

The Sixth Creek

Volume 1

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Thesis submitted for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English and Creative Writing

School of Humanities

Faculty of Arts

University of Adelaide

May 2016

Declaration

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Statement of Authorship

Title of Paper	<i>The Sixth Creek</i>
Publication Status	<input type="checkbox"/> Published <input type="checkbox"/> Accepted for Publication <input type="checkbox"/> Submitted for Publication <input type="checkbox"/> Unpublished and Unsubmitted work written in manuscript style
Publication Details	Poetry collection published in a shorter and reordered form by Picaro Press, Cardiff, NSW, 2013. ISBN 978-1-921691-25-6

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Acknowledgements

Some of these poems have appeared in the following publications: *Abridged (Ireland)*, *ArtState*, *Australian Poetry Journal*, *Cordite*, *Cottonmouth*, *Foam:e*, *Four W*, *Going Down Swinging*, *InDaily*, *Meanjin*, *Metabolism*; *Australian Poetry Members Anthology*, *Poetrix*, *Prayers of a Secular World Anthology* (Inkerman & Blunt), *Social Alternatives*, *Southern Write*, *Stinging Fly (Ireland)*, *SWAMP*, *The Fire Anthology* (Margaret River Press), *Tincture*, *Verandah and Westerly*. Several have also been broadcast on ABC Radio National's *Poetica* and Radio Adelaide's Writers' Radio. My sincere thanks to the editors.

Grateful acknowledgement is made to the staff at Varuna, The Writers' House in the Blue Mountains. This project was the recipient of the Dorothy Hewett Flagship Fellowship for Poetry 2011 and a Varuna Publisher Fellowship 2012.

This manuscript was shortlisted in the 2012 Adelaide Festival Literature Awards for Best Unpublished Manuscript.

Heartfelt thanks to Jill Jones, Sue Hosking, Brian Castro, Mike Ladd, Deb Westbury and Jude Aquilina for their generous mentorship and to the University of Adelaide for the time and opportunity to dedicate myself to poetry.

Deep thanks to Rob Riel and Picaro Press for general brilliance and support.

Thanks and hugs to the Edit When Sober Poetry Group –Heather Taylor Johnson and Alison Flett – who keep me in love with poetry and striving to be a better poet.

Special thanks to Rebekah Clarkson and the Washington family for Varuna Wednesdays, without which the exegesis would be an eternal work-in-progress.

And to my husband Andrew Noble – thank you doesn't even come close.

*For Andrew,
Luka, Des & Furious
who make The Sixth Creek a home.*

I would like to acknowledge and pay respect to the Peramangk people who are the traditional owners of the lands that comprise the Sixth Creek catchment in the Mount Lofty Ranges of South Australia.

I

The Sixth Creek

Before we move from recklessness into responsibility, from selfishness to a decent happiness, we must want to save our world. And in order to want to save the world we must learn to love it – and in order to love it we must become familiar with it again. This is where my work begins, and why I keep walking, and looking.

Mary Oliver “Among Wind and Time” *Sierra* (Nov-Dec 1991) pg. 34

Reading fractals

after Mary Oliver

Does it surprise you how it seems good,
this world, viewed from your knees?
Just look. You are not repenting
anything, the actions or thoughts of the body
asked only to let go of what the mind loves.
I'm sure your assumptions are the same as mine
our teachers reading from the same books
on the how, but illiterate
to the italics of rain,
the fractal curl of landscape within landscape,
the galaxies shouldered in trees.
Down here droplets surge like rivers,
stones rinsed under tides of air.
What was seen yesterday will not appear again.
How can we ever be lonely?
This home is a wilderness impatient for imagination,
our voices rush into stutter, exclaiming the exciting
unearthing of this place
these tensile filaments webbing all things.

Anthropologist at the ceremony

The tree hangs in the valley,
a teacher leaning over a student's shoulder.
Climbing out even a few feet
the ground swings away, distracted.

The trunk is fat and taut
making the sound of plapping
your palm on the warm belly
of a sleeping dog.

And once you are out there, suspended
among the clumps of eucalypt leaves
the tree holds out to the valley
like bridal bouquets

you are above yet still of the vale,
privileged but connected
the honoured guest
the anthropologist invited to the ceremony.

Time is counted in the ticking of grass seeds
you eavesdrop on the conversations of bees
that congenial hum, the gossip of grandmothers
heard through a window on cards night.

Finches spark, the brown snake recharges
its coil, two existences geared
to travel the same day
at different speeds.

Lying, heart pressed to the trunk

lungs and leaves partnered
in an intricate quadrille
listening to the birds tuning their instruments,

able only to watch but never to know
and in the breathing, the stillness, imagine
and find content in the knowing
but not the sense of kin.

The stars wheel out, the moon
who has seen everything, wonders anew
at the opacity of these familiar beings
another anthropologist opening a notebook.

Hope is a perennial

My zine partner wants to do an issue on hope.

She's newly married and afloat in ideas while I'm standing with burning feet on Lake Frome.

For the last decade my motto has been "Hope is not a strategy."

I even cross-stitched it, circled by forget-me-nots, for the wall above the sideboard.

I won't have children. I won't buy coastal real estate.

I anticipate spending time in my later years guarding my water tanks and veggie patch with a shotgun across my lap.

I may be approaching forty but inside me still crouches that young eco-anarchist clenched like a diamond with rage and disillusion.

Wounded by failure, I'm in self-imposed exile, housebound like an injured dog, bucket on head to stop me ripping my stitches out, worrying my rawness.

Today after walking the dogs
we all stretched out in the sun-gilded grass.
Silhouetted against the glare of plum blossom
the red-gold tips of the eucalypt saplings flared
like the campfires of a bivouacked army.

Over the years
we planted these native perennials
into our land
by the hundred.

Closing my eyes

I dreamed of them
grandiose with age
stretching and breathing with the winds,
cradling parrots in their arms
and insects in their folds
when I
am
dirt.

Horsnell Gully

I am searching for Peramangk rock art
tucked away
like secret letters hidden
at the first sound of footsteps.

People sat here once
looking over the plain to the sea,
back when the fabric was whole.

They painted in red and white ochre
symbols, stories, cyphers
stashed under rock overhangs,
the shadows a vault with rusted locks.

With scalpel eyes, I dissect what's bare,
*Platycercus elegans subadelaidae*¹ nesting high
in the polyp-plump hollows of *Eucalyptus leucoxylon*²
I dismember the arcane with precision.

Wandering deeper into the hill's joints
the gossip of birds
replaces traffic's bulletin.
A tree has fallen across the path.

Eyes sharp with taxonomic conceit
I begin the autopsy, *Eucalyptus obliqua*³
leaf leather still turgid, shattered heartwood moist amberpink
time of death - last night's storm.

I stroke the cascade of raw cambium,
peer deep into the xylem tunnel

death permitting but not condoning
this intimate violation.

Only back on bitumen do I sense
the bush whispering
the heady honey of gum blossom
a treecreeper's scorn of physics
the fitful ire of the hopper ant.

These lessons lie open
to all eyes, this world
asking to be tasted with more
than human tongues.

-
1. Adelaide Rosella
 2. South Australian Blue Gum
 3. Messmate Stringybark

Blackberries

Bleached heat of February
hoardes a sweet centre
in the bitter fear of flame.

It is the month of blackberries
a settler now
on the dark creek's bank
in the valley's creases.

Stringybarks hold up tanned arms
over this cascade of canes
skimming the earth
a flood of skipped stones.

Taller and more reckless
than my neighbours,
arms raked, fingers seek and pluck
blossom swollen into berry
hunkered back between barb
and suspicious leaf.

Later,
by the wrinkled creek
the torch-eyed fox
quietly
with tender black lips
eases ripe summer
straight from the briar
leaving bandicoot and flashing wren
in their knotted stockade
unassailed.

Full buckets gleam
with the lacquer sheen
of beetles.

Indigo fingered, arms fresh
from cradling demons,
I weaken into reward.

My wet tongue ripens
with black juicelike
the taste of naked valley
under wanton sky.

The re-vegetation equation

The box is close to empty.

The tubes

huddle against each other forlornly

away from the maw of the unfilled side.

There are six tubes to a row

nine rows to a box

fifty four tubes to fill with soil per box

and I have x boxes yet to fill

$54x$ until I'm done.

For motivation I use the alarm clock.

My personal best is y minutes per row

$9y$ minutes per box

$9xy$ minutes until I'm done.

But often I find myself

drifting down a path of thought

tube hovering, efficiency forgotten,

$y + z$ minutes since I've had soil in my hand.

The alarm clock cracks its cool whip.

I balance the emotional equation,

compensating for its lack of passion,

shoving dirt deep into the tube,

imagining myself a sweatshop worker

in this monotonous job, endured dusk till dark

for an unliveable wage

where I'm not allowed to talk, to eat,

to stop

not allowed, in this slick-skin heat

to drag the wheelbarrow into the lounge

and fill tubes in front of the television
with wine open
and no deadline.

This time when I drift back, tube in hand
I work steadily, consciously,
until the boxes are full
and the bottle is empty.

The sweetness and the sting

Once the suit is on, gleaming against the hill's flank,
and the mask pulled down, shutting the world into shadow,
everything is slow, rhythmic, considered.

Breath and thigh rasp with a mourner's cadence.
Thought of him rolls in the petals of her mind, then stings.
Her longing has the rapid throb of the wasp
but the commitment of the bee.

She approaches the city, hives arranged with urban precision.
Slowly, as if floating, she lights wadded cloth,
pumps the tiny bellows
and gusts the throng into a dream state.

Her thoughts turn him over,
examine him exquisitely
with the intimacy of imagination.

The flight path traffic slows then stalls.
Meticulous as an astronaut she pries off the lid
inserts the blade between the frames and cracks them apart.

The rack is heavy with confusion.
She brushes them aside, slides frames
freshly wired and primed into place
and leaves the rest weighted with winter solace.
She plans hopeful crossings of trajectory,
meetings where she can do more
than just smile, tongue-tied.

The combs gleam wetly, thick with amber nebulae.

In the sultry heat of the honey shed
they orbit the centrifuge, a whirling genesis
flinging sweetness into the universe.
Even her sweat tastes of creation.

She dreams a space where he reads her wagging dance,
decodes this mute desire,
her stumbling movements clearly pointing
that sweetness lies here, between us and the sun.

Please. Come.
The hero always wears white.

Geology

Earth drifts beneath our attention
doing the real work,
overhead, the world's skin
barely covers its ribs, loud
with the life of city and wild.

Our surface lives flicker in fast motion
not reading in the rip of gorge or cliff
what stone, with slow enunciation, suggests.
Only within the warm pores of caves,
or atop metatarsal ranges,
do we begin to see this body with desire.

Blinkered by our life span helmet, we stumble,
heady with the daily intoxicants
of stars and sun , seeing the garden
but not the bed, rock rubbed to loamy flesh
plump and flushed with lust
holding life outspread
across its bones.

The fire pit

The centre has shifted,
spirits of home and hearth drawn outside.
Instinctively, no language needed
we drift to starlight, to the fire pit
brimming with a gratitude ancient as rain.
Its power seeps through to the bone,
coals glowing like tiny miracles.
Our ancestors stretch their ghosts
into the gloves of our fingers.

More than a companion,
it is an avatar, the heart of the map
even the clock's hands reach for it.
The weather of our minds
feels the warm change. It satisfies us
in a way the screen's bright flicker
leaves us hungry.
Basking, silence leavens into language
conversation expanding, rising
and we are full.

The borderlands

I

The creek line's cool air
burns away as thighs climb
the muscular slide of the road
across hills tiered and torn
with hoof trails.

The low slopes are carved
by cheese cutter fences
slicing orchard from paddock from vineyard,
the crackle and flake of sclerophyll woodland
long since tidied away, swept clean.

But up here, past the bitumen,
quartz is polished on the ridge,
autumn powerless,
and the grizzled elders
stand precarious, safe
on slopes too steep for logging.

The hills flare and fold, a broadsheet caught in wind.
A chalet, several stripes of topography below
overlooks a congregation of stringy not snow gums
and the Peugeot collector's two dozen cars
seem reasonable, reduced to matchbox scale.

II

Swinging homeward, we stump down
back across the border
where orchard tactically eyes the bush and waits.

A sheep steps out of a driveway
and onto the road.

We rein in the dogs
but this ewe can't sense the ancient kernel of *lupus*
skulking within the *familiaris*.
It steps right up to the dogs and sniffs, nose to nose.
We tense, ready for the lightning rip of canine instinct

but the sight hound senses no quarry
as prey has the sense to run
and without the flicker of flight
this creature can't be what it seems, how it smells.
He licks the sheep's face, confused

by the scent of lanolin and human anxiety.
Colleagues bleat wolf warnings from the paddock
but this sheep is not of the flock,
it is a hearth dweller, a kitchen familiar.
It follows us on the road like a nursery rhyme.

Here in the borderlands of the wild and tame
the tame doesn't know its place, wanting more (or less).
We stride away, don't look back,
afraid the dogs will step across that line, the other way,
slavering for a taste of the wild.

The hunt

At 5am we walk into the lagoon.
The star blanket is tucked into the reeds.
It's cold; the first birds we see are swans.
We wave flags wildly, to the derision of the hunter.
He doesn't understand it was a greeting.

Pale pink light filters in,
everything becomes fragile as translucent china.
The crack of the shotgun is so close I'm unable to fear.
It's unreal that something so crude
can exist in this freshly birthed world.

The sun rises. I feel it touch my hands first.
The world opens and flies away.
Suddenly there are hillsides
and long water.

Our breath soft quills of vapour,
we stand waist deep in the lagoon, reflected
double-headed and stern
as the royalty on playing cards
a flag-bearing vanguard
surrounding the hunter in his thatch citadel,
the first and last line of defence.

He will not surrender.
We wait until the sun is high,
until the skies are wingless,
until certain that they will fail.
As we leave

his squint tails us,
belly-low through the samphire.
I tense for the blast.

The storm

clouds held afternoon sun under blind stars
all day isobars tumbling together
drew the sinew from our limbs
the first wave blew us into bed

the wind, lost in the steep maze of valleys, panicked
thrashing around the house as if caught in a net
forcing its fingers under the gutters, trying to peer in
like we held the secret to escape

gum nuts hailed onto tin in staccato bursts
snare drum counterpoint to the woodwind howl
all night we waited for the birds
to peal the all clear

at dawn we emerged to a shuffled world
the blue spruce parasol missing a rib
and the road beneath the stringybarks now a soft forest path
strewn with the wild prunings of our storm gardener

Power cut

The rip of silence
shoves us
out of our time.

A tree breaking the wire
unstitches the town's lace,
our houses drifting unmoored,
buttons torn from a ripped coat.

Patient, we sit waiting
for the lurch forward
into hard light
and bodiless noise

embarrassed by instincts for
regular foot tapping actions
making tea, checking email
even the trivial now impossible.

We don layers, fake fur, hats
pull armchairs outside,
pour wine and watch the sunset
like a documentary.

Rusty gears crunch from disuse
as the conversation begins to roll
slowly gathering the momentum
of our first years.

Now our talk has calluses

and our dreams muddy feet,
the future mapped in dog-eared notebooks,
love poems of irrigation and carpentry.

Night passes over,
the valley lies down early in the old way
as if having worked our land hard,
we sleep with the night.

Stepping inside, it's a smaller house,
candlelight whispering the walls closer,
webbing the corners with shadow.
My wine turns to mead.

The dam

This city hums tunelessly through the day
flashing nonchalant sequins at cockatoos.
Peak hour begins at dusk
birdsong lacing the encircling boughs
as if each leaf were a trilling tongue.
Eucalypts stand in silhouette
inked symbols brushed on sky.

Yabbies in stiff blue surcoats
have stitched the velvet waterline to the bank.
The surface ticks and pulses,
animating shadows to the rhythm
of submerged penthouse living.
High rise bulrushes and sedge suburbia
sprawl back, a domestic embrace,
dragonflies darting couriers.

From beneath the jetty the red bellied black
pours itself below the cool ceiling.
All seems still, the dam
gently netting tranquillity.
This is when modesty is needed
when you must forget yourself
and be only what you are, here in this place,
on this bank, in this underwater light.

Know yourself as you are
to the triumphant mouthed frog,
to the springtail twitching the surface,
and that ghostly lily pad, the moon.
Here, with still attention,

accept yourself as a citizen.

Only now, in your animal skin
do you belong.

II

Unpinning Insects

And the poor beetle that we tread upon
In corporeal sufferance finds a pang as great
As when a giant dies.

Shakespeare *Measure for Measure* Act III Sc i. 77-9

The bull ant

Myrmecia pyriformis

Know that this is a hard art
this gentling
fidget and thought corralled
to stillness.
Our minds bark against it
like shin on stone.

Wait, past the rush of mind
the ache of bone
and where once your eyes skittered
open but blind
life will leap
unveiling itself.
Lichen and moss
as forest
on droplet scale.
Air carries more than song.

Watch the ground jerk and flutter
with insect industry,
this ant, so curious and confident,
carapace a gleam.
How beautiful its politics
of care and duty.

Now with Homer's eyes
minds sparking to touch across millennia
see this ant as loyal warrior,
gloss-armoured Myrmidon,
hoplite of Achilles.

Blind Homer, original poet, master
of the art of sitting,
of seeing.

Wedge-tailed eagle

Aquila audax

The midday soundtrack hits a strident key.
I lift my head from the blaze of weeds.
Turning gently in corkscrew currents
is the eagle, so close wing tips trail the air
like fingers rippling the surface of a pool.
Under its loamy wings
patches of light flash in the sun
like maps of the new world.

Far above, the mate rides thin air
floating over the valley's precision.
The spine of the hills stretches in the sun
vertebrae cracking contentedly,
everything so clear it is pure glare.

Its whistle pierces the sky
declaring majesty over the kingdom
sliding below.
Small life squirms into hole and crevice,
quivers under leaf.
A rabbit blunders,
the eagle arrows its chest and dives,
a spear of beak and muscle,
plunging through depths of thickening air
tendons screech over breast and rib.

At tree bed the head lifts
pulling into glide.
The rabbit pants
in subterranean safety

eyes pinpricks
of panic and relief.

Landing, the eagle sheaths its wings
a swift origami folding beat into flutter.

I turn back to the weeds
and their incandescent indifference.

The midday soundtrack
slowly resumes its tempo
allegro easing to adagio.

Brown snake

Psuedonaja textilis

A little fear is a good thing.

It focuses the eye, the mind,
pushing feet into boots
for the sandal months.
Too much and you're summer's hostage.
Too little and you may learn
things about yourself you didn't know.
Do you scream, leaping
or hold your ground?
If you flinch at lazy loops of hose
you're in the right place.

The snake may curl,
sipping heat from stone
or drape its muscular slide
from chook house eaves.
Let it lie. You both know fear.

It is only in the shock meeting,
lifting iron sheets,
stepping into leaves
that both flash to reflex.
The swipe of shovel, the pink mouth
neat and sharp as a cat.
Four eyes dilate to black, hearts shuddering,
blood slow to cool.

A little fear is a good thing.

Western Grey Kangaroo

Macropus fuliginosus

Soft light time is for eating
the time for slow steps
when bird song stretches with the sun
before the insects rise like wind,
and the itching, itching.

Bending, I listen to stories
whispered by the grass,
short histories of dry and dew.

Quiet time is for fast leaping,
my shadow paces me like a mate,
the mob doubled,
fur flying and shadows.

When the light is sharp,
and shade a belly puddle
I scrape down to cool soil, hips dipped in
but never escaping the itch.

Sometimes the chasers
howl me from shallow sleep,
or the tall two legs
with the loud smokers

who nibble, nibble and scratch
at the edges, the trees
until the pouches of land left whole
don't hold enough.

I listen, I listen.
But the tree's tales are long and slow
and the grasses only seem to worry
about the weather.

Tawny frogmouth

Podargus strigoides

Sitting still as iron
more branch than owl,
it waits in monochrome moonlight
face vexed as a camel
twin lamps beaming.
Grey-bark wings poise silent among leaves
ready to drop death twitching in the grass.

The day passes so slowly
bereft of darkness,
waiting for night mice
one after another
their tiny fates bounce
until the beak deals death iceberg hard
and down the gullet smooth as a scallop.

Chocolate Wattled Bat

Chalinolobus morio

Settling into bed with a book
the silence is electrified;
there is another presence in the room.

In a flash of negative lightning
black bolt against light
the bat banks and vanishes.

I search corners and curtains
again it flashes with only the sound
of slipping past air and air not noticing.

It pauses, scouring this branchless wasteland
trepidatious ears frantically swivelling
for the familiar tunes of wind and kin.

Head hunkered into the neck's deep ruff
the fine-boned leather arcs against the light
in teflon navigation of this blind sky.

Door open, it senses the known and is gone
swiftly shuttling the fine threads of dark
weaving the silence with pulse and echo.

King Fern

Todea barbara

In the valley's deepest crease
we are folded back
before flower or fur
to a Triassic time
when love was consummated
with a kiss of spore-rich breeze.

Sipping the creek's dark tea
the parasol airs its curve.
A tiny fractal uncurls,
one more finial
sieving the sun dim,
combing the wind still.

Mountain galaxias fish

Galaxias olidus

This creek, more shadow than water,
weaves between rock and bank, over
and down, now silent
now grumbling, holding itself thin.

The casual eye will not see your body
in the fast riffles swimming
to hold yourself still, a dream
of a fish, a shadow lingering
against the current's undertow
with nothing to snag the eye, no splash
no iridescence bursting
or tail flukes blossoms.

In shallows close to gasping
you hide, the endless struggle
of finding a place, a way
to live that cannot be taken.
So long ago now you almost forget
how your shining spine bent the water,
how it was to swim filled
with nourishment
when this water was world and the world yours,
eyes flashing tinfoil stars.
But now you are usurped in these starving shadows
and you are not alone in shouting.

The animal within

I would like to remember how to live.
As a child I had the knack of that art,
braiding body with mind,
the mindless physicality
of running through days without motive.

Now I walk on legs ripe with indigo blooms
from encounters with edges.
This uninhabited body watches in awe
as women click along, practically *en pointe*
while speaking in full sentences.

Living so thoroughly within my own head
each month I am again surprised
by my body's fertility,
oblivious to the gauges
of fleshy appetites.

Within my world, all is conscious,
everything has an opinion.
Dogs sulk, trees rejoice,
stones endure. The household
extends beyond the window.

I need to reverse the pathetic fallacy
of painting the world human,
to dig out the subcutaneous animal,
and learn by forgetting. Sit necessity
at the table's head and choice out in the yard.

I want to claim my mammalian dowry

and welcome the pariah home.
Not in the daily particulars of belly and shelter
but the reflex kick of instinct,
of noticing all, analysing none.

Pull envy from the paw's dark pad
and lick it clean.

III

Edge of an emergency

Give me silence, water, hope
Give me struggle, iron, volcanoes

Pablo Neruda, Canto XII *From the Heights of Macchu Picchu*

Fire track gate number 13

I

When the bulrush and rice grass
bow to the wind
the gate is disrespectful.

II

As the sun passes
the shadow of the gate
flounces,
a crinoline petticoat.

III

The gate is easily influenced
able to be pushed, without argument
either way.

IV

Among art nouveau eucalypts
and florentine grasses
the gate is a stoic homage
to modernist simplicity.

V

Being of secure character
the gate is confident that the number 13
is not a rank.

VI

The hinges and post
quite justifiably
feel under-appreciated

VII

Without exception
the gate is always colder
than the air.

VIII

Arriving at the portals of heaven
hopefuls are surprised to see
the entrance encrusted not with pearls
but rust
and the number 13.

IX

The padlock
makes the valley beyond
four times more beautiful.

X

The gate, when very young,
felt snow
but barely remembers.

XI

It has not met fire.
Chances are
it will.

XII

The frame of the gate
and blood
have the same taste.

XIII

The magic of the padlock
is potent on humans
but ineffective
on blackbirds.

Marble Hill I: Maid of Marble Hill (1882)

Of the slow roll of the year
the dark to dark haul of each day
it was these three that she craved.
The promise of them carried in her basket
beside the bobbins and beans
on Lady Jervois's errands.

They ticked closer to the beat
of peeling and polishing
three longshort days free
from her Lady's razor gaze;
the bustle of King William Street,
and the East End's fruity air
where her apron's linen, starched cap
marked her vice regal
as surely as if she wore the Governor's
handlebar moustache.

As summer exhaled its northern breath
she would ride in the trap
horses surging into harness up rutted tracks,
keen for their their annual journey to cool hills,
to the house of wideshade verandahs
in the eucalypt sea
where the leaves steeped the air bluegreen.

Finally free from the genteel clink of high tea
and endless waiting at long dinners
beneath chandeliers webbed
with wax and conversation,

she'd swing open the heavy oak door,
flap the ghosts from the furniture,
open windows to the blue gully breeze.

She would rise at dawn
the verandah hers for sipping tea
watching parrots in pantomime frocks
kangaroos lifting ears from the grasses
warming chestnut rumps in gentle light.

In the evening, locking shutters and doors
against the bush's sudden monochrome
she would climb the tower and watch
the languid recline of the sun
draining indolent light off the plains to the sea.

Feet up, sipping a little sweet sherry
that did not quite make the journey
to the Governor's decanter,
she would be Lady of this house.

Marble Hill II: Black Sunday

January 2, 1955

Mr Penney lugged buckets and hose,
shirtsleeves wet on his back,
the leather seats holding him
hot and close
as he parked the cars beneath the gargoyle,
not bothering to mount vice regal pennants
on bonnets too hot to touch.

Inside, behind curtains drawn like shields
morning bled into afternoon.
Beyond sight, Black Hill whipped its name
around it like a cloak, embers billowing
fireflies on the wind.
Scrambling under eaves they nested and bred,
a lifecycle of seconds.

Lady George was the first to see the tower catch
lead pouring from the roof's creases,
spigots of molten rain
electroplating the cars
heavy and liquid as fear.
Status crumbled like the mansion
level by level until all razed.

Fifteen cowered beside the stone embankment
under blankets, praying, paralysed
by the inferno's barbarian yowl
leaping over their heads
marking them as equals.

Smoke and scream in every lung,
glass embedded like scales.
The hills sloughed off their skin.

Marble Hill III: Weight of loss

Australia Day, 26th January 2011

The people here all seem the kind that would know the second verse to the national anthem and are unlikely to have any friends that call this Invasion Day.

We are here to see the ruins. I want to see them one last time as I've always remembered them, before the rebuilding begins. The National Trust finally found a rich, philanthropic couple willing to take Marble Hill off its hands. So here we are, stickybeaking, intending to sneak off before the Mayor hits his stride in front of the bunting.

national anthem

lips move

without voice

The tour of the ruins is lead by a young man, who knows absolutely everything about the history of this site. He is a Marble Hill savant. Enthusiasm lasers from his eyes and his reed thin body seems almost unstable with the effort of containing all this passion within one skin. We easily keep him talking and answering questions for half an hour after the tour finishes, while the next group stands frowning, pointedly looking at their watches.

ruin in sun

hats needed

inside

In the small museum old photographs of vice regal grandeur line the walls. Steep rooflines with fish scale shingles gleam in sepia sun. Edwardian conifers long gone stand to attention beside the driveway as it sweeps to a halt at the formal stone steps under the tower.

charred stone wall

gargoyle has

last laugh

Several old-fashioned glass museum cases hold artefacts dug from the ashes. How do the cabinets manage to support such weight of loss? Waterford pendants from the chandeliers like twisted crystalline bones, the white billiard ball crouching alone, fossil egg bereft of a mother.

gas lantern

cannot hold

strange fire

Outside I touch the stone embankment where the Governor's family and staff cowered, trembling under blankets, watching the house burn and fall, storey by storey. It is an image that pulsates so intensely, so symbolic of this place and its history, that it feels as though the hearts of those fifteen survivors should be lying on velvet within those glass topped museum cabinets.

howl of wildfire

sound of prayer

erased.

The water tanks

She called them his mistresses
but he thought of them
as loyal mates in crinkled uniforms
looking out for the five of them
when topsoil and margins were thin
and water more precious than gold.
He repaid them in kind
with close attention
each day clapping their backs
feeling the cool compactness of water,
hearing the echo of emptiness,
gauging the corrugations of clouds,
and the Bureau forecasts for rain.
Two tanks for the house, two for fire
a squat squadron in formation
beyond the reach of branch fall.
The best insurance was preparation
yet he was trapped in town
when the day came
the front's ferocity razing every plan,
wife and kids with no time
for the road or the sprinklers.
As the roaring dark swept over
they hunkered under blankets
in the tiny cross between the tanks
panting in the baked air
between those ribbed bellies
still cool and full, standing guard
among the fresh acres of ash.

Country Fire Service I: Monday night training

The grieving goose wail of siren
blares across the valley
puncturing kitchens, lounge rooms,
scraping across crockery.

Homogenous in neon marmalade
we stand in a semicircle
receiving our orders
for tonight's simulation.
A fire at the school.

The back of the truck
is an exposed bowel
of pipes and valves.
We take our positions,
arms semaphoring grandly
over the roar of engine
and imagined inferno.
Water on, pressure up.

Hose and branch are sedately
promenaded down the hill.
No running on the fire ground.
Cones of fake flame are doused and topple.
Danger averted.

A cheeky sod slips back in the dark,
righting witches hats.
Think you missed a few there, mate.
The stately procession unfurls again,
the truck releases its bladder.

Back on station
we sit for the debrief
black boots terminating
each stretch of citrus leg,
beer caps speckling the table like spore.

Country Fire Service II: Child's play

High in the hills
above reach of flood
we scoop sand into sacks,
brick them into walls.

Day-Glo figurines
in white plastic helmets
we stack our sandbag Lego.
The fire truck grizzles.

The trees lean over,
ready with gnarled fingers
to pop us on the truck,
zoom us down the hill.

The house squats in its damp loop,
the jetty a slat-backed insect
testing the dam with spindly toes.
I circle, goodbye riding my chest.
I was not enough for this place;
clarity now the clock has stopped
and the batteries are red-lining.
It's a tiny *fin-de-siècle*.
I tidy away the catastrophe
of the panicked hours
tending to the house gently,
like stroking the brow of a sick child.
My blurred, last day eyes look skyward.
Smoke has combed all the blue from the spectrum
and cockatoos flee squawking,
shockingly white against the yellow air.

III At sunset

The fire front writhes on the valley ridge
like a dragon back, the terrible glitter
beautiful when stripped of context.
The phone dies, its final breath a warning:
take shelter now.
On the radio, talkback callers
stumble out dry-cleaning disasters
while darkness oozes through the gauze of smoke,
ash falling like a sinister snow.

Fear stains me like blood on cotton.
The froth of adrenaline distils
to a crystalline residue.
Where is it? How long?

IV Ember check

Alarm set for every two hours.

Curtains open.

I fuck tension like it's paying me.

It keeps me awake

and that's how I want it.

Alarm, clothes.

Head torch cuts through smoke.

No embers.

Hell-glow crawls closer.

Tension and I get back into bed.

Get back to it.

VIII Rain

In the distance blackened skin sloughs away
from the solid face of the earth.

Smoke casts everything as pale
as a day caught in the pages of a book.

And then, it comes;

the rain.

Sweet relief caught between sky and earth,
flooding though my quiet cells,
allowing sleep and its gift of oblivion.

And this silence! This peculiar quiet
not just an absence of siren and aircraft
and the noiseless bliss of the closed road,
but a silence

that is an absence of the world.

Everything is submerged in it.

The sky is empty of stars, brimming with smoke
and finally the houses sleep, curled in upon themselves,
resting in the safe, dark rain.

IV

Second nature

One may say that we seek with our human hands to create a second nature in the natural world.

Cicero *De Natura Deorum* II, 151-2

Basket Range

Our road's seams are not stitched
with post boxes or streetlights
just the anonymous yawns of dirt driveways.
Neighbours are hidden, marked in space
by the distant barking of dogs.
Although we are younger than their children
we share gossip in the treacle light of bin night
and the long tables of Christmas and birthdays.
Out here, backyard means orchard or bush
night means creamy black silence
fast food means an hour round trip
and congealed cheese.

On weekends and sultry nights
the joyriders come,
squealing sideways on greasy bends.
Occasionally, this jagged rend of night
stops.
We hurry with grudging first aid
to find the Skyline, crumpled like a tissue box
and the boys in their shapeless, shiny shirts
gathered, shuffling
like parakeets set free
but reluctant to leave the cage.

Body poem

after John Glenday

My hair, the untameable statement of eucalypt claiming sky.

My bones, the range curled from Ashton to Uraidla, valleys folded soft between my ribs.

My brain, encrustations of street art tucked away in Stirling's back-ways, fluorescent anxieties layered with imaginings, sporadically whitewashed for public approval.

My blood, the shimmer wrinkling every summer surface, the wind combing through acacia veins.

My eyes, dams drying to crow-footed squints or overflowing with excess. Always staring at the sky.

My tongue, the knobbed scatter of creek stones, loathe to shift from its cool, dark bed.

My heart, a brown kelpie, gently breathing, asleep.

The slab hut

Bishop's cottage, Basket Range 1860

In daylight, the valley's bowl brims with sound;
the chiming axes of tiersmen
saws gnashing through trunk gristle,
the ribbons of crash and snap
threading through undergrowth
as the young'uns play bushrangers,
the cuss-like grunts of my eldest
splitting logs for the stove.

Blind to all but the encircling trees
this is my music, the daily melody
singing me through the chores.
Silence stops me still as a scream.

Townfolk expect the unendurable
thinking quiet must bear down,
a yoke of absence on the soul.
At the market they look at me
eyeing my long bones
as if confronted with a cow
ribs corrugating her sides.

They speak slow and loud
over my baskets of beans
like I'm not long for the world,
extra coppers pressed to my palm.

Poor thing, isn't it awfully dull up there?

Only at night
does the music falter

down to the whisper of children's breaths
from the cot's tangle of elbows and knees
stringybark walls powerless
to keep silence at bay.
It seeps in, banking the fire
until even my pulse feels its threat.

Stepping outside
I dig toes deep into garden soil
but not even the familiar leaves of rhubarb
the apples' blossom give comfort.

On this cleared island
in the eucalypt sea
I now call home
even the stars are strangers
and the guardian gums
raise arms as if drowning.

Domestic ecology

after Judith Wright's "Habitat"

I

This house, its DNA and mine interwoven,
each stone's mortar churned
with water first sluiced over my body
marrying cells, lint, spirals of hair
into the calcium of the walls' stretch.

We raised these walls foot by foot
until they housed us, squatting
over camp stoves, windows just holes for wind,
this process the antithesis of burrowing
but the product the warm, safe same.

We have grown together, house and I
maturing into our bodies, evolving beyond
base instincts for eating, sleeping, defecating.
Our higher needs for stillness and security
are met here. House and I, we are mated.

But the past is present, just beyond sight
in the soil, the deep roots of trees.
I am a fleeting transient, this house's pet
destined to go first, leave it behind
perhaps to grieve, though I'll certainly

be replaced. The next ones
will see my marks, the paint,
the paw prints in concrete, my life
sifted down through the floorboards.

The house will keep its secrets,
retell the odd tale then forget.

II

Life layers itself through this house
in uneasy coexistence. Rats and snakes
rustle in the cool world of footings.
The predator/prey chase of the many-legged
laces the verandahs with web
and the filigree of wing-brushed air.
Bats in the chimney shuffle lashings of soot,
dogs sleep on couches, cats claim the bed.
The hierarchy of species stretches, then lies flat.
I feed us, the birds, those creatures flashing
for notice. The house picks up the pieces
and feeds the unseen with the rich harvest
of leftovers, a surplus for the hidden,
microscopic worlds curled in the compost,
the septic tank, the folds of our skin.

Housework

fold the plates away

iron the bench tops

measure the clothes on the line

shave the carpets

exercise the rubbish

escort the dog off the premises

drown the dishes

spread eagle the quilt

re-introduce old veggies to the wild

rinse the garden

fence with cobwebs

discipline clothes with the machine

peel the bathroom

steal from the hens

paint images of self on all shiny surfaces

repeat

repeat

repeat

The allegory of bin night

It's a journey, this country driveway,
so long and potholed that the heavy bins
constantly tip or bang my heels
as they roll behind me, full of pieces
of the world I've finished with.

It's dark beneath the trees.
I find my way with the thin, dry light
of my head torch, beaming out
like a third eye, illuminating
only what lies right before me.

Beyond the pines is the moon.
Our beams touch but mine is tangled in the trees
while the moon lazily stretches to my feet.
At the driveway's end I set the bins down
and silence falls like dust.

Walking back the path seems shorter.
The slender beam turns with my attention
catching roadside reflectors,
the *tapetum lucidum* of my dog's eyes
but too narrow to illuminate the full picture.

Near the house the sensor light comes on
at first blinding me to a stop,
but soon the long sweep of driveway
and the land beyond its wildly grassed hem
steps forward from the unknown.

Behind the light, the house lies in darkness.

All I can see is my reflection in the glass door,
a single figure walking alone
amongst crowded shadows
with a small light between her eyes.

The vegetable garden

for Henry David Thoreau

The garden stitches me to the earth.
Vegetables wave to the light
roots fossicking white and blind.
I water, fertilise, trusting them
to know how to live.

The soil expresses its opinions
with green effusions.
My hoe vents any disagreement
this garden a battleground
of the sown and the wild.

The sun watches without discrimination
the whole earth its garden.
Stone-wrapped beds sprout birds, insects;
all teeming life this garden's yield.
Nothing belongs to me.

Later, beer and hose in hand
I make my offerings of false rain.
Vegetables stolen, we chop, then feast
and as the earth rolls gently onto its back
we blossom, our bodies now part of the harvest.

The waterfall

Summer flays the valley,
the skinless blue of a sky with no air,
only distance, a vacuum in sharp focus.
Birds ignorant of the physics of flight
hang in the rawness, waiting for gravity to notice.
Sounds are magnified; their waves roar
along the length of the valley's funnel,
a keen of pain or grief, I can't tell.
The heat holds us with an invisible presence,
a paradox we can't compute
as we gaze into this enamel void.

Then finally the waterfall
like the right answer.
A stone family of serious Olmec heads
piled on each others' shoulders
as uncanny as Antarctic life.
The water finds its path
leaping brow to nose to chin,
gifting itself to the ground.
We lie in the pool, heat clinging to fine hairs
in tiny, desperate bubbles,
our breath heavy with the smell of green.
Staring upward, specks and filaments float
across hard aqueous blue.
I am a scientific god
peering at the sky through the lens
of a divine microscope.

The pool shines as if the sky
had scraped against the valley's bones,

the falls roar in place,
the laced fingers of trees stop it all
from sliding out of the frame, holding
this generosity of water
dislocated from its path to the sea,
reminding us that without
these jumbled threads of vintage rain
the waterfall is nothing
but a thirsty cliff.

Deviation Road

after Emily Bitto

Ask yourself – when have you ever been free?

The question pressures within you like an infected sinus
as you drive through the loose curls of mid-morning
frustration clotted in your gut,
seething between your clenched teeth.

How do you swallow the barbed truth of *never*
that you had been trying to disavow
like the gradual tightening of your favourite jeans.

You drive that thin-spoiled bitumen
throwing yourself into the scene
as if it was momentous.

This speed, this road meaning something more
than the last hundred-something times.

This crest, your life opening out
as you hurtle over, eyes screwed shut,
like idiocy grants ownership
and survival is more than luck.

Gut in the backseat, you plummet
over the lip and into the tight-wooded valley
but not even gravity will give you up.

The road keeps looping forward
in its yesterday way
shackling you to the same destination
with a kindness belying its hard authority.
Cows watch you from their shared destiny
as you swallow hard, hit the brake
and take the barb deeper inside

hoping that for a few more quiet hours
you won't feel the jag.

Decansos

No beam of light illuminated you,
just a smear of non-descript shadow
pooled where you lay near the road,
a place not special for any reason, just
a stretch of unremarkable ground
under a conifer's fingers laced with dawn.

In that dim patch untouched by dawn
lying there as if dreaming, you,
on that familiar but not yet known ground,
looked so comfortable on your bed of shadow
as if about to stretch out of sleep, just
a breath away from shaking off the dew of the road.

But on this ordinary stretch of road
as bleak reality begins to dawn,
until now just the way to Ashton, just
the valley road until this very moment, because it's you
lying there in the moist shadow
no longer part of me, now part of the ground.

And the world is moving beneath me, the ground,
the geography of this place, the road,
the air, the trees, the light and shadow,
the clattering birds of dawn,
all are shifting now, around you
lifting and sinking into a new topography just

unrecognisable from how it appeared just
one night ago. And life, now rudderless, runs aground
right here where it's you

lying so still by the road
among crickets fiddling a dirge in the dawn
for you and all that has passed into shadow.

All dims to a palette of shadow
and any faith in the balance of fate to be just
is lost here and now, in the glacial dawn.
This foreign land, this strange new ground
has with tectonic shifts resettled, its core now this road,
my world still spinning on the axis of you.

Bright flowers might be placed on this shadow strewn ground,
just here, or nailed to the conifer by the side of the road
but every day my fresh decansos¹ for you will be the dawn.

¹Decansos is a Spanish word meaning rest or resting place. The practice of erecting markers called decansos at the site of fatal accidents originated in Mexican folk tradition and is now becoming widespread across the world.

Death of a tree

Eucalyptus baxteri

Tree motes float back into the universe

as Brownian stars.

you dissolve into absence,

as the shafts of sunlight cannot

warm the air enough

to absorb you entirely.

Chainsaw screams mask any other.

I blame my tears on

the ammonia-sharp scent

disinfecting the operation.

It is only now that you are gone

we can count how many years

you watched over us.

Behind locked doors

Montacute Cemetery

Calcified with stone and dust, this is a hard suburb
peopled with bare sketches of the dead.

The graves hold up their words
in loving memory *beloved*
lives abstracted into an absence
so profound they do not even cast shadows.

So much is hidden, held in check
under these stone façades.
Unspoken grief whispers across our skin
as we pass thin pools of shade,
as incongruous here as joy.

We search among the stones
for the stories, those lapses of reserve
granting us more than shallow names and dates,
these spare inscriptions
the lonely scratching of the living
on the locked doors of the dead,
while below the hard packed earth
the dead slowly get on with their dark work
of sifting themselves back
into the green world.

V

Rivers and mountains continue

The nation falls into ruin; rivers and mountain continue

From “Spring Prospect” Tu Fu (712 – 770 AD)

Perseid meteor shower

Like a stranger to Galileo, I've slept through the Renaissance
still seeing the cosmos in Ptolemaic rings
entranced by the circling of celestial bodies around us.
Foucault's Pendulum in the Pantheon revolutionised my world.
Who knew we weren't standing still?

Eclipses, comets, meteors, even satellites
connect me to ancient ancestors
in awe at the caprice of gods,
eternally marvelling at the tiny holes in the floor of heaven
made by angels' stiletto heels.

I'm a pagan subscribed to NASA's email list
for the heads up on astronomical happenings
and well aware of the contradiction.

The august sky is clear
a meteor grazes the sky
tail pointing back to Perseus.

I try not to think about
the less than poetic Swift-Tuttle comet
of which these fleet diamonds are the tail.

It's cold

I retreat inside
and boot up.

The 820

Bus stop 23 is a yellow pin that fastens the Earth.
From this exact point
the Earth slings on its elliptical track
a pony at the end of its tether
circling the bright trainer,
always a step before the whip.

The days stretch and shrink around bus stop 23.
I sense these variations in the lariat's tension
at precisely 7.50 each morning.

In June we stand in dim cloud
instinctively facing east,
street trees the only ones daring to bare skin.
By January the trees are fully clothed
while we expose shoulders and legs
already sweat slicked.

Equinoxes improve the mood.
We emerge from under the shelter's brim
admiring autumn trees each day more enraged
or their fresh fashion in spring.

Our coven wheels through the year
heads bent together in ritual,
at each solstice begging the sun
to not spare the lash.

*More speed, please
a little more speed.*

Grand unifying question

At this scale we are numb to mystery,
our minds deepening into wonder
only through the portals
of microscope, telescope.
Then comes the leap beyond faith,
seeing there is no divine trick
as to how we arrived here,
this world no elite inheritance
beyond the obligation to hold it whole.

And in watching the stars, the atoms spin
somehow we hone the craft
of weaving feedback loops,
twining how with what and when,
and rendering why as useless
as asking where is god?
finally creating the questions
that bear asking
over and over again.

Night walk

Foreign as the nearest star
the forest leans in, a welcome I can't translate
new to the ecology of darkness I hurry
an immigrant reluctant to learn the tongue.

Untrammelled as fresh snow, the dark
holds all, even familiar trees dangle alien leaves
breath and feet quicken, grasses grasp my legs
but without sun they are strangers.

Branches net the moon, the dark
disorienting as smoke, compresses me.
I am lame, heart hollow with fear
my eyes strain for the light of the known.

Then the vixen's song echoes in the quarry
the forest swarms with sound
I turn for home where clock and fire tick
the forest latching hard at my back.

Tried to save the world but she ran me down

Tried to stop the world from warming
keep the Pacific atolls afloat
wrote, spoke, organised, agitated
even froze my ass for Greenpeace
down the bottom of a coal mine
till I was overcome
by rising carbon dioxide fumes.

I liberated animals from agriculture
tried to be the voice of the voiceless
in a windowless basement office
deep in the black heart
of the intensive capitalist production zone.
Some days the battery hens had it better.

Helped to stop a nuclear waste dump
spreading cancer across the country
went out into the desert to celebrate
with the elder women who kept their land healthy
only to hear the plans had metastasised
further north onto some other poor bastard's home.

Tried to dismantle patriarchy.
Changed my language, set a strong example
fought for equality and the right to choose
only to hear from a glossy silicon pout
this is a post-feminist world, bitch.

Fell in love with the last great wilderness.
From a distance she seemed so cool and independent
but now we've slept together she's high maintenance

and I'm burdened with her icy problems.
She's giving me isostatic depression
the Transantarctic Range a tyre print down my back.

Gravity

This valley is the poem I dream of writing
its dams and creeks reflecting
all that I cannot; stars, peeling trees
the endless flux of light and wind.

Under my feet it lies, unresistant
yet forever slipping my grasp
holding me with a power
greater than gravity.

I try, waiting
under the worn path of sun
the swivel of stars
but while this page is of the earth, the trees
my words fail, no true reflection
its essence as pervading yet elusive as air.

Homemade thanksgiving

after Patrick Rosal

The tide of focus swings to ebb, it's 3pm
and I surface from slippery currents of paper
rolling my shoulders out of their ammonite curl
in these pyjamas three days overdue for the wash.
I'm heading for the kettle, wading across
the plates of sun paving the boards with warm
- and just like that - I'm sliding and grooving
and this Lenny Kravitz bass has me swinging
all low and heavy. I'm major key and power chords,
hair of feathers, hands of stars, head thrown back
and I'm light as a cricket but ankle deep in earth,
rocking like the wind through these trees
with no eyes on me but the tiny blue wrens
bouncing across the bells of their garden
where I'm just another creature
flinging itself through this day,
glowing like autumn on the vine.

Flying home from Sydney *after Catullus, Poem 4*

With an overdone pneumatic sigh
the flaps tuck themselves in
and the familiar mosaic of red tile,
green tile, random azure rivet
spreads below, shrubs and cars
braille for divine fingers,
developments burgeoning
bitumen tumours.

A phlegmatic roar
propels us into cumulus
a landscape without milestone,
only prodigious light,
the gathers and folds
rushing across blue enamel,
a desert lacking only
the dejected call of the crow.

We breathe on and on
with the circulating breath
of the didgeridoo
gazing entranced
at this fog of dislocation,
the earth, the metal-lode
that bore and raised this craft
far over our minds' horizon.

Until, ears shrill with descent,
we feel that toll sounding on bone
at the gentle tweezing of the Gulf

the bays blanket-stitched with jetties
then three breaths snagged
on Mt Lofty's spires. This rolling land
the soundwaves of a chime,
a carillon, ringing me home.

Homecoming

after Catullus, Poem 31

The eastern states seem separate as islands.

The long road home is sprinkled with towns like pools
in a heat wave, cool resuscitations, making you believe
that absence can't erase the reality of home,
making you forget for long moments this state of away,
this anxiety coating you like skin,
distress and disquiet now your default.

There's no rest until the road's ribbon
loops the first familiar thing and the mind stills,
you refill your body as master,
the familiar suddenly fresh and vital as water
and gratitude fills you to the brim.

What will we inherit?

The galah and the goldfinch.

These trees but not the grasses.

Instinct.

Guilt.

History, with its lashing tail.

Obligation, passed into my hand like a stone.

My grandfather's bible. Your mother's pearls.

The rounded rocks lying quiet in the creek.

What will we pass on?

Only the fire can say.