors' coloured silks;  
to unloose pollens, potent for rape of bees.

Beside distant railway lines,  
under looping wires that sing  
unknown strange telepathic songs,  
beside dirt roads bladed through plain  
and dune and low hills, ascends  
the vented steam of wild bush perfume.  
Insects go berserk with instinct,  
driven to distil the liquors from  
thousand upon thousand flaring throats.

Kunzeas, hakeas, banksias sprawl  
bedecked as brides, wanton as young bloods,  
their brushes, banners, parasols aloft  
in spring shows of profusion. In such  
tossing heads nothing but craze of procreation.

Brief this passion of their numbered days  
that blazons even in still-opening buds  
or from full-bloomed glories gazing  
moist with daily recklessness into

white-hot suns. Then petals bleach,  
furled blossoms fall to windswept sand,  
to whitening bone.

Only the delicate  
winged seeds go searching for new lands  
and finding other homes, mount steps  
to majesty of some other blazing spring.

## **DESERT GOLD, YILGARN SPRING**

My grandfather came to Coolgardie's desert gold  
via the Great War. Brought from Victoria's rain forests  
mistily cold—hired as electrical engineer at Walhalla's  
mine where there were alluvial reefs. Alas, train  
wreck injured his second son, so to compensate

the company promoted him far off to the West.  
Sure, it was sunnier in the low white quartz  
hills of the Yilgarn that summer. More a meltdown  
in fact. And no place for his family nursing  
a brain-damaged son. So left them seaside

on the Swan River's shores in Perth. Endured  
red desert dust devils three hundred miles

inland—alone, with only the odd barmaid  
to cheer him on. Marriage broke up fast then.  
By the next spring in fact. And that was that.

Some twenty years later I was born, also  
in summer only a rough hundred miles back  
in Southern Cross. Another gold mine town  
with the great Fraser's mine on the hillside  
above the town—but by then, like Coolgardie,

in its last years of mining glory. Farming  
men would scratch for wheat crops in dust  
and hope to hell spring rains would propel  
seedlings into heads of grain by harvest.  
My mother, heavy with child through that  
stifling summer, took cold baths and draped  
my elder brother in wet towels in front  
of a whirring fan. My birth came at last  
taking me on to my first Yilgarn spring.  
And so the family line surged ever on.

## CONTEMPLATING AN ECHIDNA

Stressed, the spiny anteater rams  
its head into a hollow log and prays.  
Mostly its prayers are answered, I'd say,  
for what soft-nosed dingo or fox slams  
a muzzle into the rear end of a fistful  
of needling quills? And on the move  
they shuffle like drunks out to prove  
they can walk the line. Echidnas will  
by their nature have a bet both ways—  
being monotremes they aren't really  
mammals, although they quite freely  
suckle their puggles. These days  
(like dinosaurs) they lay eggs. Their  
fatalism, already noted above, belies  
they have mere bird brains. Each tries  
to survive in its mother's pouch near  
three months sucking at exuding glands—  
there's no nipple to which to attach.

Just areas to lick called a milk patch.  
So little heroes (unsung in other lands)  
echidnas dawdle through our woods,  
forests and savannahs, tongues tingling  
for another termite mound, mingling  
with the marsupials and the stranger birds.

Their namesake in the Grecian panoply  
was half nymph, half serpent who spawned  
monsters far more 'horridus' than the horned  
mountain devil or moloch, who happily  
shares their love of eating ants in the bush.

As schoolboys cruel for sport once we teased  
an echidna with a stick until the displeased  
fellow was so distressed our voices hushed  
as the creature frothed at the snout. More  
afraid of its spines, we watched as it eased  
under red dirt and leaf litter and ceased  
digging lustily with its little paws only sure  
it was mostly out of sight. So these days

I will jam on the brakes rather than knock  
down this eater of white ants, for I don't mock  
those who hide their faces from our lethal gaze.

## THE BALGA

**BB**  
**AA**  
**LL**  
**GG**  
**AA**  
Xa  
nt  
ho  
rr  
ho  
ea

Ah, the balga! Seen in stubborn clumps with its green shower  
of needling sprouts above a dowdy skirt of grey or brown.

This grass tree or xanthorrhoea is larder to other  
life and rich provider of artefacts.

Driving through wheatbelt  
country we could see them

marching across hill and vale

like armies of extra-terrestrial invaders. Robots

with their antennae aloft, their single foot burned black,

burred greybeards frowning through the forests and along river flats.

First knew balga on my grandpa's Yenyening farm when amber chunks  
of its trunk lay in the woodbox with morning sticks ready to get great  
black stove alight in early mornings. How those varnished chips of the  
fallen trunk blazed as our firelighters, filled the farm kitchen with sweet  
resinous scent while our grandma shifted pots and pans from the hob,  
stoked on more whitegum shanks to feed the crackling fire! Thankful  
we were, through childhood years, for this forever free kindling. It was  
our gift from Gondwanaland to us invaders to this Great South Land.

But we were newcomers. The  
Nyoongar people for many  
millennia had learned all  
and more than we knew.  
That, for instance, the soft  
growing core at the centre  
could be good tucker. Or  
that the gold gum from the  
balga's trunk helped hold  
flint axe heads firm on the  
haft; fastened spear barbs  
securely on whippy shafts.  
But way before this small  
birds nested in balga's beard  
and beetle and grub found a  
place to burrow in the trunk  
for sustenance and a private life.

[INSERT NOTE ABOUT BALGA]

[INSERT COLOUR PIC BALGA]



# **NORTHERN TABLELAND**

## **VARIANTS II**

John Ryan



Ingram's Wattle, Dangars Falls, August 2017. Photo: John Ryan

## THE BLOSSOMS WILL SOON FALL

And so they are: alas, that they are so;  
To die, even when they to perfection grow!  
-*Twelfth Night*

The cherry blossoms will soon fall  
at the perimeter of your lawn and  
their fragrance will fade. They will  
scatter like confetti on the grass,  
then fray into the earth beneath  
the flowering tree, unquestionably.

The same is true on this edge  
of our island. Pink petals have begun  
to wilt, lift and lilt already. They bathed  
my front door in frankincense for many  
days but have since relinquished their  
petioled grasp, and have floated away.

Just as the heroine Viola declaimed:  
perfection, invariably, too early, decays.  
Wattle flowers, also, will begin plummeting.  
They illumine the lawn in full-bodied blaze.  
They enshroud the vase of the tree selflessly  
with their perfect golden corona that effuses

a pungent bouquet. Indisputably,  
both blossoms will return to incite  
another spring. But I think a flower never  
stops falling into something other, falling,  
inevitably and perpetually, into a season  
which is always too soon, always already.

## LETTER FROM ARMIDALE ABOUT DRIVING

There are only two  
traffic lights and very few stop signs.  
Junctions are Give Ways. The street layout  
reflects some brilliant new theory of town-planning focused  
on enhancing vehicular flow. The right-hand always

has right-of-way. Nearly  
half the motorists seem to be provisional.

This morning I saw a middle-aged driver sporting  
a greyish beard and P-plate sign brandished like a Scarlet

Letter on the grille of his BMW SUV. Drivers become  
petulant when they must  
defer to bicyclists, pedestrians, canines or birds.

To register a vehicle is a slippery matter: the green slip is for compulsory insurance and the pink slip for the safety inspection required for cars over five-years old such as

the 1997 Toyota Starlet

I purchased from one of those bright-eyed provisionalists.

It handles the potholed final one-and-a-half kilometres to my house in Kelly's Plains surprisingly well for a cheap runabout. No, I haven't noticed any Alfa

Romeos. Nor other Italian brands.

The closest city, Tamworth, is more than one hour south on the New England Highway. Now that I have new struts, I want to take a relaxing drive down there one of these Sundays. After all, it is the First City of Lights

(1888) AND the Country Music Capital

of all Australia. I would rather cycle

everywhere, but the weather is frosty this time of year and the nights so dark sometimes I can barely see my front tyre and the climbs unforgiving enough to render

the trip impracticable and I

often work late anyhow and how would I carry groceries on a pushbike. On Saturday I saw a pink-breasted

bird sputtering in the oncoming lane. It is nearly spring.

The longer days are arousing in us all the desire

for flight. After passing

the bird, I had a nagging feeling

I should have stopped the car.

Rescued it. This letter has nothing

to do with driving.

## **THERE ARE AT LEAST FIVE WAYS TO ARRIVE**

I.

From Newcastle, turn inland through the Hunter Valley coal hamlets of Muswellbrook and Scone. At Tamworth climb the Moonbi (Banjo Paterson wrote about it).

Then continue north to Bendemeer onto the plateau & pass through Uralla. You'll notice the airport on your left.

II.

Or don't turn inland at all & proceed straight up the A1 towards Myall Lakes. At Port Macquarie, make a left (west) on the B56 through Wauchope, Pipeclay & Mount Seaview. Take care with hairpin turns, blowdowns & wandering cattle. Go past the Walcha Tennis Club to Bendemeer (then as above).

### III.

If you're not pressed for time, continue up the Pacific Highway. Cross the Hastings & Wilson rivers. At Kempsey, follow Valley Way through a residential zone to Armidale Road, mostly along the Macleay River. (This becomes Kempsey Road). At Waterfall Way turn left. Pass Wollomombi. Caravan park is before town.

### IV.

Coming from Brisbane, you'll have to deal with major construction on the A1. Watch out for camera traps. Speed limits switch abruptly from 80 to 50 to 100. I got pulled over near Maclean in June but let off with a warning. At Grafton drop south-west through Nymboida, Clouds Creek & Dundurrabin.

### V.

Another option is via Lismore. The longer route cuts out the highway construction fiasco. Head through Mallanganeet to Tenterfield. Go left past Bolivia Hill through Moora Moora & Glen Innes. Call in at Standing Stones or, twelve kilometres on, Balancing Rock (granite monoliths). There are (at least)

five ways to arrive.

## GONDWANAN BEECH WALK

The rawness of the air  
is rare in the prehistoric  
beech forest at Pt. Lookout,  
as panoramic vertebrae  
across the Bellinger valley  
unroll fully to the Pacific  
mosses of the mostly  
vivid verdure bandage  
buttress roots & fleece  
knurled, time-worn trunks  
composed of convolutions  
inscribed by indentations  
& woody vines coil  
into bearded lariats  
as dull orange fungi  
punctuate hirsute masses  
like solar flares flashing  
seconds before fading  
& basalt cliff face of  
Weeping Rock seeping  
iridescently with springs  
sheltering sphagnum frogs  
scrambling up slippery steps  
beside knotted-gnarled-rooted bodies.

## CAULIFLOWER FUNGUS

Autumn took me

over steel bridges

into

squelchy sheoak districts

beside

algae-rimed stone cupules

near

cataracts nimble midst granites

through

precincts of moss-clad saplings

then

through

communes of gilled mushrooms

near

enclaves of hooded orchids

beside

ghettoes of fallen trees

into

the sanctuary of

a brain-like fungus.



## INGRAM'S WATTLE

in full abandon	flowering	<i>Acacia</i>
<i>ingramii</i> at Dan-	gars Falls	bursting
lucid aureate	pom poms	seducing
bees with elixir	of early sun	springing
forward to witness	dangling haloes	blazing
over glorious brim	of vertiginous	plunging
to Salisbury Waters	underneath	cartwheeling
wattles gilded	are adroitly	acquiring
fire language	are combusting	chasming
with quiet sing-	eing radiance	consuming
swallows flitting near	blossoms ever	goldenning
head of falls	honeyeaters	trilling
as eels migrate	to distant seas	multiplying
inmost essence	of gorge glowing	in full abandon

## IMMORTELLE

In a manila folder  
at the Beadle Herbarium,  
the golden everlasting  
*Xerochrysum bracteatum*

with its distinct papery bracts.

Collected at Tenterfield  
in the nineteenth century,  
it was known in Europe  
then as *immortelle*.

The immortal specimen.

Its dry rootlets adhere  
to miniscule galaxies of dirt.

Its lanky stems appear  
to gasp for breath. It itches  
to fulfill some venerable  
covenant, which remains  
unfinished until the  
right time comes for it.

When it does,

people will overbrim with  
blessing. The trees, reptiles and  
animals, too, will welcome  
kin home. What is the feeling  
shared between us? What  
commonness pulls persistently  
at us? Without one other,  
what becomes of us?

## DORRIGO DIALECTS

When  
at Dorrigo I  
faintly heard the  
falling of vine verbs  
conjugated to bird's  
nest fernfrond subjects  
clarified by adjectives  
of walking stick palm  
berries amidst yellow  
soft patois of sassafras  
perfume, like camphor  
laurel, more verbose  
in age & impervious  
to caterpillar slangs  
unlike stinging gimpi  
trees whose prosody  
readily interleaves with  
other forest phraseologies.

## RUSTY FIG

In this province of currawongs and goats, I am watching.  
As you cross the fence and enter the field, I am watching.

I am the cornea of this winter field preparing to enclose you.  
Tell me, is today the day when the southerly wind is blowing?

Tell me, is today the day when the stacked stones will topple?  
I was once water flowing around stone. I hardened in my waiting.

The ribbons of tumbling water calcified to ligaments and bones.  
My leaves agreed with the stones, sand, stars and sun watching.

The grazers stave off other trees. Goats manicure foliate gloss.  
When will these inner fruits ripen? My wasps will cease waiting.

From a rock-strewn rise, I shepherd the slow flexures of seasons.  
New families come. Children mature. They leave. I am waiting.

See my purpling air roots spider darkly as venous blood. Lean in.  
Soothe this calloused skin with your touch. Breathe in. Watching.

## **BRUSH-TAILED ROCK WALLABY**

Since you were here last, the wattle fervour has begun fading.  
The luminous bijoux are drying, drifting into the unseen, fading.

The wind today is neither zephyr nor tempest. It brushes us airily.  
What were you feeling on your way here? I have been feeding

noiselessly on the manna of this threshold between gated field  
and numinous edge. Can you see fogs of falling water fading?

On a sliver between ledges, wind-chiseled acacias flare upward  
like flambeau. Bearded dragons are blown up, midstep, sunning.

Listen. Can you hear the murmuring innards of the land below?  
Turn around. Look. Can you touch the braille of our foraging?

My face (rummaging in leaf litter) my fur (carob-brown) my tail  
(a thick ashen-hued balancing stick). I am immersed in feeling.

Near the lookout, mosses compose faint verses in pubescence.  
Through the cypress, did you notice the clear plateau fading?

## THE WOLLEMI PINE

pro-  
tected  
from theft in a  
steel cage on a lawn  
in plain view of kangaroos  
also behind metal fences. Leave me  
alone with my two-hundred-million-year-  
old sensations in ferny branches  
that terminate in my father's seeds.  
I am known as a Lazarus taxon for  
a reason: my deep valleys of memory.  
I implore you to avoid them  
at all costs because  
there  
are  
dan-  
gers  
in re-  
mem-  
ber-  
ing that  
are more perilous than anything  
possible in this world. Your unimaginable brink, the one I hurl  
myself over.

## The Poets

### *Glen Phillips*

Born 1936 in Southern Cross, Western Australia and educated in country schools and Perth Modern School, Glen graduated from UWA with First Class honours in Education and an MEd (1967) and gained a PhD from Edith Cowan University in 2007. Glen has taught English for more than 55 years in Colleges and Universities. An Honorary Professor at ECU, he is Director of its International Centre for Landscape and Language. More than 40 books of his poetry have been published. Poems also appear in some 30 anthologies and many national and international journals. Recent books include *Five Conversations With the Indian Ocean* (2016, Platypus Press).

### *John Ryan*

John is a poet and scholar who holds appointments as Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the School of Arts at the University of New England in Australia and Honorary Research Fellow in the School of Humanities at the University of Western Australia. He is the author or editor of several books, including the Bloomsbury title *Digital Arts* (2014, as co-author), *The Language of Plants* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017, as co-editor and contributor) and *Plants in Contemporary Poetry* (Routledge, 2017, as sole author). His edited collection, *Southeast Asian Ecocriticism* (Lexington Books, 2017), is the first to address the field of ecocriticism in the Southeast Asian region. His poetry includes *Two With Nature* (Fremantle Press, 2012) and *The Earth Decides* (Cyberwit Press, 2017).

# The Regions

## 1

**The Northern Tablelands** region of New South Wales, also known as the New England Tableland, is a plateau stretching from the Moonbi Range to the Queensland border. The Tablelands includes three World Heritage Areas and forms part of the UNESCO-designated Gondwana Rainforests. High rates of biodiversity and endemism have historically characterised the region. Like many places in Australia, however, dramatic change beset the Tablelands after colonisation, severely impacting its natural landscape. Since the nineteenth century, the vegetation of the central and eastern Tablelands has been mostly cleared and, in other areas, less than ten percent of the original woodlands remains. More widely speaking, forty to fifty percent of Australian forests have been removed since Europeans arrived. Since 1970, the highest national rates of loss have occurred in south-eastern Queensland and northern New South Wales. My current research project “The Botanical Imagination: Poetry as a Means for Inspiring Ecological Appreciation and Community Wellbeing” (2017–20) in the School of Arts at the University of New England responds to this biogeographical context. —*John C. Ryan, Armidale, NSW*

## 1 Some other poetic responses

South of my days' circle, part of my blood's country,  
rises that tableland, high delicate outline  
of bony slopes wincing under the winter,  
low trees, blue-leaved and olive, outcropping granite-  
clean, lean, hungry country.

—from Judith Wright's “South of My Days” (1945)

Looking up and down the face of the Dorrigo Mountain, the vegetation is full of interest to the botanist and to other lovers of plants. As we ascended, the two showiest trees in the valley below were undoubtedly the flame-tree and the native tamarind. The former is certainly one of the most gorgeous trees in all Australia.—from Joseph Maiden's “The Dorrigo Forest Reserve” (1894)



2

**The Great Western Shield** forms the western one-third of Australia. This is a remnant of what was originally the ancient continent of Gondwanaland. The two distinct portions of the westernmost granites are the Pilbara block or craton and the Yilgarn block, both formed about 2600 to 2700 million years ago. The Pilbara block is mostly buried under sedimentary and metamorphosed rocks, including the famous iron ore deposits, but the Yilgarn block is barely covered, if at all, by thin soils and occasional crusts of laterite and coastal limestones. However, there are some mineralised zones of metamorphic origin and this is the source of the great gold-bearing lodes of greenstone that gave us the rich Coolgardie-Kalgoorlie goldfields. Of course there are many other goldfields in WA including at Southern Cross, my birthplace.

I used to like to walk there as the days grew old,  
Beneath the stately gum trees afire with sunset gold,  
And watch the pale stars steal there, beyond the eastern hill,  
Then trim my lamp, a nearer star, within my window sill.

—from **John K Ewers’ “The Red Road” (1932)**

Bought petrol at a roadhouse.  
The only bowser in the street.  
A school-bus standing under  
the eucalypts.

No other landmarks.  
And not much to see.  
Not on this road.  
A rabbit sometimes . . .  
a windmill.

—from **Nicholas Hasluck’s “Yilgarn” (1976)**

