

# DIFFERENT BIRDS



MARK WEISS

## ***Also by Mark Weiss***

*A Letter to Maxine* (The Heron Press, Deerfield, Massachusetts, 1974)

*Intimate Wilderness* (The New Rivers Press, New York, 1976)

*A Blockprint by Kuniyoshi* (Four Zoas Nighthouse, Ashuelot, New Hampshire, 1994)

*Fieldnotes* (Junction Press, San Diego, 1995)

*Figures* (Chax Press, Tucson, 2001)

*Across the Line / Al otro lado: The Poetry of Baja California*, with Harry Polkinhorn  
(Junction Press, San Diego, 2002)

# **Different Birds**

**Mark Weiss**

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*San Diego*

Away from home, and other teeth will eat my tomatoes.  
Faithless, anyone's  
tomatoes.

Butterfly almost the color of the blossom  
it lands on. Slightly greener, but wings folded  
become invisible. Something here,  
must be, eats  
butterflies.

Scant rain  
big drops  
with space between  
nonetheless  
a hammer-blow  
to a hummingbird.

A second generation of flowers on my night-blooming cereus  
waits for dark, and in the valley between its ridges  
tiny snails search for nutriment.

Cock-eye the Sailor Man  
a port in every girl.  
Just have to learn the sandbars.

*Sydney,  
Coogee Bay*

Like home? Two cockatoos perched on a phone line.

And a walk, still dazed with travel,  
along cliffs and beaches, Coogee to Bondi. Coogee  
an arch of sand between promontories.

Cemetery Cliff terraced above surf. A wheel  
to steer by, three spokes intact.  
“He sees his pilot face to face  
Now he has crossed the bar”  
Captain George Nyholm 11<sup>th</sup> December 1907  
Aged 55.

Lorikeets.

Magpies, but larger than ours, and perch in trees.

Blue-lit public bathrooms.  
Junkies can't see their veins. One would think  
they'd miss.  
Or skin-pop. Or even  
mark a vein before entering.

*Katoomba,  
Blue Mountains*

Like a white rag  
cockatoo flutters down the canyon.

Silently the white cockatoo  
like a leaf  
floats  
to canyon bottom  
the merest lint  
in the shape of a bird  
on the green mat  
of eucalyptus.

60 years to get here,  
skating all the way.  
And how many left  
for the rest.

The unfamiliarity of the southern sky.

“Sailors take warning.”

In the morning

In the morning al amanecer at the becoming  
day the light,  
understood as progress,  
not mandate, declares  
it will happen  
in the face of all logic.

Fell, like a handkerchief  
with wings.

*Coogee Bay*

Concrete pools filled by the tides.

“Beautiful” — alright, then.  
The niceties of daily life.  
Society a loose bond of friendships.

The sand drained from beneath her feet she enters  
pushing the waves before her, become liquid,  
dissolved, resolved  
as vector.

Cliff to cliff,  
and back again. Then dries her hair,  
arms raised, neck bent to the towel,  
a straight leg, and a bent,  
torsion at waist.

The half-life of life.  
A discontinuous life experienced as discontinuous.

A gull flies low across the beach  
its shadow before it  
broken by the surface it seems  
to paint.

*Sydney*

Jewfish.  
First time I've seen one on a menu, and I order it  
as if compelled, my head  
thrust forward, reptilian,  
checking the room for danger,  
without, and within. The fish  
named for the way it rubs its pectorals,  
for all the world a moneylender  
rubbing his hands,  
anticipating the ruin



of another Christian. Shylock  
the Jewfish. Rationale  
for the deaths of millions.  
What would I call it,  
swallowed insult? Eucharist  
of humiliation? Delicious and tender,  
with an avocado chutney.

Here as elsewhere,  
the scourge of Christianity.

A short black/ a tall  
black. It's only coffee,  
only here.

*Gippsland,  
Phillip Island*

Songs of unfamiliar birds  
unfamiliar birds and their songs

pharaonic birds  
magpies  
that warble  
in the spring

raven, but with a different call  
(called "crow" here)  
the cry of a child  
wah      wah  
                 wah

many ibis grazing among black cattle  
scarlet and turquoise rozellas  
kookabarras  
kangaroos  
wombats  
wallabies  
tree de  
cline and fall  
terns  
the ocean turquoise at the far end  
indigo  
shearwater  
muttonbird  
gulls with cinnabar beak and feet and black  
black unblinking eyes  
a giant worm.

A plank stairway down the bluff, weathered  
to the gray of the sky. Beneath the slats  
nesting penguins, and  
dead penguins also.

*Melbourne*

*Melbourne girls*

1  
This is the child of fairytales: blond,  
angular, eight years old,  
red jacket, turquoise pants, on a green  
bench, and strokes

a bunny.  
Twitchy nose.

Isn't this embarrassing?

Think of the passions of children  
think of a passionate childhood  
a moment of stasis belying the violence.

Was that violins, or the screech of a tram wheel.  
Clang.

In the Victoria market  
one could buy such.  
And there may be others,  
each identical.

Where is the complex life  
of the magic child?

2

Who does she see in her mind's mirror,  
the day's confection of darkened lashes  
or the pallid animal that washed its face  
at bedtime? Right now  
licks the foam from a coffee spoon  
and talks to her boyfriend who thinks  
"foam is foam, is good enough." Quoth she,  
"wha' evah,"  
and flips her hair.

3

Time's transit so fast and I catch myself wondering  
who put the dot on the i  
and for what reason. "The real  
Australia"  
she says, as if reality  
were anywhere we don't inhabit. Enough reality  
for anyone.

Anti  
podes.

Tipped over, as if  
the brain every so often attempted  
to right itself.

Nighttime sculling the Yarra River.

Them and the ducks.

Singing as a matter of muscle and breath.

Nolan: "...it was not mummified in the belief  
that God is a drover."

This catastrophe befalling an entire continent.

To worry endlessly about being Australian. Imposed  
on the landscape. The Sistine Chapel

of despair. So that the light  
emerges.

Little black ducks with a white  
something above their beaks:  
the local grebes.

Sculling clubs upon Yarra.

All-girl crews in blue-and-white jerseys the cox in red and on a bike  
path a coach with a bullhorn “square your shoulders, girls.”

All manner of birds not known — this one  
the size of a small pigeon white underside black back and bib, the rest  
pied, feeds  
on the bank, the beck of bug  
and worm, the look of a bug-and-worm-eater.  
I make it fly so as to see  
the white stripe of its wings. Elegant  
black legs and eyes. Right next to me it grabs a worm  
and swallows. A magpie  
lark. Hark  
hark.

Knees to chest, breast  
flattened, vulva  
presented. “And  
stroke!”

Make a muddy track  
by the river.

Presuppose that it's dusk  
and cloudy  
on the cusp of Spring,  
the city all around us.

Black swans with red beaks, at the tip  
a horizontal band of white.  
They feed on grasses.

The generative triangle.

Only so many ways  
to make a wall stand up. Count  
them.

Let's pile  
a thing on a thing the lives  
like ants  
stomp stomp  
who's to answer for.

I will ascribe a thought to a house (a horse)  
a submissive gesture to a kangaroo, its hands  
clasped as if to say  
“please.”

“Of course it suits you”  
in the company of noses.

In the cathedral: “whether you have entered this church to pray,  
out of curiosity or merely  
because of the rain,  
welcome.”

Outside, Flinders in bronze in the bow  
of a bronze boat, clear-eyed, impeccable  
in the bronze garb  
of a Georgian gentleman, the boat buoyed  
not upon waves but on the straining forms  
of anonymous brutes. And truth be told,  
unwittingly.

“I think that angels are natural creatures  
that you can’t see. Like giant squid.”

*Wilpena Pound,  
Flinders Range*

Dusk: big reds  
galahs &  
ravens.

Stock-still the roos could pass  
for eucalyptus stumps.

Hard black pellets the size of a half-dollar.

Nao problems

Frosty dawn the grass frozen.  
Kangaroo retreats through the eucalyptus.

Dime-sized yellow balls with thorns.

Nao worries

It's called  
umbrella wattle

Outside my tent a joey  
is separated from its mother  
by a low fence. Her body  
strains forward in silent  
anguish. I summon a ranger  
to reunite them.

This may be a begging routine.  
I may have been conned  
by a kangaroo.

How could I learn what I've learned if I'd learned other things?

From Blinman camel trains  
of copper. Now  
a kangaroo and claret pie.

Emulation: emu see, emu do.  
Or: to kill a bird, emulate it.

Low moon stripes the forest. All night mynahs  
talk and talk, elaborating a theme.



Hopefulness instinctive in the young.  
Otherwise there would be no children.

In the room full of eating people a small child  
wanders, in pursuit  
of whatever curiosity. Her father  
follows with his eyes, alert, prepared  
to rescue. “Give her some rope,”  
he thinks, and I think to tell him  
that as long as life lasts alert to danger  
his eyes will follow her.

This, here, is all you get, you’d best  
get used to it.

Thin wash of green over burnt red earth.

By the side of the road the remains  
of a kangaroo, half-gone, a bit of flesh  
darkening the otherwise bleached ribs, the low arch  
of vertebrae. Where a truck  
left it. Its head intact,  
though eyeless, and it seems to scream  
the agony of all that live. The stench  
of putrefaction covers it  
and everything around it.

Emulation — to cook an emu.

Kangaroos abounding

**flinders** (flin' dɔrz) *pl.n* Bits; fragments; splinters.  
What the mountains are made of.

A pair of wedgetail eagles on a dead sheep  
fly low to the ground at my approach. A magpie,  
desperate, flees, thinking  
the eagles have plans for it.  
Not this time.

Emu paté — perfumy aftertaste  
kangaroo fillet, camel sausage  
emu pattie, bacon on top,  
over mash  
rye berry coulis and deep-fried  
parsnip.

Some would do it anyway  
for God's command,  
despite the pleasure.

*Adelaide*

At the Eros Restaurant the pretty waitress stands  
with her left (her off)  
hand coiled  
behind her, covering  
the cleft. A peculiar  
modesty — in tight black pants  
slung low, and she's unbuttoned

her white shirt to reveal  
both breast and belly.

The way a swan will float  
sometimes, a leg  
resting on its back.

A long blond swan.

Something to do with a hand, then.

A couple eats silently. It's clear he experiences her jeans  
as an affront, as things aren't great  
between them.

The problem with feral olives  
the radio says is that the natives  
haven't a chance  
against them. And these on the table  
are small, hard,  
camphory.

A bad copy of Canova's Cupid and Psyche on the wall, but the intention  
pure enough. And dancing to the music opposite  
a frieze of dancing girls.

*Alice Springs*

In Alice  
the class divide's at the bakery door.

*Curtin Springs*

Curtin Springs  
A few buildings, and a corral for the camels.  
1700 square miles  
1000 cows.

“As long as we can run a few cattle and tourists...”

90% of the land burnt over.  
“Careless aborigines,” he says, or maybe  
“to clear a space of snakes. Hard to know why  
they do anything. Fifty thousand years  
and they didn’t even  
invent the wheel.”

Unroll my bag in red dust and watch the stars.

Clouds to the south and west from blue to purple  
and there, pure light, she comes  
above the horizon.

One sliver to the east  
invisible before  
incandesces, the bark on the eucalyptus  
cuprous  
burnished  
the galahs explode in song and the earth  
returns to red again, my shadow  
an enormous pincer.

It's a one-gallon kettle the slight girl pours from,  
pewter, or the color of pewter, no-  
nonsense, industrial,  
a thick stream of boiling water.

The pepper has four holes  
the salt has one, but larger.

Rehearsed words.

Two doctors, orthopedist and  
“my anaesthetist,”  
motorcycling from Darwin to Adelaide.

The anaesthetist's  
the quiet one.

A bird's life  
blown by the wind.

Here amidst leaves  
like spear points.

During the night some insect has  
bitten me — a round swelling  
above the joint of my right thumb.  
Harder than a mosquito bite, no apparent center, but  
there it is. Nothing deadly, despite  
the possibilities.

*Uluru  
and Kata Juta*

We think the holy of holies of all peoples  
should be open to curiosity.

Kata Juta.  
The two great thighs bisected  
by a line of green.

“The men would jerk off here?”  
“That too.”

Shallow caves    omphalic,  
feminine, or  
omphalopian.

Where rain has streaked them with  
illegible hieroglyphs.

It’s about entering.  
It’s about emerging.

A man and a woman, very old, each hold  
a hand of a still older man to steady him as he staggers  
up slope into the gap.  
They reach the first resting place.

I can imagine being someday at once both grateful and resentful of  
benches.

Flinty sunlight.

Each with its thin crown of soil and greenery.

The encapsulation of space otherwise limitless to the eye.

A charcoal forest amidst burnt brick the clouds white and gray drifting  
through deepest blue and a thin fringe of soil and greenery  
like a cap atop each monolith.

A hillside of cobbles, grass  
and live and burnt  
shrubs. Very pale  
occasional  
lavender flowers  
or pale green shoots.  
Multicolored.  
Vivid as glass.

Resting, I exchange a few words with a Japanese couple  
stopped for a picture, and suddenly there's a set of social obligations  
of which I'm unaware that render parting  
awkward—there's a gesture I'm supposed to perform  
but haven't learned.

Hawk teeters on the wind.

Just past dawn, and  
so many galahs feeding on the bush one could think they grew there.  
Festooned with galahs.  
So the landscape becomes a textbook for the behavior of animals and animals  
a textbook for the behavior of humans.

An aboriginal woman whose English would indicate  
that as a child and into adulthood she spoke none  
speaks on her cell phone in her own language in a place  
where in her girlhood all tools  
were wood, bone or stone.

Imagine a people whose primary identity is social — the individual a  
limited concept — my role is who I am. Then the cataclysm and the  
foundations of the society suddenly crumble or at least are revealed  
as insufficient for the new reality. Survival becomes a matter of  
experiencing one's primary identity as individual. Only the most  
aberrant — those most aberrant in the threatened society — succeed  
quickly and easily. For the rest generations of despondency, at a  
loss (and lost) in the new landscape.

The change from self to “self” as if limbs ripped off.

Justice is right ordering, and honor  
one's place in that order — one's  
rights. One's  
rightful place.

Henry Adams:

Whatever your class you will be trained for a society  
that will no longer exist by the time of your initiation.

Wanampi, the water snake, swims across his pond through spangles  
of tourist coins.



How did these aquatic bugs get here  
from the last waterhole?

Mulga and witchety instead of mesquite.

Mistletoe a parasite of each. Snotty-gobbles.

“He pried the sanko from her steely fingers...”

*King’s Creek*

Dingo scat  
but no dingos.

Crested pigeons.  
The courting of noisy mynahs.  
Flaccid camels at midday.

Maybe 60 stations in the NT. This one turned tourist hostel.

EU and Commonwealth kids can stay for a year, allowed to work “to aid travel,” but for no more than three months at any job. The idea, presumably, that a short gig wouldn’t displace a native worker. So the tourist industry is inhabited by an endless supply of cheap labor — at Kings Creek Station 10 languages working together. And of course a certain percentage decide to settle — attracting the “right” immigrants must be a part of the concept.

How could anyone who has seen them in the wild  
bear to keep one in a cage?

This evening, sitting on a lit porch, the cockatoo caged in chicken wire not 20 feet away insistently begs my attention, “hello,” in the captor’s language. Humans are its life, provide their careless silence in the absence of the flock that is home and family. A creature of trees and crowds here forced into nightlong solitude. It grips the wires of its cage, as close as possible, insufficient as I am to meet its hunger.

The casual cruelty of zoo animals in this environment  
captured virtually in sight of their pens for the amusement of  
tourists.  
Careless careless brutality.

To measure one’s life by a dog’s or a star’s.

The wisdom of my people — that at the heart of greatest joy  
is greatest sorrow, memory being  
the plague it is.

I chat with a couple in a caravan. My age, give or take. The wife offers me her seat by the fire. I demur. She insists — ” I’ll be doing things anyway.” Not ten minutes later an ungodly wailing, the words gradually understood — something about no place to sit. They’ve downed a fair bit of whiskey. I stand up, so does he — the universal embarrassed moment, his loyalty and comfort in conflict with the moment’s pleasure. I say, “sounds like your wife needs you,” and retreat to my sleeping bag.

Coffee in hand, walks around. Where's a table? Puzzled. Face like a mask.

A sweet young thing with a nervous laugh  
he thinks will make  
the days pass quickly.

Only the joys of the weefolk untainted.

A few words of greeting  
oblige a parting  
but a wave of the hand will do here.

Hey pigeon!  
*Nice landing!*

*Kings Canyon*

Mannerly trees.  
Discrete plants inhabit their places  
each within its patio of sand.

What significance, if any,  
to the ragged black cloth  
draped on a fallen bough?

Ghost gum, white pine  
exploit the cracks.

Desert grass tree.

No two places no two moments alike  
each a cinder  
lit and extinguished.

The endless holocaust that will have its end  
at the end of everything  
in entropic distance.

Cycads fernlike palmlike survivors.

Not quite in any sense the goat I was,  
nonetheless I save myself when I trip  
and slide  
onto the scree. Only a little cost  
to weathered tendons.

My own shadow trapped  
amid the odd linear shadows of desert plants.  
A frenzy of wind.

Toward the end of his life my father asked me “why  
do you always have to do things  
your own way?” and I laughed, not aware  
there had been a choice.

Poetry first and foremost  
a tool for knowing.

No time to note  
everything. One makes perhaps  
the wrong choices,  
but so it is.  
I was thinking for instance, when I tripped,  
of the Irish kid  
behind the breakfast counter. From Kerry,  
she said, and I'd forgot to tell her  
about my time in Skibbereen, all of it,  
the car broken, waiting at roadside  
for the rental company. Hard to know what's not  
significant. A dirty edge of town,  
an oily ditch by the road,  
horse-drawn wagons hauling scrap.  
And here I am at the base of a canyon,  
pancakes of sandstone,  
in the dead center of Australia,  
wind whipping  
strange trees. If I'm very careful  
I can parse their sounds.  
Olive-green, yellow grasses —  
millet, I think — sprays of flowers,  
orange, yellow, occasional blue,  
and stumps of charcoal from the last burn  
in this overwhelmingly red landscape.

*To the West*  
*MacDonalds*

Twenty-six wild camels. I walk among them  
and they amble off, small groans from those  
forced to rise.

Ur of the Chaldees.

Like me, the first of them transported  
from Arabia might have thought  
“not so bad, a lot like home.”

Sky ahead red with blowing sand.

Through every dry watercourse  
a flood of red sand whipping, and the sky to the south and east  
something between pink and purple.  
450 K to my next campsite,  
another night under stars, unless the wind  
prevent it. Though certainly a tent would be useless  
in such a gale.

All manner of leaf and twig blowing.

Tricky to drive, but lovely  
to stand in.

*Helen Gorge*

Due south a great starless blackness,  
like Poe's negative where black was white and the savage god  
inhabited an ultimate warmth within the frozen antipodes.

I sit here waiting for the dingo I have been told is in the habit  
of coursing the sand, unlikely as it seems  
that so hunted a beast  
would pass before its hunters.

All over Australia poison baits are offered  
for its eradication. It's not really native, one hears  
repeatedly, probably came with the aborigines, no more than  
50,000 years, and maybe less, as little as 3  
millennia. So authenticity becomes a matter  
of choosing the moment and killing all  
that follow. By that logic, why not poison  
the aborigines, why not the europeans, leave the land clean  
of all but birds, and reptiles, and marsupials?

If a wallaby hops in a canyon and nobody sees it  
is it really there?

High-pitched electric squeak of a bat.

Alpha Centauri and its mate still above the cliffs, but the cross  
lost from sight. South, however,  
exactly where it was.

In this desert drought's  
the only news, flocks trimmed  
by two-thirds, and a good lamb  
goes for 150 that last year would have fetched  
a third of that.

The line articulated  
so as to express volume.

High up a plane deadheads for Canberra. Down here  
the rumble of engines. What can the creatures  
make of it?

The wind's died  
to a downy breeze, enough to keep  
the flies away.

Cliff. Absence of stars  
is how you know it's there.

La Chingada and La Llorona stalk  
the dreams of Mexicans,  
cause and effect  
to the very edge  
of the fiesta.

Glen Helen at dawn  
a pair of black birds —  
cormorants — loonlike  
on the water.  
Silver fish — bream—  
leap for their breakfast.

Clucking and trilling on the cliffs, the galahs  
arrive. They sing for the  
insistent moments of mating.

13 grebe and one chick.  
Through the cloud the light silver  
then gold in the clearing.



*Ormiston Gorge*

Up a long incline and around a hill, into a canyon, then opens  
onto the Pound, wide floodplain, a lake once — one can see  
along the mountains the mark of old beaches — reduced, as now, to a  
series of deep, cold,  
shadowy pools in an expanse of rock and sand. The Finke River,  
salvation of seabirds, and once  
a songline. There are fish, a sort of bream, that grow a foot long and die  
when the pool dries but always reappear  
with rain.

Ants everywhere, red sand  
for soil, a ready-made pigment.

A cut through the mountains at a bend of the dry bed. At the outer edge  
a cliff  
undercut by a still crescent of water, and on what would be the slow side,  
the eddies, pink sandstone broken into square terraces. Emerging, the  
largest pool,  
in places cut beneath the hill, but on the other side a wide beach, and on it  
some kids from America and some aborigines, teenagers  
from a mission school, volunteers and their charges,  
down from Darwin to show their land to the natives  
and bring them a god. Such  
perfect innocence, innocent of the temptation  
of irony and of all temptations.

I want to tell them, “whatever you do  
you’ll never do again.” Despite joy  
or sorrow.

*Alice Springs*

Water from “the bore,” the deep well that’s the only source, here,  
and in the continent’s entire center. Brackish,  
pleasant, like certain mineral waters.

A country in general where one needn’t add salt at table.

“Beautiful,” the waitress says  
as she takes my order.  
Red Ochre Grill — Alice —  
Morton Bay Bugs with a spicy kim chee,  
the vinegar cut with parsely.

Camel sirloin with butternut squash, called pumpkin here.

As sacrament,  
flesh of my flesh that carried Abraham  
forth from beside the river.

*Alice Airport*

Foreign presence in Alice overwhelmingly German, then Italian  
and French. Plane to Darwin late, but Alice Airport’s actually  
pleasant — reasonable prices, outdoor tables, a lawn to sprawl on,  
magpie larks, plaintive ravens, and a small garden of native plants.  
One walks onto the runway to board, apparently.

No day packs then, no back packs,  
slacks on women sometimes illegal, shorts  
more so. Midriffs never bare. So the girl facing, reclining against  
her chair,  
hands clasped behind her head, naked from hip to breast, and a small

glittery stone in her navel says “look at me,” in jeans, t-shirt and  
flip-flops — nothing unusual, but the change so fast  
that those my age are constantly overcome by wants  
to which we’ve developed  
no defenses.

What a drag

it is.

Hell, she couldn’t even have sat that way, nor her mother, beside her, neither.

I had forgotten about her for a while, but find myself now  
on the grass behind her. She stretches forward — a purple thong.

Removal of a pullover  
attended by much drama.

*Alice to Darwin*

From the air  
vegetation in the lea of red dunes marks the pattern  
of ancient seabeds.

A road through a desert almost devoid of vegetation pinker than the burnt  
land around it. One billabong visible. Must be the bed of an ancient lake.  
On its edge, just into a greener place, a square of farmland, different colors,  
green to rust, everything right-angled, like a set of tiles. Down the road the  
messiness of a small settlement, maybe twenty buildings and an air strip.

Mountains like mudpies  
brown amidst red.

A haze of pink above the desert from a three day wind. Feels almost like there's no way to take in enough liquid.

The desert a set of parallel streaks  
one dense red-ochre dry water hole  
and higher ground a gray-green stain on the land but at last  
a few billabongs.

No blend — the boundaries between soil types as if etched.  
Even where bisected by a line of ridge the striping, SE to NW,  
continues, troughs and crests  
a shade of color different.  
Nothing interrupts the pattern.  
Even in higher ground where the broken land  
forms a harsh circle one can make it out  
as understrate.

French farce is any room  
with two doors.

More billabongs,  
the dry places stained by different concentrations  
of blue minerals. And no sign  
no sign at all  
of human presence.

Patches of low cloud.

From this height the round form could be hill or crater. Darker  
center, probably  
foliage, probably hill or crater.  
Salt pans    dry billabongs, a few threads  
of water.

Heart-shaped, purple.

A spray of vegetation, like the spines  
of a fan or the fin of a sailfish.

Interminable striping.

Small clouds, wisps  
to cast a shadow. But the haze  
that had stood at the horizon  
pink as ever  
begins to close in.

The stripes are almost gone,  
and a straight pink road perpendicular to our path.  
Stripes again, but regular. Almost like gouges.

No stripes at all. Wait —  
some sort of patterning between dry floodways.

And another road, four bends within my sightline.

The soil more beige than red,  
more vegetation, though hardly lush. One could perhaps run cattle here.  
Hey, two roads, three,  
scratched into the desert.  
And a fourth, and a fifth. All drawn  
by ruler. The darker heights may be forest. Forested probably  
by no tree I'd recognize.

A road that bends  
neither for hill nor valley.

A circular billabong surrounded by the sand of its dried bed, a green  
scarp at one edge,  
and a shallow place in the center.

Two buildings and an airstrip. Roads. A watercourse, in places a trace  
of water.  
The land pocked with circles,  
some surrounding blue dots of water.

Major watercourses from arid hills feed into one. The soil as revealed  
by roads  
red once more in places.  
The watercourse a flow of sand, threads of green meandering through it.

Now here a road divides color —  
differences of land-use — and there the lopsided geometry  
of a few adjoining fields.

Plateau breaks into mesas, fingers and islands. The road  
twists among them.

A clump of buildings, and a few fields  
along a watercourse. Cut deep, enters another,  
continuous, or almost continuous, water, with a road beside it.  
And enters another still, the band of riverine greenery wider.  
No shortage, however, of dry beds and sand flows.

Coming up, fields, mostly dry, and the glint of a laminate roof.  
Ploughed striations. The soil  
a set of earthtones,  
different yellows and reds. More billabongs. Two buildings. More  
fields, the circular pattern  
of modern irrigation, and five buildings, one surrounded by trees.  
In the distance, across a mesa,  
a field of concentric half-circles. A coil of road notched with trailer  
sites, all empty. A series of fires  
in rough country. In the distance a river  
enters the sea.

The ugly slurry of mines.  
A small town with trees and parallel streets  
a riverbed thick with trees and a dozen farmsteads.  
Network of roads. A larger town. A full billabong. A hilltop home.  
Another mine pit. A paved  
highway with a truck train and three cars, two of them passing.  
A large reservoir and a lake fringed  
with algae. Lots of farm  
and pastureland.

Big rivers enter an enormous bay, in its great arms  
a ship.  
Coming in low over sparse forest, but river beds,  
mangrove and swamp.  
A bridge across a river and the trail  
of a pleasure craft.  
Over city now but lots of bush, the airport ahead.  
Plots of industrial forest,  
other plots scraped bare. Paved roads. A grassy field  
with rugby players.  
Palm trees. A mall.  
Brush. Dry season grasses. The marks of dirt bikes.  
And touchdown.

*Darwin*

At Mindl Beach electric didgeridoo gets all the attention.  
Four aboriginal girls sing “I’m a believer” while an old man  
keeps time with a rock and sings  
in his own language and three others  
almost skeletal  
on the ground in a circle, singing, and another four  
with a didgeridoo  
sing their music, but it’s the white guy  
with the drums behind him and the amp and the three didgeridoos  
who takes in the shekels, the others  
unquiet ghosts in their own country.

Tapara asked for the body of his lover’s son, but Purukupari told him, “no,  
now that my son is dead we will all  
follow him. Everyone will die.” And they fought. Tapara



became the moon. Then Purukupali took his son in his arms and walked into the sea, where the whirlpool swallowed them. Impassive, the pelicans looked on.

The myths are mute because everyone knew their meaning. So that the girl abducted by pirates — why belabor it? A life of servitude and longing. Her family on the shore, no need to say it, except, “we looked for her everywhere, but she was gone. They must have stolen her.”

“And that among these truths are death, slavery and thoughtless destruction.”

No one who had seen them in the wild could keep them as pets, one would have thought, as if there were limits to the selfishness of desire.

A culture defined by a pose or a stance,  
kouros to contraposto.

The peristaltic journey.

Here where the hill was,  
a pile of stones.

Clastic fields,  
hoodoos.

In the paintings animals are indicated by their tracks, and people  
by the horeshoe trace where they had sat, crosslegged,  
as they still do on the streets of Darwin.

*Kakadu*

A pictograph — the dingo-head woman — distended labia — at the  
edge of the precipice.

Some things one delights in  
pandanus  
sand palms  
a troglodyte cave with remains of humans. On the mesa  
a pool with water lilies.  
What the dog told him. Marrawati  
the eagle  
the transport of souls.

And here on the rock at the edge of the flood plain, the girl  
had eaten flesh of barramundi at her time of month, and the people  
of that place  
had beaten her, and her own people came with spears and a world  
ended in conflict. A rock  
that could be Ilium, how an argument over a woman  
ruined everything. In the river  
endless bodies for the sisters who had learned,  
for their unbridled hunger, to transform themselves  
to crocodiles.

A tropical depression.  
A notebook full of birds and marsupials.  
Goanna.

The choice is always with us isn't it.

*Darwin*

The girl from Guantánamo to whom all Cubans sing, what do we have,  
not even a picture, she lives  
as an essential longing, she  
so far from the capital,  
as if another life. We live,  
she says, as if in scenes  
played parallel  
on the same stage, she says,  
and sways away  
from beach to forest.

What a strange thing to write in Darwin  
in this other tropics.

Circle round it.  
Circle round it.  
Flagons of water  
as a matter of course.

There were two of us here.  
ok. ok.  
ok.  
ok.

Sometimes the ship has truly sailed.  
Flesh, blood and other juices.

*Envoi: Australian Pest Control*

*1. Cactus*

If you can't lick it  
eat it.

*2. Cane Toad*

If you can't eat it  
lick it.