## One Night in March: Stuart's Crossing Under Lights

My voice is a human thing, and weak,
and it disappears with the sun
—Charles Wright

At the back end of summer the sky's spent A million years making it to this point

—The stars pressed like a sheet of papyrus,
The air, dew sweet and sticky from the work
Of the season.

We set a fire under

A forked trunk of manna gum, near halfway

Through a life of shedding its lesser self

And we've done about as much as the same

In thirty odd years.

The day whittled down,
The noisy friar bird disrobed;

silent.

We'd come into the country that morning, Along a millstone road, the dirt, pestled And pale like fine chalk,

the dust as ground bone

From the hacksawn ridge line—the hammerscale

Edge of the Budawangs down their westward

Step.

Four camp chairs on a bedstone of sand
And greywacke, a poker game—all stone faced.
Everything here is in purgatory
And trying to knife you

-spiny headed

Mat rush, large headed club rush, the three card

Flop. Last year's fire front had flushed the land out,
No monitors or grey roos to speak of,
Our bodies a feast for water spiders
And horse flies. So often,

the highest stakes

In the game are the rivers, our lives told By their lines.

The night ajar in embers,
We pile chips like haphazard skyscrapers,
And talk ourselves back, to one another;
Of high school, of love's turns, of houses full
With children, of the Shoalhaven's eternal

Narrative—ours the smallest parts, almost Unspoken.

There's more at play here, the land
Will have its way, the great dealer of time,
Long drawn and quartered for its pound of gold,
Will return us, one day,

sifted like ash.

On the water this afternoon we stripped
Off our shirts and let the sun scourge our backs,

One hundred lashes

—sweat and stream, rugby

On the sand bar and we were almost young Again. The geebung and the bottlebrush

Were burning with calls of the reed warbler And out there,

life seemed a thousand feet deep

And etched slow into the gorge. A wedge-tailed

Eagle stirred the welkin as a restless

God; walking in the thermals as a furrowed

Field—an ancient of days signing the sky.

But that was earlier and now spotlights

Are turned up to ten and all of our cards

Are on the table. And in the distance

There's a trio of four-wheel-drives enraged

By the hush of the weeping grass and wind; So they kick and scream all eight cylinders At once and drag us all through the gravel To the beach at the river's bend to haul In midnight

—axle deep in the sand surge
Of a story we've never lived. We stand
With the sheoaks, our shins in the tussocks
And watch bottles fly off a belly-up
Bonnet—the twenty first century rites
Of bacchus,

pedal to the metal floor.