

A LOCALE OF THE COSMOS

An Epic of the Wimmera

VOL. 2

POEM

A LOCALE OF THE COSMOS

An Epic of the Wimmera

Homer Rieth

2006

To my daughters
Ruby
Monika and Sarina
and to my son
Peter

&
to Shelton Lea
erleuchtet und geliebter Dichter
in memoriam

for
Ralph Johnston

When thou think'st I am far from thee, I am often nearest,
And when nearest, I am furthest.

- Thomas á Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*

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BOOK ONE

JACKSON SIDING

JACKSON SIDING

PART ONE

§

And the length and breadth of those summers
the back of them
fading into a blank-stare distance
towards nothing remotely on the horizon
the horizon itself a vanished thing
its whirlpools of heat its wash of haze
cotton thread clouds unravelling and the light
in a bare-faced sky drifting towards an abyss
an edge that the eye cannot see
the last long rays of sunlight in the grass
stalling the innocent and patient stars
once again he says you've come here
this place of perdurable memory
place of silences
sounding
of water soughing over rocks
of reeds returning the purl and lap of water
down to the last trickle
rock water reed
each remaining calmly within the confines of its own nature
leaving the scrawl of their signature
on creek beds on windrows on sandy stretches
holding out for the slake and quench
of trunk bole branch leaf
shade
and within and around these surface tensions
on the branches of enduring trees
birds swing or swoop off
shedding their wings on boxwood
ghost gum Norfolk Island pine

asking nothing of the going down
evening
of the coming on night
attuned only to what has already been granted
and the day with its last calico gleam
lingers
thinking about it
the cobweb of its hours clinging like a promise to what
it can't remembering promising
something more tenuous than a hope
that this night may for once be prevailed upon
to keep at bay
despair's onset
the only thing that makes hope possible

§

a year five years ten perhaps
and the ivy runs wild over the wall
the hard cold ground grows harder
colder than ever
and the heart once a seat of animal radiance
is now tongue-tied like a child's first confession
and the soul's is only a reflected light
all cast and filigree of leadlight
of iron and half-life
the road has vanished into a tangle of wrong turns
and only the poplars swaying
in the wash up of the road
retain a sense of their place and metier
understand the order of things
and looking at it for long enough
you take a leaf out of their book
the book of the winds
turn the pages of the horizon one by one
or flick back

and find to your surprise to your dismay
the fable of your own life
how everything in it
is in the gun sights of the hunter
time
and the length of the tale like those summers
those blank-faced winters
hangs upon what lies between the lines
what is heard not as a sound but only as an echo
of something soundless
like the terpsichord of the clouds
and of where or when they may tell you
but nothing of why
somewhere nowhere
never
the unknown
the murmur
inland
once remembered as a fog horn on the shore
of a shipwreck coast
a place beyond what it used to be called
before it lay beyond reach of what they call it now
this fetch of scrub this fosse of creek
bulrush and boulder country
a scree of endless scrub
the black stump's last resting place
now an eyrie of the wind where the flat sweeps
pick up the raging static of the constellations
and the mullet-faced moon is left speechless
in a fugitive sky

§

tells me he does that those towering sugar gums
look down on the leafy flotsam
with neither disinterest nor disdain

the stones broken or unbroken
are strewn about under a sump oil sky
where the eye follows without blinking
the gouges of bins and bunkers
where the front end loaders
load the augers in the airless dust cloud
and grain showers shaking with diesel smoke
great belts grinding the silence into a paste of time
leave a bitter taste
the sign still reads in bushels and hundredweights
though no one measures that way now
and strawboard stacked to the rafters
looks as safe if not as sound as rough log
and thatched stables or the thresher's yard
down where the gully meets the sludge
Kara Kara Lallat Marma
Rich Avon Rich Avon West
counties parishes villages
hamlets farmlets reaching to Kewell
Jung Jung and Burrum Burrum
Laen and Longerenong beyond Wirchilleba
beyond imaging now those quaint
north country ridings
and lemon sherbets sipped in the afternoon shade
the jinker's left his wheelmarks
the horses their hoofmarks
the scrum of light pole wagon shows in fresh ruts
the weight of White Lamas of Bluey and Queen's Jubilee
and Purple Straw foreshadows single furrow ploughs
and grim reaping hooks
stockyard and stackyard
fowl house pig sty and horses
out to pasture out beyond
Dugald McPherson's patch
who hailed from Argyleshire
and the hard-boned Germans
Uhe and Degenhardt

Boehm and Kruse and Bretach
Hauestorfer and Sudholz
Gott in Himmel the cracks and fissures
cracked their hearts
the crab-hole ground at Jackie Jackie
and looking out across the lake the home of the lizard
they prayed even in their profanities
just to soothe the pain with pug
and slabbed the reed splashed the daub
the *Gemutlichkeit* engendered by a church
and parsons on horseback made the ridings meet
like outstretched hands
or slogged it by gig in the snap and frost
of a god-forsaken sabbath
when only the chapel bell sounded and the blacksmith's
dark-skinned striker lay in his hard bed
snoring soundly
you could hear him they said all the way
to Kewell to Avon Plains and Kellalac
it was a life of earthen floors and mud
of pugged wood and the country
waiting upon them and the seed broadcast by hand
as far north as Patchewallock as far west as Goroke
as far too far as Serviceton
wherever the wind might rove among buloke and split clouds
and you could hear the dull whistle of Martini Henrys
and 303's back of a dirt mound
and when the dreaming was to the good
and the weather hot enough to fry your arse
they'd cook eggs and bacon on a corrugated sheet
then go a day's walk or a couple of days
sleeping out in the open
fettling for Murray perch
for trout and tench
that was the life being a handy boy
a boundary rider with a feather of wheat stuck between your teeth
riding into and out of the sun and into it again

checking the cockatoo fences
stamping a name for yourself from Lawlor to Dullum Dullum
a Yankee hat or a cabbage tree pressed down over your squinting eyes
and bluchers over your ragged Prince Alberts
staying one step ahead of the sting of sandy blight
or dysentery or colonial fever
while the days were measured by hay-stooks drying out into haystacks

§

tells me he does that Sam Wilson's
pride was all gardens and sculptured grounds
worthy of Capability Brown
he ran deer and ostriches thickened and fattened with nostalgia
sweetened with Oporto madeira and Lisbon port
being the silent type he let on very little
let his money do the talking
the grubbing days full spasms and muscular weeds
of tender shoots and tiny bulbs
sweet pods their delicate moistures
of such stuff men dream

§

tells me he does that the weirs and water channels were signs
of a god whether of earth or water
fire or air the precious flows
made the wind turn and look over its shoulder
and near the majolica-blue of Sheep Hills
what had been Kinlock and then Tarkedia became the climbs
and inclines of Mokepilly in the flatlands
where the single furrow plough and the wooden harrows
turned up the soil to the sun and the sowing was done by hand
from a makeshift apron with the breeze lending an assist
in the smudge paddocks where the light ran like a dye

later the back delivery reaper lined up seven men in a row
binding the sheaves to the knucklebones
and threshers with flails and coupled horses circled the corn
and threshed it with their feet
it made the wind turn and look over its shoulder
at the Coulton strippers drawn by a quadrella of horses
two ahead of two the grain winnowed bagged stacked in rows
and the cocky chaff kept like sugar for horse feed
and mineral sustenance
you see he says that Beaufort blacksmith changed everything he touched
and Woods too with copper wire
reaping and binding in the throes of progress
blind as fate and later the splitter axe and the switch
that proved magical to presten flax twine
tells me he does there was no fallowing then
and the land almost gave out in despair and disgrace
but for the grace of Lutherans and Scots
rolling the land with Mallee rollers
pulled by teams of bullocks a dozen at a time
so obdurate the ground dried out under the sweat of their feet
the burn offs charred the seeds in a halcyon of myriad holocausts
and left the ground miraculously fertile
then the stump jump and the seeding harrowing with crude branches
and in good time a layer of ordure that ushered in
a golden age of Florida phosphate
but make no mistake these ghosts were the ghosts of slaves
toiling from still dark to still dark
way past sundown under a sprinkle of starlight
and into the throat of night with wretched food
the water often foul
no riding plows but the sweat of a thousand heave-ho's
from somewhere way back behind
and wheels that shoulders were put to
the only hint of distraction
the plaintive sound of a Sunday fiddle or a peeling concertina
and feet stomping on grub soil
the soundless leave takings and the horizon itself seeming then

if only for a moment straight as wire cut brick
and the world a prospect of intimacies
valencies of the wide blue yonder

§

tells me he does that Mister Bill's
water troughs are all over the place
on the salt edge the crust the parched tableland
in the watery couch plains
across scrublands and sandplain heath
where glasswort and bladder saltbush sprinkle the dune crests
and the copi the gypsum soil give out
without your noticing it
and the rufus songlark in the broombush stops his singing
just to be enchanted by his own echo
there were times he says when people lived on nothing
except maybe rabbit bones and boiled wheat
or scavenged among the middens and in the clefts
of scar trees just to fill their bellies
this was in the days long before the Depression
mind you he says without a hint of self-pity
days of holes and rock holes
but yeah you got to love the life just the same
in that curmudgeonly kind of way
that swagmen manage
tell me he does the wind blown skies the sand-crampons
the great flood flats and gilgas full of herons and lapwings and terns
and great snow formations of clouds
up so high you know they're always up so high
it's London to a brick it'll never rain
and to myself I sing
wondering what echo will come back
to me as it did for him
and from where out of the dark
to find a language for his villages and hamlets

for his impossible small towns scattered like atolls
in an ocean without a drop of water
for here the eye sees for as far as it likes
and knows that what it sees is nothing
that nothing is something after all
you can only see with your eyes shut
the inarticulate truth
and being all there is to see there
you might not go mad O no not yet
or like the rivers remain invisible but always audible
a poignant trickle
there are things of expectation either great or small
and whether or not they are met hold us
to a killing curiosity
our hearts are left ajar like memory's door

§

tells me he does that talk of a second coming
is not what nature teaches you not out here
it's more he says like the secrets of illusion and sleight-of-hand
or perhaps disillusion
neither a vision nor a mirage not even a half-crazed hallucination
but only the kind of figment you imagine when you speak
of a heaven my friend or a hell
of a promised land
then you begin to climb Mount Purgatory
its shores lapped by the great incognita of the Southern ocean
beyond the pale beyond all pales
there where your wretched dreams lie about
like dead men's bones
this is the place you had always imagined was your own
what is it if not of no return
there's nothing tender about it or meek
and mild
or so they will tell you but they lie

you see he says here the world is not all that's the case
here cause waits around forever for effect
motion loses its bearings and perishes of thirst
searching for rest
here the only perpetuity is the riddle of no rain
or rain at the wrong time
or rain by the bucket load drowning you in its own sorrows
this is a place of guilt and shame
of qualms and misgivings
this place is real
here are the ancient markings the boundaries of time
here is space as a geometric measure of emptiness
burnt beyond recognition re-entering its own atmosphere
here is the face of love itself obliterated
the touch of human hands in a pile of shards
here is a knowledge of the land
as something recondite
even the Jardwa struggling south
could not keep intact such things as bores and songlines
what records we have
show that the place was wooded
that brush fires were common enough and the corroborees
lasted all night
the women beating possum rugs with their sticks
and the camp fire smoke rising over roasted game
you don't have to look too hard he says
to find the middens and in the most unlikely places
on the wing of a football oval
or under the shady tarps of a riverside resort
the implements all gone or most of them
an axe here a flint there a precious bead or a message stick
where poor fella me shrank back
from the white glare but could find no solace
in brown shade either
the vanquished are safe now in their anonymity
such abundance there was once
now such desolation

the icons have become kitsch
bandicoot kangaroo
blue-tongued lizard opossum emu
along the river you know certain trees still reveal
where a canoe was cut out
or where the river ran out of its own water
or show you where the searing sky became a clay oven
cracking in its own heat
and the cool red ochre of the caves preserves their stencilled hands
the mouthfuls of red mix blown over a hand or a rock
leaving an imprint at dawn over Arkona
leaving a residue at dusk at old Antwerp
where you see he says the caves are full of ghosts
the cave of hands of the emu's foot
the cave of initiation rock
and off in the dust of the distance blessed Ebenezer
all but gone the stones of peace
its Moravian music still keening through the buffalo grass
or upon the wisteria with the Moldau and *Ma Vlast*
and the roof fallen in
the windows broken or blown out
the walls crushed by their own brittleness
or the thunder of fallen manna gums
you see those stones he says and counts them one by one
the crosses faded and jagged like the skulls of sheep and oxen
lying in the long dry grass
not one but is leaning westward towards the land of the never never
their last liturgy the wind
and all about lie the promises of the ageless ones
Spieseke and Traeger and Hagenauer lying under the shimmering sky
where spotted pipers and wattle birds fleck the trees
flush with apple and honeysuckle
and the crisp scent of sweet pea and chick pea
in the broad acre paddocks begets a greening in the mind
a remembrance of the walla walla

§

in the end it was all left behind
even revelation
lambs for the slaughter had their front legs broken first
and were dragged to Polkemmet and Glenwylln
to Vectis and Walmer and Mount Zero
for all must eat or be eaten
they say that McKenzie Creek has a tree on its banks
the better to bury a body in
and even now when they stamp their feet the ground
becomes smooth and hard and takes on a gaunt kind of grandeur
there's time enough he says to fill a fox hole
or disguise a hutch
tells me he does there were some
who played the whitefella at his own game
and outplayed him easy
Bobby Kinnear the wind-runner and Johnny Mullagh knockabout
good with the willow as with maleen saplings
and Mulga Fred the stock whip star
and Gatum Gatum who could slice in half a cigarette
hanging from a man's mouth
and turn and bow to the crowd and then light one up for himself
taking long slouch drags
as if he'd done no more than brush away a fly

§

his horses they say run on the scent of chervil
on Somerset couch and commonage
and if you'd seen them he says all dressed up
in grey legs and shirts redder than a gash above the eye
the worsted thick as batter the braces white and taut
from any distance pull focus or close up a look splendidly military
about them an air of chevaliers and shining armour
playing at musketry and swordplay

and in their gait when dismounted a coil unwinding
and to a man cons or ex-cons
flash as pig weed after rain these real goers
making a go of it horse carters and blacksmiths and bullockies
a groom a cook a carpenter a shepherd
botanist and apiarist
sailor and shoemaker soldier and downy-lipped medico
on the brink and spur-line
'...a country ready for the immediate reception of civilized man;
and destined perhaps to become eventually a portion of a great empire.
Unencumbered by too much wood, yet it possessed
enough for all purposes;
its soil was exuberant, and its climate temperate;
it was bounded on three sides by the ocean;
and it was traversed by mighty rivers, and watered by streams innumerable.
Of this Eden I was the first European to explore its mountains and streams-
to behold its scenery-
to investigate its geological character, and, by my survey,
to develop those natural advantages, certain to become,
at no distant date, of vast importance
to a new people...'
so recorded the Major trailing glory's treacherous clouds
and tells me he does
the climb was long and laborious that in these parts
you climbed horizontally and the fatigue was no less utter
behind a curtain of drizzle and fraying cloud
the light almost lenitive a world of sand and stone and curious icicles
the mist more dense than smoke and the desolation
stealing up on you without warning
and air pockets bursting into hail and sleet
at first light an immense and imponderable weight
hung over the world
and the wagons bogged down and squelched in the clay
at the foothills of Mount Zero dull as damper
and only after the illusion had passed a treble cleft plinking
of water somewhere on a hidden soak
and the grasses growing broader and deeper

more supple in their movements the blues and greens of their verdure
tintured like blemished brass or rusted copper
a riot of mimosa and wimmera
these waters they said
our waters
lifting their spears above their shoulders
wimmera these waters our waters
from wide tributaries to an almost inaudible tricklet
they could sing the tones and half tones
of every sound the exact particulars of its place
sheets of glassy water or the curve of a shore
revealing a frosty lake or a maar crater
chains of dapple and peel where silvery ponds sucked
on underground streams
leaving their liquid trails like veins *pis aller*
the ground sloping or sliding with equal rapidity or carving steep channels
and at a stretch the grunge shadow of mud flats and lagoons
festooned with runnels and rustling reeds
you see he says the land was then after all and despite all
open undulate beautiful
swelling with little hills
no more than faint protuberances
the puffs of cloud that up closer
were really casuarina or banksia or eucalypt

§

PART TWO

§

tells me does the land lay south of their imagining
and northward was heath country sandy and thick with scrub and thirst
where the colour of kangaroo flesh the pith of kangaroo apple
rose over the verge and the vista again promised nothing
except catarrh and scab and duffed flocks
mewling to the winds
you see he says in the days of the overlanders
gentlemen dressed up like banditti
wearing broad sombreros and beribboned with furs and eagle feathers
pistols poking from their belts and a knife or a tomahawk
their sunburnt faces mustachioed or bearded
like Sinai's thunder
they rode Arabian horses or half bloods every one of them
whether emancipist or Oxford man first class
and excelled in the captious execution of plans laid against uncanny odds
tells me he does that the great musters out on the Monaro plains
sent upon one occasion thirteen thousand sheep
and a storm of steers
a hundred horses heading south to stock the runs freshly opened up
and the man from Finchley he brought them down
fording the Murray south by south-west
sturdy Monckton Darlot thwarted by reluctant ewes lambing
and ruinous disease
he watched the herds pull away towards the Loddon
in Simson's steady hands
nobody wanted them not a bit of it
dragging misery and misfortune across the struggle acres
at last they shunted them towards Cairn-Curran and Langi-Coorie
shuffling over Charlotte Plains
and undaunted Carter from van Dieman's Land set out to stock the wimmera
taking with him his daughters and young Ellerman
two sometimes three at most miles a day

reaching Amphitheatre and pastor Irving as winter turned the Crowlands slush
 to Woodlands bog and the green swarthes of Lexington
 that he says is how they reached Muckpilly and the mountains
 where the noradjuha blew across the plains
 and every rivulet in sight from Ledcourt to Four Posts
 yearned for the rushes of the Yarriambic
 there they put down roots at a place called the waters parting
 full of bandicoots and swampy game
 there Carter built himself a pine log hut
 with a roof of wattle and box bark and a slide door and portholes with caps
 the easier to fire on the native from
 and by God there he sits in his frame stern and upright
 look at him he says jaw set
 as stubborn as tantalite and as obdurate
 clutching his fob watch as if time were the work of his own hands
 and space an efflorescence of his mind
 let them eat mutton he growled and mutton they ate
 and this was no thieving he thought no commandeering of the land
 but a purchase on paradise
 one of God's more scrutable designs and he well-fitted for the task
 a great bullock was duly slaughtered and roasted
 and all night the corroboree continued
 the girls drumming on their roo skins and chanting *A lip-maliah*
 after which quite soon Jim Crow's spear wound was washed clean
 and properly dressed
 a gesture that would save the pertinacious Carter his life and his son's also
Melligig white man cried Jim Crow
 and they were left untouched as if surrounded by an aura of angels
 and the shepherds passed their tobacco around
 and smoked until nightfall
 you see he says in time what you call fate is only
 the willing accomplice to whatever happens
 thus men dream and women weep
 or women dream and men weep
 look at them he says take them at their word
 Scots Germans Welsh Manx
 and recites the names like a roll-call at the apocalypse

McLachlan- Archibald

Simson- Hector

Taylor- William

McPherson- Dugald

and his vowels as knobbly as broad beans

one destined for Glenisla another for St Helens

another at Marma Downs

one at Wonwondah one at Rosebrook and Brim Springs

and the boys would sing between their bets

I'd sooner be a sapling

and live on Mount Rouse hill

than I'd hire for a squattor

who has to bung the mill

§

and seeing as he could work wonders

wonders came forth

for he was *Name big one Master* lord of the lorikeets

and the missus put on her husband's tumultuous clothes

fending off ambush with double-barrels

and he who was once the mayor of St Andrews in Dundee

Langlands too fell under the geomancer's spell

he and wife and all five children setting off in bullock drays

stepping into time future but snow-bound on Macedon

stuck at Carlsruhe

drinking from wagon side puddles from hands frozen blue

the bullockies had bolted for the nearest pub

all's well when put to prayer

they found the Loddon snoozing between its banks

and not a fence in sight or shadow of a road to show the way

they kept to a westerly course counting every incline every declivity

the clouds like lignotubers their roots at the Four Posts Inn

where Gleeson talked their Dundee language

and wiped their tears with a bar-towel

and it rained my God it rained

where they said it never did
it rained so much they couldn't move
and sank to the ground with sinking heart until the horizon reappeared
and the hoar frost hung in their throats
and burned their frost-bitten lips
a dour determination was all they had left to see it through
'Cocky' Darlot Major Firebrace the Simsons
Splatt and Pysent and Rutherford
and Dougherty the mailman one and all quite sterling
you see he says wool hides tallow
in good time made it back on packets riding the white caps to England
or sometimes to the bottom of the sea
and the life they had
perplexed them into a deeper knowledge of their persuasions
it was a life without lawyers without paupers
a world of stockmen and shepherds and honest labourers
of dreamers fools and gamblers settling old accounts
of men on foot and men on horses
of swaggies and sweet Bridies and children in bare feet
setting out on the road to the Green Gingerland
road of Gold

§

'...this fine colony has been brought suddenly to the verge of ruin...'
and ruination stretched before them
like an idea of yonderness they hadn't dreamed of
at their backs the irrecoverable past its light still visible but going out
in front of them the inconceivable future
glinting with prophecy
Tolmer headed up the Gold Escort across the wimmera plains
from Adelaide to Mount Alexander carts groaned
with gold to the tune of a million pounds
and all he had were bullock drays and mounted sappers
a black to guide them through desert country
pointing out spores pads the cold comfort of a soak or a well

the pack animals punished on sands of Little Desert
the beaten track the salt lake of Duchembegarra and eastward
to the swamp at Swede's Flat always in mind
swollen rivers in winter at Nine Creeks
and a serviceable boat to negotiate the muddy swells
and rafts for the drays
you know he says at that time Horsham was a blacksmith's
and two wooden houses
a place where a man could pause for a pub-stop
before taking on the Dooen swamp and Pepper Tree Lane
and at Wild Dog creek you crossed three of Dennison's out-stations
before winding up in the criss-cross of Iron Bark range
and at Navarre lay Heifer Station creek and then it was on to Avoca
Daisy's Hill on to Bucknall's and Deep Creek
and Sawpit gully where the sight of El Dorado spread out before you
like a peal of laughter
that redoubtable gentleman Jeremy Chambers had devised a cart
for conveying the gold fitted with a false bottom
the inside was lined with tin and rendered water-tight
whereupon he filled it with a brag's length of brandy
complete with peg and tap
much to the commissioner's dissatisfaction
and every couple of miles the escort halted while Jeremy availed himself
of a modest tipple careful to pass it round
and as they drank Paddy McCullough piped on his cornopean
'See the Conquering Hero Come' and the diggings
magically came into view
or a melancholy departure lay ahead to 'Over the Hills and
Far Away'

§

tells me he does look now and tell me you can look away
that horizon is the same one that mocked them
now it's mocking us
how easily one is charmed by the momentary

the clear blue sky with its gentle pasquinade of clouds
beckoning clear skies
the whole world then exists only in the pluperfect
the present is no more than a fragment of the shattered past
leaving a brackish taste in the mouth
the taste of unfallen rain
of waterless waterholes and creek beds cracking
the rain god is not a god of rain
there is only the god and there is rain
more you cannot say
and the wind you think is bringing rain
is bringing nothing of the kind
only the voice of the god carrying through the trees
or scudding on the sand
the voice of a stranger with a plausible tale
or rumours of native wells poisoned and of cart wheels removed
the cart itself placed on a tarpaulin
and the extremity of the flood waters up to your armpits
the horses panicking and shaking free of their harness
and a rope thrown across the torrent and one by one saddles and ammunition
provisions of every kind to be kept intact are brought across
to the opposite bank
always keep your powder dry he says
and above all don't take your eyes off that gold
they cosseted it in canvas saddle bags under the lash of the rain
all twenty eight thousand ounces of it
and after saving the shaft horse the reliable traces of the whole team
and diving six times to the bottom of Deep creek
to retrieve the precious loot
Tolmer proved himself to be no less than Hercules
they say you know that the real hero was Saunders his horse
sixteen hands high and mighty-hearted
the same that was groomed and buffed over a flurry of fences
every day at dawn without fail
by trooper Gordon quite unofficially between poignant poems
he had seen how over the jumps a horse instinctively picks up a certain tempo
by the time it covers the distance the tempo has become a heartbeat

the grace of its motion almost supernatural
and yet he shot himself as if the shot ringing out might make for
the sound of a caesura
and those blackguards knew it too those scoundrels
working the country over in another kind of life
Captain Melville or Gypsy Smith
galloping into a sunset of no return as Sullivan and Norton too
had done and ended up in Portland's stocks and chains
but by God their names were on everyone's lips
Dan Morgan and 'Darkie' Gardiner part Irish part aboriginal
a great lifter of horses
got five years for his trouble all of it hard labour
and then resumed what was clearly a career
conducting himself to all intents ever like a gentleman
even at the comic opera at Forbes
that little stint earned him thirty two years
Langlands thought him a fine fellow a grand figure
with good graces sufficient to enter into the good graces
of genteel folk not least the ladies
he had a heather-mist look in his eyes they said
an orotund Scots burr in his conference
not like Captain Melville who preferred a more blunt approach
counting to five as if that was as far as he could count
at Wonwondah the cook Pickford slapped up a plate of chops
for the insouciant fellow his wife thought him
a bonnie man
he'd have done better to have died then and there
in the muffled thunder of Bail up! Bail up!
than at the end of a swinging rope
and Bill the Spaniard all flash and swarthy looks
a good breaker of horses you knew was none other than
Dan Morgan standing under a scented gum
or clearing his throat under a claret ash
you see what a horse can do to a man
make him feel he is a king
ask them at Lockhart at Bunyip at Tattiarra
at Bringalbert and Drumbanagher

see if they remember that the lake at Brambuk is so called
after one of his finest horses
and Wyperfeld of course remembers only his effrontery
and Ozenkadnook the last of his dream of kingdoms
for never was there a horse but for him was a reliable old hack
no hulk swinging in a fetid off-shore breeze
could ever make him think twice
about purloining horses even if it meant McLean dead
McGinnity dead
or McPherson the next to face his thunder
bring me a glass of grog! he cried
if any disobey me I'll shoot him like a dog!
pound foolish penny foolish obstreperous Dan Morgan dozed
muttered in his sleep with pistols at his side
cocked and at the ready
and in the sweet May morning the ambush
set like an alarm clock he ambled out to breakfast
and a fuselage of lead shot
McQuinlan had got him the Macs had got him
why even the servant girl slipping out softly to betray him
while he slept
was a freckled and unfrightened McDonald
O what road was it Dan Morgan was going down?
what road secondary and quagmire
impassable except by dint of luck and pack horse
long before any blue horizon or purple plain showed itself
to be no more than smoke and grapeshot?
what road was it that seemed all downhill from here?
you takes your choice he says not without a hint of hard-bitten
pity

§

vis á vis Rich Avon vis á vis Rich Avon West
at a cock-a-doodle-do you stumble across Muckindar and Cow Plains
where Charlie Wilson drove two thousand sheep

and a scrum of bullocks to Vectis
he and his brothers bristled with the smell of opportunity
like the Arapiles wind itself
lifting the flax to a flame three feet high
opening up Kewell and Polkemmet they wrestled with the waters
throwing down dams like gauntlets
releasing creeks and channels on parole to make it up
to the long-suffering grass
they washed and bathed their sheep in pearl-grey ponds
and later watched them being boiled down
when the collapse was on and all they got was eight bob a head
for the tallow and hides of thousands
but nothing could stop them and Firebrace at Vectis
made the place his own damning under his breath the shepherds
doing moonlights for Ballarat gold
and Charlie Wilson tended his own flocks for weeks on end
wilding his senses to the wild
no wonder the Wilsons of Ulster became a byword
for the Wilsons of the Wimmera
settling Longerenong first then Yanco Woodlands Trawalla
the foothills of Ercildoune
before long their purview stretched from Kewell to Ashens
to Green Hills St Helens Walmer Kirkwood
Blackheath Tulganny station
way out west to Arapiles and Wyn Wyn
that homestead he says was a wonder made from pugmill bricks
the bearers oregon as were the roof beams
and floors polished to an inch of their life and the doors
skirting boards and staircase done in elegant cedar
roof slates shipped from Portland by bullock wagon took the brunt
of foul weathers and fourteen high-ceilinged rooms
and three cellars with a further ten rooms out the back the quarters
for the servants and the walls of the house itself about a yard thick
and the windows of stained glass Belgian
and canopial over a great carved door with its ram's head knocker
in cast iron and high dudgeon visage
the skylight drawing down larks and starlings to reconnoitre

the ten acre garden and the garden path lined with pine and pepper trees
at Vectis his brother Alexander constructed a pile
of highland-red brick the timbers all redgum pitsawn and smooth
and a staircase of cedar the mantlepieces flawless marble
stained glass everywhere the cut tiles all Italian
only the shady verandah lending a true antipodean shade
the garden a cornucopia of oleanders and lilacs
mulberries olives grapes and honeysuckle
thus was Vectis the house of many tales

§

in Dublin's fair barracks where the 75th regiment
of the Bengal Tigers were on parade
Mister Bolton rose to become a mounted trooper
one of many mainly gentlemen's sons
saw the riots at Ballarat the Cross fluttering above Eureka
soon became Searcher of Customs for the Wimmera
in one year alone arresting over a hundred Chinamen at Guichen Bay
for evading poll-tax
chargeable to all Chinese upon arrival in the new fair state of Victoria
appointed Perpetual Commissioner
of the Supreme Court of the colony
O how he loved auspicious titles!
look at him he says if you will
stolid square to the lens
a cast in his eye that would make devils tremble
barrel-chested ripe to take on any comers and for all that
how lamb-like at a pinch
what road was it that Stuart Bolton was going down
that bad Dan Morgan had not gone down?
what road Carl Rasmussen slaughterer and of fearful temper?
what road McDonald of Wonwondah?
what road McClounan builder of bridges?
what road John Langlands what road Thomas Edols
winding from Nhill to Dimboola west of Lochiel Bridge

through rocky country and scrub plains?
what road from Horsham to Stawell laying the culverts
at Ledcourt Bridge?
what road Andrew Scott at Werricknebeal
obstructed by dogwire?
what road John Chester Jarvis? what timber bridge at Burnt Creek
at Rose's Gap at Burrum Burrum
crossing the 't's' of McClounan's tender?
how many chains of plough furrow to Lawloit and Albacutya?
what road to Half Way House to Deep Lead
and Pleasant Creek?
what road metalled or unmetalled secondary or of earth formation?
what road to the horizon—
back of it lies Dunmunckle
its dusty patchwork of dwellings and smithies and honest toil fields
unfolding like a rodomontade of mirages
on the only road you never had to ask: Pray stranger—
what road is that?
with its smattering of sugargums and ungathered hills
its ruts and potholes smelling of long-buried water
redolences of spring in the Orkneys of summer in the Hebrides
of autumn in the Shetlands still sapid
in the memory

§

scarlet-painted Cobb & Co took these roads
these not much more than sandy tracks
leather-strapped to bear the brunt of every jar and jolt
bringing with them news from abroad and a handful of souls
united in one doubtful but tremulous vision
of a heaven in the middle of hell
the horses four or six pulling hard from one half way house
to the next and on to another Ten Mile Inn
where the fresh relays waited and the grooms with pads and brushes
watered them down while coachman and postilion

and every weary passenger found faint refreshment and salves
for deeper-seated disappointments in the yards
or peered uneasily through weeping bottlebrush and wirilda
at the great white maw of distance that lay in wait
out there out of sight
beyond their ken and yet one day this would be
within their purlieu
where the light they would see by would no longer be the sun's
or any star's but only that steady ray
shining from their own eyes
what road to Dooen or to Ledgerwood's Hotel echoed
the prayer of souls found and souls lost
and those that denied the soul altogether
and every ten miles the heart rose or sank or set itself in some grim
adamantine resolve to see it through
knowing the whole thing to be so foolish as to be almost glorious
the hardships were but the half of it
the horrors all of it
not he says the high dramas you know but the creeping boredom
ah yes that one that wife from Tatiara
now take her he says coming out of Kaniva's bonfire of swallow wattles
fleeing the quarrel of loneliness and company
on Flying Fox her husband's best horse
heading for Horsham cut off at Nine Creeks by the posse
but no way could they catch her
what road she drew rein on? what road she wept to see?
a hundred miles onward
but at Bowden's Hotel where the kind sir himself
stood in amazement
and at the horse itself which on the spot
he purchased and set her free heading for down country
to find a life of her own choosing
after all a life that was not one's own was not one's own for the taking
if it comes to that
she leap-frogged from Hodby's to Wail and on to Spark's at Drung Drung
Brilliant's Hotel at Kewell the Squatter's Arms at Vectis Bridge
the Quantong and finally Mister John's Commerical

cooling her heels under the bell-fruit at Noradjuha
in such transports of grit and dust
the last heard of her

§

a place arises where once there was only space
and slowly an outpost a hamlet a township
a locale of the cosmos within and beyond its lines of fate
its hand lines joy and despair
its alloy of hopes and dreams
of casting out and taking in
of rage and regret and reprisal
of resignation acceptance and forbearance
of doing hard of getting it easy of giving up and going on
and by slow and imperceptible degrees sinking into a doldrum
of locals at their watering holes
the Western and the Union the Wimmera and the Shamrock
and the White Hart where the lines of join
lead as far as Raglan and Burrumbeet and Fiery Creek
threading towards Trawalla and Buangor
and then by circuitous and broken arcs to Little Wimmera
to Boga Lakes to Glenorchy and Ashens
and all for the princely sum of two pounds on the nose
and the mail coach departing at six o'clock in the morning
sharp from Mellor's Club Hotel
and thus by horse to Melbourne and Empire
but you know he says for those who ventured further west
say to Lochiel station and river crossings emulating Tolmer's route
westward past the waterhole at Tangett
the finger post on Coker's Dam
five chains onward to Kiata and a heat haze that seemed everlasting
them's as reached Dimboola in mid-winter
wiping the mud from their boots scraping it off the wheels
and nothing to stop the lightning of horses
or the thunder of the land when their hooves beat it like a drum

well you know such things he says became after a while
matter of course
on occasion leavened by a coachman like Cane
full of a wicked wit and broader yarns than delicate ears
could endure
what road to Lillimur or Lockhart going westward?
what breaker of ball and leg irons?
what road to the beginning of the end of the world
smelling of wool-grease and chaff under the high-tossled clouds
ended in gaslight at Green Lake at Haven and Lah Arum?
the age was on the move you see
iron rails and endless sleepers and blasting steam
in the Upper House all present were left in no doubt of gravity's
new field and force and the Stranger's Gallery
rose in a diapason of united and unshakeable resolve
and when the day was won the ballast was gotten
from Red Gravel pit and in the dust even the blowflies rejoiced
the Governor-in-Chief stepped down with quiet deliberation
from a handsome four-in-hand
and Treacey riding the King of the North
led the way to the banquet at Bennet's
where the better part of five hundred were victualled to the point
of a riotous an unaccustomed gluttony
that evening sets were danced and the splendours of the ball
were ladies like the winsome Miss Bolton
and gentlemen who but for hands to hold their glasses with
and a fondness for large cigars
would have cut off their little finger
for the likes of her
it was Major Pitt after final acceptances
was seen to make adorable love to Miss Twigg
under a humid moon

§

BOOK TWO

THE ROAD TO WAL WAL

THE ROAD TO WAL WAL

PART ONE

§

drunk as skunks the fireman and his driver were firing
on all pistons
carriages lurched around curves
a delirium tremens had set in—
never again they said!
but the age of iron the age of steam had arrived
at Rainbow at Jeparit and Mitre
and over the paddocks settled lonesome drifts of smoke
over the creeks and down among the gullies
out past Burnt Bank and Crowlands Balrook and Mount Elgin
out at Yanack-a-Yanack
where the lemon gums stood tethered to a rail of stars

§

what road to Tullyvea with news of loved ones
far flung in shanty towns
marooned at Kalkee and Garup
at Murderer's Dam and Murra Warra
mere dots on a no man's map
what road to Green Lake where nothing ever seemed to move
for hours on end on end
not even memory stirring
and yet the trees are full of song
motionless leaves are invisibly moving
scenting a change in the smell of dust
and the dust shifts among a scatter of pebbles

the pebbles show the way to ancient shadows tearing at the trees
the way to the Wal Wal road

§

tells me he does that picture's true blue
a bloke smoking a rollie with the dog lying at his feet
and a shovel leaning up against the house
the house itself no more than log and straw thatch
a makeshift thing
neither one thing nor t'other
the lean-to with the rickety fence along one side
and straggly eucalypts leaning into the sky
all this is true enough but only as a dream is true
a dream of a day of rest
the atmospheres of the house are and remain its own
no matter the howl
of the weather-spawning wind
out there lies the vegetable patch the garden
still half in love with Northumbria and lacustrine landscapes
at the window there's a man staring out
as if this is the way he feels at home
this is how he shows himself as set in his ways
perhaps as if this may be the only way worth living
or doing things
the only way there is for a cocky to make good his modest claim
his necessities being by their nature bare
no vision of a sheep run stretching to a kind of forever and ever
the market rigged the double dealings
and treachery and subterfuge commonplace
the not letting on of valuable information
a waterhole a well an arable soil
farmers weren't wanted then and so you see he says
what they did to Jervis's six hundred and twenty acres
all that luminous wheat
and wrecking his mill just before harvest

for the bloody-minded hell of it
the crop ruined with impunity
and all that back-breaking work that had gone
into the sowing and the reaping
at Nattimuk sheep were set loose on thousands upon thousands
of golden acres
the wheat devoured as animal forage
the Lord their shepherd had it seemed abandoned them
even the most pious among them
Moravians who had put their faith not in the Hapsburgs
but in Galilee
and the year after that the bastardry spread to all new chums
not only their precious crops but every last bleeding
blade of grass
tells me he does they pulled up stumps and packed it in
setting their wagons at a hundred and eighty degrees
back to Mount Gambier back to Gulf Saint Vincent to Port Augusta
back to the Ultava

§

the Drung Drung Scots and Irishmen showed them
he says a clean pair of heels
those gormless boundary riders in the squattors' pockets
had run dry of new deceptions
were sent packing and maps of the land
were slapped down on municipal tables
along the length and breadth of wet-towelled bars and bannisters
Sam Wilson's number was up and the vast reaches
of Vectis South and Wonwondah and Mount Talbot
became Nurrabiel
opened up at three hundred and twenty acres a piece
or six forty if the terrain was wretched
the corners surveyed and pegged
sold at one pound an acre and when properly fenced
paid for at a shilling an acre per year

twenty god-fearing years settling the matter
you can see it he says in a nutshell
the way the Hutchinsons settled Darragan Swamp at Dunkeld
building their homesteads within a spit
of the boundary rider's hut
a kick of red dust of the corral and sheep yards
their places were without pretense
bull oak for the spars mud for plaster straw thatch for the roofs
and that for the most part a motley of swamp reed
and wire grass
the fences post and rail or brush
at Carchap they did the same and the Sinclairs the Gillies the Forsyths
sunk their wells with stub fences to keep at bay the roos
and when swamp and well gave out
they carted any water they could by hand from Norton's Creek
or collected rain in holes dug seven feet deep
with home made picks and shovels
the forest devil lending a hand and the horse grubber's lever
the wheat was planted in a pool of sweat
with a single furrow plough pulled by a pair of horses
the first crop mown and hand-bound weighing in
at a bag and a half to the acre
five years he says that's all it took
and the choir lofts were ringing out their joyous liturgy
across the yellow flatlands

§

a bloody hard life it was and the water dragged or carted in tubs
by squeaking waggonette
a man knew he had become something at last
perhaps even prosperous
when among his possessions were numbered a squat iron tank
from Wail all roads lead to Sandy Point
Humbug Corner to you and at Katyil mallee blocks were carved out
by native sons with names like Petschel and Schilling or Wiedermann and Nuske

along with the Murphys the Murrays and the MacRaes
and Mister Bosisto's Arkona eucalyptus factory
rose above the western plains where Hagenhauer's dream at Antwerp
Ebenezer
hung its hat remote from all contamination
there the natives were reared in the faith and safely housed
the wine shanty went bust

§

observe the softer sufficiencies he says
a proper house of the period
square posts six by six filled with pine or oak spars packed firmly
with straw-mixed pug the rafters of pine or hand-sawn hardwood buttressed
with iron roof sometimes a shingle and bedrooms
snuggled under a gable roof
such fine dwellings often had enormous fireplaces
one in the kitchen another in the living room
with huge chimneys taking logs three and four feet long
and ovens for baking bread built up to a chain away from the house
to spare shingle roofs from catching sparks
the ovens laid over an altar of wood pug and bricks
resting on blocks of wood a foot or more above the ground
in time the woman of the house grew irritable at the thought of it all
all that futile baking in the rain
in time the ovens were built up against kitchen chimneys
the door opening onto the kitchen itself
suffusing the whole place with a drowsy radiant heat
outside solid galvanized iron tanks
held the house's only water supply
the dams rarely held out
buloke-brush was spread over the water to keep it cool
but the sun could not be kept at bay
the soil gave up
a hard-baked clay or sandy or loamy
the returns less than modest you'd reckon

no more than twenty odd bushels
bloody hard work it was and that after a journey of six months
say from County Down like Mister Molyneaux
with only a single sovereign in his pocket
but within the year he'd built for himself a cottage of spars of buloke
packed with cocky chaff and mud
and rushes from the swamp at Jung Jung
day after day the bush was grubbed with pick axe
yard after yard cleared
the land ploughed then and yielding White Tuscan and Steinwiedle
the soil opened up its heart
and water was brought from the wimmera river four miles away
in casks or drawn on sledges pulled by sweating horses
and on Sundays Mister Molyneaux carried his youngest child
to Sunday school a round journey of over nine miles
the other nippers following in tow in all their simplicity and Sunday best
the German selectors being of a piece
young and fresh out of the Kaiser's army all gainfully employed
in copper mines or saddleries or as carpenters
until stricken like all the others with aureate fever and dreams
of El Dorado you know he says
one day a man might be a brushmaker and the next
survey a kingdom of sorts
and the day after that hang himself
to see the tide of rabbits rolling over his acres in plagues
but if you survived it meant
a crucifixion at Nattimuk or at Drung Drung
at Dimboola or Nhill
where the hawker hung out on his dogcart
or on foot
trundling endless miles with great bundles of goods of all kinds
strapped to his back
and wads of unbleached cloth
in his hands an array of saucepans and tins of curry powder
a billy to boil his tea
and in the evening he would make up Johnny cakes
over a flickering camp fire

a satisfying repast such as the Punjab legend Nagassa Singh
often used to slap up
he who knew not a word of English and couldn't count his own money
purveyor of handkerchiefs
shirts India silks
cottons buttons scissors
tinned fish and sweets
Nagassa Singh roamed these parts for forty years
his head crowned by a perfect turban
his chin whiskers snaking down his chest
and children would stand around him spellbound
watching him spin sugar into Turkey lolly
in front of their very eyes
down remote roads the hawker's horses pulled their hooded loads
and Mister Singh prayed often and loud
'born a carpenter die a carpenter'
and smiled a Mhahabarata smile as he said it
polishing his closely-set teeth with a bristle of buloke twig
and the further you went the more you saw
how soon wet feet took hold
how soon a supple gait
could collapse into the ryegrass staggers

§

gone now beyond the reach of beyond
and Bailleul Park with a bag of chaff
or a fetch of fat rabbits freshly skinned and cleaned
straight from the meat tree
all gone now the him and the likes of him
all gone into the sunrise into the sunset
all gone the voice gravelly among the almond trees
trailing a silvery laugh
all gone the tanned hands sprinkling sugar or pepper
droplets of rosewater like divine tears

§

tells me he does that a story begins with something that knows it's dying
and all it's got left is a longing to be remembered
south of the past south of the tumbling waters
south of the rush of the wind through the ravines of the Arapiles
south of lightflash and coker
where the corroboree grounds are laid out and palisades of golden wattle
shake above the dark nugget soil
where the drovers push through and teamsters came from up-country
from down-country
there the Scots appeared with sobriquets like 'captain' and 'colonel'
and shearers who slugged it out in the shanties
when the sheds had fallen silent and it was cut-out time
time to melt down a cheque for a bit of mayhem
and the captain's or the colonel's daughter was ever so delicate
a shearers could be shot just for touching her hand
a glance in her direction was death by flogging
in the tap room they found young bush hands whacked
biting their sandpapery tongues
their hard-earned all melted down in a reckless fury of 'see if I care!'
there was nothing left then to live on
until the next pay day
a whole fifty quid blown just like that!
pissed up against a wall and nothing to show for it
nothing

§

tells me he does about the flames and dust-storms
ragged shepherds consumed in the roaring fires
like so much tinder
a lost soul last seen humping his bluey
into the smoke and cinders of hell's own scrub country

§

brick then and plinth and arch
a place for time to put down roots
forges turning out iron strippers and winnowers
ploughs and harrows
horse-rakes wagons and drays
and now all mud
now all dust
and hayseed in your hair
and way out there puritan spires spearing the blue
but wherever you went it followed you
that thirst for something that would drown all thirst
it followed you out of the desert
like a cloud fever
out of the mica glare of noon

§

one by one the box posts went in
the spaced buloke studs
and a sweep of terrain lending itself to the clip
of point-to-point steeplechase
rose before their eyes while the girls went off
feather-picking at Thatch Grass Flat
and wheelwrights and pony strippers and saddlers
the damp weather strippers
broke the land at Quantong and Tooan
at Darragan and Bungalally
men in bowler hats rode motor buggies and the *Times*
rolled off a double demy Albion press
and yet the old coach the gig and four-in-hand
still raised the dust of the deserted roads
a man might yet sleep more soundly rolled up in a horse blanket
under the raw ecstasy of the stars
the fastnesses of space and time winking back at him
the vastnesses of the land laughing in his face

§

you know he says it was worth it yes worth it all
to wake at dawn at Brimpaen
and watch the orange of wattle gum the burnt-sienna of sugar gum
rising over rockpools and wild bulrushes
over piles of old bones
let the wind blow out the hurricane lamps at Towanniny
where the grasses almost gravelly in their low whisper
found cockspur
or caught the fragrance of an Aleppo pine
old fears heaped up in the ash
of old fires

§

kookaburra laughin' kookaburra laughin'
in the middle of day
silent in the morning silent in the evening
reckon it'll rain

§

remember sweet mother England her green meadows
chill smells of the old country
a carillon of bells drifting over the fens
here over crab-holes at Murra Warra and Pimpinio
over seed wheat and shag
church pitchin' on Hospitality Sunday
counting shorthorns counting clydesdales you know he says
they counted them at Dadswells Bridge
the Berkshire pigs at Wallup
the truncheons of vines and olives to bursting
nature's hand of hidden powers by her fruits shall you know her
that said this fetch of God's earth so sparse

the sussurations of a hidden stream
are a kind of hesitation in the flowing water's flow
wimmera wimmera wimmera
the plain chant of a throw of wild grasses
where the sheep would surely die of catarrh or scab or foot rot
and the trigonometry of the constellations is a measure
of the cold of the watch-box
a mere barrow with auger holes and Halloween eyes
you keep it all in good nick you do
a basket fence
hardly dog-proof as the hut keeper knew too well
keeping himself awake by force each night
until the first light thawed and melted
well it was for wool and carcass trim
for creek-washing and hot-washing the scouring of shorn fleeces
but how many walked off into the west
on a nowhere no way road
or walked into the warp and woof of memory as if it were
a Morton swing gate
leaving behind them screws of bales beaten by shovel
and hung from the rafters?
the fleece rolled like virginia leaf
at least he says it gave you the dough
to buy the necessary box and dice of Cockle's pills
and painkilling whiskey
you got some satisfaction you know and smiles
braining wild dogs with a stirrup iron
or knocking down rabbits like giant ant-swarms
at Roseberry and Norwegian
but the shrewder ones among them stashed away
every quid they could
set their sights on a Melrose
flocked with Currie ewes and Rambouillets or Wanganella rams
and dreamed of stockyards cracking with sou-westerlies
and blackjacks and stockwhips
and in the frame of their romance swayed the breezy billows
of redgum and white-box

a heat haze glued the mulberry trees to the sky
and all around them the ground lay ripped and slashed
with rake and cradle blades
of blinding light

§

stubble saving deep ploughing the red land
lined with stub fence with wattle hurdles and whipstick mallee
I can still see he says Jim Hardingham's bullockies
the bales stacked four storeys high
on top of them a bunch of shearers with the look in their eyes
of a job well done
and down the back roads and across the paddocks
rabbits were gassed from their burrows
in time the bobtail the two furrow plough carved out
by the chain and half chain an arable silence
broken only by the ratchet drop wheel the lifting coulter
seat socket of the mould board
at ploughing matches a good hand at straightness at crown
at comb and cutting
might earn a hundred ploughman's points
and walk away with a pair of tweeds trace chains swingle trees
under the duress of cast-iron weights
the man on the land slowly got the upper hand
the nine tyne scarifiers cutting five foot strips and jumping a foot
or a foot and a half into the air whenever they hit
a rock or a stump until the arrival of the stump jump plough
till then a man might walk six hundred miles for every paddock ploughed
you can see he says how the disc plough was a god send
and sowing by the half bag or the seed simply tossed off the back of a dray
the harrows eight feet wide covering over as much as it could
but much was left to the mercy of the open air
the wild sky and rampaging birds
so the hay raker the mower the twine binder worked themselves to the bone
the old ways persisted the flail for threshing

the leather thongs splitting the wheat sheaf and then the peg drum
and look at those clydesdales two or four or eight
and the soil combed by the wind
look at the men who did this work the hay stacks towering above them
and above the stacks the scribbly gums inscribing their names
across the enamelled sky
and ladies in pinafores bending their backs
the cast iron shutes the rods and wheels
the cross bars of the horse treader morticed into a series of cast iron cogs
shaft and flywheel of the chaff cutter
the works and days of threshers and straw stack labourers
sticking it out day in day out for sixpence an hour
and the gargoyle wind laughing at them behind their backs
later the treader-winnower made it all look so easy
packing three hundred bags a day
they began to sing their bucolics in a scientific key
and the combines of Hugh McKay in one go
turned the labours of a generation on its ear
stripping threshing winnowing bagging the golden harvests
bare fallowing and superphosphate the seed and seed drills
putting an end to stubble crops and the ruins of rust
but there was always another misery to replace an earlier one
mice eating through stacked bags filled to the brim
or the bags exposed to wind and rain
slowly the grain elevators of Winnipeg and Manitoba
started to make more sense than hessian bags and grain sheds
soon every town had them
rising like pyramids over the wide blue yonder
over tracks and shunting yards filled with locomotive smoke
from Antwerp to Lubeck to Lillimur
from Dimboola to Marnoo the glory days had come
soon horses halting to take on fresh water became a shadow
of themselves and of their passing
and so too log fence and chimneys and baling yards
all fading into a grainy photogravure
in the end it came down to water or the lack of it
all other plenitudes are as nothing he says in this parched land

even if it meant digging a dam or a well
with your bare hands
and by God he says it was common to see a sign that said
'tuppence a drink
two shillings a hundred gallons
no money— no water
if you weren't careful you'd be murdered by lack of water
channels spread like wilting tubers across the dry flat plains
and children died not only from lack of water
but of what water there was
crab-holed swamp-fouled puddling with scarletina
you did what you could for them and then you waited for them to die
at Dunmunckle at Glenorchy at Swede's Creek
and in winter the flood waters would suddenly sweep out of nowhere
from the Mia Mia or McKenzie's Creek
you had to marvel he says how at Wartook those sand embankments
massive things thousands of feet long
rose above the McKenzie headwaters its catchment
three thousand acres and capacity enough to drain the ground
to a depth of eight good inches
the waters rushing through the sluice gates and out across
limestone and arkose or mudstone and siltstone
clay and sandstone and deeper down layers of marl
ash and river sediment
the riparian shade chiselled out of cones and maar craters
their tops sprinkled with tuff and on the stoney rises
tuff rings and shallow lakes
the lunettes of the clay ridges and maar lakes
their run-off and topsoil of buckshot and wind-blown quartz
the friable soil laid over with ancient eruptions of red or brown
basalt lava or blown into vortices of bluestone
all this water in a waterless place you wonder how it got there
to Pine Lake Green Lake Dock Lake
Lake Lonsdale
Toolondo Moora Moora
under the aegis of unseen powers of divining rods and natural
shelter belts where domestic interiors declared the place a settled one

of mud brick sun-dried whitewashed
life was one long round of hopes clung to
and time's loose change all spent and sorrows smoked away
on penny clay pipes

§

tells me he does that bugles drifting across the paddocks in 1914
took them away in a trice every last able-bodied one
scrambling for Arabia
for sand within view of a sea
and if to die there well then as good as anywhere
as far from home as might make distance a comfort
and an end to the quotidian grind of brush maker and blacksmith
iron turner and paviour carpenter or plain dumb cocky
where there was water you chanced your arm
if you followed it long enough
water would flow undeterred by stump and ash
yankee-grubbed to a level below which the cultivation of vines
was possible among fair-weather friends
the stump-jump plough dragged up a tree with block and tackle
as a warning of camp fire and grit
a man will do anything he says to survive and sometimes has to
even if it means tramping by moonlight
or working the broom or the corn or tobacco and turnips
or drifting into the shapeless life of a rouseabout or a railway navvy
at Goroke and Nhill or at Mitre
dreaming of Quantong at the end of the line
with its luscious table grapes
tomatoes cling-peaches apricots and pears
fearful of hoarfrost
and when brown rot or the black spot had killed off the orchards
there was always something left he says for kine to chew on
even if it was only weeds in the dust

§

PART TWO

§

tells me he does that this is the land of swamp yate
and cladocalyx
of yellow gum and Monterey pine
sugar gums lovingly tended by Mister Gray sitting it out
in the summer heat a hundred and six in the shade
building shelter trees
and down by the bend of the river where the wide plains roll
and the ground's all cracks and dwarf trees
you can see in the distance the Arapiles where the wind blows
slow puffs of smoke-cloud
and the place looks peaceable enough with its foliage
now umbrageous or dun green
now sombre or dotted with copses and tints of treetops
the bark sanded by the sun
the soil with its camphor smell
the lie here leans towards tumulose and a scarcity of good forage
oat grass and other succulents
but bodies of water such as they be are fresh
bulrushes growing right to their centre
you'll find he says that every canoe tree has a story
the burnt clay offers up its secrets
and shells form an intrigue with their scatter
the man-people have left their footprints north of Dimboola
east of the river they left their spittle
on well-placed stones and the bone-places where the water
crawls to a trickle at Pine Plains
there Bunjil ruled in the wide blue in the dreamtime
in the days when the jun met and the last ripples of sunlight drowned
in the time of the la'ap of bright talk and dark talk
time of cloud-silence
and the will of Bunjil was done
the leaves fell from the trees over where Bain-Bain-Gurk

and Netto-Gurk wrestled with a man's soul
dragged him down into cannibal gully and ate his brains
his liver his heart in the shelter of the sand hills
where Njun-garud lurked by the shores of the lake at Albacutya
the place was the place of Bunyip Banib
and there Nadge made the scrub his moiety
it belonged according to them to Banib-ba-gunawar
and over all the weak or the strong
whether awake or asleep the serpent with pointed tongue
spelled desolation
the work of Mindai at whose command no mouth dared open
to tell of the coluba or the terrible pain
which not even the guliwil roasting or the yulo could make pass
tells me he does that such a life began with the child rubbed in sand
or soft grass and given the name of the place
and the place itself seemed unconfined to any spot
uncontained by any boundary but open to the great horizon
wherever the eye might fall that was its name
and there the wotjo grew up on fruits and grubs
native millet and salt bush and on lerp yams and lignum seeds
all kinds of insects even fringe lilies and dillon bush
stunted honeysuckle and pigeon grass
and on hot ash and heated stones cooked up possums and frogs
the days were measured in possum skins
or by the height of mallee saplings
by greenstone and billabong shoots
and great rivers and streams nourished the mallee wood
to its legendary hardness
and around camp fires fed with flint and brush wood
the dancers leapt over their own shadows
into the breathless dark
a dance at once measured and savage
like highlanders at a fire-cross
their bodies daubed and streaked with kopi and lime
tassled with wattle and fledgling boughs
this world of painted water and jagged fire of spur and outcrop
flatland of mallee scrub fell before the onslaught

of the white wind
across the plains Cow Plain Pine Plains Wirrengren Plains
as far as Skeleton Hut
the mia mias scattered and all that was left of wells
a bit of stone or metal or a bird shell
the inexplicable apocalypse with its inexplicable beasts
hawing braying spitting in the eye of their dreams
in dry season and in wet
across the sand or in the bed of a dead river
they strained their ears and heard the winch and pulley
dragging dust out of old wells
or across the corrugations of dusty roads

§

tells me he does that sometimes it was a miracle
the savage corn became a savage bread
at Ebenezer *panis angelicus*
and the indigenous girls were given instruction
in godliness by sister Johanna
while the reverend Spieseke the reverend Hagenauer
kept the coals of righteousness ablaze
and the girls learned to sew and bake and clean
and to cure a flitch of ham
their menfolk fitted out in drab hats and awkward boots
and taught the curious manners of white man's washing
pipe-smoking and blowing one's nose
combing one's hair
the finer points of crockery and cutlery
by such stratagems Nathaniel Pepper laid the ground
for new and godly joys
and the soil was rid of its spike and scrub and at evening huge mounds
were set alight the tailing brush wood
got at with a hoe and rooted out once and for all
and the mulga as well
soon it must have seemed like the prairie or the savannah

the hand of God clearly visible
home-making and prayerful worship with calves at foot
bullocks geared to the terrain
and a mob of sheep among the hopi and the mulberry trees
all twenty two the last of their tribe
salvaged but from a land they were always at home in
Ebenezer stone of help stone of stones
how easily they died Johnny Sutton and Tarpot
Jim Crow and Dick-a-Dick
their log and stone world shutting them out
these were the swede years out beyond the wide blue yonder
a life of blowflies and listless dogs
of slow death and the spears and flints you lived by
all gone fella only broken English
for your last words
so the pigs were let go and the draught horses
the spring dray and the treasures of flock and kapok
bedsteads mattresses fenders looking glasses
lamps and fly-proof doors and tanks and utensils
even the lovely harmonium
all gone fella in a waste of tears
all gone the cart upset of apples
all gone pastor Bogisch of the blazing eyes and jet black beard
all gone into the rock-hard soil
all gone the church its windows blown out
its walls a shambles
all gone fella
gone
all gone

§

tells me he does they were dumbfounded
at how good he had made and how soon
Horatio Cockburn sailing out on the barque *Florentia*
joining the overlanders Carter and McLachlan and Cocky Darlot
all of whom made a go of it

and the Ellermans too at pine Hills and Cannum
at Glenmire and Evergreen at Muckcross and Kenmare
but even for these the wells were often full
of feathers hairs maggots
redolences of alum and sea water
and in Mister Beilby's estimation these
'...western wilds were but an endless and appalling prospect—
a disgusting country...'
fit only for adventurers and misanthropes
and yet they came and having arrived and found the place
clung to it passionately
loving it and hating it in equal measure
the sheer size of it filled them with awe and fear
the vast flatness of it these endless stretches
of land and sky going on forever
infinity in a fly-blown light

§

chains at a time cleared and space turning slowly
into particulars of place
where the pin point light of the stars
shone down on man and animal alike
on all things living and not living or only seemingly alive
seemingly dead
miles by the chain cleared and time turning slowly
into and out of the grain of the land itself
shepherds fence menders and musterers
pressers winders tiers carters scourers classers gun shearers
on the sheep's back
the good life was still a hard life
quandong and parrot and bush turkey
swans' and lowans' eggs for some
but for the shepherd in his hut the road stretched
from one fearful monotony to the next
until after a year or so of this

it was time to head for Melbourne town and a blow-out
at The Rose or The Thistle
or getting thrown out of the respectable Shamrock
such bodily and spiritual balms all a part of lambing down
a man may find his low water mark easily enough
even at Cregan's a mere walk or stumble
to and from the woolshed
and chain lightning was readily swapped
for coin of the realm
hot tempers were hosed down by hard fists
and young Mister Hogg observed how the musterer Cookey
was 'drunk and bleeding'
Mister Weir 'bleeding from fighting'
Mister Wearing 'cut and bleeding from fighting Mister Weir'
blackfella Teddy 'drunk'
a stranger from Tullyvea 'drunk and bleeding
from fighting Mister Cookey'
and Cookey himself in a stupefaction so insensate
very liberal quantities of ammonia it required
to bring him round
it was all part of it he says
you learn how to live and how not to live
chains at a time cleared and space turning slowly
into particulars of place
miles by the chain cleared and time turning slowly
into and out of the grain of the land itself
these were men with burnt faces full of lines and creases
plains men who rode all day in the glare of the sun
or took a pick and shovel to the infinite emptiness
spreading before them in all directions
rough as guts he says
they'd save a mate by means of a poultice
made only of what they could find in a sheep's stomach
after they'd slit it open from the neck to the nethers
these were the hard bastards
who broke the land to the axe head
to the mall rings

hard bastards hard as nails
rough as guts
infinity in a fly-blown light

§

from The Outlet across impenetrable scrub
Joseph Jardine hauled the bodies of his wife and new-born child
until the axles gave way
and with his own hands buried them
within sight of the lake
at Yerre Yerre at Mathoura at Langley Vale
and a hundred other specks on the endless horizon
they counted their dead they counted the cost
and the missus wrote in her own blood
the climate— ‘wretched, miserable’
the land- ‘wretched, miserable—
have to begin the world again’
and yet in that vast place where nothing seemed to grow
she wrote also of the Watchegatcheca
land of the wattle of the buloke of the cockatoo
land of figs and wild honey
and sundowners coming home on their horses
whistling *Dimdamboola*
they remembered or refused to forget
the cramped miserable crofts of the old country
wherever they settled
or whenever it was time to move on
at Murra Warra or at Wallup at Sailor’s Home or at Wail
even at Verandah Swamp water or no water
hope shone in their eyes
gold-seekers and god-seekers from old Silesia
the flame of their *Deushtum* at all costs to be kept alive
no turning back no looking back
to Klemzig or to Hahndorf or to Bethany
no more talk about that other world across the Mount Lofty ranges

and perhaps nothing more than a quirk of Scripture
drove them from Germantown
to a place much-maligned like themselves
that place became their place
at Dart Dart at Kornheim at Gerang and Lochiel
they kept their bibles lovingly wrapped
in best cloth or safe in sea chests
among saws and spades and blunderbusses
and laid the trees low
ringbarking pulling wrenching
digging them out
piling the limbs high for burning
but in seed time the wind took their hopes away
at harvest time they saved pitiful straw
for mud and daub
milled and sacked the crops in jute
and the murmurers the doubters threw down their tools
and cursed the useless land
land without water a land without bread
but to those who believed to those who stuck it out
O land of bread and water
land of wine

§

at Coker Dam he says there's a silence
hanging over the endless acres like a heavenly mist
that's where St Eloy D'Alton went riding
remembering Tipperary
among blots of wormwood scratches of wild thicket
wondering how he might settle for an ironmonger
or a wainwright
too much sun and not enough rain
he thanked his Irish luck for those visitors from the *Flowery Land*
cultivating a Confucian wisdom
of cabbages cauliflowers carrots celeriac

supplemented by horse radish and plump melons
on a squeeze of five acres
at the place of small birds one could ride out
into good box country
even with a mind for pine for oak and spruce the stringy barks
could easily seduce the Celtic soul
to build a hut here in the antipodean wilds
perfect almost picaresque
say at Peppers Plain where the land unfolds like a fan in the wind
and the clouds are like silken sliding screens
opening and closing all day long
a *chiaroscuro* of smoky hazes drifting from one horizon
to another as in a dream
now touching the barley out in ear or the wheat
at elbow-height
now rolling for miles over the land flat as a pikelet
and the pan-flash of noon blinding the eye
at Koonik Koonik where the cocky chaff blows down
into shallow pits and invisible depressions
into crab-holes and dams dug with makeshift shovels
or the shafts of eerie wells
you know he says it takes a good shoot cutter to get at mallee roots
and the log rollers pulled by teams of big-hearted horses
often left the horses lame
their pride trampled in the dust or turning into an agony
of mullenised butts and gnarled spores
but it always seemed worth it when you smelled the earth
the lime and mortar the charcoal
and heard the whinny of the horse turning a windlass
and load and haul of fifty gallons
of precious water at a time
drawn up and drained over fifteen chains
under the palmar of a flinty sky
there you might meet a gumsucker or a swagman
wearing a flattened hat and metal-coloured boots
in his pack a roll of blanket and some matches and pen and paper
a pocket knife a bottle of ink

some soap and a bag of flour
and boom turning to bust and back again with every mile
of country road unfolding another mile
seemingly more endless
praying to meet perhaps a kindly storekeeper at Four Mile Post
or a credit foncier at Willenabrina or Wail
the dust behind him rising up in a cloud of gum sap
full of cockspur or stinkwort or star thistle
and facing west his eyes meet the glare of white weed
and the desolation of the creeping dark
and all he can do is dream of pannikin and billy
steaming in the evening air
and a stub of greens pressed into his pocket by a celestial
in the last town he went through
with its horseshoe sandhills
burrs of wild hop bush

§

you know he says you can always tell them from town folk
who talk in tongues of 'too'
'too this' and 'too that'
too dry or too wet or not dry enough or wet enough
and the ash-blown acres too ash-blown
to stack up even against the grin of a scarecrow
and sometimes the heat would hang around the swagmen's necks
like a halter
but on they went walking through sand drift
through melancholy mud
what water they found often nothing more than slush
and in the dead paddocks the dead animals
lay scattered about like grotesque sculptures
of bone horn shadow
and the swaggie would sing to himself
if you could call it singing
and sit down at night under the stars

remembering what it was like as a kid going hungry
and all there was to eat was bitter pollard
for your pains
with a touch of treacle

§

at Ni Ni they lugged water from the dam to the house
over five hundred yards
a tub or a bucket at a time and soon the dam emptied
leaving nothing more than a mire
of recriminations
and somewhere feeble springs or leaky soakages
filled the heart with temporary promises
and straw and broom brush was laid over the bracken surface
to give some solace to a herd
the reed beds of vanished lakes if nothing else
a reminder of some fleeting mirage
those that survived wore zinc medallions
from an agistment further south
or from up east in the high country
you had to see it he says the stubble plains all seared
the charred remains of the stick weed flats
there was nothing for it but to put your bets on channels
gouged out of the soil by great monkey-tailed scoops
and that hardly done it rained so long so hard
the whole place drowned in its own bitter irony

§

you can open your eyes now he says
tell me if you recognise it
streets abuzz with coffee palaces and wine saloons
Excelsiors cutting ice by the half ton
and the watchmaker stocking up on Edison's contraption

and at A G Strauss's ladies swanning about in muffs and hopsacks
weighing up a beaver coat against lace and cheviot
tulle or chiffon
no wonder they were soon calling Rainbow
the 'Palmyra of the Mallee'
you would have thought it was Camelot
those storied Victorian houses and elegant establishments
the hotels vine-leaved marbled with balustrades
with bull-nosed verandahs and lace iron work
coin by the troy weight struck on the backs of corriedales
merinoes and lincoln sheep
at *Yurunga* Mister Cust's house boasted high ceilings
with ornate cornices and *Wunderlich* pressed metal
drawing rooms and a dining room commanded by an upright grand
the smell of civilisation was almost palpable
and in the coach house a Belgian F N purred like a cat
when stroked with the crank handle
all this began from rough pine and pug
from kopi from bare earthen floors
dirt poor wattle and daub
whitewash
out of a wiry sandy country

§

BOOK THREE

WIDE BLUE YONDER

WIDE BLUE YONDER

PART ONE

§

tells me he does that the lines run down to a ledge
where the furrows reveal themselves
as belonging to a face
that such lines also have a history
of things not done that had they been
would have made all the difference
and memory brought to bear on the smallest detail of
a leaf or a cone or green hay
whether cut or uncut
that fallen logs half-buried in prickle grass
among fading headstones and old man's beard
show he has passed this way
and you were not aware of him
only of an unforgiving sky
from which no voice has spoken
and rock that knows no water

§

a smear of weather is all you see
and you call it the horizon
the imaginary line
that eludes you
like a close call or no call at all
but however empty the sweeps
of the lie of this land are

they are never entirely without
bird life of some kind
chanting his name morning and evening
and in the haze of the noon
the fractious trills of kites and hawks
working the wind
the cheeping of wagtails
wood swallows in the sugar gum woods
and with them the sussurations of shaping clouds
sliding by in the slow blue
bringing moistures to tangled lignum
to ancient pepper trees
peering across acreages of rape seed
endless
and all this under a relentless light
of sovereign shadows
ghostly silhouettes
of bluebush saltbush porcupine grass
creeks reed-dry
stone-weathered
dust-whispering
and when the night dew is on the copper burr
tells me he does through his teeth
clamped on a briar stem
as he takes long slow inhalations
long slow exhalations
of *Night Cap* or *Rum and Maple*
that the Dutch were good at this
at tobacco and tulips
but left this land behind as being recondite
without trace of tenderness
a world of scrub and wavy marshwort
and with a wave of his hand
he changes the subject to another kind of emptiness

back of beyond
its chains of silence
and way up there the exterior darkness
where night drops like a ring spanner into a pile of nuts and bolts
the scattering stars

§

tells me he does that there's no difference
between what you think is real around here
and what isn't
in the illusion there lies an infinitesimal
ground of truth the mustard seed
that the pattern of things is compelling
a kind of divine palmistry
that out here distance is what you measure
from what is to what might have been
from 'further' to 'farther' or *ferther*
as our fathers used to write it down
just so there's no heartbeat out here
that isn't in some way
an absolute music
harbinger of mysterious longings
of a life before this
of a life to come
a yearning that leaps in octaves
of loving and being loved
the bitter loss the burning regret
you'll find it all here he says
and when you do you'll find him as well
and yourself *ferae naturae*
at home in cycles of rainsmells and windspores
where the waltzing gullies are strewn with bones

where the clay pans the crab-hole ground
as far as Jackie Jackie
are a desolate feretory of generations
home to the goanna the imperturbable lizard
to snakes and insects in their thousands
incinerated at sunset in a blaze of sinking light
the burnt offerings of their field
you watch all this and yet see nothing
he has passed this way
and you were not aware of him

§

tells me he does how soot settles
in pug chimneys
how smoke spools into the fuscous air
leaving a smell vaguely sweet
vaguely bitter
and how the colour of the sky
is neither honeycomb nor vinegar
but the colour of crops gone to seed
a tawny residue of top soil
all that's left
more than enough to break a heart with
to mock proud promises made
in an earnest of intent
this life he says is thankless
in hindsight
as unbolted wheat flour
or rotten water gotten in the eyes
but I still thank him for it
tells me he does it beats him blind
and do you see it all

do you see any of it
do you see how it goes here
how it goes there
where the sky and the horizon meet
in this mantling yonderness
in the shadows where if you can
you make fit to call
one shadow your own
but only long enough to stay your fears
let us say that something can be redeemed
that something roseate remains
suspended in the hydrosphere
velvety and vespertine
forever reachable but just out of reach
crystalline yet obscure
not half but more than less
or as much that you couldn't have
had you tried
brushed it with your fingertip
like God
Adam's finger
or felt his breath on your face
at such a moment you would know
that this is a life of infinite fractions
you have it by a hair's breadth
all the pain
all the futile measures
the incomparable bliss
would leave you speechless
leave you wounded
never having yet come near enough
to be truly in one's keep
intact
or in good stead

or just in tow
but only ever loved hopelessly
as being glimpsed at last
from afar

§

tells me he does and then warns of the golem
who haunts unmetalled roads
the road to Ashens the road to Lubeck
the road to Wal Wal and Navarre
you see he says the road is always shifting
however straight its line
and there is always that other road ahead
way over there
beyond the back of beyond
dry as wheat sheaf
you see he says
from the beginning this place
was abandoned and left to the wind
and the stones were deserted
left to the stony waste
and the waste was abandoned
left to a world of sump oil and sweat
a land without water
old timers had said a day was coming
such as have remembered it
remember it as an hour like a year
most of them inconsolable
lost on a gibber plain
lost in the Little Desert
to the north the north-west
where cane grass clumps should be
a heaven of sorts for lapwings
they walked off and never returned

and the women in their corsets and crinolettes
gathered up their children like fallen fruit
shut their eyes
or stared out on stag head on fan flour
rust in the sweet pea paddock
thrown down
the gauntlet stared back at them
became part of the ground

§

there are makeshift curtains heavy enough
to hide behind
to peer around from in rooms
patched from wattle and daub
and even in houses of solid stone
a sea chest or the sideboard of china
the wicker and rosewood chairs
cannot hide the sense of loss
after the war Our Lady of Lourdes
was the one thing left
to remind them of miraculous water
the back shed the lean-to
became places of retreat and refuge
even the skillion where white tails
and red backs lay becalmed in musty corners

§

tells me he does sometimes the heart is like
a burnt-out fire suddenly flaring
owlet nightjar fledglings prey on the mind

become a feast for birds of prey
and chanceless ghosts wander the haunted plains
looking for a breach in a dog-and-post fence
or a dry stone wall
you can never tell he says
walking sublunary into a Wimmera mirage
in a deranged fog
in a dust storm
or in the glare of a heat haze
which road this is
the road to Dullum Dullum
or the road to Laen
to Lubeck or Rich Avon
or perhaps some other road altogether
one you've never been on
there you'll come upon an errand
of your own in the making
a thing not yet accomplished
and in the hard mirror of the sky
see yourself for the first time
and weep to know it
that he has passed this way
and you were not aware of him

§

tells me he does in moments of doubt
suppose that if nothing else
if nothing ever
this at least is
that the fear is not so much to be mistaken
as to be misunderstood
a chronicle of falls

somewhere east perhaps or a little
more or less southwards of east
or neither south nor east
north or west
but trapped within one minute
of a degree of arc
that minute a fragment of memory
left among the ashes of a mia mia
at Burnt Creek
where Bunjil once brooded in the time
before time began
a world of rock pools and paper-thin light
no more lit he tells me
than a match struck in a gusting wind

§

the death of anybody undoes me
life holds out against all odds
and all it gets is an answer that answers back
that curses revelation
tells me he does that if you took the wrong road
it was a way of finding the right one
if on the road you fell in with a stranger
it would seem unprovidential
but springing up out of the ground
a calm light spreads across the windrows
suddenly it would be as if that road
was one that he had walked
passing this way
and you were not aware of him

the road you always dreamed of taking
with its fork at Callawada its dog-leg at Pine Plains
going the way to Emmaus the long way round

§

tells me he does that all this talk
of heaven and earth
is knowledge gained by default
lacking the struggle of faith
purgatory in the antipodes is perhaps
the pain of a world upside down
yet there is after all he says
something infinitely tender about a place that is
the cemetery of its dreams
and the west you know is full of lost horizons
like the west you do not know
like the east in which you once believed
you know he has passed this way
and you were not aware of him

§

tells me he does that if you stop if you listen
you'll catch that soughing sound
the human breath within a hollow log
coming up through the crust of the ground
the keening of the murra murra
for old man Wimmera
only begotten and late of Ashens
who was brought here

and to Marnoo also with solemnity
when the land and the water were first parted

§

tells me he does that he has seen the world
in the days when it was wide
and the glory of that too
I once saw he says and am not satisfied
that nothing unusual happened
or that something out of the ordinary
did not take place
you know he has passed this way
and you were not aware of him
the smallest creature an unfallen sparrow
will shift the light about
from box to buloke to redgum
and finally get it right
asking nothing of the earth
or why the sky is not more beautiful still
and yet you ask me about the world
in the days when it was wide
and whether there was a road
as the crow flies
that did not go to Damascus

§

tells me he does that the man leaning on the fence
till it gave
related to me never so well
as when he related tales to do with this terrain
its road signs fading
but showing the place to be unending

mile upon mile
day upon day
he passed this way
and you were not aware of him
but at night there is sometimes a quickening
when the moon clings to the sky
like a frightened child
and in the serried undertow of its own gleaming
an amniotic world is revealed
the light follows the path of an elliptic
unlike any that it should
the wind tears up the trees in its wake
and the feeling grows inside you
that Ebenezer too is a place no less safe
no less delivered from evil
from oblivion's clutches
no less real
its roof holed and shattered
the tower sunken
stone of hope sweet Ebenezer
blackfella not forget you
cabbage hat shielding face
you like tree lending shade
to calf at foot
you like waterhole smoking
with hymn song

§

tells me he does that days of burn off
of back burn and bush fire
ignite unsuspected seeds
blown willy-nilly

or lying where they fell
other days everything that can be done
has been
and it all comes to nothing
all's done with
time is a worm's turning
or the shiver of a shooting star
a cry of derision a cry of anguish
you know he says more than once
he has passed this way
and you were not aware of him
old man Wimmera would tell you
who well remembers rain
falling falling
but only as a sound

§

tells me he does it's no good
getting involved in the domestic scraps
between earth and heaven
their vast imbroglios are out of your ken
if he has passed this way
he will pass this way again
suffering you must know
needs most of all the presence of another
fallible like you
and like you vulnerable
not some sublime explanation
all of us hang upon a word
one word spoken or unspoken
the land itself gives us pause

gives us up to silent prayer
perhaps no different
from dread

§

God give us water they cried
and tells me he does
that God gave them water
though never enough it seemed
and the soil turned to dust
the dust to cockle under the hooked shoot cutters
give us water they said for our sheep
for our goats for our cows
for wheat for barley and oats
let us throw grass seed like caution
to the apocalypse of the winds
yes
let us throw guano and bone dust
let it blow back into our faces
and laugh at us
only give us water O Lord
give us of your rain

§

tells me he does that this is what
she's always like
this land
moving in the stream of the noon
or at an uncanny standstill
waiting for a smidgen of moisture

the dew drop
the tiny trickle
purl or plash
that once washed over boulders
filling the world with fresh spring water
the land knows itself well enough
if not flood then drought
if not drought then flood
a life against the odds
tells me he does that from the beginning
he had passed this way
and you were not aware of him
the word was written on eucalyptus
gracilis and *oleosis*
on crazy filbert on peeling bark
right now he says right here
the land's looking at you
look at it
looking at you
at that moment I am to compare her
not to any summer's day
but to this one only
dusty nondescript wind-worn
a dullard weather
and that *the Lord giveth*
and we forget much sorrow
and I am to say this too
that among the pepper trees
out in the wide blue yonder
she is a willow
not weeping but bending down before his glory

at Rainbow Rise at Nhill
and Sheep Hills
her soul
magnifying the Lord

§

PART TWO

§

tells me he does that this neck of the woods
has a hard won beauty
obdurate
elusive
not easily understood
they say it's featureless
the long flat contours caught under a horse treader winnower
and what seems like nothing is nothing
if nothing's all you think you can see
like the sky without a clue
to the mystery of its own endlessness
between distance and distance measured
is time
known but not understood
a way of feeling your way through space
between the known and the unknown
the familiar and the unfamiliar
and every circle closing is a circle opening
all is apparent
without change without shift
full of change and shift
a subtle slope a gradual incline
the senses stirred by some delicate variation
uncinata incrasata gracilis
sufficient to make this otherwise unremarkable country
a conundrum of its own making
its silence like that of the buloke or the clydesdale
with its muscular shoulders
with eye of pity eye of pride

legends like Tom Walton and The Charmer
I remember he says how in the old days bullock steers
were broken in
their tails tied to the horses
and the horses themselves fed on oats and molasses
combed and groomed their teeth carefully filed
and with splendid hames on the collars
and harnesses well-oiled
wounds bathed in laudanum and linseed oil
a man had to watch out for them
during long waterless spells
a persiflage of green hay could lead to a fine animal
turning bumble-kneed and bloated
sullen and contrary
the horse you see was one with his farmer
the farmer with his horse

§

you got sick he says and it was boracic acid
or alum powder and kerosene
poultices of mustard and ginger
castor or cod liver oil
poured from stiff prussian blue bottles
egg whites washed down fish bones
cuts and stings took to creosote and pepper
or were soothed with ammonia
and vinegar and water
there was arrowroot
there were peppermint cures
and Mother Seigel's Syrup
lime water and liquorice and fluid magnesia
malt and figs and bay rum

herbals oriental
you brushed your teeth with charcoal and rag
and for the dying and the destitute among daub and hessian
paper walls and dirt floors
vials of sweet angelica
cocaine

§

inside the homestead reigned the virtues
of improvisation and thrift
a life of making do
sand-soap and a coolgardie safe always facing south
a tank deep underground
to keep butter cool and the jelly set
and in the cellar stone crocks filled with brine-rinsed meats
barrels of provisions for long preservation
and on the high shelves jars of jams pickles and conserves
the stove stood on a solid hearthstone shot with coals
firing the black kettles and heavy boilers
these to feed and water and wash with
to wield flat irons and box irons
the hobs holding it all in place
and a copper to boil the clothes in tallow and caustic soda
the draining rinsing wringing blueing mangling rolling
the set-to of starch
and freshly-laundered basket-loads
flapping in a wide blue breeze under a rung of dolly pegs
and the pour-over for the nippers
to let them make their splash

§

it was a day worth waiting for
the hawker with his scented soaps and haberdashery
trundling into view
and in the evening the men would sit with him in a circle
under a spotted gum
passing the hookah around
trying to work out the wizened secrets of old Farozi Ali Khan

§

you knows he says the idea of perfection
as something immensely simple
came home to you at pig-killing
a couple of times a year on a cool day
after quarrelsome weather
the blood collected in bowls
stirred and smoothed into a black pudding
after the animal had been brained with the blunt face of an axe
and run through just under the rosy cheek line
they dug a deep pit covered it with straw
the skin was scalded with gallons of steaming water
the hair pulled out with hoop irons or a honed cutless
until the whole crimson charred thing hung
flailed and filleted
and as it swung from a tree they bathed it down
with water by the kerosene can-full
and slit the torso with a hard flick of the wrists
and began the butchering within the day
cut by cut the casings soaked and cleaned
for sausages
the fat and the liver for liverwurst
the raw flesh sprinkled with saltpetre
the lot then shoved into the smokehouse

the smoke giving off sweet-sour and salty smells
and this was not just family but community
to share and share alike
neighbours or strangers
and the kids were in on it from the start
fetching firewood tending the horses
milking the cow rearing the poddies
collecting eggs wrapping them in chaff
rope-making
scraping smeared lanterns
cutting up old newspapers into squares
tying them up with a string for the ash-bucket dunny
and you kept your galatea breeches clean
for school and Sunday-school
nothing but a hut or a woolshed makeshift affair
with canvas maps on the walls and copperplate for script
and not a day or a wagon passed
but you played rounders in the grass
and sang your little heart out till your voice was hoarse
*we will march to our places
with clean hands and faces
and pay great attention to all we are told
or else we shall never be happy or clever
for learning is better than silver and gold*

§

O world of natural wonders
the time and world of a child
waterholes full of yabbies
paddocks tossed with wild asparagus and fairy grass
huntsmen lurking in hollow logs
the feel of sticky sap of peeling bark

days of doing nothing but chucking pebbles across a creek
watching their circles widen the time and world
of a child

§

you'll come back he says
you'll be right
at Lallah Rook the foundations go down
five feet deep
and even so are prey to perturbations
frenzied blowflies have cracked the benzolene lamps
the Oregon ceilings soar into their cobwebs
the world's kept out by double walls
you'll come back he says
she'll be right
those quoins of solid brick
shall hold you up and every metalled room
you'll go walking of an afternoon
under the glassy chutes
under the parapets where the shade hangs out
where gossip spreads like morning glory
and the clinking sound of ice in soda or ginger beer
will let you know I'm here
you'll see him he says in his long white apron
almost touching his toes
ladling out the light or scooping fine weights
of flour and sugar
topping up a demi-john on Caledonian Day
you'll come back he says
it'll be right
just take it as it comes he says
go with it
watch the clouds and how they do it

how the yellow gum does the *semperflorens*
moving without visible motion
watch how the ladies do it on Lake Albacutya
tilting back their heads
their eyes shielded under broad-brimmed hats
watch them as they draw
a wimmera mandala in the sand
measuring the day with their courteous smiles
meant perhaps only by indirection
for the gentlemen lounging at their feet
across what unending whiteness of rock and water
are such things understood
what lies in wait for the unsuspecting
but a word like rain
or the sound of it
a betrayal

§

so you've met her at last he says
sitting in his corner under a bismark lamp
sinking into saddlebag leather
the room is red with oak and mahogany sheens
a large open fire crackling
the horsehair gives as he looks at me and says
but before he can say anything
can you hear that my boy
listen
someone's singing
Take nothing from nothing and nothing remains

where is it coming from?
but I can hear nothing see nothing
but the sound of no rain
and the wind kicking up the dust

§

you see he says a land is never chosen
not by us
it leads us to it like a horse a water
and we follow
it promises not much or too much
the land is as the land does
it is itself
in all its lifting up all its letting down
it is arms that are open
arms closed
it is the voice you have always heard
the voice that has never spoken
it belongs to those who have been here from the beginning
and to those who have never been
and then there's that he says
looking as if at a ghost
there's that
on the window a tendril of rain is trickling down
the yellow leadlight
a blow-in from the wide blue yonder

§

swag days he says swag nights
time to put your feet up and listen to the stars

ticking like cosmic clocks
in another world they went on singing
The Boys of the Old Brigade
fiddle and reels and pom-pom cartridges
made for a lovely innocence
toast after toast and the raising of ceremonial swords
to rounds of *Ballyhooly* and *Molly Maguire*
and the further away it seemed the closer it was
the relief of Mafeking with its regimental pluck
and derring-do and soft-nosed bullets
swag days he says swag nights
volleys fired into the ether of a wild enthusiasm
into an empire of thin air
top hats and boaters tossed high
and hearts burning for a land they had never seen
kissed the girls and made them cry
but little did they know
another kind of day was coming
another kind of night

§

swag days he says swag nights
they saw themselves in all their glory
landing on a reflected shore
above the rapid-fire and swirling smoke
in the thick of it
a maelstrom of death and mutilation
where you lost count of the make-do mounds
crosses made from strips of cartridge boxes
and in that no-man's land
you swallowed hard on the sight of heads blown off
biscuits and bully-beef spattered with blood

and thought to yourself he says
at least I've crossed the seas
I've seen the world
the sands of Egypt and the pyramids
mosques of alabaster blue
as well as all this mud
among the shouting and the screaming
among these cross-eyed cock-eyed colonels
and in the middle of it all
through the sound of mortars of bugles of drum taps
young D'Alton remembered his Wimmera
of the sweeping acres
the click and shuffle of the shearers' quarters
where the sun rose on tumbledown sheds
and a dusty wind had blown her hair
across his face
as he made his confident farewells
they brought young D'Alton home
back to Dimboola
having offered up a perishable life
for 'an imperishable name'
he and others like him
no more than boys
lambs for the slaughter

§

swag days he says swag nights
in all their glory they are still with us
not in the valley of death
but in one of its remote gullies
dry as dogsballs
with a brim-feather in a slouch hat

and on the Antwerp range their buckles can still be seen
hanging in the breeze
sometimes he says I think I hear their voices
out there in the middle of woop-woop
as if they're telling me something
I still don't know
or asking me— what d'ya reckon? have a look at this!
or what d'ya reckon? have a look at that!

§

and what don't I know
except he says
it's a sense of everlasting possession
this place has the feel of space
enough to move about in to fossick around
and all the time in the world
to set out for it
all the time in the world
to get there
to get lost and found
and yet however far you think you've come
you're still long a way from it
wherever it is you think you're going
and who he says to me knows where
that is?

§

you cop it sweet he says
and the wind looks over its shoulder
down Roy Street

and little boys decked out in khaki
the little girls in kimonos
like something out of the Mikado
you cop it sweet
as strychnine and wholesale slaughter
conflagrations of mallee root
and the blood on the chaffcutters spatters
everywhere on man and machine
in an unbearable stench of fumes
the sight of empty saddles leaves you speechless
and riderless horses

§

say no to the cannon
no to the guns
no to the lies
to the sweet half-truths
the reassuring platitudes
to all the reckless illusions
say no
say no
sonny boy
say no

§

when flood tide has ebbed
come with me he says
and see their bodies on the barbed wire
or washed ashore at crimson dawn
come with me and I'll show you
on the sands of memory
how softly they lie there

each name heaped up in mortice and flint
the rage of their growing pains
every April we'll reconcile
ourselves again
to an eternal treasure

§

tells me he does I've been out there all my life
and still it gets a hold of you
hunger and thirst and sunstroke
but I love this unloved land
where the short horns stand
swishing their tails from one grassy day to the next
and find in their shadow a new kind of shade
on days when nothing's worth a farthing
except just being alive
you have the measure of an old bushel
an imperial ounce a gallon
or a hundredweight of down in the palm of your hand
and the bridle whistles a jingle
and its coo-ee among the trees
root and branch
days like that the heat gets to you
you wonder what it is you can see out there
in the squinting distance
what is it that you hear almost underfoot?
perhaps you only imagined it
swag days he says they always fool you
but something's there alright
a shaft of blinding light
jagged on the horns of a huge cloud
and left to die there

§

there's a holocaust out there he says
of stumps and twisted trees
the hissing language of bindi-eye of sour grass
and sot weed
of a life bleating out for salvation
where time pulls the strings
and hangs them high those long dark shadows
and there's nothing for it but to eke out
a bare existence
such as have survived have done so
for who knows how many years
doing it hard
taking it without a whimper
with a dogged pride
and if you could get it the work
you thanked no lucky stars
but made your own luck and called it
a good day's pay a bob a zac
even a miserly deener
and if all you were left with was snakeskins
damp and smut in the wheat
that was better than nothing or better than last year
or no worse than the last time
things got worse
the kids got fed and the wife went on
having kids
and when you could you jumped the rattler
saw nothing to be done but what you had to do
and you did it
saw a sign or a mark left on a fence post
a dog and leg a broken gate
tapped into the bush telegraph

sold all you had left in the world
showing up one day on your own doorstep
with an empty look
a kit full of rosins and scrap wire
Lawson and the Banjo
to read to him after supper
the little snotty-nosed whipper-snipper

§

BOOK FOUR

ASHENS

ASHENS

PART ONE

§

along the roads the winding windrows
under culverts and bridges
in the hollows of pepper trees
fallen on a hard season
they found no world to which they belonged
or one they might still recognise
and in return gain a consolation of sorts
they belonged nowhere
always on the move
from somewhere to somewhere
settled at no place
tenured to no time
nothing to call their own
they belonged to nobody
not even to themselves
this world they said is but a figment
of its own fevered loss
no more than cloud no more than shadow
forever changing shape
forever vanishing
and such things as one might call
my place or *my* space
the ancient geography of the heart
were to them only points on a map
of a pain they never let on

things endured beyond endurance
things that happened a lifetime ago
and only yesterday
never forgotten
yet beyond memory
every step on the journey
itself a journey
every tree to them looked like the next
or nothing like it at all
all similarities were rank illusions
all differences only a mirage
every road led somewhere
but where that was remained unknown
every word every step on the way to it
an evasion always of nowhere
the road narrowing or widening
now straightening now crooked or bending
into or out of another bend
but wherever it was going
was not to where you thought it was
the horizon remained far-fetched
an hypothesis for sorrow
for a standstill of the soul
what looked like the middle of somewhere
was only the beginning
of old man nowhere
the end of somewhere you thought you might
once have been
or could have made it to
and cross what bridge you like
it would not take you over
could not
there was no other side
only the feeling of being dumbfounded

of having reached the *incognita*
a place so empty it was full of nothing
point without counter-point
a time not passing but passing out
call it a state of mind
one you have never not been in
where the greener grass is always greener
but where the grass?
where the valley green?
only cloud only dust
only shadow
and walking through it
you
bodied yet disembodied
and say for a moment you might have been
as real as your own legend
like Wally and the Major
or Bluey and Curly
Barney or Chilla or China
say for a moment you might have been
walking into or out of
the surf or the desert or the sea
Bondi or Oodnadatta or Arafura
you did it without ever having left
the smell the light the still
of the Wimmera
walking on air walking on the dust
in the air
walking the Wal Wal road
to Antwerp or to Lubeck or to Banyena
but you were going to Ashens
and there you might have looked
into the face of the heat
or hanged yourself in its haze

or turned away at the last minute
from its gaze
hearing the mockery of the kookaburras
every tree here he says knows
about a journey that has no beginning
has no end
about that horizon forever beckoning
but never reached
a thing that belongs neither to the land
nor to the sky
but to the hoodwink of lines and planes
that are the clues to yonderness itself
stuck in the craw of your every breath
a dropping of scales
a drifting of smoke
of back burn and burn off
of your every longing
they who have no home
to speak of
but where the heart is
say it's there mate
wherever yellow-tailed blackbirds
leave a trail of their wings in the sky
an earnest of their presence
here they say or there
look over there
or not here not there
but there look now
maybe somewhere maybe sometime
maybe somehow
something moved or ceased to move
or simply vanished
in a plume of insane appearances
disappearing no sooner

than caught sight of
and you can't say they've never come
or ever left
only that they were there
and now are not there
or were not there
but always have been
or always will be
going back he says to Antwerp or to Lubeck
for them is a leave-taking
and saying good bye to Banyena
or Frog Hollow for them
is going back
as if it's always bush week
and the spinner comes in
and you know he says that's when your luck
always runs out
and you're back to where you started
a green hand
a tarboy
and how many schooners does it take
to remember what that was like
to remember that *London to a brick*
or *Sydney or the bush*
is something more solid
compared to this
and that time you see is only a way of talking
things going on or nothing going on
something doing or nothing doing
like death in a forty acre paddock
like life with the white lady
what does it matter
dog days
possum yacker

back to the cactus
to where it's all or nothing
Johnny Raw
hoeing a hard row
and the world's your tin shed he says
and calls me *my boy*
and believe me he says
the dirt is being on the road again
with all the time in the world

§

a dead-pan grin to hide your pain behind
you can only take so much he says
but you know hardship's a funny thing
after a while you find your happiness in it
learn to live with disappointment
ride it side-saddle
the kids grow up before you know it
going off to school in gigs or carts or on their ponies
sometimes on the draught horse
and the teacher's pointing stick sometimes
is a fairy's wand
sometimes the slayer of the tiger snake
curled up in the chimney
and bush days were days of ferreting
unearthing the mounds of mallee hens or catching
rabbits in their hutches
and the long walk home was filled with cypresses
and lemon gums
whispering to each other
and you could always dream a Sunday dream
of cream-filled sponge cakes

and orange and pineapple cordials
sheffield races or rooster chases or egg and spoon
and rounds of quoits
while the pipe and drum band swirled into the afternoon
and the grown ups fell into a snake gully swagger
on the sawdust and candle grease
sprinkled with kerosene
for the *Lancers* and the *Cotillions*
it wasn't half bad he says when the train came pluming home
and victory over the other mob
was like winning the war
and the same lady that decked herself out
in voile or organdie
also fed the horses the truss hay
and everybody said that's it and never again
there'll be no more wars
until they heard the Avro Ansons and the Wirraways
droning over the west riding
or coming in low over hedgerows
under a reddening sky
and watching them for long enough you saw the terrain
in a new light
the flat earth being lifted up enough
to be thought of at last as something high and mighty
not low and unrelieved
the horses had always known it
stripping the soil turning it over darkening it
with good width and grace
and yet tales of old miseries fell on deaf ears

§

tells me he does that in that serene pause
between one horror and the next
the loquat trees wept their fruits to the ground
the rush orange in the afternoon shade
shook in no wind
and they came and sat down by the banks of Lake Hindmarsh
as if by the waters of Leman
in their silk hats and tub bowlers and shirt-sleeves rolled up
pushing small row boats out onto the water
or dragging them across the sand
docking on little dunes shaded by stringy barks
and in the line of sight a snow gum
led the eye out towards an undistracted horizon
of small comforts and small mercies
elsewhere the world had grown tired of itself
weary of peace of dull prosperity
but here a patch of low scrub
a brackish billabong
could give you your fill of nostalgia
hearing the drum tap
seeing the drummer boys once more in all their gear
and all the waste and ruin to be repeated
like a hackneyed song
unnerving even the night owls

§

I suppose he says they'll always think like this
there's nothing like a good war
to get the blood going
men pretending to be boys
boys pretending to be men
with their bootlaces done up tight

lips sealed laughter as an anodyne
like spearmint or PK
and their tongue moistening a Tally-Ho
good old boys
who can tell a claxon from a cow bell
who need nothing
fear nothing
who can get by on the smell of an oily rag
are good in a scrap
and know the true value of
old bedding old bottles old sugar bags
twine hemp rope wire cordage ribbon bits of string
rusty blades dead butts old bits of tin
men pretending to be boys
boys already men
there's nothing he says like a fair dinkum war
to get the blood going
brown outs and slit trenches
blinds drawn
windows papered over
stump charcoal and horse-hair filters
blow flies camouflage nets
you know he says those 'I-tyes' looked so handsome
the more haggard
not like the Japs who'd slit your throat with a finger
if only it was sharp enough
and the women came into their own
yet again
and swapped darning socks pullovers mittens
for real man's work
which they'd always done anyway
like Jock Haines' wife harvesting salt
driving trucks and tractors
and Sister Murray in her old Austin Seven

going cross country packing a scale
to weigh babies with
bringing tea and sandwiches for all the other little blighters
and the doyen of them all Anne Dreyer
over dirt roads over the quagmires
sometimes over no roads at all
so a little girl at Gerang Gerang who never had
could be read stories to
or pour over dog-eared picture books
in better times you could easily forget such things
began the kindergarten of the air
you know he says they were our saints
and the greatest of them all was tough and tender
Matron Paschke of Malacca
and later of Singapore
she held the Vynner Brooke together with daily boat drills
and when the boat went down
kept the last life boat afloat with the wounded
taking all six planes under heavy fire
and the machine guns cutting down the nurses
like dandelions
in the murk of the ocean they hung on for eighteen hours
and she no swimmer in the end
went under
the rest made it onto Banka Island
and there they were mown down in the shallows
every last one of them
their blood washed the tide for days

§

tells me he does the elements themselves
rose up in horror

a world without beginning a world without end
in the days when the Jap when the Hun
fell upon the sheepfold
and dust blew across the streets and into men's eyes
made them weep for a lost world
the houses darkened the paddocks lay bare
the wind fell on its sword at the edge of the waterless dam
the sun was not to be seen
one man could barely make out another through the haze
and the hard and unforgiving earth
bred sand hills and wormwood in the memory
or blew itself up on the dry bed of a creek
in the towns in a frenzy of wind
the street lamps came on and went out
and shadowy figures moved about incognito
vanishing under dark verandahs
crawling into the cracks where soot and dust
rose above stairs leading into airless rooms
in the smokeless fire of that desolation
out on the plains the rivers sank
under the weight of their own emptiness
the horses drank of the river's blood
the soil all crack and drift
lodged as dust in the cracks of men's voices
you know he says around here you never
but never put your glasses down
you keep your guard up
waiting for the water next time for the fire
waiting for the fever for the plague
for news from a front ten thousand miles away
to tighten the nuts the screws
of desolation and the feeling that it's all futile

§

your's is such a backward water
holier than a thousand springs pulsing
from a thousand rocks
in your insignificant splendour
you are being itself
just being
rapturous ecstatic self-absorbed
you have the stoical eyes of a survivor
yet all you've ever done
is nothing but day-dream all day
your memory is like a pebble in a shoe
your echo the accident of an hour
passed on the slopes of your grasses
lying on my back under the dead end gum trees
forestalling the *jouissance* of the wind
not the mirrors not the halls
not the shapes of questions concave or convex
nor the over flows of light
and other conduits of sudden revelation
not the ilex that emboldened the Murray or the Murrumbidgee
not the smoky mountain with its burning cloud
just long flat endless forgeries
of hope

§

Out here you're on your own
in the burn off
beyond the clearing
where the charred flats
cut across the Wal Wal road

and a cooper's barrel hoop
the blade of a skeleton plough
rust away in long dry grass
or under trees standing at ease
in their own shadow
here the light can do what it likes
put on a disappearing act
a pan-flash a sleight-of-hand
or just spook the slowpokes in the paddock
on a tar-stained afternoon
a wedge-tail eagle does a pike dive
into the deep end of the sky
where the eye meets the horizon
that wears it down
beyond that
only a scribble of bog gums
rock spurs
the flint of the next rise
the hypochondria of a river without water
how easily you're fooled by those clouds
agents provocateurs
ahead you hills that aren't even there
once a week a concertina
freight train rattles
through Mutton Swamp
black stump
paper bark
pepper tree
crack
in the heat
the char
of the Wal Wal road

§

Pluperfect falls of light enter the endless flats
of a thousand zeroes yellowing the road
where the haze defaults on the hard baked ground
and the wind scatters its blandishments
and its wishful thinking into my face
the road appears
disappears
reappears
hollowing out of the dust an acumen of cloud
climbing over Jackson Siding
the seagram hour slides into a drink made of rye
and the retina is arrested
with a sudden unforgettable effulgence
of Morocco or Algeria
Tunisia in all its purity
Libya of the oarsmen at dawn
the shots rings out
the first—then the second—then the third
cold-blooded smelling of panic
inexplicable
a feeling of being utterly bewildered
bathed in the sweat of a cool collectedness
only the steel spring of the door
slamming behind you
sufficient to bring you back at last
to your shocking senses
it was all an apparition
a horrible mirage
road grit and windrow dust
one in the eye
prickle bush slapping you across the mouth
the strangulations of grappa

at your throat
and a gruff *yeah I reckon* breaking through
the carpet snake shade
of the dead middle
of day

§

on mulberry plains
great southern
great ocean
endless land mass
of unrecorded
of unremembered time
older than Stone Age
younger than yesterday
where the buzz
drone
cawing
of flies
of hoofs
of stony crows
where weavers' hands
feel to the fingertips
the touch of sorrow
the touch of water on the tongue
parched
the surface noise of feathers
in flight
in the grit of the evening hollows
horsebells
there is lowing in the gullies
starlight on the river

yonderness as a peroration of forever
as a *vade mecum* of tenderness
like inexplicable-ness
a silence to hear sound by
a sound in which silence settles
wide blue yonder
heartland
wider
wilder than a distant *coo ee*
blue
big
sky
sand
loam
shellack
mulberry dust
black stump
beyond the
beyond Brim
way north to Wallaby Island
back of beyond
beyond the back of beyond
beyond and back again
as far north as Gununa or as Orford Ness
as far south as Navarre or Lubeck
as sleepy Marnoo
tuckerbag
jumbuck
harp
swag
pouch of shag
the shadow stealing up behind you
the shadow shirt fronting you
but nothing

never anything
there
nobody
no-one
never
ever
but only you
you alone
alone with yourself
the only one
on the Wal Wal road
you
a shadow of a shadow
in unrecorded
in unremembered time
older than stone
younger than a sunbeam
mulberry stains
blood-tears
for the lie of the land
not a drop
not even of the never
never
rain

§

PART TWO

§

and like a raga the story will run on for years
I'll tell you now that none of these
are found
in what you might think are likely places
or end up like late mail or gossip
buzzing around the traps
but rather melt away into the darkness
somewhere in the sticks
beyond the back blocks
where you discover that life is what's the matter
with time
life is what's the matter with space
and where there is life
there are the ordinary miracles
come
let us say grace

*Mother Mary Philomena
always said I was a dreamer
O where is she now?
who has seen her?
sweet Mother Mary Philomena*

§

the timing is uncannily precise
the spacing is of beautiful electron microscopic patterns
endlessly unrepeatable however much the same

things common to farming folk
for whom birth and burgeoning and burial
are matter of fact
that is to say matter of mystery
therefore set me a set and turn me a turn
dance me a jig if you please
Middling Thank You and *Lamb Skinnit*
and finish with a reel of three
My Mither's Coming In and *Montgomery's Rant*
with bagpipes and a violin
with the click of the bridle and a tambourine
fashion me a figure of eight
strew the field with hornpipe and strathspey
The Theekit Hoose and *I'll Gang Nae Mair Tae Yon Toon*
snap me a snap and catch me a catch
and finish in a whirl with *The Duke of Perth*
and the *Petronella* on my lips
let fly with the kick let fly with the fling
let the nights be 'Late Wakes' and not a body dead
and the dirk dance in the dying fire
the 'Ghillie Callum' if you please
let it be a wild and a whooshing and a winsome thing

§

and tell me again that none of these are found
in what you might think were likely places
but rather melt away into the darkness
somewhere in the sticks
beyond the back blocks
where you remember that life is the matter with time
life is the matter with space
and where there is life as you know

there are ordinary miracles
come
let us say grace

*Mother Mary Philomena
always said I was a dreamer
O where is she now?
who has seen her?
sweet Mother Mary Philomena*

§

Where the road to Gre Gre crosses at Burrum Burrm
the horizon sinks to its knees
in the shadows of the reeds
small brown dams
are lost in their own reflection
haven't a clue what weather's on the way
from as far away as Lamplough or Nowhere Creek
or which bird calls the tune in the backwaters
the barbed-wire stutters
fog patches mope under the lemon gums
there's the pittance of a rivulet in name only
Mount Arapiles feeds on dreams

§

You get it at last
if you wait for long enough
the ruts and ridges
blind moles of memory and desire
pot holes intent upon some revelation of rock

deep beneath the bitumen
the wind shreds itself on spike grass
you hear the cold gravamen of the windrows telling the road
go back to where you came from
at evening the pound foolish sun's in your eyes
leaving you with small change in clouds
and moonlight
which in Garriwerd is the fret and spittle of the hills
Mount Arapiles feeds on dreams

§

that's how it is
things just go on or don't
as they always have
boundaries and rocky outcrops
fences that lean too far
the natural order holds fast to its secret
or just keels over some day
without warning
taboos remain untouchable
the shibboleths are unspoken
you accept things at their word
think about them for a while
then
spit them out

§

sometimes I wonder what the place was like
when nobody was taking to it
there were no strangers to misinterpret its moods

at night I hear the metallic music
of the Jupiter moons
the thrum of the wipers
I shall want for nothing but jumper leads
Mount Arapiles feeds on dreams

§

there's a dot on the map
not far from Speed
a place feigning ignorance of everything
outside itself
not much to speak of
a pub
a few road mail boxes
shards of sheet metal
twisting through the grass
old tractor tyres
kero tins
dumpsters
shattered bottles
shattered dreams
a smattering of chimneys
tumbledown sheds
the wind ricocheting off them
the signpost says 'Batyo Catyo 13 Km'
you see life's simple enough out here
like driving to Jung Jung or going on to Murtoa
it dawns on you one day
it's been quite a while now
since you've thought of death
not like you used to
you're not afraid to die

changing gears after a while
is just like changing your mind
the steering wheel takes up the slack of your fatigue
road works kick up the dust
scatter the shadows
gravel leaves a chip on the windscreen
in the distance rises a cloud
of wallaby dust
you're mesmerised by cats' eyes
the fuel gauge falling
Mount Arapiles feeds on dreams

§

and I will tell you now that none of these are found
in what you might think were likely places
or end up like late mail or gossip
buzzing around the traps
but rather melt away into the darkness
somewhere in The Far where the stump is black
and the sticks are barely visible
where you discover that time is the matter with life
nothingness is the matter with space
and where life as we know it goes on
just goes on
come
let us say grace

*Mother Mary Philomena
always said I was a dreamer
O where is she now?
who has seen her?
sweet Mother Mary Philomena*

§

there is down on the cones
on the shellack slopes
down on the splinter posts
on marsh mellow
on sour grass
down on the valley slopes
on the utmost tops of wind breaks
on road shoulders
on windrows
down in the crook of the hill's elbow
in the cocoon of the caterpillar
on fence posts
there is down on the lake
on the countless sparklers
all lit at once
on the captious surface of a creek
with its silver ripples
there is sugar plum
passionate fruit
Rimsky-Korsakov and *pizzicato*
in wimmera birdsong
in the tea house there's cream and strawberries
a Devonshire tea
Van Allen belt rays are falling onto the jetty
in a pointillist flood
there are what are believed to be
ontological impossibilities
beatific swans
festooned with ripple and radiance
of light and wind and water
without formal theological attributes
yet these creatures are truly

supreme beings
transcendental
the hauteur of their wings of their necks
conveys an absolute poise
as only Atman Brahmin
or Ahura Mazda
or the Blessed Trinity
in the plenitude of their formal attributions
can hope to match
and then for but a moment
theirs is the flash
the meteor flaring
in the clay bowl of the sky
the rainbow glitter of the oil slick
a sky like beaten egg white
and the wind off the water smelling of mussels
and marine diesel
theirs is the solitude of the lone fly fisherman
standing at arm's length from the shore
turning himself into a statue
of his own likeness
as he flicks the shade from the light
falling across his eyes

§

Hazy hills and dishevelled leaves
are my horizon
where the river forks
where the mountain ash plummets into the gullies
in a breath the mirage is gone
I dream of cottonwoods and wait upon news
of those who have come this way

before me
leaving some shred of their wild surprise
upon the violent landscape
some vestige of agony as it is visited
upon pioneers
prisoners of dreams
the same hills the same skies were their horizon
for which great thirst
desperate hunger
have no replenishing
and the silence makes no reply
on smoke mountain
Mount Misery
the curlicues of its clouds
flimsy as rice paper
the light on its summit slowly drops off
into a deep sleep
the wind snores softly through the pines
the pines dream a floating dream
down river
towards the swirling falls
the lone fly fisherman flicks the shade
from the light
falling across his eyes

§

and I will tell you now that none of these are found
in what you might think were likely places
or end up like late mail or gossip
buzzing around the traps
but rather melt away into the darkness
somewhere in the far where the stump's always black

where the sticks are barely discoverable
they're so out of the way
where you discover it at last the real time
and what the matter with life is
too much void about in the matter
too much space
and yet life as we know it
goes on
come
let us say grace

Mother Mary Philomena
always said you were a dreamer
O where is she now?
who has seen her?
sweet Mother Mary Philomena

§

upon the pristine landscape
there are the algorithms of bewilderment
the agony of not knowing the meaning
the land is recondite
even to those native to the place
all that is inglorious lies in wait
all that is ignominious
unutterably sad
lurks in the bulrushes
or peers through them
see now who will be poisoned in the wild
in all such places
felt as strange
as deeply inhospitable

§

the same hills hazy and smoky
the same leaves
dishevelled
were their horizon too
for which great thirst and desperate hunger
can find no replenishing
no pity in the limestone
in wastes of sand
the silence is enough to spook
the kookaburra

§

on black smoke mountain
Mount Wycheproof
wind gusts to forty knots
mariachi trumpets

Mother Mary Philomena
always said you were a dreamer
O where is she now?
who has seen her?
sweet Mother Mary Philomena

§

You get it at last
if you wait for long enough
listening to the cold gravamen of the windrows
telling the bloody-minded road

go back to where you came from
this place is full of ruts and ridges
 huge pot holes
you ride roughshod over all day
 with the pound foolish sun
 forever in your eyes
the loose change of clouds
 and moonlight
 all that's left
Mount Arapiles feeds on dreams

§

 that's how it is
things go on or they don't
 as they always have
 or as they shall again
 or never shall
 like rocky outcrops
 fences that lean too far
the natural order holds fast
or just keels over some day
 without any warning
you accept the weather at its word
 think about it for a while
 then spit it out

§

Sometimes I wonder what the place
 must have been like
before its shibboleths were spoken out loud

when there were no hands taking to it
no strangers to misinterpret its moods
at night I hear the metallic music of the Jupiter moons
the thrum of the windscreen wipers
I shall want for nothing but jumper leads
Mount Arapiles feeds on dreams

§

evening falls
all this time you've been crossing double lines
and haven't noticed at all
your headlights glare at the gravel
the bitumen blinks
you keep an eye on the fuel gauge
falling falling
Mount Arapiles feeds on dreams

§

it's not as if though nothing ever happens here
life creeps along scampers away
scrapes about
there's a constant whistling
wheezing
the exertions of something you can't see
but you hear it
breathing in and breathing out
clouds stutter above the paddocks
patches of fog fill the spaces
the sky is full of broken window panes

§

If you stick to the road for long enough
you'll get lost
blind moles of memory
wait upon some revelation of rock
the hoarse voice of spike grass
the place as it was
or as it might have wished it was
a long time ago
as it might have wanted itself to be thought of
before it was too late
the wind sheer collects the clouds
like so much debris
the light on the paddocks is a wet cement
the roads are full of vigilantes
boots tramping through dreams
through tents and flapping tarpaulins
the thud of rifle butts
whistle of 303's
jam of cartridges

§

all's well for the wretched fox on the road
what's left of him
the one I've seen many times now
flat-nosed gut-busted
strung out like a costume fur
the more dead for being left there
rather than hung up on barbed wire

or bailed up on a fence
death as is known has many fine things to offer
in degree if not in kind

§

and well for him wretched thing
as he lies there on the road
one eyeball bulging from its socket
well for him what's left of him
hub-capped
spread-eagled
squelched
spittooned
choked on his own viscera
buckled
beaten to a pulp
given such a belting
as he will never forget
ironed out by farm machinery
he has become the very cloth and pattern
of the smooth macadam
tarred and feathered
despatched at high speed
the real world is all mud and slime
death by ditching
fate at a gravel turn off
at a T-intersection where nothing ever approaches
until you just happen to cross
life's a game he says we can't afford to lose

§

in the end
it's always a road going nowhere
you think you know where it's going
though really you have no idea
you know only it's the road you dreamed of
the one the compass point itself dreamed of
the one the road declared itself to be
when it saw you coming
saw you in its own strange dream
appearing out of nowhere
like itself having a life a fate
where there was no life
no fate
the road saw you coming
saw you taking it
as if you knew where you were going
out where the wind flies in the face
of its own intent
through the wild barley the oaten field
miles of time withered or sprouting
or snap frozen
a road of pikes and forks
of moments each a turning point
whether to go back or to go on
of thinking at last you've arrived
of realising you never will
that one day you'll vanish altogether
at the local watering hole they'll say—*yeah I saw him*
he was here or he was there
somewhere they'll reckon
reckon it was him—could have sworn it was
one day they'll say you were last seen
heading out that morning on the road to Wail
or so they thought

no good looking for him now
all you'll find is the road
the one he thought he was on
leading towards an empty and endless sky
a sky that lies before you
never over your head
like the elusive horizon
just that much further
always at arm's length
beyond telling beyond its limen
where the visible world peels away
becomes too small to see
too vast to measure
like time must be for the dead dreaming of time
a place without space
a point of light filled with darkness
a darkness you can never delve
there where the road stops in the middle of itself
comes to its own end

Mother Mary Philomena
always said you were a dreamer
O where is she now?
who has seen her?
sweet Mother Mary Philomena

§

BOOK FIVE

SHEEP HILLS

SHEEP HILLS

PART ONE

§

through what landscapes the mind wanders
taking its bearings from the dead
the land remembers you
the sound of your footfall
the smell of your skin
and this is how the inevitable comes into being
as if the mind itself is the landscape
and the lie of the land
is that of the mind
the land and the mind are one
they lead you to the edge
where the Richardson meets the Avon
carved out of rock and sand and serrated tussock
a stay of time's proceedings
follows or is followed
where hedge and thicket where fern and rush
meet the slowly-moving water
there where the curve of the back
of the day itself shows
and by how much and for how long
it has survived on a hunch
nearing nightfall he says the watermark is breached
the banks are severed by shadows
by morning who could guess the wind
or second guess any wind at all
perhaps enough to drop wisps of her hair
across a cheek line

to let slip through fingers
a moment without spur
wary of liberties
of how easily it happens
a mind like a landscape
going under going out
until one day like the landscape
the mind can take no more
it cracks
and is gone

§

a snake coils and uncoils its rainbow vows
a bellbird pipes to an invisible other
driftwood does what it does best
it drifts
but secretly and with such seeming purpose
as makes the river's motions stick
in its own dead craw
and the banks to fear the overflow
but not here he says
where the snake coils and uncoils its vows
and the invisible other pipes
to the brittle bellbird
on either side of the indifferent stream
whose are he wonders these acres bludgeoned
with the blunt instrument of heat
and hear how the gully is a perfect echo chamber
for a truth that's too close to call
nearby lie the cock-eyed ones the dreamers
they came to indulge in badinage
were undone before the day was out

by the brutality of a simple truth
a cold reflection conjured up by camp fire
by the flickering stars
for here he says night does not arrive
of its own accord
it is slowly conned into falling
and the heart must
as day does
break

§

and you ask me he says as if it were that simple
answering without pause
see there the night abject on its knees
begging the moon be merciful
and see there the moon shifting
unawares
and the jaws of approaching clouds
closing in
and in this stream they say there lives
a pioneer mermaid
whose kiss it seems was a reprimand
you ask me he says as if it were that simple
to pause without answering
as if a shuffle of leaves
a rearranging of shadows
might settle the issue
then and there
and the mouth be kissed and all
forgiven
her life's like this he says
this she lived for

suffered and died for
a summer day spinning in the spectrum
a future you could not foretell
a past you could not forewarn
these are the words of her sorrowful mysteries
words in the wind
words of water and earth mingling
of air and fire meeting
dissolving into all that is left here
the enigma of her silence

§

in the tall grass
a crow perches
watching the day pass
when I was in the army he says
stationed at Puckapunyal
we'd take the curve of Pretty Sally Hill
and end up in Donnybrook
on extended furlough
watching like a crow
in the tall grass
another day pass
her horse being eased up in the straight
sent us packing
licked
not by animal temerity
but by human cunning and counterfeit
you see he says that's the way she goes
in the tall grass
a crow perches
or a man searches

watching the day pass
listening to the rippling lucubrations
of the little Richardson
the little Avon
offering traction to fish
and heading home we'd stop he says
at an old tin shed
leaning skew-whiff
with a stringybark holding up its end
and a dog on a chain
digging up rumours of a pioneer mermaid
and a long-buried rain

§

that was no mermaid he says
but flesh beautiful
and blood that burned through its veins
their ardours and longings
birth-pangs
of moments that seemed a lifetime
a lifetime gone in a moment
barely conceived and already over
the angelic doctor's vision of straw
her life he says was a Zoroastrian fire
Pythagorean number
Heraclitean riddle
her moment was neither crescent nor gibbous
drawn into the neap tide of time
her smile if it were carbon dated
would remain a part of *terra incognita*
unknown even to the Dog Star

§

turf fires in the memory
smoke on the hills
blue flame flickering
sky burnt umber and acid
bones weeping at the edges of a waterhole
glassy water that looks you in the eye
standstill of wind and cloud
nowhere to turn and run
nowhere to hide
light that leaves no shadow
loss that knows no name
like death beautiful untouchable
reach beyond reach
turf fires in the memory
smoke on the hills
indigo and endless ellipse of earth
sky of cobweb invisible weave
of scrub and leafy kindling
what you call life is only the flame
what you call the flame is a holy fire
the unknowable burning to be known
what you hear is not the wind
but the wind meeting its own resistance
the closing and parting of tree and neighbour tree
the idea of rain lodged in the root
in the branch in leaf tip
in the hollow of a sleeping ear
rain that never falls
that will not stoop to falling
smoke and mirror of a cruel mirage
sway of saltbush that remains unswayed
of blue gum black box pepper tree

of wattle dazzling like shot silk
blurring the sight of scattered bones
drowning the sound of weeping at the waterhole
turf fires in the memory
smoke on the hills
bridle and saddle a star to pierce the sleep
promises of impalpable roses
the heart beating so loud
it cannot bear to hear itself
the tide turning in a mind turning in the tide
all changed being unchanged
call down your gods
the ancient spirit of the place
let it answer you
in the law of infinite care
of carelessness as an infinite caprice
remembering the orange tree
the lime tree its bower
remembering the Jesse tree
the weeping at the waterhole
remembering and forgetting in equal measure
turf fires in the memory
smoke on the hills
hills that have no height or depth
no slope or incline
only the faintest trace of arc or curve
the land spreading endlessly in all directions
beyond the reach of any horizon
beyond the pale of recognition
of things real and unreal
the trees left standing
no more than smoking ruins
a world of astonishing shape
of perpetual shift

of unpredictable motion
brought to a standstill by wind and cloud
like death beautiful untouchable
reach beyond reach

§

PART TWO

§

who keeps he says a Book of Kells
about such things
an obscure sign a chance meeting
turns out to be your destiny
who of us knows for what purpose we were born
or of what father
what great earth mother
or in God's unimagined image
but to be a spark of life itself
embodied in language
the mystery of one's own face he says
one's own voice
familiar and yet bewildering
in such ways one becomes a poet
for are they not of the tribe
who seek for clues
grasses rustling
or wolfram
the wind speaking in the parlance of the locale
a landscape bewitched by words

§

it is not always obvious he says
or clear how all this happens
laid out by a blow from behind
or caught off guard
talking to oneself

there is a moment
which may last a long time
when you know that this is serious
a surge in the current
harmonies on higher frequencies
lightning flash
unrolling thunder
you are the few the chosen
into your possession the mystery comes
a certainty for which there is no logic
an event for which there is no precedent

§

when I observe a carpenter at work he says
running his hand over the grain
the texture of untreated timber
exploring the grooves
delighting in solidity for its own sake
in the shape of shaping hands
choosing the planes
bringing into being the utterly mundane
a table a chair
a bed
a kite
a camphor box
I am taken back again he says
to where I was born
I am lost in an enchanted forest

§

they know me he says my parents
but not as well as I know them
they remember me as I was
or regret me as being in a way
they had not foreseen
I am their poem
the field of their vision
the unified field theory
of what it was they felt
the translation from the original of their times
the glossary of their giving and taking
the gasp of speechless surprise
of wonder and of disbelief
I am their long and baffling journey
their fear of the unknown
their despair at the wrong fork
in the road
I am their wondering aloud
their howl of fear
howl of delight
at how it came to pass that I
was the road they chose

§

once put to the page he says
the words stare back at you
hard-eyed
like a difficult child
who wears you down
who gets what it wants

the child clings to you
as if nothing could make it let go
but in secret it has already gone
it has poked its tongue at you
it has become an instrument of torture
it gets away with murder

§

some days he says the phrases round on you
or sound like they've just sailed in
by slow boat from Togo Togo
or Tenerife or Senegal
the vowels have ripened
the consonants are in the clear
everything has gone smoothly
these are lines full of what you meant to write
the throwaway the castaway lines
marking twain
dabbling in limpid water
casting off under full sail
into a picturesque sunset
other days he says
you're caught in a squall
under huge clouds
on splintering seas
looking death in the face
you write well
but little
no mention of weather

on deck or from the crow's nest
or in the ship's log
you hold fast to the helm
you have come through

§

the perfection you seek is not here
not there not anywhere
it is a perfection he says that can never be
an illusion that begins
is no sooner shattered
the road runs on
you can never reach an end
reality has set in
you have arrived at zero
everything connects
but nothing holds
the words have come full circle
the dragon has breathed the last of its fire
the myth has found you
it needed you
it required your seduction
to give it utterance
it has moved on

§

finished
but not finished with
the poem takes on a life of its own
it will be read or not read
an open book

the interpreter at the lines
the lines between their lines
behind the lines
unearthing the hexagram of your heart
conjuring fate in a change of tone
in a handful of words
you have become the sum of your syllables
things that in themselves seem
plentiful and full of purpose
but survive like everything else by sheer chance
you have been cornered he says
by your own creation
nothing has changed
yet you have made something happen
this is your calling
you have entered enclosed orders
a Carmelite of language

§

in the end there is no other face
to look into
no other voice to listen to
but your own face
your own voice
in the mirror
at the bottom of the well
you are the abyss you shrink from
the poem dries to a parchment
but on your tongue its words melt
there are days he says
when you wish to remember nothing
obscurity is ever sweet

they will say he is mad
hearing voices
and you are and you do
you have found your argot
in the book of the winds
in a landscape bewitched by words

§

late in the autumn of nineteen hundred and two
at Weiner-Neustadt
I Franz Xaver Kappus pledged my life to poetry
much to the bitter disappointment
and chagrin of parson Horacek
who prefers the profession of arms
from that moment *cher Maître*
there could be no turning back
how hard it is to be true to oneself
even in the smallest things
I have much to learn
all art is labour
hard labour
the artist's life is a labyrinth
this was what he wrote or something like it
and was it not he says the same letter
in which he said
a poem is a thing of words that lives
in fear of being laughed at
this morning a mist shrouds the stream of Orpheus
I hear shots across the paddocks
and wonder what innocent sleep
is being disturbed for the last time
light rain is falling
and souls are leaving bodies

I am all aflame and yet unmoved
the moon takes its bearings from the silos
the wind looks over its shoulder at Sheep Hills
the land he says remembers you
as mind reflecting on it like sunlight
this is the moment of illumination
the mind and the landscape
are one

§

BOOK SIX

FLORIDA VILLAS

FLORIDA VILLAS

PART ONE

§

threshing floors
sties of liquid dung
the stables a stone's throw
from the sheepfolds
the cackle o'cockle of the straw-beds
the barns and coops
and captious geese like a praetorian guard
the rumour of them arriving first
infiltrating the fowl house
truculent and cavalier
the order of the house shown no respect
the ranks and pecking orders
the distemper of their trumpeting
disturbing the agricultural peace
the wind in the chimney like a ghost still attached
to the mortal remains of its own echo
the crows chasing after their own air-stream
through the dust cloud
on the last bough left with leaf
the honey-eater trills into the air
his first autumn complaint
a lonely parenthesis
where is summer gone?
where the light into which to dip my wings?

with only fog to peer through
to see by
where is summer gone?

*Vair me oro van o
Vair me oro van ee
Vair me oru o ho
Sad am I without thee.*

*When I'm lonely, dear white heart,
black the night or wild the sea,
By love's light my foot finds
the old pathway, to thee.*

*Thou'rt the music of my heart,
Harp of joy, oh cruit mo cridh,
Moon of guidance by night,
Strength and light thou'rt to me.*

*Vair me oro van o
Vair me oro van ee
Vair me oru o ho
Sad am I without thee.*

§

in the days of the shearer harrows
of the fire harrows
disc drills
furrow ploughs
nineteen-tyne scarifier wagons
hay frame poles
tractor pull

tip drays
hand winnowers
wet picklers
big-boned they broke the land
the land broke them
even the strapping ones
girded with trace chains with leading chains
cyclone wire
the land broke them
at first for a day or a week
then for a month or a year
finally for good
but they always came back for more
suckers for punishment
corn sacks
cow feeders
bran bags
cows down at Milking Yard Creek
heifers yearlings calves
steers
a roan shorthorn
a handful of tooth ewes and two-tooths
a couple of placid mares
a gig horse
the nippers' pony
clydesdales in collars hames winkers
and a hack standing dead still under a peppermint gum
on Peppers Plain
some wiseacre would always jump the gun
putting in rows of days at a time
sweet pea
rye for the catcher
rough beard in a dream season
and the road you went down

you dared not look up
look back
only head down or dead ahead
you knew the past perfect the future perfect
of the weather by heart
but could only mumble the imperfect present
in participles of piddling rain
a drip of run-off
you know he says the drift sand
has a natural cycle
loams mulch
bulokes are layered
it was madness to tear down the scrub
tear out its vitals
all those dead weight rollers ripped the land apart
at the seams
no amount of medic ley of barrel medic
can heal such wounds
perhaps barrel clover or lucerne
vast vats of myxomatosis
1080 to put to grief the rabbit plagues
what you do he says is ridge and bulwark
against the furnace of the wind
use disc ploughs sparingly
enrich with nitrogen not only soils
but ignorant souls
that way fat lambs thrive and pastures flourish
in the fifties it was like that
runs ran to the million and there was no end
to dipping shearing crutching
earmarking branding tail lopping
dags swept off the floor
and swails of new growth the green suckerings
took regular sarcasm by surprise

the morning glory glittered on the fences
honeysuckle and blackberries
privet made a syllabary for the privet-hawk
men in moleskins and navy blue singlets
began to dream dangerously
of domesticity
to shake their matches out with one shake
and put aside a pony on the bar
for Pig Iron Bob
on Movietone it was all as black and white
as Carringsbush
the great golden rectangles
turnip root and radish root were left to boom sprays
wheat rust was always a wild card
so long as weld mesh and hessian were all there was
but *by flamin' Christ* they'd say
throwing their heads back as they sank another foaming beer
you'd swear by *Weeah* mate wouldn't ya?
mad not to
forget Prior's *Chevalier*
good preparation's what you need
ley ground
stretches of wheaten of oaten
and malt barley
good honest stubble
and good gear too like headers and cultivators
combine harvesters
the pride of machinery field days

§

the shed is shot through with age
log and pine bark a sling of wattle sapling

pug lumber that has worn the seasons out
that's shown the door to the wind
a shepherd's hut or a shearer's
it's stood so long against the odds
the apotheosis of weather
and cold black tea
somewhere over by Fading West or Watering Hole
where a hand pushes back the nap of a bush hat
to get a better view
of barrows of cairns of death piled high
and poison-baited bottles
auguries of something that smells like rain but isn't
something that sounds like rain but isn't
something beyond recall
the shed is shot through the age

§

you've gotta take it on the chin he says
the queues of trucks were so long
the silos groaned
they had to put some of it in bunkers
whopping great tarps
to keep safe
flapping like giant blue sails on white water
that's how it is he says
either there's too much or not enough
at the gun club ladies' auxiliary
you arrived feeling like a mourner
at your own funeral
they were there to cheer you up
the ladies pretty-aproned and clean-pinafored
with plates of cup cakes

and home-made lamingtons
out the back under the army tarps
were trays of ice and bottles of Melbourne Bitter
you take it as it comes he says
there's a time for laughin' a time for cryin'
time for tin kettling
nights of taffeta and flugelhorns
the silky Monte Carlo
and a tenor singing *How Great Thou Art*
within earshot of Arkona
of Ebenezer nestling under nettle bush and jacaranda
and wandering jew

§

that fine hew of a man hailed from Sussex
brought out on the transport *Arab*
transported for life
for pilfering a shrub or lying in a flower bed
or was it perhaps for dabbing a tear
from my lady's eye?
tipped into the creek at its narrowest point
on a cracking morning in mid winter
the horse out of its depth
in the breeze the bridle and portfolios
dragged by the running current
but all saved by the quick-thinking lieutenant
horse and gear and good reputation
transported for life to a new and better life
how often must that have happened?
so what if he was partial to trafficking and boot-legging
the master of spirituous liquors
loaded on and loaded off the good ship Isabella

for that despatched to Fort Dundas
Timor and lonely Melville Island
a man soon found most useful in the matter of botany
given ticket of leave long before time
taken into the service of Major Mitchell on the cusp
of finding the Golden Fleece
in his blood and born to it Mr Richardson
a self-made man to the marrow
his troopers marched in full regalia
through scrub tangle wood weird-looking bush
dreaming of waking in a dreamland
Eden or Field of Cloth of Gold
or fair go country *Australia Felix*
and this they did
for which through his loyalty won his liberty
was never heard of again
a very Australian fate
or was it in his bones to be out-witting chance
seeing how skittish a thing fortune is?
the Major himself pushed on
finding destiny to be rich in many pleasant streams
woody plains and grassy vistas
a country traceried with the feints of purple hills
below which there flowed an antipodean Avon
an Avoca a Campaspie a Loddon
so reminiscent of Britannia's tributaries
westward they were headed or slowed to untroubled ponds
waters fresh and pure
woods speckled with lakes
the lakes with ducks and wild swans
deep waterholes and shallow channels carved out of the stone
hideout of the bandicoot and the roo
the emu the mallee hen
wild turkey

and on every bank great silent gum trees
native pine
the hinterland a bailiwick of the buloke
sun spangled with sheep
grazing on the sun-filled grassy flats
or at the edges of dark ponds
the realm of King Johnny and Queen Mary
Anthony and Jacky Syntax
Macredie and Bobby Kneer and of Black Mattie Hines
Black Mattie who rode horses like the wind
whose mother tongue was horse-talk
whose land was now primed for Australian pastoral
I remember he says Browning Hall
coming over from the Monaro
halting at Glenmona where the Bet Bet trickles away to nothing
into the darkling bush
a place untouched unspoilt
but unwatered
it made men weep to see it
made them pour their precious last few drops
for their horses
into the crown of a cabbage-tree hat
held fast by a strip from the hem of a makintosh
turn to the little Wimmera and to dreaming
of quiet continuities of reed of bulrush
of sugar gum
the rustle and settle of leaf on bough
of insect on leaf
of field mouse or wild quail or kookaburra
on a striation of shade

§

who knows when the heavens will mock you
or when they will laugh
and if they laugh it's in your face
rain shine and sun fall
earth beam and moon cataract
so it was for Horsfall and the Creswicks
for Hamilton and the Donalds for Mister Shanahan
for the Wilsons the Taylors for Harrison and Briggs
for Redfern and Benjamin Boyd
some made good
some came to nothing
some left a mysterious fruit on an otherwise
dead looking tree
at Ledcourt or Wonwondah at Calladwadda or Kewell
at Muchbilly at York Plains and Molly Plains
at Dog Trap Creek
by God's grace they sank a well or built a bridge
and if the well struck water it went on
to give good service in three great droughts as the stone says
under its stony breath
in great sweeps of arc the lucky years dawned
when the serene vantage of a rise or a ridge
fell their way
and a young lady might sit on just a such a grassy rise
or down by a purling creek
reading her book
or look up from her sewing to see him come
galloping towards her in the distance
his hat flying behind his head
the one she was secretly waiting for
there on that sweet spot the bronze horseman
of her apocalypse
found his English rose
and barely having married her

buried her
under a riff of cirrus cloud
this was her beloved Banyenong
the colonel's daughter's fetch
and the buloke tree that bowed so politely
granting her its shade
died with her they say or from that day
they laid her in the grave
you know he says
the road is never the same
as the one you think you've taken
you cannot give it a name nor call its tune
or say—*look! its going west* or *look! it goes east*
it's over here or *over there*—
it is not something that anybody
will ever understand
all you can do is look for where the road begins
or for a sign as to where it goes
all you can say is
well—I am for taking it
why one road goes somewhere
another goes nowhere
is only the way things seem
like dry stone walls that keep out nothing
keep in nothing
but the memory of stone

§

skilled fencers and mallee scrubbers
built Mister Donald his comely homestead and outhouses
barracks and stalls
the smithy burnished his implements

his instruments
made him a harness
and the young rouseabouts put crops into his soil
raised many a haystack
rode many a winner fed on wild grass
and a nostril-flaring breeze
just for the hell of it
or for a saddle prize or a bridle stake
to get the darkie over the line
to let the girl they'd broken in run her hand
down the stallions' wet side

§

Mister Donald sailed home to England
leaving behind a *palazzo* and a colonnade of palm fronds
overlooking the St Kilda beach
settling he says for slippered ease and pipe smoke
in the Chelt valley
not even Weston-super-mare was far enough away
from the other side
of the other side of the world
his brother did you know he says was killed
on the Clare station
schooling an intractable colt
strange isn't it he says how things turn out
one blind man's bluff
is another's amazing foresight

§

tells me he does that one among them stood out
the man with the cabbage tree hat
gallant intuitive gentle

came out from van Dieman's Land
arriving with nothing but a swag
running hard on the heels of opportunity
through the hot days looking out across the expanses
he saw what appeared to him to be a ridge
a place to put down roots
a homestead rose over the grasses verge
comely durable Lawlor
in time he added Lyn and Beulah
the Break O' Day Tuck to his kingdom
ran cattle in a four square mile formation
enclosed by a cockatoo fence
forked every nine feet
he was a big man a boundless man
with a keen eye for the main chance and plenty of nous
never learned to read or write
but rarely bested
tough
rough as guts
on his own admission unforgiving when crossed
but generous to a fault behind the play
many a man owed him for their start and said so
all it took was a nod from Pyers
it was a good place to make a start and he was a good man
to help you make it
it was good land for sheep and horses
for thoroughbreds going through their paces on the flats
or over the steeples in foggy parabolas
on winter mornings
or fettled broken in for a sulky or taught to trot a jinker
or as a last resort to pull a wagon
Pyers' pride was Aldinga with Kilduff in the saddle
when Black Mattie Hines got too twitchy
on the booze

and one year The Ace beat home Dagworth
in the Melbourne Cup
Pyers himself never laid a bet
tells me he does that he lies now in his little glory
under an unmarked mound
close to the spot where he first found
his perfect patch of earth
looking out across the empty range
towards the grassy horizon
he thought he had caught a glimpse of an incline
perhaps a ridge or a gentle rise
the land came to the man
as the man came to the land
the clouds circled his dreaming
or shifted back and forth across a big sky
as if looking for somewhere to settle down
you don't just live in a place like this he used to say
you learn to live in it and learn to live with it
maybe in time you learn something about living
about how much it takes to carve out a niche of your own
how little it takes to lose everything

§

PART TWO

§

it seems to give so little
this land this life
and to take so much
but that's only appearances you know
that's what you'd see any day he says
on the road to Glenorchy
to Laen and Callawadda
that's what you'd see on the sandy road to Jackson Siding
on the stretch from Break o' Day Tuck
where the autumn clouds are a kind of giant dark shadow
on the lungs of the sky
and deep beneath the soil the cardio-vascular systems
of stem and root begin to falter in their rhythm
the sweet salt-sap dries up
rivulets are no more than a trickle
and then the trickle stops
branches droop
grasses wither
and this is autumn season of pastures
of moistures
of dew and frost
of fog and mist
when the Windermere sailed to Hobart Town
young Tom Guthrie had been aboard a hundred days
and Duns was a Restoration window
drizzling all day with rain
here at the bottom of the bottom of the world
he planted his shovel in the Rich Avon soil
where Horsfall and Sutherland had already settled their sheep

and set up at Native Creek
a place full of stout fences
 hay cut green
 rolling acres of oats
a homestead right beside the river
with woolsheds and dairy herds
 an out-station at Cope Cope
 the men here were Scottish
yeomen by birth and inclination
the McLachlans the Scotts and the Moffats
 who had shepherded in Shelford
and now on the vast runs had erected Chatsworth House
 all bullnose and bluestone
the spread was a mere fifteen thousand acres at Breakfast Creek
 some found more space to their liking at Lake Bolac
 at Glenloth on the Avoca or at Wycheproof
 young Tom Collins was of a type he says
 you don't see much any more
 could turn his hand to anything
 could turn up anywhere or any time
 at Coot Narung at Quambatook at Carr's Plains
and fix up a woolshed from timber lopped out of the Jeffcott forest
 pit-sawn Murray pine to match a ship's carpenter
 and then go off to breed sheep
or vanish for months at a time in a cloud of sundowner dust
 headed vaguely for the salt lake
 Moggs or Morton's Plains or Gideon's run
you know he says after a while a man himself becomes
 a kind of milestone on the landscape
 like Wilson at Ashens or Pyers at Laen
 Moggs at Swanwater
Jas Murphy and Hamlet Taylor at Rich Avon
 Airey and Niel at Warranooke
 Martin Shanahan at Marnoo

and then beyond the milestone stands a cairn
 Johann August Meyer
 solid striking square-faced
out of Schleswig-Holstein in search of gold
 turning slaughterman at Landsborough
 butcher at Navarre
taking to himself Charlotte a Cornish wife
 setting up the shanty at the bridge
 on a pocket handkerchief of land
 roughing it at first on the eastern bank
 getting up the noses of the Donalds
with his store of sly grog and a wild-eyed bulldog
 that spared not even the baby boy
later as a full-grown man he always wore a beard
 to hide the scars
so when under summons Meyer moved his shanty
 by means of shafts and skids
 it seemed the bridge itself had moved
on the west bank of the Willows the reverend Hugh McKail
 rode to the out-stations and homesteads
 to preach God's glory to the wattle
to comfort the sinner laid low at a shilling a nobbler
 a home might be made of nothing more than reeds
 or bark or rushes from the stream
 but it was your home
its shingles caught the morning light in their cracks
 and in that light you could see the motes
 of which the world is made
 mud brick or buloke or bluestone
 slabs or spits or chocks
 roofs of iron or roofs of straw
 tracks of sand or slush or corduroy
ranging homesteads built from blocks and stones
 gathered at the lake's edge

stones as numberless as the stars
and the whole place fed by fresh water and windlass
or in jugs or basins or buckets
and yet the children died of dysentery and nervous distress
a home sweet home might fall deathly quiet
in a day without wind
like the old Corack where only gorse and wild daisies
a scrum of box trees and tussock
are left to speak of a life dreamed of lasting

§

imagine he says the primitive as the beginning of beauty
pannikins and wooden spoons
filigrees of twisted wire for your forks
a tripod pot and a billy can
and when the shearers came to Sheep Hills
they made do in huts with dirt floors and a bluey at night
unless they could scrounge a wool bale
for a station rug
the sheep were upwards of ninety thousand
in those days of shearing
worth two thousand bales of wool
the bullockies spelled their teams on the dewy grasses
and bartered spuds and butter
on the return trip they hauled hides and tallow
and wool twenty bales to the dray
six weeks on the road
six quid a ton for their trouble
whiplashed by easterlies
bogged down under clumps of cloud
or if they were good enough at it
bribed their way across to the greener grass

like infamous Jack Jess
with bags of spuds laced with bottles of gin
or playing sentimental mandolin and the squeeze box
under the frosted southern cross
in those days he says a man might throw the horseshoe
high into the air
as if it were his own heart
for a love whether sweet or forsaken
and all the cold winds in the world were not enough
to blow out the little flame
the dip and rack of loneliness were worth it then
worth all the figs and the tobacco
mustards and peppers from palmy archipelagos
a man could dance into the dawn
in a gin-spin or a whisky-swoon
reckless as or as feckless as
until cut-out time
next morning the pack horses made their way to Marnoo
to Warranooke and Wallaloo
and the men either wallowed in their scorn
or followed them like a pack of flies
that's how it was back then he says
you stayed put or you shoved off
looking for another Walker's reef
the horizon was always there to mock you
yonder it said *look yonder*
over here it said *over there* it said
and played you like a pair of twos
like a fever on the Litchfield road
drowning your last miserable days on Bullfrog Flat

§

the sheep in their time were hung and turned in quarters
on roasting spits five at once
over ten feet wide fireplaces
the sugar in a man's tea was a treacle
but the lie of his land was like the cursives of his signature
he followed it wherever it led
into what loops of a waterhole he could find
as if water were the ink the land the paper
on which he left his mark
and in the towns there rose the great hotels
the Royal the George the Shamrock
embroidered with balconies and balustrades
garden bars fluting the light into glasses of sparkling wine
and the froth high on the ale
and the smell of freshly-baked bread
wafted over the streets from Cerini's and Mister McGrath
the blacksmith pounding on his anvil
as if to silence the birds
the millers had found their niche in the Egyptian Hall
and Mister Ganoni the tinsmith
Fella the wheelwright and Mister Hearn their place in the sun
and Doctor Woinarski surgeon and accoucheur
and Mister Slaughter the architect and Smith who fixed you up
for scissors and razors
and Allardyce the tailor who kept his ear to the ground
Mrs Cumming's temperance house had a place too
stocked with temperate drink and soda
and Mister Adcock the moral purifier of the town
and Mister Hill the draper whose goods were always spanking new
even when faded by sun and dust
it takes grit he says to make a life out of a living
to face the fact of the place as a vast seemingly unfillable void
it takes grit to face up to distance out here
as something you can never cover

only convey some idea of
or render in a bodily gesture like a hand shading the eyes
or a corner of the mouth creasing
that's how yonderness was faced up to
that's how it was broached
as something you didn't talk about
as a given of the bush
the mystery of the utterly bland of the rank ordinary
understood though beyond understanding

§

tells me he does a fitful business it was
at first vast timbered flats met the eye
with unequivocal displeasure
a meeting of extremes
of landscape and elements meeting head on
in a rush of mortar and blood
or by stealth or shark or dummy selection
yet a glint remained in the eye a purlieu of valleys
fed by fresh waters flowing in the mind
gullies echoing to a sound heard only in sleep
great stretches of sandy nothing
flecked with the dust and star dust of dreams
men moved in and men moved on
for every rajah every pasha
a hundred woke to find themselves grubbing
felling fencing building picking through
the ruins of delusions
you see he says it takes faith in a land
and to have faith you have to be willing to believe
the beautiful impossible
that the mundane itself is a miracle

that what the world thinks of as worthless
is beyond riches
that a land without dunes may still be a desert
a land without water may still be a sea
a *nostra mare* reflecting on the moon
so thought the Mantons the Coynes the Marchments
out at Cope Cope
on the York and Avon Plains
so thought the Bugges the Stratfords the Pilgrims and Hollands
who fed their animals on she-oak in the autumn
sent them off hundreds of miles
hauling wool through waterless country
you know he says despite all
it was those like the Hollands who had a hunch
that this was good land
that you had to wait and watch the land
change before your eyes
that was all
even if it rained at the wrong time
or not at all
you just went on as if nothing had happened
because nothing had
or you just knew in your bones that out of nowhere
a Lake Benepree a Lake Corack or a Grassy Lake
would suddenly appear just where the horizon disappeared
on the elusive Swanwater
at Mount Jeffcott or upon the Banyena plains
the scent of wild lavender or correa or eureka lemons
making your eyes water
and the land in every direction thick with buloke
as far as Gray's Bridge and Traynor's Lagoon
as far as Gre Gre
and you didn't think to count the quarters of the moon
or how many phases it had gone through

remembering how the first O'Shannessys had done it all
by hand with the seed broadcast
from a seed bag and single furrow ploughs
the only way forward
the winnowing left to the wind
same as the Hodgsons at Whitehaven
men more used to the Cumberland downs
who rode the tail of the spring cart
with a bag of seed between their legs
the evening light lying on the grass like a sudden blush
and all about swamp box timber and no rain
to speak of
which was why you said nothing
the place as far as you looked just dumb scrub
at Litchfield and Witchipool
at Cope Cope and Watchem where the blackfella Syntax
camped by the edge of the empty lake
just to 'watchem wild cattle come for water then spear 'em'
you knew then that someone had passed this way
and made a go of it
and then been beaten down or broken up
tell-tale pepper trees to-ing and fro-ing in a shifting arc
all that's left of what was once a house
someone had passed this way he says and you knew it
because some too had known it in their time
and like you were not aware of him

§

Sandy Muir he says was one of a kind
big bearded stalwart of a man stepping out
in full kilt and glengarry
Sandy he says traversed Rich Avon as if it were

the legendary Land of Punt
a man then had to make the most of it
whatever fate doled out
the harder the tougher he had to be
the lonelier the more self-reliant and self-possessed
a handful of women and an odd fiddle
or a jew's harp was about it
for dallying with life's superfluities
the young bucks riding out to a buck's dance
going courting on horseback
had to get back before it got too dark
or too late for the lady to demure
it mattered little for the most of them ended up
in Sailor's Gully or Jim Crow
at Burnt Creek or Forest Creek
bingeing till the dawn of the day after
unless of course it rained
then you'd find them at Swede's Creek
with something to celebrate
otherwise he says it was the same routine
sowing fallowing manuring
bare fallowing and seed drill
the art of transpiration
of water settling in seed beds
allowing Farrer's short straws to balloon
with heavy-laden ears
the wheat snow-white the yield devilish
it was all tillage and chaff-cutting
horses to be fed and watered
and properly groomed
long after the day of the horse had passed
it was hard to say goodbye
to the Dobbin
you turned back more than once with a wistful look

or took your pew among a congregation
of manna gums and pepper trees
each with its cool sharp scent driving the bees crazy
tangs of amomum and cardomom
the grains of paradise
but it was at any moment just a flick of the whip
away from the devil's kitchen
on a road going nowhere or simply vanishing
at devil's corner
the harvest either a bumper or an absolute bastard
at the pub they laughed about it
until they cried
and talked about a land of the beautiful shore
where the water was never still
even in repose
and about the salt of the earth
of which they were in their way a part
bound to it as Ulysses was to his *Wanderlust*
they were to their heartland
of wheat and oatenmeal of rape seed and sweet pea
and as dolphins follow the screech of gulls
so they followed the creak of black bird
the groan of winch and platform
high among the silos
their tall ships
what day is it? they would ask
not a Saturday or a Sunday or any week day
but *what day is it?*—
day of reckoning? day of woe?
and what forgiveness?
and who is left to count the cost?
the land will only yield so much and then no more
or will yield but once and never again
or else be beyond all yielding

you see he says these acres are no islands of the blessed
more like circles of the damned
the waterhole or the creek is but the lure
the artesian emptiness of the sky
is what you die of
the alchemy of words like wind or tree or water
making their sounds without a trace
of interpretation
there's a world where everything comes out right
where the purest motion
is in the stillest tree
there's a world where good prevails
where the seed comes to life
like an exploding star
but only one god so help you
the god of weather

§

blackbird on the branch and blackthorn poker
a lowering sky that runs shy
of its own gauntlet
how is it that you look but cannot see?
how is it that you listen but cannot hear?
blackbird on the branch and blackthorn poker
no use shaking your fist at the thunder
no use out-staring the lightning when it strikes
no use spitting in the eye of the raging storm
no use cursing the wind for blowing the wrong way
you have to do to it he says
what love does to you
see it out see it through
this is the place you chose and which chose you

this is your own self
writ large in the landscape's tableaux
what difference is there between a drop of rain
and a drop of blood?
between a body all skin and bones
and a land without water?
and however particular to the place
feathery grasses grow
however especial the filigree of buloke in the mist
the mist bears no water
bears no malice
remains a sleight-of-hand of meteorology
still he says this locale gives good report of stars
of such magnitude of such splendour
as must when east riding meets west riding
or north meets south
find a universe left as a kind of explanation
to a forgotten question
an answer sufficient to fill the hollows of the gullies
with their hollow sound
to startle the rocks with the stifled crack
of their own ricochet
such that a spurt of sudden water
might seem the work of the divining rod itself
you have to do to it he says
what love does to you
see it out and see it through
bring fat lambs for the slaughter
make offerings of the first fruits of your fields
the line of the horizon you see is not the line
of the horizon that is there
it is the faintest trace of Bolangum in the spring
when the reds of the sky and the yellows
turn the brown world blue

it's there he says out there
you can see it
you can touch it before it's too late
you can see where it's been trowelled and where tuck-pointed
the heap of stones the mortar and sand
dressed and squared
hammered into shape pounded into shape
you can see it when they brick a well at sixty five feet
to draw clean water for the hill sheep
the horse pulling hard on the whim
the force pump plashing each precious drop at the feet
of thirsting animals
bulokes and red gums lining the spouts
the truth is the stuff was mingled with weed and brackish
but you drank it in the charcoal light
of a thousand grey mornings grey evenings
what else to do but head across country to Cope Cope
going by Round Lake
to Laen and Jeffcott summer after summer
riding out of the of St Arnaud ranges
following the Dunmunckle to Swede's Creek and Yarriambiack
all the way to Batyo Catyo
it's no good reminding a man that it floods when it wants to
when he can't find water when he needs it
the boats down Woods Street were swept away
like dead leaves
culverts fell like fiddlesticks
people saved themselves by clinging to the slate-tops
of ornate billiard tables
and you had to paddle to the bar to get a drink
floods are the gods become laughing bastards
that's why he says a mirage always looks like water

you see he says when it really is water
you won't even know it
more fool you

§

the yonderness will have deceived you yet again
the road will come to meet you half way
a chimera of cloud and moistures and tree line
nothing if not a rainbow
nothing doing but the road to nowhere
sure the sign will say Colbert's or Stricklands' Point
or that way to Big Lake
but don't believe it he says
take what you can get and what you can't
take that too
the rain that falls in one man's paddock
but not on the next man's
is no rain
but a ghost weeping for the living

§

where is summer gone?
where the light into which to dip my wings
with only fog to peer through
to see by
where is summer gone?

*Vair me oro van o
Vair me oro van ee
Vair me oru o ho
Sad am I without thee.*

*When I'm lonely, dear white heart,
black the night or wild the sea,
By love's light my foot finds
the old pathway, to thee.*

*Thou'rt the music of my heart,
Harp of joy, oh cruit mo cridh,
Moon of guidance by night,
Strength and light thou'rt to me.*

*Vair me oro van o
Vair me oro van ee
Vair me oru o ho
Sad am I without thee.*

§

tells me he does of a morning in summer
when through an open window the west wind blew
and looking out you saw polygons of light
glittering over the banksia
the dull malthoid of an apple or a pear tree
as it must have appeared when the world began
an ordinary morning in the wimmera
the sound of a roller on the pitch
of the cutter on the green

and a silky oak rustling slowly in the wind
achieving a kind of armorial stasis
the heartland a broken heartland

§

like all such vastnesses of pampas and savannah
the melancholy of the emperor of Russia
the white serenity of the snowed-under steppe
an ordinary morning in the Wimmera
a smell of bay leaves and star anise rising
from the cast iron dutch oven
a feeling of all being well
of life having reached a sudden perfection
you could not have foreseen
could not have dreamed of
on the horizon the winding road gives the eye
the slip for good
in the standstill flame of the morning star

§

Vair me oro van o
Vair me oro van ee
Vair me oru o ho
Sad am I without thee.

When I'm lonely, dear white heart,
black the night or wild the sea,
By love's light my foot finds
the old pathway, to thee.

*Thou'rt the music of my heart,
Harp of joy, oh cruit mo cridh,
Moon of guidance by night,
Strength and light thou'rt to me.*

*Vair me oro van o
Vair me oro van ee
Vair me oru o ho
Sad am I without thee.*

§

BOOK SEVEN

MARNOO

MARNOO

PART ONE

§

it is enough to know anything at all
looking up at the moon at the right moment
you may observe the lakes the blotchy marshes
the seas you have yearned for here
and find a clovis point a scapula a hammerstone
in the phosphorus light of dawn
glimmering in earth's moment of sunlight
borrowed of silicates and comets
of shadows planetesimal penumbras oblate
as all the things of this earth are
echoing in the whorls of unhearing ears
etched on the retinas of unseeing eyes
here is your rain and your rain god
in the moisture-motions of egg and spore and sperm
their delicate hydrostatic tensions
as pagan as sunrise
for nothing is born without a death
and death itself is another birth
the zone within the zone

§

the food of animals is the food of stars
the light upon the leaf
is the leaf filled with radiant light
the light that fills the belly of the living world
feeds the dead new life
finds them a rhumb-line among the stars
the vibration motionless at its own core

the flares and fireballs the galactic fires
of ice and dazzling crystal
of sand and the wounded wind

§

there is water enough above the lithosphere
grief has tears
all that grieving you do is not in vain
the confusion and the pain
change the way the seasons themselves
know of change
the way they sense the dryness of soil
the depth of the root withering
bringing with it a wish to be leaving all this
once and for all behind
and upon some open road wander down
into the eternal daze of the wombat and the wallaby
to hear some strange sound underfoot
the flintlock of rush and unmoving streams
a whoosh in the high trees of the kestrel's wings
the speed at which a sound vanishes
being much slower than that at which it arrives
there is enough water he says
grief has tears
and there are the graves to be kept
the names cleaned of rust and verdigris
the dead to be tucked back in
and told another story
and kissed goodnight again
there is enough water
never enough

§

the real strength of a man he says
is in his soul not in his arm
you allow for the lever or the pulley
or the brute power of draught horses and bullocks
old England's Glory and Scotch Jack
putting the world behind them
into an ancient orbit
leaving off at the voice of a wiseacre
pulling rein among familiar smells of turf
of dung and pipe smoke
as an old geezer at Rich Avon long ago said
I farm as though I have a thousand years to live
in the late afternoons I have sat and watched him
circling on his tractor
keeping apace the paddocks seeded or fallow
counting the divots he lets fly in the face
of a stray four wheel drive
or waving as night falls to the rabbiters
heading for where they reckon the warrens are
I watched him working by spotlight
long after the sun had gone down
and the shadows fled
the six team horses he says are a thing of the past
but I can still hear the tap of their hooves
on the drum of the dark
and the sheep now are bred from Peppin blood
and eye off the chick pea paddock
when the truck goes into reverse among the greens
and sometimes you hear someone whistling
as if the world really is an oyster
and its pearl is his
a snatch of a tune such as you don't hear now
with a melody to it and meaningful words
something of the old country
of Londonderry or of Tipperary or Cork
and gradually you enter into a golden silence
like that hanging over Lemuria

where the wind is the quality of softness
and the light the pitch of a primitive instrument
played upon by water
and in the house the rooms still echo
with cries of living cries of dying cries of being born
the iron roof still remembers what a spatter of rain sounded like
and what dank fibres of wet wood on a fire
really smelled like
Long Garry or Blind Tommy could light those fires
with a smouldering cigarette butt
they were that good
and Mister Syntax rocked the white babies to sleep
better than their own mothers
then sit down and chewed on a blade of grass
such matters were duly recorded by Doc Wettenhall
who knew his man by his stance
the way he stared
the unguarded tilt of a toothless smile
they were all like that he says or almost all like that
the women with their children on their knees
sitting in front of a florida villa
the swamp pond only a stone's throw away
from where the bunglecarney and the bunyip
took it from them for good all this
that once was theirs

§

tells me he does standing under the cherry plum tree
that the musk duck could be what they saw
or the curlew or perhaps the mopoke
but saw it they did in the dreamtime
and there they heard the planets
each speaking in their own language
and straightaway understood
by means of a nod or a turn of the head

an eyebrow slightly crooking
or even just a wordless tumble of lisps
you see he says it's like us here
regarding the curves of that currajong tree
as a natural kind of ambience for sunlight
to play upon our faces
so that our faces may show us what our words mean
even before we have said them
and all the while an engine's running
idling towards a kind of hypnosis you sense in the tree
towards a similar kind of phonic continuum
of leaves and wind
of wrought iron work and peeling paint
of brickwork and dusty street
and one of us shall say *see ya*
or *so long*
as if seeing alone were believing
or length was of another order altogether
compared to breadth
and we'd turn around without knowing why
to find Tommy Come Last cagging a lift to Portland Bay
waving his pork pie hat at a passing ute
stalled on the melting road
so we'd buy him a beer from the Temprite
frothy cold
give him time to grow talkative
and ourselves enough time to believe our ears
about as much time as it takes for the bark to peel off
a peeling gum tree
there was a song they used to sing at old Concordia
in well-mannered quatrains
about God and Beauty and one's country
shaking himself down he says
life's all straw bales or hay stacks and you have to choose
no use standing around like a windmill
waiting for the wind
even the sour-mouthed ewes under the dead trees know that

and when a shout is on and they ask you what you'd like
always he says always tell them
anything in a glass
and knock it down fast
tell 'em you're going to Wallaloo
tell 'em Dog Rocks or Bell Post Hill
where the way of the flesh is a slough of despond
reaching beyond its own excess
to find another heaven

§

he put up all the fences the yards the sheds himself
and tossed branches from the brush trees
as if he were born to it
his wife remained aloof as a church spire
her face a grim geometry of moods
grounded in resolution
and the land giving out at a shilling an acre
tells me he does the McLennans were typical of their kind
all brooding and breeding
souls cut to measure like galvanised wire
their hearts in their mouths
O mother Mary how goes it at Grey's Bridge?
how goes it at Laurel Bank?
and all eleven of her little ones safe
but for one fallen under a plough
O mother Mary with sugar bags and flour sacks
with tea chests they adorned her kingdom
a midsummer's dream and the lady with the grey eyes
wearing a shady hanover
the man in his straw hat spoke of Isabella Galloway
as one speaks of a messenger angel
and all her beautiful books lost at sea
the only consolation was Miss Patience on a spring dray
bringing back Isabella's few belongings

O mother Mary and she but four years old
the land all cracked or all bogged
and you were wishing to be anywhere but here
O mother Mary pray for us
a candle will light a room
but what shall light up our hearts if not the fire
burning brightly at the Weatherly's

§

tells me he does how ethereal the place was
all watercolour and watercress
in a mutilated landscape
and Norfolk Island pines vaulting over Rock Vale
their tips almost touching the clouds
and the gravel road in a gravel voice calling them home
in the chill of evening
and the blue of her dress was a velveteen blue
as were her eyes
sweet Miss McAllister
laughing at the sheep hurdles alongside her English garden
the chairs were of cedars of Lebanon
the sun in the morning played Venetian fugues on her curtains
or rendered Miss Bella in pretty pastels
by morning tea time the oven fires were red hot
the kettles spewed like villains
in the heat of the noon the land lost all definition
the sky itself had no join no seam
and the wind found their names unpronounceable
O mother Mary how goes it at Grey's Bridge?
how goes it at Laurel Bank?
at St Oswalds of the weatherboards?

§

days of bagged wheat and sixteen horses pulling hard
 days of dunnage at the sidings
 of blade shearing
 of hay carting in stubble fields
 groaning under the great weighbridge of the sky
 of hooded buggies and bogged gigs
 the wetting of the whistle at the Bolangum Inn
 in the shade of the Kanya sugar gums
 you see he says there'll always be new for old
 but the old always seems better
 or better done
 the plumb hammer effect he called it
 of one time forgetting what another was like
 of one generation waiting in the wings for another
 O mother Mary how goes it at Grey's Bridge?
 how goes it at Laurel Bank?
 at Burrum Burrum?
 now the waters flow softly at Wallaloo Creek
 and the flowering gums remember them
 when all else on the horizon fades
 ball and pillar stand at the gate
 letting memory in
 letting their suffering go
 O mother Mary these were good folk of good stock
 of highland and lowland temper
 of midland and moorland caste
 sprightly of step Presbyterian of backbone
 or of mild Anglican mein
 from Ross Shire and Forfarshire Clydeside and Old Cambro
 from Forris Elgin and Strathaird Isle of Skye
 from Stratford-upon-Avon and Cornwall
 from Ipswich and Somerset from Suffolk and Cheshire
 all found how move the mysterious ways
 of the things of this world
 and of those things which are not of this world
 like Piper John McLennan ever after
 the Sanguine Scot of Aeneas Gunn's *Never Never*

or Ebenezer Dunne with his lorry
and cream-white horse
or Pickford's piebald pulling a spring cart
to keep a lion-hearted town alive

§

on a deserted road there's a railway crossing
where the world vanishes
the incunabula of faulty memory
all you have left
the thing you call your life
there's only so much of the incalculable
you can find in the quantum
the weird mechanics of certainty and chance
there's only so much oblivion
in a shot glass
you hear the shear of a tooth saw
the slow slidings of a plane
a lathe
it might be Charlie Newall or Maconachie
somewhere out back
in another world
working on lumps of wood
think not of sparrows falling short
of providence
think of neighbours safer knowing
next door lives somebody like themselves
it might be Joe Reading sitting out front
in the afternoon light
or pottering about in the sanctuary of the shed
listening to Eliza stirring her pots
you follow the road to where it goes
to his plate of chitterlings perhaps
or the thornberry bush where the wind moves softly
through the spring-fed swamp

§

words wear their disguises well out here
sentences are meted out
phrase by phrase
in years in generations
such violence done to them he says
at times you wish you had said nothing
had nothing to say
that the life you led was nondescript
all small talk and gossip
harmless
wise only about the weather
then a pause a certain look
a soft betrayal
would find the going easy
the master of disguise his metier

§

at the point marked x on a scrap of paper
the field reaches vanishing point
you find a road that forks
leading to another life
no less real than the one you imagined
in which it would always be morning
and you would cross the creek at the ford
or conjure a bridge out of nowhere
apparently

§

the light bends to the sounds
of pine stands
blue gums
the red shift widens
it's hard to tell by depth of shade
if it is morning or evening
a chalk scrawl is all the sky is
birds lurk in the unhande bush
swallowing up shadows
there are voices at the edge of the lake
if you stop and come up close
the sound is of two people talking to one another
under water

§

yesterday is today without a clue
as to how it happened.
today is yesterday trying to forget
it ever happened
tomorrow is today thinking nothing
can happen to yesterday

§

there are the lost perfections
like a shore searching for a sea
the days keep to themselves
the shape of their questions
nights are feverish
they want for saplings
facing south or a swallow
in the trumpet tree
the sound of raindrops

on the roof will do
the wind at the window she said
or you

§

they know me but not as well
as I know them
they remember me as I was
or regret me as being in a way
they had not foreseen
I am their land
their words committed to paper
a translation from the original
of their time
I am the rhyme and reason
of their giving and taking
the measure of their despair
I am the long journey
they took on a moment's spur
the point of no turning back
I am what they lose in translation
what they would if they could
put into my mouth
words not my own

§

in the end he says there's no other face
but your own in the mirror
no other voice but yours
at the bottom of the well
the abyss out here
is in here too

§

tranquillity is a treacherous thing
it's in his eyes
it fills the room
everything in the house is touched by it
he sits with his knees under his chin
gathering them in
as if something deformed and colour blind
a thing very low in the world's estimation
has settled in his mind
lodged itself at the centre of things
become something beautiful
something supreme
perhaps for the first time
has come into its own
his dinner's in the oven
the evening breathes out slowly
the light dies on the windowpane
while they talk they can tell
tranquillity is a treacherous thing
it's in his eyes
it fills the room
everything in the house is touched by it
reaching out her hand to him
he holds her
remembering eleven children
the night goes up in flames

§

the wind howls across the weir-locks
the pub's swaying under its verandah
nothing's left of a year-ago rain

the sky's had the living daylights kicked out of it
you come upon serviceable gear he says
a shearer's comb
the block and tackle of a wainwright
at the edge of the dam kids fish for redfin
playing hookey
day's too good to waste on school
a ute on the dirt road pulls up
a fence needs mending
the heeler's bark echoes for miles
summer turns molten in the ruts and pot-holes
the sky has the washed-out look
of her treasured English garden

§

this life leaves you like it left him he says
when you least expect it
before you've had time to organise things
to get things right
before you've done what you said you'd do
what you said you had to do
what you always knew you could do
it leads you not to purgatory
you're already there
and always have been
but to the Mount on bended knees
there that great southern shore beckons
taking you to no paradise
not to where *thou shalt be with me*
but to hellfire pass
from where but few return
this life's a hammer drill
a malfeasance of fate
a contumely of the spirit
a language all in knots

a seamless hallucination of the ever-betraying real
what road is not Burma railway?
what creek not a river Kwai?
you know nothing and what you know of nothing
is nothing
like points of rain that are measured before they fall
like falls of rain that are measured
in pitiful points
and well may you dance in the rain
as if the rain were to dance on your grave
well may you declare it a clear day
or insist on the old inches
the ideal is not water but the dream that in water
all will be well
a shower here or a shower there he says
one way or t'other we're sunk
O Mother Mary we know not what we do
we know not what we say
to be sunk without water

*sweet Mother Mary Philomena
always said you were a dreamer
O where is she now?
who has seen her
sweet Mother Mary Philomena*

§

PART TWO

§

carting bagged wheat from agreeable crops
is a chore he says and a slow and seemingly dull one
but you know he says it's such a satisfaction
the standing crops the good unexpected yields
the hay stooks stacked up neat and close
unbleached unblemished
the prices firming
and Coromby and Lallat Plains the gainers
and so what if it's a hundred and ten in the shade
and the horses dying of sunstroke
do you think they didn't care?
what could they do?
they were dying themselves
just to live
at Burrereo the crop early sown
came to rich harvest and a hot time
they had of it
but in other places no more than the time it takes
to down a pot or buy a Casterton buggy
or couple of good steppers
poor show
well
that's how it goes

§

make hay he says make hay
the sun will take care of its own shine
make hay for duck boards
for dryabone and gum boots
make hay he says for grain that's stripped

for lucerne and rape
make hay make hay
make hay for Aisla and Cooper and Starbuck's
for the trotters and the Dorsets
for the Dorset Horn
make way for ribs wacked to wake you up
for the snore that fools nobody
the sun will take care of its own shine
make hay he says make hay he says make hay

§

what is it he says about brass bands
for all their swagger and *braggadoccio* they of all
sound most plaintive
the pathos of their volume gradually diminishing
as they turn a corner of the street or play out
the last bars under the cupola
in the fading light
what is it if not stirring old memories
opening old wounds
I've looked out he says across many a tendered paddock
from Donald to Nullawil and back
afflicted with marshmellow or skeleton weed
or with hoary cress
and prayed my friend for no rain
or for no more rain
that's how it is
and the band he says with a wry grin keeps on grinding
playing Waltzing Matilda as if to spite the gods
for what they do to us
old George Loats knew a bit he says
at Brooklet Stud his dairy shorthorn took all before them
Willow Park Imperial Cran
Willow Park Barrington Prince
Willow Park Paradox

Greenmeadows Prince
standing at Minview under Dunmunckle
and the day of the horse was a long day's ride into time
The Draught Entire glittering with grace
at Dunmunckle West pure bred stallions stood
like Westphalia Hero
and ponies and galloways in their paddocks
envied the stock horse the arabian and the appaloosa
that ran the plains
tells me he does that the great mobs of the old days
moved like cloud puffs leaving in their wake
a jet stream of heat haze and dust
rich merino strong and superfine
poll dorset and dorset horn the regal corriedale
suffolk lincoln shropshire and border leicester
ryeland southdown hampshire southdown
tukidale zenith and perendale
those were the days he says pushing back his hat
as beams of sunlight fell on the wide front window at Selkirk's

§

flystrike and friable soil
crutching cradles and pit silage
hay slashing and hay baling
blade shearing and circular sheep yards
the Stevelyn wool press
barley and clipper barley
sunflower and lupin
sheaf tossing jumping trotting tilting
loving and leaving he says and all the iterations
of the hard years the hard acres
are what this place is all about
this is sun country
not pretty but without persiflage

land of the great wide
of earth and sky
of Cato's breed

§

what is hope but a stay against despair
not a wishing for or a dreaming of
not a looking back or a looking forward
but the gaze steady clear-eyed
accepting and yet undaunted
confessor of grim irony
allowing for the laconic laughter
of pluvius insurance
because it never rains but when
you don't want it to
the roads are never impassable
or cut by flood waters
except when all roads lead to a communion of souls
and September when it should rain
when it has to rain
if it doesn't then he says we're done for
and all the rough riding and gallantry in the world
isn't so much as a pinch of salt

§

you take them as they come he says and gratefully
the wrought steel plough
the light draft seven-furrow skim plough
strippers and stripper harvesters
header harvesters
axial flow headers
the wet wheat pickler
the rotary hoe

the mother of invention is gratitude
and gratitude breeds pride
a good head crop
the wild oats negligible and few
going for the bag o' wheat for the crop and fallow
getting the inside running on the machinations
of capricious gods
malting barley may save the day
oaten hay was fine when the horse was king
and green stuff and rye
can always get you by
but the one good god
the one true god is a wheat god
imperial and paradisial
Early Purple Straw and Farmer's Friend
Rattling Jack and Rattling Tom
Dart's Imperial and Federation
Algerian Pinnacle Kewell Millewa Egret
sure is he says the one good god
is a wheat god no matter what he metes out to you
and that can be plenty
furnace-like heat or flowering time frost
too little or too much my friend
or too soon or too late
the wet stuff
but one way or t'other it gets done
from the ground up
man and machine
concrete and steel
the conveyor belts the bunkers the bulk handling
the soaring rotundas of the silos
like giant torsos of weathered gods
carved out of the Valley of the Kings

§

the yarding of lambs of vealers and yearlings
brings to mind he says the smells
of the old days
pats of half dung half shag
the muddy footsteps the footsteps left in the dust
I might have been a lighterman he says
on the red-sky estuaries the deep-water harbours
where ancient rivers flow into ancient seas
I might have lived my life on the tugs
that horn and winch and spool the great ships in
but here I am yarding the lambs
the fat lambs the vealers and yearlings
penning the heavy steers
and you ask me what was it like in those days
the past is more obstinate he says
than the present
the present more fragile than the future
what is the colour of time?
is it the red of morning? the bluest of day?
or the pitch of night?
what is the colour of time?
tells me he does that a place has the colour
of the space surrounding it
the space the colour of the time it finds itself in
the colour of time is like no other colour
it's a colour you can never describe
never forget

§

I've lived like this he says all my life
surrounded by a light that refuses to go out
by shadows that refuse to leave
here among cast-offs and makeshift things
the tatterdemalion and the junk
of little use to anybody

but me
the shafts of old wells the beams of low roofs
are homely to me
I have needed no mountains
needed no hills
the pain of losing what I have loved for so long
is precipice enough for me
this place is the flat earth of old
that all the world once thought of itself as being
my coign is Ashens my vantage Jackson Siding
sufficient for the day of judgement
I smoke my pipe and tap it out on the in-step
looking across paddocks like clay beds
dun and khaki
across a plateau of everlasting pause
this is my vineyard in which I have laboured
over the grapes of forgetfulness
this is my becalmed ship upon the motionless waters
where the bearded wheat is wiser
than the hand that brings it to harvest
I take nothing for granted for I am granted so much
and if anybody should say
this is a dull a level and a wretched place
they have not understood he says how easy it is
and how difficult to be born
how much mystery persists in pure reason
in knowledge there is much ignorance
in ignorance the flash of bliss
a supernal understanding
when did they last look up he says
at the caravels of clouds?
or last look down at the holes in their own shoes?
not a day passes not a night but I say
it is a limpid evening
it is a transcendental night
or shall I say it is a troubled hour
a season breaking down

the impersonal wind blows
the leaves will fall where they will
last glimmerings of light
stretch towards Antwerp
gleam towards Navarre
touch the hem of Lubeck of Harrow
of Callawadda
in Horsham they're shutting their curtains
they're stalling for time
but look he says they have begun the journey
of the lost ones the found ones
of another life another way of not dying
and the stars shall form in clusters
of moving radiance
how good it is and how not good
to be alone

§

who is that little girl who looks so like a McAllister?
I have seen her hopscotch on the footpath
I have seen her pull the cerise ribbon
out of her hair
heard her sing London Bridge and Camden Town
one of which it seems is always falling down
watched her on the surge of a swing
pushing herself into a supreme ellipse
and on the squeaking see-saw making mayhem
then as soon asking to be taken home
before it got too dark
there is providence he says
when you see a child's face fall
but I speak now of this place as a locale of the cosmos
of hers and yours and mine
and it is and always has been my place as it happens
I speak of the McGilps who built this house

of Mackenzie and McCubbery and McDonald
of Smith and Dalgleish of Furman and Germano
of Barber and DeMouliplied of Rutherford
of Drum and Johnston of Ahern and Pipkorn
of Chatfield from far Birchip and his Nimblefoot
of 'Survivor' Jim of Darlington and *Poor Fellow My Country*
of Niewand and Hamann of Petering and Boschen
of Landwehr and Ruwodlt and Schurmann
of William and Carol and 'Beazer' and nuggety Doug Gill
of pastor Peter and pastor Adam
of the sheriffs Tony and Scott
of Graham and Ruth and of Bev and 'fetlock' Pat
of Dave and Alan and Tony
of the Molloyes and the Byrnes of Banyena
of 'Argus' and Iris and Kevin
of Maurice and Erin and chimneysweeper Charlie
of old Hans and Marty and Liz and lovable Peter Curtis
of piano man Don and butcher John
and young Dale and Richard who expostulate on Plato
between snooker shots and shout me pots
of Steve and Glenda and all the 'Anne's and their kids
of Jo and Garry and Gary and Margot gone to Gippsland
of Barry and Andrew and cantankerous Lainy
of blind Maurie and willowy Barbara
of old Jack Britten and corner store Monica
of John 'Welcome Mat' Morley and Cotty Vella
of His Eminence Cardinal Vincent
of 'L Ron' Gavin and 'Raffles' Laurie
of Verna and Mavis of Janice and Joy King
of the McIntyres Ronnie and Nick and Kristen
of Olwen and Jill and all the ladies of the grand auxiliary
of the Heintzes Corrine and Gillian and Lorraine
of the McColls the Loates and the Summerhayes
of the Talbots the Millgates and the Midgleys
of Marie and Donovan of 'Fin' and redoubtable 'Dasher'
of 'Smudger' Coates and Shirley and Betty Barry
of 'Hemingway' Al and 'Vietnam' Doug

of Ray who crossed the Nullabor and Bruce 'Long Tan' Wilson
of 'Snowy' Lennon and 'Smoky' Dawson
of Mary Cantwell of Graham Parsons and John the postie
of Fraser Quick and Brian Clarke in Warracknabeal
and Ruth the publican and Doug 'Lawnmower' Mitchell
of Bruce Midgley our 'Man from Ironbark'
of Chris and Peter with whom I supped until our spirits soared
of the El Gas guys Rod Fulton and Matt Kirkwood
of the family Gonzales and the family Watterson
of all the old 'Lodge' dears laughing through their tears
of Brendan at Sheep Hills of 'Walshy' and Di
of Steve and Glenda and 'Tootles' Tom
of Trudy Greer and Michael and Bronwyn
of David and Tiu the mandarins of Terradome
of Wayne and Betty and Norm and Nola in stately Camperdown
of balladeer 'Tank' and Annette Chenoweth
of 'Golly' of 'Pirate' Russell and reliable 'Huddo'
of neighbourly Shirley shielding her ancient roses
of Bev and Laurie their Clinton and ours
flies for the Hawks
of Johnny Lawlor and Barry McQueen—'the man from Minyip'
of David 'Tyrepower' Thomas and Frieda from the op shop
and beautiful crazy Kylie and her brood
I speak of them all and of those I have left un-named
they too shall be remembered
the town aristocracies and the in-betweeners
the upside-downers and the inside-outers
the 'blow-ins' the blown around and the blown out
I speak of a place that touches upon all places
that was and still is
one of a kind

§

this is my country this is my place
there is nothing explanatory

there are no reasons forthcoming
this is my bolt-hole my 'pied beauty'
my *pied-a-terre*
five years have passed
centuries from Tintern and Grasmere

§

those who know their onions
peel them slowly layer by layer
and will not cry
the grass is greener while there's still grass to go around
a petal will lift a tissue of moisture and colour
in an unforgiving soil
the godly geranium is a gift a child would play with
the head will rule the heart he says
until the heart will have its head
under the bridge that hears no water
flows the sound of water that longs for a bridge
on the road going nowhere is a sign
showing the way to the place you never thought of
that feels like home
and is
Mutton Swamp he says is a silence
a patch of emptiness bordered by the boundless
something you listen for but never hear
Jackson Siding he says is a sound
not a shunting yard
something you look for but never see
five years have passed
and the river is still a zodiac of signs
of life of no life
of all or nothing
the road goes on and dreams of tracks
of where it might have gone had it got there
the fog is a forgetting

the cat sejant remembers
the dog out of loyalty waits and dies waiting for
the pick-up on the Wal Wal road
the mist evading all meaning
being a promise of water
the haze is always there
is a heap of embers that never doubts
that smoulders until memory itself
is a fire
impossible to put out

§

BOOK EIGHT

MUTTON SWAMP

MUTTON SWAMP

PART ONE

§

red loams sheer and the wild
all shadow
in the evening the black soil plains
glinting against grains of weather
from out the west the stubble winds
a patch of moisture peeling the peels of bark
a light too distant from its own reflection
galling over reed and spore
licked by sand
by sand licking the water
a mirage of algae
of apple rot in slow fermentation
in the hoar and cobweb
of dead calm
the glass eye hour of evening
tells me he does then the fox
is among his fowls
swinging from barbed wire
staring down the setting sun
ransacking the stars
the spent cartridge shells of clouds
rock wall and stony rise
waterless waterfall
dull flame of shagbark
flaring on the horizon
over sour grass and marshmellow
turnip oil mash
as far from Constable and Gainsborough

as redback or white tail
the wishing well of a hollowed-out heart
its chambers laid with claymore and limpet mines
and staring back at you a face
with that look on it its last
caught by surprise
by this dying business
pinioned or trapped or shot
or blown to pieces
a hand over a heart where the memory
is fatally severed
the remnants of an unforgiving regret
let the night he says finds its way
through the rustle of unseen
of unfelt forms
the beetling nebulae way above
incomprehension
touch us like live wires
in that instant is an end of all
go no further he says
you'll find at Payne's Pool untouched water
cleanskin pristine
the poor parched earth will gulp down
and the foothills kick over like an ancient pitcher
where are they now he says
your Buvelots your civilised shades
the sharp refreshing tang of temperate latitudes
here there's only the original lithic
the solemnities of caves
their cool confines and hollow leads
flashing with grudge-growing gold
leading nowhere but to perdition
a place full of shards
of dust and ash heaps
mullock heaps for an immemorial cairn
beyond the snake miles
the sunken hopes

that face with a look on it of death
of a death coming into its own
is yours
the flint of recognition
the grit of a lifetime of unwept tears
and smiles sand-papered over

§

tells me he does that runnels of mousegrass
survive great bush fires
you see he says that's why they say
banis bilong susu
when the sun refuses to shine
when buloke and black red emperor
each in their own kingdom
plug their ears
against the caterwaul of ferals scowling
caught in a turk's head of intricate arraignment
a devil's ring with a black radiance
for pendant afterthought

§

you see how it is he says at the dog hour
when mistress cigarette goes out
and the chafing wind rattles the windows
the corrugated roof's tech-screws
are loose as teeth
and it seems the world itself is
blown away
the whole quaking chain of cause and effect
you see he says the ragman was right

as always
so right after all
in the end everything's circumstantial

§

to what a pretty pass things have come
all is pose all pretence
or palpable lies
like the crummy weather
like nights vowing rain by the bucketful
the hour when rag-doll eyes look out
from under the covers
in childish innocence
but the night remains neither sleepless
nor slept through
only fly-blown and spider-webbed
a nausea of decomposing dreams
the silos with their silhouettes at evening
agonising over the light
its delirious and lurching angles
the rumble of elevators filling the gloom
with the weight of the drop
the snap of the cable lines
the pit bottomless
tells me he does he remembers whose shout it was
fell from the last and highest rung
of the steel ladder
stupid boys being boys
measuring their echoes in cooees
encased in concrete
drowning in the drums of their ears
it leaves its mark he says
like a mirage on a melting road
the one you never took
the one you always took

the one you said you'd never take again
only a stone's throw from bliss
a spit's yard from the fountainhead
of a recurring dream

§

tells me he does the wind's distempered
the water drags its feet at Litchfield
its a mallee mood he says
squinting in the sun
they can all go to blazes
lured by time
ambushed at the pass
bushwhacked by the dead ringer
struck dumb by an eclipse of the sun
on the weir road the bitumen disappears
into the land of long grass
a feckless shambles of boulders
of tar and sand
the siding lines have buckled
pylon and wire shake with cold
all their surge and heat spent
the hammer of blind chance comes down
like a fallen angel
spelling disaster with perfect equanimity
in high dudgeon you drink yourself
into a profound stupor
all the seed scattered the good with the bad
and the land itself like you
annealed
a bulwark against eventuality
that conversation on a country path
left unfinished
putty for fate
for rock-foot and heat haze

for muffled thunder the atomic charge
and the sky he says stops at Watchem
or speeds up at Beulah
when the night splits its own atoms
the moon goes up in smoke
morning clears its throat almost apologetically
surveying a world of char
and what was Dunmunckle or Glenorchy
is for sifting through
steering towards darkness
you connect the smell of rain with dry rot
the far horizon fizzles out
or detours down desperado gully
the old momentum's gone
the glorious green and Dublin's glow
the road seems afraid of itself
where to go without going crazy
to meet at the end another road
a road like no other
in the aftermath
full of the old intransigence
cordite and Golden fleece
and if you fall asleep at the wheel you'll miss
more than The Wattles

§

man is a deciduous species
or is it that death is only a hibernation
from which we never awake?
the ghosts fossick in the short dry stuff
the gormless stubble
and in nine years not a drop
not a jot or a tittle at Minneboro
where one would weep a minute's worth
of one degree of arc

or pine for an inclined plane
full of contours
giving up on perpendiculars
all this land this landmass is but flotsam
jetsam of oceans
your dream has deserted you
unfinished in the fontanelle
and in the distance a Kenworth horn
blares across the paddocks
as if it was God's own plumed charger
caparisoned in cloth of gold
but you and I know he says it's nothing
but a tin whistle
a shiny poverty pack
still it will come to the rescue
frontal memories of Virgil
coronal and sagittal of the seven hills
who will guide us now
a disembodied voice looking for a body
still groping towards consciousness
reaching for the noosphere
on the flat plains you come face to face
with yourself
nothing in front of you but you
nothing to look up at and be awed by
the sheers the heights the crags
only this endless emptiness
reflecting you back to yourself
the unknown zone
the unsung zone

§

O where lies James Morrow
Unremembered?
O where lies Irishtown with its colleens

its headlands and bays?
not here my hearty not here
this is lizard country
the land of unflowing flows
of stringybark of streambank vegetation
gnawed to the bone
a sea without a shore you might say
a sun without a sphere
a strange world this
where the maggots do their work
fleecing the sheep
and a ten acre voice calling us kids
echoed from the dam to the verandah and back again
we were always slow finishing
in the ferret world in the world of yabbies
among mud pies and tar babies
while the girls played queen of hearts
or set of jacks
O Sandy Bay your spleen-venting wind
howls down the day
and will not settle like those sloops
I remember in the luff at Waterloo Bay
your swamp plains are overflowing
and dawn at Telegraph Saddle
is always diamond-hard
instead here we are on the roadless road
all dust and flies
drawn by something we can't see
but is alive to the touch
it makes the wind turn and look over its shoulder
not back at the Oberon Road
but all around you as far as you can see
goodbye to the old country
old London old Bristol old Liverpool
Plymouth and Folkestone
old Portsmouth and grey-eyed Dover
goodbye Dartmoor and Exmoor

goodbye Bodmin Moor
and Cambria vanishing and the Cheviots the Broads
here in this wattled wilderness
this matchless monotony
roughing it in the land of the ready-rubbed
among the sand pans and the eucalypts
in the thick of white clover
dreaming of sheep runs
vast green spreads
all forage and bridal brass jingling
and the smells and sounds of settlement
a place fresh a patch unmarred
but do such places
exist without a history?
without gods?

§

tells me he does he was walking in the foothills
among the fireflies
under the whirring stars
the windmill sucking in the evening air
heard a splash parting the reeds
and in her wake the blue-white light of Jupiter
severing bulrush and sharps of bindy
and heads of cockle weed
between barrels they'd talked of her
scratching the furrows deeper into their foreheads
her wind span tousles her rain-flecked looks
unnerved them unbuttoned them
those brawny shearers
navy singled axemen
their eyes turned liquid when they stole a glance
she roused their hard-boned hungers
on a moment's spur
bolted their feet to the spot on which they stood

yeah he says you threw your hat
into the age-old ring of desire and despair
he'd heard of some that for far less
had hanged themselves
somewhere out there in the whiplash grass
where not even the mercury climbing
could match the fever in your brain
the words stayed stuck in your throat like a fine fury
and soon drove you mad

§

I've seen he says rivers shift and ground fall
from under a man's feet
the colliding stars send slivers of light
flying into your face
I've seen rock fall so weightless
it buried a man alive
with the breath still in his lungs
but out here the only kind of ambush there is
is pure perfect weather rubbing the salt
into a wound without water
what threshold is this that so stirs the blood
you don't give it a name for fear
that once named it's got your number
you're headed for the madhouse
and so slapping down another beer he pats down
the tidy bar towel with his glass
tucks his tobacco into a Tally-Ho
and shakes out a laugh like some loose change

§

I've known them too right he says
the rank night-sweats

the dumb walls
the sinking floorboards
tells me he does it runs in families
like fissures in the soil
fools even the seasons themselves
even the sunlight gets tangled in the shadows
it leaves along the joists
and the shadows themselves creep like lantana
between the stumps they wrap themselves around
drawn by the smell of sawdust
by the softness of cobweb on curtains
the tenacious hold of niche to undisturbed corner
corner to groove
groove to Edwardian ceiling rose
such sweet silence
and the window looks out on persimmon and cumquat
on purple-belled correa
on mint bush and potato vine
as if a moment's peace had stopped to pause
and stayed forever
on Main Street the verandahs are rusting
their mission browns have faded to a methylated white
you watch the May clouds spreading the field
across eight furlongs of sky
the piaffe of their drift more delicate
than wisps of dandelion

§

so where was she headed they ask
and the answers keep their own counsel
or take upon themselves local reckonings
as a right of first refusal
never go back he says you hear me
never do that
and she didn't but rode on

leaving the gargoyles to mock themselves
the griffins to leap off the storied eaves
and in the dust lay the numbskulls and dunderheads
who thought that love was a cinch
was a way of bringing the bitch to heel
those sea-green eyes
the blue watery veins of her breasts
flamed the night lamps
left their brains banging like a door in the wind

§

tells me he does they got over it
as they do with hard liquor
or without
godless and abandoned
or let slip an unhinged sibilant
of some crime unconfessed
against their own natures
something unresolved and unforgettable
loath to admit it they settled for something
way yonder
something emptied out
looted of all its life
like time and space
or the void with its sky-filled foil
its spasmodic moon
the intangible nimbus neither new nor old
wind-blown and going nowhere
some night you'll see he says
the dark ivy creep over the cobblestones
over cracks in the memory
the night moth-eaten
the garden fence leaning back to get a better look
at the tall espaliered trees
and the house holding out against the odds
its worn timbers its lead pipes

whispering the name Esmeralda
the name Pasqualina
until the tears dried in their own salt
and the mouth of night felt a hand clamping it
a hand colder than its own heart
Esmeralda the smoking logs whispered
Pasqualina
all these winters
where have you been
O where are you gone
sweet Mother Mary Philomena?

§

this he tells me is my makeshift kingdom
little has changed and much
neither the mildew nor the wormwood
have gotten to it
more than memory itself
those uproars of rage
downpours of silence
the terrible winters the terrifying summers
the storm waters of autumn
the mushrooms and toadstools of spring
all left their fluid on the brain
you see he says this country is older
than any other
the oldest one of all
this catalepsy of rock and sand
their spells cast in rock ruins and sand pans
in clay beds and sluggish billabongs
where onion weed is the watercress
where those who came first
found only the bladderwrack of a dream
in the sleepy shallows
and prying eyes between the trees

looking for lime weed
such confusions of memory
such ramshackle notions where the buloke stood
the wind harp of the Wimmera
wizened to the bone
tells me he does time is no measure
like step of dance or bar of music
but paranoia's sentinel
a thousand equinoctial precessions may pass
before the shift of stars is visible
all attunements are to the submediant
the sixth note solid and orchestral
snoozing like Zukovsky's 'A'
at four hundred and forty cycles per second exact
all the rest are but the vapours
of a useless yearning
a rolling of the waters over the waters
a blowing of dust across dust
the tritone of a rain that never rains
the devil's note in the beak of the crow
if you have to he says you live
on the motes that drift through the dry air
you drink of the empty radiance
in which they float like flints
sheered off leaping stars

§

my mind's beyond its element he says
all its leave-takings are the ever
the never of farewells
are only ways of being lost
from and to oneself
in negligence it finds a strange pervasive peace
in neglect a quiet solace
the abdication of all ridiculous desire

the abjuring of one's dreams
an end to the sorcery of the senses
a letting go I tell you even
of letting go
then to be alive only in the fullness
of one's animal temerity
finding perfection in the skew-whiff
of awesome distance
of an horizon unmistakably
proudly illusory
its monotony profound
a thralldom complete
the conjurations of these heartless plains
enchanted ravishing
the unreal at its utterly perfect

§

I have seen her sometimes he says
drying out by a waterhole
with her wet hair falling across her eyes
her shoulders her neck her clavicle
fine-boned and supple in sunlight
the slow release of curls
the smile denting the shade
here at The Wattles in the seed time
that's what it's like he says
one day you wake to find her gone
no universe of her mention on the wires
a world neither holy or unholy
neither bitter nor sweet
the sound of shattering in the rib cage
suddenly it's only a place like many
you can no longer place
the kingdom of the spook-eyed owl
of the blue-tongued lizard

in the reckless lust of youth
perhaps One Tree Place
still fenceless and unfallen
vaguely paddocked-in
smelling of sun-dried manure of wild rosemary
where a fool will follow his nose
to find something foolish
where the blind will play the game of bluff
till the bush flies drive them crazy
such are the weathers of love he tells me
no match for time
for lost poor-fool souls
lost for sure
for good out here
in the hum and drum of the endless dry
the laughing scorn of clouds
grim southern oscillation
swinging above their heads like a noose

§

such lakes as there are have been fished dry
to a dust bowl an ash pile
or flooded to a mockery of once
luminous swamps
the floating carcasses at Strickland's Point
at Granite Flat
one long repetitive blast for the wise
sarcastic kookaburra
tells me he does that on a Wimmera evening
her face can be seen in the sky
in the scorch marks left by the sun
in the sear of the clouds
wherever fires have come to a stop
but have not gone out
or gone into hiding in an orgy of embers

in scrub and stubble
in thorny undergrowth
there's your pitiable attempt at loving
of glory flush with catastrophe
a passion the worse for being so
go on he says get out of here
head to Frog Hollow
to Possum Creek or Kara Kara
to the land of sweet pea
find what you're looking for there
if you reckon you know you're looking for
or listen out for it

For the End of Time

or smell it in death's last unbearable stench
waiting for rain O for the sound of it
if only that
if only the dew upon a wild daisy
or a fugue from the Goldberg at frost time might fall
or on a still and moonless night
under the haycock where the coot hides
or in a rippled sleeve of creek water
where the gudgeon stirs the lily pad
the lonely gadfly

§

PART TWO

§

cloud-veiled Arapiles
vertiginous obdurate unatomised
the sky lies over you like a sole plate
over Dreamer's Hill where the westerly disperses
the cracker dust
sometimes the sky's like a leaky roof
full of holes worn by wind
not by water
worn out waiting for water
for what used to be some passing
heavenly shower
or sprinkle of lilac or lavender
now the levels have sunk too low
the levelling land smells of sump oil and kerosene
bluestone crusher dust
where the lie of the land is indeed a lie
and Pink Lake that other place
you should have repaired to
while there was still a chance
look at it he says
nothing but one vast sheep's foot roller
where the vine might have bloomed
the grape ripened
and old men sat about in the shade
sifting through tobacco strands in golden tins
tucking the tobacco in
licking the rice gum with the very tip
of their tongues
lighting up
tracing the afternoon
the wall tiles glittering across the line of their gaze
the street smelling of horse radish

and smouldering brambles
well he says taste this
you'd swear it was water
or is it just beer watered down
red sky in the evening
I remember that rhyme its truth
red sky in the morning
and no mountains about to blush
only a track of weed grids and worn down wheels
crankshaft and axle dust
the mother of a necessary invention
of something accomplished
but only in the mind where doubt remains
only over the broad acres
the richer for shade and mulch farming
everything he says everything
comes from the land
a wind harp waiting for the wind
for planting and sowing
for soft-shoed roos
for a cloud snapping to attention
like a bugler's flag
and Mutton Swamp moves back
steals forward
as if it knows where water still is
but is afraid to say
it remembers the old measures
links and rods and chains
the tinge of red rises
the span and collapse of the clay flats
and the black top mulching
stretching all the way to the tip of spring
it falls into a reminiscence of words
some few that end in u-d-e
beatitude desuetude solitude
the sound of courtesy and honeysuckle
of undisturbed stones

of the moon if it has a sound
you see he says there's a spirit of place
where shadows are reigned in
where the leafy flecks think of themselves
as underwood or brushwood
even Sherwood
and fall about themselves in an idle wind
waiting for a dark-eyed girl with her hair in plaits
for the jingle of her bridle
the laughter of a still young insouciance

§

no such luck out here
spirit of space is the law's dead letter
has nothing human about it
you see he says place is all I know
place is all I am
it is place that gives me speech
gives me my name
where the sedge is mutton chop
burns and whiskers
where the buloke stand is where I stand
the constellation of my locale
so leave me to myself the swamp says
without so much as a self
to speak of
I am my own presence and absence
exhaustion and repletion
my own *non sequitor* following itself
all too real
but only an illusion
leave me leave me to myself
to the dull thud of field and game
to the clod and shovel of unloved ground
the surface of unstirred waters

pocked with dreaming eucalypt
they will say as they have said before
old burnt out land what has become of you
to what have you sunk
old washed up acres
for now they lock up the soul
that once they set free
O burnt out land
oldest of old flames
washed up acres that have barely known water
abandoned settlement of uneasy scores
in love once with all the elements
with wind-leaf of chevalier
O orphan child of unremembered time
what has become of you
for there's nothing here of acorns
of beech-mast and oak and ancient pannage
no sowing here of winds for whirlwinds
only the whirlwinds themselves
unsown for the reaping
all but the most native and unsung weed
de trop in the enduring dry
the civilities of silvaculture dispensed with
germinal days and days of pruning
the lop the graft the trim of umbrageous arcs
the dibble of bulb-beds
not here not the half of it
nutless and shrubless
a coppice pollarded in a fruitless dream
perhaps further north or further east
or in another land altogether
where the hornbeams are at home
with orange saplings and the golden apples
of contumacious Atalanta
all the more is this a love
hard-won beyond anything in the Hesperides
the kind of thing a mallee cocky would do

bruited your dun wastes with such gall
as if they were sweet dells
for the pell-mell carelessness of your undercover
a vision of sere flats and emptiness
as something superabundant and overflowing
such as no fir forest no beech wood no oak dale
no alder kingdom could conjure
trackless aimless unforested
good for nothing but ferreting about in
my own ramshackle *Holzweg* of the wemba-wemba
under no greenwood tree but a hardy perennial
between its dog-eared leaves
you spread acacia seed you fluff the horizon
with yellow button and straw flowers
blood-red bracts and weedy furbelows
so much a part of the place
and yet so destitute
so utterly without decorum
almost ruinously uninteresting
and yet like Hesperia
heart of my longing

§

when to the foreshortening of things foolish
such a moment of unexpected revelation
might seem to last a lifetime
tells me he does how unsafe it is
to think oneself wise
just look he says how little it takes
to nourish a lifelong illusion
how short a distance between awareness and sleep-walking
perhaps no more than a casual stroll
beneath the daisy chain of evening stars
before twilight and moon-chill
on a dirt road heading down into the dillon bush

where the heat haze lingers
smelling of the sweat of old summers
nothing can bring back a cloud no longer there
a sunlight no longing shining
who can conjugate the ways of the seasons
when the seasons themselves slide into contradiction
slip a gear or go walkabout
or lose the plot entirely
who can measure the animal and vegetable worlds
with mineral accuracy
the revolutions of the stars around millions
of other stars being revolved around
without a stupefaction of sense
of crazed hallucination
in which the last of hope is left in tatters
that all is not well
not only with the self but the several selves
not only with this world but the next
if ever it was the stuff of revelation
it was so only in the days of king stringy-bark
when the locale was simpler
and place was that to which you belonged
to which all roads led
or from which all roads went out
into the rinsing light of day
and whatever it was that had brought you there
left you there not so much abandoned
as bereft of clues
to unravel the riddle for yourself
but of course you never could
because the riddle was you
and the place itself had changed
the one thing you thought would never change
how unsafe it is he says
to think oneself wise
if this place teaches you anything he says
it teaches you to wise up

to the intolerable
somewhere between the nook of Goroke
and God's own cranny if you're lucky
you'll stumble upon some solution
like the stringy bark has done
thirsting for a glimpse of a tame mirage
on the only road it knows
vanishing into the scrub the arid soul
of the torrid zone
the kingdom of creeks and gullies

§

tap root and trickle of light
faint traces of honey
hive and ant hill
bowers of scrag and tuft and the bower bird
without its bearings and swamp
utterly moistureless
how anything stays here longer than it should
might give cause for wonder
a long iron rake lying in the grass
the grass wilding over the implements
until one day what seems like nothing more
than a sudden gust of spring wind
blows away the last fragments of an age
and landscape and memory become one
the jointed meats baked and basted
the aromas of bread
are brought back by the sight of oven tins
in the windows of desultory small town stores
where an antique Persian cat presides
among the trash the bric-a-brac
and licks its musty paws
it warms itself in the long afternoon sun
another day another season another century

§

those sheep hurdles he says at Rock Vale
 those water tanks served them well
 where the first of the plantings were tended
 huddling together in the bitter cold
 sprawling out in Marnoo heat
 there the debris of generations has gathered
 forming a mound a heap a sunken mulch
 of cones and acorns of grasses gone to seed
 tells me he does there's no secret
 to sprigs and bulbs
 the slender stems shaking above the pismire
 though each are a secret to themselves
 as are we to one another
 thirty years fifty a hundred perhaps
 what is it when the hand-me-downs
 are worn by a burly station hand
 swallowing lung-fulls of air
 breaking in the last of a stubborn lot
 watch out he says for the ratchet-shaped grin
 the wave of the hand and—*see yer later mate see yer next year*
 as he heads off to Saint Arnaud and Boort
 never to be seen again
 what is it when in the blink of an eye
 you take in mile upon mile
 a world without loops with only a pittance of certainty
 all hard beginnings and loose ends
 with its boots always on
 its tattered hat always done over its eyes
 tells me he does one day the road there
 will come to meet you
 come looking for you through a cloud of dust
 transfigured noon
 when the sun shuffles the clouds
 like a deck of marked cards
 and the road that was going nowhere

that had nowhere else to go
no one else to turn to
they'll say *we've seen him for sure!*
they'll be certain it was you
half lost half found
on the road from way up and on the road from way down
past Dog Rocks and back of Bell Post Hill
not of this world bluey
last seen in beery and smoky weather
of old man wimmera making
drone piping drum tapping
through the haze that hangs over Bolangum
and sweet Wallaloo.

§

BOOK NINE

TAP ROOTS

TAP ROOTS

PART ONE

§

a day of southerlies off Mount Helen
and tells me he does it's westward
but how far west to go
Paynes Find or Three Springs or as far as Meekatharra
to New Norcia sustained by cactus
hardy clumps of saltbush of Gallipoli heath
there to pay homage to the grand old man himself
Albertus under the olive tree
singing of Shaw Neilson holed up in Nhill
keeping me on song he says
a man's only as good as his sibilants
among native companions and Murray river pine
and wild violets in a dust wind
in their divine nakedness
you know he says perhaps the heart of it is nearer
as far and yet not as far as Stockyard Hill
where the narrow road corkscrews
leaving Wendouree in its stippled wake
beyond Burrumbeet and down into the steeps
into the winding forestry of Snake Valley
there gradually the bitumen wears itself out
the sun leans over the shoulder of a hill
to read the glade's reflections
it shimmers between pinewood and ti tree
takes in draughts of eucalypt and rosy vine
at Moyston and at Great Western
settles on a tongue of scrub at Sugarloaf Creek
watching the serrated clouds in the blue
seeding their moistures over Mount William
thinning over Mount Lang over Wannon and Jimmy Creek

their allegretto of light and shadow
such as Mirranatwa shows at evening
when in high dudgeon
and further west the Black Range and Glenilsa Crossing
takes me back he says to my boyhood
to Cope Cope and the tuppenny banks of Lake Buloke
same kind of country you know
sort of he says sort of and yet so different
and they that think they know the place
call it flat and featureless
a fine and unfinished ignorance
though it's true he says freeing up a smile
the further west you go the more uncrowded it gets
until finally you have only yourself
all to yourself
undiluted hours undisturbed miles
a thousand chains to choose from
whichever way you look
and sweet the roaming how cavalier time becomes
to find what's to your fancy way past Dadswells Bridge
heading for Flat Rock and Mount Difficult
as if to say to yourself in an idle fashion
will it be Wonwondah South
Wonwondah North or Wonwondah East
so long he says as you make it
to Pine Lake or Dock Lake by sundown
to Burnt Creek before dawn
under a sky that for all the world was sown
by a skim plough with a seed box
overflowing with orange-clustered clouds
that he says is my country
of short-strawed wheats and fattened ears
bursting with flour as white as lilies
and old Dobbin nodding and neighing in the breeze

in my own country
my own patch
country of reticent kith
of stubborn kin

§

down the road a bus stop waits for a bus
that isn't coming
the wind-harp's in its own makeshift weather
you can hear it he says from Navigators
from Napoleons and Cape Clear the long dry
coolah grass of home
where the rusted hinges the droppers and wires
under the currajong and the swamp-box
hear no water
you can hear it he reckons in mullock heaps
oozing with ancient sap
in culverts and runnels full of old rain
in falls of sodden shoveled earth
plumose grasses and mossy decays
the pools and overlays of shallow ruins
the cumuli of digs and run-offs
from the local catchment
overgrown with spike and tussock
the wind-harp's in its own makeshift weather

§

tells me he does that horse of Rosie's
is under sleet
its hands-high have shrunken
to a hollow rib-cage
the bus stop's waiting for a bus that isn't coming
in the stubble paddock chasing chervil

the Yankee Flat grey
is stock still
mostly
it dreams Rosie's dreams
a robust gallop
a turf that feels like cork full of spring
clouds frothing over the gardenias
the bedded roses
inferno and paradiso at Flemington
and old smoky just this once
on top
landing the late plunge
good money it was too he says
chasing the flint as ever
after the bad
all gains in the end are ill-gotten
perhaps a thousand years ago in Bingen
the seasons were symphonic
and now her heavenly revelations are only sung
for the last of the goners like Rosie
or Hildegard herself
out of their own ear-shot
talking horse-talk they way they talk to God
as if you'd be doomed otherwise
the bus stop's vanished in a scotch mist
the lake has lost its colour
it shudders below Mount Ercildoune
Mount Misery
where the road turns to pitch and blur
the sky booms and darkens
to a steady pour

§

O Lord so it goes
from whom all holy desires

say it sweetly
all just counsels
(softly)
and all good works do proceed
(softer still)
tells me he does you love
even if you can't believe one love word true
grant unto thy servant that peace
surpassing the silence of the swamp
which this world cannot give
under this canopy
under this bronzed craquelure of clouds
where match-lock and wheel-lock
still make sense to gunsmiths and slingers
gone to winter-quarters
an arquebus of first light
where pea and sweet-pea still burst
over the scions of the land
with a thunder like some carabin
or doughty double barrels
just so Puckey and Pilgrim came back from the dead
or like Pickford came back no more
the last smoko of that last sunset
the last post over the gate of ivory
gate of gold
the chimneys echoing the crack of the shots
timber frames of laths and plaster
straw pallets and coverlets creaking in the wind
and dagswain or hopharlot
and meat smoked or dried or salted
eaten as one in the desert would eat honey and locusts
in the absence of root crops the animals foraging for winter fodder
blessings on your beets and onions
on humble lentil and turnip
on cabbages enfolded in viewless leaves
and one was thankful he says for stale oatmeal
weevil the least of it in the grain the bark

nut and fruit
and little tikes supping their soup too loudly
buttering bread with their grubby thumbs
licking the egg-yolk off their plates
onto their sticky noses
while the dog hunched in a corner
gnawing on a bone
some nights they'd have dark dreams
the kind that children have
that have no cause to fear
a witch riding the millet on a rampant cow
the air black as poisoned blood
a pig in a trough dragged into the sunshine
to be boiled alive

§

tells me he does the beginning is always
the hardest place to start
it's because of beginnings he says that there's no end
no respite no going back
marsh mellow of the plains or the undulate sour grass
or cliffy glasswort
what does it matter? what does it mean?
I've watched *Bluey* Whelan the nightman he says
moving silently from house to house
street corner to street corner
heard the thud and click of wood or metal
the infinite heartbeat of the night
in the throat of the day
watched the stars sinking without trace
into an ordeal of wind and cloud
the hell hole of the world
that is this gorgeous and gifted earth
made squalid by misuse
by sacrilegious man

oblivion's henchman time's hooded executioner
master of the dire turn

§

tells me he does from dry chalk fens
to Frog Hollow
from Yallack y Poora to Wycheproof
an angel's fishing rod leaned over the glassy water
and in her mother's mind an old English garden
blossomed in wretched heat
the horse wore its martingale lightly
and Irish strawberry trees flung their shoots
and flirted brazenly with myrtle
and coastal cottonwoods
I've heard them he says the mirnongs
rising quietly in the evening over the weeping grass
over the apple berry the grass tree
the cockies' tongues where a green music
gathers flame among mouse-grass
and brown-jerkined beetle
as if somewhere close by grew hellebore
the last orchid of youth
or wiseacres of Christmas rose
and the kookaburra like a continuo in the eucalypt
serenaded the willow spangling the creek
wiry at sunrise and forever waiting
waterless but for the obstinate slow trickle
of occasional dew
taking her mother perhaps too far back
to a kind of forgetfulness that one can never forget
a slow-motion music budding forth
the last fused note of summer
a note held longer than any breath
by cool virginia creeper

§

brandy rose othello rose
 leafminers and smoke trees
 plumbago and boston ivy
 and lurking in the shade a thunder box
 a baby's breath among the corms
 the stalks and sprays chanting their litanies
 the rosettes and mats bowing low
 the spikes and feathery plumes making japes
 at the knapweed
 a world of such jewel-like flowers
 beyond canker beyond death itself
 or so it might have seemed
 the wind sweeping them up into pirouettes
 into succulent arabesques
 no rust to stain no smut to despoil
 or powdery mildew
 and the leghorn roistering at dawn
 the game male blithe and the bantam boisterous
 by turns how all this now
 seems abysmal when seen from the last coign
 of a vanishing point
 the vast and undisturbable past
 and the avenue of elms and London plane trees
 staring into the harsh light
 flintlock country
 land of ash and powder burns
 a smoked haddock smell in the grub soil
 and thunder without rain
 resounding over fields covered in films
 of herbicide drift
 tell me he does there are the tiny trinities
 the brunt of the northerly blasters
 clouds over breathless waterholes
 the dencer in a blue singlet after all on the board
 lying on an army surplus mattress

tallying up the two cut flyers
playing blackjack and two-up with the top gun
tells me he does that's what it's like
to leave damn it once and for bloody all
wishing things were otherwise
piling Karnak upon Ozenkadnook
Scrubby Lake upon Arapiles
no he says the way to live is just to feel the wheel
for the faintest hint of shimmy
to smell the rain that isn't rain
in my own country
my own patch
country of reticent kith
of stubborn kin

§

I was not to know how much it meant to him
what it was about Mount Mercer
that took his last breath away
from Hardie Hill and Warrambine Creek
you could see Mount Emu its greys and greens
shading from broad bean to celeriac
and Mount Elephant a twisted terebinth
across sheets of occasional water
and the Leigh almost buried in its own bulrushes
and Mundy Gully Creek
where at the mention of the name Pasqualina
he remains tight-lipped
that it seemed was it
no river no creek no hill no mountain
not the plains themselves
but left a bitter taste
only her hair lemony at the nape of her neck
keep him alive in his own life
that gone he says all that one can have

are the slow infinities
of a lifetime of waiting for death
for the smell of rain that isn't rain
in my own country
my own patch
country of reticent kith
of stubborn kin

§

tells me he does it was the one thing
that made him move on
the anonymous years on the Snowy
the drilling and digging
with good supplies of slivovitz and beer
and Turkish tobaccos
and Christmas at Millicent and Cape Jaffa
comes a day he says when any man may stumble
upon a place as unassuming as Kaniva
and think it heaven by half
and the desert close and the wind dry
blowing towards Wail and Pimpinio
until the pale ends at Cherrypool
and a picket fence
waiting for the smell of rain that isn't rain
in my country
my own patch
country of reticent kith
of stubborn kin

§

forget about old father Time he says
what I want to know you see
the one true promise false secret

true secret false promise
is this
tell me whose child
Time is
old man wimmera knows
old woman too
old herm old ocean wave
old Telangatuk and old Warrnambool
morning star and evening star
cave of fishes cave of hands
initiation cave and cave of ghosts
tower of David tower of ivory
ark covenantal
gate of heaven house of gold
upon Mount Dryden upon Mount Byron and Mount Thackeray
tells me he does you're seeing God
upon Mount Zero the ash of solar fires
the dust of asteroids
Mount Nelson Mount Sturgeon Mount Abrupt
Chimney Pots Borrow Pits
Moora Moora
old man Wimmera knows
old woman too older and wiser than time
older and wiser than Father Time
older than Time's old father and his father too
what I want to know once and for all he says
the one true promise false secret
true secret false promise
is this
tell me whose child
Time is

§

why should a life after this he says
seem impossible

when of all that may be imagined
nothing is so improbable
as this life itself
so vulnerable so shot through
with incertitude
superb in the purlieu of its own locale
in the icy precincts way out there
slap-dash feverish
almost indign
of all legitimacies the least legitimate
and how most precious
how in the throat of the tawny frog-mouth
in horse lick and cow lick
how in the bosom of the Warrumbool
in the ardour of the post-hole driller drilling the soil
in the douran-douran purblind
blowing it away like a bit of fluff
and the summer sun will suck with brazen idleness
on lozenges of clouds all day
and the boys count four ring-pulls
on each nipple
and say to themselves silently
under the bulokes at one Tree Place
half my luck and half hers
is how it is
and whose progeny who knows?
progeny of angels
of hundred and fifty millimetre Krupps
of patriarchs of prophets
of apostles disciples martyrs
confessors and virgins
traveling salesmen freckled and red-haired
of tramps and swaggies and blow-ins
of Mulga Fred at Wando Dale
of Ben Bowyang and Dad and Dave
of Bluey and Curly at Tulse Hill
she was once a divoter he says at country meets

and horses were always her passion
unbridled I lived in my pride
in the nonchalance of ignorance
undone by chance
neck and crop
the patsy and foil of love
led on by the breezy liberties of the open plains
brought to book at Bolangum
there's a hill he says overlooks Navarre
from where Mount Bolangum sheds its radiance
over sleepy Kanya and down to Wattle Creek
those parts he says are dear
at such remove you'd think from misery
from the shadow of a fatal reach
a man may die many times
before they bury him
and each of us he says dies of something other
than we are buried for
blow douran-douran blow
to the root-ball of time
reap the bolter the talabilla the birrablee
the clamorous reed-warbler
the yowee
boolee boolee boolee
tell me whose child
Time is

§

PART TWO

§

that field artillery piece reminds me he says
of too many places
of Pozieres and of Villers Bretonneux
Mont St Quentin and Lagincourt
of rivers and streams the horrors of their trceries
trenches sandbags barbed wire
of the faces of men you dream of seeing again
O yes they're heroes alright
it's the ones that led them on with their lies
that get clean away
that stick in the memory's craw
adrift off Imbros
cast ashore at Ari Burnu
what undercurrents of destiny drew them there
put it down to unpredictable tides
to cliff winds that hauled them in like a deep sea catch
beyond Gabe Tepe towards Cape Helles
that dragged them under to Krithia
put it down to the derogation of the other mob
they have their heroes too
up there on the ridges
soon to be Bolton's and Holly
or along the scrub and pine plateaus
or upon the Ozymandian sands
a false dawn at the foot of the ageless Sphinx
put it down to the ridiculous ease of Ismaelia
a mock locking of horns
what it does he says is make the heart haemorrhage
the memory tear at its wounds
opening them up again
old wounds that have never healed
and they took him down to Shrapnel Gully

and buried him among his kinsmen
in a glory all his own
not ours not yours
not anybody's
only his

§

put it this way he says
weird or otherwise we're a different mob
to most others and not without
good reason or no damn reason at all
this land is neither *mater* nor *pater*
but a template of space *semper et sempiternam*
an unsurveyed abyss
what you die for here is never here itself
but always somewhere else
over the next paddock the next non-existent rise
under the fever and rage of a few gaunt trees
or the bore from which the last drop has been wrung
what you die for here he says
is some imperial dream of temperate latitudes
some county patchwork of hedge and field
cricket and lark and climbing rose
thatch and chimney smoke rising over orchards
or the glissando of a lake view
with the murmur of rock pools and waterfalls
in a snow-capped distance
and bourn-sheltered swallows vanishing in a gloaming
that only exists now between the fly-leaves
of a world of forgotten bowers and silenced brooks
of a long-lost immemorial sweetness
to which supposedly we still belong
to which we still have access
towards which the heart warms and the spirit stirs
but to speak of being in my own country

my own patch
without hesitation he says or equivocation
is to speak not of what might have been
but only of what is
to say its unassuming names over and over
aloud and in silence
in the lingo of the place in the argot of the journey
the one that always seems to begin and end
on the same morning the same afternoon
along the same road or another road
that looks just like it stretching to the same infinity
familiar yet strangely ominous
for the road is no longer rosy-coloured
no bluey or matilda no kit bag in sight
it's a road where the milestones and heaped up cairns
where the untrammeled turns trail off
and lose themselves in the circuitous nature of the past
where the talk was more halting or humorous
where the place itself bred a dialect of the locale
and if they said you find a spot congenial
half way promising
then settle it for at least it's yours
even if every yard every acre seems cursed
set the furrow of your mind he says to the blazing horizon
to the unchained acres of the cold night sky
there's reaping there he says
the dark harvest of unblinking stars

§

pits too deep for the boots that stepped in them
and the muddy entanglements awful
the blue sky more awful still
glistening over Eski Hissarlik
over Suvla Burnu over Teke and Helles Burnu
over Kum Kale and Karba Tepe

over Saros hard by Ghenikos
over Saribair and Sed el Bahr
where Homer sang that first great grief-stricken song
at the Scamander Gates
and on Mount Ida where the slopes are bathed
in honey-milk and herb
as if any war he says could be a war
to end all wars
not for all the red poppies in the world
they sleep now just a stone's throw
just a gnarled ghost gum's ungathered shade
from old Ilium
they lie there in Beach Cemetery
listening to the rolling sea
the drum tap of the tide holding the long chords
of the Dardanelles
its grey-blue waters its white horizons
fading over the bugles of the gulls
and carved forever in stone on Scott Street
Glasson and his company

§

over a few *chopps* the new chum from South America
a man of the *pampas* and the *pueblo*
confessed to the unexpected
a land almost hermetic
freighted with a handful of figures in a landscape
more like fringe-dwellers and outcasts
a people almost companionless
and still-life acres stretching forth their withered arms
to a withered sky
the dead-pan delivery of the summer wind
shifting across dun grasses
nothing happens here he says and looks at him hard
unless it manages to appear as if

it didn't happen
in which case it probably did
and if it didn't he says then it would have
sure enough alright
but only as an event of time out of space
or of space running out of time
a thing of earth and sky
each escaping the pull of the other
the silence of the earth itself
nothing if not unearthly
it left you thinking he says left you trembling
by God it must be true
for nothing consequential happens here
except what happens as a consequence
to those to whom it happens
if at all
the immeasurable is drowned in space
the infinite drowned in time
this is a locale of the cosmos
close to what the cosmos itself must be like
a place called home
and yet a place utterly inhospitable
like all deserts of which drowning men dream
like all oceans for which land-locked eyes
are famished
still he says she'll be right you'll be right
you'll get used to it
after all the Bolangum hills in a certain light
look he says like polished balustrades
of an ascent into an uncertain heaven
the ash haze the ash mist
the smoke of burn-off and charred stubble
the sense of something dying
and yet of something still alive despite it all
will soon seem familiar enough
grasses turning ingrown and turpentine
crops riddled with wild radish

you see he says and look him in the eye
a little more softly
on a summer morning a bright light may shine
upon a quirk of twig or bole
bringing forth honey-eaters and wag-tails
and weather like no other
motionless all-encompassing reclusive
not of this world

§

this lime tree I remember he says
gladdening the old back shed with its bric-a-brac
in my grandmother's backyard
long ago at Rufus River
and oranges dangling like pompoms
from her Valencia tree
there are some things he says you never forget
you see up there they'd always make sure
to keep on side with the god of rain
a god nobody believes in around here
here the only god at whose feet we bow
and proffer incense of saltbush and bindi-eye
is the god of smallest misfortunes
very relatively speaking
after no rain for months
no rain for what seems like years
a god we remember in the absurdity of hope
one we can still laugh at
without being laughed at back
at least not within ear-shot
like Heath Robinson weather or Heath Robinson soil
the kind that don't do the job
that you can't do much about
and whatever you can do comes to nothing
what can you do about nothing mate

except anything you can think of
no rain for six months
a year without a decent drop
thems are small misfortunes he says
distant cousins of half a chance
you get out your divining-rod
roam over the terrain the rock-hard sub-terrain
and offer dumb hecatombs on the barby
when all you find is beer
my grandfather he says used to say that a scrimmage
of hectoring chickens
grubbing for anything in the scrawny dirt
could find water or pretend to
on a blowy day
but all they dug up were bits of old string
pipe or rusted nails
fragments of once-treasured mimosa tea cups
tossed out with their loyal saucers
buried in an imperceptible avalanche
of slow-moving time
until it seemed that like everything else
time had stopped for good

§

how far to Mantung? how far to Swan Reach?
to Marne Valley and Murray Bridge?
how far to Lake Alexandra and to Blanchetown?
to anywhere but here?
I've heard them say it yes I've heard them ask
I've heard them turning and turning
in their dreams
psalming the names as if to invoke
some painful some pensive blessing
Monash Renmark Berri Paringa
and the salty Murray flows down to a salty sea

and again the names fall from their lips
a febrile litany
conjuring a fertile readiness
Cambrai and St Kitts and Mount Mary
Lyndoch and Koonunga
and Bolivar looking west to Largs Bay
to anywhere he says but here
I've heard them say it yes I've heard them ask
heard them chant the martyrology of the names
singing from a pioneer psalter
Scots and Pomeranians Cornishmen and Welshmen
dragging their wagons their women their crying children
heading east heading this way you see
as those broken on the wheel here
have headed their way
back west beyond the reach at last
of the beyond
for one man's sweet sleep is another man's
sleep no more

§

the way west is always to the wine-shadow sea
waters dark or glistering
the horizon enveloped in gauze
or filled with crystalloids of stars
with massed and jagged cloud
kettle drums of a gathering wind
westwards he says is to speak truly no direction
there is no point of the compass
whatever its bearing and however fine the degree
that does not point west
the way of hope with heels dug in
the way of faith flying against wingless logic
why here cannot be endured
why over there seems empyrean and charmed

why the now is enough
can never make us feel that we live in it
as we do the past
as we shall the future

§

under the persimmon and the peach tree
bull-grass rosemary mint-bush
under the apple tree and the pomegranate
onion-weed honeysuckle sour-grass
the peach tree haunted only by its own beauty
safe in the certainty of another summer
the apple tree burred and felted against inclemency
unsure of where the wind will blow from next
persimmon and pomegranate coiling into a more subtle
if subsidiary sense of the beholder's eye
a feeling more mutual to grass and bush and weed
down the Donald road the graves keep their names
the wind has a voice not all its own
it asks how is it with you grass?
with you bush and weed?
how is it with you honeysuckle?
sweet native rosemary?
and tells me he does it goes on asking
even though there is no answer
except the occasional high call
of the yellow-tailed black cockatoo
was it always so?
will it always be?
and I too shall go down the Donald road he says
and you in your day also
rain or no rain
to where coltsfoot peeps from the catercorners
of the dead in their disrepair
and the tender catkins cling to the light

as the wind sweeps up the dust of generations
and down stirs in the ecstatic air
you too will go down the Donald road he says
to where lost dreams lie underfoot
when the bell flowers lead the evening
into the presence of night
and under the dark shaking thunderheads
the graves hold fast to their names

§

how slow he says the days seem out here
to the uninitiated and the impatient
waiting restlessly for something real to happen
something that can be measured they think
or written down in law
for good effect a stay against illusion
like a settlement reached between the here and now
by shadows severed from their leaves
hastening or delaying against the light
shortening or lengthening the penumbra
between one tree and the next
how slow he says the days seem out here
where the grit clings to your eyes
like a second line of sight
the road melts into a vague distance
like a streak of sand soap
one day like that we'll vanish
into an everlasting haze
from which no light escapes
no shadow
and there on the last horizon
the sky itself will vanish

§

the trees here turn earth and air into geometry
 into truncations of burnt-out fires
 or streams no longer visible
the bus stop waits for a bus that isn't coming
 on the Minyip road there's a cloud
 with the moon recumbent
the wind-harp's in its own makeshift weather
 all those yards he says the shunting yards
 the sidings have lost their voice
 lost their reason
their shadows grow longer and more farouche
 the scent of mint cannot waken them
 the lowing of cattle being loaded
 with each year the hollows dry up
 the stone curlew's gone elsewhere
 or gone for good
 what sweet calabash stirred its dreams
 what fire waits upon the old pines
their branches drifting aimlessly in the breeze
 the kookaburras open their throats
to a thousand days and then another thousand
 they no longer care for
the bus stop waits for a bus that isn't coming
 for a crescendo of gold and garnet light
 but all that's left here are the gullies
 the dust the sour smell of rush
cats'-eyes on the road glinting like pinchbeck
 the land has the look of a place no longer
 in love with its horizons
 a place that has not only been forgotten
but lies almost beyond the mercy of memory
 and only the wind-harp it seems is still
 at home and at peace
 in its own makeshift weather
 as if it alone knows its own limits

as if it alone in this waste has never overstepped
the sun's measures or the moon's
having the measure of both

§

so what is it then about any place
that fills and empties alike
the world with its life
and makes of bald mountains bald plains
a memorable scenery
a locus of such intrigue as mere curiosity
cannot account for
is it the presence of absence as a grief in bud?
is it the shadow of a hope?
so faint it makes distance seem near
what tap root of imperceptible
of unimaginable time
comes to such flower as the age
of the stars themselves
tells me he does that his own ancestors
swore to it in the Shan Van Vocht
water keeps the secret
ageless sap the memory
fire is in the blood from the beginning
and in the earth is form and number
an instrumentation of motion and rest
the dance of mote and speck
of cob and seed
the dark cognizance of ash
the hieroglyphic dust
the line and colour of unflinching bone
as if the absence of presence itself is a mystery
that lies in wait on the brink of being
a presentiment not of what will be
but of what has already passed and is passing now

a life forever among us
sworn to us by the ancients of the Shan Van Vocht
by the ancients of the Yarriambiic
beyond our reach yet always in our grasp
the flux of things beyond all bidding
holding good

§

BOOK TEN

ALDEBARAN AND BEYOND

ALDEBARAN AND BEYOND

PART ONE

§

it all comes back he says to how on this earth
any of it ever began at all
when all that the world dreamed of when it dreamed
of vast and distant worlds
was a place like this with its own signature space
its own dark bar on a spiral arm
of speechless magnitude and brilliance
and yet no more it might seem than an arm's length
or the flick of an eye
tidals of elements
mutualities of electrons mind-numbing neutrons
protons impalpable as tomorrow
glowing among points of black light
of such gnostic perfection
as worlds achieve when worlds apart
it all comes he says and goes
in a gaseous iridescence an oceanic calm
the true *ellixis alleghensis*
as if memory only is of the very essence
and energy itself no more than granules or particles
of things remembered of things forgotten
and then remembered again
perhaps as a lubricious tremor on the skin
or an oscillation of the corona
or a wave rolling over the pupil of the eye
washing up on the shoreline as tears
a pulse in the blood keeping uncanny time
two-four three-four four-four

a mass of minims and semi-quavers
stupendous arpeggios
tracking the rhumb of a dazzling star
resounding beyond any other sound
silent beyond all known silences
it's the way the bush itself talks he says
the music of such and such
the melodious so and so
neither an if nor a perhaps not even a maybe
language is all or nothing
the unknown emerging into the light of sound
a sound not at all certain of itself
only of the danger lurking in things
that make no sound
there are perhaps no more questions he says
only the first question ever asked
never forgotten
in the now or never of all or nothing
what can Canopus tell us or Sirius he says
or the Pleiades if they chose
the element of surprise is all but dead
unless you're truly alive
now answers are never enough
never good enough
the wind ensorcells the humblest seeds
kernels crammed with life or bursting with bud
and the trees it seems bring forth their fruits
with such insouciance
wind or no wind rain or no rain
the real surprise is always a kind of cosmic reckoning
like the arrival of the *papalongi*
like the arrival of life reeling against itself
craving for the juice for the gourd
the bending reed bending its own shadow
the perpetual mystery of the edge
gone over
of ends met and defeated

of chasms between the stars crossed like bamboo bridges
a day comes when the tree and the bird are one
with the honey light the milk horizon
a day comes when you see again the angel
its sword twirling at the gate
barring the way into the garden that was ours
ours from the beginning
all this and more he says must again
come to pass

§

nothing he says rouses the miles of one chain miles
from the torpors of their afternoons
than hydrogens of emptiness
the heeler scratching in vain at the same dead post hole
nothing he says is more plain to the evening wind
than snakeskins impaled on fence posts
that hour when the infinitesimal and the infinite
have both succumbed at last to the hypnosis of time
sensing that whatever wind it is
it blows around them and under them and over them
and right through them
as if from the beginning they were never there
but to be blown through
for some purpose of which the wind itself
has no inkling
but knows what it must do
who knows he says what it does to a tree
to a bird a flower to awake to this
to find itself touched by pure radiance
in a place like this so planiform and still
a place of no fixed address of no sweet vantage
a vagabond place
the locale of misfits and wanderers
runaways from Rigel and Bellatrix burning out

like love nights under Betelgeuse
shiftless and dumbfounded at being at all
at being here and not there
or now and not before or not hereafter
dicing with rain that isn't rain
and what you thought was the sound of rain
is only the stars idling

§

it's as if he says we are crossing the great wastes
heading for the foam of Tierra del Fuego
for the rollers under Cape Horn
or trudging to Novosibirsk
only to be lost utterly at Yakutsk or Kamchatka
crossing the last most desolate of landscapes
remembering how radiant how sweet
this our neck of the woods is
its nutmeg browns its charcoal greys
broad twill expanses and flaxen stitched miles
dull at dawn as gabardine
scored and etched by an old hand
a god's own algorithm
in oil and sulphur and wood sap
and so it is he says so it is
of a night under shining Aldebaran
when the last of the day's long shadows have sunk
at a bend between the tall poplars
you'll come upon a creek weeping into its own waters
its reeds looking up at the unsleeping stars
as if to beg for this pond this patch of ironweed
this unloved morass
this half-baked dog-leg billabong
no hex from the spook-eyed owl
this is it he says this is time's strange way
of loving its own productions

it's one and only offer you see is pure mortality
there's no other way forward
no other way back
no going back or going back
to back when
somewhere up there he says there sits
a mind high in the saddle
on the verge of something perhaps a precipice
so I'll settle for this he says licking down a rice paper
I'll settle for a sweet scintilla of Wimmera sky
these motley crews of sugar gums and bulokes
standing under the sandman gaze of the moon
I'll take these he says any day
for mine there's none more friendly than these
long stray shambles of cloud
sky shag
the corduroy gravel the hessian of the wind
keepsakes of old crone rain
of rocky clydesdale
of ancient winds that long ago blew themselves away
or became the equinox breeze that fell in love
with its own sweet breathiness
with the pale jellied lips of the Bolangum hills
bleeding from prickle bush and raspberries
tells me he does life ain't buttercups
it's all windswept and fly blown and dust bowled
this is a hardship he says
and not the half of it bloody hell
yet who would turn tail here who would creep back
crying for his lot from the barn tops
this is it he says this is your one slim fat chance
fragile as phlox and as brief
here among miles of nothing among miles of nobody
miles and miles from nowhere
you see he says after a while it gets so hard
it comes easy
at last you find an amount of absolutely nothing

so great as to be nothing short of all
where paddocks greet the culverts and ditches
where hay bales in rows are hooped
against the stubborn wild-oat wind
and the smell of rain is only the sprat smells
of stagnant pools
and yet he says that's where you'll find it
the hemp of contentment
a soul grows docile almost dominical
you become he says such as you once were
and always dreamed of
perfect in your own imperfection
surrounded by lumpen sheep and the usual bijou
and farmyard crap
a serenity strong enough to bring the supplest light
to a sudden standstill
like dogwood enduring alongside creek stone
there's nothing he says that isn't elemental
no matter how plain or humdrum
it's all marlock to the flimsiest trickle of dew
to catspaw and yellow bells and primula
and in that dream hour when the young Irish runaway
took her his sweet black velvet
and all day the shadows were on the wallaby
in the season when the monterrey ripens
for sure it was a dreaming path he was on he says
a road of fleecy striations
of cirrus and palomino haze
the pabulum of the wide blue yonder
out here he says in the ash plain
it's all to the good he says
it's all good
all good

§

there's a kind of conspiracy he says
surrounding yonderness
rank scrub rubs up against hedgerow
they eye each other off
where a wilding rose rambles and unfolds
to sun itself above rock-moss and the pipit's rapt attention
strange mixtures waft away of wild sassafras
of barley sugar and rye
pulsing through the sullen paddocks
oaten-coloured under the first acacia blossoms
there he says if you get down low
you'll hear the bass clef humming
of a brambled continuo
improvising the simplest of divertimenti
tiny string sections of snail and slug
trombones of worms
and the grasshopper tinkling away on a leafy clavicembalo
leaving weightless drops of water
hanging like serifs among the grassy sharps and flats
here he says there are no imaginary toads
in real gardens
only imagined gardens that real toads dream of
when the circular saw snaps a blade
nature's never done with
even here among the sand bands the waterless reaches
with not so much as a mound spring
old man wimmera if you wait long enough
will give you your fill

§

so then what's real he says is the same
I guess as what's apparent
all is real and all is apparent
what appears to be is no less real as appearance
as that which is real and rebukes apparency

you'll wait forever in the wings he says
here in this withered bog
where the only personae dramatis are the moods of weather
this land of generous nullities
marsh flats mudless
fens of sarcasm and dessication
moor land of creeper and dead waterholes
of salt morass and moistureless bitters
firkins of dustbowl and ironweed
this land of silences long congealed in the soil
in the miserere drifting down at evening
between limp trees
this is your Sargasso sea
your weed shavings of fresh cut wood
or sawdust smells on a rasp
tells me he does appearances matter
being all too real
that cloud that never rolls your way
is a chain of madder in the glass-eyed noon
between one threshold and another
one slipstream pluming into view
another fading from sight
there alone he says
lies the real

§

windbags that's all you are
you lot by crikey he says a bunch of air-gaspers
cunning in the art of verbal midwifery
all blather and bobby dazzlers
that's what's left of sense after all your pyrotechnic
penny bangers of hortative nonsense
like smoke drawn through water
bubbling in a fevered brain
the lees of speech drained to the last toxic drop

such extravagance of starry-eyed dreams
such manic hyperdulia of maiden hair moss
I've seen your lot he says and you're no good
no bloody use that's for sure
running after every fiddle and finical of riotous language
like a rakehell after skirt
tells me he does just the other day he found himself
down at Dogtrap Creek on the lookout
for a stand of pine or buloke
that might he thought take my fancy
that would cool the frenzied aftermath of another day
ferreting fruitlessly through deadwood
in search of the one true
innocuous sublime

§

twilight and its reaches at Wallaloo Creek
in the eye of time I see
the black bird looking back over its shoulder at the wind
reading from the book of the rain
taking in a breath the wild compass of the sugar gums
rejoicing spring-onion lean
spurting new shoots in a new spring
bursting with brown mignonettes
there are times he says when I dream
a dream of all I ever dreamed of dreaming
of woods thinking
this way goes the wind
that way the water flows
where the house stands steadfast
and orchards teem with blossom tufts
hidden variables of light and moisture emblazoning the breeze
and the clouds are orchestrations of the high-tossed trees
there the light prances above headstones
doodles on them in an innocence of translation

twists leafy tendrils among hare-bells
as if to get at some secretion of primal gourd
neither here nor there you will find it
says a voice from somewhere he says that's never been seen
neither now nor later neither the fool nor the wise
know the language the archaic dialect
only in the past perfect of the past
there where nowhere is everywhere and also one by one
in sand time in clay time
in time of granite time of basalt
in water time and in time without water
where something that never was yet always is
remains and is forever at a remove
is given to thinking now this way now that way
or both ways at once or never
or no longer given to thinking at all
but only to the prolonged absence of feeling
of time as the laggard of unspoken longing
to be whiled away
until worn away with whiling
you know he says creasing some Champion Ruby
between finger and thumb
licking the rice paper with a suspicious pause
maybe it's life's way of pulling the wool over our eyes
to let us think that existence is measurable
capable of being comprehended
if not entirely understood
so many so many lies just to get at the truth
and yet here it is possible just possible
to pass into another life
the unpassable passed through without pause
at the moment when only the moment is
and the spell is indistinguishable from what came before
from what comes after it is broken
as if this were all only a mere preliminary
a tuning of strings a pressing of stops
a flurry of muffled voices

before the baton rap of water moving underground
freed at last from the tension of surface
from dawn and its dappled skies
from the noon's sullen whereto and why
out of the ash of afternoons
you come at last to twilight and its reaches
the wake from which nothing wakes
and the land itself he says is such as you have never
known it before
or will ever know it again
or who the beheld is and who the beholder

§

everlasting and in surges are the hebdomadal dews
the terrine moods of memory
leaving the words of yesterday in tears
and today he says is all a fear of what tomorrow may bring
in the cascade of shadow
in the ambushade of light
in the crystal radiance of amber
of pure impossible ruby
of what contains all and is contained in all
the pippet's song the wattle bird's bellwether warble
the categorical kookaburra
sprays of gypsophila or a sprig of phlox
a cube of iceberg frost
and the diosma soaring over the fence
pretending this ramshackle run of the mill place
is a tableau vivant of picket fence perfection
with a window releasing the strains of *Greensleeves*
above a climbing rose and clumps of jonquils
yet this is real he says and true
nothing lies beyond the dreamer but his threshold
he who know that nuts are only bolts
warts are nothing but all

that lilac wine is the wine of weeping magnolias
that at Wallaloo Creek where this little sun gives way
hearing night's footfall on the barley grass
a sudden recognition of a world inside out
no less supreme than the angelic orders
is unearthed in the unearthly quiet
in the archaeology of memory
a life of presentiment becomes palpable
this he says is the speckled egg in the tottering nest
the radiant glow worm burrowing
towards dark bliss

§

dark matter and galaxies isotropic
where to find the surface in the bottomless
the way up of the way down
and since all is filmy all utterly transparent
bedrock and gale force and buttress
pith and peel and unbudded bud
blowfly and firefly
collapse into corpuscular visions of themselves
invisible as the seemingly visible stars
for what is it he says that we see up there
where the gaseous is a kind of solid
and the solid a liquid amounting to stupendous light
Aldebaran beckons as a point of incandescence
of the purest independence
among countless curvatures of space
an atoll of time in an ocean of infinitude
the starry night is no more than time
only space only
the inaudible overheard
an unending snatch of song
a dull hum slipping into and out of tune
a sight of such splendour

such tripudiate iridescence
the black smoke and glittering splatter of time-space
gyre of infinite gravitations
vibrant radiative murderous
smouldering and burning and exploding
ages since and aeons hence
and all at once in a forever ever
frozen fast in shade yet motile at high noon
melting like the leaves of the Yarran-tree
colliding and careening
hurtling towards and away from multitudinous ingots
of itself and its other
white hot to the cosmic touch
electro bolts of cluster the smash of mega nebulae
shat he says by Coyote as the Winnebago say
the primeval muck the pristine ooze
the orgasmic sludge
density beyond densation
arrays of mirrors beyond array
blow up and close up of high resolution
viscous gneal and spectral grain
streaming forth and spuming back the eternal scream
of bitch heat of mongrel slake
totality at the point of nil
Johnny Troy resounding through the little *via lactea*
at the pitch of where pitch cannot go
all deadwood and deluge in one
cornucopia of inconceivable brilliances
of wormhole worlds and ant heap masques
of magnetic piss and electro defecation
of boundless and fecund beauty
blood trails at red shift
vanishing into deep sea speech at blue shift
seedtime as time of total annihilation
Stabat Mater sung by quantum choirs
and pavannes goat-footed
ancient airs and reels horn-headed

at the sweet point of the event horizon
where matter is nothing and nothing is everywhere
contaminate of absolute purity
the spawn and sputum of headlong love
reckless of consequence of risks beyond reckoning
all brass and miscible contradiction
oxygens of silent night
the stellar turbulence of repulsion and attraction
wilderness of hydrogens and heliums
drowning us he says at daylight
O bitter-sweet is that sunny-side up
and old man wimmera blind with promise
makes his way into the nitrogen blue
into whorls of silence
of wattlebard and wallaby dust
where the plot at Rookwood is filled with clods of star dirt
with the carbons of Aldebaran
you see all is clay he says even in the heavens
and here the sod and dust of our days
how sweet it is to be washed by the waters
of oblivion

§

PART TWO

§

black soil red soil and soil Cavendish brown
soil cloud-grey and without silver lining
clump and spatter of vegetation
clouds of earth as dumb as the departed years
Raglan-knotted at Long Gully
pinched and airless as a humidior at Firebreak
unforgiving at Ben Nevis and Sledging Point
the sobbing of wind in the scrub at Hellhole
the last rites of the last rain at Ditchfield
the wordless viaticum on lips and eyes
at Mugwamp and Chinaman Link
look up he says if you want to look down
look back he says if you want to see straight ahead
into the pilsner-tinted haze the lager-yellow dust
that brings on endless thirst
this is a land that tosses and turns
that never sleeps in the soundness of deep sleep
but slumbers through shifts of ground
through cracks in the walls
through the rattle of coruscating tanks
slouching from one long drought to another
dreaming of clover purpling the seared horizon
dreaming of kangaroo grass and threads of golden braid
shimmering across the brigalow flats
dreaming of the trceries of a starry forever
where life flows like a never-ending stream
into the solent of a vast uneasy stillness
dreaming of snow-caps and rushing waters
of imperious waterfalls of kettledrum rock and boulder
thistle root and tussock that give no purchase
and khaki soil and khaki grasses
dying for lack of bog worm and mud beetle

and birds warbling at morning to the muddy-faced frogs
land of snake and reptile remembering a phantom time
when Romney-cross ewes padded through grasses
and the red gums rose into the scorching noon
waiting for the morphine of afternoon to take effect
for the basket-willows to look for drowsy shade
the hour when billabongs dead to the world
find themselves still alive
smelling of stagnant leaves and stubble fields
or the rusty lees and rainbow cobwebs
of an ancient water trough shot with holes
this is your infinity he says not the high and mighty
vertigo of mountains and hills just shy
of the altostratus
but plain dull flat endless stretches of stretch
this is the grid he says without airs
but of such resolute graces as are never found
except where infinity appears as something of no purpose
as a form without pattern or a music without staves
something under rather than over
all that is or was or ever will be

§

infinity he says is a feeling first and last
the burning bush that does not burn
but forever smoulders
the running creek that does not run
but forever trickles
the ash wind leaping the fence at Rich Avon
where the shadows are used to it
of doing without
and the bones lie about under wheels
picked clean by bulrush tips in the flintlock heat
until all that's left is dry water

§

let them look hard he says for Cassiopeia
let Andromeda drift however slowly towards us
and still you will see he says
the parched outlines of this desolate outland
the silhouette of its tears stuck in the corners of your eyes
the waterholes a niggardly thing
at beetroot sunset when the grasshoppers reconnoitre
paddocks stale as cabbage mould
and the moon doesn't know whether to wax or wane
and drops off like an old coot
dreaming of fish-hawks in the Dargals
and brolgas silvering the wild Snowy water-couch
give us a go he says and for sure
you're doing it to me again and how often
have I asked you not to
there's no love lost and no love left
not here any more and only enough of losing
and enough of leaving to settle for hate
just withers of loneliness and nethers of isolation
the paspalum whispering through the evening road-side smoke
when the bulk heads and steam rollers are sidelined
and the line markers hit town in a zig zag
after one too many White Ox smokos
tanked to the gills with demijohns of ginger beer and turps
and their own sweat smells to them decidedly sweet
as cut rye-grass and Sherwood sward

§

let Rigel flash before your eyes and Bellatrix
like young guns of untouchable years
spear-throwers laser shooters glints in girls' eyes
let Betelgeuse glitter and dance
be the empyrean of that which is unreachable
of that which alone can be reached

the world of which our world is a world
the hunter and the hunted
the bag of winds the golden bough
the sack of exquisite fungus
narcosis of the night
tobacco pouch of Old Man Time
a jewelled radiometry of pure incandescence
the glyph of all our fates
tells me he does that thirst gives water meaning
that hunger gives bread its benison
that there's no further looking to be done than the long gaze
that takes it all in slowly
out here is where all in is a thing possible
a joining of sky world and earth world
of all that is unearthly
of griffin tree and gargoyle swamp
what's out there and can't be seen
out there and seen up close
what's scrutable and what's beyond our ken
here he says the world is so wide open
it shuts you in to let you out
to let you be free at last
but tells me he does you've got to be dying
to be free and dying to live
to be free

§

snowgrass and basalt chip he says I dream of
and of stringing along on a leathery road
with a trail of dusty horn-tossers
under a salt-sprinkle of stars
greeting Aldebaran nightly with a touch of the nap
and a Drum glowing and going out
and lighting up again in a cool and circumambient breeze
and soon you know he says it's all quiet

and the hooves have stopped and the wheat's asleep
like a cat with ears cocked
and there's always tomorrow he says to think about
time moves like a mob out here
and if isn't liver fluke its fly-strike or foot-rot
or rust in the paddocks
or a rusted-through lifetime of water on the brain
your heart burns like bluestone out here he says
through the dagging days
the grassless summers of smart-weed and scrub
whipped into submission like the animals themselves
by burn back and gully-raker
god he says that chum from Argentina has it good
there the snowline lifts the eye as in a vision
of windmills and hidalgo courtesies
a Rosicrucian benediction of Argentine earth
and crisp Chilean air
unveiling the virgin-Mary-blue of the high Cordillera
but here he says what have we here
is only the flax and dun of long-buried dunes
a hard crust toothless light
crumbling over hessian bag streets
their gabardine shadows strung up like snakeskins
the land interprets it all he says
and our land is a harsh interpreter
knows no quarter and gives none
land of wheat and chaff and of bitter reproach
out there is the bread and butter of our days
from there we came and back there we're headed
to eat the dust and wash it down
is a kind of destiny a king hit of sorts
death by a thousand ponies
not that bad I reckon
and if you can't take it he says
too bad

§

old man wimmera of impossible distances
of endless roads and swooping skies
of crow's foot of obliterate fog and killer frost
of murky dead-ends and tangled briars
of blotted out joys and insinuating sorrows
of rippling heat and cat-o-nine-tails cold
hear us poor sods
all's in the balance even the balance itself
and from one blow to the next
is but a dog's day away
for here the canyons of the mind reverberate
with hymns to the nothingness
with the dirge of the dust storm
with the whippet's howl and the pointer's
the Jack Russell's crowbar growl
and the heart is only a hollow place
a rabbit's helter-skelter refuge
what you have here he says is a remoteness that crushes
the membrane of reverie
where even the cairns shake with an unnamed fear
and lop-sided tombs collapse
into the dark soil like a dying star
you see he says we should have listened to him
to old man wimmera while we had a chance
listen he says each of us lives as if we alone
ever lived or ever would
as if the now were for all time
and only our time was real
why then we are indeed the lost ones
forever finding something more
and more to lose

§

there was a time he says there was a place
the hearth-height of birth-right
now long gone
and words that meant something
enough O more than enough
to warm the hearts of the souls of the living
like Rosie he says who always had on hand
cream sherry at Christmas and Chestnut Teal
while a blustery wind almost blew the windows out
I remember he says the scent of rosemary
filling her house on roast lamb days
and the smell of wool grease and eucalypt
in the copper boiler
and aunty Vera up to her arms in bread dough
in those days he says it only seemed natural
to keep things simple
counting the raindrops falling off the Hills hoist wires
one by slowly one
or marvelling at catkins making their oblations to the morning sun
while chocolate pipe smoke sweetened the air
with puffs of settling detachment
and from the veranda rocking chair
you could see dead ahead for miles in arcs of angelic direction
feel rich even with your pockets hanging out
this is good land you told yourself
dragged into the wattlebird's orbit of blackthorn
world of rhododendron and flowering plum
of silk cut cloud
here in the bleeding heart of the west
you can almost smell the ether

§

and the length and breadth of those summers
the back of them
staring back at you without flinching

towards something vaguely on the horizon
the horizon itself an ethereal thing
its doldrums of haze its washed-out heat
merino clouds scuttling towards the nearest homestead
sensing another kind of weather
the slow disintegrations of mercury and lime
once again he says you've come here
only this time it seems for good
far from the cow-bells and lush pastures
of polled Hereford country
from meadow lands of hardened *caballeros*
maybe you've come he says because you had to
you've been weaned off that other world
with its prongs of kangaroo paw and kangaroo grass
its peach Melba skies and *sans souci* valleys
lake water lapping at the toes of ancient hills
we'll teach you he says how to shear yet
first the brisket my boy and then on to the belly
and how to hoe the row until the row is hoed
at nightfall under a pale Narcissus moon
you can count sheep until you fall asleep
and bless the half of your luck
safely in your keep

§

in that beginning that never was
there came from out of the legend land
the dragon teeth stars
out of the womb of time
where the heart knows not what to speak of
but only that a great silence fills the spaces
where this place or that place
made out of the clay of time a habitat
what wind what dust tailing one horse towns
each a day's ride from the next

what ash cloud drifts down Main Street in the haystacked noon
down Petering Street down Morris and McLeod
drifting towards Slaughter and Degenhardt
and down the Rupanyup Road
no more than a haze over Molyneaux and Devereaux
a shining rain of echoes hanging like icicles
over Saint John's octagonal belfry
over Kirchheim and Saint Stephen's bells
outcrying the cockerel on the day you were born
singing *Die ganze Welt ist Himmelblau*
and the sun that day wore a hat hung with corks
and wooden shoes

§

days of doing and undoing
of dancers in a circle
shadows shifting a yard at a time
a chain across an afternoon
what is done is done with
and nothing else coming of it
except the unforeseeable
you leave lying about a gradual scare
in the shape of an aftermath
you know the place but which place is it
a mortmain a play of light
the moment emerging
or that into which the moment vanishes
each thing is measured by that into which it changes
or into which it cannot change
until everything is known at last
for what it is
or what it can never be
the moment always surprises us
but surprises us with complete anticipation
you know the place and do not know the place

at any moment an age will have passed
and here is not he says where they say it is
nor there either
slowly he says you'll learn the south wind's language
where it scuffs the shunting yards
skirls the cemented girth of the silos
leaving you far but not too far
near but not too near
settling for dog weed and thistle down
for the convex reflections of an intricate terrain
in a house where the master is present
but not to himself
in a place of cracking joists and beams
here he says the days are never rid of their burden
what you are left with is what they inevitably leave behind
clues to other mysteries
but not to the mystery of themselves
you know the place and do not know it
watching the isobars narrow
the nettle bush finds new ways to survive
waiting for evening cool
for rain to fall in rhythms proper to rain
ancestral to the core

§

how wide is heaven's net
how fine its mesh
through which nothing passes
yet all things are passing through
how moist the un-rained on ground
that harbours snail and newt
in the colloid world of sap and dung
micro-spheres of unvarnished worlds
attuned to the diurnal as to the seasons
to the generations and to the ages

the duodecimo dance of life and death
the carbon armatures of rock and wood
of rosebud and Eureka lemon
captive within the choral helix of light and water
within the contemplation of the aeon plane
time's multitudinous crystal
this pilgrim's locale
this landscape

§

here too the *immrama* and the sagas survive
in pub yarns and dry arguments
in backyard stoushes and the ramblings of fishermen
who come home without a catch
here's your slag heap he says your supernal sludge
the wimmera algorithm that rules the plains
in memory's kit bag dubbin'd to a sheen
in the satin-backed alcoves and lampshades
of magenta and turquoise
of what was once the glory of the Ladies Lounge
in scattered petroglyphs and glass shards buried deep
in tip heaps and land fills
and in the more recalcitrant earth
and there also he says where the buloke threads the needle
through the woof and weave of the Bolangum hills
where shades of olive and aniseed
betray a muddy bore a marsh patch a hidden spring
wherever he says the lambing sheep and the low roofed shearing sheds
are pencilled in or air brushed out
they also he says remain forever a part of the far horizon
tells me he does all absence is but a sign of a presence hidden
in the chevron pepper tree weighed down
by a singularity of seeming weightlessness
of pure and breathless air
in the transmutations of dust to dust

of emerald and pearl
in the wine-deep pelagos of dusk and in the annunciation of dawn
in acid rains in pyramidal clouds and sulphurous winds
in carmine planetary moons
in the blinding rebus of ring topography
in the what you see before you with naked eye
tumbledown weatherboards and sheds and lofts and chicken coops
magnolias in bloom drenching a Devonshire garden
in rose and blaze and cerise
conifers and the mistletoe as if this O God were still Beyreuth
and in the lone stick figure on the bitumen bend
slumped under a lamp post
or on the long dirt road or across the grey dust plain
all that immense and prodigious emptiness poured out
in a never-beginning and a never-ending stream
in a whirlwind of stillness in the dead weight of rage
in the advance and retreat and in the element of surprise
the weight of light the weightlessness of shadows
there it is he says there's your land
your heartburn and backfire
your locale your law of unintended consequences
a torus of infinite amplitude
a constant that reassures the sublunary world
all-encompassing camouflage stripped bare
in the silence of transfigured night
ruthless and absolute whether upstream or downstream
on the river of wimmera light

§

outlandish country this he says
of such vague elevations and clairvoyant curves
how often he says have you lost count of the miles
before something moved and took on shape
achieved a density greater than the lightness
of the morning flood plain or clouds motionless on the horizon

the road goes to Pimpinio or winds down to Warranooke
lit up by arcs of sugar gums and she-oaks
by wild broom and mountain spire
or vanishes in a fog of Scania funnels and diesel fumes
the blare across the paddocks muffled by pea straw
how many times he says were you deceived at Sheep Hills
or betrayed at Murra Warra by what looked real
the kestrel the flat earth endlessly comforting
the way is many ways and no map tells of it
but hour by hour the haze deepens to an intoxicate
on a virtual bend the wheel might slip as easily from your grasp
in the sweep of a skater's curve and find you hurled
against the geometry of an ancient tree
at the fork of ghosts where one life meets another
you'll find how small a thing infinity is
its night scent drifting above honeysuckle gully
where Aldebaran waits in vain for the high beam flood
to drown the gloom
tells me he does the world is you see at any given moment
only what it seems and god never what it is
for what it is can only ever be what it seems to you
loss and absence alone he says
there only something is and something was
like words before they form some poem that can never be found
doomed by its very being to be the zero sum
of the sand pans and Wallaloo its woodlands and soaks
dragged into the force field of the dark matter of theme
and what it was you dreamed of saying
the word before the word was
is like the road you dreamed of going down
pot-holed by a lifetime of raining blows
here lies Rosebery and here Beulah in the dust
back of the back of beyond
and you he says fill that which never was to overflowing
with that which can never be
making a space for time out of sap and buloke shade
a time for space out of the bud light

the imperishable swept off its feet by the fleeting
that's why he says yours is the cradle song of the dry culvert
the love lilt of a land without weather
of stops and bellows of shag and thorn wind
forever shifting key

THE END