

Landfall

2022 Manchester Poetry Prize Winner

The Rainforest in Winter

I used to imagine...

That language could lead us inextricably to

Grace. As though it were geographical.

I used to think these things when I was young.

I still do.

—Charles Wright

Today, the wind has set in like dew that won't dry,

bone deep

And damp with all the world's worry. It blows hard, midnight cold

At midday. The boys don't feel it though, their bare legs barrel

The grass along the sloped bank of Caalong Creek. The water

Below runs winter's way

—dark funnels in the eddies, slow

And glacial among the rushes. Autumn is in the ground

And our gum boots tell the season, thick with mud and mush, moss

And wood fibres from a fallen branch of blueskin wattle.

We're out

of the house—for now. The breeze beats our oilskin jackets

Like old boxers' gloves and we walk punch drunk down the sloughed edge

Of the path,

the dirt slippery like sweat covered canvas.

But, there's nothing more determined than two boys on the loose

And I'm the kite they carry and flit in each draught—scribbling

Their whim across the remnant paddocks. The weeping grass bends

To our knees and falls uneven in tufts

like a mind bowed

Low by life—animal trails scrawled with time's unsteady hand,

The slow migration of dairy cows that once sheltered

Under the blackwoods and peppermints. A little raven

Stalks us through the branches
like a bag of all my mistakes,
The *kar karr* of his call forming hieroglyphs of sound.
I'm pulled on. I leave the stones to the river—rosettas

Of algae and lichen. Interpretation
is patience,
But my two have none of it in the flush of July air
That ripens our faces and tears the tops of ribbon gums
To shreds. We cross the soccer fields,
emptied like aerodromes
For a bombing raid—the maple leaves, convulsing windsocks
At the far end. In the cutting, the tracks are endless trains
Of thought, translated in ballast and steel—eastward and west

In equal measure. All afternoon the sky
chain-smokes
The clouds and grits the corners of its tobacco stained teeth
As the rainforest exhales in front of us and we plunge
Between the vine twisted ribs.
In here under the great skin
Of canopy the whipbirds are making aviaries
Of the pencil cedars and I wonder if the weather
Wears birds the same or if Miss(ed) Flite keeps them, like me—hope

And ruin. The forest forms a digression
from the gale,
An oracle of calmness and slow to judge. There's refuge
Behind the coachwood walls and coolness like an old god
Breathing on our necks—hushed dampness and restoration.
The trim light slakes the soul
like the hand of a great verdant
Colossus. By now, the boys have blown out the bluster of youth
And we bramble the shaded and rooted path. Through the litter

Of leaves I walk myself back,

while they point at sickle ferns

And splay their fingers through. Life in a fine balance. These days

Clarity comes recalcitrant as little ones in an evening

Fury—Philistines on the war path.

And I'm with Sampson

At the mill. Yet, the quietness here beguiles us, the light

Slackens the solicitude and the penwork of wonga

Vines on possumwood is a newness written in the gusts.

Phaethon in Three Parts

*They bolted bright and brought him low
But high were his spirit and daring*

—Ovid

I

Night, first weekend in December, wind; the world

Hanging on by its fingernails.

We pass the Tuena junction—you're asleep my son

But there are soft moans on your lips and your mother reaches

Over car seats; cool river of her eyes,

Hesperian hands

On the burning banks of your brow. The country in summer fever

Thirty-nine and falling,

the Hume hardens its way south.

Rye grass like ashes underfoot, the air anneals all.

Earthbound Dawnsteed;

Phoebus' brumbies trample the ranges these days and nightly

The news tells of the billows over Batlow. Three millennia

Of warnings forgotten,

Black summer—a conflagration of the spirit.

We are brought dirt poor like the Murrumbidgee,

Like a bastard's birthright,

Like policy written for the polls.

II

In the eighties, we spent Christmas lining the Abercrombie

With the smell of calico tents.

Three to a room, wallaby grass and sand for our floor

—The cosmos of the river, it's pebbles and rocks

Skipping through the days.

The she-oaks saw us,

Standing there, wise men with wire beards. But now,
The white-browed wood swallow
Is Apollo's scorched headed messenger
—Singing soft arrows in the air.
The river wrung out; the bulrushes withered
Like lost legions in the desert drought.

Curled on rock walls, diamond pythons were black figure
Masterpieces; their heads the Tiber,
Euphrates and springs of Pirene,
—All ancient echoes. Now, reins loose as promises,
Drop like the dams; rapids run dry as the paddocks
And every creek's a tribute we forgot to carry.

III

You shiver a shallow dream, river red gums shadow your skin
And we strip you down—sweat beads
On your temple. In the fields, quail rise
In the night sky like overweight stars,
And the moon sends her smoke stained tears
over Goulburn Valley. In memory,

I walk the stringy bark forest in snowfall, Crookwell in winter;
Or the smell of summer rains
On the back porch—wet jasmine
On the trellis. Tonight, the anger of the old gods,
Thunder and the threat of rain
—Jupiter blusters in the back hills

Like a southerly. Delirious, you wave at the turbines over Pejar,
Faceless clocks,
Apocalyptic stop watches on the countdown.
What world is left for your spirit,

My boy, when the firmament smoulders

And all on Olympus fall silent.

Two Sijo and Tanka in Autumn; Or the Steel City Gardens

I

Today the sun's dialled down and winter rises in the shapes
Of swamp cypress. I chase my son through azaleas. He's hiding,
As always, with a smirk —the world unburdened in his smile.

II

Sulphur crested cockatoos, minding dusk in redwood branches
—Imprints of white oil on ink sketch. The steel city dims its lights.
We are towering infernos, quieted in the night sky.

III

The dragon's blood tree
 Broad shoulders the winter sky
And sits in time's peace,
 The way the world would want us,
If we only knew the same.

IV

Escarpment curtains
And shadows conduct the pond
 —evening matinee
Of eel, wood duck, and ibis
 —we throw peas and take our place.

Notes: *The Rainforest in Winter*

- Blueskin is another common name for Green Wattle.
- A bag full of my mistakes, riffs on the ideas in Plath's daddy, a bag full of God
- Miss Flite from Charles Dickens Bleak House keeps her bird caged in her room until the end of her court case in the Chancery. At the novels end, they are set free.
- Delphic verse was often quite obscure and ambiguous. In the case of the wars with Persia, some historians believed it had taken favour with the invading force and was offering dire oracles for the Greek city-states.
- The Athenians were so dejected by the first oracle of Xerxes invasion that they approached the pythia a second time and asked for another, which referenced some saving grace 'a wooden wall shall stand.' (Herodotus 7.141) Themistocles, one of the prominent leaders of the time, determined this 'wooden wall' referred to their triremes and thus set about building up the navy. It was the Athenian fleet that would win a decisive victory over Xerxes at Salamis in 480.
- Samson was blinded at chained to a stone mill after the deception by Delila and capture at the hands of the Philistines.